Boyfriend Material

by PoppyAlexander

Summary

Boston Brawlers' team captain John Watson longs for two things: a championship before he retires, and a boyfriend. Assigned to room with goaltender Sherlock Holmes--known around the league as both a genius and a "weird dude"--on Brawlers' roadtrips, John discovers the things they have in common that lead to an easy friendship and a convenient arrangement.

Slow-burn, adversaries-to-friends-to-lovers, romantic comedy.

Alternate Universe - Sports/Ice Hockey

Notes

It's my aim that even hockey naifs will be able to enjoy this story. I have written in-game scenes in such a way that with extremely basic knowledge of the sport, readers should be able to easily and clearly visualise the goings-on, and appreciate the excitement and drama of the game. I will update the hockey glossary and notes with each chapter posted, as terms are introduced. I will also include diagrams that will help readers visualise the game and its setting. Aside from sharing a fun love story, I want readers to be engaged in our mens' team and its season-long pursuit of a championship!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“From the ninth floor of the Boston Garden, high above the ice, I’m Jack Edwards here with my colleague Andy Brickley and the already roaring seventeen thousand, five hundred, sixty-five Boston Brawlers fans. Thanks for joining Boston Sports Network’s coverage of Game Seven of the Cup Final. Just two options remain for the Brawlers and the formidable Shoreham Shock of Long Island, New York: win it all, or end a thrilling season with the disappointment of not having their players’ names etched into the base of Lord Stanley’s Cup.

“It’s news to no one who the real pride of Boston Garden is tonight, though. Standing on the shoulders of giants—and some might point out that at only five feet, nine inches in height, he could use the boost—one Brawler has been in the spotlight week after week, game after game.”

“That’s right Jack: team captain John Watson is a veteran player, well respected around the league through his astonishing eighteen seasons, joined the Brawlers just this year through a series of trades after spending the past dozen years as a first-line defenseman with the Hamilton Thrashers in his adopted home town in Ontario. He’s esteemed by his teammates both on the ice and in the room, and this Brawlers team—which has been developing over the last three, four, seasons—has really coalesced around Watson in that leadership position. After last season’s disappointments, where the Brawlers barely made the play-offs and were picked off in five games during the first round, a lot of credit’s going to John Watson for bringing these guys together, raising morale in the room so that what we see on the ice in nearly every game this season has been classic Brawlers’ hockey.”

“Watson’s known for his no-nonsense, workmanlike playing style as well his cool head, and he has great hockey IQ. And speaking of hockey smarts, another player known for amazing knowledge of the game is Brawlers’ goaltender—and, small world, Watson’s countryman from Merry Old
England—Sherlock Holmes, who is showing up every game throughout the long playoff run, and certainly in this final series, shutting down opponents’ scoring opportunities in a way that I’m tempted to describe as preternatural.”

“It does sometimes seem like Holmes must be getting divine messages ahead of every shot on his net, as his lowest-in-the-league Goals Against average of 1.93—and close to a 92 save percentage—proves Holmes has a truly unique talent in goal. Keeps his cool, Jack, always very settled and calm, and for a guy who’s technically not very big as goaltenders go, at six-one, one-seventy, Holmes can get big as a house to defend the net, making save after save in the clutch.”

“That he does, Brick. Who can forget the game at Milwaukee, back in March, when Holmes made sixty-four saves in sixty regulation minutes and let not a single Muskies puck get by him? And as you at home can probably guess from the absolutely deafening cheers here in the Boston Garden, the players have taken the ice; we’ll take a break and then it’s right back here for a scenario that fans—and probably players and coaches—both dream of, and dread. Sixty minutes. Three periods of play. One Game Seven to decide it all. When we come back, two options for the Brawlers and the Shock: Do, or die.”

Ten Months Earlier
August, Brawlers’ Training Camp

“Get at it, then. Three. Two. One. . .Go.” The conditioning coach, Bobby Whitehouse, blew his whistle and half the players burst across the line, sprinting up and down the gym, dipping down to tap the line on the floor at each end. “If you need to puke, use the buckets!” he scolded, perhaps noticing a telltale look of panic in the eyes of some of the players. John’s group was at the sidelines, some doubled over and heaving to catch their breath. John walked it off, pacing and kicking to stretch his legs. He’d given up wiping away the sweat—it was pouring off him everywhere, stinging his eyes, trickling in the small of his back. He sized up the other group as they did their shuttle runs.

Sherlock Holmes was quick as fuck, all lean, no bulk, with most of his not-terribly-impressive height stored in his miles-long legs. The best goalie in the league, two-time Vezina Trophy winner, Holmes was coming off his career-best season and through training camp looked as good as ever he had. John knew his job as a first-line defenseman would be markedly easier in front of such a talented goaltender. Thomas Gerhardt, in the lane beside Holmes, was his physical compliment, sturdily muscular like a Hollywood action hero. John had always admired Gerhardt’s playing, good workmanlike stuff, nothing fancy, and he put the puck in the net like a machine. Stripped down to his skivvies (most were wearing only the tight boxer-briefs they wore under their uniforms, stretchy exercise shorts, or basketball shorts), John found his eye repeatedly caught by a body so improbably close to ideal.

John cleared his throat and shifted his gaze. There were a couple of kids—Taylor Sawyer, 19, a showboat/scoring machine fresh from his high school team; and Corey Hatch, a good Christian boy of about 22 with a hometown wife and a baby already on the way, who’d played two years on the farm team after two in college in far western Canada—both of whom consistently embodied their playing styles even off-ice. Sawyer tried to accomplish a lot with minimal expense of effort, embellishing where possible, while Hatch was eager to please, genuinely thrilled to be there and willing to give up whatever was necessary to make sure the team advanced; he had enormous hockey smarts, the instinctual sort that couldn’t be taught. John figured Hatch would have a long career, probably Hall of Fame caliber, provided he didn’t get hurt or get moved up too fast. Sawyer seemed the type more likely to end up getting a DUI in the off-season and whose initial bright
promise would be burnt out in a matter of a few years.

Jake Mellon was an archetypal Boston Brawler on ice—head down, working, always ready to drop gloves or take a hit to make a play—and every lap of his shuttle run was punctuated with screamed obscenities, grunting, growling, and wordless roars of fury. It was wasted energy, of course—without it he’d probably have gotten through the ordeal quicker, but it put some needed aggression into the air and seemed to drive the rest of the players on; John had to credit it.

The whistle blew and the runners pulled up, walking it off, clutching their guts, grimacing. A few collapsed to the gym floor. At once, another long shrill of the conditioning coach’s whistle.

“Awright, boys, that’s it for today. Final roster’s going to be posted in about an hour, so shower up then head to the team meeting room and Coach Lestrade will talk to you. Dom Crisafulli, maybe Haber, too, if he’s around,” Whitehouse told them, naming the team’s general manager and the club’s president. “Whatever the roster says in the end remember you’re all part of Brawlers hockey, up here in Boston or down in Bridgeport. You’ve done some wicked work during camp—new guys and veterans both—and whatever way it shakes out, we’re gonna have a great team and a great season. Those of you who think you’re off the hook and won’t have to deal with me again, think again—I’m running training down in Bridgeport twice a week.”

“Aww, fuck, I quit!” someone called out—Chris Sullivan, a six-year Brawlers vet and a notorious Joker with a dry sense of humour.

“Eh, Watson, who do you like?” Another veteran player—Pietr Kocur, a six-foot, seven-inch monster, the veteran defenseman close to John’s age, who’d been playing in a Brawlers sweater since they’d drafted him out of the European leagues when he was just 20—surveyed the guys in camp who still had question marks beside their names.

“Hammel looks good to stay,” John replied. “Sawyer’s a whiz kid but I don’t know about chemistry.”

“Aww, fuck, I quit!” someone called out—Chris Sullivan, a six-year Brawlers vet and a notorious Joker with a dry sense of humour.

“Agreed. I like Siven on the D.”

“Yeah, the scrimmages were good and he takes correction pretty well.”

“Holmesy’s not a fan.”

“Holmesy needs to mind himself upstairs and not worry too much about what’s going on in front of him,” John replied. Holmes was a save-making machine, reliably stopping almost everything that came at him as easily as if they’d texted him the list of shots ahead of the practice, but when he did let one by, it was almost always going in over his left shoulder.

“Anyway, guess we’ll know soon enough,” Kocur said, and bent to snatch his sweat-soaked t-shirt off the floor, then headed for the showers. Men started drifting en masse past John, exchanging fives and casual praise. As a pair of the youngest ones passed, John overheard their not-at-all-subtle conversation.

“So many old guys on this team. Kocur and Watson are, what, like forty?”

John was thirty-seven. He cleared his throat.

“Watson was a pity trade; the Thrashers are shit again this year and the league wants to give him a chance at the Cup before he retires.”

“Or dies!”
John had been working a towel against his neck for so long it was beginning to hurt. “I’ve no plans to die,” he piped up, following behind the younger players. “Nor to retire. I do have a plan to get the Cup, and if either of you is still here in an hour, I hope you’ll have the same plan.”

The prospects looked chagrined.

“‘S’all right,” he assured them. “It’s true, I’m getting old. And maybe I did get moved here so I can get a championship—if that was the reason, no one said it to me—but let an old guy give you some advice—careful how you talk out loud about fellas you might want to buy beer for you, a few months down the road.”

“OK, boys, listen up just a couple more minutes for some final business, then you’re free ‘til ten tomorrow morning.” Head coach Greg Lestrade was the last of the bigwigs to speak to the team, following pep talks and we’re going all the way encouragements from the GM, team president, and the talent scout. “Look, I won’t repeat what’s already been said; I promise I’ll have plenty to say to you as time goes on. So for now I’ll just say that I think we’ve got a really well-balanced team, and we’re set up to have a really successful season. Now, we’re going to step out so you all can have your vote for team captain.” One of the assistant coaches started dealing out scraps of paper and a handful of pens. “Bring them out when you’re through and I’ll count them up.”

By the time Lestrade, the assistant coaches, and the suits had left the room, almost all twenty players who’d made the final roster were already folding their slips of paper. Sullivan collected them in his upturned ball cap. There was some chatter, some laughter, a lot of knowing looks. Holmes sat on a table pushed against the wall beside the door, and was the last to toss in his ballot. Sullivan pulled open the door and passed the hat to the coach.

“That was quick,” Lestrade commented, mugging, as he returned a few minutes later with the stack of paper scraps in one hand. He tossed Sullivan’s cap to him over the heads of the other men. “Take that; it stinks.” There was a ripple of laughter. “No surprise to you, I’m sure, your new captain by a vote of 19 to 1 is John Watson. Excellent choice.”

There were whoops and applause, and John looked appropriately humble. Lestrade motioned for him to step forward and speak.

“Yeah, thanks, thanks,” John said, taking a spot at the front of the room. “We’ve got an amazing group here. This level of talent is a ticket to the finals, so let’s focus on working hard, staying healthy, playing Brawlers hockey. Just a couple things I’ll put out there right from the start. First of all, captain’s practices are optional, in the sense that they are mandatory.”

There was scattered laughter.

“I promise they’re nothing near as bad as what we’ve been put through these past couple weeks. I’ve only had two men vomit. And only one died.” John grinned. “Maybe you know this about me from my time as captain of the Thrashers, but one thing I don’t fuck around about is off-hours behaviour. Whatever nightclub you’ve got a VIP table on standby, call and cancel it. You’re not about that.”

Sullivan pulled out his phone. “I’m group-texting bottle service girls all over town, Cap, hang on.”

“Yeah, I’d heard as much,” John joked back. “They’re only into you for your money, Sully.”

“You’re breaking my heart!”
“If you’ve got a free day, you’re at Children’s hospital or the like. Charity appearances are going to be your second job. I want the Brawlers to contribute more time and more money to causes than any other team in the league this year. The player who clocks the most hours gets a donation of five grand from me to whatever charity you like. All right?”

There were general noises of agreement.

“We’re twenty lucky fucking bastards; I aim to make sure we don’t forget it.” John crossed his arms over his chest. “The last thing I want to let you know is this: Every woman in or near this organization is my sister.” He raised an eyebrow. “You get what I’m saying? And they’re yours, too. The girls in the office are all Kocur’s sisters. That new rink-side reporter from BSN, Molly Hooper—she’s Gerhardt’s sister. Take a look at that big bastard; do you want to face the consequences of fucking that bloke’s sister? Of course not.”

“So, what, like…” Sawyer piped up. “Even the ice girls?”

“Especially the ice girls. The ice girls are your sisters, and mine, and Hatch’s and Mellon’s. You think Mellon wouldn’t break your nose if you tried to get with his sister?”

“I would actually murder you, Saws,” Mellon piped up. “You frickin’ pencil neck.”

John gestured with an upturned palm, “See? Mellon would murder you. So, in short, we don’t chat up, date, fuck, or even marry our sisters. Is that clear?”

The group grumbled its acquiescence.

“Excellent. Trust me, you’ll be more focused with that off the table. All right, that’s all I have for today. See you all tomorrow, and really, thanks again. I’ll do my best not to let you down.”

Thus dismissed, the players began to gather their things and filter out of the conference room, bringing to a close their first day as that season’s Boston Brawlers. John accepted some handshakes and slaps on the back as he returned to his chair, dragged his bag up onto it and began rummaging for his water bottle.

“I’m not free for captain’s practices,” came a deep voice from close behind him. He turned to find Sherlock, whose approach he hadn’t even noticed.

“I think I just said they’re mandatory,” John retorted, exaggeratedly frowning as if scanning his memory for an error he may have made.

“Yes, it was an excellent speech. Nevertheless, I’m not free.”

“Guess we’ll see,” John said, tilting his head and raising his eyebrows.

“You have your work cut out for you, keeping cohesion in this group—the vets respect you but some of them have been here much longer and are almost certainly wondering how a player only traded here in July is going to prove himself as captain; the Brawlers’ ethic is much different to Hamilton’s—it’s a completely different culture here. The younger players have all the usual hallmarks—think they know it all, each one used to being the star wherever he came from and unlikely to easily adjust to being low man, some of them never even having lived away from home before. They’re like fledglings pushed from the nest, cute balls of fluff who don’t have a clue how to manage their calendars, their alcohol intake, their finances, or their teenaged libidos. I don’t envy you.”

“I was Thrashers captain for seven seasons; I’ve been through all this stuff before,” John told him,
not rising to the bait. Holmes was legendarily quirky: smart as a whip and equally capable of delivering a sting. He was grudgingly acknowledged to be the league’s best goalie, the player with the highest hockey IQ, and innately talented, but even as people praised him, they generally finished the sentiment with something along the lines of, . . .but what an arsehole. He was prickly and unfriendly, arrogant (though arguably he’d earned the right to be), and dismissive. He was no Miss Congeniality. John shrugged and assured him, “I’ll be all right.”

Sherlock hummed skeptically. “You’re thinking this is your last season,” he commented, eyes narrowing, scrutinizing John as though he were a questionable bit of something Sherlock had found floating in his drink.

“Nope,” John replied instantly, with a firm shake of his head. He shouldered his bag, ready to move on from the conversation, which was starting to stink of sour grapes, though he couldn’t imagine why. He and Holmes had barely exchanged ten words all through training camp, and four of those were used up introducing themselves. “I’ve no retirement plans.”

“It seems a strange move for a man who’s played over a thousand of his fourteen-hundred, fifty-six games in Hamilton, Ontario, to suddenly want to make a move to another team,” Sherlock said. “Unless he’s making a last run at a championship.”

“I’ve been making a run at the championship for eighteen years.”

“Ah,” was Sherlock’s only response.

John twigged suddenly. “Nineteen to one,” he mused, and widened his eyes disbelievingly at Sherlock. “You’re the one who voted against me.”

Sherlock touched the side of his nose. “You’ve found me out,” he said coolly.

“Well did you vote for, then?” John reached into the pocket of his track pants, to fish out the little stack of papers. He started sifting through them. Watson, Watson, Watson. . . Watson. . . At last he found the dissenting ballot. “You voted for yourself?”

“I always vote for myself.”

“There hasn’t been a goalie captain since the 1940s,” John protested.

“I voted my conscience; I’d be an excellent captain.”

“It’s against league rules!”

Sherlock said nothing, only went on staring at John for a moment, as John shook his head, chuckling, and tucked the slips of paper back in his pocket. “By the way, I noticed an interesting omission from your speech,” Sherlock said at last, as if the previous exchange had not happened. By this time they were the last two men left in the meeting room.

“Oh?” John prompted. “What was that, then?”

“You didn’t forbid fucking our teammates’ brothers.”

John cleared his throat, shifted his weight and glanced at the floor. As he was about to go along with the joke, telling Sherlock that gay shit didn’t even need talking about, he caught Sherlock’s eyes and what he saw there was something glinting and playful, but not exactly the joke John had imagined him to be making. Sherlock arched one eyebrow, said nothing. John cleared his throat again.
“Well, thanks for the feedback. I can see you think you have me all figured out,” John said, squaring his shoulders. “But you’ve got it all wrong.” He quickly added, “About my retirement plans, and about my ability to lead the team.”

Sherlock showed his palms in false surrender. “All right.”

John offered his hand and Sherlock shook it. “See you at practice,” John told him, and retreated quickly out the door and down the corridor toward the lifts.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Useful hockey info for this chapter:

Each team has 20 players. Four offensive **lines** of three **forwards** each: a **center**, and two **wings** (left and right); six **defensemen** who play in pairs (three defensive lines), and two **goaltenders/goalies**, one of whom is the starting goalie and will play nearly every game, and the other of whom is the back-up goalie.

Each team is allowed five skaters on the ice (a 3-man forward line and a 2-man defensive line), plus the goalie. Players skate in shifts of about one minute, changing out as needed.

The play-by-play announcer will often refer to the **zones** (sometimes called ends, as in "that end of the rink"). Each team has its own zone, more technically its **defensive zone** (it is defending its goal in that zone). The middle third of the ice is the **neutral zone**. (mobile users may need to scroll to see the whole diagram)

When a team has control of the puck, it must move the puck into the **offensive zone** (sometimes called the "attacking zone") ahead of its players. If a teammate crosses the **blue line** into the defensive zone before the puck-handler gets there, the play is called **offside**, play is stopped, and players reset to start play again. The beginning of play is a **face-off**, which will happen either at the center dot (the blue dot in the middle of the spoked-B logo, above) or one of the other face-off dots, depending on which team has possession of the puck, and the reason for stoppage (usually an offside call; penalty call; or in the case of action close to the goal, the officials may lose sight of the puck under a pile of players).

**Face-off**: beginning of play; one forward (usually a center) from each team face each other and an official drops the puck between them.

**Offside**: a teammate crosses the blue line into the offensive/attacking zone ahead of the puck-
handler.

**One-timer:** a player receives a teammate's pass and takes an immediate slapshot, making no attempt to control the puck with his stick.

**Wrist-shot:** a player with control of the puck shoots it by making a quick twist of his wrist (versus drawing his stick back and swinging at the puck)

**Slapshot:** a player shoots the puck by drawing his stick backward—often to shoulder height or higher—and swinging hard at the puck

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When room assignments were announced for the first road trip, where the Brawlers would open their season, right wing/don’t-call-him-an-enforcer Shane Thurston brayed out a laugh as the travel coordinator called out, “Watson, you’re with Holmes.”

“Good luck with that, Cap!” Thurston chided, and lightly punched John’s shoulder.

“What’s this, now?” John prompted, grinning.

“Nobody wants to room with him. You’ll see.”

Two nights before the New Jersey Demons’ home opener, John and Sherlock were in a two-bedroom suite, with a shared sitting room and a kitchenette that had been stocked to their specifications before their arrival. For Sherlock, candy bars; decent tea and a kettle and pot to make it in; as well as three bottles of red wine, a packet of cigarettes, and a tied-shut plastic bag from a local pharmacy he carried with him straight to his bedroom along with his garment bag. For John, the advance team had stocked everything he’d requested: a dozen energy bars and six break-and-freeze ice packs.

In his room, John found most of his luggage lined up on the floor by the sliding closet doors, his biggest suitcase set upon the stand. He went through his usual motions, unpacking clothes into the dresser drawers—socks and vests and pants, belts and neckties and pocket squares in the top drawer; then two jumpers and two pairs of jeans in the second drawer; and two pairs of pyjama bottoms, an assortment of t-shirts, and his workout gear in the bottom. Delivering his shaving kit to the en suite bath, John unwrapped the little bar of hotel soap and laid it in the dish, set a drinking glass from the desktop set-up beside the sink and dropped his toothbrush into it. He had his own pillow in his second, smaller suitcase, and threw it at the head of the bed. He hung his garment bag in the closet, dragged the zip down, and rehung the suits and shirts.

Thus settled, John wandered back out to the sitting room and parted the window curtains just enough to take in the view, of which there wasn’t much—mostly the opposite bank of hotel room windows, as the building was horseshoe-shaped. Off to the right a sliver of the road was visible, along with a traffic signal at the intersection, and a nightclub’s skinny, vertical sign clinging to the corner of a building across the way, which read *Axis* in blue neon. Sherlock emerged from his own bedroom and began rummaging in the little kitchen, rattling glass.

“You want to get dinner?” John asked casually. “I think I remember the steakhouse downstairs is all right.”

“I’m not free,” Sherlock replied, with no further explanation, nor any thanks for the invitation. He picked up the phone by the wet bar and after a moment he said, “Send up a corkscrew please. Yes
—Holmes.” He rang off, and vanished back to his bedroom.

Before John had time to be offended or even puzzled, his phone buzzed alive in his trousers’ hip pocket and he fished it out. A texted invitation from Kocur to join him, Gerhardt, and Bouchard—the Brawlers’ elder statesmen, of which John imagined he may now be one, if age was the primary qualifier—for dinner in an hour, to which John replied in the affirmative. He and Sherlock were sharing a suite, but of course that didn’t require they become friends. He likely had more in common with the others, anyway. Feeling dehydrated from the flight, John stood at the sink gulping glass after glass of cold tap water that tasted like licking a river stone, then went for a shower.

John shared a pleasant couple of hours with the other veteran players, comparing notes about wives and kids—Gerhardt and Kocur each had two small ones, and Bouchard’s first was on the way—talking a bit about personnel changes around the league, and then comparing their own lists of injuries and surgical histories. Afterward, he strolled a few blocks up the road to a corner shop he remembered from having stayed in the same hotel as a member of the visiting team for season after season, only the room number—and now his roommate—changing. It was just as he remembered it, and he headed to the coolers at the back, wanting ginger beer to settle his gut after a rich meal. He scanned the rows and rows, was about to settle for sugary, artificially flavoured ginger ale in lieu of the real thing, and reached absently for the handle on the glass door. His fingers brushed another hand that was already there.

“Oh, sorry,” he said quickly, pulling his hand back and glancing sideways to find the hand belonged to a blond bloke with elaborately accidental hair and sharply arched eyebrows, who smiled with a mouth full of straight teeth.

“No problem.” He opened the door and reached in. “What were you—?”

“Ah, same as you have there, actually,” John said, shrugging in what-a-crazy-random-happenstance fashion.

The blond drew out two bottles of iced tea and passed one to John. Their fingers brushed as John took it from him, and the blond man went on smiling. “Buy you a drink?” he joked, tilting his head toward the front of the shop.

“Thanks. I’m John.”

“Devin.”

“Live nearby, Devin?”

“No, but my car’s just out back. Can I drive you somewhere?”

“That’s kind of you,” John said, as Devin paid for the bottles of tea.

Devin’s car was a sleek European thing with tinted windows and leather interior, and after a quick glance around the parking area, they slid into the back, abandoning their drinks on the floor mats. “I like your nose,” Devin said, and his hand slid firm and sure along the inseam of John’s jeans. John grabbed Devin’s hand and pressed it against his fly, curving both their palms over his thickening prick. “I like your big dick, too,” Devin breathed, leaning close to John’s ear.

“Do you kiss?”

“Sure, honey, if you want.”
When they were finished, John declined Devin’s second, genuine offer to drive him somewhere, in favour of walking back to the hotel. He forgot to take his bottle of iced tea.

Next morning, the Brawlers were scheduled to practice at ten, but John awoke before his phone’s alarm chimed to the sound of voices outside his bedroom door. One was definitely Sherlock’s, and the other two he couldn’t place.

“. . . number in my phone.”

“Did I leave a jacket somewhere?”

“Just . . . sofa.”

“Come out for coffee. I’ll buy you breakfast.”

“It’s generous. . . rather not.”

When John emerged from his bedroom he found Sherlock—as expected but for the fact he was wearing a white hotel bed sheet like a toga—and two men John didn’t recognize, the first with heavy fringe covering all of one eye and half of the other—which John could see was smudged with black liner—and the second with three silver rings piercing his lips. Sherlock was herding them toward the suite’s door, but he spared John a surly glance, making it clear John’s intrusion was unappreciated.

“It was a lovely evening,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly, in a tone which implied that the lovely evening was well and truly over and it was time for his guests to vanish back to whatever college dormitory their parents were paying for them to live in while they spent nights in hotel suites with strangers.

“Can we call you later?” the pierced one asked, as Sherlock pulled open the double doors and stood aside for the two to take their leave.

“No, thank you,” Sherlock said, with a patently false grin that drove both young men out into the corridor. He shut the doors soundly behind them.

John was making coffee.

“The reason no one likes rooming with you, I take it?” he asked jovially.

Sherlock grimaced. “As if none of them flies in his wife now and then.”

“Oh, right! My mistake; I didn’t realise you’d married them.” He poured two cups—they were the ridiculously small hotel ones—and picked up one in each hand. “I hope you checked those children’s IDs.”

“They were delicious,” Sherlock replied with a stagey shrug. “And insatiable. They barely need any recovery time between rounds.” He looked expectantly at the coffees in John’s hands.

“Bus leaves in ninety minutes,” John said, eying Sherlock up and down meaningfully, then turned and took both his cups of coffee with him to his bedroom.

“Screen Hoffmann!”
Sherlock shouted to be heard over the public address system’s blare of music, the crowd noise, and the chatter of the officials and players as they arranged themselves in the Brawlers’ defensive end for a face-off.

“Why him?” John dawdled momentarily in front of the crease. Sherlock set himself in the corner of the goal, deeply bent at the knees and folded slightly forward.

“Deneski usually beats Boosh in face-offs. He always passes to Hoffmann and Hoffmann always goes straight for the one-timer.”

John nodded and took up his usual position.

“Face-off in the Brawlers’ end, Brick. Michel Bouchard is the league leader in face-off wins—four seasons running!—but there are an elite few around the league who reliably give him a run for his money, and Milwaukee’s David Deneski is one of them. The official waves them away. Drops the puck. Deneski wins the face-off, pass to Hoffmann, Hoffmann’s one-timer wide on Holmes’s glove side, Holmes deflects and Deneski’s there for the rebound, passes back to Hoffmann at the hash marks. Hoffmann, with patience. To Schmitt, back to Hoffmann, Deneski, wrist shot, SAVE BY HOLMES! Watson and Hatch both in a skirmish with Deneski, Schmitt is there, Watson frees the puck but Bouchard gets there ahead of the pass and can’t settle it. Hoffmann takes possession, Hoffmann with a wrist-shot—right into the catching glove of Sherlock Holmes, and he’ll take another face-off. What do we think of Sherlock Holmes in goal today, Brick?”

“Two nice saves there by Sherlock Holmes, let’s look at the replay of this face-off, see how the play developed…”

Sherlock hunched in the corner of his goal, set his stick down hard. “Why didn’t you set up a screen against Hoffmann?” he demanded.

John shook his head, grimaced around his mouth guard, but said nothing.

“Deneski’s going to get thrown out of this face-off on purpose; he’s out of gas and wants a change.” Sherlock tossed his head on his neck, left-right, and settled.

“Deneski’s thrown out of the face-off for a false start; Mike Schmitt will take it. Puck drops, Bouchard wins the face-off. Jake Mellon with control of the puck, flying up the boards, and they’re off to the races.”

When John’s shift ended, he sat on the bench between Thurston and Kocur. “Holmes just told me how both those face-offs were going to go, and they were both exactly as he said,” he said loudly, into the towel he was using to mop his face.

“First rule of Brawlers Hockey,” Thurston said. “Do what Holmesy says.”

John had just finished shoveling his midnight meal into his mouth—they were on the plane from Knoxville back to Boston after beating the Wildcats in a 6 – 2 blowout—when Sherlock crumpled into the seat opposite him, beside Bouchard.

“I need your ear things,” Sherlock said, and Bouchard squinted quizzically at him, ear buds in his ears and his phone propped up against his folded hoodie on the little tabletop.
“Yeah, well, I’m using them at the moment. What happened to your own?”

“Don’t know. Left them somewhere.” Sherlock looked supremely put out.

“Here, use mine,” John offered, unwinding his from where they draped over his shoulders.

“Thank you.” Sherlock accepted the proffered wire and went into the inside pocket of his suit jacket for his phone.

“Boosh!” Thurston shouted from near the front of the cabin. “We need you for cards.”

Bouchard replied with a loud, “Yeah, all right,” and made to leave, nudging Sherlock’s knees when he refused to move them. “You jackass,” he muttered, shaking his head, but he smiled.

“Thurston always scratches his chin when he’s got face-card pairs,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly.

“Thanks.”

John wadded up his paper napkin and tossed it onto his empty plastic plate, shoved it aside on the table. “You play?” he asked, tipping his chin toward the poker game getting underway.

“They won’t let me anymore,” Sherlock said, and shrugged.

“Because you’re a know-it-all,” John said, grinning.

“Because I won Hatch’s wedding ring and wouldn’t return it.”

John barked a laugh. “What?!”


“About honouring his marriage,” John nodded.

“That playing with me is no joke,” Sherlock corrected, and launched out of the seat and into the one beside John. “Do you like films?”

“Yeah, of course,” John replied, leaning away to study Sherlock, who was sprawled with one expensively-shod foot on the seat he’d just abandoned, the other leg stretching out to infinity in the aisle. For post-game, late-night travel—when no press was around to film or photograph them as they left the arena or arrived at the airport—most of the team opted for casual, comfortable clothes, jeans and jumpers or tracksuit bottoms and zippered sweatshirts. Sherlock, though, always wore one of his exquisitely cut suits and a beautifully tailored shirt, open at the neck. In the four weeks they’d been playing and traveling and rooming together, John didn’t think he had ever seen Sherlock in the same suit twice. He glanced down at his own horizontal-striped pullover, bought in a department store, one in every colour. He’d no food on it; that was something.

“Old films?” Sherlock asked, swiping away on his phone.

“I’ve got WebMovie on my tablet, if you want,” John suggested. “Bit bigger.”

“Well I do always prefer bigger,” Sherlock mused, as if to himself. “Thanks. Here.” Sherlock tucked one earbud into his own ear and offered John the other. Once he’d fetched the tablet from his rucksack by his feet, John passed it over and Sherlock went back to swiping. “I’m in a bit of an old movie phase at the moment,” Sherlock said. “Ah, there we are.” He made some final taps at the screen and folded it to stand on the table top. He plugged in the ear buds’ cord and John waited to see what would show up on the screen. He settled back a bit, and had to lean toward the armrest
between them because of the wire. Sherlock reached up and clicked off the overhead lights.

The film started and after the first several minutes John cut a few quick glances toward Sherlock, trying to gauge if he was taking the piss out of him.

“I thought you said old films,” John prompted.

“This is old.” He didn’t look away from the screen.

“This movie is from the ‘80s.” It was one John had seen as a teenager, on a VHS tape he rented from a shop; it had John Cusack and that weird, screaming comedian who breathed hard.

“Yes, 1986.”

John laughed a bit. “I thought you meant, like, Citizen Kane or something, when you said old.”

“Shh.” Sherlock unbuttoned his jacket and reached inside to scratch softly at the far edge of his torso. He left his hand resting inside his jacket, forearm draped across his waist.

“Yeah, all right,” John acquiesced. He studied Sherlock’s profile for another moment before turning back toward the screen.

John laughed all through the movie; he’d forgotten it was clever and a bit romantic, not merely silly, but when he looked to Sherlock in that expectant, automatic way of people watching funny films together—did you see that? Funny, right?—Sherlock never returned the glance, never got beyond the faintest upward curl of his lips. It ended as the plane began descending. John ditched his lone ear bud as his ears were filling up anyway, and he dug in his rucksack for chewing gum, offering a piece to Sherlock, who refused with a shake of his head.

“Thanks, that was good. I’d forgotten that one. That same director—he had another good one. Same lead actor, too.”

“Next time,” Sherlock offered.

“Yeah,” John replied, and began to pack away his tablet and ear buds in his bag. “Good. Great. Look forward to it. Back when I was playing in Hamilton I used to—” He looked up out of his rucksack’s depths, only to find Sherlock was gone, walking toward the back of the plane, where he sank into another seat and out of John’s sight.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

John was sharing literal boatloads of sushi—served on ice in small wooden boats at the center of the table—with Sawyer, Hatch, Sullivan, and Gerhardt at a restaurant near the Long Island arena where they would play the following evening. John’s linemate Hatch and showboat Sawyer were both drinking soft drinks—the former because he was a teetotaler for the lord, and the latter because he was too young to be served alcohol in restaurants—but Sullivan and Gerhardt were sharing warm pitchers of sake with John, and the overall mood was convivial. John had felt from early days with the team that he was respected—they’d made him team captain in his first Brawlers season, after all—and pretty well liked by his teammates. But it had taken these first few months actually playing—especially road trips, which inevitably meant dinners together, close quarters on the bus and plane, and a more intense sort of socializing off-ice than when they were in Boston and each had his own home to retreat to—for John to begin to feel that he belonged.

“How’s it rooming with Holmesy, Cap?” Sullivan asked.

“He’s fucking you, for sure,” Gerhardt laughed, and John’s gut tightened.

“Fucking him?! You mean fucking with him?” Sullivan guffawed at Gerhardt’s choice of phrase. “Jeez, bro, how long have you been here? Learn English.”

“Fucking with me?” John forced a grin. He’d long since shaken off any suspicion from his former Thrashers teammates, and had rarely felt self-conscious. Being in a new group of players had him on guard in a way he hadn’t been in years. John knew he passed easily—he was straight-acting and knew all the right things to say, all the things never to do—but these guys didn’t know him the way his old team had, and he sometimes doubted himself, wondering if somehow one of them might see through him. Not helping matters was the fact that despite being teammates—and therefore supposedly as close as brothers—John was distractingly attracted to Thomas Gerhardt with his superhero physique, angular face, and, yes, even his German-accented, sometimes-crooked turns of phrase. It was exhausting, constantly checking in with himself about whether he was looking at Gerhardt too long, smiling too much, touching him too often.

“Holmes is not easy to spend time around,” Gerhardt half-elaborated. “Such hockey genius he has, but he is not one you want to drink beers with.”

Sullivan nodded. “I love the guy; Holmesy’s my brother. But, man! He is a fucking weird dude. I’ve known him five years and I hardly know him, y’know?”

“He’s all right,” John shrugged. “I like him.”

Sawyer had been listening to their exchange and put in, “I heard he turned weird because of boarding school. His parents shipped him to Finland when he was a tiny kid, like preschool or something. Because . . . he’s English, right?”

“You’ve heard him talk, what do you think?” Sullivan jibed, and smeared a green pearl of wasabi across a slice of whitefish sashimi before spearing it with his chopsticks and shoving it into his mouth. His eyes turned pink and glistened.

“I don’t fucking know,” Sawyer defended. “Coach talks like him, and he’s from Canada. And Watson!”

“I’m not from Canada,” John corrected.
“I thought you were from Ontario.” Sawyer looked incredulous.

“No, I’m from London,” John corrected, smiling. “England. I only moved to Canada when I was a teenager.”

“Do they even play hockey in England?” Hatch asked.

“A bit. I didn’t get serious until we emigrated.” John swirled a slab of dark pink tuna in a shallow dish of soy sauce. “I didn’t know that about Holmes, the boarding school thing.”

The server dropped the folio near John’s elbow and he reached for it. He glanced at the total, which was north of six hundred dollars, and read off the last digit. “Five,” he announced, and the men all brought out their credit cards. Whoever’s card number ended with a five, or whichever was closest to five, would pay.

“Aw, fuck me, that’s two in a row!” Sullivan moaned good-naturedly. “I’m bringing a different card next time.”

John’s phone, lying facedown on the tabletop by his water glass, buzzed to life. John turned it over and leaned back to prevent anyone glancing over his shoulder, though he needn’t have worried as the moment he’d reached for his, they all got out their own phones and the table fell silent as the men checked texts and social media. John’s notification was of a new CRUZR message.

Nice pic.

John’s profile picture on the notorious hookup app was of his erect cock with a pearly bead of pre-cum sliding down the crown. He glanced around the table once more, eyes settling on Gerhardt’s forearm where it rested on the table, the veins and tendons standing out; his wide, heavy wristwatch; his wedding ring. Before John started tapping out his response, the phone buzzed again.

A lot to swallow but I like a challenge.

John shifted significantly in his chair, sliding it back as he rose to stand and turned to fetch his coat off the back of it. “My agent,” he lied easily. “Gotta call him back, so I’ll take off. See you fellas tomorrow.” Excuses made, John summoned a ride-on-demand and walked to the nearby intersection, glancing every few seconds at the progress map. He tapped out a reply to his CRUZR contact, whose handle was JanuaryMan and whose profile pic was the upper half of his torso—well-defined but still slim, he was obviously athletic—and one flexed bicep.

I’m free in about an hour. Where are you?

The car arrived and it was a short ride back to the team’s hotel.

Downtown. Waite Street, came the reply, along with a photo of heather-grey boxer briefs low-slung across a sharp-edged pelvis, one thumb hooked in the waistband to hold them in place, a dark trail of hair from the navel downward, and with promising outlines and shadows just visible beneath the fabric. As it happened, the team’s hotel was on the corner of Waite and Roosevelt.

Perfect, John typed quickly. Your photos are hot. Show your face?

Sorry.

John was by then in the corridor leading to the suite.
No problem, same here, John messaged back. With what he’d seen thus far, he wasn’t terribly worried. He never put his own face on CRUZR, either; the risk was too great. He thumbed to another photo he had saved in his phone, a mirror shot of his chest, his phone held just so, to block most of the tangled mess of scars from an old shoulder injury and the subsequent surgeries. He messaged the photo to the JanuaryMan.

Nice. T/B?

John let himself into the suite and started toward his room. He’d scrub up a bit, clean his teeth, and within the hour he’d be getting a blow job from an eager stranger. Modern technology was a marvel. “Hey, Holmes?” he called.

From Sherlock’s room came a distinct, “Hmm?”

“Going out tonight?”

John congratulated himself on being completely obvious about trying to get rid of his suite-mate; he may as well have shouted that he was inviting a hookup to their room and could Sherlock please fuck off for a while. He paused in the middle of the sitting room waiting for Sherlock’s reply. He thought about his response to the JanuaryMan’s query, then about Gerhardt and how despite John’s best effort never to think about a teammate in that way, he’d more than once had a wank with his finger up his own arse imagining Gerhardt bending him over the furniture and shagging him incoherent.

He typed, Switch, then shouted, “Holmes!”

A message came back. Can I finger you while I suck that big prick?

John bit his lip. Fuck yes! I’m close to Waite Street, where can I meet you?

I'm staying in the Hyatt, the JanuaryMan responded.

Sherlock finally called back, “Staying in.”

John froze. It couldn’t be. He couldn’t possibly be having this particular nightmare. He stepped quickly into his bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him as he typed back, Nice hotel! Business or pleasure?

Business, but it will be my pleasure for you to ride my cock so I can jack yours while I fuck you. Are you coming or not?

What sort of business?

There was a pause, during which John was almost certain he’d lost the JanuaryMan’s attention by responding to graphic sexual banter with small talk about work. But after only an extra beat, his phone buzzed with the reply.

I’m an NHL goaltender. Answer please, are we on?

John balled his fist and repeatedly slammed it into the pile of bed pillows, punching them harder than he’d ever punched during an in-game fight. This was his nightmare come true, that he’d end up talking on CRUZR to someone he was sworn to stay away from, who he wasn’t even attracted to, and who would almost certainly never let John live it down, should he somehow give himself away.
Forget it, he typed, then added, Sorry. Something’s come up and I can’t get away.

Right. Maybe another time.

John wanted to hurl his phone at the mirrored closet door, settled for throwing a couple more jabs at the pillows. He needed a drink.

Rummaging in the kitchenette’s mini-fridge he liberated tiny bottles of vodka, gin, whisky, and rum. Sherlock swanned out of his room, speaking in the stilted tone reserved for dealing with his mobile phone’s AI. “Nearest gay bar to Waite Street Hyatt,” he said, and reached into the closet for his coat. John started twisting the tiny lids off the liquor bottles, downed the gin first, in two swallows.

Sherlock set his phone on the wet bar’s marble top as he shrugged into his coat, and it sweetly told him, “Here’s a list of gay nightclubs nearby. Avalon, Tenth Street; The Paradise Café, Ninth Street; The Ramrod, Ninth Street. . .”

“Sounds promising,” Sherlock joked, raising his eyebrows conspiratorially at John. “Don’t wait up.”

John’s simmering fury was melting into depression. Easy for Sherlock, who clearly was not bothered a bit about anyone and everyone knowing he was gay—and a bit of a slag, to boot—to change course so quickly, from a failed CRUZR hookup to trawling for a standing hand job in the gents’ of a throbbing, sweat-stinking dance club, in no time flat. He didn’t look bothered in the least.

“Let me ask you something,” John said, crossing one arm over his chest and holding his chin with the other hand.

“Car service, Waite Street to Ninth Street, Long Island City,” Sherlock demanded of his phone, then fixed a narrow gaze on John. “What is it?”

“Don’t you worry the press will get wind of your . . .” John gestured. “This,” he clarified. “Late night trips to Ninth Street, Long Island City.”

“Primarily, my answer to that is that I don’t care what the press—or anyone else—gets wind of. But over time I’ve also come to realise that being seen in the company of many different men doesn’t attract attention—we’re in the company of men everywhere, all the time. It’s only when you start to be seen over and over with the same man that people begin to draw conclusions.”

“That’s happened to you?” John asked.

“I don’t do boyfriends,” Sherlock retorted, pocketing his phone and checking his hair in one of the many mirrors. “One and done. Scorched earth.” He smiled. He’d have no trouble finding someone to rendezvous with him—he had several good angles, and John imagined that in a certain light, his cocky confidence would probably read as sexy charisma.

John raised the tiny bottle of vodka in a salute. “Know thyself and be set free.”

“Indeed. See you at practice tomorrow.”

Once the door had clicked shut behind Sherlock, John took the remaining two bottles to his bedroom. He toed off his shoes, took off his belt, and untucked his shirt tails, then lay back on the probably concussed pillows. He imagined that throwing punches like those during a game would have earned him a fighting major and probably two minors—one for roughing and one for
instigating. He turned on the TV and tuned it randomly to a midrange number where the sports networks usually were—42—and found he’d guessed correctly. Half-listening to the play-by-play on a college basketball game, he scrolled back through the CRUZR messages to see if he’d missed some early clue, but there was nothing to find. Just dirty talk and quick agreement to meet for a tryst. The JanuaryMan could have been anyone, until suddenly he could only have been one person. It would only be a matter of time before Sherlock figured out that ON_D_18 was actually John, as the app’s GPS showed his screen name listed nearby again and again, in every city the Brawlers traveled to.

John took another long, appraising look at the photos Sherlock had sent—he was fit, of course, and John scolded himself for not recognizing Sherlock’s bare chest, given he’d seen it countless times in the Brawlers’ dressing room, at the gym, in the pool. Those designer briefs he wore, when the majority of the players wore the league-sponsoring brand of compression shorts. Maybe he should have put it together, but the context made all the difference, so John forgave himself the blind spot. After a minute or two, he blocked the JanuaryMan from seeing his location or contacting him again. Just in case.

Rereading the messages, with a few drinks in him, thinking about Gerhardt’s forearms (something about that watch, heavy on his wrist, and the square shape of his thumb joints, was positively devastating), admiring Sherlock’s naked chest and shoulders and the shadow of his cock and bollocks beneath the hundred-dollar underwear (before he knew all of it belonged to a teammate). John clicked off the bedside lamp, left the TV on, and opened his trousers. He wondered if Sherlock had gotten a hard-on, looking at a photo of John’s prick, offering him a blow job, to finger him, to lie back and let John fuck himself on his prick. He must have. He’d run out to find an alternative within two minutes of being waved off. John noted with some surprise that Sherlock’s pubic hair, some of it visible above the tugged-down waistband of his pants, had been auburn-tinted.

John tried to imagine those graphic come-ons had been sent by Gerhardt instead of Sherlock, even mentally reworted them into Gerhardt’s English-is-my-fourth-language grammatical style. A lot for a swallow but I like this challenge. Can I put fingers inside while I suck this big prick? I will take pleasure from your ride of my cock. But behind his closed eyes, John kept seeing Sherlock’s pink nipples and slender but sculpted arms, Sherlock’s waves of dark hair, even Sherlock’s ridiculously expensive Italian shoes, and what did it matter, anyway? It was all in his head, and had got him hard, aching with the promise of a blow job he now felt he’d been cheated out of, and he thought about fucking hard into Sherlock’s know-it-all mouth—that would shut him up, but good—and John came in his own hand, across his own hip, trudged to the bath and cleaned up with toilet roll. He pissed, flushed, cleaned his teeth to get the funk of too much alcohol off his tongue.

Of course, he shouldn’t be wanking to any of his teammates, regardless of whose fault it was. He wouldn’t anymore. One and done. It was a sound policy.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Not much hockey in this chapter though I'll remind you the "trapezoid" is a trapezoidal space behind the goal net. There's reference to one team "outshooting" the other—which refers to the number of shots on goal, not the number of goals scored. The Vezina Trophy is awarded to the NHL's best goalie each year.

They were on the plane home to Boston after their road trip (won against the Shock in a barn-burner, 2 – 1; lost to New York 5 – 3), and most of the team was either asleep or at least very quiet; they’d been delayed out of Newark due to bad weather, and it was nearing three in the morning. Sherlock and John had watched another 1980s comedy about a bunch of cool misfits (weren’t they all?), and John had laughed while Sherlock merely smirked. As he packed his tablet into his bag, John said, “I hear you went to school in Finland.”

“True.”

“That’s where you started playing?” The Finns were hockey-mad, very unlike John and Sherlock’s fellow Englishmen.

“I went there specifically because I wanted to play,” Sherlock corrected mildly.

“Oh? Sawyer said you went to Finland very young.”

“That’s right. I was six.”

“And you already knew you wanted to play? And your parents—?” John imagined Sherlock’s family must be very posh to have shipped off an infant to a foreign country; it was the sort of thing rich people did with their children, to keep them from becoming inconvenient.

“My family was living there for a while; my mother was teaching mathematics at a prestigious boarding school out in the countryside, somewhat near Kuopio. I was what my parents called ‘spirited’ and what others called ‘a pain in the arse,’ so they had me in a lot of activities. Skating and hockey came quite naturally to me, even that young. It was imagined I was some sort of autistic savant; and I was recruited by the boarding school. But it certainly did no harm that I was also stubbornly single-minded; once I’d been on the ice I rarely wanted to be anywhere else. My mother moved with me and sometimes taught, and we spent summers in London with my father and brothers.”

“And are you?” John managed to ask, though he kept his eyes focused into his rucksack. “A savant?” He couldn’t bring himself to ask the question with the emphasis on the more obviously intriguing word.

“Not at all. Everything I know about hockey, I know because I worked to learn it. I still work at learning it. Having that sort of brain wiring would have made organizing all the statistics much easier for me, I imagine.” Sherlock stretched his arms over his head, arcing his back so his chest
thrust forward, and roared a yawn at the ceiling. “What about you? Couldn’t make the cut at football?”

“My dad’s Canadian, and he played in the minors for a few years before he married my mum, but he never got the call-up. He had me on skates as soon as I could walk. Coached my youth teams. We moved to Ontario when I was 13 so I could play against better players, to improve my game.”

“And did it?” Sherlock half-smiled, teasing.

“No, I’m still shit at hockey,” John replied. “Really hopeless.”

Sherlock nodded, still smiling. “I know. I know all your stats since your rookie year.”

“I bet you do.”

“You were married,” Sherlock commented, as if that were one of John’s significant playing statistics.

“I was, for a short time. Years ago, in my twenties,” John said, nodding, wistful. “We were young and it turned out we wanted different things. Unfortunately,” he shrugged, “we didn’t figure that out until after we got married.”

“What was it she wanted?” Sherlock asked, not sounding terribly interested.

“A nine-to-five life in the suburbs with a husband home at the weekends,” John replied. “I don’t begrudge her; we were just two kids who made a mistake. We didn’t last a year.”

Sherlock was studying him intently. “And since then?” he prompted.

“Married to the game,” John said easily.

“Me, as well,” Sherlock replied.

“I won’t tell the game about that parade of blokes through our suite, then, or it might get jealous,” John replied.

“You needn’t whisper, it’s not a secret,” Sherlock said, though by then the plane was so hushed they were both speaking in voices just loud enough to be heard over the drone of the engines, and both were slumped toward each other, sharing the wide leather arm rest with their shoulders and elbows nearly touching.

“No, I know,” John said quickly, waving his hand a bit. “I didn’t mean—”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him questioningly. John’s neck felt hot and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Do as you like,” John said, dismissing himself. “It doesn’t matter to me. I don’t. . .I was going to say I don’t care but that’s not it. It’s just that. . .it’s fine. It’s all. . .” He limped to an end he knew made him sound like an overcompensating, homophobic hetero trying to make himself sound cool. “Fine.”

“I know it’s fine,” Sherlock replied, sounding defensive.

“Yeah, of course. I only mean, you should know I don’t mind.”

Sherlock only nodded, looking vaguely skeptical, though what his skepticism was aimed at wasn’t
John yawned, starting out stagey and ending up genuine. “Gonna try to catch a few before we land,” he said, and pulled the blanket draped over the back of his seat down over his shoulders and across his chest. He reclined his seat all the way back and turned his head away from Sherlock, who went on eyeing him up. John imagined he could feel the burn of Sherlock’s curious, appraising gaze for a discomfitingly long time. It occurred to him Sherlock had not asked John to clarify what it was John had wanted from life that his ex-wife could not provide, probably assuming he’d already deduced John’s answer.

“Still scoreless with just under 12 minutes left to play, and Kansas City is tilting the Boston ice, clocking big minutes in the attacking zone. They’re outshooting the Brawlers 37 to just 19. Boston’s defensive pairs are working overtime, and goalie Sherlock Holmes has made save after big save, looking every inch the two-time Vezina trophy winner he is. Kirk to Gunnerson, he passes to Moore who wheels past the crease trying to open up the shooting lane. John Watson giving Moore some attitude now. Moore passes back to Kirk, Kirk the one-timer, SAVE BY HOLMES! A massive save by Sherlock Holmes there, getting way out in front of the net, and he was as big as a house. The Brawlers take possession, Hatch hangs back in the trapezoid and the Brawlers get fresh legs on the ice.”

“They’re playing my song,” Holmes shouted, sounding somewhere between exultant and furious. “Well, one of them, anyway.”

The crowd was a massive wall of sound, letting out a long, low cry of “Hoooooolmes!” in praise of Sherlock’s truly impressive performance through two-plus periods against a relentless onslaught by the Kansas City Rovers. The drawn out vowel created an eerie moan that sounded like nothing so much as a low-rolling threat.

“Heads up,” Sherlock shouted, and Hatch broke out from behind the net, passing across to John, who sent it up quick to Thurston.

The Brawlers applied pressure, driving the Rovers’ forwards out of position and sending their defensive pair scrambling. “Thurty, Thurty, Thurty!” John barked, and Thurston wheeled a tight circle, passed hard without looking, right to where he knew John would be. The lane was wide open, John could see the goalie squaring up, with no hope of help from his dislocated defensemen. John drew back and fired a slapshot, aiming at the goalie’s stick-side shoulder. The light went on, the horn sounded, and the Brawlers threw up their arms as the goal-celebration music blared out over the PA and the crowd jumped up, roaring.

“Cap, you glorious sonofabitch!” Thurston yelled, and the four other skaters converged on John, hugging him and patting his back. John skated by the bench to bump gloves with his teammates, then turned and looked up at the scoreboard to watch the replay.

“Team captain John Watson gets his first goal as a Boston Brawler to put Boston ahead. Watson’s made a long career as a high-scoring defenseman, and this Boston crowd is showing him the love right now. The Garden is rocking, we’ll take a break and catch our breath. . .how’s your entertainment factor tonight, folks?!”

The puck John fired over the shoulder of the Rovers’ goalie was on the shelf of John’s locker after the game—Mellon scored on an empty net in the last half-minute for a 2 – 0 shutout—wrapped in
white tape on which was written John’s name, the date, and “1st Goal as Boston Brawler.” John grinned at the puck as he pitched his sweater into the central wheeled cart.

“Congratulations, Captain.” Sherlock, dragging his sweater over his head and tossing it over his shoulder.

“Yeah, thanks. Thanks.”

“I’ll buy you dinner,” Sherlock offered, with a raised eyebrow and slight smirk. They were flying to Phoenix overnight and would be eating the usual catered meal around the tiny tables in the team plane.

“Generous of you,” John grinned back. “Movie, too?”

“Think I can manage that,” Sherlock agreed. He slapped John on the shoulder and waddled away, still wearing his skates and massive leg pads.

Just after midnight, the team was settling in on the jet when head coach Greg Lestrade called for their attention and to everyone’s surprise, the general manager stepped into the plane, looking dour and with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Good game, boys,” he started, sounding unenthusiastic, frowning. “I want to be the one to tell you that Thomas Gerhardt is being placed on indefinite league suspension and we don’t anticipate him returning to the team this season.”

There was a general clamour of dismay among the players and Lestrade shushed them like a schoolteacher with unruly students.

“On the way out of the Garden after the game, Gerhardt was taken into custody by Boston Police on a domestic violence charge. From what we understand, this is credible, and will be an ongoing issue for him for the foreseeable future. That’s about all I can say right now; we only have basic information. But. It’s serious. Apparently there’s a history. This is not something we want players commenting about publicly, so if you’re approached by the press, your answer is No Comment, and you refer them to the Brawlers front office. MacGraw’s being called up from Bridgeport; he’ll meet us in Phoenix in the morning for practice.”

John and Sherlock were already side by side with the tablet computer, and Sherlock—who seemed utterly nonplussed by the distressing revelation about his teammate—started tapping at the screen to get their film started.

John’s brain was busy re-categorising everything he’d ever known or believed about Gerhardt—no longer a handsome Teutonic charmer with a winning smile, but rather a monster who beat up the mother of his children. John’s gut churned. He’d have no further worry about distracting fantasies of his teammate, surely; he was repulsed. “That’s a bit of a shock,” John said at last.

“Mm,” Sherlock half-agreed, then added off-handedly, “Perhaps you should have included a Don’t Hit Your Wife section in your opening remarks.”

“What?!” John scowled at him. “Fuck you; that’s bullshit and you know it. I’ve known the guy three months. How long have you and Kocur and Bouchard been playing with him? Years, right? Did you know he was like that?”

Sherlock shrugged, staring at the tablet’s screen and fiddling needlessly with it. “It’s not my business.”
“More bullshit! You knew he was hitting his wife—”

“Suspected.”

“Suspected, then. And did you confront him? Or you think that’s acceptable behaviour?” John was riled. Sherlock finally set the tablet aside and looked at him, eyes narrowing as if reading something on John’s face.

“Someone like him interfered with someone close to you,” he said. “Your parents? Oh, or is there a sister? Given your obsessively protective attitude toward even fictional sisters—”

“You know what? Shut up. Will you move, maybe? I want to sleep.” John knew that of course he was too irritated to sleep. Sherlock had just found a raw spot John generally managed to keep covered, and dug a bony finger in.

“You feel guilty for not having spoken up,” Sherlock finished, still staring. His eyes relaxed from thin slits back to their usual almond shape.

“You should feel guilty for not having spoken up,” John shot back at him.

“Of course I do,” Sherlock replied, so plainly it immediately deflated John’s outrage.

John let go a deep sigh. “Yeah,” he said. “Sorry.” After a short pause, he added, “My sister’s boyfriend almost killed her. But I didn’t know, because I was away so much and only spoke to her by text and email. If I’d known someone was doing that to her, I’d have done something. By the time I found out, she was in hospital.”

“From what I understand, victims often hide and deny abuse; likely you wouldn’t have known even if you saw her regularly. She’s all right?” Sherlock asked.

“Better, yeah. Thanks for asking.” John shifted, wanting relief from the tension. He tipped his chin toward the front of the plane. “Still buying dinner? I’ll take one of those meatball sandwiches and some crisps.”

“Specialty of the house,” Sherlock joked, and got up to fetch them each a meal while John scrounged in his bag for his earbuds so they could watch another of Sherlock’s “old” films.
They landed in Green Bay in a snow storm, and on the bus to the hotel the travel coordinator broke
the news that they would be in double rooms instead of suites. Sherlock claimed the bed nearest
the bathroom as soon as they were in the door by throwing his designer leather duffel on it. As he
hung his coat in the narrow cupboard with theft-proof hangers he said plainly, “I sleep in the
nude.”

“I could have guessed,” John grumbled. “Do I have to say aloud that you shouldn’t be bringing
anyone back here given the close quarters?”

“If you like,” Sherlock told him, and reached across himself to unbutton his shirt cuff.

“I’m too old and tired for socks on the door knob,” John said, sinking to sit on his own bed with his
back to Sherlock, and bending to untie his shoes. “So you’ll have to cruise the clubs or—and I
know this will sound outrageous—maybe keep it in your trousers for a couple of nights.”

“That would be terribly unfair to whomever misses out, though,” Sherlock protested, and John
could hear his clothing rustling, then the bathroom door clicking shut. John liberated his pillow
from one suitcase and began unpacking his clothing from the other into the chest of drawers, then
crossed the room to hang his suits. As he shut the cupboard door and turned away, Sherlock
emerged from the bath in just his designer boxer-briefs, scratching his chest and yawning
extravagantly behind his other hand. John redirected his gaze away from mostly-naked Sherlock
and swerved around him to retrieve his shaving kit from where he’d left it on the foot of his bed.

“Done in there?” John asked.

“Mm,” came the reply. Sherlock’s long torso curved beautifully—rounded back and concave belly
—as he reached beneath the pile of squishy hotel pillows to drag the blankets back. John’s eyes
flicked to the dusting of dark hair beneath his navel, a drift that disappeared beneath the black
waistband imprinted with DOLCE & GABBANA in blue. Sherlock slid into his bed, drew up the
blankets, wrinkled a bit, and flung the underwear onto the floor between the two beds. He wrapped
the duvet around his head so only his face was exposed, and closed his eyes.
Behind the closed bathroom door, John did as he must, washed his hands and cleaned his teeth. Sherlock’s trousers and his soft-as-silk cotton shirt with its slim tailoring and monogrammed cuffs were strewn over the edge of the bath tub. John shut the toilet’s lid and sat on it, the recent sight of Sherlock in his skivvies inspiring memories of the photos he’d gotten from the JanuaryMan those weeks before. Sherlock’s low belly was tight and pale, enticingly speckled with dark freckles near his navel in a constellation of four. Of course, he hadn’t known it was John he was offering to swallow down in one go, John who received the enticing photo of his low-slung waistband showing off his pubic hair and the shadowy shape of his half-hard prick beneath the front placket of those expensive briefs. And despite John’s thus far successful effort to put them out of his mind, having just been confronted with Sherlock’s near-nudity only a few yards from him, all he could think in that moment—as he plucked up Sherlock’s shirt from the bathtub’s edge and rubbed it against his neck, held it over his mouth and nose to inhale a faint mixture of Sherlock’s cologne, deodorant, and perspiration—was Sherlock offering a blow job with his long fingers in John’s arse, offering to jack him off with those big hands while they fucked.

He drew out his phone, found a likely candidate, and let his profile picture do most of the talking as he sent a concise message: *Wanna suck it?*

He was uncomfortably hard beneath his trousers, though he would have had to admit if pressed that the discomfort actually originated in his conflicted mind. Sherlock was a flamboyant slag, a teammate, the nearest thing John had to an actual friend; he was well out of bounds in every conceivable metric and yet here was John huffing his discarded clothing and seeking relief from a dark-haired stranger in the dead of night when he should be resting up for the morning skate. *Looks good, big man,* came a reply. As John was opening the ride-hailing app to summon a car, another message followed. *Will you piss in my mouth?*

John felt his face pucker. *Not my thing, sorry. Forget it.*

At least it had served to turn him off; his erection began to wither and he allowed himself to go on thinking about that particular proposal until he’d cooled sufficiently to leave the bath and put himself to bed. He augmented his mild disgust with thoughts of drinking the water from the therapy tub—despite its chlorine smell, John thought of it as a germ soup bubbling away as player after player took his turn marinating in it—and the alarming, rank smell inside his teammates’ gloves. By the time he’d stripped down to his boxers and vest and slid between the too-cold sheets of his bed, it would have taken a miracle for his erection to revive itself.

Once John had settled, tugging the blankets tight over his shoulder and digging his nose into his pillow a bit, he at last felt the pull of three a.m. and his breath grew shallow.

Sherlock hummed in his sleep, inhaled a gasp, and there came the sound of the bedclothes shifting and slipping over his naked limbs as he stretched and rearranged himself—a series of suggestive noises which rapidly undid all of John’s diligent work to damp down his completely inappropriate arousal. It felt like hours passed as he lay silent, suffering, before he finally drifted off.

“Aw, nice!” Mellon shouted, pumping his fist downward through the air. “Check it, Cap.”

John slowed the pace of his pedaling on the stationary bike and leaned sideways to catch a glance
at the screen of Mellon’s phone. There was a full-length mirror-selfie of a shapely woman, dressed only in a barely-there pair of red lacy panties and high-heeled shoes.

John nodded appreciatively, smiling at Mellon, who pulled the phone back to look again.

“Puckbunny,” he said. “Wants to meet up later, doesn’t even care if I buy her dinner first.”

“Oh, very nice,” John allowed, nodding sagely. “But be a gentleman and at least offer to buy her breakfast.”

“Look at those big titties, jeezus!” Mellon shook his head before ducking down and starting to pedal harder at his own bike. “I’m getting la-haid tonight,” he crowed. “How many’ve you had by now, Cap? Eighteen seasons, fuck. Like, hundreds probably.”

John laughed. “No comment.”

“You dog,” Mellon joked. “Hatchet doesn’t know what he’s missing,” he added, loud enough for Hatch to hear from where he was working with hand weights in front of a mirror nearby. “Married at twenty-whatever, what the fuck were you thinking, man?”

“When you meet a good girl, you’ll know what,” Hatch replied, good-naturedly.

“They’re all good girls,” Mellon said, and looked back at John, “If they let you fuck their huge tits. I’m right, Cap, say I’m right.”

John hadn’t hit his mileage goal yet but slowed to a stop nonetheless, cleared the bike’s computer and climbed off, dragging the towel from around his neck over the saddle. Again, he bent his mouth into a grin and said, “No comment.”

“Cap likes eating them out, probably,” Hatch threw in. “That titty-fucking thing is just your weird fetish, Mellon.”

“You should both maybe focus on your conditioning a little more; you’ll have better stamina,” John half-joked, and they guffawed approvingly behind him as he headed for the shower.

As he passed Sherlock, working his quads on the leg machine, John heard a low, “I wonder, too, Cap—how many hundreds?”

John heard the taunt in it—the one that felt like the very leading edge of threat to out him, or at the very least indicated his choice to keep his private life private was being harshly judged—and snarled, “Shut up, you.”

That night Sherlock left their cramped double-room wearing a dove grey suit with his lilac shirt open at the neck, a fine veil of his church-like scent lingering everywhere. John, feeling low-key and lazy, decided to forgo a trip to a gay bar or a scroll through the local offerings on CRUZR in favour of some internet porn and a wank that with any luck would send him straight off to sleep. Once Sherlock had been gone about an hour, he drew the drapes and killed all the lights but the one in the bath, leaving that door partly open. He stretched out on the right side of the bed, setting his laptop on the duvet beside his left thigh. Of course then there was the WiFi password to fetch from the little envelope that held the keycards, across the room on the desk, and then he got distracted for twenty minutes checking scores and looking at the day’s league highlights, but
eventually John found something he could live with. A thick-bearded hipster type with a Greek statue’s physique, and a floppy-haired twink with pierced nipples and navel, in a scene free of any conceit that they were teacher and student, pizza delivery kid and lonely homebound telecommuter, or whatever the fuck, so John could imagine it the way he liked, which was that they were boyfriends. In the past he’d sought out subgenres of porn tagged “affectionate,” “boyfriend experience,” “real relationship,” or the like, but didn’t want to venture into too much amateur stuff as he had a back-of-mind horror that he’d somehow accidentally end up seeing someone he knew—or had hooked up with—so was pretty much stuck picking his way through pro porn where the blokes too often barely looked at each other. If they occasionally kissed or said a kind word, John was acutely aware it was mostly put-on, the pleasure purely physical, emotions left out entirely.

The muscular one was open-thighed on a wooden dining chair—there was a table nearby, too—and the skinny one spit on his prick (why did they always spit?) before beginning to run lips and tongue over it. It was long, not too thick, cut, flushed dark pink with a highly-defined slit at the crown. John had to get up again, go into the bathroom to his shaving bag for a tube of slick. By the time he returned, the twinky one was taking the big fella’s bollocks into his mouth, his lips shiny and stretched, pale at the corners, with fingers wound around his shaft, dragging in irregular rhythm. John’s own cock was beginning to show signs of engagement, so he wriggled his boxers down just enough to free it, adjusted the volume on the computer before things got messy, and squeezed a trickle of minty-smelling lube into the palm of his left hand. He sucked a breath as he took hold of his prick; he hadn’t bothered to warm the stuff.

Soon enough the imaginary boyfriends had moved on, to the thin one with his belly and chest draped across the tabletop and the stocky one behind him on the edge of the chair, thigh tipped away in an unnatural and probably uncomfortable position so the viewer could get an eyeful of him pulling his generous, pink-tipped erection as he worked his partner open with the fingers of his other hand, now and then leaning in to lick, or spit (again, the spitting...who had started this trend, and fucking why?). John’s own cock grew fully hard rather quickly, though he kept his pace languid so as not to finish too far ahead of the fake couple.

The twink lifted his hips, offering himself, seeking stimulation, and that warranted a deep, grateful moan from John. The twink’s arse was impossibly round and plump, and John could imagine the feel of those cheeks under his own hands, against the side of his face as he licked the pink hole that was even now opening up to take three of the bearded bloke’s fingers, which were all knuckles and the sight of which made John shiver. He paused in his stroking to roll his bollocks a bit, licked his drying lips, then shifted his foreskin over and back around the now-oozing crown of his cock. He caught a bead with one curled finger and resumed stroking.

Suddenly—shockingly—came the thud and click of the room door unlocking with the keycard, the handle being pushed down. In swanned Sherlock, frowning at his phone.

“Fuck are you doing here?” John demanded, not sure which to deal with first—the laptop or him with his cock out—quickly settling on the latter, and yanking a pillow from beside him to drag across his lap.

“He was a no-show,” Sherlock muttered, still staring at his phone’s screen, swiping, typing, and he walked straight into the bathroom and shut the door. Had he not even noticed? Phone in the toilet, repulsive; John hoped he was only going in for more cologne, or to have video-chat-sex out of John’s eyeline.

John tapped the space bar with one slippery fingertip to pause the video, then let the back of his head thud hard against the headboard. His prick was still raging; the freeze-frame on the video was of the muscular one standing, holding the skinny one by the hips with legs wound around his
waist, bouncing him on his cock (how was he so strong?). The twink’s face was what decided him, though. . .he looked delirious, gorgeous, and John figured no matter what Sherlock was doing in the bath, John could likely finish himself before being interrupted again.

He dropped the pillow aside, spit into his hand (even he was doing it now, it was a fucking epidemic) to get the slick going again, and went back at it, staring at that freeze-framed, pleasure-drunk face, slipping his hand quick and urgent along the length of his prick. His breath came fast and he tried to control it, keep it quiet, closed his eyes so he could concentrate on getting himself off, quick as he could.

A sinking weight landed beside him on the bed and the sound from the laptop blared out, squelching noises and stagey groans and the slapping sound of skin on skin. Sherlock, half-reclining on the other side of the bed, was unfastening his trousers.

“The fuck—!” John demanded again.

“Shh. Don’t be selfish. I’m not going to bed with blue balls just because some junior-college queen thinks he got a better offer.” He flicked the cap on the plastic bottle and coated his hand; John saw all this only in his peripheral vision, keeping his eyes on the laptop screen and his hand on his cock, which was flagging slightly in response to the weirdness of the situation. John hadn’t been in a circle jerk since his teens; it was juvenile. “Wouldn’t have guessed this would be to your taste,” Sherlock noted, then let out a quick hum that John interpreted to be the moment he started stroking.

“Shut up. Seriously just shut up and do not talk,” John demanded.

“Fine.”

Sherlock’s hand appeared at the keyboard and with a flutter and tap of his fingers, he backed up the video to the previous scene, of the muscular one fingering and eating out the skinny one’s arse. John could sense lazy-paced movement from Sherlock, and decided it wasn’t worth it to bail out, make a scene. The same moment that had lit him up previously—the twinky one rolling his hips, pressing his backside up and out—caught John’s faltering attention and he skimmed the ring of his fingers up along his length, then dragged it back. He tried to shut Sherlock out of his mind, but every time he nearly succeeded, Sherlock made some needy sound in his throat, or let out a heavy sigh, and John was dragged back to uncomfortable awareness of the weird dynamic: side-by-side wanks to middling-quality porn, like horny schoolboys.

The couple on the screen—who John was now acutely aware had probably only met that day, and were not actually a pair of lovers hungry for each other—shifted positions, the skinny one clinging to the strong one’s chest, arms around his waist and his ankles hooked tight together as they fucked. Soon they were back where John had left off and Sherlock had barged in, the bearded one holding his partner suspended with flexing biceps and forearms, and the multiply-pierced one pulling faces that were the only part of the scene that passed for genuine. He was loving it, being held, being fucked. John could imagine it all—how it would feel to fuck that improbably round arse, how it would feel to have that long prick thrusting and dragging inside—and he couldn’t stop himself letting out an over-loud moan as he shut his eyes and rolled his slippery palm around the crown of his cock before sliding down again.

All at once, Sherlock’s hand bumped his own out of the way, and though John’s mind registered another what the fuck?, he surrendered without outward protest. Any hand was better than his own, and he was too far gone now, so fuck it, fuck it. He kept his eyes on the screen, the muscular one arranging the twink on his back on the table, a gonzo shot from below of his long cock sliding in, his hanging bollocks and springy thatch of hair. John gathered the blankets in his fists at either side of his hips. Sherlock squeezed as his hand slid, and rubbed his thumb over John’s slit, and
answered John’s moan with a pleased-sounding hum. John closed his eyes again and there was an enormous shift of weight, *oh christ Holmes no*, but god yes, but no, *no*, and then Sherlock’s tongue was slipping along the edge of John’s foreskin, circling his crown, lips closing around him and sliding down to meet the ring of his fingers. Fuck, *fuck it*, his mouth was hot and he was licking, sucking, shifting skin with his fingers, and rolling John’s bollocks in his hand. John’s pelvis quivered, and Sherlock began to hum around him, long, low *mmmm-mmms* of encouragement—of satisfaction—that John could feel in his bollocks and the base of his spine. He bit down hard on a moan, and Sherlock’s mouth was tight and deep, so hot, so wet, so fucking hot, *fuck* . . .

“Holmes. . .” John warned, and dared to look down, only to find Sherlock’s icy eyes wide open, glistening with reflexive tears, and staring straight up at him. “Fuck. . .oh, christ, *fuck* . . .” Sherlock hummed again, and sucked hard as he drew back to make space, and that was all John could take. He shuddered, grunted, came into Sherlock’s mouth as thick waves of heat blared outward from his center to fill his limbs, ricocheted around his gut. Sherlock licked John’s cum around his crown, then at last pulled off and sat back on his heels. With his trousers around his thighs, shirttails framing his prick as he took himself in hand, it took him only a few sturdy jerks to get himself off, coming across the duvet as if some underpaid mother-of-three wasn’t going to have to gather the thing in her arms the next morning, making the beds. John watched Sherlock’s face overcome with something that looked like absolute agony, then his expression softened into a wide, crooked smile, with closed eyes.

Sherlock collapsed sideways onto his hip, immediately rolled off the bed and got to his feet, dragging his hands backward through his hair and starting to strip off his clothes. John lifted his t-shirt up over his head and scrubbed at the streaks on the duvet, then tossed the shirt over the foot of the bed onto the floor. He slapped the laptop shut. The video had finished; John wasn’t sure when. By the end, his own and Sherlock’s sex noises had drowned out the enthusiastically faked ones, anyway.

*Oh, fuck.*

John cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. Sherlock—by then naked—dragged back the blankets on the other bed and started to get into it. He fetched his phone off the shared nightstand and thumbed it to life, started swiping and scrolling.

“Well, obviously that can never happen again,” John said, and lifted his hips to rearrange his own bedding.

“Oh?” Sherlock sounded amused.

“You know it can’t.”

“What I know is that I happen to be an absolutely *magnificent* cocksucker, and that was almost certainly the best blow job you’ve ever had,” he said, in his usual self-assured tone. “What I don’t know is why, given those facts, you think it should never happen again.”

“That thing about not fucking one’s teammate’s brothers,” John said, grimacing. “And by the way, I’ve had a real fucking *lot* of blow jobs, some of them—to use your word—*magnificent*, so don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Irrelevant.”

John had to admit—and perhaps it was just the afterglow talking, but honestly, it probably wasn’t—it had in fact been a singular experience, might only have been improved by having gone on slightly longer. Or quite a bit longer.
“Best, worst, or in-between. . .We just can’t,” he said with finality.

“Suit yourself,” Sherlock said with exaggerated lightness, as if he knew better, and was only humouring John.

The matter of shared wanks, mutual porn consumption, and yes, a truly mind-bending blowjob once and for all settled, John said, “Get the bathroom light, would you.”

Sherlock rolled away and dragged the blankets over his head. “Fuck off.”

They were away against the league’s worst team, the Dallas Tornadoes, who were having such a miserable season they defied the popular notion that the difference between the best and worst NHL players was negligible. Coach Lestrade had given Sherlock a rest day and put in the backup goalie, Anthony Lopresti. Sherlock was seated on his stool opposite the end of the bench, dressed for the game in full uniform, including leg pads and gloves, but wearing a black and gold Brawlers’ ball cap in place of his masked helmet. He mostly looked bored, though between plays when the PA system cranked up, he sang along with nearly every song.

John had just finished a shift and was wiping out the inside of his visor, spraying water into his mouth, swishing, and spitting. Seated at the end of the bench, he planted his stick between his feet and worked to catch his breath. As they were coming out of a TV timeout, the charge music began to play. At home, that particular tune was traditionally followed by a chant for the Brawlers’ goalie, and at the end of each rippling, prompting phrase of the music, John could hear Sherlock chanting along.

_Da-dada, da, da, dada-DAH._

“Sherrrr-lock!”

_Da-dada, da, da, dada-DAH._

“Sherrrr-lock!”

John looked over at him disbelievingly. “You are some piece of work, Holmes,” he shouted across at him.

“It sounds better this way,” came the reply, and Sherlock shrugged. “Oh, at last something interesting is happening.” He gestured, and sure enough, Thurston was dropping gloves on a Tornadoes player who’d been annoying him all night, chirping at him with streams of trash talk. They watched the fight unfold, and John joined his teammates in banging his stick on the boards as Thurston—the patch bearing his name torn and hanging from the back of his sweater, his eye already starting to blacken—skated to the penalty box to serve his five minute major.

John had managed to avoid Sherlock outside of mandatory practices since their hotel room encounter, pretending to sleep or involving himself with other players’ discussions and card games on the plane, going for runs or doing laps in the pool instead of working out in the gym, shutting himself in his bedroom of their shared Dallas hotel suite. He figured once he’d made it clear by his distance from Sherlock that he was serious about it not happening again, perhaps they could resume their habit of watching movies together while they were traveling, continue developing their friendship. It wasn’t that John particularly wanted to have a chat about it—what was there to say that he hadn’t already said?—but he could see that if things stayed awkward between them
another discussion might be necessary, though he mostly dreaded the idea. If only Sherlock weren’t so overarchingly awkward, the situation might be a bit easier to read. For his part, Sherlock had not dropped his stride on hooking up night after night, so perhaps he just wasn’t bothered.

A little while after the game—which the Brawlers won in a 7 – 1 embarrassment for the Tornadoes —while the team waited for the bus to take them to the airport, Thurston was going from man to man in the dressing room, with his tablet computer in one hand.

“My foundation’s doing the charity auction to shave our heads again this year. Money goes to the kids’ cancer hospital. You shaving, or making a donation?”

“I’ll shave mine,” Bouchard volunteered.

“Yeah, I’m in,” Kocur agreed. Thurston, his black eye by then in full bloom, made notes on his computer.

“How ‘bout you, Holmesy?”

“Put me down for five thousand,” Sherlock replied.

“Nice, thanks,” Thurston grinned, and noted it. “One of these years you gotta shave it off, though, come on. It grows back.”

“How long have you known me, Thurston?” Sherlock challenged, half-smiling.

“Yeah, yeah. I know it’s important to you to stay pretty. Thanks for the donation at least, yellow-belly. Whaddaya say, Cap? Can we put you down to get clipped?”


“Thanks, Cap.” Thurston moved on.

“In reality,” Sherlock said under his breath, to John, “I made that particular mistake as a junior, in one of those team-bonding situations where everyone sheared his hair off. It turns out I have an oddly shaped head.”

John barked a hearty laugh and threw his head back, clapping his hands together.

“That’s between you and me,” Sherlock said, smiling. John mimed locking his lips and tossing away the key.

“I’ve another film for us, about twentysomething slackers in existential crisis circa 1985, if you’re up for it.”

“Sounds good,” John agreed. “It’s a long flight back to Boston.” The travel coordinator appeared in the dressing room and summoned the players to begin boarding the bus. John and Sherlock, both dressed in suits as it was early evening after a matinee game and the behind-the-scenes TV crew was likely to shoot footage of them at any given moment, gathered their carry-on bags, glancing around the lockers to be sure they hadn’t forgotten anything. John added, “Dinner’s on me this time.”
Forechecking: Checking/battling to retrieve the puck while in the offensive zone without possession of the puck.

Power play: A team goes on a power play when the other team is playing shorthanded due to a penalty.

(The announcer in the story cites a team's "19 in 32" power play record. This statistic means they have only been able to score a goal in 19 of 32 power plays.)

“As goaltender Sherlock Holmes leads the Boston Brawlers onto the ice, it’s worth noting that team captain John Watson is skating in his fifteen-hundredth NHL game tonight. That makes him just the sixteenth player in league history to claim that distinction, and Watson at age thirty-seven shows no signs of slowing down, despite rumours he was quick to quash that he might be contemplating retirement at the end of this season, should the Brawlers get the Cup.”

“As absolutely right, Jack. Watson has repeatedly and strenuously denied that this will be his last NHL season, and you know, even a guy his age definitely still has a few more in him so long as he can stay healthy. At five-nine, one-eighty, he’s not a guy who gets in a lot of scraps, and he’ll take a hit to make a play but he’s not known as a real physical player, which of course doesn’t mean he’ll never get injured but it certainly gives him better odds for not suffering something potentially career-ending. He’s a great player, great guy, well-respected, well-liked... I can see him continuing on, for sure.”

“Watson is officially listed at five-nine but I have to say, Brick, I’ve been in an elevator with him and I do kinda wonder if he was wearing his skates when they recorded that! Stand him next to his fellow Brawlers’ defenseman Pietr Kocur, who is a towering six-foot-seven in his socks, and it’s quite an amusing picture. The puck has dropped and the game is on!”

The Generals were everywhere at once, and after two periods they were leading the Brawlers 2 – 1.

“Give me a hint here, Holmes,” John demanded; the team had gathered near the bench for a TV timeout.

“Play better,” was Sherlock’s terse reply. His elaborately painted helmet—a skull with black-and-gold roses in its eye sockets—was pushed up so the face mask faced the ceiling. He tucked his catching glove under his opposite elbow and rubbed his face with a towel he then threw over the bench where the equipment manager caught it.

“Fuck off with that,” Bouchard snarled.

“If you can get in their zone, Hanks hasn’t been making saves low on the glove side in his past half-dozen games. Even better chance if the forwards go up with speed and fake a one-timer but pass for a tip-in.”
“Got it,” Sawyer said, all bravado as he spun his stick with a flick of his wrist. “I’ll go in deep and you make the pass, Boosh.”

There was a commotion at the end of the bench; Thurston was exchanging words with one of the Washington forwards who—like Thurston himself—would have been called an ‘enforcer’ in the days before the league tried to clean up its went-to-the-fights-and-a-hockey-game-broke-out image.

“Boston Bitches! Line up and bend over to get fucked!” the other player, Raymond Billings, railed.

“Oh that’s how it is? Shut your mouth or you’ll find my dick in it,” Thurston threatened. “Get a haircut, mop-top.” Thurston never went for the obvious insult. The two kept barking as the players skated out for the face-off.

“Do your knees hurt? I heard you girls spend most of your free time kneeling in alleys.”

“What fucking carny put it in your mom to make you, you water-headed clown?”

“Shut up and check in, Thurt!” John shouted. The puck dropped and Bouchard won the face-off, passing back to Hatch.

“Hatch takes control, passes up to Thurston, who drops it back to Watson in a nice give-and-go, Watson up the boards, saucer pass to Bouchard, Bouchard the one-timer—no, he fakes!—Sawyer. . .SCORES!”

The Brawlers threw up their arms, skated in to hug it out, and Sawyer sailed past the bench to bump his teammates’ gloves. John watched the scoreboard for the replay.

“Suck it, milk-drinker!” Thurston roared at Billings.

“Bouchard wins the face-off, drops the puck back to Hatch, passes to Watson who will settle it in the Brawlers’ defensive end, and the Brawlers change out man by man. Watson up the middle, passes on to Mellon, Mellon to Sullivan, but there’s the whistle—the play is offside.”

John sprayed water into his mouth and down his neck, spit, and accepted a towel passed over his left shoulder by the equipment manager to wipe out the inside of his face shield. He juggled his mouth guard back and forth between his teeth. The Brawlers pestered the Generals with some aggressive forechecking, which lead to Sullivan drawing a tripping call and heading for the penalty box. Alternate captains Bouchard and Kocur protested loudly but unsuccessfully, and with just over three minutes to play, the Generals went on the power play. John sucked his mouth guard back into place and edged forward, readying himself to spring from the bench when Kocur was ready for a change.

“Washington’s power play is middling at best; they’re 19 for 32 so far this season. Billings to Mayer, Mayer dangles, Kocur’s big body is a nice screen there in front of the crease. MacGraw is making himself a nuisance so Mayer slips it across to Smith. Smith back to Mayer, Mayer shoots a dart, Holmes deflects, Kocur battling for the rebound but Smith is able to control it, Smith sends it around the boards to Billings, Billings the one-timer, Holmes the stick deflection, Mayer in deep, backhand shot, stick save by Holmes, it’s loose in the crease, Kocur and Billings, Mayer at the corner, Billings gets it loose, Mayer the one-timer and a save by Holmes! It’s loose! Billings poking at it, there’s a pile-up in the crease. . .and we get the whistle.”

“Huge leg-pad save to finish a nice trio of saves by Sherlock Holmes there—first this deflection off the blocker, then the stick save, and finally this leg save—Holmes going high to low, left to right, with that leg outstretched—just a massive save, Jack. The Brawlers rely on Holmes for his
steadiness, his cool head, and making saves just like that one. Perfect. I’d say it’s the save of the game.”

“The Generals still on the power play, Billings wins the face-off but these Generals forwards have been skating a long shift and the energy’s looking pretty low. Kocur gets control, sends it up the boards and he’ll change out. Generals with just under thirty seconds left on the power play, Watson is fresh off the bench, gives some attitude to Raymond Billings, Watson with it, the one-timer, he scores! Captain John Watson with the go-ahead goal kills the penalty, and the Brawlers have a three – two lead with just about ninety seconds left in regulation. The Boston crowd of seventeen-thousand-plus, is chanting Let’s Go Brawlers, and when we come back, from this break. . .it’s winning time!”

“What do you usually do for Christmas?” John asked, bending to unlace his skates. They were off for three days, no practices, no games; they’d fly to Cleveland the evening of the 26th for a game against the Hornets the following night.

“Sleep,” was Sherlock’s reply. “Spend time with friends.” His unruly eyebrows jolted upward, and it was as good as a wink; John caught the implication. “You?”

“I’m flying out to Hamilton, to my sister.”

“Tell her hello from me,” Sherlock said. “Ask if she has some ear things we can borrow for the flight to Cleveland.”

John barked a laugh. “Dear Santa: we need more ear things.”

“Get a room, you two,” Sullivan threw in. Sherlock smiled and shrugged out of his shoulder pads. John cleared his throat and looked at the floor.

John found a bar called the Falcon which was described online as “an unfussy gay bar with a casual atmosphere” and fell into easy chat with the bartender, a fiftyish woman with hair in a greased-back pompadour that would have made Elvis Presley himself cry with jealousy at its perfection. After about an hour, she set down a fresh double-shot of Macallan in front of him and tilted her head. “From the dude in the purple sweater, there.”

John leaned forward to look down the bar a bit. In a dark violet pullover with the sleeves pushed up his forearms, a dishwater-blond of about 30, with a few days’ stylish scruff on cheeks and chin, sideburns, and—dear god, say no more, the end—dimples in his cheeks. He was smiling, and lifted his hand from the bar in a gesture of greeting. John smiled back, and the man approached, leaning on his elbow on the bar.

“Thanks, it’s kind of you. I’m John.”

“Nick.” They shook hands. “You look so familiar. . .”

John shook his head, mugging. “Nah. Just one of those faces.”

“Hm,” Nick allowed. “Well. It’s a nice face, either way.”

“Thanks very much.” John sipped the whisky and grimaced appreciatively. “You live nearby? I’m only in town for a few days; maybe you can tell me about anything I shouldn’t miss out on.”
“I guess it depends what you’re into. What do you want to do?” Nick’s squinty, friendly blue eyes were glittering. He touched one fingertip to the back of John’s wrist, traced a swirl, withdrew. Went on smiling with his dimples.

John leaned up, and Nick ducked down to offer his ear. “I want to get off with you,” John said quietly, and leaned away. Back to his normal tone of voice, John asked, “So what would you suggest I do, in that case?”

“I suggest you get your coat.”

Nick’s flat wasn’t far away, a tiny studio with a mattress on the floor, a table littered with electronics—he’d said on their walk from the bar he was doing graduate work in engineering—and an all-in-one kitchen with a tiny sink, single burner cooktop, and half-size fridge. Multi-coloured Christmas lights were strung around the ceiling, making both their faces look bluish and sickly, even as Nick took John by the hand and dragged him toward the unmade bed on the floor. They shed their coats and toed off their shoes, and Nick arranged the pillows so John could sit up against them, then settled across his lap with his knees at either side of John’s hips.

“Do you kiss?” John asked, sliding his palms down the front of Nick’s thin pullover, feeling his nipples harden beneath the drag of John’s fingers.

“Mm, please.”

“Ah. Good. Good, I’m glad.”

When John got back to the hotel suite it was well past two in the morning, and as he passed the mostly-closed door to Sherlock’s bedroom, he could hear two male voices muttering, moaning, and a rhythmic thud that must have been the bed against the wall. Sherlock let out an unmistakable growl and the pace picked up. John tossed his coat over the back of the sofa on his way to his own room, where he stripped to his boxers and fell into bed. Flakes of dried spunk still clung to the hairs on his chest. The Brawlers had practice in less than seven hours; John rubbed his nose against his pillow a few times and hoped Sherlock’s hookup would be gone in the morning.

They won against Cleveland, then lost in overtime to Pittsburgh. They would play an outdoor, New Year’s Day game in Philadelphia against the Hawks, and had three free days leading up to it, including one without a practice scheduled. John slept in, and by the time he emerged from his bedroom, he found Sherlock at the round table near the windows in the sitting room, uncovering room service food, more than enough for them both.

“Join me?” he offered. He was dressed in dark tracksuit bottoms, slim-cut, with white stripes down the sides, and a clinging, heather-grey Brawlers sweatshirt with a hood.

“Thanks,” John replied. “Isn’t that a girl’s shirt?”

Sherlock glanced down at his chest. “Is it? No wonder it’s so tight.”

John rolled his eyes, grinning. Sherlock passed him the coffee pot and turned over a cup for him to pour it into.

“Riggio’s gone out with a concussion, did you hear?” Sherlock asked. Johnny Riggio was the Hawks’ first-line center and a deadly left-hand shot.
“No, how long?”

“Six to eight weeks.”

“So it was a good one, then,” John allowed, with a low whistling exhalation.

“Heikkinen got a four-game suspension; he aimed an elbow at Riggio’s head, both skates left the ice.”

“What the hell, y’know?” John demanded. “With all we know about head injuries now—what is wrong with these idiots? You can hit a guy without targeting the head.”

“Heikkinen’s on more drugs than there even are,” Sherlock replied, slathering a triangle of wheat toast with honey and jam from plastic packets. “He’s like those rage-infected zombies in that movie we watched.”

“You watched; I fell asleep,” John corrected. “You ever had one? A hit to the head?”

“Not that sort. Incidental contact. And not for several years; having a monster like Kocur playing in front of me tends to discourage goaltender interference. No one wants to make him angry. You?”

John piled sliced ham and fried eggs onto his toast to make a sandwich. “I’ve had two concussions. The second one, three years ago, was pretty severe; I was out cold for about twenty seconds? And when I opened my eyes, all I could see was black. They got me up on my feet to skate me off, but I was blind. Fucking terrifying. That was in late February; I was out the rest of the season and missed the playoffs.”

“I remember that,” Sherlock said. “They said it was your shoulder.”

“It’s always my shoulder. Except that it never is. I did blow out my shoulder in ’08, needed surgery and rehab, the whole bit. But it’s never been reinjured; that’s just what the brass tell the press so no one looks too hard at the hits we take, and how it’s wrecking guys’ brains.” John took a bite of his sandwich, chewed a few times and pushed it into to his cheek long enough to say, “If I ever get another concussion, I’m done. I’ll retire then, for sure. The recovery sucks and too many guys end up depressed, anxious, suicidal. I probably should have quit after that bad one but . . . you know.”

“We’re idiots.”

“You said that right,” John agreed with a grin. “I wasn’t ready to quit. So now I just try not to get hit too much, keep my head up when I can, don’t fight. Thurston’s just begging to get knocked out, as much as he fights.”

“That’s what they pay him for,” Sherlock shrugged. “I say that off the record, of course. There are no hockey goons anymore.”

“Right. Speaking of being off the record—you don’t talk to the press, like, ever.”

“No.”

“How do you manage that? The rest of us have to do those press avails before games, answer those questions we can barely hear from the on-ice reporter. . .”

As he spoke, Sherlock poured himself a second cup of coffee and dumped in several packets of sugar. “My agent negotiated it. The league agreed because it was made clear to them I couldn’t be relied upon not to curse on television, nor to keep my mouth shut about being queer. They readily
agreed to let me out of press obligations.”

John cringed at Sherlock’s casual use of a word John still viscerally felt as a slur.

“Anyway, it lends me an air of mystery which is now my ‘brand.’ Someday when I finally sit down for an in-depth television interview, it will be a big event, not just another washed-up athlete whining about how his father was too hard on him and how winning all the trophies and accolades in the world weren’t enough to keep him from drinking himself half to death within six months of his career-ending injury.”

“You paint such a rosy picture,” John said grimly.

“Correct me,” Sherlock challenged.

“I didn’t say it was wrong,” John allowed. He looked out the window; the suite had a decent view of the city, a blue sky brushed with wispy, curled white clouds. “I’m looking forward to the Classic; I haven’t played outdoors in forever.”

Sherlock hummed mild agreement. “I was looking forward to it until the weather forecast revealed it’s going to be below freezing, and windy. You lot are in constant motion; I stand there doing not much of anything most of the time, if the forwards are doing their jobs staying in the other end.”

John smirked. “We can keep you busy, if you like. I’ll tell the guys to play at, what, seventy percent? Sixty?”

“Don’t do me any favours.”

“In that case, you should probably layer up on the designer underwear,” John suggested.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow and stroked his thumb across his chin, just below his lip, as if pondering his reply.

John fidgeted with his napkin, wadding it up and tossing it on his empty plate. “Well, some of us are required to do press avails, and I’ve got one this afternoon, so I’ve got to hit the shower.” He shoved back his chair. “Thanks for ordering breakfast.”

“Not at all,” Sherlock replied, and John decided to ignore the look of amusement on his face.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Housekeeping note: I moved the notes/diagrams/glossary into its own "work", which is now part two of the Boyfriend Material series (some readers were saying they were disappointed each time they clicked "next chapter" and the notes came up!).

No hockey in this chapter, so no new vocabulary. Is yr local NHL team playing tonight? Why not watch a little? Let me know how you enjoyed it.

I've started a YouTube playlist, and even if you're not super into checking out fic-associated music playlists, you might like hearing the first song, which is the Boston "Brawlers" goal horn and celebration music (it's only about 90 seconds). You can play it in yr head throughout the story when the Brawlers score a goal! The second song in the playlist, "Out of Our Heads" by Dropkick Murphys is the "Brawlers" skate-out music, played at the opening of every home game; another one to set the mood! The playlist is unlisted, so can only be found if you have this link (so bookmark it!):

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHaBWF1stcWY8yqZwROIH5_07FCfkJQT

Starting next Thursday, I will be updating twice a week! Thanks for being on the team, Lovely Readers!

The Brawlers won the Winter Classic, despite the cold and the fact the fans were so far away from the rink (built inside a baseball stadium) and the cheers so windswept it felt like they were playing in a vacuum on the moon. The game was nationally televised and sold to hockey fans as a big event, but it also counted as a regular season game, so the team was happy to walk away from it with a needed win along with their mostly-frozen bollocks.

Sherlock’s cheeks and nose were still stained pink from the wind even hours later at the team dinner, held in an Italian restaurant that served family-style—the players, coaches, and staff passing platters around and across, the servers barely keeping up with the pace of necessary refills. The room was loud with conversation and frequently rang with laughter. John helped himself to slabs of every variety of breaded, cheese-covered, tomato-sauced meat that sailed past, and washed it down with sharp red wine. By the time they were offered their choice of a dozen cream-intensive desserts, he settled for coffee and a chat with the team doctor about a trip the doc was planning for the summer, to hike part of the Appalachian trail with his two grown daughters.

Sherlock’s head was bowed, his thumbs flying over his phone’s screen, as the party wound down and the players started drifting away. John checked his own phone with a vague hope of someone pinging him for a hookup on CRUZR but found nothing. He scrolled the local prospects but with his satisfied stomach and a mid-morning flight back to Boston in the offing, decided pursuit of a tryst that evening was more work than he was willing to put in.

“Hey, I’m going back to the hotel,” John told Sherlock. “Try to keep the noise level to a dull roar when you and...whomever—” he gestured toward Sherlock’s phone “—come in later.”
“Actually, it appears I’ll be staying in, tonight,” Sherlock said. “I’ll walk back with you.”

“Oh. Yeah, all right. Great.”

The walk in the extreme cold put even more colour in Sherlock’s face, and sobered John nicely. He hadn’t realised he’d perhaps overdone the wine until they started walking and he felt a strange, circular lightness to his gait. Two blocks later, his head was beginning to ache but he felt marginally more in control of his faculties.

In the hotel’s lift, Sherlock stuck in his key card and the doors slid shut. Before they’d even begun to move, Sherlock said, “Why must it never happen again?”

John was too gobsmacked to do anything other than play dumb while he processed the situation. After a slightly too-long silence, he managed, “What?”

“A few weeks ago in Green Bay we wanked to your homo porn and then I sucked you off,” Sherlock reminded. “Why must it never happen again?” Leaning back against the wall, one hand in the pocket of his coat and the other tucked behind him, Sherlock was completely casual in posture and tone, as if merely curious.

“I’m not. . .” John started.

“Don’t say you’re not interested in sex with men—with me, specifically. We both know better. You can pretend all you like with other people but your internalized homophobia is not particularly relevant to what I’m asking.”

“Know what? Fuck you,” John replied, readying a harangue about labels and privacy and Sherlock’s thoughtless use of words like queer and homo.

“Yes, I’d like you to, that’s why I brought it up,” Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. The lift settled and the doors slid open. John was unaccountably irritated, and stormed out, leaving Sherlock lagging behind him. The suite door nearly swung shut in his face as John let it fall from his grip. “It’s a terribly convenient arrangement, when you consider it—we’re already rooming together, and on nights like this when the best offer I can get is a pensioner who wants me to wear his late wife’s girdle—"

“What? Like fuck-buddies?” John scoffed. He had shrugged out of his coat and hurled it onto the sofa, while Sherlock smoothly shed his own and hung it in the closet. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and slid that from his shoulders as well, folding it in half and laying it on the back of an armchair.

“Not ‘like’,” Sherlock corrected.

“There are a million reasons not to, starting with the fact we’re teammates and ending with the fact you’re a complete slag.”

“Said the pot to the kettle.” Sherlock’s lips curved up.

“I’m not,” John protested.

“I’ll ask you again: how many hundreds? Because it is hundreds. I’ve no doubt of that.”

John paced the alley between the back of the sofa and the marble-topped bar separating the sitting room from the kitchenette. He challenged, “Why do you care?”

“I don’t care. That’s another point in favour of making an arrangement. As many as you’ve had,
I’ve likely had more, and I’m not bothered.” Sherlock settled on the sofa, one ankle resting on his opposite knee. “I’m only suggesting something mutually enjoyable; you act as if I’ve asked you to help me commit a murder.”

He had a point. John felt his shoulders settling downward and his resolve slipping. A back-burner situation to retreat to when there was nothing else going wasn’t the worst offer John had ever gotten.

“I assure you I can be discreet,” Sherlock said then, in a lower voice, less full of his usual bravado. “I know it’s important to you,” he added with a shrug that managed not to be dismissive of John’s tendency toward keeping his private life private. “You might not know this about me, John, but I’m a professional hockey player and have been for years. I understand your perspective.”

“You think I’m a closet case,” John said pointedly.

Sherlock set both his feet on the floor and leaned forward with his elbows on his thighs, spreading his hands in a what’s-to-be-done? gesture. “I don’t judge. You’re entitled to live the way you wish.” His shoulders rose and fell, dismissing the topic. “Anyway. No expectations. No demands. I’m only offering.”

John exhaled hard through his nostrils. Sherlock’s phone, lying face down on the side table, buzzed awake and light seeped out around the edges of the screen. Sherlock ignored it in favour of continuing to look at John—standing dumbly near the other end of the sofa—with mild expectation.

“Offering...?” John heard himself say, and he half-stepped forward, thinking of sitting down but finding he felt too edgy to do so. His fingers rolled against his curled palms.

Sherlock, with his impossibly long reach, stretched out an arm and sank two fingers behind John’s belt buckle, persuading him to step forward with a gentle but unrelenting pull.

“What do you like?” Sherlock shifted his knee so that John was stood between his splayed legs, and the two fingers that had caught his belt dragged lightly down the front placket of his trousers. Sherlock let go a little hum.

“This is a very bad idea,” John said, frowning, eyes rolling upward toward the heavens. His prick clearly disagreed, twitching needily as Sherlock’s fingers reversed course, dragging knuckles upward to catch his belt buckle again, fingertips tapping impatiently against its top edge. John ventured a glance down at Sherlock’s face, which was relaxed and confident, with a glint of mischievous hunger in his eyes that unhitched something in John’s gut. “Oh, what the hell,” John muttered, and reached for his belt, the two of them fumbling with the buckle until they got it open. Sherlock gathered John’s trousers in his fists at the sides of his waist and tugged him down onto the sofa, quickly rearranging himself on his knees as John lay back and stretched out beneath him.

In the time it took for John to shimmy his trousers down his thighs, Sherlock emptied his pocket onto the coffee table—his ID and some folded bills, the keycard, and a couple of tell-tale foil packets—and he reached for his own trousers’ fastenings. John watched as Sherlock peeled the zip apart and adjusted his designer briefs (grey with the logo in black around the waistband) so his prick and bollocks were free of them.

“Jeezus,” John gusted. Sherlock unbuttoned his shirt from the bottom up, an elegant blend of seduction and efficiency, his expression daring, inviting, and John’s gaze flicked between his fingers working the buttons and his hungry, mischievous expression. As Sherlock went for the final button with one hand, the splayed fingers of the other landed on John’s low belly and slid upward,
shoving John’s shirt and vest up to bare his chest. He swirled his fingertips through the hair on John’s pectorals, over his breastbone, then caught a pinching hold of John’s nipple, gripped his own with his other hand and pulsed his fingers, drawing a gasp from John and sighing out a heavy breath.

Sherlock leaned away to fetch one of the packets off the table, tore the corner between his teeth and squeezed out a dollop of slick onto the insides of his fingers, then used his thumb to spread it. John found his mouth was dry, so he licked his teeth, his lips, leaned up to reach for Sherlock’s shirtfront, to pull him down. Sherlock caught himself with one palm planted beside John’s head, and his pelvis rolled as he settled down atop John, his hand between them gliding quick and firm up John’s length to slick him, then repeating the motion on himself. He pinned John and began to rock, sliding their pricks together in the loose cage of his fist. John groaned, thrust his hand into the back of Sherlock’s pants to feel the muscles of his arse contract and release as he thrust up and then drew back; his other hand caught the back of Sherlock’s neck.

Sherlock’s eyes were closed, they were both panting, John knew he wouldn’t last; Sherlock’s fingers cradling his prick, Sherlock’s foreskin dragging against his own, and Sherlock’s arse rolling under his fingertips were adding up to imminent devastation, and John let himself surrender to it, why the fuck not, fuck it anyway. His stupid moralistic rules, what good did it do him, when he could have been getting off like this all those nights he wanked himself to sleep when there was no prospect of a willing hand, an open mouth.

“Ah… ah, good. That’s so… so good,” John breathed. “Do you kiss?”

With half-open eyes and a crumpled smile that said John must be joking, Sherlock shook his head. As if to make it up to him, the pace picked up, and Sherlock’s fingers tightened around them, and he fucked his cock along the side of John’s in hard, sharp thrusts, grunting his exertion. John settled for pulling Sherlock down by the neck and biting hard into his shoulder, then sucking at the bitten spot before Sherlock rose back up onto his shaking arm. He rutted hard, loud grunts descending into deep moans; John shut his eyes and rode the tide of Sherlock’s uninhibited fuck-noises, up and over the crest, his orgasm a sharp and sudden shock of sparks flooding outward from his center to fill his limbs, blur his brain.

“Oh… fuck,” John gusted, “Fucking… ah, so good.”

Sherlock collapsed down onto John’s upper chest, head turned so his face was beside John’s cheek, panting hard, and he swiped upward just enough to catch up some of John’s cum along the edges of his fingers, and with a few more slick slides along John’s quivering cock, he, too, tensed and shivered, and sucked his teeth too loud beside John’s ear. Sherlock’s spunk pulsed out between them, warm and oozing on both their bellies.

“Mmm…” Sherlock sounded luxuriant and deliciously satisfied. He gave John’s chin a nip with his teeth, then rose up off him into a high kneel. Stripping off his open-fronted shirt, he swiped himself clean and dropped it onto John’s middle so he could do the same. Letting go a grateful groan as he stretched his knees to stand, Sherlock tucked himself away, then raised both arms over his head and tugged at his wrists. His rack of ribs shifted; his stomach caved in. He dropped his arms and began to fasten his trousers, casting a sideways glance toward John dragging his own clothes back into place: shirt down, boxers and trousers up. “Don’t say it’s a mistake or a disaster or against your ethical code.”

“Yeah, no, I won’t. It’s… it was good.” John arranged himself to sit. He felt sleepy and stupid, but that wasn’t unusual. At least his bed was only a few yards away, through a half-open door, instead of a twenty minute cab ride through a strange city. “This can work.”
“So how many hundreds?” Sherlock asked casually, crossing to the kitchenette and running the tap, filling two glasses. “I’ll say mine, as well. Twelve hundred.”

“About a thousand?”

They spoke at the same time, and John laughed and massaged the back of his own neck with one hand. Sherlock passed him a glass of water and sat in a nearby armchair.

“And you call me a slag,” Sherlock said archly.

“It’s more the attitude than the number.”

“Says he of about a thousand.”

John shrugged, smiling. “I took a break to be married.”

“To a woman.”

John threw back the cool, slightly salty water in one long swig, braced himself with hands on knees and rose to stand. “A story for another day,” he said. “Good night then.”

“M-hm.”

“Remember the kids don’t always know who we are. We’re not here to soak up accolades and be the stars; the kids are the stars. Just ask them what their favourite book or song is and listen to them talk.” John was lecturing the rookies, Sawyer and Hatch, before a visit at Children’s Hospital. Sherlock was farther off, down the hallway, tapping away on his phone. “Holmes?” John prompted. “Care to check in, here?”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise, went on tapping, and eventually pressed himself up away from the wall and ambled over to them. The hospital’s PR person approached the players from the other direction. “Just about ready for you, guys,” she said, and the Brawlers Foundation liaison assigned to wrangle them passed around their jerseys. Sawyer and Hatch shed their hoodies and pulled the jerseys over their heads; John pulled on his over his woven shirt, the buttoned, plaid cuffs visible below the hems of the jersey’s sleeves.

Sherlock pulled his jersey on over his suit jacket.

“And if I see your phones out of your pockets, you’re going to be doing speed drills at my next practice,” John said. He gave Sherlock a pointed look.

“That leaves me out, captain’s practices not being in my calendar.”

“I’ll think of something,” John promised.

Sherlock smirked. “Shall we? I’ve an urgent appointment in just under two hours.” He strode off up the corridor and was intercepted by a nurse wearing scrubs printed all over with cartoon monkeys and banana trees, who accompanied him into a patient room.

After John had spent some time posing for selfies with two sets of parents, sorting Pokemon cards with a seven-year-old named Jayden, and having his fingernails painted pink by Rebecca, age nine, airline pilot/princess in training, he wandered through each room checking in on the other players,
who all seemed to be having similar experiences to his own—though he was the only one freshly manicured. At the end of the hall, he found Sherlock reclining on the bed beside a painfully thin, pale boy with no eyebrows and a Brawlers ball cap atop a bald head. They were staring at Sherlock’s phone, tilted up against a kidney-shaped plastic basin on the rolling table hovering above the bed.

“Hey,” John said, and offered his hand for the kid to shake; the fingers that gripped his were like a handful of chicken bones. “I’m John Watson.”

“I know. You’re awesome.”

As John was about to say something self-deprecating in response, Sherlock said, “This is Tyler, he’s eleven and has acute lymphocytic leukemia. He likes Batman—Christian Bale, rubbish—so we are watching Tim Burton’s version from 1989. It holds up.”

“Oh,” John said, taken aback by Sherlock’s having actually done the right thing by the kid he was visiting. “Good, then.”

“Tyler and I want Pepsis. There’s a machine down the hall, through the double doors,” Sherlock said, his eyes fixed on the small screen of his phone.

“Oh... kay,” John said. “The parents are...?”

“Out having lunch together. Kristin is here to supervise me.” Sherlock tipped his chin; the hospital’s PR rep was sitting in a chair in the far corner of the room; she’d been behind John as he entered the room and he hadn’t even noticed her. She was playing a matching game on her tablet, and gave John a smile. In a demanding tone, Sherlock prompted, “Sodas, Watson. Down the hall.”

John, dumbstruck, patted his trousers’ pockets looking for change or small bills. “Yeah, all right.” He cut a glance to the wall clock. “Won’t you miss your appointment?”

“I haven’t got an appointment.” Sherlock tore his eyes from the screen long enough to raise his eyebrows at John, who smiled and shook his head, then went in search of a vending machine.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Two new hockey terms! There is a reference to John once making a save in front of an empty net. If a team is behind, they can remove the goalie from the ice to send out an extra skater. With rare exceptions, this happens in the last two minutes of a game, as a last-ditch attempt to tie (forcing overtime) or win.

There is also a reference to the Brawlers wanting to gather "points". The number of points a team has is what determines their ranking in their conference, division, and the league. Each game is worth two points. If a team wins in regulation time, they get two points while the losing team gets zero. If there is a tie at the end of regulation, each team gets one point. The game then goes to overtime (and then a shootout if no one scores in the five minute OT, but nevermind), and a winner is determined; that team gets a second point.

(Of interest but not in this chapter: Players also get "points" to determine their statistics. Each goal or assist gives them a point. The NHL player with the most points at the end of the season wins the Art Ross Trophy.)

*

John’s old team, the Hamilton Thrashers, had played at Boston in October, but it was the Brawlers’ first game at Hamilton, and the crowd at the Canadian Airlines Centre was making it clear they missed their old team captain. When he’d skated out for the ceremonial first puck drop, the fans were on their feet and the cheering went on and on, until John raised his stick and saluted them, turning in a slow circle.

During the first TV time out, a video montage on the scoreboard showed John’s Thrashers highlights—hits he made and took, a couple of fights he’d been in, post-goal celebrations, a save he once made in front of an empty net, even footage of him sitting on the bench getting his split lip taped together between plays. It ended with a clip from a between-periods interview with the rinkside reporter, his hair completely mad from sweat and having just pulled off his helmet.

“Well, you know, Hamilton’s home. I always play better at home—I think we all do, but I know for sure I do—so it’s always good after a few road games to come back home. There are a lot of places that are fun to play—different challenges in different arenas, y’know?—but I love playing here. Home ice, and the Thrashers fans, who are always so, so amazing—so loud! I love playing in Hamilton; there’s nowhere else like it.”

The scoreboard flashed a quick series of photos of John playing in Hamilton blue, then stopped on one of him wearing his black-and-gold Brawlers sweater with its captain’s C on the shoulder. Beside the image of him skating hard with his stick extended and his head up, face full of determination, appeared the words

John Watson
The Thrashers fans went bananas; John had only heard the arena that loud a couple of times in his career, and certainly never because of anything he’d done. Both teams stood up from their benches and banged their sticks against the boards. On the ice, leaning against the rail in front of the Boston bench, John nodded and threw a little wave to the crowd, shook his head and blinked several times, quick and hard, to clear his eyes. Nearby players from both teams offered him gloves to tap, or slapped his back. Sherlock tipped his head down to bump his mask against John’s helmet.

Hamilton beat the Brawlers that night, 1 – 0.

“You never laugh.”

Sherlock’s nose crumpled; his eyes narrowed.

“You never laugh at the movies,” John repeated, gesturing at the tablet lying on the little table in front of their airplane seats. They were on their way to Chicago and had just finished watching an ‘80s playing-hooky-from-high-school film, which—not coincidentally—was set in Chicago.

“Oh,” Sherlock said, and shrugged. “That’s because I don’t like them.”

“What?” John snorted a laugh. “You chose them! We’ve been watching them for weeks.”

“Yes. Because you like them.”

“Don’t blame this on me,” John laughed.

“But you do like them.”

“Yeah, of course I do. But don’t suffer on my account.” John was suddenly prone to agree with his teammates who’d more than once described Sherlock as weird. “What sort of films do you like?”

“Italian giallo. Crime documentaries. Are you familiar with the director Jim Jarmusch?”

“I don’t think so.” John felt the frown rumpling his forehead. “Anyway. You should start picking some you like. I must owe you at least twenty by now.”

“Twenty-three.” Sherlock confirmed. “I’ll start you off easy; some of the Italian films have dialogue in English. Are you squeamish about gore?”

John smiled and shook his head. “I don’t know if you know this about me, but I’m a professional hockey player and have been for years,” he said archly, echoing Sherlock’s own words from an entirely different conversation.

Sherlock looked pleased. “Good then. I know just the thing.”

“Yeah, take a knee, fellas; just a few minutes and we can all get out of here.”
Practice was wrapping up and John stood by the goal, his gloves tucked under one arm. The Brawlers players in their different-coloured practice sweaters knelt, leaning on their sticks or with elbows on their upright knees. Sherlock, as was his usual habit, merely leaned back against the top of the goal, his elbows raised behind him to rest on the crossbar.

“Looking good today, boys. I like the way the third and fourth line forwards are really stepping up. I think Coach was smart to mix you guys up a little to change the dynamics. The forecheck will probably serve us pretty well against New Jersey tonight.” Having dispensed with the praise, John got to the point. “Look, boys. Nobody’s happy with six losses in a row. Every one of us knows we could be playing better. We’ve been looking pretty sloppy, missing passes we should be able to connect in our sleep, the pace of play overall feels slow, and a lot of you guys—I hate to say it but I have to—a lot of you guys seem pretty checked out the past two weeks. I don’t know if it’s just midseason fatigue, or if everyone’s focusing too much on the break coming up for the All-Star weekend, or if you’re just spending every night drinking and trying to get your pricks wet. But whatever it is, we have to set it all aside and focus on playing our game. So. I’m not your dad. I’m not a cop. What I am is your team captain and I’m telling you, every one of you—every one of us, I include myself—you need to look at what you’re doing, personally, to contribute to the messy play we’re seeing, and make some changes, but quick.”

The players looked grim; some turned their gazes away from John altogether.

“It’s one thing if we’re playing as well as we can every shift, every period, and the other guys are just outplaying us. But that’s not what’s going on with us. And I’m telling you, boys, I want a fucking championship this year.” John laughed around it, confessing. “And we are not going to get it with this half-assed shit. If we lose tonight, we’re last in our conference and that’s just bullshit because we’re better than that. We’re the fucking Boston Brawlers, for fuck’s sake,” John snarled, his heart in it, and the players banged their sticks on the ice. Someone began to chant, Brawl-ers, Brawl-ers, and soon they’d all joined in, a deep-voiced roar. After a few moments, John gestured for them to settle, and they quieted.

“So get your heads in it, boys, and let’s stop embarrassing ourselves,” he finished. “Fuck off out of here. See you tonight.”

Sherlock skated up beside him as they both headed for the tunnel. “Another excellent speech,” he commented, and John couldn’t tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic.

“I’m sure you’d have done better, had you been made team captain, despite league rules and the fact they all think you’re bizarre.”

“Not at all. Your observations about sloppy play, laziness, and outside distraction are spot-on.” Sherlock let John step off the ice ahead of him, and followed him past the bench and down the tunnel toward the dressing room.

“Well, thanks for saying so.”

“We’re going to keep losing, though, at least until the All-Star break,” Sherlock said, sounding resigned.

“We have eight games between now and then,” John replied. “And we can’t afford to lose that many. How do you figure?”

“The veterans are tired and feeling the accumulated effect of the injuries they’ve had so far this season. The young players are either cocksure and blaming anyone but themselves, or blaming only themselves to the point of undermining their own confidence. The third line forwards are a bunch
of drunks. Half the defensemen are addicted to pain pills. They’re all half on holiday already. I admire your impulse to appeal to their consciences, but I feel certain it won’t garner results.”

They reached the dressing room and started ditching equipment, shrugging out of their practice jerseys.

“You may be right, but I had to try,” John said with a good-natured shrug. “As for your prediction we’ll keep losing, care to make it interesting?”

Sherlock heaved off his shoulder pads and dropped them into his locker. “What do you have in mind?”

“I say we’ll win at least five of the eight games between now and the All-Star break.”

“Not possible,” Sherlock said.

“Loser pays for dinner?” John scratched and scratched his bare chest, counteracting the disarrangement of his chest hair under his tight-fitting, mostly-spandex compression shirt.


“Yeah, OK,” John acquiesced, feeling devilish, grinning. “Winner’s choice.”

Sherlock extended his hand and John shook it. “It’s a bet,” he said.

“From an early two-nothing lead, the Brawlers now find themselves going into the third period trailing the New Jersey Demons four to two. They came into this series of three home games planning to gather up as many points as possible with that home ice advantage before hitting the road again next week, Brick, but hope of snapping the six-game losing streak they had coming into tonight’s game is beginning to fade, with only twenty minutes left to play and the Demons really just dominating through the second.”

“It’s true, Jack. The Brawlers are just not looking like the team they were even a month ago, when things really seemed to be gelling as far as sorting out the forward lines, defensive pairs finding their stride, newer players really rising to the level they need to play at to match the Brawlers’ veterans, style-wise and skills-wise. On paper this Brawlers team definitely has the potential to be the best in the league, but lately we’re just not seeing it come together for them when it counts.”

With just a few minutes before the start of the third period, head coach Lestrade was letting the team have it. Smacking his ever-present roll of papers against his opposite palm, pacing the dressing room, shouting, his neck red and spit flying, Lestrade laid into them about missed chances, too many turnovers, and that they needed to get their lazy arses moving or he was going to start asking the GM to make some major moves, and would you rather be in Bridgeport or in Boston, because if we’re moving too fast for you here, he’d be more than happy to see your sorry behind busted down to Connecticut so someone who gives two shits can come up and maybe win us a fucking game. He ordered them to get their shit together and get out there and stop letting New Jersey bend them over and fuck them in front of their home crowd. The Brawlers looked chastened and furious as they trudged up the tunnel. By the time Lestrade took his place behind the bench, he was his usual stony-faced, unperturbable self.
“Bouchard wins the face-off, Mellon takes control, skates up the boards, throws it behind him to Watson, Watson fires the dart, Morrow deflects. Juicy rebound loose in front, Sawyer the backhand, save by Morrow, Mellon and Bouchard battle with Ryan, Sawyer shoots, and Morrow covers it up. Ryan gives Mellon a facewash, Mellon wants to dance, gloves come off—here we go! Looks like Sawyer’s gonna go with Marsden, too. The crowd’s loving it. Could be the jolt of energy the Brawlers need.”

John felt a sudden tug at his sweater that almost jerked him sideways off his skates. The Demons’ right wing, Daniel Keats, was trying to goad him into a fight.

“Come on, bitch!” Keats roared.

“You’re not worth it,” John said, face contorting with exaggerated disdain. “Not worth it.”

The linesman got between them, one arm around the front of Keats’ chest, trying to push him back as the other officials worked to break up the other pair of fights. Keats clung onto John’s sleeve, and John tried to shake him off.


John got free of his grip and skated a little ways away.


“Watson says no thank you, the officials cut in everywhere, and we’ll take a break while they tally the scores.”

“Keats hates you. What’s that about?” They were walking out of the Garden toward the parking lot.

“I don’t know. He’s been like that for years, he’s a bully and I’m one of his identified targets,” John offered. “I just tune him out.”

Sherlock fished a key fob from his pocket and a hulking, dark metallic grey muscle car hooted and flashed its lights at them.

“Oi, I didn’t know you were Batman,” John joked.

“Shh,” Sherlock replied, half-smiling. They got in and John let out a low whistle of appreciation.

“Bitchin’ Camaro.”

“It’s a Mustang, actually.” The engine turned over, sounding like a beast growling awake. “My agent arranged it because he likes them and has no worry for how I spend my money, and though I realise it’s ridiculous, I admit I’ve grown to like it.”

“I’m not out of your way?” John prompted.

“Not terribly. I wouldn’t have offered if it was a bother.”

“That’s true, you probably wouldn’t have.” John settled his bag between his feet, noticed that unlike in every other car he’d ever been in, the radio had been turned off when the car started up.
“Keats was chirping at you quite a bit,” Sherlock offered, returning to the previous discussion.

“Same old homophobic line of bullshit he’s always spewing,” John shrugged, as Sherlock weaved in and out of sparse, midnight city traffic. “Too bad about his tiny dick.”

“Or perhaps he’s so disturbed by his curious desire to handle yours, he sublimates his lust into rage.”

John barked a laugh. “Oh, eugh. Thanks, I’ll pass.”

“Wise. I had to share a flat with him for three months in the Euro league; he’s a pig in every sense.” Sherlock’s head ducked and bobbed a bit as he drove, seeking the optimal route, looking three and four moves ahead.

“I forgot you played over there. Do you miss Finland?” John asked.


“What, all of it?”

“Every flake of snow, every fjord, every umlaut. Every ginger-bearded man and every stoic, stocky woman. The only thing of value I got out of my time there was hockey.”

John pointed out, “Well, but that’s a lot.”

“The price was very dear,” Sherlock said distractedly, making an illegal left turn a half-second after the light changed from red to green. John, in the suicide seat, tensed as the headlights of an oncoming car stuttered to a too-close stop and its driver laid on the horn. “Fuck off,” Sherlock muttered.

“Did I say Batman? I meant madman. Have you got a death wish?”

“Not at all,” Sherlock assured. He shifted back to the previous topic. “I do miss England, though, sometimes. London. When I retire I’m going straight back and never leave London again. And you? Do you miss Canada? The entire city of Hamilton was quite far up your backside when we last played there.”

“I know, that was really something. And, yes, I do, a bit,” John mused. “Just up at the end of this block, The Tremont.”

“They put me there when I first came to Boston, too.”

“It’s a decent flat. Nice views. Bit posh for me, though,” John told him. “Hey, maybe I have your old place. 16D?”

“I don’t remember but that doesn’t sound like it,” Sherlock replied, and eased up to the curb, parking illegally at a taxi stand. “Seven more games to win five, by the way.” They’d lost to the Demons and gotten ripped yet another new one by the coach after the game.

“Yeah, I’m not worried. We were starting to get something going late in the third. The energy’s coming back.” John cleared his throat. “You want to come up?” he asked, then cleared it again, gestured with his thumb toward the building.

Sherlock smirked and shook his head. “No. I’ve got a...” His eyebrow finished the thought.

“Oh, right. Sure,” John said, shrugging it off. “No wonder you’re in such a hurry.”
“Probably best to keep that situation on the road, anyway,” Sherlock added.


“Any time.”

John heard Sherlock’s ridiculous, cool car roaring away up the street even through the two sets of lobby doors.

John hated his flat. It was vast and largely empty; he’d arrived at training camp straight from the airport within hours of being traded, and someone—his agent, his accountant, the Brawlers’ head office, or some combination thereof—had arranged it for him. It came partly furnished with nondescript, vaguely Swedish bedroom furniture; an oversized, squasy loveseat and a massive, wall-mounted television in the sitting room; and a kitchen full of appliances, cookware, and dishes that appeared brand new. There was a chandelier hung in a spot meant to illuminate a dining table below it, though there was no dining table; John ate over the sink or on the sofa. He’d signed a lease; it had already been his home for six months, and would be for six more (unless he was traded again), yet John had nothing personal in the place save the food in the fridge and a paperback book he’d bought to read on the plane from Hamilton but had never even opened. The views were truly spectacular: Boston Common and even as far as the public garden on clear days, and the lights of the city at night, but otherwise the place had nothing to recommend it. It felt like a too-big hotel suite except that he opened the door with a real, metal key and the only sex-noises he ever heard were his own.

CRUZR message from BrownEyedBrett: Hey big man. Like to get my hands around that cock.

John left his shoes by the front door and padded in his sock feet to the loveseat, sank down on it and picked up the TV remote. The set was already tuned to BSN, replaying an edited-to -two-hours version of the game the Brawlers had played earlier in the evening. He tapped back a quick message.

Come round then—100 Tremont, text me when you get here

BrownEyedBrett: What, right now?

Yes

BrownEyedBrett: Sorry, not rly looking 2 hook up 2nite. Like ur pic tho

John exhaled hard.

Forget it then. Have a good one.
Two hockey terms for you: "blowing a tire" is cute play-by-play announcer-speak for a player losing an edge (did you know skate blades have inner and outer edges? Oh, yes. Say you're wearing skates and you want to circle left, with forward momentum. You lean to the left, on the outer edge of the left skate an inner edge of the right skate—feel that? So in the course of keeping forward motion while also turning, you're putting one foot ahead of the other, then alternating (on dry land, we call this "walking"). If you're leaning to the left, on the outer edge of your left skate, and you lift your right skate off the ice to swing it forward, whoa, you're on one foot, ON ONE EDGE! Say you skate across a particularly deep nick in the rink surface, or you overbalance because you suddenly need to adjust the location of your stick, or are trying to avoid a collision—where the hell did he come from?!—you may just lose traction on that blade-edge, and sorry, charlie, you're going DOWN.); players who lose an edge usually fall, or at least stumble.

A "breakaway" is when a skater gets control of the puck in his defensive end or the neutral zone, and takes off at speed toward the opposing goal, and usually because it's sudden and the other players are just unfortunately situated, that skater is basically skating toward the goal alone (defenders will give chase and try to catch up, of course). A breakaway is an excellent goal-scoring chance because it's one-on-one: one player shooting at the goalie, with no defensemen in his way.

Short but pivotal chapter today; Thursday's is longer and more full of smexin'.

The Brawlers had two more home games over the following five days and lost both, one of them an embarrassing 6-3 loss that had seen Sherlock—widely known around the league as a "regular guy," able to keep his stoic cool in every situation—bashing his stick on the ice and against the goal, roaring his frustration as the St Paul Grizzlies tossed puck after puck past him. His tantrum continued as he stormed down the tunnel, screaming obscenities and hurling his mask at the floor. The team flew that night to Vancouver to play the Mountaineers, and spilled—largely delirious with low-quality airplane sleep—into the hotel near 4 a.m., with an optional morning skate at ten and a mandatory practice a few hours later. John felt he must set an example as team captain and report to even the optional skates, though Sherlock had made it clear over the course of months that he did not feel similarly obligated. The suite was quiet with sleep at 8:15 when John boarded the bus that would take him and about half the team to the arena.

Before that evening’s game, the dressing room mood was low. Now having lost nine games in a row, even the most aggressively optimistic players were beginning to doubt they’d rally. It seemed the Brawlers’ season was falling apart, and none could put his finger on the reason why.

“Listen up, boys,” John called, standing in the center of the room half-dressed for the game in his hockey pants and white socks; he shoved up the long sleeves of his compression shirt just to drain some energy as he spoke. The players stopped their low-key chatter and activity, most sinking down on the benches, looking to John with expressions equally expectant and dejected. “All we have to do tonight is play this game. Forget Thursday’s game, and don’t worry about what happens
after tonight. Practice looked good. There’s no reason we can’t get out there and win. No reason. Holmesy’s ready, but you know these chuckleheads like to pester goalies, see how far they can push things before the refs call them out—if they do—so one thing we’re going to keep eyes on is protecting the crease. If they think they can get away with it, they’ll be up his arse all night, distracting him. So job one, make it clear no one gets close to Holmes.”

“I think he likes guys up his arse, though,” Sullivan joked, no meanness in it. Sherlock raised his eyebrows comically.

“What you fellas do in your free time is your own business,” John said, and cleared his throat, waiting for the mild laughter to die away. “Job two, keep your heads up, and play like you’re in a hurry. These guys are weak on defense this season; if we keep up the attack that’s our best chance. Put on the pressure. Skate fast, make quick passes, but be smart. Like I said, we only have to play this game, so we need to tighten our focus. Let’s just win the first period. Hell, just win the first eight minutes. If we can manage to win the first eight minutes, I’ll buy you all a beer during the first TV timeout, how’s that?”

John’s impossible promise elicited appreciative laughter from the team.

“All right. Let’s go to work.”

“It’s a cold January night in Vancouver, British Columbia, and this Boston Brawlers team was clearly desperate to come in from the cold. A nine-game losing streak has had both players and fans disheartened, but the B’s exploded onto the Vancouver ice and scored two goals in the first six minutes, just fifty-three seconds apart. If they can keep up anything like the pace they’ve set so far, we could finally see the end of the drought, here tonight.”

“Nice one, boys,” John enthused, shouting to be heard as the players arranged themselves for the faceoff. “Keep it up, keep it up. Rack of cold ones on me at the intermission, yeah?”

The Brawlers played on, one period—one shift—at a time. After two periods, they were leading 3–2. As they gathered in the dressing room to head back out onto the ice, John urged, “Remember which jock you’re wearing tonight, fellas, because it’s your lucky one now.”

“Sixteen minutes down, four to go, Brawlers up by one near the end of the third. Gray and Bouchard will face off to the right of Sherlock Holmes, who has not had a lot to do tonight, facing just 18 shots through two and half periods. Bouchard wins it, Hatch takes control, throws across to Watson, Watson passes ahead to Bouchard. Gray blows a tire—it’s Bouchard on the breakaway! Carver and Mikkelson give chase, Bouchard stickhandling, fakes the one-timer and SCORES! Michel Bouchard gives the Brawlers insurance with a close-in backhand shot that Vancouver’s Ben Irvine never even saw coming, low down on the stick side. They’ll take it back to the center dot and the Brawlers have a chance to put two points in the bank. We’ll take a break and when we come back, Brick… it’s winning time!”

In the dressing room after the game, the Brawlers were exultant, smacking each others’ backs, joking, more like themselves than they’d been in weeks. Later that night on the short flight to Seattle, the mood was still boisterous, and John was persuaded to play a couple of hands of poker with Bouchard, Sawyer, Kocur, and Sullivan, while Sherlock sat behind Kocur and Sawyer, watching something on his phone and intermittently signaling to John how good or bad the other players’ hands were.

Their game against the Aeros was the very next day, and a matinee, so they would have an early practice at eight a.m and play at two o’clock. Upon arrival at the hotel near one in the morning, John was feeling wired and knew sleep was unlikely. Without even unpacking his clothes into the
dresser or hanging his suits in the wardrobe, he sat on the edge of the bed and with a quick internet search on his mobile, tried to discern which of Seattle’s seemingly innumerable brewhouses was the one whose atmosphere he’d enjoyed the previous winter. All he could remember was a warehouse-like approach to décor and against one wall, enormous shelves with metal barrels stacked on them. He knew it was in walking distance of the hotel, which was the same one visiting teams always stayed in, and he figured he could just make last call if he hurried.

Ten minutes later, he was in the door, walked straight to the nearest bar and waved cordially at a passing server hustling past with a tray of empty glasses and dead soldiers. “Know what you’d like?” she asked, barely pausing beside him. John asked for a stout—whichever she recommended—and set his phone on the bar, scrolling quickly through his email inbox and then finding a couple of texts from ex-Thrashers teammates giving him good-natured hassle about the Brawlers finally having snapped the losing streak despite a piker like him as captain and what a clown show the Brawlers were and it was probably just a one-off, ya frickin hoser.

Once his beer was set down in front of him, he scanned the room, fairly crowded on a Saturday night, but not rowdy, it wasn’t that sort of place, which is what John had liked about it. He was clearly overdressed, still wearing the suit he’d worn leaving the arena in Vancouver, but once aboard the plane he’d stashed his necktie in his jacket pocket and opened his top shirt button. The beer was perfect—smelled like mulling spices and tasted of toasty coffee—and John settled in to read a bit of league news as he drank it, hoping to take off the edge of adrenaline and still get about five good hours of sleep. He shifted his phone farther up the bar, away from himself, and drew his head back a bit.

“Borrow my cheaters?” came a voice to his right, and a folded pair of plastic-rimmed eyeglasses appeared on the bar beside his phone.

John looked up. Professor type, fortyish, caramel-coloured hair slightly graying and hairline high on the sides of his forehead, smile full of nice straight teeth. Neatly dressed, in a room largely full of flannel shirts and functional footwear. John returned the smile.

“I don’t need them,” he said. “Thanks.”

The bloke reclaimed the glasses and slipped them into the breast pocket of his shirt. He looked knowing. “Funny how they just make the print too small nowadays,” he said, gently teasing, as if he had a right to poke fun. “It happened all at once, too, right around my fortieth birthday.”

John pointed his finger in an a-ha motion. “Oh, so that must have been about a year ago. That’s when I noticed it.”

“Saves resources, I imagine,” came the grinning reply, and a hand was extended for John to shake. “Glen Harding.”

“John Watson.”

“Nice to meet you, John.”

By the time Glen Harding was sliding back into his khaki trousers in John’s hotel bedroom, the most sleep John could hope for was two hours, forty-five minutes. Glen asked for John’s card as they were kissing goodbye with John’s fingers resting on the door handle.

“I’m not really—” John started to say, but wasn’t sure how he meant to finish.

“I’ll give you mine,” Glen said, and fished in his pocket for his billfold, flicked it open and thrust a
plain cream-coloured card into John’s hand. “I enjoyed talking with you. I’d like to talk more.”

John cleared his throat, and flicked the edge of the card with his thumb. “Sure. Yeah, I’ll be in touch.” He actually thought he might. John had enjoyed their conversation, too, and while the mutual hand jobs in his big hotel bed had felt more like a high school snog session than a hot one-night hookup, he’d enjoyed that, too. It figured the first man he’d met in over a year that he might like an actual date with lived as far away from Boston as it was possible to live; it was just John’s luck. Momentarily he considered offering to arrange for Glen to come to the next day’s game, but he needed to keep his head in it, and so left it aside. John hadn’t even told him he was a player, only that he worked for the team. “I’ll definitely be in touch.”

“Please do be,” Glen said, and leaned in to kiss him again, closed-mouthed and kind.

They said their goodbyes and John made sure the door was locked behind him. It was too much to hope that something could happen there, John knew, but on his way back to bed something made him tuck the card into his shaving kit instead of chucking it straight into the bin.
Chapter 10

The Brawlers beat Seattle 2 – 1 in overtime, and John regretted not having gotten more sleep the previous night, though not the reason for it. On the short flight to Sacramento for a game against the California Gold Rush four days later, John availed himself of two pillows and two blankets, and was quickly shoveling his supper of lemon-ginger chicken and noodles down his gullet before the Brawlers’ plane even pushed back from the gate. Sherlock dropped into the seat beside him.

“Tenebrae,” he said. “Hugely influential. Very meta, a film that comments on its own genre and the associated controversies. Probably Argento’s greatest thriller. It was banned in the UK until 1999.”

“Sounds great, but I’m completely done. I was just going to sleep through this one.” John was apologetic; he did still owe Sherlock nineteen films, and so far he’d mostly enjoyed Sherlock’s selections.

“Ah, next time, then,” Sherlock replied, and without another word, he got up and moved to another seat, somewhere behind John’s. A few hours later the team piled into a bus that would take them to the hotel, and John felt much better after a nap so deep he hadn’t even minded the semi-upright airplane seat, the ambient light, or the noise from the other players. Sherlock was in his own world, wearing borrowed headphones, engaged with his mobile’s screen, and he sat in the first row of bus seats with his face turned toward the window. He put his overnight bag on the aisle seat beside him.

Once they’d let themselves into the suite, John offered, “We could watch your film now, if you want.” Having played the matinee game and flown right after, they found themselves in the strange, in-between hours when most people were having dinner—when they were usually playing hockey—too late for daytime activities, too early for nightlife.

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise, found that a corkscrew had, in fact, been left with his contract rider-required bottles of wine, and opened one. “Drink?” he offered.

“Sure, why not?” John agreed. They had the next day off from practice and press, with some kind of team-building, manufactured-fun activity scheduled in the afternoon which John felt obligated to attend though it was technically optional. Sherlock brought two half-full wine glasses to the sitting area and set them on the coffee table.

“It needs to breathe a bit,” he explained, and folded himself into an armchair, reaching around his shins to untie his shoes and let them drop to the floor.

“Don’t we all.”

“Hm.”

John cleared his throat, swiped his palms down his thighs. He noticed Sherlock hadn’t made any moves toward arranging for them to watch his movie. “Think I’m going to win that bet we made, yet,” he offered. “You said we’d lose five out of eight, and so far we’ve only lost three. And now we’re winning again, the confidence is coming back.”

“I imagine we’ll beat the Rush,” Sherlock said thoughtfully. “Their Injured Reserve is like a Who’s Who of their club. Half of their current forward lines were playing in the minors two weeks ago.”
“L.A.’s a toss-up, I figure,” John allowed. “The Condors have been solid for the past four seasons and they look the same this year. That team is a fucking juggernaut; I’m unfailingly glad we’re not in the same conference.”

“Could come down to the Jaguars, back at home,” Sherlock said. “I’m considering my options, though, for my prize. Winner’s choice, you said.”

Clearing his throat again, John reached for his glass and took a swig. The wine was tart and sharp, and he felt it at the back of his jaw.

“That needs more time,” Sherlock said.

“Needs something,” John agreed, and set the glass back down. “Sugar, maybe?” He grinned, and Sherlock returned a lazy smile that John also felt at the back of his jaw.

“Had a nice time last night?” Sherlock asked, casual but sudden. It felt to John like his tryst with Glen—he of the prematurely-grey hair and reading specs—had happened a thousand years earlier; all his random sleep of the past twenty-four hours had thrown his clock completely out of whack.

“Yeah, I did, actually. Why do you ask?”

Sherlock shrugged and shook his head, eyes fluttering and slow-rolling to show his lack of real interest. *No reason.*

John sipped the wine again, as if he hadn’t just tasted it and found it distressing. It hadn’t changed.

“It’s odd I never see you on CRUZR,” Sherlock said with the same false casualness, looking amused. “You use it, don’t you?”

 Shrugging, John replied, “Sometimes.”

“Given we’re always in the same city—and on the road, even right in the same hotel suite—one would think you’d show up on the map as someone nearby.” He raised an eyebrow, and kept his gaze on John as he peeled off his socks and dropped them to the floor. His toenails were neatly trimmed and glossy. John wondered if Sherlock got pedicures.

“Just weird timing,” John offered, by way of explanation.

“I suppose so,” Sherlock allowed, and reached for his wine glass. He swirled it a bit, tucked his nose into the rim. “I assumed it was because you’d blocked me.”

“What?” John protested, hoping it sounded genuine. “I don’t even know your screen name. Why would I block you when I’ve never seen you on there?”

All faux innocence, Sherlock said, “O, N, D, eighteen? Was that not you? Because that name used to show up everywhere I went, and then just when things finally got interesting, away it went. It would be a small world indeed if someone other than you was also a D. . .fenseman from Ontario who wears number 18.” Sherlock smiled as John felt his face flush hot. The blood rushed away from his head as he remembered the messages he’d exchanged with the JanuaryMan.

“You knew that was me?” John demanded. “When did you know? Later, yeah? You figured it out after all those messages.”

Sherlock smirked.
“Jeezus, Holmes, you offered to finger me—you said you wanted to fuck me!”

A fluttering wave of his fingers through the air. “The offer stands. I do want to.” At last, he sipped his wine. “Oh and by the way, I switch, too.”

John was trying to sort what it might mean, that Sherlock had come on so strong that night, knowing exactly who he was messaging from the start. Hesitantly, John said, “That’s...good to know, I suppose. In case we ever do that back-burner thing again.” He found himself taking a drink and attempting to clear his throat at the same time, ended up coughing into this glass, splashing wine up over his upper lip and onto his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

Sherlock chuckled and touched his own face. “You have a little something,” he said, as John dragged his palm down his face.

“Thanks, I noticed.” He set his glass on the coffee table—it was nearly empty—and slid it away from himself a bit. “So, do you think we will, ever? Do that again?”

Sherlock took a long draught from his glass and then set it aside. “Oh, I think we probably will. I’d like to take the time to give you a proper blow job someday.”

John’s breath left him. He looked at Sherlock’s bare feet, the sharp jut of his ankle bone, but it did not—as he’d intended—shift his thoughts away from sex with Sherlock. On the contrary, he instantly imagined Sherlock’s ankles hoisted on his shoulders, where he could turn his head and nibble the arches of Sherlock’s long feet. “Jeezus,” he muttered. Then: “Someday?”

Sherlock tipped his head toward his bedroom door. “Or right now?”

“Yes. Now is good. Very good. Yes.”

Sherlock looked devilish as he rose and started for his room, beckoning over his shoulder with one curved finger. “Come on, then.” John did not need a second invitation, and followed eagerly. Once they were through the door, Sherlock turned on the bedside lamp and went rummaging in his bag. “Sit,” he directed, and John sat on the edge of the bed, admiring the shape of Sherlock’s arse in his beautifully cut trousers, bent over as he was to reach inside his duffel on the floor. He came up with a handful of foil packets and scattered them on the night table, smirking.

“Wonder if this is going on in any of the other guys’ suites,” John joked, as Sherlock tugged his shirt tails out of his waistband and began unbuttoning the shirt from the bottom. John licked his lips and leaned back a bit, on his palms. The bed was high; even sitting close to its edge, only the front of his feet touched the floor.

“Imagine it going on in all of them,” Sherlock said with stagey lasciviousness. He let his shirt slide down his arms and off onto the floor, then stepped forward to stand between John’s knees, sliding his wide-open palm and splayed fingers straight down John’s chest, then dragging back up, disrupting the set of his shirt, feathering long fingers over John’s pectoral muscle. John sat up straight, bringing his hands to either side of Sherlock’s waist, feeling expensive wool flannel and warm, dry skin.

“Um...No,” John said, rejecting the idea he visualize his teammates in various erotic pairings. Sherlock slipped fingers behind John’s neck and persuaded him closer, tilting his torso toward John’s face. John took the hint, wet his tongue, and pressed it to Sherlock’s pink nipple, circling quick, then flicking. There came an appreciative hum and skinny fingers raked through the hair at the back of John’s head.
John replaced his tongue with a finger and thumb, pinching and rolling the tightened bud as he moved to suck the other, dragging his lips and nose over Sherlock’s pectoral muscles, into the valley between them. A low growl escaped him as the musky taste of Sherlock’s nipple hit his tongue. Sherlock worked as many of John’s shirt buttons open as he could reach without breaking contact, and dropped his hands inside, stroking through John’s chest hair, giving him a delicious chill.

Ducking his head, John scraped teeth and lips over a patch of taut skin on Sherlock’s belly, was gratified to feel it ripple away as Sherlock flinched from the ticklish touch. John grinned against his skin, bit down more firmly a second time, far from cruel but not exactly sweet. Sherlock arched into it, so John pressed his teeth down once more, drawing a sharp, hissing inhalation from Sherlock. After a moment, Sherlock leaned away and quickly rearranged himself on his knees, both spidery hands sliding up John’s thighs, at last reaching for John’s belt. As he worked to unfasten the buckle, he dipped his face, pressed his open mouth against the trousers’ front placket, and roared a hot breath through it, warming John’s already firm prick. John groaned and his hips rolled up to meet Sherlock’s mouth.

“Christ. . .”

“Mmm hmmm.” Sherlock slid the zip, grasped fistfuls of fabric at John’s hips and started to tug; John lifted, helped Sherlock divest him of trousers and pants in one go, leaving them in a rumpled bunch around his ankles. As Sherlock adjusted his stance, shifting his knees back and apart, then closer again, he scratched lightly with his well-manicured fingernails up and down through the hair on John’s left thigh, and John stared at Sherlock’s pale eyes, which in turn stared at John’s formidable erection. Sherlock’s mouth twisted into a small smile and he let out a low, delighted, “Oh,” that John felt thrum through his pelvis, swirling like a roulette ball low in his belly.

And with that soft exclamation, Sherlock sank forward, taking John’s cock in his hand and slipping perfectly wet lips around the crown, dragging John’s foreskin forward and back in a quick rocking motion that made John suck his teeth. After almost enough of that particular trick, Sherlock dipped forward, adjusting the posture of his shoulders and neck a bit as he took John’s cock mid-deep, his gathered saliva coating the shifting skin. Sherlock’s already gaunt cheeks collapsed as he drew back sucking, then his head bobbed gently as he smoothed tongue and lips around John’s length.

“So good,” John sighed, letting his eyes fall shut, and his fingers skated over Sherlock’s bicep, flexing as he worked John’s cock in the curl of his fist.

Sherlock changed the plot again—broad, wet tongue serpentine-sliding down one side of John’s prick, his neck rolling to turn his head, then licking up the other side. He slid his tongue in a luxurious swirl around the crown, closed down to suck, then licked his way back down, this time nosing into John’s pubic hair before dragging his tongue back up to the head.

“Christ. . .” John muttered, and his instinct was to say, Christ, Holmes, but he wondered if their current close proximity warranted a more intimate, Christ, Sherlock, but before he’d sorted it, Sherlock had resumed swallowing him down, then dragging back with hollowed cheeks, much quicker this time, and John forgot to say anything at all as his quadriceps muscles tightened, quivering, wanting to close his thighs together. His breathing went ragged around the edges, coming choppy and loud through drying lips.

Sherlock slowed the pace again, taking John ever deeper, varying the suction as he drew back, and his free hand moved away from John’s bare thigh to the fastenings on his own trousers. Venturing to open his eyes, John licked his lips and dropped his gaze to find Sherlock looking up at him—a thrilling shock that made John gasp a loud “Uhh!”—and Sherlock’s eyes were stormy and glittering.
His big hand slid up John’s thigh again, and then around behind, and gave an ungentle cue, press-and-release. Not needing to be given an order twice, John set his hands behind him on the mattress, bracing himself to allow space for his hips to rise.

“Fuck. So good,” John gusted, and Sherlock hummed encouragement, so John lifted his pelvis higher, harder, pressing in. Sherlock released his grip on John’s prick and in a moment John could feel the muscles in Sherlock’s shoulder and upper arm tensing and relaxing against John’s thigh as he stroked himself in time with John rocking up into his mouth and with the quicker, more forceful bobbing of his head.

Sherlock’s free hand returned to cup John’s arse, guiding, urgent, and John felt an electric shiver tingle through him. “You’re gonna make me—” he gasped, a gentlemanly warning. Sherlock growled around him, clenched harder at John’s buttock. John’s hips thrust up and up and up, quick, juttering, and Sherlock opened his mouth wide to take him, applied pressure with tongue and partially-sealed lips, his head nodding—rolling—while he let go needy noises behind his nose.

“I’m so. . .fuck, so close. It’s so good,” John gusted.

Sherlock’s rhythm fell apart, and he groaned, hummed, took John’s thrusting prick deep into his throat, sucked, curled his tongue. He tilted his head deeply to one side as he drew back, and John could see saliva shining on his chin, his lips nearly red and the skin around them flushed pink.

John’s body went taut and his voice was a loud, windy whisper. “Aww, I’m gonna come. . .” He shuddered hard, shoulders to knees, his thighs clamping tight to Sherlock’s sides and his back arching, leaning hard into the heels of his hands. Sherlock moaned then, and his body jerked a shiver, his shoulders jumping crazily as if in reaction to a sudden chill. His head slipped back to accommodate a thick swallow, then sank forward again, and he sucked John’s prick clean, tongue lapping, rocking his head side to side until at last his lips went slack just behind John’s crown and dragged softly away.

“Jeezus fuck that was incredible,” John panted, his thighs relaxing apart, curving his spine and dragging a hand backward through his hair.

Sherlock looked self-satisfied, sloe-eyed, tongue flicking here and there across his lips, and he drew his hand from inside the designer briefs, which were stained dark and wet where he’d come inside them. A single swipe and grope served to wipe his hand clean as well as shift his cock away from the damp front of his pants. He knelt up and set one hand on John’s knee.

“You’ll never see me crouching in goal quite the same way again,” he said, a teasing promise.

“Likely not,” John agreed with a grin. He felt sated and slightly stupid, and as Sherlock got nimbly to his feet, John bent forward to retrieve his trousers and started to drag them up his legs. “I’ll hand it to you, Holmes. . .you’ve a real talent; you weren’t exaggerating.”

“It doesn’t hurt that you’ve got that gorgeous big cock,” Sherlock replied, his eyebrows rising and lowering rapidly. “Just my type.”

“We aim to please.”

“Shower,” Sherlock said, and John tilted an upward glance, wondering if it was an invitation, but the bathroom door clicking shut in his face quite plainly told him it was not. Once John’s trousers were back where they ought to be, though still unfastened, he let himself drop back onto the bed, absorbing the wash of post-orgasm bliss-chemicals, allowing his muscles to melt.
The water ran in the tub, then changed pitch and pattern as the shower came on. After a minute or two, John reminded himself he had not been invited to linger, and hoisted himself up and out, ambling back to his own bedroom and straight through to the en suite bath for his own steaming shower.

When he emerged naked from the bathroom—intent on, if not pyjamas at only half-eight in the evening though he was tempted, at least warm-up gear; he’d watch television, maybe order something from room service and make an early night—John was surprised to find Sherlock sitting on his bed, wearing a hotel bathrobe, his mad hair damp and still dripping a bit at the ends.

“I thought we could watch the film.”

John quickly turned away, giving Sherlock his profile, and fetched out his clothes from the bottom drawer of the chest. Was this what they were doing now? One invitation to get sucked off in Sherlock’s room meant all boundaries had fallen, that there were no more neutral corners to fall back to?

“I ordered us chips from room service. And cake. Wasn’t sure.”

John felt his face break into a grin, but managed to rein it in before he resumed his upright posture, hastily dressed in black track suit bottoms with BOSTON down one leg in gold, and a black thermal Henley with the Brawlers’ logo on the right chest.

“Ah, excellent,” John said, and settled onto his own side of the bed, rearranging the pile of pillows behind his back. “I could murder some chips. And cake, for that matter.” Sherlock had John’s particular pillow folded behind him.

Casting a quick glance away from his laptop screen and toward John’s outstretched legs, Sherlock quipped, “Aren’t those girls’ trousers?”

“They’re? No wonder they’re so tight around my bollocks.”

They settled in to watch Sherlock’s Italian horror movie, centered on an author whose violence-soaked novels seemed to have inspired a serial killer, and within a few minutes the doorbell went, and Sherlock went to answer it, returning with plates balanced up his arm and the open wine bottle tucked into his other elbow. They passed the bottle back and forth, while John ate most of the chips and Sherlock ate most of the cake. The film was gory and John was distracted by how the actors’ dubbed-in dialogue didn’t sync up with the movements of their mouths; Sherlock said it was a giallo classic, and John didn’t have the heart to say he could really live quite happily never seeing pretty, topless girls get their throats cut, which seemed a fixture of the genre. Sherlock piled the empty dishes on the floor beside the bed, and John set the empty wine bottle on his bedside table.

They’d both sunk lower and deeper into the pillows as time went on, just their shoulders and necks propped up, so they could see the laptop sitting on the bed between their thighs. At some point John must have dozed off, because he woke with a slight startle to find Sherlock swiping and tapping at his phone.

“We can leave it,” Sherlock said, motioning toward the laptop with a quick flick of his hand.

“Finish it on the flight to L.A.”

“If you like. Anyway. . .” Sherlock paused, intently focused on his phone’s screen and the movement of his fingers across it. At last he lowered it and turned toward John. “You’re falling
“Yeah,” John said quickly, sitting up to fold the computer shut, waving off Sherlock’s further elaboration; it was plain from the time of night and his eagerness to flee exactly what Sherlock was. “Yeah, fine. Guess the past few days are catching up to me; I’m not usually asleep this early. Sorry.”

“No apology needed.” Sherlock climbed off the bed and quirked a knowing grin as he said, “You might want to—” he nodded toward the pillows and covered his ears lightly with his hands.

“All right, I get it,” John said, with some irritation. “Just shut the doors.”

“Maybe turn on your TV, as well,” Sherlock suggested, and he seemed to be amused by John’s squirm, which only served to irritate him further.

“Out!”

Sherlock, smiling (irritating!), took his laptop and left without another word. John fetched back his pillow from the other side of the bed, killed the light, and lay on his side with one ear against his own pillow—warm and damp and smelling of foreign shampoo—and covered the other with one of the starchy hotel pillows.
Chapter 11

The players filed onto the waiting bus in their twos and threes, and when Sherlock dropped into the seat beside him, John said, “Didn’t expect to see you at this thing.” It was a day off, but as was often the case when the team had a practice-free day on the road, an outing had been arranged.

“This one’s my favourite,” Sherlock said. “I never miss it.”

“Yeah, all right,” John said, trying not to sound shocked. “It’s that ropes course thing?” he asked. “Trust falls and carabiners and the other guys shouting at you from sixty feet below that you’re an idiot and sure to fall?”

Sherlock hummed affirmation. “Mm. We’ve got a half-hour or more before we get there; we can finish *Tenebrae*.”

They watched the end of the film on Sherlock’s mobile, sharing a set of ear buds. Just as it was ending, the bus rolled to a stop with a loud hiss of the brakes. Out the window, John could see the place he’d remembered from previous visits with his Thrashers teammates on Sacramento days off, towers and tree trunks, ropes everywhere, a long zipline, the usual combination of fun and brotherly bonding. After gathering their rucksacks and zipping their sweatshirts against the chill—it was always a disappointment to be in California and still be cold—he and Sherlock stepped out onto the pavement and John began to follow the stream of men toward the entrance, where a couple of sporty-looking hippie-types in yellow helmets and climbing harnesses waited to greet them.

“Here, Watson,” Sherlock hissed under his breath, and touched John’s elbow. He circled around the front end of the bus and John followed, curious.

“Where are you—?”

“Just come on.”

“Are you... bunking off?” John asked, smiling and incredulous.

“I’m a grown man on an optional outing; I can go where I like.”

By that time they were already out of sight of the front of the climbing park, the yellow-helmeted hippies, and their Brawlers’ teammates; John followed alongside Sherlock as he walked casually up the block. They crossed a main thoroughfare and the neighbourhood on the other side was different, a mixture of residential and retail buildings.

“Care to tell me where we’re headed?” John at last couldn’t resist asking.

“Just up here a bit,” Sherlock said, and they passed a small movie theatre, a laundry, a few townhouses, and a Vietnamese soup place that smelled like heaven before Sherlock at last slowed to a near-stop before turning up a brick walkway to a charming yellow house with a small white-painted front porch and a dark red front door. There was a picture window on the left side with white lines painted on in the shape of a stout teapot with a curved spout. Above it was the name, “Rose and Waite.”

John looked at Sherlock, who only half-smiled and pressed open the red door. Inside, the place looked like someone’s drawing room, with settees and sofas and upright upholstered chairs, little tables everywhere set with lace doilies and simple white china. It reminded John of his gran’s
house, but smelled much better—like butter and cinnamon and, by god, *proper* tea.

A woman about their age with flat shoes and her hair in a long braid down her back greeted them and gestured them toward a nearby table.

“Is Mrs Waite in today?” Sherlock asked, as they took the offered seats in firm but comfortable armchairs. Between them was a round, dark wood table set with delicate china cups and saucers, heavy silver cutlery, a pitcher of milk and bowl of sugar, and a crystal honey pot with a silver dripper. The small white plates had lace-edged linen napkins folded atop them. John shifted his gaze from Sherlock to the woman and back again, several times in rapid succession.

“She is. Shall I send her out to say hello?”

“Please,” Sherlock said, “If she’s free. Afternoon tea, please, for both of us. A pot of Assam and one of Royal English Breakfast. Thank you.”

John felt as if he was watching a familiar actor in an unexpected role. The woman left them.

“How did you ever find this place?” John asked, looking around. The décor was a bit twee, and the only other patrons were a pair of late-middle-aged women chatting over a plate of biscuits, sitting near the big window.

“Mrs Waite was a friend of my mother’s when I was very young. Her second husband is a wealthy American something-or-other—financial something, probably a white collar criminal—and she threatened to pack herself back to London unless he set her up here.”

“Ah, Sherlock!”

The lady in question approached as if on cue, wearing a baker’s apron over her simple black trousers and pale blue button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, her mostly-white hair held back from her face with a wide blue band. Sherlock stood, and after a second, John did, as well. He blinked as Sherlock let the woman embrace him. “How are you, my darling?” she asked.

“Quite fine,” he replied. “My colleague, John Watson.” He gestured and John extended his hand; Mrs Waite shook it gently, ladylike. Her face was round and her smile full of very un-Californian, not-quite-white teeth. John felt a weird urge to hug her. Sherlock virtually beamed at her as he finished introducing the two of them. “Watson, this is Rose Waite.”

“Nice to meet you, John. Sit down, the two of you. You’re on Sherlock’s team, then?”

John and Sherlock shared an amused glance between them at the unintended double meaning in her innocent question.

“I am, yes.”

“Another displaced Englishman,” Sherlock added.

“Aha! Poor you,” Mrs Waite said. The woman who had greeted them delivered a three-tiered tower of tiny sandwiches and cakes, and scones with cream and jam. Behind her came another woman carrying two pots of tea. “I’ll leave you boys to it.” Mrs Waite laid a hand lightly on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Tell your mummy hello from me. I hope to be in London in April; maybe I’ll see her.”

“I’ll tell her. Thank you, Mrs Waite.”

“Always lovely to see you, my darlings,” she said, and spared a kind smile for John before she
walked away.

They lay the silver strainers across the tops of their cups and lifted the lids on the pots just long enough to have a look, then poured. Napkins arranged on their laps, they set a few selections of sandwiches, cakes, and biscuits onto their plates, then sweetened their tea and poured the milk. As John lifted his cup to his lips to blow across the surface of the tea, he said, “I almost don’t want to.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Sherlock assured him. John sipped, and found that—as was often the case with random and strange-seeming things—Sherlock was right.

“This is brilliant,” he enthused, and set his cup in its saucer. “I feel like I’m at my grandmother’s on a Sunday afternoon.” John took up one of the two-bite sandwiches and popped it in his mouth.

Sherlock smiled, and bit an egg sandwich in half. “Better than the ropes,” Sherlock prompted.

“God. No question! I never thought I’d be so happy to eat tiny cheese toasties.” Everything that crossed John’s lips made him quietly hum his pleasure at how much it smelled and tasted and felt like home.

They ate their scones (Sherlock, who John noted might be even more posh than he’d originally assumed, really did manage to make his scone, dollop of cream, and spoonful of jam all come out even—only crumbs and a diagonally-set knife left on his plate by the time he’d finished), finished all the sandwiches and cakes and the little lemon tarts, and drank their tea while they traded stories of horrible mugs of lukewarm water, paper bags full of weak, bitter leaves, and how there must be something about the water in London, or the milk—or something—that made it so that only tea in London tasted like tea in London. Whatever it was, Mrs Waite’s afternoon tea came wonderfully damn close.

When the woman who’d greeted them dropped the portfolio with their bill on the table, John got to it first.

“Let me,” Sherlock said.

“No, it’s a two,” John protested. “That’s mine.”

Sherlock looked quizzical.

“When the blokes go out for a meal, you look at the last digit on the total and whoever has a card with that number at the end, pays,” John explained. “You’ve really never heard of that?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Everything’s a game,” he said.

“I suppose so, yeah,” John agreed. He hadn’t thought of it quite that way, but it was true there was always some element of competition or gambling—often both—about even the players’ leisure time. Hell, at that very moment, at least fifteen of them were trying to out-Spider-Man each other climbing all those ropes faster, more skillfully, easier than their teammates. “Anyway, I’ll get it. Thanks for bringing me; honestly, this was a treat.”

“No trouble,” Sherlock said. “I’m going to say goodbye to Mrs Waite.” He gathered his things and vanished down a hallway toward the back of the building.

The two arrived back at the climbing park just in time to board the bus back to the hotel.

“Where were you bitches at?” Mellon challenged.
“On a date,” Sullivan threw in, eliciting laughter from several nearby players. John cleared his throat and swung his rucksack around in front, began rummaging inside it on the pretense he wasn’t listening or didn’t hear.

“There’s a theatre up the road that was showing the remastered director’s cut of *Blade Runner,*” Sherlock said, lying as easily as if what he said was true.

“Oh, right, forgot you were both film students,” Mellon replied. “Watson, don’t let him turn you into whatever he is; we don’t need two.”

“No worries,” John said, smiling. “So I reckon Thurston made an arse of himself up there, somehow,” he ventured, nodding toward the high climbing structures visible from the parking area. As he’d hoped, this quickly shifted the focus of discussion to who was afraid of heights, who was slow, who was hopeless at tying knots, copious trash talk and a generally boisterous recounting of the afternoon’s events, which carried them all the way back to the hotel.

As John had predicted and Sherlock had stipulated, the Brawlers beat the California Gold Rush 6 – 2 in a game that was barely a contest at all. They arrived at their hotel in Los Angeles around two in the morning and John located his contract rider-required ice packs, broke one open, and pressed it to his bad shoulder. He then went straight to his room, did a sped-up version of his usual unpacking routine, slammed down four ibuprofen pills with what John rated some of the country’s best tap water, and nestled gratefully beneath the duvets with his own pillow beneath his head and the hotel pillows squashed between his knees and behind his back. He twisted his spine so the ice pack, wrapped in a hand towel, rested against his shoulder properly. Late in the third period, he’d lost an edge and collided with a Gold Rush forward, and knew right away he’d be hurting for days.

The alarm clock blared a traffic report at him at quarter to five; he’d forgotten to check that it was off. Shifting around in his sleep meant the ice pack was by then lying on the mattress behind him, just a packet of nearly-room-temperature blue gel. He went for a piss then out to the little kitchenette for more ice. While he was there, he liberated a bag of trail mix from the mini-fridge and tore it open, stood barefoot and too cold alternately pouring the mix into his mouth from the its plastic bag and chewing it automatically. The view out the sitting area’s big window was decent; nighttime city lights, and John fixed his gaze on a distant, large green glow, vaguely wondering if it was an electronic billboard, a business’s sign, or perhaps an alien spacecraft.

All at once there was the sound of Sherlock’s bedroom door coming open, and light spilled out into the middle of the suite. The man who emerged first was not Sherlock, but rather a balding bloke in late-middle age with a rectangular mustache and small, close-set eyes. His chambray button-down shirt was too big and was tucked into his jeans. John made himself known with a quick display of his palm and a soft, “Hey.”

The guy looked startled, but nodded at him, and as Sherlock emerged from the bedroom just behind him, he lay a palm on the troll’s middle back and pushed him gently toward the front door. Behind the fellow’s head, Sherlock mouthed, *Huge. Prick.*, and smirked, rubbing his jaw to indicate its soreness. John mugged amusement, nodded and lifted his eyebrows. He went on crunching his snack, aimed his gaze back at the view through the distant window, though it was harder to see with the light flooding into the sitting room from Sherlock’s open bedroom door. It occurred to John his having gone straight to bed may have cost him a chance at another of Sherlock’s stellar blow jobs, and mildly regretted the choice.
Sherlock returned from chasing his hookup out the door, and pulled a can of lemon-lime soda from the mini-fridge, which he cracked open loudly and downed in several long, continuous gulps.

“And here I thought Los Angeles was filled with tens,” John smirked.

“Any port in a—” Sherlock belched loudly. “—storm. Anyway, when you’re a size queen sometimes you sort priorities differently.”

“That what you are?” John asked. He’d figured as much but had also never heard anyone actually use the term to describe himself—at least not without a campy scream-laugh immediately following.

Sherlock only shrugged. “I was going for comic effect.”

“Big dick gets priority over good dress sense, decent body, attractive grooming standards, and a haircut that cost more than eight dollars?”

“Tonight it did.” It could not have sounded more like a demand that John go fuck himself if Sherlock had actually said the words. Sherlock crushed the soda can in one hand and dropped it on the countertop, then strode into his bedroom and shut the door. John tossed the can in the bin along with his empty plastic packet, took up his ice pack, and retreated to his own room. If he fell asleep within five minutes, he could get another two hours in before he had to get up and going for the optional morning skate Sherlock would surely opt out of.

He did not fall asleep within the next five minutes, nor the next twenty-five, nor the next forty-five. He blamed the throbbing sensation in his shoulder while studiously ignoring the twisting sensation in his gut.

“Brawlers ahead 2 – 1 at the end of a game that has been like nothing so much as a chess match on skates. Just eleven seconds left to play, it’s Los Angeles’ Nathan James and Boston’s Michel Bouchard on the face-off. . .and they’ll drop it again. There’s a rugby scrum for the puck, Boston comes away with it. Kocur, the tap from MacGraw, gets it to Bouchard. Makes the shot, pirouettes to the inside, gets it to Mellon. Mellon, the shot goes wide on the stick side, Thurston and James battle in the corner, and there’s the horn. The Brawlers head back to Boston on a four-game winning streak—on a west coast road trip!—after finally snapping a string of nine losses, to face the visiting Jacksonville Jaguars three days hence. On behalf of my partner Andy Brickley and everyone here at BSN, thanks for watching, and we’ll see you back in Boston!”

* 

In case you want to start an RPF ship, here’s a picture of Jack Edwards and Andy Brickley! (trivia: Brick’s hometown is the Boston suburb where I currently live)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Back in the day, players had to put these blade guards over their skate blades every time they walked off the ice. Technology today makes it possible (through special floor surfaces) for players to walk down the tunnel and into the dressing room in their skates, unguarded. (I find this interesting—science, man!—and it is relevant to a moment in this chapter so I thought I'd mention it)

John says at one point the team is "gassed". This is a phrase I've only ever heard in the context of hockey games, so it may be new to some Lovely Readers. It's just slang for "out of gas," exhausted. Often a player who has skated a longer-than-usual shift is described as out of gas/gassed.

Enjoy the second smut-filled chapter of this Valentine's Week, and know that I LOVE YOU.

“S’all right, boys. We played hard; nothing to be ashamed about there. Nothing at all. Look. We flew all night from L.A. while those chumps laid around in their hotel rooms, resting up, waiting to play. Nothing we can do about the schedule. We played our game. One more before the break, and I know—you should know—we can win it. You know we can. Bring it in.”

“BRAWL-ERS!”

Sherlock sat on the bench in front of his locker to unfasten his leg pads. “Another uplifting speech.”

“Yeah, thanks.” John was grim, worried the team could fall back into their rut after they’d just begun to hit their stride again.

“Drive you home?”

“Thanks.” An assistant ducked into the room and motioned to John. “Now I have to go fucking blame us for losing,” he muttered, and stomped—still in his skates—across the dressing room and out into the hallway where the BSN rinkside reporter, Molly Hooper, was waiting to grill him. John blinked to adjust to the camera’s light.

“. . .thanks, Jack. I’m here with team captain John Watson. John, it seemed like the Brawlers were struggling with some fatigue from about the middle of the second period. I know you had a long flight from Los Angeles last night; does that affect the players much?”

John shook his head, grimaced. “Well, yeah, back-to-back games on the two coasts is tricky, it’s hard to get rested up with a schedule like that, but you know, we should be able to play through that and tonight we had some trouble keeping up the pace, keeping the pressure on. We played some great defense when Jacksonville went on the attack, but in the end, they just outplayed us.”

“Only one game left to play before the All-Star break, John, and I know you’re headed back to L.A. for that. What do you think will be the key against Pittsburgh?”
“Keep up our communication on the offense, make smart plays. They’ve got a lot of depth, so we’ll have to make sure all four of our offensive lines are working as hard as they can, to match that.”

“See you Tuesday night. Thanks, John.”

“Yeah, thank you.”

Upon John’s return, Sawyer called out, “How’s our sister looking tonight, Cap?”

“I didn’t notice, and neither should you.” He actually had noticed that Molly looked particularly pretty, in a close-fitting wine-coloured jumper and with her hair plaited in front of one shoulder, but would never tell the other players anything like it.

Later, as Sherlock leapfrogged around traffic, the other thing John had been feeling strangely grim about came up, at last.

“So. That’s five losses in seven games,” Sherlock said, and John could hear the smug smile in his voice even without looking over at him. “I believe we had a wager, and I’ve won it.”

Given Sherlock had shot down John’s idea the loser should buy the winner a meal in favour of a winking winner’s choice, John had been imagining what Sherlock might claim as his prize. Almost certainly it would be something sexual, which was fine—though he still had a nagging doubt it might somehow blow up in their faces, John was mostly on board with the idea of their continuing to use each other as a sort of safety net when other prospects became thin on the ground—though each time he’d thought about what Sherlock might ask of him, John felt vaguely alarmed, for some reason he could not pinpoint. Despite their back-burner hookup status, and their developing friendship, there was something about Sherlock that kept John feeling off-balance. Their acquaintance had not been entirely free from conflict, after all. In some way, John feared Sherlock might take the piss, humiliate him somehow.

Hesitant but curious, John said, “You’ve won it. You have. And it’s winner’s choice.”

“Fantastic!” Sherlock sounded pleased with himself.

“I can only imagine,” John half-joked.

“Buy me dinner.”

John turned to stare at Sherlock’s profile, lit in shifting colours by passing streetlights and shop windows. After a few seconds, John said, “Is that a new euphemism I haven’t caught onto yet?”

“No. Buy me dinner.” Sherlock glanced quickly at him, then back at the road. “Proper dinner, though—not the catering on the plane.”

“You’re sure? I thought certainly you’d want something more. . .” John cleared his throat.

“Creative.”

Sherlock laughed. “Made you sweat a bit?”

“A bit, yeah.”

“There’s always after.”

“After?”
“After dinner. But we’ll keep it optional.”

“Yeah, all right.” Cleared his throat again, twice, in rapid succession. “Good.”

“How’s Wednesday night?”

John felt off-balance in an entirely different way.


“Here you are,” Sherlock said, easing into the same no-parking zone he’d used previously. John once again had the urge to invite him up, but wasn’t particularly hungry for a rejection, so didn’t voice it. Sherlock would have found a legal parking space if he’d planned on staying. Sure enough, Sherlock only bid him good night and drove off in a rumble of engine noise and the faint, sickish smell of exhaust.

John was keyed-up with post-game adrenaline and some amount of annoyance that the team had not gotten it together to beat the Jaguars, who were objectively a worse club than the Brawlers. He rummaged in his kitchen cupboards for something he could chew hard and loudly—but he had repeatedly forgotten to arrange grocery deliveries and found nothing that satisfied. He thought about watching the late night, two-hour version of the game but didn’t think there’d be much to learn from it—the Brawlers were gassed from traveling, and Jacksonville was well-rested, and that was it. Into the bedroom, then, and he opened the CRUZR app figuring that while he was unlikely to want a hookup, maybe he could get someone to exchange some messages he could wank to, to help him sleep.

The map was rampant with blue dots; it was Saturday night, after all, and not yet midnight. He zoomed in, tapped his way around a bit, knew he was too much in his head to be any good to anyone, so decided to wait and see if anyone chatted him up. In the meantime, he poked around in the settings, saw his short list of blocked users: a couple of local men he’d met up with who’d recognized him; one in DC who refused to take John’s numerous hints that it had been a nice evening but John was not interested in anything longer term; three who’d annoyed him in one way or another during exchanges of messages. And the JanuaryMan, Sherlock Holmes, I’m an NHL goaltender, are we on?

Sherlock had known ON_D_18 was John, before he’d even pinged him, and that was—what?—hot. Mildly embarrassing. Was it weird? Yes, a little weird. But Sherlock was weird. Famously so. And perhaps he’d just been trying to discern if John was receptive. Or. Whatever. But it was all out there now; Sherlock had known it was him, known John had blocked him, and even so, weeks later here they were. . .fuck buddies? Such a stupid phrase. Friends with bene—that one, John couldn’t even finish thinking about. Anyway, no point in blocking him anymore. John wouldn’t send him a message or anything, but.

He tapped the button to unblock the JanuaryMan, then tapped on his screen name to look at his profile. Same profile picture of his naked torso, plus a few more, none fully nude—which struck John as hilariously prudish for one so obviously sex-obsessed. There was one full-length mirror shot, with the phone visible in front of his chest, in his designer boxer-briefs and damn but his legs were two infinitely-long, just-the-right-amount-of-hairy, beautifully muscled works of art. If he couldn’t get any dirty chat, John figured that photo might be enough to get him by.

JanuaryMan sent you a message. “See anything you lik. . .”

John had the weirdest feeling that Sherlock had somehow seen him snooping around in his photos, though he knew it was technically impossible unless in addition to the other versions of strange
genius, Sherlock was also some kind of super-hacker. He clicked on the preview to reveal the whole message.

*JanuaryMan:* See anything you like? My ratio of real potential to falsely promised “potential” is quite distressing this evening.

John sighed something like relief, then tapped back a reply.

*Not really looking. Have set myself up as sexting bait??? Not fit for actual human interaction tonight.*

*JanuaryMan:* Check out DragDragon’s profile. He says he wants to lick my thighs.

John knew the feeling. He found the user name and looked.

*Ah, big fella.*

*JanuaryMan:* Not an issue. But he seems reluctant to commit to meeting. So. NEXT.

*What’s your type? I’ll help you look.*

*JanuaryMan:* I don’t have a single type. There’s something to enjoy about every type. Anything with a pulse, to start, then I suppose willingness to actually meet is a high priority.

*Know what you mean. Hate the strong come-on followed by I Didn’t Mean Right Now when you agree to let them, whatever. Fist you. HAHA. (never had that offered, tbh, and would say no thank you)*

Something about the text-only format, and the fact Sherlock seemed focused on finding someone other than John and so was only engaging in friendly chat, was freeing.

*JanuaryMan:* Noted. Oh, how about Twinkle-Twinkle99?

*If that’s the year he was born. . .I’d have to say no.*

*JanuaryMan:* Fair enough. Love the smooth chest though. Adieu, Twinkle, call me in five years. Have you ever had someone in the league?

It took John a moment to register the latter question was aimed at him.

*Not a player, no. There was a bloke worked in the Generals’ travel office. We had a beer then he gave me a HJ in his car in the hotel garage.*

*JanuaryMan:* There are no other gay players that I know of. . .I think our man Sawyer might go our way in desperate times.

*Nevermind him. Off limits by a mile. Anyway, I don’t get that from him???

*JanuaryMan:* You wouldn’t. Kid his age doesn’t want an old codger like you.

John rolled his eyes.

*JanuaryMan:* Ice girls’ choreographers are reliable. Seattle, Knoxville, Detroit. Had all them. I think Cleveland just hired a male one. Why are so many of them women? Such a missed opportunity.
For you!

**JanuaryMan**: I am the first 300 items on the list of things I care about. This one PeteCheetah is pinging me. Hang about.

John waited a bit as Sherlock went silent. He looked at PeteCheetah’s profile. Average Boston guy, 30ish, ball cap and Levi’s, not the best body John had ever seen, and aside from a dick-pic that made it hard to judge size, fully clothed in all his photos. But oh shit. . .

*Oh shit, I’ve been with him. But he had a beard.*

**JanuaryMan**: Would it bother you if I offered to suck his prick?

No. You’re welcome to my sloppy seconds.

**JanuaryMan**: He won’t come to mine and frankly does not enthral me to the extent that I want to drag my bones off my sofa to go to him, so I think that’s a no.

**Heartbreaking.**

John tapped on a few of the blue dots to see profile pictures, but with Sherlock professing no particular type, he had no idea how to narrow things down.

**Where do you live, by the way? So I can see who’s near you.**

**JanuaryMan**: Baker Street, near Kenmore Square. Just up the road from you but just on the wrong side of Mass Ave so it’s not technically the Back Bay.

Well that whole area’s lit up with horny blokes.

**JanuaryMan**: All the clubs are on Landsdowne Street just behind me. Near Fenway Park. There used to be amazing cruising in the parks in the Fens but it’s quieted down a lot the past few years.

John settled himself lower on his bed.

I’m surprised there’s not more date-able blokes in the whole of the league?

**JanuaryMan**: Trust me, I’ve looked in every corner. It’s hockey. The ratio’s bound to be skewed toward heteros. Not that there aren’t some I fervently wish played for *our* team.

Oh yeah? Like who?

**JanuaryMan**: I would give up a year’s salary if Coach would let me jack him off just once. Just once!

John barked a laugh and replied, Not OUR fucking coach??!!!

**JanuaryMan**: Yes, our fucking coach. Christ, I want him to come on my face. Maybe if I sat on his lap with his cock up my arse it would resolve my daddy issues.

Jeezus, I’m going to try to scrub that image from my mind. First, he’s our fucking COACH, and second, he’s just not my type? I’m trying to imagine it now, but no. Even if he weren’t OUR FUCKING COACH!!!

**JanuaryMan**: You clearly had an eye for Gerhardt, so I guess Coach wouldn’t be your type.
John felt caught out and exposed. Sherlock was proving himself positively masterful when it came to pricking at John with pins made of casual slurs and too-frank familiarities.

*I got over it quickly when I found out what he’s like.*

JanuaryMan: *I don’t blame you for looking. He’s got that body.*

Before he could overthink it further, John let it go and replied in the spirit of friendly chat: *Exactly.*

JanuaryMan: *Will it make you feel better or worse about it to know he got the body mostly from chemical enhancements so he probably can’t get an erection? And his bollocks were shriveled to nothing. I think he got calf implants.*

*What?!* John barked out a laugh that made him screw up his typing and have to start again. *I suppose it just augments my distaste. Not sure if that’s better or worse.*

Sherlock didn’t reply for a couple of minutes, and John thought he must have found a hot prospect. He wanted to just sign off and try to sleep, but something was bothering him and he found himself tapping out the message and clicking SEND before he could stop himself.

*Do you think anyone else knew I was attracted to Gerhardt? Was it obvious?*

While he waited for Sherlock’s reply, he left the phone face-up on the mattress and stood to undress down to his vest and pants, then dragged back his blankets and crawled between the sheets, a thrilling shiver of cold rushing through him.

JanuaryMan: *Don’t worry. You pass. I’m sure no one noticed but me.*

John wasn’t sure if the comment about him passing for straight was meant to be cutting or merely factual; it was hard enough to tell what Sherlock’s intentions were when they were in the same room, let alone when all John had to go on was text on a screen, free of inflection or expression.

*Ah, OK.,* was all he could think to reply.

JanuaryMan: *This is hopeless. Answer your phone.*

Before John could protest that his phone was not ringing, it began chiming at him and the display showed, *Sherlock Holmes Calling.*

“Hey,” John answered, putting the call on speaker and holding the phone in front of his chin.

“It appears neither of us has anything on this evening,” Sherlock intoned. “Talking will have to suffice.”

John felt obliged to lodge a protest, given the previously set parameters. “You said we should keep it on the road.”

“Neither of us is inside the other’s home. At the very least, this is a grey area.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” John agreed. He leaned across to the nightstand for a plastic bottle of slick and settled it between his pillow and the spare, then clicked off his lamp. “So…”

“What do you like?” Sherlock asked pointedly.

John had been looking for dirty talk, and here it was; he decided to embrace the opportunity. He lay the phone on his chest near his shoulder and in a lowered voice said, “I like to eat arse.”
“Mm, do you?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you like about it?”

“The sounds he makes,” John murmured, and his prick throbbed and thickened. “Feeling his hole start to give, opening and going soft.”

“You’re right—I agree that’s very good. Fingers, too?”

“Yeah, but I love licking and sucking, fucking with my tongue.”

“Bloody hell, Watson,” Sherlock’s voice was a needy growl. “That’s making me hot.”

“Good. Me, too. What do you like? Sucking cock.”

“Of course. And anything I can use my hands for: jacking him off, handling his bollocks, finger-fucking, having my fingers sucked and bitten, pinching his nipples, pulling his hair.”

John scrabbled for the slick and flipped the cap.

Sherlock grunted a laugh. “I can hear your lube bottle. Are you hard already?”

John kicked the blankets down and then shifted his briefs down his hips. “Fucking right I am. You and your hands. I’m fucking aching.”

“It’s a truly impressive cock. I’d be happy to give you a hand with it, nearly anytime.”

“While I fuck myself on yours?” John gruffed out.

Sherlock groaned, then laughed lightly, and eventually said, “Still thinking about that, are you?” He sounded more than a bit smug.

“Now and then,” John managed to parry back, though he felt certain his ability to deliver sharp ripostes was rapidly falling away as the blood rushed southward away from his brain. He set a pace stroking himself he knew would bring him along quickly.

“Mmm…” Sherlock hummed languorously, and his voice filled with wind as he went on. “Opening you with my slippery fingers. Then you’d slide down my prick, your back against my chest so I can reach around to pull your prick. Pinch your nipples.”

“Fuck. Yeah. Sucking your fingers. Tasting myself on them.”

Sherlock let out a groan. “That’s filthy…What a delicious surprise.”

“Think about watching you wank, too,” John gusted. “That first time. Mostly dressed, just your cock in your hand there between your shirttails. Your face, my god.”

A snarl from Sherlock. “Unh!…god, I’d love to fuck you.”

“Yeah.”

“Jerk your prick ‘til you come in my fist.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Your big hand around me? Fuck, yeah.”
“I’d fuck you hard. So hard. I’m so fucking hard, oh…”

“Make yourself come,” John urged. He was nearly there; Sherlock’s noises would almost certainly push him over the edge. “I want to hear you. Can you? Are you close?”

“Mmm!” Sherlock sounded urgent.

“And I love fucking raw. Imagine coming inside me, no condom, just your cock deep in my arse, so fucking hot, fuck. Can you come?”

“Christ,” Sherlock muttered, and loudly sucked air, then again.

“Oh god you’re right there, I can hear it in your voice. Make yourself come. Jack your cock. Come on.”

Sherlock gasped again, then let out a long, low, “Ohhh…” that went on and on, and before he went quiet John was right there with him, his cock swelling in the tight ring of his sliding fingers, and he groaned, deep-voiced and dry-mouthed.

“Oh, fuck…”

Sherlock grunted a satisfied hum.

“Good?” John checked in, felt himself smiling dumb and sleepy at the darkness, scrubbing his belly and the edges of his fingers with the corner of the bed sheet.

“Very nice,” Sherlock affirmed.

“Captain’s practice tomorrow at half-ten.”

“I’m afraid I’m not free.” John could hear the smile in Sherlock’s voice, taking the piss.

“Yeah, well. Hope springs eternal,” John shifted his pillow behind his neck. “Anyway, good night, Holmes.”

“Mm. Good night.”
Sherlock had chosen the restaurant, primarily because having lived in Boston for several years he knew enough to recommend it, and secondarily because it was about halfway between them, just outside Copley Square. The upstairs dining room had a nice view and it was the sort of place where they wouldn’t be bothered if recognised.

“That was honestly one of the best meals I’ve had,” John said, as they waited for their cheese board and a bottle of German Riesling. “Maybe ever. This place is great; thanks for suggesting it.”

“Not at all. It’s a favourite of mine.”

The conversation had been easy, chatting mostly about hockey—player stats, team standings, league gossip—and John had been reminded once again of Sherlock’s incredible knowledge of every aspect of the game, from league history to the most recent scores. He was like an encyclopedia, but an interesting one—sprinkling his analysis and insight with amusing anecdotes and scandalous rumours, all delivered with appropriate relish and impeccable dramatic timing. In two hours, the conversation hadn’t flagged, and included pleasant digressions for drinking stories, comparison of favourite cities (aside from London, of course; John loved Vancouver while Sherlock favoured New Orleans), and fond recollections of childhood pond-skating and pick-up games.

“Any plans for the off-days next week?” Sherlock asked. After the All-Star weekend, they had three days free before they had to report back to Boston.

“Nothing particular,” John shrugged. The server set down a slate tile bearing a row of six bite-size cheeses down the center, identified by a chalk scrawl beside each. The sommelier made a fuss about opening the bottle and pouring a splash for each of them to sample. John swigged and grinned, while Sherlock stuck his nose in the glass, swirled the wine, and held it up to the light before taking a sip. He nodded and the wine was poured, the bottle set in its own little dish on the table. John said, “I’m not flying back right away, so I imagine I might just spend a few days on the beach. You?”

“I have to get back; I’m booked on the red-eye flight Sunday night,” Sherlock replied, but did not elaborate on what it was that required him to return to Boston so soon; John didn’t pry. Despite his assertion he might spend a few days soaking up the California sun, John had lately been considering a side trip to Seattle to see Glen Harding, if Glen was amenable; his business card was still in John’s shaving kit.

They divvied up the cheeses, humming and frowning, telling each other which were nice and which were a bit much. Sherlock licked honey off his thumb; John had to stop himself eating all the figs. The wine was perfectly sweet, coolly acidic.

“You know a lot about wine,” John commented.

“Not really,” Sherlock demurred. “I do like it, though. It’s a bit of a hobby.”

“This one’s nice.”

“I’m glad you like it. The Auslese was also very tempting but I think this is better with raw cow’s milk cheeses.” Sherlock smiled and tilted his glass in a figure eight, balancing the stem between a thumb and two fingers. He sipped and set it down again. It wasn’t until Sherlock reached for the
bottle and tipped it to refill John’s glass that it occurred to John their Sherlock-won-the-wager dinner felt just a bit like—uncomfortably like—really distressingly like—a date.

John drummed his fingers on the table. To his great relief, the server offered the folio, giving him something else to focus on. He liberated a card from his wallet, tucked it in with the bill and passed it back to her with his thanks and a smile. Sherlock sat back a bit and sipped at the last of the wine in his glass, eyes narrowed at John as if trying to figure him out.

John raised his eyebrows. “Something wrong? You look concerned.”

Sherlock shrugged and shook his head a bit. “No. Nothing,” he said lightly. “You’re flying to Los Angeles tomorrow?”

“Yeah, the early one,” John replied. “What is it? Seven a.m.?”

“That sounds about right.”

“You?”

“Friday noon.”

John nodded and when the server returned, he scribbled in a generous gratuity and handed her back the folio.

“Thank you for dinner,” Sherlock said.

“You won it fair and square. Don’t worry; I won’t tell anyone you bet against us.”

“I appreciate the discretion. Shall we?”

They retrieved their coats from the hostess on their way outside, where the air was frigid, with a wind that stole the breath right out of John’s lungs.

“Damn! Freezing,” he muttered.

Sherlock handed his ticket to the parking valet and drew his phone from his inside pocket. He said, “I’d offer to drive you but—”

“No, no. It’s fine,” John told him, and signaled a cab driver at the taxi stand. John offered his hand and Sherlock shook it, and they both leaned in for a quick back-clapping, one-armed hug. “See you in L.A. on Friday, then.”

Sherlock nodded. “Safe travels.”

“Yeah, you too,” John grinned at him. “Keep warm.”

John put himself in the taxi, heard the rumble of Sherlock’s Mustang drawing up behind it as he told the driver the address. So, not a date after all. Of course it wasn’t. John felt stupid for having gotten so shaken up over it. Of course it wasn’t a date.

To: Glen.Harding@IntoTech.com
From: WatsonJH@BostonBrawlers.org
Wednesday, 10:14pm
Hi Glen,

I really enjoyed meeting you when I was last in Seattle. Work brings me back there early next week, and I wondered if you’d like to get together for a drink, or coffee?

Best,
John

To: WatsonJH@BostonBrawlers.org
From: Glen.Harding@IntoTech.com
Wednesday, 10:22pm

John,

So glad to see your name in my email. Let me take you to dinner. When do you get into town? I’ll come clean and tell you I went to the Brawlers’ website to find out what sort of job you have with the team—I promise I’m suitably impressed. I see you’re an All-Star; I’ll watch the game Sunday and root for you. Let me know when you’re free for dinner. Looking forward to seeing you again.

Glen

Over the course of John’s eighteen seasons and nine appearances, The NHL All-Star break had descended from debauched, testosterone-overdrive bachelor-party-weekend to family-friendly, wholesome Sunday picnic. The children of players sat on the ice during the skills competition and other exhibitions, and there were carnival-like events scheduled every day to keep the wives and kiddies busy, allowing the players to compete not only for Fastest Slapshot but also Dad of the Year.

“I’m going to the fucking beach.”

“Rarely does one sound so disgusted when announcing plans for such an outing,” Sherlock smirked. They had finished a massive spread of breakfast on the hotel restaurant’s patio and were draining their coffee cups while they waited for the bill.

“This weekend used to be fun,” John grumbled, then corrected himself. “More fun. The skills competition is great, and the game, time with the fellas. But all this family stuff. . .I feel like I’m always having to be on my best behaviour because some guy’s toddler might be around the corner.”

“It’s always been this way since I’ve been coming, but I’ve heard stories,” Sherlock agreed, scribbling his room number and signing his name. “Fancy hiring a stripper or prostitute, do you?”

John laughed. “Yeah, naturally. That’s right up my street.” They made their way through the restaurant toward the lobby. “What are you doing this morning?” They weren’t needed at the arena until three o’clock.

Sherlock arched a brow as he pressed the button for the lift. “I thought I’d hire some strippers and prostitutes.”
“Before noon? You’re just asking to have your contract’s ethics clause invoked.”

“You’re probably right. My team captain’s a real stickler about off-hours behaviour, as well.”

“Is he?”

Sherlock leaned in, faux-conspiratorial, and lowered his voice. “Morality seems a bit more relative when I’ve got his cock in my mouth.”

John growled.

“Is that John Watson?! How are you, my darling! You look well, we miss you back at home though. Come here and hug me—Braden, Julia, do you remember John? He used to play with Daddy on the Thrashers.”

As John was meeting and greeting a former teammate’s wife and children, Sherlock vanished into the elevator with a brisk, clearly amused, “I’ll meet you on the beach in thirty minutes.”

The hotel’s private strip of beach was host to several of the young families John had been feeling so resentful about, but with his skin warmed almost to the point of discomfort and the roar of the ocean softening ambient noise, he found he didn’t mind them so much. He and Sherlock were quickly goaded into a surfing lesson with a few of their fellow players in the Eastern conference—a sport at which the group was uniformly untalented, despite their determination. In addition to the NHL All-Stars and other hotel guests, trudging up and down the beach dressed entirely inappropriately was a television crew of about a dozen men, shooting footage for the prime time All-Star broadcasts, and to be divvied up among the many “behind the scenes” series shown in the various teams’ hometowns. Mostly John had become used to them—the Brawlers TV crew was a fixture at practices, in the dressing room, and at the team-building outings—ones like the climbing park in Sacramento—trying to make compelling, twenty-two minute narratives of a bunch of highly focused guys doing a demanding job and largely ignoring the fact they were expected to be reality TV personalities.

“How’s it going, John?” A voice John immediately recognised, though he knew the futility of a wish that he might be mistaken.

“Jason,” he said, and begrudgingly shook the offered hand. “Sherlock Holmes,” he said, gesturing at Sherlock, whose pale eyes were slitted against the sun. “This is Jason Barrett. He’s a producer for the Thrashers’ behind-the-scenes thing.” Sherlock shook his hand.

“Actually, I’ve got a league job now. Second assistant producer, nothing flash, but I’m based in Toronto. Traveling.” Jason shrugged and threw his hands out. “Not a bad gig.”

“Ah,” John said. “Good on you, then.”
“Won’t bother you. Just wanted to say hello. I’m sure I’ll see more of you guys around this weekend. Wonder if we could get some one-on-one time with you, John. Basic interview stuff—the East/West rivalry, predictions for the skills competition, that kind of thing.”

“Call my agent,” John said through a forced smile.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course. See you around, then. Take it easy, Holmes.”

Sherlock nodded at him, and Jason moved away, splashing awkwardly through the water, jumping to avoid getting his shorts soaked, holding his cell phone almost over his head.

“You’ve hooked up with young Jason Barrett,” Sherlock said with a sly grin.

John huffed and said grimly, “No.”

“Something…”

“We dated for a bit. He borrowed a lot of money he never paid back, and I broke it off. He didn’t take it very well,” John said. He took advantage of an ebb in the tide to kick at the foam around his ankles.

“Meaning?” Sherlock prompted.

John flicked an upward gaze at Sherlock’s face and crossed his arms in front of his lifted chest. “The money he borrowed while we were together wasn’t enough for him, apparently. As I was leaving Hamilton, I ‘gifted’ him my flat, with the rent and utilities prepaid for a year.” John made angry air-quotes then resumed his defensive posture. He watched Barrett’s back; he was hunched over his phone, still standing in ankle-deep water, now and then swaying to counter the push and pull of the waves, looking a bit drunk.

“Why would you do such a thing for someone you broke it off with?”

“He had…” John raised his eyebrows. “Pictures. You know. As people do when they’re together.”

“I don’t have boyfriends,” Sherlock reminded.

“So you’ve said, but you’re familiar with the concept?” John said, irritated.

Sherlock ignored the question. “What, a blackmail scheme?”

“The attendant risk of wanting to live a private life,” John said casually, with a shrug, though he felt anything but casual and shrugging about it. He was itching to throw a punch; preferably at Jason Barrett, but really anyone would do. “He said he’d make them public, do some tell-all thing. . .the whole sordid business.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Repellant.”

“Yeah.” John shook his head. There was nothing else to say about it so he changed the subject. “No idea what time it is but we probably should be heading in,” he said, and turned to take a last look to the far horizon: blue sky, a dark grey line, then grey-blue ocean. When he’d looked his fill and breathed a bit, he turned back to find Sherlock gone from his side, walking slowly in and up toward the beach, drifting a bit to the South as he went. John jogged to catch him up. “Hey. Holmes. Coming to the dinner after the skills comp?”

“Not sure. Excuse me, Barrett was it? I wonder, could I borrow your mobile a minute? I need to
check my voicemail—it’s a bit urgent.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Sherlock took the proffered phone and stepped a few feet away to John’s left, started scrolling the screen, cupping one hand intermittently around it against the glare of the sun. He made a quarter turn to put the phone in his shadow.

“Look, John. . . No hard feelings, eh?”

“Fuck you, no hard feelings,” John said, in a low, hard voice. “You extorted me and now you think you can tell me there’s no hard feelings? Easy for you to feel kind and generous, sitting in a flat I fucking paid for, you piece of—”

“Thanks,” Sherlock interrupted, and stepped slightly toward them, extending the phone. “Oh, damn,” he said in a weird, flat tone. The phone dropped straight down, beneath the surface of the water among their ankles. Barrett yelped and bent down, swirling his arms wildly in the surf in search of his mobile. “So sorry. I’ll buy you another. Contact my personal solicitor’s office. It’s an international firm: Yura, Kant, & Farkov.” He turned to John with a wide, satisfied smile.

“Watson? We should be going.”

“Yeah, we should. See you, Jason.” John scrambled after Sherlock, who was already jogging up the beach. “Christ, Holmes, that was—”

“You’re welcome. I deleted the pictures—very nice, by the way, gives a man ideas—so you shouldn’t have to worry over it again.”

John’s face cracked wide with a smile. Behind them, at some distance, he heard a voice yell, “Don’t bother shooting Holmes; they won’t let you use it anyway.”

“That was. . . Why would you—?”

“You should be able to live as you choose without threat of disruption from some gold-digger starting to lose his hair before age thirty.”

John laughed. They walked on, trudging through the sand in what felt like slow motion, and John said, “Oh, but. Cloud storage?”

“He didn’t even have it enabled. Not terribly bright, Watson, but I’m sure he had other attractive qualities.”

“Not really,” John replied. “Smaller than average dick and he wouldn’t let me anywhere near his arse.”

“Straight?”

“Maybe,” John said with a shrug. “No. I don’t think so. Whatever. Anyway, thanks for that. You’ll have to give me your solicitors’ card; they sound like a solid outfit.”

“Terribly,” Sherlock agreed sardonically. John caught sight of one of the junior assistants from the television crew sprinting past them, cradling what he assumed was his ex’s mobile phone.

“Oh, hey,” he said, and felt the thoughtful frown gather behind the bridge of his sunglasses. “Is that why you kept jitterbugging around me while you had his phone? To keep me in the frame?”
Sherlock grinned. “It’s in my contract they can’t shoot me behind-the-scenes except at home because of my big gay mouth, et cetera, et cetera. I thought it best not to leave him with footage of the two of you chatting in the surf, that he might be able to manipulate later.”

John shook his head. “It’s a damn good thing you don’t use your powers for evil.”

“Yes, well, I advise you to stay in my good books. Less than an hour until the bus leaves,” Sherlock replied, then lowered his voice. “Share a shower?”

“I owe you at least that much,” John agreed. “Plus, isn’t there a drought?”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

In case you wondered and/or wanted to play things out in yr head as you read some hot John/Glen action, I've head-cast Tim Roth (circa ten years ago) as Glen Harding. There's a pic of him at the end of the chapter. Also, John's sister in this story is not "Harry," but an original character.

“Hey, Kim, how’s it going?” John hurried to empty the hotel drawers into his suitcase and duffel bag; near-shouting over his shoulder toward his mobile on the bedside table. His flight to Seattle left in less than two hours and though he hated to think it of himself, private jet travel had spoiled him; he was near-certain he wouldn’t make his flight on time. His sister had called at precisely the wrong moment but he rarely declined a call from her.

“Going well. Congrats; your boys looked OK against the West.”

“Thanks,” John smiled. The All-Star game had been good fun, more like a pick-up game, fast-paced but without much threat of harm—any player would happily take one for his home team, but no one wanted to be injured playing a game that didn’t really count. John had scored one of the Eastern Conference’s three goals; Sherlock made thirty-four saves and only let two go by him.

“How’s work?” Kim was a higher-up in the Loss Prevention department of a big retail chain.

“Good. Wrote up that proposal I told you about at Christmas and passed it on; the big-big boss wants to meet with me about heading it up.”

“Nice one!” John enthused. “When’s that?”

“Thursday lunch.”

“Let me know how it goes. Send me an email,” he demanded. “Will you?”

“Yeah, all right. Probably nothing will come of it.”

John crammed his bed pillow into his duffel, then changed his mind, laid it atop his piles of folded clothes and his shaving kit, and tried to close the suitcase lid over it.

“Don’t say that,” he scolded. “They’ll love it and make you president of the company. Just watch.”

“Shut up,” she replied, but he could hear she was pleased. “How’s California?”

“Warm. Gorgeous people everywhere. Palm trees. You know.” He removed the shaving kit and a pair of shoes from the suitcase and put them in the duffel. “I’m flying up to Seattle—did I tell you? —for a couple of days. Met someone last time I was there and he wants to buy me dinner.”

“Yeah he does! Tell me everything.”

“Not much to tell. He’s called Glen. We had a drink, chatted, he was funny and quite smart. Didn’t know who I was, which is always a plus.”
“Handsome?”

“Sort of weirdly handsome?” John replied. “Not an underwear model or anything but well put-together. Like a six, but he wears it like an eight.”

“You slept with him already?”

John got the case zipped at last and took one last tour around the room and through the bath, checking he’d got everything. He picked up the phone on his way by, held it in front of his chin. “Don’t sound so knowing, please, you’re my baby sister.”

“But you did sleep with him.”

“A bit.”

Kim burst out laughing. “I won’t ask you to define the difference between ‘a bit’ and going for the deluxe, or whatever!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t tell you anyway. Go look at Urban Dictionary.”

“Urban *dick*-tionary.”

“You’re a child.”

“So. OK.” Her tone became more serious. “Not ugly, lives far off but it’s the internet age, smart, makes you laugh. Does he make a living?”

“Yes, Mother, he’s gainfully employed. Something in tech. Facebook or Google or something, but not those. Not a name I recognized but something with data and, I don’t know, algorithms.”

“Ooh, is he a billionaire?”

“I don’t think so.”

“*Secret* billionaire?” she persisted.

John knelt and flipped the bedding up out of the way; he found a sock he knew to be his own and retrieved it.

“I don’t know. Possibly, I suppose. He didn’t have a black credit card or anything. Normal clothes.”

“Those internet guys are stealthy. They look average but keep their fortunes in a hangar full of luxury cars, or a huge wine cellar, or they own a chain of charter schools,” Kim lectured. “He sounds like boyfriend material.”

John laughed. “I don’t know. It’s just a second date. It’s not . . . it’s nothing.”

“You’re flying to see him.”

“But I was here anyway.”

“Yes, in L.A. Seattle is like, what, seventy thousand kilometers from there? How long’s the flight?”

“Seventy thousand?”
“Whatever. It’s not next door.”

John slung his duffel over his shoulder and wheeled his case behind him toward the door. “It’s only three hours.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Don’t...” John mock-threatened.

“Well, it sounds promising so don’t fuck it up like you do.”


“Not right now. Focusing on work.”

“Seriously, let me know how the meeting comes out.”

“Yeah, all right,” she acquiesced.

John told her he needed to call a car and they exchanged goodbyes. Once he’d checked out, John walked out the front door straight into the waiting car. The driver looked mildly panicked when John told him he was headed for the airport and needed to be there in under an hour, but he was sporting about it. John listened to him talk about baseball spring training, trips to Arizona and Florida, whether this team or that one had a top-heavy batting order. By the time John had time to consider whether or not Glen Harding was, as his sister had suggested, boyfriend material, they were at the drop-off spot and the race was on to get to his flight before they shut the door in his face.

“I admit I don’t know much but it seemed like you played well.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Scored that point.”

John grinned, bit down on the urge to correct him. Glen had offered to cook them dinner at his place, and John agreed, figuring there couldn’t be harm in moving things along a bit to see how they might develop, and not at all disliking the idea of a meal cooked in someone’s home rather than in a restaurant attached to a hotel.

“It’s not called a point, is it?” Glen smirked at him over a forkful of herbed rice John thought was as good as anything he’d had in those countless steak houses and seafood places.

John smiled and shook his head. “No.” He sank the side of his fork through a flaky piece of grilled fish. “A goal. A point is something else.”

“Right. Of course.” The sharp tips of Glen’s canine teeth showed when he smiled. “I’ll learn. Can I get at least partial credit for watching?”

“Of course. I hope it wasn’t too much of a trial for you.”

“Not a bit of a trial.” He reached for the wine bottle off to one side of the table. “Pour you a bit more?”
“Thanks. So now you have some fuller understanding of my job; tell me about yours? This is delicious, by the way.”

“Ah, thank you.” He poured John another few swallows, then tipped the last little bit into his own glass. “I work for IntoTech, as you know, says so on my card. That’s real, by the way.” He smiled knowingly and John returned it. “Basically what we do is interpret and analyze mined data from the major social websites, then sell our summaries back to them in a way that’s useful to them, for targeted advertising, matching users, suggesting content. . .whatever they need that information for.”

“So it’s you I can blame that all I get are ads for erectile dysfunction medication I don’t need and suggestions I be friends with my childhood bully?” John joked.

“Not me personally,” Glen defended with a grin. By then they’d finished the meal and were lingering over empty plates and nearly-empty wine glasses. There was even a candle burning between them; John was certain he was being seduced, not that he minded. “My particular group is trying to develop ways to glean the maximum amount of useful information from the least data. Basically, we want to give users the most possible privacy even as we extract carefully targeted data that will benefit our clients.”

John raised his eyebrows. “You’re one of the good guys, then,” he commented.

“I like to think so.” There was double meaning evident in their words.

“It’s the impression I’ve had since we met,” John assured him.

“That was a lucky thing indeed,” Glen said against the rim of his wine glass, then drained it.

“How did you—?” John began, and checked himself, and wasn’t sure how to articulate his question so only came up with, “It wasn’t a gay bar.”

Glen frowned a bit. “No. . .” he agreed hesitantly, prompting John to go on with the upward inflection of his tone.

“How did you know I was. . .that it was OK to approach me?”

Glen shrugged. “I don’t know that I thought about it. You’re cute and you were alone so I thought I’d say hello.”

John laughed, “Oh, cute, am I?”

“Quite cute,” Glen confirmed, then quirked his lips up to the side. “You know you are.”

“Well.” John shrugged it off. “But you just came on to me not knowing if I’d be receptive?”

“Sure.” Glen turned one hand palm up in front of his chest then started stacking plates and flatware to clear the table.

“That’s bold.”

“Is it?” Glen sounded truly puzzled.

“I wouldn’t try to chat up a bloke in a place like that.”

“Would you not?” Glen asked, and the two of them carried the remains of the meal from the dining table to the kitchen, separated by just a half-wall and a counter with bar stools. Glen went into the
fridge for another bottle of wine. “Oh. Uh,” Glen said then, and John disliked the tone. “Are you not out?”

John cleared his throat, adjusted his posture. “Yeah, no. Not really. Family.” His only family left alive was his sister, and his parents had died blissfully ignorant. “A few friends.” Or, you know, just the one.

Glen looked at him closely. “That must be difficult.” He passed John the bottle and corkscrew while he drew fresh wine glasses from a rack over the sink where they hung upside down, like in so many bars John had passed time in.

As he struggled to manage the better-than-basic corkscrew, John couldn’t help but think Sherlock, the league’s own wine-expert-in-training, would have known intuitively how the bloody thing worked. “I play in the NHL with a bunch of gorillas. It would be much more difficult the other way.”

“Lift that finger, fit the mouth down over the rim, then squeeze,” Glen said, and John raised an eyebrow at him.

“Bit early in the evening for that kind of talk,” he joked, and Glen laughed. His hand settled over John’s and guided him through the motions, standing close behind him. John leaned back a few inches to close the space between them and turned his head, and Glen read the situation perfectly, moistened his lips just before the start of a tentative kiss that rapidly heated. John let go a hum and moved to turn his body into Glen’s embrace.

The elaborate corkscrew, still not fully disengaged from the cork, which itself was still half in the bottle, overbalanced as John let go of it—he may have bumped it as he withdrew his hand with an aim to clasp Glen’s bicep or touch his throat—and the bottle went over, thudding to the floor, not breaking, but the cork came free and the wine started to run over John’s shoe.

“Oh, damn! Sorry, sorry,” John apologised, as Glen sprang to action, plucking a dishtowel off the handle of the oven door. John crouched down to retrieve the bottle at the exact moment Glen bent to cover the spill, and their heads banged together at medium velocity. “God, are you all right?”

“Fine. Sorry about that.” Glen stroked his temple with three fingers as he mopped the floor. “OK?”

The spot where they’d made contact, in the middle of John’s forehead, throbbed a bit. “I’ve survived worse. And there’s plenty still in the bottle,” he reported, setting it well beyond the edge of the worktop, then getting to his feet. He offered Glen a hand up.

“That was a bit of a disaster,” Glen smiled.

“Do-overs are allowed,” John assured, and made a false fuss over Glen’s right temple, touching it gently with two fingertips, then stroking them backward through his hair a bit. He sucked a whistle. “That’s a bad one,” he said, half-smiling. “You’ll need sutures. Maybe one of those bandages that goes around your entire head.”

“You think?” Glen played along, eyebrows rising.

John nodded. “Or. . .” he cradled the back of Glen’s head to tilt him down a bit—he was only just taller than John—and pressed his lips against Glen’s temple, then again, lingering.

“I feel better already.”

“Ah, good.”
“That wine’s really better if it sits a while.”

“Needs to breathe,” John agreed, nodding, grinning.

Glen took his hand and began to pull John from the kitchen—sweet but a bit silly, being lead like a kid—but John was glad to follow. The flat was small, the bedroom just a few steps beyond the dining table. Once they were inside, Glen half-shut the door and didn’t bother turning on the light, only drew John toward the bed, sat, reclined, pulling John down with him, kissing, stroking shoulders and shirtfronts, nuzzling each other’s necks, humming to ask for permission, sighing assent, gently moving each other’s hands to where they were most needed.

After a rather long snogging session that reminded John of stolen hours after school, one ear out for a parent’s car turning into the drive, they were both half undressed and so parted to finish the job. Glen went into his nightstand drawer and came out with foil packets and a neatly-folded-from-the-bottom tube John readily recognised.

“What do you like?” John asked, voice low in the darkness, watching Glen’s naked silhouette—soft around the middle, but with invitingly sturdy shoulders and a nice cock standing out hard and straight—backlit by the light from the other room, and he tried to assure all his clothes landed in a single pile on the far side of the bed as it seemed he’d later have to retrieve them in the dark.

Glen replied in a lowered voice, “Been thinking about rubbing my dick against you. Can I suck you a little first, though?”

“Oh, yes.” John adjusted the pillows behind his back and sat with his thighs spread apart; Glen settled between them, leaned up for a few more kisses. John had at last nearly got his fill of kissing; they’d been at it forever, as if they were inventing it and had to test out every variation.

“Condom?”

“I don’t mind either way,” John told him, softly, between kisses. “But usually not for oral.”

“Mm, not, then,” Glen murmured, and kissed down John’s chest, the side of his belly, and then the top of his thigh as he repositioned himself flat on the mattress, hands on John’s hips to draw him down a bit. John wanted to watch but the shadows fell in such a way he couldn’t see much more than a lumpy suggestion of Glen’s head and shoulders, so he shut his eyes and rested back on the pillows. One of Glen’s forearms slid beneath one of John’s thighs, and then his fingers slid up the side of the other, swept inward to stroke through his pubic hair, smoothing it flat as Glen’s fingers and thumb encircled the base of his cock to put John where he wanted him. John’s belly tensed in eager anticipation of that first warm, wet touch.

It was his tongue first, licking a quick ring around John’s crown, over his foreskin, which still mostly covered it, and then Glen said, “Oh.”

“That feels nice,” John encouraged.

“Good,” Glen said quietly. “I have to confess it’s my first uncut one.”

“Really?” John tried to keep the amusement and shock out of his voice. Surely he was in the minority among men his age, but it wasn’t that unusual. Their prior encounter had been slightly frantic mutual hand jobs while they snogged on John’s hotel bed; the pace and angle must not have afforded Glen a full tour of John’s anatomy.

“I’m a serial monogamist,” Glen offered, and stroked the underside of John’s length a bit with his thumb. “All my lovers were circumcised.”
John reached down and shifted his foreskin back, exposing the head of his prick. “It’s not so different. Sensitive, though.”

“All right.” Glen shifted his head to lick and suck his way up the side of John’s shaft, as if warming to the idea of taking the crown into his mouth again. John tilted his head back once more, trying to relax into Glen’s exploration. His tongue cradled John’s crown, swiped and rolled a bit, then licked up from below to tickle the slit. John let out a low, approving sigh and his shoulders softened, though he hadn’t realised they’d tensed. Glen went on gently working his way around the head of John’s cock, now and then nudging the edge of his slid-back foreskin with his lips or tongue-tip, his mouth soft and very wet. John heard him inhale, and he closed down and began to bob his head with soft sucking.

“Mmm. . .So nice,” John sighed. “You can go harder if you like.”

His mouth came open and he adjusted himself to take a bit more of John’s prick in his mouth, his lips closing just behind the head. He twisted, sucked, pushed forward, twisted again, sucked. John reached down to stroke his hair, then his cheek, which was mostly slack. Glen drew back, panting. “So big,” he breathed, and sank down again, rolled his tongue around and around, then closed his lips on just the tip and sucked, weak and quick.

It was nice enough, though certainly nothing to write home about. But John liked him; they’d figure it out. Not everyone was as enthusiastic or—what a completely inappropriate time to be thinking of it—as skillful as Sherlock “I’m a magnificent cocksucker” Holmes. John could not imagine Glen “one of the good guys” Harding would ever grab John’s arse to encourage John to fuck into his mouth, nor that Glen would ever gaze up at him, open-eyed, with all the lights on, humming encouragement as John rocked up between his lips.

John kept still and gentlemanly, stroking his fingertips through Glen’s hair, sucking in a noisy breath whenever he hit on something good. After what seemed to John a bare minimum of time spent at it, Glen drew away, trailing quick kisses down John’s thigh before walking around to the bedside table to fetch the tube of slick.

“Hope that was all right,” he said, sounding abashed.

“Very nice,” John replied, even as he reached for his cock and gave himself a few strokes to firm it up. “You like to be on top for a frot, or. . .?” John asked, as Glen sat on the edge of the bed and slicked himself, then offered the tube to John.

“Yeah, if that’s OK. Will you like that?” Glen ducked in to kiss him, and John tasted the bitter salt of himself on Glen’s tongue.

Against Glen’s lips, John murmured, “You fucking up against my cock? Oh, yes. Holding both our pricks in my hand while you rub off on me?” He fumbled with the slick but got a bit onto his palm and slid it along his shaft. “I’ll like that immensely. Come on, then, c’mere,” he invited, smiling, and they settled into place, John’s feet flat on the mattress, knees toward the ceiling, and Glen lined them up and started to rock against him. He set a languid pace, leaning up on one elbow as he and John took turns caging them together in the circles of their fists. John began a counter-rhythm, seeking more friction. It was better than the blowjob, and they kissed a bit until Glen became urgent, but instead of moving faster and harder he only slid his length slower and more shallowly against John’s prick, which was flagging a bit, though John doubted Glen noticed as he seemed to be edging quite close to his orgasm, judging by his close-mouthed whining and the way he dug his fingers into John’s bicep.
John had a flash of memory, flat on his own belly on a hotel bed with one of Sherlock’s long, bare feet settled into the hollow of his shoulder as John sucked him. They were just out of their shared shower after the beach, and Sherlock had jerked him using the entire contents of the miniature bottle of hair conditioner, while John redirected the spray so it didn’t wash away the mostly-inadequate lubricant. John had shuddered so hard as he came Sherlock had to hold him up for a few seconds because he couldn’t trust his knees. On the bed, both of them still dripping wet, and Sherlock tasted like perfectly clean skin, warm and wet and soft and hard as John opened his throat and swallowed down all he could, breathing through his urge to gag, taking Sherlock so deep he had to deny himself breath at all, and Sherlock’s moans were low and hollow and completely unguarded. He’d come across John’s tongue and lips and the hot flood of it—salty as blood, thin-thick and oozy on his tongue—was the perfect complement to the tastes-of-nothing, fervid skin of his prick.

Glen came with a gulping gasp, sticky-hot on John’s belly, and as he hovered there panting above John’s chest John reached down and jerked himself, squeezing and pulling, fucking into his fist, and he wanted to shout as he came but bit it back. Glen kissed him, messy and breathless, and John let out a soft moan.

“That was so good,” Glen told him. “So good.”

John smiled and hummed.

“I’ll get a towel. Be right back.” He disappeared into the attached bath, not turning on the light until after he’d shut the door behind him.

John waited, flat on his back with one hand on his chest while their spunk cooled on his belly. Glen was lovely: funny and smart, handsome enough (John reckoned himself to be ranging in the Just Enough spread of the handsomeness spectrum, anyway, so certainly wasn’t a snob about it), and he was very sweet in a way that made John feel comfortable and calm. So if the sex was a bit boring, he could forgive it. Anyway, sometimes it was awkward until people got used to each other. It certainly didn’t rise to the level of a dealbreaker by any means. John liked him and wanted to see him again—at the very least to take him out on a proper date before flying back to Boston and falling back into the grind of the back half of the season.

Glen returned, dressed in pyjama bottoms that must have been in the bath, and passed John a hand towel. Once he’d mopped himself clean, he passed it back and Glen deposited it in a laundry basket. John swung his legs over the far side of the bed, leaning toward the floor to feel for his clothes. “Would you like to stay tonight?” Glen asked, and John heard the nightstand drawer rattle open, and the tumble and scrape of wrapped condoms and the tube of slick being dropped back inside it. So if he accepted the invitation, clearly there’d be no second round forthcoming.

“I...ah...” John had no real excuse not to stay, beyond having paid for his hotel room.

“I don’t mean to rush things,” Glen said quickly, apologetically, and John felt the mattress shift as Glen sat on the other side of the bed. John dragged his boxers up his legs and turned to face him. It was much brighter than it had been earlier; the bathroom light was still on and the door stood open. Glen’s hair, longish on top, fell loose and slightly waved toward one side of his forehead, making him look younger and less serious than he had before.

“No, no,” John protested. “I imagine you have to work tomorrow? I don’t want to be in your way.”

“Nice thing about being the boss—I can take a couple of days, if something special comes up.”

John grinned, and pulled on his shirt, started to button it. “So I’m something special, then?” he
mused. After a moment, he admitted, “It does feel a bit quick. But can I take you out tomorrow? We could have lunch and... do you skate? Have you ever skated?”

Glen laughed. “Not since I was a kid, and then only a few times.”

“İ’ll take you skating.”

“Sounds like fun,” Glen agreed. “Also potentially disastrous.”

“I won’t let you fall,” John assured. He finished dressing and Glen walked him across the flat; they lingered for quite a while over goodnight kisses by the front door, nearly long enough to make John reconsider leaving.

“I had a really nice time tonight,” Glen told him, showing his canine teeth when he smiled, glancing down almost shyly. “I’m glad you got in touch. I like spending time with you.”

“I like you, too,” John said, and saying it warmed him. “I like kissing you,” he added with a grin.

“That works out then, because I feel the same.”

“I’ll phone you in the morning and we can make a plan?” John offered. “I’ll let you choose the restaurant, since you know the city better.”

They said their final goodnights and John found his way downstairs and out to the street, where he reoriented himself and started walking North, toward a busier street where he could find a taxi. Once settled inside one, he drew out his mobile from inside his coat.

TXT from Glen H: Already looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. Sleep well. xx (<--more kisses)

John texted back, Good night. :)

TXT from Holmes: Not sleeping. How is it with the man you’re seeing? Shall I expect a happy announcement upon your return?

John had not told Sherlock he was going to Seattle, nor anything about Glen Harding.

Don’t know what you’re on about. Isn’t it 3 in the a.m. there?

TXT from Holmes: You met someone in Vancouver or Seattle. Not Sacramento. You’re seeing him before you come home. How is it?

John sighed through his nose.

Very good. You? Finally gave in to the charms of the smooth-chested, barely legal Twinkle-Twinkle99?

TXT from Holmes: Tonight, only to the charms of a Chateauneuf-de-pape.

He sounds exotic.

TXT from Holmes: He’s a mostly-grenache red from the Rhone region. Bold and thick on the tongue but likely will not have him again.

One and done, as ever.
TXT from Holmes: Dead bored; you should have come home.

John cleared his throat and typed, *We keep it on the road, remember?*

TXT from Holmes: I have a low tolerance for Alone. Did you know?

Are you drunk?

TXT from Holmes: Only a bit. What’s he like? Your man.

John felt his face break wide with a smile at the idea Glen might be his man. The taxi had arrived at his hotel; he pocketed his phone long enough to pay the fare, then made his way up to his room.

*My sister considers him boyfriend material.*

TXT from Holmes: Good looking? Nice arse? Did you eat him out yet?

Yes, yes, and nevermind.

TXT from Holmes: Ah. Better luck next time, then.

Go to bed, Holmes.

TXT from Holmes: See you at practice.

*
Chapter 15

Boston Bruins' goalie Tuukka Rask makes a save using the "two-pad stack"—both leg pads arranged horizontally. Pretty cool move, yeah?

**dasher:** another word for the boards around the rink (technically "dasher boards").

**seam:** space between players where the puck can be passed to a teammate.

**ringing the post:** the oh-so-satisfying metallic clang that sounds when a puck hits the goal post (but doesn't go in).

**tape to tape:** hockey stick blades have tape wrapped around them; this phrase indicates a pass that connects.


"Mellon wins the faceoff; Mellon close to sixty percent in his last three games—wins another, but
the Brawlers can’t get it out of the zone. Medeyev into the middle. Lawrence—the dart goes wide of the goal. Sullivan rides the dasher now, Aleks Siven around the boards, Hammel extending as the puck gets up on edge, rolls to Jake Parker, who finds the seam to Georges, tape to tape with Lawrence going toward net. Georges a shot, back to Medeyev—a deflection and a SAVE BY HOLMES, who has been huge in the middle part of the second period. Mellon dangling over the line, three on three, saucer pass—Sullivan RINGS THE POST! on the stick side of Piper. Great chances at both ends, and here Pittsburgh is two on one—Georges to Vavra. . .OH YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME! HOLMES STACKS THE PADS, LEFT TO RIGHT, AND DENIES PITTSBURGH THE GO-AHEAD GOAL!!! That was a five-star save!”

That night’s game at home against Pittsburgh was a barn-burner that ended in a 2–2 tie; the Brawlers won it in overtime thanks to Bouchard’s keep-him-guessing puck-handling on a breakaway; Brendon Piper fell for a fake and Bouchard threw it in on a backhand wrist shot to get the Brawlers a much-needed two points.

“What were you—practicing during the break?” John joked, once they were in the dressing room. “Where are those lazy clowns I was skating with all through January?”

“You inspire us to greater things, Cap,” Sawyer replied. “We just wanted you to give us a cookie.”

“Yeah, you’re all right,” John said dismissively, grinning. “Let’s see how things look Saturday before we get too chuffed with ourselves.”

Once he was showered and dressed, John straightened his locker to his liking—lined up his gloves with the fingers facing in, set his helmet close to the front edge with the “18” facing out—even though he knew the equipment guys would come through and pack it all away until just before game time Saturday. An assistant stationed outside the dressing room got on a walkie-talkie to tell yet another assistant farther on to summon a taxi, which John found waiting for him by the time he reached the pavement. Once he’d given the driver his address, he looked to his phone for a message from his sister about her important work meeting. Finding none, he put a call through, reflexively checking the time on his wristwatch despite the cab’s dashboard clock and his mobile’s screen both already showing him the time.

“Nice win,” she answered.

“Thanks. Fuck knows it was needed; they all are, at this point. How was the thing with the big-big boss?”

“Not bad. They’re going to let me trial-run the new systems I proposed, in fifteen percent of the stores, starting in the fall.”


“Got an extra title, ‘project manager,’ and a budget, and a team of seven.” Despite an obvious attempt to sound casual, John could tell she was pleased.

“More money?” John asked.

“A bit.”

“Nice. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, thanks. But I’m dying to hear about the visit with the secret billionaire!”

“Definitely not a billionaire judging by the flat,” John assured. “The visit was nice. Fine.” He
shrugged even though Kim couldn’t see him do it. “Nice.”

“I’m going to need more details. So the plane landed in Seattle and. . .did he meet you at the airport?”

“No. God, no. Second date, remember?” John lowered his voice, cognizant of the cab driver despite the fact of his radio tuned to loud chatter in a language John didn’t recognise and an apparent general lack of interest in who John might be, despite his having been picked up by the players’ entrance of the Garden shortly after game time. “Made me dinner. Good cook. Candle on the table. I spilled the wine and we did a bit of slapstick, banging our heads together trying to clean it up.”

“Not really!”

“Oh, yes. No blood was drawn; it was fine.”

“Cooking you dinner; that’s quite romantic. So, he likes you.”

“I think so,” John replied. “Next day we went out for lunch, then I rented a rink and gave a skating lesson.”

“What, like a whole arena?” Kim asked, sounding incredulous.

“No where we play,” John told her. “A municipal one—you know, kids’ lessons and birthday parties. Pee wee leagues at the weekends.”

“But still. That’s quite romantic, too. So, you like him, as well.”

“I did.” John cleared his throat. “I do.”

“Sparks flying? You sound kind of equivocal.”

“Sparks?” John echoed. He swiped his credit card to pay the fare and thanked the driver, hustled into his building with his jacket collar raised against the wind whipping along the corridor created by tall buildings on straight, gridded streets.

“How was the sex, I mean?” Kim asked bluntly, then added, “No details!”


“Uh-oh.”

“No, it was. . .fine.”

John’s memory played him back bits of their afternoon—flowing, easy conversation all through lunch; holding Glen’s elbows as Glen figured out how to work the edges of his skate-blades and propel himself across the ice; lots of laughter, always getting each other’s jokes—and of the sex they’d had afterward, back in Glen’s bedroom with the blinds closed and lights off, absolutely lovely snogging accompanied by rather dull mutual hand jobs. They’d ordered in a pizza for dinner, shared a bottle of wine and more conversation, then John knelt on the living room carpet—lights on, television on but the volume low on a movie they’d been half-watching—and delivered what he thought was a truly excellent blow job. Glen tensed uneasily when John gently persuaded his thigh up and out, kissing down the inside, mouthing Glen’s bollocks, then nudging them with lips and chin. He’d moaned about wanting to lick Glen’s hole and Glen had responded with wordless rearrangement of his body on the sofa, pulling John up from the floor, and John got the
message. They’d had a decent frot, John on top, setting the pace, and he watched Glen’s face; Glen never once opened his eyes.

“Yeah, no, it was fine.” John fitted his key into the lock and let himself into his darkened flat, found his way by the streetlight through the windows all the way back to his bedroom, where he set his phone on the dresser and shed his suit jacket. “I mean, not like...amazing. But. You know. It’s new.”

“Oh, dude...no,” Kim protested. “I’m sorry; that sounds like a bust.”

“Not at all. I like him. Very much. He’s...” John could hear he was talking himself into something. “Aw, shit.”

“Yeah,” Kim said sympathetically.

John sank down on the edge of the bed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Dammit, I really like him.”

“Like, as a friend?”

“A bit more than that, but...I guess yeah.”

“But you’re not looking for a friend.”

“No.”

“Oh, man. That’s disappointing. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Anyway. It’s late; I know you have to be up early for work. I just wanted to hear about your meeting; I’m glad it went well. I knew it would.”

“You’re the best,” Kim told him. “Sorry again about your fella...what will you do?”


“Talk soon.”

John finished undressing, put on soft pyjama bottoms and a black Brawlers t-shirt and stretched out on his bed, neck and shoulders propped up. He turned on the TV set, already tuned to BSN, where the play-by-play announcer and the colour commentary guy were yammering with a retired Brawlers player and a former coach about how replays were ruining the game. He tapped open CRUZR and checked the map. There were only seven blue dots on it, and one of them—to John’s non-surprise—was the JanuaryMan. John compared his experiences of blow jobs and cock-fucking during back-burner hookups with off-limits teammate Sherlock Holmes to his more recent ones with actual potential boyfriend Glen Harding. The comparison made him grim. He didn’t like to think of himself as the sort of bloke who valued getting a leg over more than comfortable conversation and good fun with a quality person, but there it was. He’d rather one zipless fuck with someone he’d no chance of ever having a relationship with than a hundred mostly-boring ones with someone he could comfortably assume would have driven him to the airport, had he only asked. If that made him an arsehole, then...well, he likely wasn’t the only one in the world.

As his mind had wandered, he found himself staring blankly at the television, his phone face-down on his chest. He raised it. Two of the blue dots had vanished from the map; one of them belonged to the JanuaryMan.
The Brawlers won their Saturday matinee home game against the New York Avengers, 4 – 2, and after a team meal in one of the Garden’s larger conference rooms, the players were shuttled to the airport for a flight to Charlotte.

Sherlock wanted to watch a documentary—something about wine, though he promised it was not going to be boring—and John gave in. John’s throat was scratchy and he felt a telltale heaviness in his head that told him he was probably coming down with a cold. He draped a blanket across his chest (no standard airline blankets, the ones on the Brawlers’ team jet were cashmere and large enough to cover a man, so long as he wasn’t the size of defenseman Pietr Kocur) and coaxed a zinc lozenge from its cellophane wrapper, popped it onto his tongue.

“Not travel sweets,” Sherlock said hopefully, not looking up from the tablet while he sorted the film.

“No, I’m afraid not. I think I’m coming down with something.”

Sherlock leaned away.

“Not the plague, arsehole,” John grumbled. “Only a cold.”

“Commercial flights, shaking all those hands the All-Star events,” Sherlock scolded. “You hugged that woman in the hotel lobby.” He sounded accusing: you brought this nightmare on yourself, sinner.

“Probably, yeah,” John agreed. “These things are nauseating but they help head it off.”

“Don’t breathe on me. Breathe over there.” Sherlock pointed toward the window at John’s right hand. “If you sneeze or cough, I’m moving.”

“Yeah, all right, all right. If this movie is as dull as I imagine, I’m going to sleep,” John countered.

It turned out the film was about an internet whiz who bought rare wine at auctions, building a cellar worth millions, which made John smile thinking of Glen Harding and of John’s sister’s theory he may have a secret fortune invested in cars or wine. About a half hour in, Sherlock tapped the tablet’s screen to pause it and went for a piss. John pulled out his phone and tapped out a quick email.

To: Glen.Harding@IntoTech.com
From: WatsonJH@Brawlers.org
11:40pm
Hey Glen,

Sorry I haven’t been in touch sooner; we’ve had a packed schedule since I got back (two wins!). Just thinking about you. I think I owe you a bottle of wine for that one I knocked over in your ki

Sherlock dropped back into his seat, wearing a hooded, zip-front sweatshirt over his dress shirt, and
he propped his crossed ankles on the opposite seat. He drew the hood up and pulled the strings around his face so it covered his mouth and brushed up under his nose.

“That’s not how germs work,” John told him, setting his phone face down on his thigh.

“I’m cold.”

“Maybe you’re getting sick, too.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “Bite your tongue, Captain, or I’ll do it for you.”

John hummed displeasure at the comment but could imagine Sherlock making a similar threat to any of their teammates and so reckoned it was not worth a worry. Sherlock tapped the screen and the movie resumed. The twist was soon revealed: the internet whiz was not, after all, a multi-millionaire but rather a con man who later sold off huge segments of his by-then-famous wine cellar—and most of the wine he sold came up counterfeit. Sherlock had been right; despite John’s initial hesitation, the film really wasn’t boring.

By the time they arrived at the hotel, where they were once again doomed to double rooms instead of suites for three nights, John’s head felt stuffed with damp cotton and he was clearing his throat even more than usual. Sherlock insisted on first turn in the bath, so John unpacked a bit, then returned to his earlier email.

To: Glen.Harding@IntoTech.com
From: WatsonJH@Brawlers.org
11:40pm

Hey Glen,

Sorry I haven’t been in touch sooner; we’ve had a packed schedule since I got back (two wins!). Just thinking about you. I think I owe you a bottle of wine for that one I knocked over in your kitchen. I don’t get back to the west coast until early April I’m afraid, and only to Sacramento and Los Angeles. Would love to see you before then. What do you think?

Sherlock emerged from the bath shirtless and John set his mobile on the side table.

“Sleep facing the windows,” Sherlock demanded, and reached for the fastenings on his trousers.

“You’re an infant,” John fired back, and faked a cough toward the foot of Sherlock’s bed as he crossed to the bathroom, shaving kit in hand. Sherlock dove into his bed and pulled the duvet over his head.

Once in his bed, John took up his phone one last time and reread his email to Glen. He added, “Best, John,” and sent it, reassuring himself he was giving a potentially good thing a chance, not giving a good man false hope.
I tweeted yesterday that this chapter is "like 2000 words of nonstop smut."
I correct myself. It's actually 2500 words of nonstop smut.

After having been dosed up by the team doctor on every legal, barely-legal, and probably-legal-in-Canada cold medicine to which he had access, John was able to rally for practice but otherwise spent his time in bed, bored with television and the internet, blowing his nose so often he had to call housekeeping to ask for more tissues, too tired to wank and too wired to sleep. Sherlock kept himself scarce—went to the gym and the pool, disappeared for several hours Sunday night (John surmised he’d found a hookup), spent most of Monday afternoon after their morning practice away from the room. John was having what passed for tea—a club sandwich and a slice of chocolate cake—on a wooden tray beside him on his bed, when Sherlock returned carrying a black plastic bag, which he threw at John’s bed and which landed in the general area of his knees.

“What’s this?”

“Things you may want from the world,” Sherlock said, and slipped out of his coat, then his suit jacket, hanging them both in the cupboard by the door. John gathered the bag and started pulling out the items. A paperback book with two shirtless men in cowboy hats on its cover, with the inviting title of Rough Riders. Two stroke mags, one of which John was surprised to find featured mostly women, the other of which was somewhat disingenuously titled Collegiate Male. A tube of lubricant called EZ LuvR. A pack of mentholated cough lozenges. And a paperboard box containing “six sterile surgical masks.”

Sherlock was unbuttoning his shirt cuffs, standing on the far side of his bed, as far as he could be from John without leaving the room.

“Very kind of you,” John said. He held up the box of face masks. “What are these for?”

“Playing doctor, of course,” Sherlock smirked.

John shook his head. “I’ve never met anyone so afraid of catching a cold. Are you germ-phobic or something? Oh.”

“What—‘Oh.’?” Sherlock demanded.

John hesitated only a second before asking, “Immuno-compromised?”

“Of course not!” Sherlock protested. “You know they test us for everything and then some twice a year. You might have thought to ask this before you let me spill in your mouth, by the way.”

“I assumed you were clean because I know we’re tested,” John defended. “Still, it’s not an outrageous conclusion for me to draw.”

Sherlock shook his head in a way that made John feel a bit small. “Anyway, no, I don’t have HIV. I just prefer not to be sick; it’s boring.” John, half out of his skull with boredom, allowed that
Sherlock had a good point. Sherlock dropped his trousers and crossed the room dressed in only his black boxer briefs. He removed John’s room service tray from the bed and set it on the desk.

“I’m still eating that.”

Sherlock gave John a look that instantly shut him up, and stretched out on the bed where the tray had been, on his side propped on his elbow. He took up the box of masks and tore into it, drew one out and looped it over his ears, covering his mouth and nose with pale blue paper fabric and adjusting its accordion pleats so it hugged his chin. He clambered up on his knees and shoved the magazines and book aside, tossed the bag of lozenges onto the nearby arm chair, passed John the tube of slick which John deposited on the bedside table.

Sherlock’s voice was slightly muffled as he demanded, “Take off your shirt and lie down.”

John barked a laugh. “Are you going to examine me?”

“Thoroughly.”

Sherlock straddled his thighs and tugged at John’s t-shirt; they worked together to strip it off. Sherlock wasted no time but went straight after John’s nipples with pinching, pressing fingertips.

“This one is more sensitive,” he announced, making tight circles around John’s right nipple with the pad of his middle finger. John sucked his teeth. “Ah, yes,” Sherlock mused, and shifted his backside to clear his view of the front of John’s pyjama bottoms. “I see that’s stimulating a satisfactory response.” He pressed his thumb against John’s lips and John parted his teeth so Sherlock could press in, dampening it against John’s tongue. John arched up into the touch as Sherlock dragged the wet thumb pad roughly across his right nipple. Sherlock said, “Blow.”

John raised his eyebrows at him and Sherlock’s eyes above the paper mask narrowed with annoyance. “I’ve got this mask. You’ll have to blow on it yourself.” Sherlock repeated the motions: thumb against John’s tongue, then across his nipple, and John raised his head, pressed his lips tight together and blew in a wavering stream across his own nipple. It tightened and tingled in response to the change in temperature from warm to cool as the saliva evaporated off it.

Sherlock’s eyes smiled with satisfaction, like a housecat with murder in its heart.

“This one can take a bit of abuse, though,” Sherlock reported, and caught John’s left nipple between his thumb and first two fingers, squeezed, then began to roll.

“Fuck,” John huffed, and his prick twitched significantly. Sherlock tugged and held, and finally released.

He slipped his flattened hands into the sides of John’s waistband and started to slide. “These have to go.” John raised his hips a bit and he let Sherlock drag his bottoms down his legs, and John managed to kick and nudge them off with his feet. Long, cool fingers raked down the fronts of John’s thighs toward his shins, and Sherlock shifted his knees from outside John’s to inside; John’s cock throbbed.

“Get your kit off, Doctor, and give a dying man something nice to look at,” John implored, half-smiling, reaching for Sherlock’s hips. Sherlock was out of his briefs in no time; his cock hanging heavy to one side. He held out his hand, palm-up, and John uncapped the slick, squeezed a huge dollop onto the flats of Sherlock’s fingers.

John watched Sherlock’s eyes widen and spark, blue-green irises with brown-black centers, sparse dark lashes. Above them, expressive and unruly eyebrows.
“I promise this won’t hurt a bit,” Sherlock said archly, and John licked his lips, reached back to adjust the pillows to make himself more upright. Sherlock stroked his palms together, fingers to wrists, back and forth, spreading the slick over both, carefully arranging the excess onto the fingertips of his left hand. As John watched the motions of Sherlock’s hands and fingers, he grew more aroused, and had to let his lips part to accommodate his breath. Suddenly, Sherlock’s hand wrapped around his prick and slid up, back, light and so slippery, and John let out a whuffing exhale. Sherlock’s eyes above the sterile mask glanced up to John’s face and the eyebrows rose inquiringly, even as he went on stroking, coaxing John’s erection fully to life.

“You’re very good,” John told him. “I feel better al—ah!—already.”

In lieu of a spoken reply, Sherlock dragged John’s foreskin over the crown, gently pinching with thumb and middle finger, then rolled it back and held it there as his forefinger traced a spiral around and around the head of John’s prick, then reversed direction to circle back.

“Jeezus.”

A muffled hum behind the mask, and Sherlock gripped tight with the circle of his fist and slid down until the edge of his palm rested against John’s body; John felt a stream of fluid flow down the crown, and he moaned. “Like that,” he urged. “More like that. Like that. Just—”

Sherlock obeyed, pumping hard and steady up and down John’s length for several strokes.

“Jeezus, yes, like that,” John groaned, and his chin dipped toward his chest, his belly tensing. There was pressure against the inside of his thigh, and then a cool, sticky dampness stroking down between his bollocks—Sherlock’s finger as he used the back of his wrist to indicate John should open his legs. In wordless agreement, John shifted his thighs apart. Sherlock went on stroking his prick, though he slowed to a lazier pace. John watched his hand working, gazed at his sculpted shoulders and what he could see of Sherlock’s mostly-folded and hunched torso as he knelt there between John’s knees. Sherlock looked up at him intently, and John moaned out loud. “Fucking do it, then, if you’re going to.”

“Oh, I am,” Sherlock said blithely, and widened his eyes, lifting his brows. His fingertip slid down, pressing, and began a slow, wriggling advance once he’d found what he wanted. John let his head and shoulders drop back, and Sherlock kept up the firm strokes along his cock, a bit quicker again, as he pushed in. John hummed a loud exhale, wanting to refuse, burning a bit, fuck it was good, Sherlock twisting both wrists gently, adding sensation to what already felt dangerously close to overwhelm. Sherlock’s deep voice, breathy and low: “Good?”


“Your big prick’s tiring my wrist. That never happens.” John took it as a compliment, was fairly certain it was even meant as one. Sherlock drew his finger nearly out of John, wormed in the second, longer one beside it and waited for John to ease, accommodating, before he began to gently twist both fingers deeper inside. One last crook of his wrist, a quick come-hither motion, and John saw stars.

“Jeezus christ!” he hissed through tight teeth, and he momentarily wrapped his own hand around Sherlock’s, urging him to stroke faster, squeeze a bit tighter, and Sherlock obliged, his fingers inside John’s arse dragging electricity across just the right spot.

“You’re going to come buckets-full,” Sherlock noted, sounding pleased with his own skill, absolutely sure of his prediction. John could not argue; Sherlock was almost certainly right. “What if I do this?” Sherlock asked in an amused tone, and replaced the rocking, in-and-back motion of
his fingers with a twisting grind, and John could swear those bony fingers must have an extra knuckle because—

“Oh fuck that’s good. Your hands. . .fuck. . .” John was blathering, babbling, did not care, would pray to whatever god presented itself, would debase himself begging for more, he was going to come fucking rivers if Sherlock kept this up. And Sherlock seemed as if he would keep it up for as long as it took, which would not likely be all that long. “So good,” John moaned, and let go of Sherlock’s sliding hand long enough to reach down and cradle his own bollocks, which felt overfull, the skin around them warm and tight. He ventured lower and let his first and second fingers bracket Sherlock’s fingers as they resumed sliding in and out, quick and easy now, the pads of his fingers easily finding and brushing over John’s hot spot. Sherlock looked down at the tangle of their fingers, John’s still and his own moving, and let out a deep, grateful moan from low in the back of his throat; just the sound of it raised gooseflesh on John’s thighs.

Sherlock fucked in and held, fingers curling to scrape over John’s prostate with deliberate, slow pressure. John whined, closed-mouthed, and felt his eyes drifting back behind his lids. The drag of Sherlock’s fist around John’s cock was less smooth as the slick began to dry, and the irritation of it was yet another sensation for John to contend with, and he found he couldn’t contend with it, not a bit of it, no more, not for a single second longer.

His cum spurted up to a truly impressive height before splashing down onto his hip and the back of Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock let go a surprised-sounding gasp as John shuddered and shouted, jamming the heel of his hand between his teeth to stifle it.

“Yes. . .” Sherlock urged, his voice thick and hollow behind the paper mask John had nearly forgotten he was wearing, “Yes. . .god, that’s brilliant.” His tone was such that he might just as well have been praising his own prostate-stimulation technique as the quality of John’s orgasm or the quantity of his spunk, which was copious. He sat back on his heels and withdrew his fingers, not gently but with a steadiness that alleviated the shock of absence.

“Fuck me, will you?” John gasped, and rolled halfway over to reach for the shared table between the beds, where Sherlock had earlier emptied his trousers’ pockets and where John got a hand on a foil-wrapped condom. Sherlock groaned in response, and when John rolled onto his back once more, Sherlock was stroking his own prick with firm, slow strokes, rolling his palm over the head. “Do you want to? Will you?” John felt light-headed and sleepy, and his cum was smearing all over the skin of his pelvis, sticking his pubic hair together in clumps. But Sherlock hummed and nodded, and John sat up long enough to unroll the condom down the length of Sherlock’s prick, squeezing and easing it into place, then leaving Sherlock to make the finer adjustments while he lay back, shifting pillows away to flatten his back. He planted his feet and raised his hips, sliding his arse right up onto Sherlock’s thighs.

Sherlock gripped John’s hips hard, shifted them both, released John’s left side just long enough to reach down and guide his prick home. He sank into John with one steady shove that made them both groan aloud, Sherlock’s voice still muffled behind the paper mask, and he backed out just as sure and quick, then in, setting a harsh rhythm clearly meant more for Sherlock’s pleasure than John’s. John hooked his hands behind his knees and pulled back, and Sherlock let out a loud grunt, ground his pelvis against John’s arse, then resumed fucking, his breath coming out in voiced exhales with every stroke.

“Good,” John shout-whispered. “That’s good. Uh! ‘S’good. ‘S’good.” The arrowhead crown of Sherlock’s prick jabbed against John’s prostate, sending deep thrums of heat outward from his center, through his belly and thighs, delicious little aftershocks of orgasm that made him open his mouth and shut his eyes.
“So hot inside,” Sherlock muttered, and his hands on John’s hips changed from steadying him to pulling him closer with every thrust. After just another handful of strokes, he shuddered and shivered, his mouth contorting around a drawn-out, “Ohhhh. . .” low but loud, wet and empty-sounding against the paper mask, and John moved a bit against and around him, making Sherlock gasp and shake. Once he’d subsided, Sherlock withdrew, pulling moans from both their throats, and rolled onto his back beside John, both of them relishing the chance to stretch their legs.

To the ceiling, John said, “Brilliant.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock said behind the sterile mask. John turned his head to look at him; Sherlock’s eyes were closed and one hand rested on his chest, still heaving.

“You’re ridiculous. It’s just a cold.”

“Can’t get sick.” Sherlock suddenly rolled off the bed and leapt to his feet. “Shower. Movie. Dinner.”

John propped himself up on his elbows, unsure if he was being invited or merely informed, until Sherlock said crisply, “Come on, then.”
"Chirping" is hockey slang for trash talk.

Reclining side by side on John’s bed later, they watched one of Sherlock’s Italian gumshoe gore-fests, and though Sherlock looked at him accusingly every time John sniffed or reached for a tissue, he didn’t put on another mask. As the credits rolled, Sherlock ordered them dinner from room service and John shuffled the collection of fine pornographic literature Sherlock had brought him earlier. The novel was a bit hilarious; he regretted that he’d have to bin it rather than risk carrying it home in his bags, which were handled by so many assistants along the way. The gay porn mag also felt too risky to keep, though John definitely appreciated the pages full of muscular men with youth still softening their jawlines, most with their cocks out.

“Of the limited selection, I thought that one best suited your taste,” Sherlock said casually, snapping shut John’s laptop and rounding the bed with it, to set it on the desk out of the way. He threw himself down on his own bed and fiddled with his phone’s screen.

“It’s a good one,” John agreed, grinning. He rifled the pages of the straight-men’s magazine, mostly women alone, but also featuring the inevitable “girl-on-girl” spread and one male-female pairing where the poor woman never got off her knees—first giving a blow job then being taken from behind by a terrifyingly-endowed fellow who looked alternately angry and bored. “And this?” John prompted, shaking it a bit.

Sherlock shrugged. “You were married to a woman; I assumed perhaps you tell yourself you’re bisexual.”

*Smug arsehole.* John exhaled hard through his nostrils.

Sherlock went on, clearly sensing John’s annoyance. “It makes no difference to me. I was only trying to cover all the bases.”

John decided to assume Sherlock was sincere and had merely chosen his words inelegantly. “I don’t,” John began. “I’m not.” He cleared his throat. “I like men. Same as you.”

“No one likes men the same as *me,*” Sherlock smirked.

“Possibly true,” John allowed.

“So...you once said she was ‘a story for another day’—your wife.”

“Yeah. Well.” John shrugged. “What’s there to say? It’s not as if my particular situation was unique; happens all the time. I was raised in a family where being gay wasn’t something that was even on the radar. My parents assumed I was straight, and so did I. And you know how it is with hockey. Not only is it not tolerated, it’s—what—derided. When ‘faggot’ is the go-to insult, the worst thing you can call a fella, because it means he’s soft and not a real man...no one wants to be that. I didn’t.”

He paused to blow his nose into a tissue he wadded up and lobbed into the bin he’d placed beside
the bed to save himself round-trips across the room. Sherlock was looking at him intently, listening, but his expression was inscrutable.

“I would have given anything not to be. I denied it, I hated myself, I called other guys queers and fairies and probably became the worst bully on my team, because I was terrified of being found out. Kept my eyes on the floor in the dressing room, talked about the girls at our school in ways that made my stomach ache—the only thing crueler than that homophobic bullshit they spew is the way they talk about women sometimes, jeezus—and I just did whatever I could to fit in, be normal. Not be...that. That thing I hated and wanted to murder.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows went up.

“When I was fifteen, sixteen, I was suicidal over it. At a summer hockey camp another boy and I would sneak away at night and snog behind the latrines—”

“Eugh.”

“Yeah, I know,” John laughed. “What won’t you do when you’re young and horny, though, right?”

“There’s nearly nothing I won’t do,” Sherlock smiled, marking himself out as both.

“Anyway, he got spooked, thought someone was onto us. Maybe they were, I don’t know. He started throwing punches at me during a scrimmage, but they couldn’t get him to stop and had to pull him off. Three stitches in my eyebrow.” John tapped his forehead. “It hurt like hell, in every way there is. He gave me a beating, but more than that he showed me how even another bloke like me could hate what we were so much he’d beat me bloody rather than have anyone know—or even suspect.”

Sherlock hummed his understanding.

“I met Nic—Nicole was her name, everyone called her Nic—in my first year with the Thrashers and I thought she was the answer for me. That I could be with her and it would be fine. You know...enough. My parents were thrilled, they liked her and our dads got along—they went fishing together in the summer, played golf—and I liked her, too. I loved her. She’s a lovely woman. So funny, smart, kind to everyone—very generous. She was a great friend, and I guess I thought that would be a bit perfect: married to my best friend, a normal life. There are worse things. I did love her.”

“I’m sure you did,” Sherlock put in, plainly. “Happens all the time,” he added. “Love.” He made quote-marks in the air with his fingers, and John laughed.

“Right, well. I did love her, and I tried. But we were young and I clearly had not the slightest clue about who I was. I was so closed off from myself in every possible way, I was barely there at all. There are huge chunks of my life at that time I don’t even remember.”

“Dissociative episodes,” Sherlock said knowingly.

“Whatever it was, I was a disaster. And I suppose even when I was home, when we were together, I wasn’t being even a good friend, let alone a good husband. She wanted a regular life, regular guy. I tried. But.” John shook his head.

“So how did it end?” Sherlock asked, sounding genuinely curious but somehow not prying.

“A man I’d been with was diagnosed with HIV. So I had to tell her so we could both be tested.”
“Good god. That could hardly be worse.”

“Who are you telling? It was a nightmare. She wanted an annulment; I begged her on hands and knees not to tell my family. We both cried for days—I went to bed and wasn’t sure I’d ever get up again. But once the initial shock passed—she was kind, like I said—and told me she understood though I’m sure she didn’t—how could she? I think she loved me. Must have done, because I could tell I’d broken her heart, as well as her trust. But she never said a word to anyone, at least not that I know of. The divorce was as friendly as those things ever are, but we never talked again. I don’t blame her that she couldn’t forgive me. I should have been honest with her from the start—we were friends—but I couldn’t face it in the mirror, let alone say it out loud.”

“You’re right to say that it’s not a unique story,” Sherlock said, and there was some measure of reassurance in it.

“It was a long time ago; I think I’ve only just forgiven myself for it in the past few years. I’m much more comfortable with myself now, obviously.”

“Obviously. About a thousand men would agree you’re quite comfortable.”

They laughed a bit.

“I never came out to my parents before they died, though my sister thinks my mum at least suspected.” John shrugged. “I just don’t feel it’s anyone’s business, and in our line of work... I admire people who are out, whatever they’re comfortable with—even when it’s difficult for them they live a public life, that’s fine for them and I admire their guts—but I couldn’t be that guy, you know? The one gay man in a major sports league, to have to represent all gay men, all athletes, become The First Openly Gay So-and-So. It’s not for me. I couldn’t bear the weight of that all on my own.”

“Nor me,” Sherlock said.

“Really? I thought the only reason you weren’t already that guy was because the league has gagged you from talking to the press.”

“Partially. But I recognise I’m not the poster boy for the well-adjusted, hetero-friendly gay man next door: either a sexless monk, or a pseudo-straight with a husband and a child adopted from China and—whatever—pleat-front khaki trousers. I have a sense I’d get as much blowback from the gays as I would from the straights; no one wants me to be, as you say, That Guy.”

John nodded. “You may be on to something there, Holmes.”

There came a knock at the room door.

“Ah, dinner,” Sherlock said, and went to receive it. John moved miscellany from the table top, they pulled up the too-big, too-low chairs and tucked in to the meal.

“So, there you have it: my story for another day,” John said. “My secret shame, that I lied to myself until I lied my way right into a sham marriage with a perfectly nice woman who loved me. All because I was a headcase and wanted to please my dad.”

“Well, Captain, I was riveted; it was better than one of those movies on the ladies’ television network. And speaking of fathers and how to please them, now I owe you my own story for another day.”

“About your dad?”
“My family, yes.”
“I look forward to it.”
“Stop breathing toward my food. Turn your chair.”
“Jeez, Holmes, I have no idea why the other fellas think you’re weird.”
“Fuck off, you plague rat.”

The Carolina Vikings were sitting on the edge of a cliff over the side of which was a long drop straight out of playoff contention, and so were playing a feisty, aggressive game that kept the Brawlers on the defensive. Sherlock made save after save, appearing focused and very cool in front of the net; the Vikings were taking every opportunity they could find, and by the end of the second they’d already made thirty-one shots on goal, only one of which Sherlock had let by him. Sawyer had put one in early for the Brawlers but they’d barely spent any time in the Vikings’ zone thereafter.

“Fuckers are playing like we were talking shit about their moms,” Sullivan complained as they filed into the dressing room for the intermission. “What did we ever do to them? It’s a fucking game? It’s supposed to be fun?”

“Listen up, boys,” Coach Lestrade barked, and the players’ chatter died away. “Carolina’s a team we should easily beat, but someone clearly put a bug in their arses tonight. So let’s try to disrupt. Refs aren’t calling too many minors, as you may have noticed—Mellon, Sully—when they were holding your sticks. So let’s throw some elbows, get up close and let ‘em feel your breath down the back of their sweaters. In the third, you get big, get close, swing the sticks, take some risks.”

The players nodded, grunting their understanding. Thurston looked particularly pleased to have been given orders to pester and provoke.

“Now, I say that. But at the same time—you draw a penalty, I’ll brain you.” Lestrade shook his roll of papers at them, pointing at one after the other, raising his eyebrows. “Got it?”

“Yeah, Coach!” came the reply, more or less in unison.

“What do you say, Holmesy?” Bouchard half-shouted across the room. Sherlock was sitting on the bench in front of his locker, fussing with the interior of his helmet.

“Shea and Meddows can be easily goaded into instigating a fight. Chirp a bit, frustrate them by getting in their way, then brace yourselves for a right hook.”

“Thurston, Mellon, you’re on that,” John said.

Sherlock added, “Philippe’s backhand is weak; if he shoots one at me look for a rebound to the stick side.”

“Got that, fellas?” John prompted.

“Yeah, Cap!”

“OK, then. Let’s fuck’em up.”
“Sawyer draws some deafening protests from the crowd here in Charlotte with a huge, heavy hit on Butch Shea, and the Brawlers get control of the puck. Bouchard to Mellon, Kocur in the high slot gets the pass. Shea must have got the license plate of that dump truck that hit him, as he throws his big body against Sawyer. Sawyer says, You wanna go? But Shea answers, My gloves are glued to my hands—I can’t do that. Bouchard closes on the crease, Mellon to the middle, back to Bouchard—it rings the post! Philippe takes it back and both teams change out.”

Thurston barreled out chirping.

“Meddows! Your wife left her panties under my bed last night! We had a long talk about how much you fucking suck. You are, like, so bad at playing hockey!”

“Bitch, don’t waste your breath.” Meddows shouted back. There was a whistle on the play and Thurston approached Meddows chest-first.

“Shut me up,” he dared. “Here, pick a hand.” He held out his gloves, palms down, stick dangling. “Pick the hand I beat the fuck out of you with.”

“Fuck off, Thurston, you’re a joke.”

John barked, “Thurty, check in!”

“Laughing all the way to bank,” Thurston shouted across the face-off circle. “That your Accord I saw in the parking lot? I hear your house only has two bathrooms, welfare queen.”

“Hammel wins the faceoff for Boston and Thurston shoots a bomb, deflected, Meddows gives Thurston a couple of shoves, Hammel to Kocur, saucer pass up to Sullivan, the one-timer—he scores! The Boston Brawlers go ahead just three minutes, forty-six seconds into the third on a textbook slapshot by Chris Sullivan.”

After celebrating the goal, both teams reset at the center dot for the faceoff and Thurston resumed his stream of abuse. “Meddows, listen, nobody cares you’re wearing a bra under your sweater, it’s the ‘90s.”

“Keep showing me your teeth,” Meddows threatened. “I’ll smash them out of your Frankenstein face.”

“Frankenstein was the scientist, you illiterate fuck.”

“The puck drops, Carolina takes control, Kerr with it, and the puck is deflected up and out of play. Oh, here we go! Meddows throws the gloves down and Thurston is ready to go.”

Thurston had to sit for five, holding a bag of ice on his jaw, but Meddows got two additional minutes for instigating, giving the Brawlers a power play.

“Kerr to Philippe, Philippe goes for a backhand shot, Holmes makes an easy stick save, juicy rebound, Watson takes control and goes flying up the boards, the long pass to Hatch who throws it up to MacGraw, drops it back to Watson for the one-timer, save by Marcus, MacGraw, a battle for the puck, MacGraw scores! Patrick MacGraw gives the Brawlers insurance. Impressive aggression from the Brawlers since the start of this period, Brick. I think it was much needed.”

“It’s true Carolina was applying the pressure through two periods, making goalie Sherlock Holmes work hard. He took almost forty shots on goal in fifty minutes. But Boston’s tilting the ice, got the go-ahead goal, and while the Vikings still have that fire they’ve been showing all night, the past eleven minutes have looked a lot more like Boston’s game, Jack.”
“How’s that entertainment factor, folks? We’re back after this break.”

The Brawlers didn’t let Carolina regain control and won the game, 3 – 1. Later on the plane, the mood was boisterous but John was exhausted, still not nearly recovered from his cold. He wrapped up in two blankets, reclined his seat.

Sherlock said, “I’m going to murder an entire pizza.”

“You earned it. Looked good tonight.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks for the intel on Philippe’s backhand, too.” John sniffled, and then yawned.

“You want something?” Sherlock offered as he rose to make his way to the front of the plane.


“Oh.” Sherlock leaned in, grinning. “Immuno-compromised?”

“Arsehole.”

“Good night. Pleasant dreams.”
A morning with no practice, and John was having a lie-in, channel surfing and drinking coffee he’d brought back to his bed. Every segment on the Boston Sports Network was buzzing with a single topic.

“Former Boston Brawlers forward Thomas Gerhardt appeared in court today for pre-trial hearings related to his arrest last fall on charges of domestic violence. Nina Hesse-Gerhardt was allegedly held captive in their Weston home for sixteen hours while Gerhardt repeatedly assaulted and threatened her. The couple’s children were home at the time, and Hesse-Gerhardt was subsequently hospitalised for injuries the state asserts were inflicted by Gerhardt throughout the course of the overnight incident. If convicted on all current charges, Gerhardt faces up to forty years in prison. Nina Gerhardt has filed for divorce, and has moved out of state with the couple’s two children.”

Have you seen the news today?

It was only half-eight; John didn’t necessarily expect Sherlock to be awake, but he needed to sound off about their former teammate’s ongoing drama. Within a minute or so, though, Sherlock replied.

TXT from Holmes: He’s getting fat. Has he been in jail all this time?

No, he’s out on bail. He does look a bit soft, now you mention it.
I think him being out is part of why the wife moved away.
She must be bloody terrified.

TXT from Holmes: I’d imagine he would be considered a flight risk. He’s not a US citizen.

I think I remember they made him turn in his passport.

TXT from Holmes: He’s pleading Not Guilty to everything.

Of course. He’s a coward, clearly.

TXT from Holmes: I’d still volunteer to be his prison wife, though.

Yeah. Me, too.
That makes us bad people.

TXT from Holmes: It makes us a pair of shirtlifters with fucking eyes in our heads. Fat or no, look at him.

I want to stop looking at him. I’m turning off my TV so I don’t have to look at him.

TXT from Holmes: Big plans for a day off, then?

I’ve got nothing on.

TXT from Holmes: I’m meeting a friend in a few hours; maybe you’d like to come along?

What, lunch or something?

TXT from Holmes: Something. You’ll like him.

Hang on. Is this a fix-up?
“Ah, Mrs Hudson, good morning. I see you’ve met my friend, John Watson.”

“Yes,” the lady replied, absently fingering the long chain of her necklace. “It makes a refreshing change—a man arriving through the front door in the morning rather than slinking out of it, avoiding my eyes.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock said briskly, and John cleared his throat, looking at a worn patch in the carpet near the toe of his shoe. “We’re off out to Melrose this morning to see my friend Jeremy.”

“Oh, lovely,” she gushed, then turned to John. “Won’t he be distressed you’re bringing along Mr Watson, though, Sherlock?”

“To the contrary, I think he’ll be delighted. I vouch for Watson; that should be enough to sell him.”

“Well, have at it then. Drive safely.” She started out to the landing.

“I never do,” Sherlock smiled at her back.

“I know, but one day I hope to make an impression. Have fun, boys!”

Once she’d vanished down the stairs, John looked around him at the clutter of old books, half-empty mugs of tea, sheet music on a stand near the window. The furniture was all mismatched—not in a cool, eccentric way, but in a chaotic, sloppy way that suggested Sherlock had walked into a junk shop and said, *I’ll take everything.* It was not at all how John had imagined Sherlock’s flat might be—he’d envisioned sleek, modern everything, leather and chrome. The sitting room smelled faintly of stale cigarettes and spilled wine. There were dirty dishes overflowing the kitchen sink. In short, the place was a tip.

“Nice place,” John said.

“Mrs Hudson’s décor; I thought I’d redo everything but now I’ve grown used to it,” Sherlock said, reaching for his coat off a rack by the door.

“How long have you been living here?”

“Seven seasons.”

“You know, real people call those things *years,*” John smirked.

Sherlock scoffed. “*Pft.* Real people.” He wrapped a blue muffler around his neck. “We should be off; the most recent traffic information reports no problems headed north but my friend hates for me to be late so I like to allow a few extra minutes’ buffer.”
Shortly they were rocketing up the highway at thrilling speed; Sherlock raced up close behind anyone who dared to drive slower than him, forcing them to move aside to let him pass.

“You are honestly the worst driver I have ever had the misfortune to ride with,” John commented as they whizzed past a huge, newly built planned community/shopping center and then a short stretch of a tiny, trickling excuse for a river.

“I assure you, I’m the best driver you’ll ever know.”

“If this were an F1 track, maybe.”

Sherlock flicked him a sideways glance. “Shall I sidle over to the slow lane, grand-dad? Would that comfort you?”

“You’re literally near double the speed limit, Holmes.”

“Such a wilting lily,” Sherlock said with a minor eyeroll, and started shifting lanes. “Anyway, we’re nearly there,” he allowed, signaling for the exit ramp.

Once they were off the highway, Sherlock drove slightly more reasonably, though he zig-zagged along the smaller parkway to pass every car they came upon along the way. Within a few minutes they pulled up in front of a typically New England-style home on a residential street. The house was box-shaped, two stories, with a door centered between two windows on each side, a drive beside it leading to a garage slightly behind the house; John could see a practice hockey goal set up there, and a few bicycles parked nearby. The lawn was too short and had the grey-green colour of winterkill, soppy and saturated with melted snow—dirty, not-yet-melted mounds of which still clung around the edges of the yard nearest the road.

Sherlock parked on the street, and rather than approaching the front door, he lead John up the drive and around the back of the house, where they mounted some wooden steps onto a small deck in need of staining, and Sherlock knocked on a glass sliding door perfunctorily as he slid it open.

“Hello, I’m here,” he called to no one John could see. “I’ve brought someone along. Jeremy? Beth?” He stepped inside and motioned for John to follow. The doors lead into a small dining room with wood floors, open to the kitchen on one side, and the living room ahead of them. Sherlock repeated, “Beth? It’s me.”

For a moment, John was convinced Sherlock had a secret wife and child. The whole thing smelled a bit too *Honey, I’m home!* for comfort.

“Sherlock, hi!” came a woman’s voice from somewhere beyond the kitchen. “We’re down here in the playroom; be right up.”

Sherlock walked through to the kitchen and opened a cupboard. “Coffee?” he asked.

John felt his eyebrows rearranging themselves into question marks. Sherlock ignored him and poured two mugs of coffee from the pot on the worktop, dumped in far too much sugar from a nearby bowl, and returned to where John stood, pressing a cup on him. As John was formulating a demand for explanation, he heard muffled footfalls—the stairs from the lower floor must be carpeted—and the woman’s voice again.

“Come on, Jeremy, Sherlock’s here, right on time. He brought a friend, isn’t that cool?”

The woman emerged through a half-open door at the far side of the kitchen—to John’s surprise she had a baby on her hip, a little girl with improbably thick, dark curls of hair bunched together atop
her head with an elaborate, multi-ribboned yellow bow—and John was more convinced than ever that Sherlock was conducting a secret suburban life, though he could not imagine a reason why.

“Hey, good morning,” the woman said brightly. She was tall and slender, in smart-looking but not expensive jeans, a blue knit top, and a white knitted scarf looped around her neck in an elaborate knot.

“Beth Porter—my friend, John Watson,” Sherlock said, and just then, a boy nearly as tall as his mother shuffled to the top of the stairs. He kept his eyes fixed low and to one side as he marched across the kitchen and Sherlock quickly lifted John’s mug from his hand, smoothly set both cups down on the nearby dining table. The boy leaned against Sherlock’s chest and put his arms around Sherlock’s back, briefly, stiffly, without a word, then did the same to John before stepping away again. “Jeremy, this is John Watson, number eighteen,” Sherlock said, “But you knew that, I’m sure.”

The mother stepped across and offered her hand for John to shake. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about—”

“Oh, see!” Sherlock boomed, motioning toward the boy, who had drawn out from the pass-through pocket in the front of his sweatshirt a small photo album, which he held open in front of him. “May I?” Sherlock liberated the book and held it out for John. It was open to John’s own team headshot, printed on regular paper, likely from the Brawlers website. Opposite was a card with his name and player stats.

“That’s me, all right,” John said. “Whole team’s in here?” he asked the boy, who did not look at any of them, but kept his gaze on the floor. He was shifting from foot to foot a bit.

The mother answered, “The Brawlers are Jeremy’s team, for sure.”

John flipped through the book. There were also pictures of the coaching staff, the equipment manager, the trainer, the BSN announcers, and the rink-side reporter.

“Fan of Jack, Brick, and Molly, too, I see,” John smiled.

“Oh, yes,” the mother smiled.

“Jeremy’s non-verbal,” Sherlock explained. “But we understand each other. And just now, I can tell he’s anxious to get outside and get to work. So let’s go.” Sherlock wheeled and slid open the glass door, disappearing down the wood stairs.

“Go get your coat, Jer,” the mother prompted, and the boy moved out of sight into the front hallway. “It’s nice of you to come,” she said to John. “I know it’s hard to tell, but he’s pleased.”

“Yeah, great,” John said, smiling. “That’s great. Happy to meet you all. Who’s this?” He stroked his index finger over the back of the baby’s chubby hand, found the skin impossibly soft, so unlike anything else one ever touched.

“This is Natalie.”

“Lovely,” John smiled, and the baby gave him a wide, wet grin in return, showing two tiny, pearly teeth in her lower gums. “How old?”

“Nearly seven months.”

“They keep you busy,” John said.
“You can’t imagine,” the woman smiled. “Sherlock’s visits are a highlight of our week. Jeremy loves it and it gives me a bit of time with just this one. Or—god forbid—I get some cleaning done!” She laughed, and faint lines spidered near the corners of her eyes. John couldn’t see what cleaning needed doing; the house was well-ordered and neat; a lone coffee cup sat in the sink, and baby bottles dried overturned on a rack beside it.

“Sherlock’s here every week?” John asked.

“Nearly so. Road trips, of course,” she half-explained.

“Right,” John said, though he was still trying to puzzle it all out.

Jeremy returned, wearing a parka.

“Here, come let Mumma zip you, pal,” she said.

“Let me; you’ve got your hands full,” John said. “All right, Jeremy, that I do up your coat?” There was no sign of protest, so John fixed the zip and slid it up into place. Jeremy turned away immediately and passed him, went out the door, sliding it shut behind him. “Oh. Am I not invited?” John joked mildly.

“He just knows we don’t leave doors hanging open, though I haven’t got Sherlock so well trained, obviously. I’m sure you’re meant to be out there,” Beth smiled at him. “Nattie and I will be upstairs folding Mt. Laundry—gives me an excuse to sit on the bed and watch trashy daytime TV, but don’t tell my husband; he thinks my job at home is harder than him out there doing construction. Just yell if you guys need anything.” She took her leave and John pulled faces at the baby over her mother’s shoulder until they were out of his sight.

Once outside, John found Sherlock dressed in leg pads, blocker, and catching glove—all very well-worn—and a battered duplicate of his usual mask, all worn over his expensive trousers, tailored shirt, and a zip-front hoodie, his coat and suit jacket draped over the seats of a couple of the family bicycles. Jeremy was wearing a black helmet and hockey gloves, shooting tennis balls at Sherlock, who easily deflected them back for Jeremy to hit again.

“Grab a stick, Watson,” Sherlock said. The garage door was open and John saw a few hockey sticks leaning against the side wall. He found one roughly the right length—a bit long for him—and flexed the taped blade a bit, getting a feel for it. “Jeremy, we’ll let John Watson Number Eighteen shoot a few today, too, shall we? The two of you can take turns. You first.”

John took a spot nearby and he and Jeremy alternated shots at Sherlock. John made soft lobs, easy for Sherlock to catch or knock aside, and they fell into a nice rhythm. After a few rounds, John recognised that Jeremy made shots in a specific order: wrist shot, backhand, slap shot; wrist shot, backhand, slap shot, never varying. Sherlock now and then called out, “Excellent!” or “Well done!” or, “Save by Holmes!” which made John laugh and wonder if the other praise was also meant not for Jeremy, but for Sherlock himself.

Eventually, John lifted a ball and fired it high on Sherlock’s glove side, which went past him and into the net. John automatically threw his arms up and shouted, “Yes! John Watson gets the go-ahead goal!” He looked to Jeremy for a high five only to find he’d turned his back on John and was rocking side to side, clearly agitated. John looked to Sherlock.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“You’re not supposed to get it in,” Sherlock said. “The goalie is meant to defend the goal. That’s
what I’m here for.”

John’s eyes widened as he caught on. “Oh! So he’s not trying to score on you?”

“No. He just wants me to make saves.”

“Jeez.” John raised his voice a bit, talking to Jeremy’s swaying back. “I’m sorry, Jeremy. I forgot the rules. You go for a bit; I’ll take a break and watch.”

“Come on then, Jeremy Porter Number Zero Zero, get back to work,” Sherlock prompted, and Jeremy turned back toward the goal. Sherlock tossed a tennis ball onto the ground, rolling it across to Jeremy so he could shoot it back. John stood to one side, leaning one shoulder against the garage.

“You keep this gear here?” John asked, after a few minutes of saves by Holmes.

“It’s my old practice equipment; after a while it was just easier to leave it.”

“How long have you known them—the Porters?”

“How old were you when we met, Jeremy?” Sherlock asked. “Nine? And now you’re fourteen?” It was rhetorical but John thought it kind of Sherlock to include Jeremy in the discussion. “That long. His mum sent me an email.” It seemed Sherlock qualified that as enough of an explanation, as he offered nothing further.

Awareness dawned. “This is why you’re not free for captain’s practices,” John said, with a smiling shake of his head.

“Correct. Holmes makes the save!”

John hummed a laugh. Jeremy fired a wrist shot and Sherlock knocked it away with his stick.

“You should report these hours,” John said. “For the community service thing, Charity visits.”

“Of course not. Holmes deflects. . .save by Holmes! It’s not charity.”

John cleared his throat. “Right. Of course not. Sorry.”

“All right, Jeremy, six more.” It seemed a strangely random quantity until John remembered Jeremy’s repeating pattern of three shots.

John watched Sherlock making his easy saves, crouched in front of a suburban backyard hockey goal in the cold on his own time, as he did nearly every week, and had done—with no request he be recognised for it—for five years. John’s chest flushed; how was it so bloody sexy? But the flush carried straight up his throat to his ears, and he felt it burning in his cheeks as well. He had a bizarre, awful urge to take Sherlock in his arms in a manner that had nothing at all to do with Sherlock’s sex appeal, but, Oh, no.

“Save by Holmes! Last one, Jeremy.”

Oh, bloody hell. Like the proverbial shock of lightning, ripping down through John’s chest and stabbing hard into his gut. . .Bloody, buggery fuck. . .John knew, instantly and unequivocally. . .Oh, hell. Oh, hell! . .that he was having a genuine—troubling. . .god, disastrous!—feeling. For Sherlock Holmes.
“Perfect!”
Chapter 19

John shuffled where he stood, crossed his arms in front of his chest, cleared his throat, and then sniffed.

“Aside from John Watson Number Eighteen’s unfortunate slip, that was an excellent game,” Sherlock commented, regaining his full height, shaking off his gloves, and tilting his face mask up onto the crown of his head. Jeremy shuffled forward and held out his downturned fist, which Sherlock bumped with his own. Jeremy offered his fist to John and John obliged, tapping their knuckles together.

“Good game, mate,” John said. “Sorry about my mistake.”

Jeremy put away his stick and headed back into the house, shutting the sliding door behind him as he went.

Shoving aside anything else he might have wanted to say, John chided, “You could have told me how not to fuck it up for the kid.” John cleared his throat again, straightening the sticks where they leaned against the garage wall while Sherlock unstrapped the beat-up leg pads.

“It didn’t occur to me you might score on me.” Once Sherlock was free of his gear, John held open the nearby hockey bag for Sherlock to drop in the pads, gloves, and helmet.

“Oh, ha ha.”

Sherlock raked fingers through his fringe, trying to settle his hair. He shrugged out of the hoodie and reclaimed his suit jacket.

“Beth says you’re here every week?”

“I try to be.”

John couldn’t seem to get the muck out of his throat, and cleared it again. “That’s . . .” John shook his head. Before he could stop himself, he said, “That’s extraordinary,” with a small shrug. Was he smiling too much? He caught his lips between his teeth.

“It’s no such thing, Watson,” Sherlock demurred, and started toward the house. “We’ll say our goodbyes and I’ll buy you lunch?”

John agreed, though he felt fidgety and annoyed with himself. Sherlock Holmes was completely out of bounds, John barely even liked him despite the fact he was John’s only friend, and Sherlock had said quite plainly that he didn’t have boyfriends. John was absolutely not having a feeling for him. He couldn’t be. Why would he?

As Sherlock’s muscle car roared down the highway back into town, John stole glances at his long-fingered hands on the wheel, now and then at his profile.

“Can I turn on the radio, see if there’s any news about Gerhardt’s court thing?” John asked after a lengthy lapse in conversation.

“Of course.”

As John reached for the radio’s power button, he said, “I’m actually quite curious what’s going to
come blaring out of this thing. I’m thinking ‘80s cock rock—Journey, maybe? Not Top 40, surely; though you do know all the words to that Lady Gaga song that’s always on the PA between plays at the Garden. I figure there’s also an outside chance of metal.”

Sherlock only smirked.

John inhaled dramatically, and pressed the button. A wash of strings, harp, and woodwinds poured forth from the car’s excellent speakers. John sat back and bit his lips.

“I should have guessed it would never be anything normal,” he said, a bit loudly to be heard over the music.

“Several hundred years of history would argue that it’s completely normal.”

“All right. I give up; what’s this about?” John reached to adjust the volume downward. Sherlock glanced at him, then back at the road ahead. “It’s just what I like. I play the violin.”

“You fucking what?” John laughed.

“There are other things than hockey, you know. My parents insisted I have fall-back plans.”

“OK, but that usually means accounting.”

“Violin was only a hobby, it’s true. I studied chemistry,” Sherlock said.

“At university? I thought you went pro right out of school.”

“I did a university program while I was still a teenager.” Sherlock slowed—barely—as he merged onto the three-lane parkway along the Charles River. “My father insisted.”

“Wow. You must be some kind of genius.”

“If only.” It seemed to John that there must be a story in it, but Sherlock did not seem eager to tell it, so John didn’t press him. Anyway, even before he could inquire further, Sherlock asked, “Where shall we go for lunch?”

“Oh, right,” John said, suddenly feeling trapped. He needed to retreat and recalibrate, design a plan that would eliminate the threat, or at least contain it. “I actually... I have a thing. The gym. Was gonna just down a protein shake afterward, something like that.”

Sherlock said, “This morning you said you hadn’t anything on today.”

“Well, yeah. A workout isn’t... you know... bit flexible on the exact timing. But I was planning on it right after we got back. If I have lunch first I’ll be all fat and tired, and you’d probably make us drink wine...” John shrugged with his palms up.

“All right, then,” Sherlock acquiesced. “I’ll drop you by yours and take a rain check on lunch.”


Sherlock hummed. After a few seconds he said, “You were going to look for news about Gerhardt?”

“Oh, right. I’ll just check BSN.com.” He pulled out his phone and started tapping, grateful for a
place to shift his focus. “This is nice,” he said, motioning toward the radio. “Do you know it?”

“Holst—an Englishman, in fact. The Planets.”

“It’s no Crazy Train, but it’ll do.”

Sherlock parked illegally outside John’s building and John had a fluttering urge to say something stupid; thinking about all he’d learned of Sherlock that morning stirred it up again—the intensely problematic feeling which, it appeared, was not going to go quietly—and he feared he might blurt. His need to escape the car clawed at the interior of his belly.

In the end, he went for short and simple. “Thanks for inviting me.”

Sherlock’s mouth curled at the corners, just a bit. “Happy to. I think Jeremy was glad to have you.”

“When you see him next, you’ll have to apologise again from me, about making that goal.”

“He’s already forgiven it,” Sherlock said, sounding sure of the assertion.

“All right. Good. Guess I’ll see you tomorrow at practice.” John gripped the handle and shoved the door open; he’d never been so grateful to step his foot outside a car. Once he was on the pavement, he threw a quick wave through the window, which Sherlock answered with a nod, and the car rumbled away.

To: Glen.Harding@IntoTech.com
From: WatsonJH@Brawlers.org
1:45pm

Hi Glen,

Been thinking about you and wanted you to know. Since we’ve been talking about wanting to get together, I wonder if you might be able to get away from work for a few days sometime soon? There are a couple of weeks this month when I have three or even four days here in Boston instead of on the road (we’re not out West again for several weeks; I think I told you?). If you don’t mind me having to work a bit while you’re here, I’d love to have you. I’d really like to see where things might go for us; I feel like it could be a very positive direction! :-D I hope you feel the same.

It’s a bit of an intense offer, I know, but just kind of how things are with me during hockey season. My time isn’t always my own. Think it over. Meantime, can I phone you tonight?

Best,
John

After a dozen laps in his building’s pool, a long shower conducive to sorting himself out, and an email to a very nice man, he took one last step into his retreat and recalibration by ringing his agent.

“Watson! How’s things?”

“All right, Charlie, all right.” Charlie Strong had been a sports agent for nearly fifty years, still believed in three martini lunches, and would always interrupt any meeting—no matter how crucial
—to accept phone calls from his wife or kids (and now, his grandchildren). He was fat and bald and bought his suits off the rack at buy-one/get-one sales, but he could negotiate the hell out of a deal and somehow manage to let everyone walk away feeling he’d won. John liked him, in small doses.

“Let me guess, you want some kind of bonus for the All-Star thing. You were great. Great game. Lotta fun. I can’t make any promises.”

“No, no,” John laughed. “Not at all.” He cleared his throat, paced the sitting room of his flat, glancing now and then out the huge windows toward Boston Common, where people walked with their heads down against the relentless winter wind. “I was just thinking some things through, and with the trade deadline coming up, I wanted to ask you. . .” John hummed, pursed his lips. “Maybe you can ask around a bit, see if there’s somewhere else that might want me.”

“Pardon the language, Watson, but what the H-E-double-hockey-sticks. I thought you were happy in Boston.”

“I am. Absolutely I am. Great team, coaching staff’s great, management. All good. But I have some other concerns, thinking about what happens after this season.”

“The Thrashers would probably take you back,” Charlie offered, and John could hear him chewing his pen in lieu of the cigarettes he’d stopped smoking twenty years earlier.

“I can’t go back there, no. That wouldn’t feel right. I was thinking out West? L.A.? Maybe Vancouver or even the Gold Rush.”

“The blessed Gold Rush are fourth in their division; you’ll never get a Cup playing in blessed Sacramento, Watson. I won’t allow it. Vetoed.”

“Right, but. Thinking about where I want to put down roots in my old age, you know?” John attempted a joke but it sounded hollow even to his own ear. “West coast feels good. And the Brawlers would probably be happy to trade me for two or three young guys they can develop; they don’t need to carry my senior citizen arse any longer than necessary. They can get the championship without me this year, easily.”

“This is coming out of left field, Watson, seriously. I’m. Give me a minute to adjust. Jeez. This wasn’t in my calendar for today. Who put this call through?”

“Just. You know.” John cleared his throat again. He felt hot and cold at once. “Put the word out and see if anybody bites. But you have to keep it as quiet as possible. If my teammates find out the captain is looking to jump ship, that makes me out o be a complete dick. And I’m not.”

“You’re probably the least dick-y of my clients, Watson, honestly. Which is why I’m surprised to hear this from you. But. Whatever makes you happy, is what I’m here to do. So I can put out feelers, sure. Tell them what, though?”

“Personal reasons,” John said firmly. “Nothing at all to do with the team; the team is great and I’ve been happy here. Just personally, I’d prefer to be on the west coast, and if I can make the move now rather than wait for the off-season, all the better.”

“You’re sure about this?” Charlie prodded.

John ran his fingers backward through his hair, dropped his head back and looked at the ceiling.

“I’m sure.”
Chapter 20

“A monster save there by Sherlock Holmes! Holmes is from England, and therefore ineligible to be elected mayor.”

The Brawlers lead the Grizzlies 1 – 0 with just over twelve minutes remaining. St. Paul had entered the third period shot out of a cannon, and it seemed only a matter of time before they tied it up. Sherlock had made six saves in just under four minutes, as the Grizzlies threw everything they could at him. There was a TV timeout due after the next play, and as the skaters gathered for a faceoff to Sherlock’s left, Sherlock shouted, “Watson!”; John skated up close.

“With Hammel in the faceoff, Noonan could win it. He’ll pass far across to Marinov for the one-timer. If you and Sully both get between them, you could disrupt the play.”

John held his glove in front of his mouth so no one would read his lips. “Sully’s got to lean on Kassel, though, try to block the shooting lane.”

“Don’t bother,” Sherlock told him, and John had no time to reply, as he had to take his place for the faceoff.

As the ref held the puck, getting ready for the drop between Hammel and St. Paul’s third-line center, Benjamin Noonan, John shouted Sullivan’s name, jerked his head toward the center of the zone and barked, “With me!”

“ Noonan wins the faceoff, Watson and Sullivan break to the middle of the zone as Marinov swings wide. Noonan, looking for Marinov, but Sullivan’s there to take control, and play moves through the neutral zone back toward the Grizzlies’ net. Grizzlies D scrambling to catch up, Sullivan takes the shot, it’s a dart—rings the post! Hammel the rebound, drops it back to Watson, Watson to Sullivan, Sullivan...scores! The Brawlers get insurance and we will be back with the final eleven minutes and change, right after the break.”

The team gathered by the bench for the timeout. “Thanks for that.” John shouted to be heard over the PA’s music and the crowd noise.

Sherlock swiped a towel over his face, his mask tilted back on his head. “Of course,” he replied, with a quick nod.

John was circling, keeping his energy up, fidgeting. “I owe you one.”

“If you start owing me one every time I give you advice that pans out during a game, you’ll never catch up,” Sherlock said, lips curling up at one corner.

Later, on the plane to Kansas City after the win, they ate a meal of what passed for fish and chips on the wrong side of the Atlantic, washed it down with lemon-lime soda, belched extravagantly. As Sherlock readied their movie, he said, “Trade deadline’s approaching; any thoughts?”

John cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “I think we’re pretty solid. The young guys all look good to develop at least one more season, and the old guys make it hard to work around the salary caps. They might let some of the Bridgeport B’s go if they can get some good draft picks in exchange. Why, what have you heard?” He tried to sound casual; if Sherlock had somehow discerned John was thinking of making a move, he’d almost certainly broadcast it to the entire team.
“Not a thing,” Sherlock said with a shrug. “MacGraw’s done admirably since his call-up to replace Gerhardt; but it’s well known he wants to play for a Canadian team. He might be looking to move.”

John shrugged. “Why not ask him?”

Sherlock looked up over the seatbacks. “He’s way the hell over there,” he said with a dismissive half-sneer. “Also, I don’t actually care.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t think so,” John smiled.

“What about you? Happy here?” Sherlock set the tablet up on the table—John had finally bought a case that stood it up on its own—and started untangling a set of ear buds John had never seen before.

“Very happy,” John said, and it was not a lie. “There are things I miss about Hamilton—it’s home—but these guys are great and we’re playing good hockey. Very happy here, yeah.”

Sherlock nodded, then brushed his palms together anticipatorily, and let the subject drop. “I have found the perfect film for both our tastes.”

“Oh, have you now.”

Sherlock grinned, looking pleased with himself, but without a trace of his oft-donned smugness. John refused to think it was a good look on him.

They finished the film—a horror comedy from the early ’90s about an unlikely vampire hunter—shortly before the plane landed. John had to agree the film seemed to fit right into the sliver of overlap in the Venn diagram of their cinematic preferences.

Sherlock focused on his phone during the bus ride from the airport to the hotel, and barely looked up from it as they made their way to the suite.

“Well, good night, then,” John said, Liberating one of his ice packs from the mini-fridge and holding it against his shoulder, as Sherlock hung his coat.

“Ah,” Sherlock said. “I thought we might—”

John studiously ignored the thrum in his low belly and the heat across his chest at the idea that they might. “Oh. You were so busy on your phone I assumed you were arranging something. Anyway, I’m half-dead. And my shoulder’s playing up.”

“You can just lie there,” Sherlock smirked. “I don’t mind.”

John huffed a small laugh. “I appreciate it, but. . .” He inhaled hard, sighed it out. “You know, I, ah. . .eh-hem. . .there’s a fella I was dating—back in Hamilton—for a while last year. Left things kind of unfinished and—” John shrugged, looking everywhere but at Sherlock as he stumbled through his lie, made up fresh on the spot. “—he’s been in touch recently. We’ve been emailing and that. Texting. And.” He cleared his throat for the millionth time that minute. “I think maybe I want to just focus on seeing where it goes. And not do, uh. . .that. For a bit. Anymore.”

Sherlock’s eyes were narrowed, his head tilted slightly away from John as he studied him. “All
right then,” he said very slowly, and crossed his arms over his chest. “So you’re saying you want to
table our arrangement.”

“Yep,” John said quickly. “Yes.”


“Well, when you put it like that it sounds like I’ve made the whole thing up.” John defended, “but I
haven’t. Of course I haven’t. Why would I? Just. Listen. It’s just not going to work for me
anymore, right now.”

“But perhaps in future?” Sherlock prompted. He still looked skeptical and amused, which John
found infuriating.

“Maybe. I don’t know. No. No, probably not. No. No.”

“Say no again, I don’t feel completely rejected as yet,” Sherlock said, his smile widening. John had
a hectic urge to smash the smug grin right off his face, and then—oh, bloody, bloody hell—kiss his
stupid, pink lips.

“Look, I just think it’s not the best idea we ever had, and I’m calling it off,” John said, and his
voice was edged with annoyance.

Sherlock nodded, mugging a frown. “All right.”

“All right.”

“Good night, then, Watson,” Sherlock said, and vanished into his room, the door clicking shut hard
behind him.

John flung the ice pack at the wall beside the door to his own bedroom, which felt good, then
stooped to pick it up off the floor as he passed. He unpacked, undressed, cleaned his teeth, and slid
between the cool, white hotel sheets. It was nearly four a.m. but he was wired, so took out his
phone and started poking around listlessly. He landed on a series of texts from the previous night.

**TXT from Holmes:** I’ve decided to clean my flat but find I don’t know where to begin.
Thus far I’ve neatened three piles of papers so the corners are more or less square,
and filled the sink with hot water and suds and I’m letting the dishes marinate.
What else does one do? I don’t think I have a broom.

**TXT from Holmes:** I cannot decide if my bookshelves should be arranged by publication date,
author, or how much I like them.
How do you do your books?
Do you have books?

**TXT from Holmes:** Bit of a situation here in the lower kitchen cupboards. Shifting focus back to the
sitting room.

**TXT from Holmes:** Been at it for four hours. Everything looks the same.

John had not replied as he’d been on the phone with Glen Harding most of the evening, and
Sherlock seemed to be monologuing, anyway.

**TXT from Holmes:** Where/how does one hire a person to clean a flat, anyway?
Glen Harding had laughed at all John’s jokes, and their conversation was easy. They made a tentative plan for Glen to visit Boston the last week of February, though John did not fully commit as it was after the trade deadline and since his chat with his agent, there was the new possibility he would not be in Boston, in the flat he hated, at an impossible distance from Glen, by the end of the month. John did not mention to Glen he might be traded to a west coast team; there was no point getting ahead of himself. Instead they gave each other short versions of their lives to date—anecdotes about school days, explanations of family constellations (John had only his sister Kim, but Glen, it turned out, was the middle of five siblings, with nieces and nephews coming out his ears, and both parents still living and happily married), favourite memories of cities they’d traveled to, broken bone stories.

As the night wore on, John opened the door—repeatedly—for dirty talk, thinking a mutual wank over the phone might be just the thing, but Glen never took the bait. John said he’d have to take a closer look at Glen’s thigh to see the scar he described; Glen hummed a laugh but carried on. John asked where Glen was, and when he said he was on the sofa, John let his voice go a bit husky as he said he remembered it well. . .and Glen said it had been so nice, being together, and how he hoped to be so again soon. John said he always slept better after sex, and Glen agreed that was true of most men, certainly all the snorers he’d slept beside!

Despite the general-audiences rating, it was a lovely chat, and ended with sleepy, soft-voiced admissions of tender feelings—*I miss you, hope I can see you soon, would love to kiss you again, spend hours kissing you, mm, everywhere, and sleep beside you this time*—but once they’d rung off John knew that Glen’s visit (whether in Boston or wherever John landed after the final trades were announced) would be a final test of sorts, and while he hoped harder than he’d hoped for a long while that it would work out to everyone’s satisfaction. . .he still had doubts. They meshed so nicely, in so many ways, but something was missing. That flush of heat across John’s chest. But it was still early days. Maybe next time.
Chapter 21

They had a day off in Kansas City, and after a bit of a lie-in, John decided he’d skip the hotel gym and head outdoors. The grid layout of the streets made it near impossible to get lost; if he kept turning left, he figured eventually he’d find his way back to the hotel. The weather was unusually warm and the sky bright and clear. John stood by the big window in the sitting room, letting the midmorning sunlight warm his face and bare arms while he drank a cup of in-room coffee from one of the frustratingly tiny hotel coffee cups. There was a café off the lobby where he could buy a couple of bananas on his way out. He’d already eaten one of his contract rider-specified protein bars, and that would do him for breakfast.

Sherlock emerged from his bedroom, groaning a yawn and hugging himself, vigourously scratching his shoulders and upper arms. John cut a glance long enough to see Sherlock was wearing only tracksuit bottoms riding low on those clothes-rack hips; he cleared his throat and turned back toward the view.

“Morning.” John swirled the little bit of coffee remaining in his cup.

“Mpf,” Sherlock grumbled, and ducked down to look in the minifridge, came up with a sugar-laden, dramatically caffeinated energy drink.

“Going for a run in a bit if you’d like to join me,” John offered, fully expecting to be rebuffed. He was still half-expecting some random bloke to come stumbling out of Sherlock’s room, looking either abashed or show-offish, as they generally did.

“All right.”

John’s eyebrows rose. “How long d’you need?” he asked.

“Twenty minutes,” Sherlock said, between long, noisy gulps from the can of whatever-it-was.

John rebuffed a thought that Sherlock looked a bit sweet, his hair disheveled and his frowning face creased from a wrinkle in the pillowslip. His better angel scolded him to lock himself down, Watson, crissakes. Casually, he asked “Slept well?”

“Eventually,” Sherlock groused, but did not elaborate. He crushed the empty can in one hand and left it on the countertop, then went back into his bedroom.

John told himself that once he’d got a few under his belt, got a bit more distance from the arrangement with Sherlock, his ridiculous feeling would wear off. It was just a raging rush of sex hormones, clouding his brain, making him think there was something there that wasn’t. He’d known it was a bad idea to begin with but he’d let Sherlock talk him into it; not that he’d been difficult to persuade, of course. It actually had seemed to make a sort of sense at the time.

He set aside the by-then-empty coffee cup on the sofa table and went to dress, tapping out an internet search for local gay bars he might visit that evening, since it wasn’t a game night. As he pulled on his running gear, he leaned over his mobile lying on the bed, reading through the list of potential spots. Most were dance clubs, most only open at the weekends. If he couldn’t find anything suitable, maybe a phone call with Glen Harding. John smiled as he pulled a t-shirt over his head. He sent a text.

Thinking about you. Can I phone you tonight?
TXT from Glen: Ah, good morning, handsome! Consider this blanket permission to call me anytime at all.

Very nice. Thanks. Enjoy your day; I’ll ring you around 8 your time?

TXT from Glen: Can’t wait.

Sherlock looked significantly more awake and like himself by the time they left the suite. He was wearing loose shorts and a hooded Brawlers sweatshirt—a properly fitting one, not his too-tight girls’ one—and a blue knitted toque with the tips of a few over-long curls bent around its edges, behind his ears. John got his breakfast-to-go, offered to buy Sherlock something though he declined the offer, then ate each of his bananas in three or four bites and binned the skins. Once they were outside, they started walking briskly up the pavement, warming their muscles a bit.

“If we head up here to the next major intersection, then north for a bit, we can circle around—I mapped a three mile route,” John offered.

“Fine,” Sherlock agreed. “Did you see the chat going around online that Siven might go to Dallas?”

“No, really?” John was surprised; Siven was performing well. “Kocur will be irked; I think he likes him as a linemate.”

“Something to do with some American Leaguers and a draft pick,” Sherlock shrugged. “I wouldn’t be surprised to see Campbell get busted down to Bridgeport by the end of the trading; Coach wants Benoit to come up for a while. He played well with Gustavsson and Pizzi when Campbell was out with that groin pull.”

They fell into a jog, side by side, though Sherlock’s stride must have been artificially shortened or he’d have left John in a puff of dust in no time flat. The Brawlers forwards were considered one of the deepest rosters in the league; the TV and radio guys liked to say that Boston didn’t roll a third- or fourth-forward line—they rolled four first lines. Campbell, the fourth line’s right winger, had been plagued with injuries all season long, and though he had as much heart as any guy on the team, always showed up one hundred percent, it was becoming clear his season was likely to be a continued series of missed games due to injury, and there were a few guys playing on the farm team who were healthy as horses and could produce. It was a rough situation—it wasn’t Campbell’s fault he kept getting hurt—but as always, what was good for the team was more important than any one player’s sad story.

“Campbell’s a goer,” John huffed. “Too bad for him if he has to move.”

“If we want to stay in playoff contention, we can’t afford to carry a player whose legs are apparently made of wooden dowels held together with stick-tape and chewing gum,” Sherlock remarked.

“True enough,” John agreed, though he always felt grim about stories like Campbell’s. As he got older, he was increasingly bothered that the troublesome flare-up of an old injury or a slower-than-demanded recovery could essentially sign a player’s walking papers. It was a strange dichotomy of the game that players were meant to—expected to—and did—form brotherly bonds with their teammates and always put up their whole effort “for the team,” but if the higher-ups determined any given player was holding the team back, he was dropped, forgotten, and replaced by a new guy—one the remaining players then had to immediately and fully accept as a brother. Trades happened so suddenly sometimes a player’s stuff was still in his locker while the rest of the team suited up for a game even as the player himself was on a plane to his new city.
They picked up the pace, and neither could manage conversation anymore, so John settled inward, hearing his breath, falling into the dull, delicious flow of the run as his arms pumped in time with his running shoes smacking the pavement in heavy rhythm. Sherlock now and then took off ahead of him, breaking free of his artificially reined-in pace. His form was beautiful, his head high and his miles-long legs affecting a form that reminded John more of a wheel than of a human’s lower body. After a few minutes many yards ahead of John, Sherlock would slow enough that John could catch him and they’d run side by side for a bit until he charged ahead once more, leaving John to chase him.

There was a park John had looked at on the map while sorting their route, and as they approached the first set of gates, he motioned and huffed, “Through here? Out the other side, we’re only a block from the hotel.”

Sherlock shook his head and frowned. “Bad neighbourhood,” he replied.

John slowed up a bit so he could kid himself he wasn’t too out of breath to talk. “You know it? Looked fine in the street-view photos.”

“Trust me. We’re better off going around. Longer run will do you good, anyway.”

“I won’t ask what you mean by that,” John grumbled, but didn’t argue further. They ran on, past first the gate at the near end of the block, then a central one, then a third near the next corner, which they rounded, staying in step with each other.

Once they were in sight of the hotel, about a quarter mile off, perhaps a bit less, Sherlock huffed, “Loser buys lunch,” and took off at a sprint.

John barked out, “Bastard!” but put on his own burst of speed, and the two of them were soon not only running at full-tilt, but dodging pedestrians, leaping over little potholes in the pavement, making small dogs go wild barking at them. A red light at an intersection stopped them, and they were both panting, sweating, gasping for breath, grinning.

“Call it a draw?” Sherlock gusted.


“Oh, no, Watson!” Sherlock protested, and soon enough they were neck and neck, going flat out, side by side, and John’s lungs were burning, there was a knife in his side, but Sherlock Holmes was not going to best him, not while he had breath in his body. He dug down for a final burst of needed energy and flung himself as hard as he could at the hotel’s circular drive. His determination to win was such that he was truly surprised to see Sherlock sail past him, only pulling up at the last moment to keep from smashing straight through the glass surface of the revolving front door.

“Sonofabitch!” John cursed, but he smiled even though he was dying.

“My mother is a saint,” Sherlock breathed.

“S’not what I hear,” John joked back at him.

“Watch yourself. Don’t think I won’t go,” Sherlock replied, though his collapsed posture, hands on his thighs as he gasped for breath, did not seem indicative of someone ready to drop gloves and fight.

“That’s more like what I hear,” John joked back, though as the words left his lips he realised they
could come across as flirty innuendo just as easily as the jibing dig he’d intended. John dragged the
front of his t-shirt up to mop his face, though it was so damp with sweat it barely helped. He
slapped Sherlock on the back as he moved toward the revolving door. “Shower up, get yourself
together; I guess I’m buying you lunch.”
"Cruising tickets" is an old gay bar thing I came across during research. In the days before cell phones, slips of paper or cards were left out on the bar and/or tables so patrons could exchange phone numbers. I think that's sort of cute and sexy so I brought it back.

That evening, John ducked out of a team dinner between entrees and desserts, then thumbed once more through the local bar listings his internet search had turned up, cleaned his teeth, and changed from his suit into something he hoped gave off less of a “hockey-player-walking-from-the-bus-to-the-arena” vibe. He found a bar that sounded from the reviews to be suitably low-key despite having an off-putting, kitschy name, applied a second coat of his tobacco-and-cedar after shave before summoning a car.

Once ensconced near one end of a truly handsome oak bar with a truly glorious Scottish whisky in front of him, John scanned the room for prospects, but found pickings a bit slim given it was a weeknight. He’d wait it out. In line with the name of the place, which screamed of the 1970s, there were cruising tickets placed at intervals along the bar, beside little plastic cups full of golf pencils. John found the pad was the sticky-note type, so he anchored a little square of the yellow paper to the bar with a press-and-drag of one fingertip along the upper edge, and began to doodle a tiny sketch, now and then sipping from his glass, more frequently glancing about the place in case there was an eye to catch.

“Had a good day?”

The bartender. John grinned up at him, turning it on a bit. If there was nothing else going, at least he could flirt a bit with a handsome young one while he sipped his scotch. “Not bad. Took advantage of the warm weather to go for a run. Hate feeling cooped up. How’s yours been?”

“Same old. And now work.”

“Ah, but you get to chat with interesting fellas like me, so work’s not all bad.”

The bartender laughed, wiping dust from the shoulders of the top-shelf bottles with a chamois. “I was just going to say that. What makes you interesting?”

“I’m English. That usually impresses people.”

“Yeah, I noticed the accent but I thought you might be Australian.”

It was John’s turn to laugh, so he did. “And I travel a lot. I can tell you the cross-streets for the Hyatt hotels in about thirty cities.”

“Yeah?”

“Try me.”

“I don’t know. . .Dallas.”
“Reunion and... Hyatt, actually.”

“How do I know if you’re right, though?” the bartender smiled, and moved closer, dragging his cloth over the surface of the bar near John’s elbow. John drew out his phone and tapped in a search. Once he’d found what he needed, he lay the phone down on the bar top so the bartender had to lean forward to look. “Wow. OK, that’s kind of cool, I guess. You could win some bets with that.” He smelled of cheap cologne, but not too much of it—it was probably all he could afford, but he was trying.

John reclaimed his mobile and pocketed it. He offered his hand. “My name’s John.”

“Matt,” came the reply, and as their handshake ended, Matt’s hand slid softly out of John’s grip—a good sign. The bartender had dark, combed-back hair and wickedly arched eyebrows over pale brown eyes. His cobalt blue, button-down shirt was tight, with the cuffs turned back to expose tattooed forearms. Another patron landed at the opposite end of the bar and Matt excused himself to wait on her; John got an eyeful of his bum in clinging black jeans as he walked away. Returning to his drawing, John crunched a half-cube of ice from his glass between his back teeth. After a few minutes, Matt returned, offering John a fresh drink. “On me,” he said.

“Thanks very much,” John replied. “Can I buy you one?”

“I’m not supposed to drink while I work.”

“Really? That’s cute,” John replied, and nudged the newly settled glass in Matt’s direction. He glanced around the room, then over his shoulder, and in a quick motion, raised the glass to his lips and threw back the whole thing, then ditched it beneath the bar, grimacing.

“Thanks,” he managed, though his eyes were red around the edges. He moved to pour John another. “What are you drawing there?”

“Picture of you, actually,” John admitted, covering the sticky-note with his hand.

“No, you’re not!” Matt protested, but he looked delighted. He set down the glass and John reached for it in time for their fingertips to collide. “Show me.”

John sipped, then smirked, his hand firmly planted over the paper. “It’s not finished.”

“Come on.”

“No, I’m not ready to share it yet. Go dust some more of those bottles and let me put on the finishing touches.”

Matt gave him a look, but stepped just far enough away and fussed with glassware and lemon wedges. John lifted his hand—though he kept it curled around his drawing—and moved the too-small pencil over it, glancing at Matt now and then to judge the likeness.

“You’ve a nice profile,” John told him, and Matt batted his lashes, exaggerating embarrassment at the compliment. “Nearly finished,” John reported.

“So you’re a travelling artist, then?” Matt ventured. “Go from town to town making portraits of bartenders?”

“Not just bartenders,” John replied smoothly, grinning. “Go-go boys. Those ones with their shirts off who offer you free shots. Once an acrobat from that Montreal circus.” He lifted his eyebrows a few times, comically lascivious.
“Think there’s a common thread there,” Matt joked. “Can I see now?”

John hummed confirmation, put a few finishing strokes to his artwork, and set the pencil down with a sharp sound of wood on wood. “Sure. It’s finished. I’m anxious to hear what you think of it.” As he spoke, he turned it around so that Matt would see it right-side-up, and then quickly stacked his hands over it, preparing for the big reveal. As John had hoped, Matt dropped down onto his elbows on the bar, and tried to pick John’s hands apart, tugging at his wrists.

“I can’t stand the suspense!” he smiled. Dimple in one cheek so smooth he must have shaved it within the last hour, two at the most.

“All right then, but be honest,” John urged, faux-serious, smiling. “I hope you’ll like it but I won’t be upset if you don’t, so fire at will.” He paused another beat, for the drama, and Matt stamped his foot impatiently. John lifted his hands away. “There.”

He’d drawn Matt and himself, why not, as two stick figures with their pouted-out lips touching, shut eyes represented by slanted dashes, Matt’s dark hair crosshatched heavily in graphite-grey and John’s light hair described with an outline. Their stick-arms reached diagonally between their stick-torsos and their many stick fingers wrapped around each other’s cocks, John’s thick and dripping, Matt’s long and plump at the crown.

Matt peeled the note up from the bar, gave it another long glance then folded it in quarters. His expression flashed amusement, and something darker, and he slipped the sticky-note into his hip pocket. John’s eyes followed the movement of his hand and his slim, tattooed wrist.

“What do you think?” John prompted, and raised his glass, letting it dangle from his fingers and thumb, giving it a thoughtful swirl before taking a deep draught.

“I like it. You’ve obviously got a huge.” He dropped his gaze. “Talent.”

“So I’ve been told,” John replied.

“It’s been nice talking to you,” Matt said. “Just about time for my smoke break, though.”

“Oh, you smoke?”

“No.”

“Very good,” John replied. He threw two twenties on the bar and got to his feet. “The gents’?” he asked, looking around a bit.

“Just there,” Matt replied, indicating.

Five minutes later, John had him up against the wall of the handicapped stall, both their trousers open, and Matt didn’t kiss, but he put his face in John’s neck and rolled out a string of do-me-daddy filth-talk that had John on edge with amazing speed. A whining plea for John to fuck his throat until he choked and John was finished, biting his lips shut to stifle his groans while Matt clutched at John’s shirt, scraped teeth down the side of John’s throat. John gave him what he wanted, muttering the script for some other bloke’s teacher/student fantasy—thinking fleetingly of what Sherlock had once admitted about his desire to let their coach have him—sliding his fist around Matt’s prick until he came, spouting into John’s cupped palm.

They stood—shaking, quieting—for as long as it took to catch their breath, then John leaned away and spun paper off the roll, passed a wad to Matt, and they cleaned themselves up and rearranged their clothes.
“That was awesome, thanks,” Matt told him, as they stood side by side at the sinks, washing their hands.

“That’s right,” John replied. “Reckon I needed that.”

“Yeah?” Matt sounded actually curious, as if prompting John to conversation. Pillow talk in the restroom of a cheesily-named bar did not interest him, though, so John only hummed affirmation.

“You can keep the drawing,” John said, smiling cheekily. “I’m going to expect you to still have it when I come into town again.”

Matt gave him a sly smile and John reckoned he’d chosen the right way out.

“When will that be?”

“Couple months,” John assured him. “Not long.”

John would leave first; Matt was primping his dark hair with his fingertips, smoothing his clothes fussily. He looked at John’s reflection in the mirror, brown eyes gone narrow.

“Is your name really John?” he challenged with a grin.

John shook his head. “No.” He leaned on the door and it started to sway open. “Take care of yourself. Nice meeting you.”

Matt only tipped his chin, and John mildly regretted not having got to kiss him. He reclaimed his coat from the back of the barstool where he’d left it and shrugged into it as he headed for the door. When he took out his mobile to summon a car, he discovered nearly innumerable text notifications.

TXT from Holmes: Did you take the WiFi password card thing with you?
Where are you, btw?
I’m opening a bottle of Pinotage.

John wasn’t exactly sure when Sherlock had started pestering him with stream-of-consciousness texts, but evenings without a game had recently seen rather a lot of them. Mostly John didn’t answer them, either because they seemed not to require responses, or because he was otherwise occupied (as with young Matt the bartender); his lack of engagement did not seem to deter Sherlock in the slightest.

TXT from Holmes: I’m watching one of these programmes about tarting up old houses. The hosts are twins. It could give a man ideas. They’re fit enough. Obviously with myself in the middle; I’m not a pervert. Not that sort of pervert, at least.

TXT from Holmes: Let me guess, you went to Buddy Boys.

That was exactly where John had gone. He shook his head. Sherlock’s insight was uncanny, as ever.

TXT from Holmes: Have you seen this blog these two women do? They’re called Mike and Mags, for some reason. It’s about hockey. It’s quite funny. One of them is a Brawlers fan. The other likes the Hawks. They both enjoy playoff beards and post-game interviews, because the players are sweaty. I’m going to arrange for them to sit in my box some night; they seem interesting. Ah, here’s a gif of you ruffling your hair.
John made a mental note to do an internet search for Mike Mags Hockey Blog John Watson Hair.

TXT from Holmes: Oh, and here’s a gif of me looking devastating in that grey checked Gieves & Hawkes suit.
Don’t know if you know this about me, Watson, but I’m quite handsome.
This wine is very, very good.

John laughed. Sherlock was alone in his hotel room, watching home improvement on telly, getting pissed, and looking himself up on fan blogs. John was almost sorry to have missed it, though naturally he figured if they’d both been in the suite things would likely have gone differently, and what John needed was to correct his own course back to the way things had been before they’d made their very unwise arrangement. And given what had just gone on in the gents’ at Buddy Boys, John reckoned so far, so good.

TXT from Holmes: I’ll leave the rest of the wine in the little kitchen thing if you’d like it when you return.

TXT from Holmes: Nevermind I’ve finished it.
Practice tomorrow.
See you xth
XXXXxxxxxxxxxxxx
THEN.
See you xthen.
X OK see xyou xthen atxpractice.

When John let himself into the suite, he was careful to click the door shut quietly behind him, and walked through the little kitchen thing to find an empty glass in the small sink, stained red at the bottom, and an empty wine bottle nearby on the granite countertop. He lifted the bottle and sniffed lightly; it smelled of plum jam and coffee beans. He had little doubt in that Sherlock’s assessment of it as “very very good” was likely spot on.

John moved on into his own bedroom and through to the bath where he groaned over a much-needed piss, cleaned the fuzz of whisky off his teeth and tongue, then stripped, and at last dropped gratefully into the bed, not bothering with his mobile or the television set. He skimmed a mental replay of his encounter with the bartender, then farther back, to his lunch with Sherlock (burgers in a sports bar; the manager had comped their beers and then he and Sherlock had posed for photos with their arms around the waists of the under-dressed waitresses), and all the way back to their morning run that had ended in a race. John reminded himself how vital it was he get his feeling under control, and quickly; weird as Sherlock was, it was easy with him. Anyway, he wasn’t even weird, really. He was just. . .Sherlock. Just himself. And that was only weird because it was rare, that anyone was just himself—for proof of the theory one need only look at John Watson, and how much himself he was at any given time. Sherlock, as it turned out, was an excellent friend, the best John had had in a very long time. And surely an excellent friend was not an amenity to be put at risk with a foolish schoolboy crush. Surely it would pass. It was passing already. A handful more hookups, John thought, and just a little harder try at making a go with Glen Harding, and he’d have managed to collect himself. It was fine. All fine.

Sorry I couldn’t phone you tonight. Maybe tomorrow? Going to sleep now, goodnight.

TXT from Glen H: Pleasant dreams.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Just a note that the head office of the NHL is located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and can review plays during any of its games to be sure the right call was made by the linesmen/referees. A team has one time-out per game, and can forfeit it if they wish to challenge a play (usually a goal scored by the opposing team). This video review process is slightly controversial among fans and commentators, but that's the current rule.

As was tradition, the Rovers had retreated to their practice arena on game day, and the Brawlers had the run of the Sprint Center from morning until game time. The morning skate had been optional, and sparsely attended—John would give the team an earful about getting lazy, later on, in the dressing room before game time—and those who’d shown up had run some drills, shot around a bit, then called it day. John decided to hit the gym afterward, to do some work on his upper body in support of his weak shoulder. The Rovers’ gym was vast and well appointed, and on his arrival, John found Thurston, Sawyer, and Sullivan there, lifting weights, while Mellon and MacGraw rode the stationary bikes. They all exchanged greetings and John set himself up at a machine to work his arms and chest.

“You ducked out of the dinner early last night, eh, Cap?” Sully prodded almost immediately. “What was her name?”

The men guffawed and catcalled, and John laughed along. “I don’t kiss and tell,” he said with a shake of his head. “It’s bad form.”

“Kissed her where it counts, didja?” Thurston prodded. “Come on, Cap, come across. You got off last night, tell us the story.”

John hummed disapproval, but in the end shrugged between reps and said, “Found a bar quieter than the one at the hotel. The bartender turned out to be friendly.”

“Yeah? What’s your line, then?” Thurston asked. “These losers could use some new ones.”

“Well, the accent goes a long way. After that I just mentioned traveling a lot. Stupid bar trick of naming the cross-streets of the team hotels—only had to do one of them but I know every city in the league.” John was warming up to the story; he’d adapted enough of his past ones to do it easily, without feeling self-conscious or fearing he’d slip up on the pronouns.

“That works?” Sullivan sounded incredulous.

“Well, it wouldn’t for you, limp-dick. You’re not charming like I am,” John told him with a grin. “You have to sell it. Gave some compliments, made some jokes. She gave me a drink on the house, so I just passed it right back—that’s one you can use with bartenders and waitresses, if you can bear to part with a drink.”

“I definitely cannot,” Mellon threw in. “But it’s a good idea.”
“So, but—the bartender. Don’t you have to wait around all night for them to finish work?” Sawyer asked.

John smirked. “Quick minute in the restroom, not much longer than a smoke break, and then you don’t have to cuddle afterward. She goes back to work and you go out the door.”

“Fucking hell, in the bathroom? What—a blow job?”

John removed his hands from the machine long enough to hold them up and give his fingers a waggle. “Just our hands. Everyone gets to come; no one has to kneel on the floor by the toilet.”

“Let me smell your fingers, Cap, come on,” Sullivan begged.

“You’re a class fucking act, Sully, you know that?” Thurston jibed, and tossed a sweat-damp towel at his head.

“Girls smell good,” Sullivan defended.

Just then a few other players rolled in, and as soon as they’d made themselves known, Bouchard announced, “So Campbell’s gone to Dallas for two AHL forwards and a draft pick.”

“Nah, man!” Thurston protested. “Already gone?”

“The car came for him just as we were leaving the hotel,” Bouchard confirmed.

Hammel put in, “At least we got to tell him good luck. Just happened to run into him. He said he’s gonna email everybody later.”

“Fucking hate that bit,” John said, with a sad shake of his head. “Show up to a practice or a game and a fella’s just not there anymore. Happened more times than I can count, twice with my own linemates.”

“It’s bullshit,” Mellon agreed.

“He wanted to go to a Canadian team, I thought,” John threw in.

“Could hardly be farther from that,” Bouchard confirmed. “Anyway, they’re calling up Linscott from Bridgeport but he’ll only get here a couple hours before game time tonight.”

“Good kid,” MacGraw reported. He’d been playing in Bridgeport before his call-up to replace Gerhardt, so was familiar with the AHL team’s roster. “No flash, good instincts. He’ll be good.”

“Just hope they get him here on time,” Bouchard said. “Last thing we need is to try to roll eleven forwards.”

The players grumbled agreement and returned to their workouts, breaking into smaller pairs and trios of conversation. John finished his upper body work and retreated toward the showers. He fetched his mobile out of his rucksack as he went, and texted his agent.

*Any news about what we discussed?*

.TXT from CharlieStrong: Don’t pack yet but I’m working.*

John had a twinge in his gut, thinking of his teammates discussing his own sudden disappearance to come. But it was for the best. He’d be far away from the potential complication of having a feeling for a teammate, and closer to a relationship with a real future. He tapped out a quick text to
Glen Harding.

*Hope you’re having a good day. Playing in KC tonight, then flying to Chicago.*

*TXT from GlenHarding: I know you’ll win. Text me when you get in.*

John texted back a smile, then hit the shower.

Though they beat the Kansas City Rovers 4 – 2 (Linscott made it from Bridgeport just ninety minutes before game time but showed up ready to work), the next night against Chicago started out rough as the nights’ refs and linesmen called every bit of incidental contact as a hold, play interference, or trip, and the Mavericks got five power plays in the first half of the game as Brawler after Brawler took a seat in the penalty box. Chicago ended up serving a few for imaginary hooks and high sticks, and the teams played several minutes of four-on-four and four-on-three. It was impossible to fall into a rhythm of play, as every minute or so a whistle blew, chopping up the game into tiny segments and grating on players’ nerves. Both coaches had words for the refs after several of the calls—Coach Lestrade’s quite loud and animated, and should anyone watching on BSN have been a skilled lip-reader, they no doubt got an eyeful.

“Sharpe comes out of the corner, gives to Emile, Principio tries to shove it in to Haney, to Sharpe. . .OH WHAT A SAVE BY SHERLOCK HOLMES! Holmes coming right to left across the crease. . .A sweet feed and Sharpe elevated the puck, but Holmes makes a splendid save. The Chicago crowd protests loudly as the Brawlers take control and both teams change out.”

“As you pointed out, Jack, Sharpe was able to get the puck up high. Holmes had to get across—he had to play big. Anything higher than the leg pads on a play like that, 90% of the time will end up in the net. Excellent work there by Sherlock Holmes.”

“Kocur hangs back by the hashmarks as the Brawlers set their triangles, Lenin screening, pester Sullivan, Kocur to Siven, back to Kocur, the one-timer, deflected, but Sullivan’s there—here comes the rockslide to crush him—he scores! Chris Sullivan shoves one in, it looked like it might have come off Lenin’s skate, there was a scrum for the puck there in the crease and Chicago’s Mark Reed is saying he was interfered with. . .I think by Thurston? The Mavericks are using their time-out to get a review of the goal, claiming goalie interference.”

“We’ll take a look at the replay we have, from our angles, Jack, while Toronto looks at theirs—Chicago has a camera in the back of the goal, one of a few teams that do—but I don’t know that helps much when they’re arguing that Reed was interfered with. Yeah, I see Thurston there, trying to get to the puck, but both hands are on his stick, the stick is low, there’s a crowd in front but I don’t see Thurston doing anything that could qualify as interference. From where I’m sitting that looks like a good goal.”

“Perhaps just breathing the same air he’s using makes Reed feel his space is being invaded. I agree, that was a good goal, but we’ll wait for the word from the head office. Linesman Patrick Maines with the call.”

“Upon review, there was no goaltender interference. The call on the ice stands. . .good goal.”

“That was the right call, Jack. You kind of have to wonder if Chicago is somehow working with the choppiness of play, given so many penalty calls, so many stoppages—working some kind of strategy, because that slowed things down yet again, for no legitimate reason I could see.”
“Death by a thousand stoppages, Brick, I think is what that strategy might be called. Bouchard and Principio take their places on the center dot for the faceoff.”

Sherlock got the 1 – 0 shutout, but the game was a slog from start to finish, and the win felt like more work than necessary. There was pizza and the usual exchange of good-natured insults after the game, but by the time they were on the bus back to the hotel, the energy had dropped and the team was largely quiet.

“Worked for our pay tonight,” John commented, dropping his head back and rubbing his forehead with the flats of his fingers. “That was a shit game; I hope the fans asked for refunds on their way out.”

“Mmm,” Sherlock hummed absently. He was fiddling with his phone, and his face looked sickly blue in the screen’s backlight.

“Yeah, well, good talk,” John muttered, and turned toward the window, taking in what there was to see of the city streets near eleven in the evening on a Thursday.

His own phone buzzed alive in his coat pocket and he dug it out.

TXT from Holmes: When we get to the hotel I’ll give you a blow job to remember me by. For old time’s sake. To say goodbye to our arrangement.

John exhaled a sigh out his nose. “Holmes. No,” he said, mustering up some exasperation despite the fact his prick was instantly interested in getting a good sendoff.

Sherlock looked over his left shoulder, behind him down the aisle between the bus seats, then up, theatrically ignoring John.

John tapped a text.

What part of No no no no no did I not make clear?

TXT from Holmes: It’s entirely unfair you didn’t make it known that last time was the LAST TIME.

John considered whether he was the sort who could put aside a troublesome feeling just long enough to get off. He closed his eyes for a moment and took stock; perhaps the feeling had passed. And even if it hadn’t, what was it, anyway? Affection? Not so bad—people felt affection for their mates, and Sherlock was his mate. Maybe he’d overreacted. A flash of affection for a mate being surprisingly kind to a good kid . . . it didn’t mean anything. John had panicked, who knew why. But it was nothing. Of course it was nothing.

Why, you’d have done something differently if I’d warned you?

TXT from Holmes: It’s a waste and a shame every minute that big cock of yours goes un-sucked.

John let out a noise, covered it with a cough just in case.

You arsehole.

TXT from Holmes: That doesn’t read as a No No No.

No.
Because it’s not.
Sherlock sank into a slouch, closed his eyes, and began massaging the hinges of his jaw with the pads of his fingers. John shook his head, and shifted in his seat, checking his watch to reckon how long before they reached the hotel. Only a small handful of minutes passed until the bus trundled into the hotel carpark, and as it did, John’s phone went.

TXT from Holmes: Last chance for anything as yet untried, of course, as this will be the actual last time, per your wishes.

John said aloud, “Right.” He cleared his throat a few times, urgent to make a break for their suite. Suddenly, Sullivan roared up over the back of their seats, and John smashed his phone against his chest—so subtle, Watson, very good—to keep it from being read over his shoulder.

“You girls want to come to the hotel bar with us? We want to see if we can get thrown out.”

John was stern. “I think I misheard?”

“Yeah, no. I mean.” Sully looked cowed. “We’re gonna get some shots but not, like, get loud or anything.”

“That’s what I thought you said. And no, but thanks for asking.”

“Holmesy?”

Sherlock grunted a laugh, his shoulders jumping, and there was no need for him to say more.

“Yeah, well, just thought I’d ask.” Sully sank back into his own seat, and bus finally settled, the players beginning to file out.

They bid good night to Kocur and Hammel, who had the suite far down the hall, and Sherlock unlocked the door to their own.

“Drink?” Sherlock asked, as he hung his coat and John doffed his own and chucked it toward an armchair.

“Whatever you want,” John replied, and moistened his lips with his tongue.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, smirking.

John grinned. “Yeah. I mean. Why not, if it’s the last time.”

“We can drink later.”

“So glad you said that.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

If you clicked on this directly from the notification email, please refresh the page before reading; there is a formatting glitch with the AO3 that requires me to do a little editing after posting, and some of you are so quick! But I hate to think of you reading before it's as perfect as I can get it!

ALSO: I already know I will never be able to keep up with comments on this chapter (though I will try), so here is a blanket Thanks for Reading! It really does mean so much to me.

Sherlock was sliding off his suit jacket by the time John followed him into his bedroom. Sherlock had already lived in it for a day and a night, so his things were everywhere—clothes on the floor and bureau-top; demolished room service trays full of dishes and cutlery and tipped-over glasses on the desk and ottoman; sweets wrappers scattered among the condoms and lube packets on the bedside table. The bed was unmade, extraneous pillows arranged in a column down the center of the mattress.

With one sure stride forward, Sherlock stepped into John’s space, wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and cupped the other over the front placket of John’s trousers, smoothing down, curling fingers around John’s bollocks to the extent he could through the fabric. John whuffed a hard exhale and his fingers went quickly at Sherlock’s shirt buttons. Sherlock was looking down at his slow-sliding hand, fingernails of the other lightly scratching the back of John’s neck. Sherlock let go a satisfied-sounding little hum, then stepped away.

“Get comfortable,” he said, and vanished into the bath, clicking the door shut behind him.

John shed his suit jacket and unbuttoned his cuffs, then dragged shirt and vest together up and over his head, discarding all of it over the back of the desk chair. He unfastened his belt, then sat on the foot of the bed to remove his shoes and socks, which he nudged aside with his bare foot. As he was about to drop his trousers, he felt his mobile, in his front pocket, buzz against his hip, and automatically drew it out to look.

TXT from Glen H: John, I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore.
The distance is too difficult, and your job makes that unlikely to change.
I have really enjoyed getting to know you. You’re a great guy.
But I’m not so young that I can wait around, even for a great guy.
TBH, I was in Vancouver on business recently and met someone, and it made me rethink things.
I should have told you sooner, I apologize that I didn’t.
I do wish you all the best. I hope we can be friends.
Take good care of yourself. I’ll be rooting for you. xx, Glen.

John sat upright, felt a rush of cold outrage pour down his chest. “What the flaming, buggery fuck is this?” he half-shouted.

“Something wrong?” Sherlock, behind the closed bathroom door, sounded some blend of concerned and annoyed.
John held the phone out away from himself, staring at Glen’s messages, trying to process it.

“The man in Seattle just dumped me,” John reported. “In a text,” he added, shaking his head and tossing his phone onto the upholstered chair in the corner. “For his new boyfriend... in Canada.”

Sherlock let out a guffaw.

John dropped his trousers and pants in one go, tossed them toward the chair as well, then lay down on his side, facing the closed bathroom door, propped up on one elbow and a couple of Sherlock’s pillows (there were a few loose, curved strands of dark hair here and there visible against the pure white of the hotel pillows). He dragged his fingers along the length of his cock to get his blood rushing, raised his knee to display everything to full advantage.

“It’s not kind of you to laugh at me in my heartbreak,” John scolded. The cruel shock of being so affronted—dumped! in a text!—began to wear off, John slowly realised that what he mostly felt was not regret, but relief.

Momentarily Sherlock appeared, nude—long and lean and with his cock already fattening up—and said, “I’m sorry, do you need time to grieve?”

“I’ll get over it,” John assured him, and licked his lips. “So, anyway.”

Sherlock smirked, and lay a hand on John’s hip, unabashedly gazing at John’s burgeoning erection, and with a press of his palm indicated John should move down the bed. As he complied, Sherlock settled onto his side—to John’s delight, head-to-foot—and John didn’t wait to encircle Sherlock’s half-hard cock with two fingers and thumb, tilting his shoulders to push his mouth down over the head. Sherlock gasped and wrapped an arm around John’s low back, fingertips splayed on his backside to draw him close, and his tongue and lips slid warm and wet down and around the skin of John’s prick—teasing—crazymaking—until at last he caught John’s crown between slippery lips, rolled his tongue in spirals, and began to suck and drag in an unhurried, liquid cadence, now and then pressing his chest hard against John’s belly to swallow him deep. John mirrored Sherlock’s languor, slow-rocking his head on his neck, tight-lipped, tongue curling, tipping his head. He steadied Sherlock’s prick with his thumb and two fingers; his pinky stroked in gentle curls over Sherlock’s lightly-fuzzed bollocks.

They fell into a rhythm both certain and soft, and Sherlock’s hand slid from John’s backside down his thigh, and back up again, pulling John closer, his tongue rippling against the edge of John’s foreskin as he drew back to lap and tease before sinking down again. Sherlock’s hips rocked at half-tempo, a creeping roll that thrilled John each time his cock slid deep, and held, then slid back again so John had to lean in, following, lest Sherlock slip away from him altogether.

Minutes passed, and their motions became more hectic, each of them needing to come up for air, gasping then going back... humming... groaning... lips parting to allow for gusts of noisy breath. Sherlock rested his head on John’s inner thigh, the curls of his dark hair tickling, catching in and gently tugging at the sweep of stiff leg-hair. John thrust a hand against Sherlock’s hipbone, restraining him from fucking into John’s mouth, controlling the pace, but barely. He shifted a firm hand up the inside of Sherlock’s thigh, and Sherlock took the hint, opened his legs, one knee aimed at the ceiling, bracing himself with his foot on the edge of the night table. John drew back, licked two fingers, Oh, fuck, can you ever suck a cock... jeezus... He ducked down to lap sloppily at Sherlock’s bollocks, felt them roll under his tongue, and swept his fingers down Sherlock’s perineum, feeling for the pucker of his hole.

Sherlock moaned extravagantly around John’s prick, and turned his hip, inviting. John drew tiny circles with his fingertip.
“Can I?” he murmured, and pulsed his finger against Sherlock’s opening.

Sherlock sucked hard as he drew slowly back, eventually softening to use only his tongue when he got to the crown of John’s cock; John felt Sherlock’s wet lips moving against his tongued-back foreskin as he replied in a thick, rough voice, “Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yeah,” John breathed, and took Sherlock in his mouth for a few quick, tight strokes. “Yeah.”

“Mmm.” Sherlock wriggled a bit. “I’ll come up there,” he said, and there followed a clumsy rearrangement, noisy breath, grasping hands, and John was aching but god he wanted to go off inside Sherlock’s plumply muscled arse. Soon enough Sherlock was flat on his back with most of the pillows beside him, the corner of one beneath his neck and head. His mouth was flushed red around the edges, his hair disarranged across his forehead. John resisted an urge to sweep Sherlock’s fringe aside, instead swung one knee then the other over Sherlock’s thigh, settling to kneel between his legs. As he was about to ask Sherlock to pass the slick, the green plastic bottle appeared, proffered by a long-fingered hand.

“Just my fingers first,” John huffed, drizzling the minty-smelling stuff onto the flats of his fingers and working it around with his thumb. “I want you wide open.”

Sherlock licked his own thumb and first finger and pinched his little pink nipple, rolled it a bit, and his tongue flicked out to wet his lips.

John fired the one-timer. “Can you take two straightaway?”

Sherlock purred an affirmative hum. John nudged one of his raised knees outward, and Sherlock obliged, walking his foot to the side. With his clean hand, John grasped Sherlock’s other ankle and persuaded it up onto his bad shoulder. He dragged his fingers along Sherlock’s shin and calf, brushing the hairs the wrong way. Sherlock’s fingers still working his nipple, his other hand rested on his belly, rising and falling with his breath, and his prick lay in a pink curve amid his auburn-dark pubic hair. He watched John intently, as if curious, his eyes softly half-closed, now and then moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue.

John pressed two slick fingers in a firm downward slide from just beneath Sherlock’s bollocks to the wrinkle of his opening, and began immediately to draw his fingertips over it, applying pressure, until at last he felt the slight give as Sherlock sighed out a long exhale, and he slipped in the tip of his index finger, turning his wrist and smoothing the outer ring of muscle as he went.

Sherlock grunted, and his neck flexed an arch, showing John the soft spot beneath his chin for a moment. “More,” he panted, and John well knew the first rule was to always do what Holmesy says, so he let his middle finger find space beside the first, and rolled his wrist gently in half-moons. Sherlock let out a long moan.

“So hot,” John told him, and he was, clutching heat that John was dying to sink into. “Pull your prick.”

“Not yet,” Sherlock answered, closed-eyed, and licked his fingertips again, reached across his chest to tweak the other nipple. “Can’t wait to get your cock inside,” he muttered, and John felt the muscles around his fingers shifting—tighter, then softening—clasping—melting—and on the next of Sherlock’s exhalces, John surged forward, his fingers in as far as they could comfortably go, and he petted Sherlock’s thigh, turned to mouth at Sherlock’s ankle and the instep of his long foot.

Sherlock breathed noisily, slow and shaking, but after a few deliberate breaths John felt the distinct softening around the base of his fingers, and he began to press and turn, making space, spreading
the slick inside.

“Gonna work you a bit, OK?” John said, and shifted forward, catching Sherlock’s knee in the crook of his elbow as he braced himself on a straight arm.

Sherlock hummed and skittered his fingertips down through John’s chest hair, brushing over his nipples, then swept up and curved his palms around John’s shoulders. John drew his wrist back, then pressed in, feeling Sherlock relaxing, making space for his fingers as he dragged back and shoved in, John’s cock thrumming, dripping pre-cum onto the sheets between their knees.

“Mm, so good. I can feel you opening for me. So good.”

Sherlock dropped his head back again, and his belly arched up, then collapsed down, and his hips rocked needily against the beat of John’s hand. On an out-stroke, John added a third finger to the tangle and Sherlock let out a delicious whine as John pushed inside. His thigh fell wider and his fingers dug into John’s shoulders, curled around the top edges of his biceps.

“Yeah, wide open,” John panted, and looked hard at Sherlock’s face, closed-eyed and open-mouthed, letting go his breath in a soft huh. huh. huh. that matched John’s pace. “So soft and slippery inside. I’m dying to fuck you.”

“Ready,” Sherlock muttered, and reached for his prick, dragging his foreskin all the way over his crown, then rolling it back, again and again.

John withdrew and Sherlock sucked a hiss, but tore the corner of a condom packet and passed it over. John quickly slid the condom into place, slicking it with more lubricant. Sherlock caught himself behind the knees and pulled his thighs back. Letting go a deep groan at the sight of him, John shuffled forward, took his cock in hand and guided it to Sherlock’s opening. He leaned up on his straight arm once more, hovering over Sherlock, and forgave himself noticing that Sherlock’s face and shoulders and belly and pulled-back thighs were all absolutely gorgeous. John pushed in, and waited.

Sherlock breathed once. . .in. . .out. . .then said, “Yeah. Yeah.” His grasped at John’s forearms, braced as he was on splay-fingered hands planted at either side of Sherlock’s ribs. “Yeah,” Sherlock said again, and his eyes drifted up and back, and finally fluttered closed. “Yeah. Yeah.”

John pressed in a slow steady slide, settled in deep.

“So fucking big,” Sherlock complained. “Mmmm.” He shifted his hips the tiniest fraction, and John moaned at the varying sensation even Sherlock’s smallest movements created. “Yeah,” Sherlock encouraged.

John’s prick was surrounded in heat, pressure from all sides, jeezus it was delicious, and he needed to move. He drew back quick, and then sank in once more, slow and firm, leaning his hip hard against Sherlock’s body.

“Yeah. . .yeah. . .” Sherlock sighed out, then sucked in, ”yehyehyehyeh. . .”

John set a sturdy rhythm, perspiration sliding through the hair at his temples, and he was suddenly aware of the rising scent of both of them—underarm sweat and the smell of desire between their thighs, dank and warm, stinging a bit at the edges—and he could feel Sherlock’s deep interior muscles resisting, yielding, with each stroke up and back. “You’re—” he groaned through clenched teeth, “God. . .you’re so fucking—tight.” Sherlock purred a hum in response.

The last resistance fading, John rolled his pelvis to penetrate Sherlock shallowly, quick and
slippery, and Sherlock’s breath grew louder, his dry throat altering the pitch of his moans. He released his knees and wound his long legs around John’s hips, squeezing, drawing John closer—and John obliged by slowing his thrusts, deliciously surrounded by Sherlock’s slick warmth. John licked his own too-dry lips, dropped down from straight arms to his elbows. Sherlock shifted himself to accommodate the different angle, and from the change in pitch and intensity of Sherlock’s sounds—sliding from low moans up to breathless whines—John knew as he began to fuck quicker that his cockhead was hitting the spot on each in-stroke.

Sherlock groaned, bone-deep, and rolled his head restlessly against the pillow.

“You keep up noises like that,” John warned, “You’ll finish me.”

Sherlock hummed, biting his sucked-in lower lip, and John was getting too close, too quickly, so had to close to his eyes, keeping up the steady mid-tempo of his thrusts but distracting himself with a mental to-do list: get the blades changed on his practice skates, update the charity-hours log once they were back in Boston, ring his sister, arrange the damn grocery deliveries to his flat. . .

“John.”

His eyes flicked open. John? Abruptly, Sherlock’s big hands clasped John’s jaw and his shoulders rose off the corner of his pillow, pulling John down to meet him halfway. Fitting his lips between John’s, Sherlock sucked, drew back to sip a breath, and then each of them parted his lips for the other. Sherlock’s tonguetip dipped in, quick-flicking there in search of John’s tongue, then retreating.

John’s rhythm stuttered and his hips nearly stilled, only a soft shallow rocking, bracing himself on trembling arms. Sherlock kissed him and kissed him, and John at last shook off sufficient shock to properly kiss back—when Sherlock allowed it, which wasn’t often. Sherlock’s kiss was bossy, intrusive, wonderfully thorough. Awkwardly tangled as they were, John shifted his weight to one elbow, rocking back to get hold of Sherlock’s prick, damp with the perspiration between their bodies. Sherlock snarled against John’s mouth and his pelvis bucked up. The greedy kisses went on, punctuated by deep hums and moans from Sherlock, John grunting lightly with each thrust. Sherlock’s cool fingers dragged along John’s throat, gripped his chin, slid down the back of his neck, then up through John’s hair. John licked at Sherlock’s deliciously swollen lower lip, taking advantage of deep, dirty kisses that might well be the only ones he’d ever get from Sherlock, who’d already made it abundantly clear he did not kiss.

One more deep growl from Sherlock, right into John’s mouth, and he caught John’s lower lip between his teeth and dragged, and John was done for, jerking thrusting, coming in harsh bursts, his shout swallowed up in their kisses. Sherlock drew away just long enough to lick his palm; as he reached down John leaned up and away to make space, watching Sherlock wank himself as he dropped back onto the pillow, eyes pinched shut, mouth wide open, panting groans in time with his pulls.

“Fucking gorgeous,” John encouraged, and his softening cock began to slip out of Sherlock. “Your big hand wrapped around your prick. Fucking you is amazing.” John sat back on his heels, rested his hand on Sherlock’s thigh. “So tight. So fucking hot. Christ, I came so hard.”

“Yeah,” Sherlock panted, and his hand suddenly stilled as his cum erupted onto his belly, near-clear, in two thick pulses, then a trio of smaller ones. Sherlock groaned, long and deep, and John watched the muscles of his shoulders melting into softness, the tension smoothing out of his face.

“That felt good,” John observed with a grin, scuttling to sit at the bed’s foot, tug off the condom and stand just long enough to fling it into the bin.
“So did that,” Sherlock countered, yanking several tissues from the box by the bed and going after the mess on his abdomen. John stretched out on his back beside Sherlock, the column of white-covered pillows between them.

“Yeah, it was really good,” John said, hands resting on his belly and chest, eyes fixed on the ceiling. As soon as his legs stopped quivering, he’d gather his clothes and head for his own bedroom. Sherlock had finished cleaning himself and dug his fingers into his hair, shaking his curls and scratching his scalp, his fingertips moving in little circles all over. John cleared his throat. “And, you know. No worries about—I know the kissing was just the heat of the moment or whatever. I know you don’t usually kiss, and it was probably just—y’know—hormones.” John waved the whole thing away with one hand that came to rest on the front of his hip. “It’s fine. I mean, I get it. So.”

Sherlock turned his head toward John.

“Took me by surprise, you calling me John; it sounds so. . .odd. From you. You know: Holmes. Holmesy.”

Sherlock rolled onto his side, lifted up to rest his temple against his raised fist.

John glanced at him, then away, then back at him again.

“Why does your face look like that?” John asked. Why did his face look like that? Smug arsehole. John should stop yammering before he gave himself away. Him and his stupid bloody feeling. Sherlock was gearing up to take the piss out of him, and he wasn’t in the mood to be mocked just then. “Anyway, just. I won’t expect it in future. Kissing. I know you don’t.” He shrugged; he was more ready than he’d ever been to gather his clothes and get the hell back to his own room. “It’s fine.”

“No, John,” Sherlock said, and to John’s surprise, there was no trace of mockery in his voice. “I know exactly how it is when it’s just hormones. It is not just hormones.”

John studied him with suspicion. But also with a faint shadow of a whisper of a hint of. . .something else. John’s gut went berserk, flipping, fluttering, but let’s get some clarity here, Watson, don’t jump to conclusions.


Sherlock’s hand slid forward, across the border wall of pillows, and his fingers slid easily beneath and then between John’s fingers, so their palms touched, and Sherlock held on, and looked quite intently at John, and his lips curved up.

“Not the last time, then,” John breathed, and he was holding on, too, staring at their clasped hands, Sherlock’s thumb on top of his thumb, vaguely sliding over it from nail to knuckle and back again.

Sherlock shook his head. “No.” He stretched his supporting arm so he could flit his fingers through John’s hair a bit, dropped his head down onto the pillow. “If you’ll have me, that is,” he added, and grinned a bit, looking lazy and blissful and so intensely beautiful, with kiss-darkened lips and utterly mad hair. “I think you will,” he mused.

“Have you?” John echoed. He wanted to whoop and run around. He squeezed Sherlock’s hand.

“Mm.”
“Yeah,” John said. “I’d like that very much. I’d definitely like to. . .have you.” He lifted and lowered himself, trying to get closer, but there were all the damned pillows in the way, so he leaned quite far over, and said, “C’mere.” Sherlock slid his cheek against the pillow, and turned his neck, and John opened his mouth against Sherlock’s mouth and kissed him properly, probably too possessively but dear god yes, he’d have him. Have him for a bit, at least. For his own. Oh, yes, happily have him, whatever it meant. “Move these fucking pillows,” John muttered, and Sherlock laughed, and they tossed the pillows at the headboard, then moved close, slotting their knees together, hands petting each other’s hips and arms, humming, smiling, exchanging little pecks and deeper, exploratory kisses.

“I meant what I said about you living the way you wish,” Sherlock murmured. “No one has to know but us.”

John nodded, grateful, relieved. “There’s a thousand things I want to ask you. Tell you,” John said, and suddenly it felt strange—not just strange—bizarre—wrong—to be lying so close to Sherlock, feeling tenderly toward him, with a belly full of butterflies. John longed to pet him, smooth the unruly hairs of his eyebrows into proper place with the tip of his middle finger, but instead he rolled away, onto his back. “You’re not taking the piss,” John demanded, a faint threat in his tone.

“No.”

“I need a minute.” It was an utterly inadequate expression of his feelings just then.

“Take your time.” Sherlock yawned and massaged the back of his own neck.

For a long moment they were both quiet, Sherlock dragging the sheet and duvet into place over their bare legs, up to their waists, and John staring at some middle-distant nothing, trying to sort it: Sherlock called him John; Sherlock kissed him; Sherlock said it wasn’t just hormones that made him do it. John had been working to suppress his troubling feeling yet Sherlock must have been having a feeling of his own, at the same time. Or. . .before?

“When did you. . .When did it change?”

Sherlock’s shrug was an audible brush of his shoulders against the starched hotel bed sheets. “I’m not sure,” he said, but immediately followed it with, “Tea at Mrs Waite’s.”

“Was that a date?” John demanded, and he could feel his stupid smile spreading. “And the winner’s choice dinner!”

“Of course not.” Sherlock frowned, his forehead collapsing into furrows.

“Because looking back, they do feel a bit like dates,” John grinned and turned onto his side, looking pointedly at Sherlock.

Sherlock threw his arm across his eyes. “They were not dates.”

“You’ve been wooing me.”

“I have done no such thing.”

“ Took me out to the suburbs to meet that family!” John said, and poked Sherlock’s ribs, making him yelp and jump away from the touch of John’s finger. “And here I was panicking when I started to feel something.”

“Panicking?” Sherlock asked, and uncovered his face, which was screwed up in a tight frown.
“You’re completely out of bounds,” John replied. “And you never indicated you wanted anything more than our arrangement, and just being mates, all fine, I like being your mate. But you never did a single thing—”

“Arranged all those dates,” Sherlock protested.

“See that, they were dates! That’s mental. You could have just said.”

“I wanted to be sure,” Sherlock defended, then waved his hand above his chest. He clarified: “Your man in Seattle.”

“Yeah,” John said, a bit regretfully. “I thought that was. . .I don’t know. Anyway, he got to make the call on that one. In a text.”

“I’m sorry for you.”

“You’re not.”

“No,” Sherlock said, and grinned, mischief evident in it.

“Nor me, really, I’m slightly embarrassed to say. But something better has suddenly come along.” John’s cheeks were starting to ache from smiling. “Christ, this is. . .a shock.”

“Take your time,” Sherlock said again, and yawned again.

“Turn out the light if you want to,” John offered, and drew the covers up a bit higher on his torso.

Sherlock hummed thoughtfully, as if he might acquiesce, but instead he slipped one hand beneath his cheek and looked hard at John. “You should know I’m likely to demand all your free time. I’m messy and sometimes forget to talk for long stretches. My time with Jeremy is non-negotiable; he needs me to be reliable. I haven’t done this for a very long time; I’m far, far out of practice, so if I’m doing it wrong, correct me.”

“Doing it wrong?” John’s heart panged. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. What haven’t you done?”

“For starters, still been in bed with a man once the sex is over for longer than it takes to smoke a cigarette,” Sherlock told him. “Or any of it. Feelings.” He lowered his voice as if he were cursing in church. “Monogamy.”

John blew out a breath. “We can sort it.”

“What are your things?” Sherlock prompted. “Things you’re afraid might chase me off.”

“Keeping it to ourselves.”

“Not an issue.”

“I appreciate it,” John said. “I’ll probably want to touch you a lot? I’ve been called a space invader. Like right now I’d like to touch your face but I don’t know if that’s welcome.”

Sherlock’s hand beneath the blankets found John’s and drew it up from under, guided John’s fingers to his mouth and pressed a dry kiss against his knuckles, then released him. John slipped his fingertips across Sherlock’s eyebrow, then down his cheek and around the curve of his jawbone to his chin, then went back to his temple and repeated the motion, gently petting. Sherlock shut his eyes, and his lips curled up a bit at the corners.
“Married to the game, though I don’t suppose that’s likely to bother you as much as it might someone else.”

“Mm. No.”

“I’m not. . .” John caught himself. He was about to admit he was not interested in anything casual, that he was—nearing the end of his playing career and feeling his age—looking for a partner for whatever came after, someone to make a life with. But it was too much. He and Sherlock were alike in a peculiar, particular way—one which made the current situation—of lying in bed together while John stroked Sherlock’s face, talking about being more than just mates with an arrangement—feel not merely unlikely, but impossible. It was too soon to make demands. Determined though he was to find someone he could settle in with, he could allow this utterly unexpected thing some time to breathe.

He’d trailed off; Sherlock prompted, “Hmm?”

“I’m not very smart,” John diverted. “Surely didn’t do any degrees while I was still in high school. Didn’t go to university. I mean, I do read books, keep up with the news, but I don’t know things like classical music or wine or any of that.”

Sherlock shrugged. “You know hockey, and you know how to fuck. The rest are just optional extracurriculars.”

John grinned, then growled a bit at a thrill of memory: all the sex they’d had up to that point, and now the imminent promise of more, possibly even much more. Sherlock smiled, closed-eyed, and his fingers suddenly spidered open across John’s pectoral muscle, wending through his chest hair. John wondered if he had another round in him, reckoned if they snogged a bit first—god, he could kiss Sherlock now, all he wanted—he might very well manage it.

“I should warn you, too,” John said quietly, and their faces were close, nose-tips stroking cheeks, dry lips just brushing, breath warming and cooling, end-of-day whiskers now and then catching. “I’ll probably kiss the face off you.” John could feel the way Sherlock’s cheeks plumped as he smiled, heard the sharp exhalation that was almost a laugh.

“I look forward to it,” Sherlock assured, hands on John’s chest and hip, fingertips swirling and pressing.

“You’re really not taking the piss,” John gently demanded, promising himself it would be the last time.


This time it was John’s face that changed shape for a smile. “It’s the best news I’ve heard in a very long time.” Though it would take some getting used to, he had to try it out, so he added, “Sherlock.” A comforting hush, a purring growl, an opening just out of reach, a crisp finish. What a name, to hold so much in it. “Shhherlock. . .”

As if summoned, Sherlock descended with inviting, parted lips and welcoming hands, miles of warm skin on offer, the mad hair of his head, and the pretty, auburn-tinged trail leading down from his navel. John felt for it beneath the sheets, and Sherlock’s belly quivered under John’s brushing, picking fingertips.

“Can’t believe my luck,” John said quietly, and he really couldn’t.
Their kisses deepened, and John thought he could happily spend hours—whole nights, maybe the
week—just tracing the tip of his tongue over every surface, every texture, of Sherlock’s lips, his
tongue, even his teeth, the jut of his Adam’s apple and the sturdy length of his throat. Ah, yes,
John definitely had another round in him—did he ever. But first, more kisses, more to learn about
the shape of Sherlock’s muscles beneath his skin, more time to seek out the soft places that must be
there, too—somewhere—John would not rush to find them but looked forward to their discovery.
Sherlock’s fingers light on his jawbone. Sherlock’s toes stroking the side of his foot. Sherlock’s
mouth, open and shut, just wet enough, warm turning hot.

“Mmm. . .” John, sinking into something so like contentment it felt unreal. Real things were distant,
and could certainly wait; Sherlock torqued his torso away, still kissing, neck straining and his arm
flung out, feeling on the bedside table for that handful of foil packets, and he knocked his mobile
onto the floor with a carpeted thud, and

“Oh, shit. Oh my god.”

“Hm?” Sherlock’s eyes went wide. John scrambled, crawling over Sherlock’s legs, searching for
his trousers, his mobile buried under them on the seat of the chair.

“Shit. Shitty fucking shit! What time is it?” Found his phone, swiped it to life. The battery was
nearly dead.

“What’s the matter?”

“I have to call my agent!”
Sherlock’s face registered shock. And why wouldn’t it? Were they not on the verge of having the first sex of their—what—couplehood? Appropriate vocabulary To Be Determined; there were pressing matters to attend to. Sherlock’s eyebrows dove down at the inner corners.

“No, I know,” John assured him, holding up a hand in surrender as he listened to the ringing. “It sounds mad. Of course it does, but—Charlie! Hi, John Watson. Sorry for the late hour. Did I wake you?”

John’s agent grumbled a scold but followed it with an assurance it’s what he was there for, I work for you, Watson, call me from a Mexican jail at four in the morning, wait, you’re not in jail, are you?

“I need you to forget every mad thing I said about wanting to leave the Brawlers.”

Sherlock’s eyes went wide once more, and he sat upright, forearms on raised knees, attentive to John’s side of the conversation.

“I think I was just...midlife crisis or something? I went mental for a bit. But. I don’t want a trade. I’m happy where I am. Please tell me no one in the Brawlers’ head office knows yet that I was looking to move.”

John was pacing, naked, and imagined the picture that painted, so sat down on the edge of the bed, drawing a pillow onto his lap. He gave Sherlock what he hoped was a reassuring smile as he listened to Charlie stumble through a short speech about doing whatever John wanted but you’re gonna owe me one, Watson, because I’ll have to take this one on the chin to protect you, say I went rogue and you’re furious at me. . .I’m happy to do it but, hoo boy! You’re taking me to dinner—not lunch—at the Capitol Grill, and I’m ordering the 30-year-old whisky, and lots of it!

“Thanks, Charlie. Sorry about this. Glad I got to you in time, though. Sorry again.” John was properly chagrined. He’d send his agent a box of cigars in the morning. Or, no, Charlie didn’t smoke anymore. He’d ask Sherlock to name a good wine, and send Charlie a case of whatever it was. The call ended, John lay his phone on the bedside table and rearranged himself on the bed, beneath the covers once more, up on his elbow. Sherlock’s eyes were very narrow, studying him.

“You wanted to leave?” Petulant, a little demanding, like a kid considering a tantrum.

“No, not really. I told you: I panicked.”

“Your reaction to recognizing you liked me was to ask to be traded,” Sherlock intoned.

“To the west coast!” John confirmed. He wasn’t going to defend it—it was a mad overreaction and a terrible idea—but he wasn’t going to let Sherlock make it into an argument. It was all called off. It was over. “Only because there are no teams farther away,” John added, owning up to the insanity of his wish to run as far and as fast as possible away from the complication of having developed a feeling for a teammate.

Sherlock exhaled hard through his nostrils, hugging his shins with his chin on his knee. “You should have let me in on it; we could have been a package deal—at least used threats of defection as leverage in salary negotiations. Think it through next time.”

John laughed lightly and reached for Sherlock’s wrist, pulling him down, closer, back to where
they’d been. In no time at all, they were there—breathless—burning—together.

John woke too early, sunlight sparkling through a slit in the drapes they hadn’t got around to closing, Sherlock asleep in a facedown sprawl beside him, and John reached out one thumb to smooth his eyebrow from arch to tail. Their second round had been a near-endless snog consummated with rocket-to-the-finish hand jobs, and lingering kisses until at last Sherlock settled on his belly with his nose at John’s temple and his arm thrown over John’s middle as if to keep him from escaping. Thus situated, they’d each done a swan-dive into the depths of sleep unique to the exhausted satisfaction of having been soundly shagged—twice—with skill and determination by an esteemed expert in the field.

Sherlock had called him John—again and again, all night, John. . .John. . .John. . .—as if it were a delicious, dirty secret shared between just the two of them. John had tried out every tonal variation of Sherlock’s name, as well, whispering it against his neck, growling it against his chest, losing it to the wind of his own stuttering breath as he collapsed his way through his second orgasm of the night, with Sherlock humming encouragement in his ear all the while. John’s feeling for Sherlock, given permission to reveal itself, was not the plain and simple thing John had wished to crush in his fist and brush away like so much dust between the palms of his hands, but rather richly faceted, warm and expansive, stoking embers in his chest, cartwheeling around in his belly, putting an ache in his face from smiling. It wasn’t a feeling, it was a million feelings, all at once. It was every feeling.

John placed a careful kiss on Sherlock’s wrist as he left him. Sherlock did not stir, his shallow, near-silent breaths unbroken. John paused a moment to study the half of Sherlock’s face visible above the horizon of the pillow. With his steely, often-narrowed eyes closed and the frown-lines in his forehead and nose-bridge smoothed away to almost nothing, Sherlock was a thing of quiet beauty, and John knew in an instant he was doomed to fall in love with him.

John had showered, dressed, and ordered them a massive room-service breakfast by the time Sherlock emerged into the sitting room dressed in his designer briefs and an unzipped hooded sweatshirt, scratching his fingertips through the hair of his upper thigh.

“Hey,” John said, and smiled at him. “Coffee’s there if you want it. I ordered us food and it should be here soon.”

“Mm, good,” Sherlock said. “Slept all right?”

“Like a dead thing. You?”

“Same.” Sherlock dumped several packets of sugar into the too-small hotel mug and swirled the cup gently on the worktop before curling his hand around it and crossing to where John sat on the sofa. He settled close beside John, drew himself up into a bundle of knees and elbows and long, slender feet, and leaned sideways, their upper arms touching. “I haven’t cleaned my teeth,” Sherlock reported. “Just to warn you.”

“Oh?” John replied, and dipped his chin, placing a hesitant kiss on Sherlock’s jaw. Sherlock let go a little hum to show he approved, and wriggled a bit by John’s side, until John raised an arm to slide over his shoulders. Sherlock slouched into position, rather like a cat claiming more space than it technically required. Sherlock sipped at his coffee, and John brushed the tip of his chin through the waves of hair crowning his head. “Well,” John said, with an I’ll-be-damned sort of laugh, “This
is quite nice. . .and also quite weird.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“And you?”

“I have been,” Sherlock reported.

“How’s that?” John felt the frown between his eyebrows.

“While you’ve been fighting the idea of us together, I’ve been auditioning it.” He leaned forward long enough to set his coffee cup on the low table in front of the sofa, then settled back. “So far, I like it more in practice than I did even in theory.”

“Is that so?” John replied, with genuine wonder.

“It will work,” Sherlock said, with a tone of authoritative finality.

“It already is, I think.”

Sherlock shifted, stretching out on his side, his ribs resting on John’s thigh so he could look up at his face. “I’m glad you agree,” he said. “Room service on its way, you said?” he prompted, and there was an unmistakable glint in his eyes that made John groan disappointed frustration.

“Yes, any minute.”

Sherlock fiddled with the only open button on John’s shirt, dipped his thumb beneath to tap the tip of John’s collarbone. “So. . .not enough time for me to blow you?”

“Fuck,” John laughed, though it ended in a frustrated whimper. “Likely not, though I know you’ve talent and determination enough to come close.”

“You’ll come close,” Sherlock smirked at him.

John decided that by that time Sherlock’s mouth probably tasted more of sugared-up coffee than the staleness of early morning, and so pinched his chin to arrange him and leaned to kiss him, sweet and bitter, soft and demanding, god, he was exquisite.

When they paused to breathe, John murmured, “Gorgeous. . .”

“Mm,” Sherlock agreed. “You are,” and John kissed the small smile that went with it. His hand had dipped beneath the open front of Sherlock’s sweatshirt, and he slotted his fingers into the spaces between Sherlock’s ribs, feeling his chest expand and collapse on each breath.

The bell went, and they ignored it as long as they dared, both mostly content to live off the other’s kisses but also ultimately reliant on multiple thousands of calories per day to keep them fighting fit, and when it went a second time—followed by a flurry of knocks—Sherlock reluctantly drew away to let John up to receive their breakfast, strolling barely-dressed across the sitting room and stretching luxuriantly toward the ceiling, silhouetted in the winter-morning sun. John looked away before he remembered he didn’t have to, and so went back to looking as he reached for the door handle.

After the clatter and bash of arranging the plates and cutlery and the metal cloches dropped on the floor out of the way, they sat at the table by the window and tucked into French toast, and beautifully greasy eggs, and three kinds of meat, with loud groans of pleasure; John, for one, had
not even realised how positively famished he was. He forgave having been distracted from feeding himself given the whole world had changed not twelve hours earlier. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. Sherlock looked at him with a grin that implied they were in cahoots, which John supposed in some sense, they were.

“So,” John said at last, during a brief pause between shovel-loads of his food. “Monogamy?”

“Exists, yes,” Sherlock said easily, with a shrug. “Or so I’ve heard. It may just be an urban legend.”

“I meant. . .” John shrugged. “You mentioned it last night. Things you’re out of practice with. But.” He jammed a forkful of syrupy, soft bread into his mouth to buy a moment and build his courage. “Is that something that’s on the radar, really? For either of us,” he added quickly, wanting to be clear.

“Well,” Sherlock said, “Personally speaking, what appeals to me about multiple partners is not so much variety as frequency.” His blue eyes stared straight into John’s, no tiptoeing around it from Sherlock, which was refreshing and a bit of a relief; John’s least favourite part of relationships was talking about them, always having to be so careful with every word, minding each other’s feelings to the point of obfuscation. It was comforting to know Sherlock, at least, was unafraid. Sherlock tipped one corner of his mouth upward and clarified his point. “I require a great deal of sex, John.”

“Good. I can assist.”

Sherlock’s hand flicked out and he stabbed a bit of breakfast sausage off John’s plate, and in a flash he was chewing it.

“How much do you consider—”

“Every eight hours?” Sherlock offered. “I can go as long as twelve if we have a game.”

John laughed. “Three goes a day? With you? Yeah, I think I can accommodate that,” he said.

Sherlock shrugged and reached for the coffee carafe, poured each of them another cup. “What about you? Monogamy.”

“Overall, I’m in favour, actually.”

Sherlock smile-frowned, a knowing look. “The no-condoms thing,” he said. Clearly John wasn’t the only one keeping a less-than-casual mental record of their sexual history; it was nearly three months earlier John had mentioned, during a late night phone wank, that he liked raw sex.

“That’s part of it,” John allowed. He evaluated the devastation on the table between them and decided he’d eaten enough and was ready to move on. They still had four hours before the bus would take them to the airport for the team’s flight to Green Bay; talk of what Sherlock referred to as John’s “no-condoms thing” was giving John ideas. “A few months of just us two, then a round of blood tests, and then we can. . .Yes. I look forward to that possibility. Very much, yes.”

“An excellent plan,” Sherlock smirked. He was leaning back in his chair, a significant swath of his bare chest on display beneath the open front of his hoodie, his coffee cup held in front of his chin at the apex of tented arms. “What’s the other part?”

“Of being in favour of monogamy? Just. . .relationship stuff. I’ve never tried it another way; I imagine open relationships—that’s not the name for it anymore, is it?”
“Not since the ’70s.”

“Anyway, whatever it’s called, I imagine it works for some but I think my default setting is that I’m comfortable in a pair.”

“Like shoes.”

“Like two people in a relationship together,” John defended, shrugging a bit. “But if you feel strongly you need things another way, I suppose we just keep things honest, and then leap off that bridge when we come to it.”

“I imagine it will be quite a while before I have an urge to stray from you. As I said, I like you very much.”

“So if you get the urge, just tell me, and we’ll figure it out.”

“Same to you,” Sherlock said. He leaned forward and set down his cup, ducked his head so that John felt pulled to lean in as well, as if Sherlock was about to pass him classified information. “We may in fact find someone we’d like to share; I don’t see a need to close off every option.”

“Now there’s an intriguing idea. But I have about two-hundred-and-seventeen things I’d like to do, just the two of us, in the meantime.”

“Beginning with?”

“I think you suggested a blow job earlier.”

“I did, in fact.” Beneath the table, Sherlock’s hand found John’s knee, and his inseam, and his fingers picked at the fabric a bit, then crept up the inside of John’s thigh.

“You know the picture of you walking around here in your million-quid underwear sends me most-of-the-way insane, don’t you?”

Sherlock looked quite pleased with himself but said, “I had no idea.”

“I can take it off you now, anytime I want,” John asserted with a grin.

Sherlock nodded, and his hand slid to curve across the top of John’s thigh, and squeezed.

“So first things first, where do you want me?” John asked.

In a voice full of dangerous promise, Sherlock replied, “Everywhere.” John shifted in his chair to invite Sherlock’s hand further up this thigh. “But back on the sofa is a good place to start.”
This one starts dirty and ends sweet, which is a good metaphor for my hopes regarding my Boston Bruins as they head into the playoffs, having clinched their spot on Tuesday when they shut out the Bolts.

How're yr guys doing? Are they playing tonight?

Have fun at 221B Con this weekend, everyone, and then don't tell me about how much fun you had without me.

Within a few minutes, Sherlock was reclined along the length of the couch while John sat at one end, their chests held close, John’s arms around Sherlock’s upper back, kissing the last tastes of maple syrup and sugary coffee from each other’s mouths. Sherlock drew away and opened just the first button on John’s shirt, nudged the placket aside and dipped to plant an open-lipped kiss on the newly bared skin of his chest, then rose again to catch John’s lips between his own, then sank again. It was several minutes before John’s shirt was fully open, and Sherlock was deliberate about dragging out his shirttails, sliding long fingers down along John’s belly—which John held in to make space—to find the hem of his vest and draw it up, greeting each new expanse of naked skin with more kisses, in no hurry, and by the time he at last moved to open John’s belt, John felt overrun.

He glanced down the crumpled length of Sherlock’s body—all pale thighs and upward angled knees—and glided his palm down the side of Sherlock’s torso, his sweatshirt’s zipper teeth cold and scratching his wrist as he went. Finally he settled his fingertips inside the waistband of Sherlock’s pants, resting there on his hip, and Sherlock said, “Help me,” in a low voice to encourage John to lift his hips. Together they moved his clothes down his thighs, and Sherlock hummed pleasure at the sight of John’s cock. His hip suddenly slid away from John’s reach as he repositioned himself to best advantage, cradling the side of his head in one hand as the fingers of the other surrounded John’s prick and guided it to his lips.

“Jeezus, you look so good,” John breathed, and touched his hair, the curve of his ear, his jaw. Sherlock raised his eyebrows, acknowledging the compliment, and ended his slow tease with sudden, urgent motion, his tongue going flat, his lips wet and tight, sliding and sucking. John shuddered. “Fuck, Sherlock, fuck.”

Sherlock hummed and his eyes closed, shifting his arm from cradling his head to folding beneath it to make a pillow, as if he was settling in for a while. John sank his fingers into Sherlock’s hair, scratching vaguely at his scalp, and Sherlock purred a bit and his hips began a gentle roll.

“He looks so good. . .You like this?” John asked quietly, dragging and digging his fingertips toward the back of Sherlock’s neck to indicate.

“Mmmm. . .”

John went on swirling his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, watching the curls split apart as he thrust pointer and middle fingers through them. Sherlock began to hum in time with the forward and
backward slide of his mouth along John’s length, slow and languid, and John dropped his right hand onto Sherlock’s neck, feeling the tendons flex and recede as he slid his fingers up into the hair at the base of Sherlock’s skull. Slumping his torso slightly sideways so he could reach, John licked his left palm then thrust it into Sherlock’s waistband and tickled his fingers through his pubic hair, reaching to cup his bollocks possessively—drawing a heavy sound from Sherlock’s throat—before closing his hand around Sherlock’s prick and beginning to slide warm, thin skin over the hot, hard tissue beneath. John sucked a heavy breath.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he moaned. “Your cock feels so good in my hand. Yeah, suck me. Suck me. So...fucking...good...”

Sherlock fucked up into John’s hand, falling away from John’s cock to groan deeply, then rushing back to John, and in no time they were moving in harmonious rhythm, hands and mouth and hips all at a synchronous roll, wave upon wave, building steadily, and John let his head fall back at an awkward angle against the sofa, his fingers in Sherlock’s hair reduced to pulsating scratches against his scalp.

“Sherlock, oh my god.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Sherlock encouraged, and his fist shifted along the base of John’s cock, making up the difference. He raised his head off his folded arm and suddenly John was deeper down, the crown of his cock bumping the back of Sherlock’s throat, and Sherlock went quiet for lack of breath but his hips began to jut harder as he thrust against John’s palm and through the circle of his fingers.

“Oh, fuck, Sherlock, make me come. Make me. Make me...” John licked dry lips, swallowed hard. “Make me come, Sherlock, fuck, oh fuck...”

Sherlock drew back, jerking John’s cock, and John erupted with a heavy groan, cum spattering onto Sherlock’s neck and over his own thigh.

“Oh, yesss,” Sherlock hissed, pulling forth a few more pulses from John, whose hand stilled around Sherlock’s prick while he shivered through it, tightening his grip on a handful of Sherlock’s hair, then letting go. “Here,” Sherlock said, and indicated they should rearrange themselves, eventually drawing himself up to straddle John’s thighs, busying his hands with yanking John’s clothes up to pinch his nipples and pluck at the wiry hairs around them.

John spit into his palm, licked the flats of his fingers, and reached for Sherlock’s long, narrow prick, dropping his shoulder to accommodate Sherlock’s movements as he slid through John’s hand.

“So hot,” John told him. “Wanna make you come.”

“Oh, you will,” Sherlock breathed, and rounded his back, dropping his head beside John’s, breathing hard into John’s wide-open shirt collar. His exhalations became humming whines through tight-shut lips, and he wrapped his hand around John’s, not guiding him, and John watched their two hands pumping, the dark pink head of Sherlock’s cock jabbing up through the ring of John’s fingers and thumb.

“Sherlock,” John breathed, and turned his head, looking for a kiss, finding an off-center, breathless one Sherlock couldn’t hold onto. John chased him as he fell away, and their tongue-tips slid side by side for an instant. Sherlock’s chest collapsed forward and his head rocked back and he let out a loud, “Oh!” and thrust himself hard upward into John’s grip. John watched his face cycle through a series of expressions that looked alternately tortured and blissful, eyes closed, mouth open, licking
his lips then biting them. His cum painted John’s abdomen, pooled a bit in his navel.

“You look amazing when you come,” John told him, and Sherlock panted against his lips, trying to kiss, needing to catch his breath. John massaged the back of his neck, drew him down to rest his forehead on John’s shoulder while he settled.

After a few moments, Sherlock kissed him, almost chastely.

“It’s all right,” John assured him. He was no prude about kissing after oral sex, and proved it by pinning his thumb in the center of Sherlock’s chin and gently pushing down, forcing his lips apart, and pressing a deep kiss on him, sucking at his plush lower lip before dipping his tongue in to find the tip of Sherlock’s tongue twisting invitingly around it. They quieted, and their kisses became soft and infrequent, until at last Sherlock moved to untangle himself from John’s lap, stretching his legs out to rest on the coffee table. They shifted their clothes more or less back into place, and when John looked over at Sherlock, he had tipped his head back against the sofa and his eyes were closed. He was smiling. John put a hand on his thigh and the smile went wider.

“Two-hundred-and-sixteen more things you’d like to do, just the two of us, then?” Sherlock asked.

“Actually, I just thought of three new ones.”

Sherlock laughed. “Ah, excellent.”

While Sherlock was showering, John went to his own bedroom to start packing for their afternoon flight to Green Bay; the next day was Sunday and they had a weird, early puck drop scheduled for 11:36 to accommodate the national TV schedule. John was already wondering about the hours after they landed back in Boston early Sunday evening. Would they go their separate ways from the airport as usual, or split a taxi—maybe Sherlock would come to his personality- and furniture-free place or he’d go to Sherlock’s dusty hovel. They could go out to dinner, like a proper date, or order in. Maybe they’d retreat to neutral corners initially; he wondered who would break down and text or ring the other first. Or maybe it was all going to vanish once they stepped back into the reality of life at home. They had, after all, agreed months before to keep it on the road. John wanted to trust it, wanted to sink into it, couldn’t keep the smile off his face even as he dug through the hotel drawers, worrying that it might not be real.

He shut his bedroom door and turned the lock, and rang his sister.

“This is Kim, definitely NOT too busy playing Match-Mites to answer. Leave me a message and... Oh, yeah! Super-combo!”

“Hey, Kim, it’s your brother. Something interesting has happened? Like to talk to you about it when you’ve a few minutes. It’s all a bit interesting. Good interesting. Very good, actually, I think. Flying to Green Bay in a bit, but. Yeah, call me back when you can. OK, talk soon.”

He went into the bathroom and ran a comb through his hair, splashed water on his face and cleaned his teeth, then started to pack his things into his shaving kit. Glen Harding’s business card was still inside, a bit soft at the corners, against the back wall below the inside zip. John nudged it with the tip of two fingers until it vanished behind his little can of shave gel. After a moment, he fished it out, tore it three times, and binned it. Boyfriend in Canada.

He did a final scan of the bath to be sure he’d claimed all his possessions, and returned to the
bedroom to pack the shaving kit into his duffel. His phone went.

*Sister Kim Calling…*

“Hey, how are you?” John answered, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Can’t complain. What’s with you?”


“Wait, what? That’s a major status update. What happened?”

John cleared his throat. “We were, ah. . .well.” He chuckled. “Just, y’know, talking about this kiss that sort of came out nowhere, and I thought, it’s probably nothing, just hormones, heat of the moment and that. . .”

“Oh. . .kay. . .”

“But then he said, ‘if you’ll have me’. And, you know, I honestly thought he was taking the piss out of me, but he said—at least twice—that he’s not. So I told him yes, I’d love to. Have him. And. There we are.” John shrugged.

“Back it up a second,” Kim said. “Where are you, Chicago?”

“Yeah. He’s just in the shower now; I feel like a berk calling you to squeal about it but it feels like a big step.”

“I’ll say it’s a big step. So you flew him out, or. . .?”

“What?” John frowned.

“Glen?”


“Sherlock? Holmes?”

“Yeah.”

“What the fuck are you on about, dude? You’re in a relationship with fucking Sherlock Holmes all of a sudden?”

“Yeah.” John felt chastened. He hadn’t let on a single thing about Sherlock to Kim, except a passing mention over the Christmas holiday that they were rooming together on the road. She had commented that he was a good goalie and good-looking but otherwise she knew nothing about him, and John had replied that he liked him OK; they were mates. That was the last she’d heard from John about anything to do with Sherlock. “I should have said, I guess. Yeah, Sherlock.”

“Did I miss a memo or something? I didn’t know he was gay. Wait. Is he gay?”

“Yes,” John couldn’t help but bark a laugh. “He’s definitely gay.”

“OK, but I also never got a notice that he was on your radar at all? You said you were friends.”

“We are. But now we’re also. I don’t know what to call it. We’re going to be exclusive unless one of us changes his mind, and we’ve spent the last twelve hours snogging like mad.”
“Snogging? That’s fucking adorable of course, but what about, like, dating? Or sex?”

“Oh, we’ve been having sex for months,” John said, too casually, he realised too late. “We had an arrangement,” he hastily half-explained. “But suddenly everything’s changed.”

“I’m going to kick your arse when I see you.”


“There is a whole story here you never told me a single word of, and now it’s Sherlock Holmes and I are in a relationship. I mean, I’m happy for you. But like...what the complete and actual fucking fuck?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. But it was just that we were mates, and sometimes had sex, and you’re my sister and don’t like the details so I only told you the bit about being mates, and left out the other.”

“I appreciate it. Wow. So, OK. What’s he like, then?”

“He knows everything there is to know about hockey. Grew up partly in Finland. Fucking obsessed with Italian horror movies. He likes wine—not like Mum did, like a person who spends money on it knows about it.”

“OK, good. So not a drunk.”

“Not at all. Smart—did a chemistry degree while he was still a teenager. Says he plays the violin though I’ve yet to witness it, so I guess that could be a lie.”

“It would be a weird lie.”

“Yeah. But he’s a bit weird. I’ll get back to you about that bit. It’s probably true. He’s gorgeous, but you know that.”

“Yeah, I said. Very handsome. Way out of your league—you’re sure he’s not taking the piss?”

“Shut up.”

“Yeah, all right, I guess you look OK in certain light. You’re not, like, deformed.”

“Thanks. Neither are you. Oh! And he’s kind to children?”

“OK.”

“We did a thing at Children’s Hospital and he sat on this cancer kid’s bed and watched a movie with him. It was surprising.” John smiled. “It was nice.” He thought about mentioning the visit to Jeremy, Sherlock making saves in a suburban driveway on a Wednesday morning, but he decided it wasn’t his story to tell. “I just like him. Have done for a while, actually, but it’s only just now he’s told me he does, as well. Like me, I mean.”

“Well, good. That’s good, then. I am—I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“But...so what about Glen? What happened there?”

“Well. That’s an entirely other story but the short version is he threw me over. In a fucking text message.”
There came a tapping knuckle-knock on this bedroom door and Sherlock called, “Bus leaves in half an hour; I’m heading out.”

“Yeah, all right,” John replied. To Kim he said, “We’re on our way out the door. I’ll text you later, OK? Talk soon.” He didn’t leave her space to reply, only ended the call and left his phone on the nightstand and jogged to the door. “No, wait,” he called after Sherlock, who was almost to the suite’s front door.

Sherlock turned and raised his eyebrows.

“Bit early,” John said. An assistant would be coming for their suitcases any minute, but they didn’t need to be on the bus for a bit. John crossed the sitting room, and Sherlock returned to meet him halfway.

“I was going to get a cup of coffee; I think there’s a shop on the corner.”

“Yeah, I think that’s right,” John agreed.

“Would you like something?”

John grinned. “Kiss goodbye.”

“We’ll see each other on the bus,” Sherlock smiled back at him. “And the plane.”

“Can’t kiss you on the bus or the plane, though.”

Sherlock dropped the strap of his duffel off his shoulder and it hit the floor as he took a step toward John. “I’ll tell you one thing,” he said, and John reached for his jaw, stroked his thumb across the freshly shaved cheek.

“What’s that?”

“We have to stop smiling at each other like a pair of idiots every minute if there’s to be a single hope of keeping this between ourselves.”

John laughed a bit, and Sherlock’s hand came around the small of his back. “An excellent point. What do we do—think about roadkill. Or, what, shuttle runs.”

“Mm. Or Stefan Reynard possibly getting the Vezina this year.”

“Never happen.”

“I can’t have it every year,” Sherlock protested, and they were quite near kissing. “Or so I’m told.”

“Well kiss me now so I’ll have time to smile about it before I get on the bus,” John demanded, and it took several quick little kisses to soften the grin out of his mouth. Just as they were settling into it, the bell went. John started slightly and took a quick step backward.

“They’re here for the bags,” Sherlock said, and rubbed his lips together to dry them.

“Yeah, of course. And naturally I’m not finished packing.”

“I’ll tell them not to rush you,” Sherlock said. “Will I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“That’d be nice,” John said. “Please.”
Sherlock leaned close and whispered in his ear. “Stop smiling, you idiot.”

As Sherlock turned to answer the door, John retreated to his own bedroom and did his final sweep, ducking to check under the bed, scanning clockwise in the cupboard where he’d hung his suits, lifting his workout gear and pyjamas from the bottom drawer of the chest and tucking them into his smaller case. By the time he’d zipped them both and set them on the floor, he heard Sherlock thanking the assistant and saying goodbye as he left. He schooled his expression a bit as he opened the bedroom door and greeted the assistant.
“Cap, we need a fifth for cards,” Sullivan complained within a few minutes of the team having boarded the jet. He said it through a mouthful of half-chewed pretzels, both fists clenched around a secondary supply.

“What about Hatch?” John offered. Sherlock, in the seat beside him, was untangling the lime green cord on yet another foreign pair of ear buds.

“Naw, Hatchet plays like a schoolkid betting with Jelly Bellys. He’s hopeless,” Sullivan scoffed. “Come on, Cap, be a pal.”

“It’s been my lifelong dream to have someone of your class and stature ask me to be his pal, Sully,” John replied.

“Seriously!” Sullivan agreed.

“Yeah, all right, deal me in a few hands, why not.” John turned to Sherlock. “Short flight; no time for a film anyway.”

“Of course,” Sherlock agreed with a shrug. His lips curved upward and he turned his eyes back to the task of the knots in the ear bud wires before it got away from him. “Sullivan’s eyebrows go up when he looks at his hand, if it’s good.”

“Really, Holmesy? That’s how you do me?”

“It’s funny how much alike you and your mother sound when you say that,” Sherlock teased, drawing a few laughs from nearby teammates.

Sullivan rolled his eyes and dismissed Sherlock with a head shake. “Get a job.”

The lifts in the hotel were central, glass-walled ones. John and Sherlock were the only occupants of theirs, and they stood apart, each with a duffel in his hand, keeping space between them. It had been less than three hours since they’d left Chicago, but each glanced meaningfully at the other once the doors slid shut. John half-laughed, feeling a wash of what he preferred not to think of as giddiness but knew no other, less preteen-girlish word for. Sherlock lifted an eyebrow at him.

“Something funny, John?”

“Not at all.”

“What time is it, by the way?” Sherlock smirked.

“Nearly four, I think. What time zone are we in? It’s the same one?”

“Same one,” Sherlock confirmed. “I ask because I find myself with a particular craving.”

“Oh?” John had cottoned on, of course, and regardless of the number of hours since their morning’s interlude on the sofa in their Chicago hotel suite, John was desperate to get Sherlock behind closed doors as soon as humanly possible. But he couldn’t resist playing along to see what Sherlock might say.
Sherlock put his back to the glass rear wall of the lift by making a quarter-turn clockwise. John noticed the stacked fingers of his leather gloves peeking out of his coat pocket as Sherlock raised one bare hand toward his mouth, ran his tongue around his fingertip suggestively, stroked up the length from his palm to his first knuckle, then pressed it deep into his mouth. His lips closed tight, he drew the finger partway out, then sucked it back, then finally let it go, his lips parted and glistening.

“Unfair,” John protested, and Sherlock grinned. He reached across and wiped his finger dry against the underside of John’s jaw.

The doors slid open and John marched after him toward their suite, a frustrating distance from the bank of lifts—John felt a hectic urge, like the explosive burst of speed as his skates first hit the ice for his shift, pressure in his chest propelling him ahead in a forceful hurry. He knew he was smiling again, and he did not—could not—care. Sherlock had the keycard out of its paper jacket, held it out in front of him as if it were a homing device guiding him to seven-twenty-six...seven-twenty-eight...seven-thirty... “Thank christ, 7A,” Sherlock said, and thrust the card into the slot above the door handle. A flickering green light, the dull thud of the lock releasing, and he leaned hard on both handle and door and threw himself inside.

Neither of them bothered to hang his coat; they crashed to the invariant right, found a likely doorway—already kissing and grasping at shirtfronts, waists, the back of his head, his jaw, his bicep beneath the weave of his shirt—and stumbled through it.

“The—mm—beauty of the two bedroom suite,” Sherlock said—a bit breathless—low-growling because they were close and didn’t need to speak up to be heard—between kisses, “Is one bed to fuck in, and another—mpf, mm!—with clean white sheets when we’re ready to—ahh—sleep.”

“You genius,” John agreed, and shoved his shoulder to make him sit on the bed’s edge. John took a knee in front of him, nestling all the way in, shoulders rolling between Sherlock’s thighs to persuade them apart, digging in with nose and mouth, closing his teeth around a shirt button. Sherlock’s palm and fingers against the back of his neck were too cold, thrilling.

Everything cascaded from there at sprint-pace, barely undressed, breath coming hard, fingers desperately digging in, twisting fabric, massaging muscle. John kept his mouth wet, his lips soft, tongue swirling and rolling over the superheated, beautifully thin skin of Sherlock’s prick, teasing and teasing until Sherlock’s every inhalation was a hiss, every exhalation a needy moan.

Eventually, Sherlock touched the side of his throat, his jaw and cheek, and said, “Come up here now. Here. Come here,” and John readily obeyed, dirty-grinning all the while. In a minute Sherlock was stretched out beneath him, unfastening John’s belt and trousers, shoving down the lot as John hovered above him braced on straight arms.

“You taste good,” he said. Sherlock’s half-smile was sly and knowing. Something struck John then and he frowned a bit. “Slick?”

“Oh, damn. In my bag?”

John dipped to kiss him and Sherlock lifted his head off the mattress to meet it. “Which someone will be bringing in no time,” John reminded.

Sherlock’s genius kicked in and he shut his lips, his tongue visibly poking and swiping the insides of his cheeks, making his mouth water. He licked his palm, then again, and reached between them
to smooth the saliva along John’s length. John followed suit, and between the two of them they
made do, soon enough sliding against each other, Sherlock’s hips rocking up in quick-slow rhythm,
John dropping to his elbows, burying his mouth gratefully against the long slope of Sherlock’s
throat, scraping teeth over the rope of muscle there in the hollow of neck and shoulder, grateful for
Sherlock’s open collar so he could nose in beneath the stiff-soft cotton that smelled sweetly of
sizing.

Sherlock’s hands gripped John’s buttocks, pulling him closer, closer, god closer, and they both
grunted heavy puffs of breath with each exertion.

Sherlock’s low voice purred, “Come for me, John, I want to hear you.”

“Jeezus.” John felt the quiet thunder of the words in his low belly, curling up tight, straining to
burst.

“For me,” Sherlock murmured, and John nudged up to nip at his earlobe, breathe against the
curved edge of his outer ear. “For me.”

John worried for Sherlock’s clean-smelling shirt, so reached between them to catch most of his
spunk in his own hand, Sherlock groaning along with him as he shuddered, and then Sherlock’s
long fingers were in the soft curve of John’s palm, flicking, sliding, and in the tangled confusion of
their hands around and along their cocks, Sherlock made just one or two quick rolls of his wrist
before he, too, was spending himself, with much less care for the state of his clothes—or John’s—
and his throat arching up invitingly as he dropped his head back and back, letting out a moan that
John wanted to save between the pages of a book, to keep and revisit, much too pretty to let fade.

John lowered himself heavily onto his side, belly and chest pinning Sherlock’s long, muscular arm
to his side, and quick-kissed the shoulder seam of Sherlock’s shirt before propping up on his
elbow.

“You gorgeous man,” John said, with a little headshake. Sherlock, eyes closed, grinned a bit, and
his already pink cheeks flushed up to an even deeper rose.

The bell went.

“Oh, hell. The suitcases.”

Sherlock laughed and rolled away, and eventually off the foot of the bed. He yelled, “Just leave
them!” then muttered, “They won’t.” He ducked into the bath presumably to wipe his hands, then
tossed a small towel to John, who snatched it out the air as it sailed past his shoulder. As Sherlock
tucked himself back into his trousers, slid his hand around his waist to smooth his shirttails, there
came an insistent knock. “Patience!” he scolded. He smoothed his hand over one side of his head,
then the other, though it did nothing to tame his hair. “How do I look?”

“Like you’ve just been fucked in a hurry,” John told him truthfully.

“I can work with that.” Sherlock winked and made to leave, but turned back and leaned well over
the bed, propping himself on tented fingers, to plant a kiss on John’s lips.

“It suits you,” John assured.

“They’re accustomed to it by now, I expect.”

John grinned. “I didn’t want to say.”
Once the assistant had gone, John ventured out into the main part of the suite to claim his cases, left standing at attention by the front door, but as he tilted them onto two wheels apiece, it occurred to him he wasn’t sure where he was taking them. Sherlock was ducked low in front of the mini-fridge, rummaging.

“They’ve fucked up my rider items,” he complained. “Half the sweets. No cigarettes—”

“I have never seen you smoke a cigarette.”

“I quit about four years ago but I keep them for guests.”

John raised an eyebrow to remind Sherlock he wasn’t going to be having guests for the foreseeable future.

“And,” Sherlock added, slapping the fridge door shut with an unsatisfying, soft thwump and rattling his fingertips on the worktop in clear agitation. “As a reassurance. It’s easier to say no to them when I know they’re always there. Like right now, given we’ve just had sex, part of me would love to smoke, and I find myself preoccupied with the idea purely because there aren’t any cigarettes to hand. I resent being forced not to smoke by virtue of being denied cigarettes.”

Sherlock looked at him expectantly and John nodded. It made a sort of sense, though John couldn’t precisely relate. Once upon a time John had realised he was allowing himself too many maple doughnuts, and swore them off while he sorted his middle, but he certainly would never have kept a box of twenty around to prove to himself he wasn’t eating them.

“It sounds a bit mad, I realise,” Sherlock offered, and his face flickered a moment of vulnerability before he collapsed it back into an annoyed frown. “I’m a goaltender; I’m allowed my strange rituals and superstitions.”

“Of course you are,” John smiled at him. “Once I figure out where to unpack my things, I’ll go out and buy you some, if you like.”

Sherlock waved his hand, dismissing it. “In there,” he said, pointing over John’s shoulder into the bedroom they’d so recently besmirched. “I was joking about one bed for fucking and one for sleeping.”

John cleared his throat. “Well, but.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened. He ducked down once more, quickly, and drew out a can of lemon-lime soda, cracking it open as he regained his full height.

“It’s probably better to use both rooms, one way or another,” John went on, hoping desperately he would not have to elaborate his reasoning any further.

Sherlock was gulping the soda, his Adam’s apple bobbing with each swallow, and as he came up for air, John was relieved to hear him say, “You’re right. It would be one less bed for the maids to change if we left it, but having only one bedroom rumpled when those interns come fetch the bags to load the bus. . . .”

“They’re not interns,” John said, needlessly but automatically.

“What? Someone is paid to do that? That’s their actual job?”

“On the road, yes. They do other things, as well, back in Boston.”
“What a stupid job.”

John had to laugh a bit, to think Sherlock had never considered the young men who hefted his designer bags in and out of bus holds were paying taxes for the privilege.

“What department do they work for?”

“Some for Travel and Logistics, some for Equipment.”

“How do you know this?” Sherlock demanded, suddenly looking at John with suspicion.


Sherlock hummed, looking thoughtful, then drew his last swallow from the soda can and half-stifled a belch with tight lips, exhaling hard out one side of his mouth.

“So I’ll unpack in there,” John said, motioning toward the as-yet-unused bedroom and tilting his cases once more. “And we can mess up the bed later.”

Sherlock winked at him.
“I’ll find us a film to watch,” Sherlock volunteered, picking up the hotel phone and dialing the front desk. “Put your things away and then meet me back in the Designated Sex Parlour.” He looked heavenward and boomed, “Corkscrew!” John gave him a look and Sherlock added, “If you please. But quite quickly.”

John dragged his bags into the second bedroom, unzipped them and went about his habit of unpacking his clothes into the drawers. After he’d cleaned his teeth, he plugged in his mobile to charge and found a message waiting.

TXT from Sister Kim: I’m dying to know, how’s things with Sherlock?

Quite nice. Can’t keep the smile off my stupid face.

TXT from Sister Kim: Nice one, dude. Tell him hello from me. When will I meet him?

Playing in Hamilton later this month.

TXT from Sister Kim: You’ll buy me dinner.

I will.

By the end of the exchange, John had taken off his shoes and placed them side by side on the floor inside the open wardrobe. On his way across the sitting room, he was taken by a weird wave of embarrassment that after only a few minutes apart from Sherlock, he was already feeling hectic about getting back to him, and so he stopped for a glass of water in the kitchenette to cool himself. Sherlock called, “I’ve opened wine, if you’d like,” and John felt a spill of something very like relief down his throat and into his gut, stoking rather than settling the giddy sensation there.

“Very nice,” John replied as he entered the bedroom to find Sherlock with his bare feet crossed at the ankles, shirt tails out, propped up on a mountain of pillows with the television remote in one hand and a glass of dark crimson wine in the other. “They may have forgot your cigarettes but they remembered that, so,” John offered, “Silver lining.”

“Come here,” Sherlock demanded, diverting his gaze from the television set on the wall long enough to look hard at the empty spot beside him on the bed, and John did as he was told, pausing just long enough to unbutton his shirt cuffs and turn them back before taking his place. Sherlock passed him the wine glass. “Cabernet-Merlot blend,” he said, though it was a meaningless distinction to John. “Dark cherry, plum jam, and terroir.”

“Sounds lovely, but what’s that last bit?”

“Earth. The soil where the vines grew.”
“So... it tastes like dirt?” John clarified. He tucked his nose into the rim and sniffed; the wine smelled like red wine. Possibly he could detect the cherry.

Sherlock had set the remote on his thigh and reached to the bedside table for the bottle and a second glass. He poured himself a bit, swirled it and inhaled its aroma deeply before taking a sip. “Not dirt,” Sherlock said, his face frowning annoyance but his eyes glinting amusement. “Earth. The whole environment around the grapes—air and water, too. The atmosphere. Go on and taste it.”

“I’ve only just cleaned my teeth,” John said.

Sherlock shook his head, looked skyward as if John were hopeless.

Ignoring him, John set down his glass and shifted a bit closer to Sherlock’s side, nudging his shin with a sock-clad foot. “What are we watching here?”

“Cooking. This is the one where they give them baskets of surprise ingredients and they have to make a dish using all of them in twenty minutes.”

“All right. What else is on?”

“There’s always a police procedural somewhere. And I passed a repeat of that one with the friends.”

John leaned back to look at him. Sherlock went on, oblivious to John’s disbelief.

“Looking at houses to buy. A cartoon family whose parents never smack the children even though they’re smart arses. College basketball, of course. The only film I could find is a made-for-television one about a tsunami that brings ashore aggressive jellies with paralyzing stings.”

John slipped a hand onto Sherlock’s thigh, worked it gently over the firm curve of his quadriceps muscle, an affectionate gesture rather than a lustful one. “Whatever you like,” John told him. Sherlock stepped through the channels until he settled on the inevitable police procedural, people in suits looking dour and droning on about needing enough evidence to make a case against him. He set the remote aside and slumped toward John, slightly lower, so they were shoulder to shoulder.

“Perhaps we should rent out the second bedroom on a night-by-night basis,” Sherlock suggested. “That would serve dual purposes—the room would look lived-in, and we could make a bit of cash. In no time we’re real estate moguls.”

“That’s genius,” John told him, grinning. “I’ll draft an internet ad.” They both focused on the television for a bit, then John, still stroking Sherlock’s thigh absenty, piped up. “Oh. My sister says hello.”

“Hello, John’s sister. Forgive me; if you’ve ever told me her name, I’ve forgotten.”

“Kim. I phoned her this morning to tell her about this. Us. This.” John cleared his throat.


“Anyway, she said hello and she wants to meet you.”

“Me, specifically? Or me, the man you’ve been shagging?”
“Mmm. . .” John really did have to consider the distinction. “Both, I imagine. She’s always game to have a beer with the fellas—she grew up around hockey players and she’s one of the guys—but she probably wants to be sure it suits me.”

“What does?” Sherlock sounded teasing, lifting his glass to sip the wine.

“This. Us. You just want to hear me sounding stupid, searching for words.”

“Not at all.”

“What, then?”

“I just want to hear you saying, ‘Us.’”

John lifted the glass from Sherlock’s hand, gulped what was left in his glass. “Tastes like toothpaste with just a faint hint of dirt,” he reported, and returned the empty glass to the bedside table, using the stretch across Sherlock’s body as an excuse to find an angle at which to kiss him. “Give us a kiss, then,” he said with a grin, then added an arch, “Sweetheart.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. John could not resist needling. “Mm, no. . . not sweetheart.” He leaned in and they kissed, and when John drew back he tried, “Duckie? Pet. You’d make an excellent Baby. Oh, how about Luv, like million-year-old grannies call each other?”

With a thin smile, Sherlock told him, “Just Sherlock is fine.”


“I think just Sherlock.” He was protesting, but sounded amused, perhaps even just a bit pleased to be having such an argument.

John dropped his hip against Sherlock’s thigh, and Sherlock’s hand rested lightly against John’s neck, fingers busy, tickling up into the edge of his hairline and down to massage the tendons at the back.


“Just call me Sherlock. And I’ll call you John.”

“Tais-toi, chou-chou. Mon Cheri.”

“Honestly, John.”

“Mon nounours . . .” John laughed a little, kissed Sherlock quick, regained himself and said, “Oh, hello, Handsome.” John cast a lascivious look down along the front of Sherlock’s body. “Hello, Gorgeous.” he muttered, and went back for another kiss, and they lingered in it, lips and chins, necks, ears. . John warmed with the bliss of it, a good ol’ snog with an enthusiastic partner. After several long moments, John worked his lips around the edge of Sherlock’s ear, soft brushing, tickling with the tip of his tongue then sucking the spot dry with a gentle flex and curl of his lips. He whispered, "Ma moitié. . .”

Sherlock hummed, quietly, unguarded.

“Mm?” John inquired, smiling against Sherlock’s hair, digging his nose in. “Found a good one,
have I?"

A pause, then: “It’s not terrible,” Sherlock said quietly.

“Merveilleux,” John whispered. “Ma moitié.” He dipped into the open collar of Sherlock’s shirt, holding the button placket aside with two fingers so he could brush his mouth across Sherlock’s clavicle. “Mon secret,” he said, not to name Sherlock, but to claim him. “Précieux.”

“Dis-le encore une fois,” Sherlock prompted. Of course, his accent was much better than John’s—of course it was!—despite the fact John had been pressured by his father to study the language endlessly in case he ended up with a Quebecois coach. It seemed everything Sherlock did, he effortlessly excelled at—except perhaps remembering the titles of 1990s sitcoms.

“Ma moitié,” John breathed against the bit of bare chest tantalizingly visible, and reached for Sherlock’s first still-fastened button.

“J’ai envie de toi,” Sherlock purred.

“Oui. . .Ah, oui.”

*

John:
“Tais-toi, chou-chou. Mon Cheri.” [Shut up, sweetie. My dear one.]
"Mon nounours." [My teddy bear.]
"Ma moitié. . ." [My other half.]

Sherlock:
“Dis-le encore une fois.” [Say it again.]
“J’ai envie de toi.” [I want you.]
The Brawlers beat Green Bay’s Timberwolves in the next day’s matinee game, a sound 5 – 2 thrashing that left them all in good spirits as they were carted to the airport for their flight back to Boston.

“Those girls do not do mornings,” Sullivan commented, shaking his head, as the players filed into the jet. “They were all playing like they missed their wake-up call and only made it to the arena at 11:35 for an 11:36 drop. Like they only got one leg in their panties.”

“Whatever their deal was, I’ll gladly take two points off them,” Mellon said. “Now where the pizza at?”

John had gotten into the middle of a few scrums—twice for control of the puck in the Brawlers’ end, and once sandwiched between two Brawlers and three Timberwolves, all ready to drop gloves, jawing and grabbing each others’ sweaters, goading each other and asserting alpha status until the linesmen broke them apart. Near the end of the game, a wicked slapshot low toward the stick side of Sherlock’s goal had caught the front of John’s shin pad and the bruise beneath had already begun to bloom by the time he was in the shower. After claiming a can of cola from the jet’s catering cart, he went into his rucksack for a bottle of quad-strength ibuprofen pills, and washed one down with a slug of the soda. His shoulder was stiff and achy, and he could feel another tender spot developing on his forearm as he used his elbow to lower the arm rest between his and Sherlock’s seats.

“You’re looking your age, Cap,” Bouchard joked, motioning to his own shoulder. “Walk it off.”

“Yeah, I know,” John replied good-naturedly. “Can’t go the full ten rounds anymore. Maybe you could try not to let the other guy grab you while I’m in between, all right?”

“He probably didn’t see you there,” Bouchard said.

“Wait—am I short? Why did no one tell me before? I thought you guys were my brothers,” John protested, looking across the aisle at Kocur and Mellon. “You should have told me.”

“Everyone looks short to me,” Kocur shrugged. “You’re all a bunch of—what’s the word?—elves.”

“Dwarves, I think you mean,” Mellon corrected.

Sherlock dropped into the aisle seat beside John, mercifully cutting him off from further discussion of the appropriate vocabulary to describe the vertically-challenged among them.

“Four hours back to Boston; we can do a double-feature,” John suggested. “Each pick one, maybe?”

“Fine. What have you got in mind?”

John took up his tablet and tapped his way to his chosen title. “Seen this one?” he asked, pointing to the thumbnail icon, a photo of a young couple embracing, she with lofty dark hair and a bare midriff, he with a black trench coat and the face of a pre-teen DeNiro.

Sherlock frowned and shook his head.
“Another I think will suit us both.”

“Fire it up, then, Captain.”

Sherlock stretched his leg to rest one foot on the facing seat, plucked John’s soda can from the tabletop in front of them and took a long draft. John glanced sideways, his brow tightening. He cleared his throat. “Still not completely over that cold,” he warned, though it was not at all what he meant.

Sherlock let go a scoffing sound, took another pull off the can, and set it down; it sounded empty, or at least very nearly. “It hardly matters,” Sherlock said. John bit his lips together. “We share a suite; I’ve been breathing your air for days,” Sherlock added, at last having caught on. It seemed that by then no one was listening to them, anyway, but John nonetheless felt slight relief. They couldn’t suddenly be taking up each other’s space in public they way they’d begun to in private, touching each other’s hands or hair easily, taking advantage of newly-given permission. Sherlock had never drunk from John’s soda can before. Of course by itself it was nothing, but a dozen such intimacies witnessed by their teammates could easily add up to someone realising things had changed between their goalie and their captain. Sherlock had seemed perfectly content to keep it quiet that the two were having sex with some regularity for months—he should be able to maintain their privacy. So, yes, stop smiling, you idiot, and while you’re at it, get your own soda.

Sherlock nudged John’s knee with his own beneath the table, just for a moment, and John forgave him although it was likely not meant as an apology. John arranged the tablet in its stand-up case on the table between them and passed Sherlock an ear bud.

They landed in Boston just past seven that evening, and as they waited for their bags, everyone’s phones beeping and buzzing to life after having been deprived of calls and texts for four hours, Sherlock offered, “My car’s here; I’ll drive you.”

John looked up from his own phone at Sherlock’s smooth, nearly expressionless profile. Despite having now spent two nights asleep with Sherlock tangled around him in shared, sex-wrecked bed sheets—after the previous afternoon’s rendezvous with the television on in the background, they’d finished the night properly messing up John’s bed with room-service dinner, the rest of the wine, and mutual hand jobs, kissing until their breathless, groaning orgasms forced them apart—the back of John’s mind still held a fear it would all vanish upon their return home. Of course things were different now—radically, shockingly different—but Sherlock had offered to drive him before, and it had always ended the same way: John’s chest vibrating from the roar of the Mustang’s engine as Sherlock drove off, leaving John behind.

“My landlady always leaves food in my fridge after a road trip,” Sherlock said then.

“That’s nice of her. I know I’ve got nothing in, at mine. Keep forgetting to arrange for deliveries so all I’ve got is a couple of beers and maybe a stale bag of crisps.” He was actually rather doubtful about the crisps. “Most times when I get back I have to order something in, or just eat whatever I can put together at the corner shop.”

The bags had begun to appear on the carousel and their teammates called out goodbyes as they wheeled them away toward the car parks and taxi stands. John kept his eye out.

“My landlady always leaves food in my fridge after a road trip,” Sherlock said then.

“Ah, well then, come to mine and have something decent. Mrs Hudson isn’t terrible at cooking, and there’s always quite a lot of food.” Sherlock looked at him then, and gave a small smile that made John’s heart twinge. Sherlock wanted to feed him. Sherlock wanted John with him at his flat. So maybe it wasn’t all going to vanish, after all.
“OK, great; thanks,” John said, and they parted a bit, each pulling his cases off the conveyor, then
walked together to the bus that would carry them out to the satellite parking. The driver was a
sixtyish, red-faced fella trying to hide his excitement when they mounted the bus steps and started
to stow their bags on the rack.

“They didn’t tell me I was doing the VIP run tonight,” he joked.

“Hardly that,” John smiled back.

“Hell of a game today!”

“It was a good one,” John agreed. Sherlock sat facing John across the aisle, his elbow up on the
seat backs, long legs at every angle. “Always a good one when we win.”

“I had it on the radio here, doing a double shift today, nine a.m. to eleven p.m.”

“Jeez, that’s a long day,” John said jovially. Sherlock looked at him with amusement.

“How many saves you get?” the driver asked Sherlock, tilting his head to see him in the rearview
mirror. A young couple who looked like honeymooners returning from somewhere sunny, and a
family of two parents and three quiet, big-eyed children got on the bus through the side door,
settled in the seats near the back.

“Twenty-six,” Sherlock replied.

“That’s what they pay you for, eh?”

“It is, in fact.”

The driver shut the doors and signaled to pull out into the traffic lane, his head barely turning on
what little neck he had as he looked out to his left and in front, hefting the bus away from the
pavement. “My daughter’s got my grandson in skating lessons this year; he’s only five but I hear
he’s doing pretty good so who knows, right? I guess when they’re first teaching them they have
them pushing around milk crates on the rink, for balance. My daughter showed me the video at
Sunday dinner last week. So funny with the full face masks on the helmets. I guess that’s how they
do it now—when I was kid we didn’t even know what a helmet was.”

John laughed along. “Gotta keep their brains from scrambling, for sure,” he said. “What’s your
grandson’s name?”

“Michael. I call him Mick, my daughter doesn’t like that.”

“Take him to Brawlers games?” John asked.

The guy shrugged, one hand leaving the massive steering wheel to wave the suggestion away.
“Who can afford it? Seventy bucks in the cheap seats? And the kids want food and soda, and one of
those foam fingers or whatever. And they know they’ve got you by the leg so they jack up the
prices—did you ever pay seven dollars for a frickin’ bottle of coke anywhere outside a sports
arena?—and you gotta pay to park, the whole thing. I wish I could, y’know? But I can’t take out a
second mortgage to go to a game at the Garden, y’know? Look at me, working a double on a
Sunday.”

John and Sherlock exchanged meaningful looks. The driver turned the bus into the entrance to the
car park.
“Here you guys go,” he said.

Sherlock stood, and went into the inside pocket of his coat, pulling out a black and gold business card. “You’re the best driver I think I’ve ever had,” he said, offering his hand. “VIP start to finish.” The driver shook Sherlock’s hand.

“Aww, naw,” he demurred.

Sherlock said, “What’s your name?”

“Dan Harrington.”

“Nice to meet you.” Sherlock handed the driver the card. “Call that number, talk to Jackie in the office. She’ll arrange for you to come see a game. I’ll make it plus three—so you can bring your grandson and your daughter and whoever else you like.”

“Naw, come on, that’s not—” the driver started to protest, but he was clearly thrilled. John had by then got all their cases off the rack.

Sherlock, even as he tapped away on his phone said, “No trouble at all. I’m emailing her now; she’ll be expecting your call.”

“Hey, thanks, man. That’s...that’s awesome. Seriously, thanks for that.”

“In lieu of a tip,” Sherlock smiled at him. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“You guys take care,” the driver called after them.

Once they were walking along the row of parked cars to where the front end of Sherlock’s Mustang stuck out, looking menacing, Sherlock said, “I’ll take a quarter hour’s credit for community service for that one, by the way.”

John laughed. “Noted.”

“Need to stop at yours first?” Sherlock asked, as they wound their way up the parkway through town, approaching the exit for John’s neighborhood first.

“Not especially. Am I staying the night?” he asked, a bit on the sly, knowing the answer but with a strong desire to hear it aloud.

“I told you I’ll be quite demanding of your free time,” Sherlock replied.

“So?” John prompted.

“So yes, of course you’re staying the night.”

“Ah. Good.” John stared at him, watched his Adam’s apple slide down and up again as he swallowed. “Drive on, then.”
Chapter 30

Sherlock’s flat was the same old tip John had encountered—that first morning he’d visited—clearly Sherlock’s evening spent tidying and texting had resulted in no progress, and the landlady was not his housekeeper. Or if she was, she was a terrible one. But regardless of that shortcoming, she had, in fact, stocked Sherlock’s fridge and stacked boxes of dry goods on the small portion of the kitchen worktop not covered in clutter (though John noticed there were no dirty dishes in the sink, and the trash bin was empty, so it seemed the lower end of Sherlock’s tolerance for mess ranged somewhere above spreading the Welcome, Vermin! mat). As they put their bags in Sherlock’s bedroom, John took a quick, stealthy look around; it was sparer and less disastrous than the rest of the place and John figured it for Sherlock’s island of sanity. There was a hardback book on the bedside table with an actual bookmark in, and the bed was made up with hotel room precision.


“Grand tour, eh?” John helped himself to a box of “cheez-y” snack crackers and tore into it, raising it to his face to take a skeptical sniff. He held out the box for Sherlock, who wrinkled his nose and shook his head as he yanked open the fridge door. “What’s in?” John asked.

“Are you hungry?” Sherlock asked the interior of the fridge.

“No.”

“Shall we to the bedroom, then?”

“Yes please.”

In under ten minutes they were in Sherlock’s bedroom, and through a series of awkward transitions, ended side by side on the edge of the bed, twisted at the waists, hands inside each other’s open shirtfronts, kissing each other deeply and long to break through an icy layer of alcoholic mouthwash they’d rinsed-and-spit, each avoiding the other’s ducked head. John caught Sherlock’s lower lip between his teeth and gently drew out and back, scraping the edges along the tender flesh as it was released from his bite. Sherlock’s fingers skittered over the knotty scars at John’s shoulder, reminders in relief of his injury and its subsequent repairs, the skin so much newer than the rest of him it was still shiny. Sherlock’s fingers were warm instead of cool for once, and slid between John’s skin and his sleeve, guiding the shirt off his shoulder.

“I like scars,” Sherlock said plainly, between kisses. “Bruises, too; and little wounds.”

“You’ve come to the right place then,” John grinned at him, sitting back and shaking off his shirt. He was aware of the slight roll of his belly at his beltline and straightened his spine. He bent his elbow, showing Sherlock the back of his forearm, where a medium-violet bruise the size of a chestnut was already in evidence. “Got this one tonight. One on my shin, too, that I know is gonna be a real beauty.”

Sherlock looked admiringly at John’s arm, skimmed the flats of his fingers over the bruise, eliciting an inward twinge John felt against the bone. He sucked his teeth, and Sherlock’s lips curled up into a soft grin.

“Oh,” John said, “You like bruises, you mean.”

Sherlock nodded. “Oh, yes.”
“Have any of your own to show?”

“At the moment, no,” Sherlock admitted. “You and your colleagues have been doing your job admirably well.”

“You can take a good look at the scars, if you like. Have a feel of them.”

Sherlock did not hesitate, reached out to trace each raised, snaky line of pink tissue, leaning close to look. Soon enough he dipped his head and followed his fingers with lips and tongue, alternating comforting, gentle kisses with more overtly sexual licks, and the occasional sucking pinch of his lips. John left him to it for a few minutes, stroking Sherlock’s shoulder and back through the silky weave of his shirt. Eventually John drew him down, reclining on his back with Sherlock beside him, draped partway over him with one leg and half his torso, and once he’d learned all he could of John’s scars, he started to kiss his way down John’s arm, dipping in to the pit to rub his nose in the hair, and John near-laughed at the ticklish sensation, but it was not that sort of tickling and what began as a giggle ended more like a growl. Sherlock carried on, shifting himself beside John so he was propped on his elbow. Taking John by the wrist, Sherlock angled his arm, draping it over John’s chest with his hand resting in the hollow of his own shoulder.

“It’s a pretty little thing,” Sherlock said appraisingly of the bruise on John’s forearm, as if he barely approved but would deign to accept it. “Does it hurt?”

“Only when I touch it.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Or I do.”

Sherlock’s eyes were positively glittering. His interest was inspiring within John a new-to-him facet of arousal, and he went along. He licked his lips.

“Go on, then.”

Sherlock lay the tips of two fingers lightly against the bruise; they nearly covered it. He pressed, then curled his fingers as he released. It was a bright shock of an ache that dissipated quickly. Sherlock kissed him then—mind reader, John thought—and used the very tip of his index finger to poke-tap a clock face around the edges of the bruise, dotting it with little flares of sensation that John felt sparking quite far from their point of origin.

“Hurts?” Sherlock murmured against John’s mouth.

“Yeah. Feels good.”

Sherlock purred a hum, kissed him deeper, caught his wrist tight in one curled hand and ducked, lapping a wide swipe over the black-and-blue mark with his tongue, then catching the skin between his teeth, worrying it gently. The mini-rush of pain-induced adrenaline was making John’s skin tingle; every sensation registering bright and loud. Sherlock went on nipping at the bruise a bit, then curled his lips around his teeth to make a proper bite, pulling upward until the skin resisted and slipped out of his kiss.

“Jeezus,” John breathed, then near-laughed, “Why does that feel so good?” Sherlock licked again, and slid a hand roughly down John’s hip until he was rubbing and grasping at John’s half-hard cock through the front placket of his trousers, and he pressed his chin against the bruise—a deep, quick flare of pleasing pain—then went back to soft nibbling with his teeth edges, and John’s hips began to roll up to meet Sherlock’s long, warm palm.

“Trousers off,” Sherlock ordered, rearranging himself. “I want to see the other one.”
“Yours off, too,” John replied, going for his belt. “I want to see your legs.”

Sherlock obliged, and in no time they were both nude, and Sherlock was sitting in a drawn-up tangle near John’s hip, guided his leg up into a triangle. John let his thigh fall open against Sherlock’s side.

“There’s slick in the drawer,” Sherlock prompted, tipping his chin to indicate, and John looked over his shoulder, reaching at a bad angle for the drawer pull, finally getting it open and straining to see inside. An unopened packet of cigarettes, two pens, the shiny front cover of a magazine, and a smooth plastic bottle John wrapped his hand around and withdrew. Meantime, Sherlock was curled over John’s leg, looking at the bruise on his shin.

“How is it?” John asked, and lay the bottle beside him on the bed in easy reach for both of them.

“How big?”

“Puck-sized. A bit smaller.” Sherlock’s fingers were there, suddenly, though he didn’t touch the bruise or even John’s skin. Rather, he swept softly at the hair of John’s shin, brushing it the wrong way up, then smoothing down, his fingers and palm hovering just over the surface. His other hand was presented palm-up on John’s chest, and John flicked open the cap and drizzled a stream of the slick onto the crease where fingers met palm, then swiped his own fingertips over it to spread it. Sherlock reclaimed his hand and wound it around John’s cock, giving him a few solid, mid-tempo strokes. “Love to feel you in my hand,” Sherlock told him. John closed his eyes, sank into the deep pleasure of Sherlock’s just-tight-enough, not-quick-enough-but-somehow-still-perfect, rhythmic slip and drag. Sherlock’s lowest voice above a whisper, almost as if to himself: “You’ll like this.”

A ticklish ghost of a spiral drawn from the outer edge of the bruise inward with the tip of Sherlock’s index finger created a fluttering discomfort John wanted to draw back from, generating a confusing sense of disconnection between the pleasure of being expertly handled and the lightweight bother of pressure against the tender spot on his shin. John let his head drop back and shut his eyes, releasing a deep huff of breath as he went. Sherlock let go a soft, satisfied sound, and slowed the pace of his stroking, fingers sliding down John’s shin toward his ankle, curving around to massage his Achilles tendon briefly (another deep throb of pleasure, and John moaned softly between parted lips) before drifting up, tickling, along the back of his calf. He steadied John’s erection with his thumb and rolled his curled palm around and around over the crown, swiped flattened fingers down the length of the bruise with gentle pressure that John felt not only as the deep, sweet ache there at the spot but also as an electric shiver deep in the crease of hip and thigh. He jolted upward into Sherlock’s fist, and followed that with a continuous, steady, upward roll of his hips, bracing himself lightly on his planted foot for leverage.

“I can feel the bump under it,” Sherlock reported. Then, in a less distant tone, he murmured, “Good?” His fingers went to soft-scratching among the hairs of John’s shin, and he briefly lifted his other hand to his mouth to re-wet the slick in his palm with saliva.

“So good,” John confirmed, desperate for more of all of it, and for more of Sherlock’s bossy kisses, and for the long cry Sherlock let out as he came. “You really are a genius.”

Sherlock gave him a dirty smile and moved to handle John’s bollocks, drawing forth another whoosh of surprised breath from John. “Come here and kiss me, now you’re willing,” John demanded, and in a few seconds Sherlock had rearranged John to his liking, with his bruised leg hooked over Sherlock’s elbow at the knee, and Sherlock fumbled for the slick a moment before
John took it from him and squeezed more onto his own fingers, reaching between them to slide the curl of his fist around Sherlock’s hard prick. Sherlock leaned down and John leaned up and their mouths met, warm and desperate, until their necks protested and they fell away from each other again. Sherlock adjusted his weight and angles, all perfect precision, until he was fucking up along the length of John’s cock, simultaneously bothering the bruise on John’s shin with his fingertips. He pressed gently at first, rocking his fingers toward the sweetly tender edges, then pulsed the pads of three fingers against its center; John heard soft roaring in his ears at the sensation, and whimpered, and reached down to angle his cock more closely against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock leaned and coaxed John’s lips apart with his thick, wet tongue, licking deep into John’s mouth, and he clamped his huge palm over the bruise and twisted his wrist, following the curve of John’s shin, warming the surface and waking the blood cells in their stagnant, dark pool, making them sing out in ten thousand-thousand pinpricks of sparking pain. John gripped both of Sherlock’s rolling shoulders, digging in his fingers, shoving him down and down as John rocked up and up. Gasping breath broke their kiss and John’s orgasm was bright, electric agony he felt in every exposed bit of goose-pimpléd skin, in every hair follicle, only the warm, oozing pool between their bellies proof of its actual point of origin.

Sherlock abandoned the deep purple object of his fascination to brace himself with both hands on John’s arms just above his elbows, pinning him, grinding and rocking, eyes shut, mouth open, wetting his lips, following John so closely John’s cock was still hard and hot for him to slide against, and Sherlock gripped his prick in the last seconds, sliding his slick-sticky palm for a few quick strokes, and came over John’s length, and across his gold-brown pubic hair.

“Yes, Sherlock. . .that’s fucking hot, watching you come on me.”

Sherlock cut him off with a quick, deep kiss, then collapsed beside him, briefly teasing John’s thigh with the sticky tips of his fingers.

“In the bath. Shelf over the toilet.”

John’s legs shook, deliciously weak, as he ambled into what was a mostly-neat bath, with precisely folded, matching towels of exceptional loft and softness just where Sherlock had said they’d be. He found the smallest ones, snapped one loose from its fold and ran it under the tap, then gave it a squeeze. He mopped himself and slung the towel over the edge of the tub, then found a fresh one for Sherlock, wet and wrung it and brought it back out to the bedroom.

“It’s clean,” John reported. “I wouldn’t make you go after what I just cleaned up.”

Sherlock cleaned his hands, between his fingers, twisting the towel over each long digit, then went after his prick.

“Cold!” he shuddered, and John laughed.

“Sorry.”

“Yes, you sound it.”

John was reclaining his pants and trousers from the floor, pulling them up his still-jittering legs.

“That was fucking amazing,” he said. “Now I’m hungry. You?”

“Ravenous,” Sherlock agreed.
By the time they’d finished eating—demolishing a tray of sliced roast pork and potatoes probably meant to last several meals, which they ate cold, rolled up in huge slices of thready Italian bread and washed down with cider straight from the cans—it was nearly ten o’clock and their morning game seemed ages before. They made a superficial effort at cleaning up after themselves, twisting the plastic bag shut around the bread, piling the plates in the sink but not rinsing them.

“No practice tomorrow,” John said. “What’s your day like?”

“I’m out to see Jeremy in the morning, but free in the afternoon. You?”

“No, nothing.”

Sherlock grinned. “Ah, good. More for me, then.”

“Always more for you,” John agreed, and Sherlock looked momentarily disarmed, eyes flicking downward, catching his lower lip between his teeth. John snapped a mental picture.

“Movie,” Sherlock said, catching John’s wrist as he moved through the kitchen back toward the bedroom. “Then sleep.” John allowed himself to be lead, seeing no reason to argue with another of Sherlock’s genius suggestions.
Chapter 31

There were flowers waiting for John on the building concierge’s tall desk. Sherlock had dropped John at his own flat on his way out to the suburbs, and John carried the vase of yellow jonquils and fuchsia tulips in one hand while he steered his suitcase with the other (his second case having been left behind, Sherlock adamant that John would stay at his until their next Away game, at the weekend). Once inside his flat, he set them on the low table in front of the sofa and plucked the little envelope out from between the plastic tines of the fork-like clip that held it. He turned it over and over in his hands, not wanting to consummate the gesture right away—it seemed so incredibly unlike the Sherlock Holmes he’d known since the summer, but simultaneously thrilling to imagine it part and parcel of the Sherlock Holmes who’d upended his world simply by uttering his name and catching him in a kiss. He dropped the card, unopened, into the breast pocket of his shirt, and took the vase to the kitchen to change out the little bit of cloudy water inside.

The flowers were returned to their spot, and John flopped onto the squashy sofa, clicking the remote to turn on the TV even as he reached for his phone and began scrolling through his email in-box, full of nothing urgent, or even personal. The stiff card in his pocket was not going to let itself be ignored. He fished it out, peeled back the flap and slid the card out.

_I realize I was cruel._
_These are to say I’m sorry._
_XXX, G._

The flowers were from Glen Harding. John reread the note several times, feeling galled and unsettled, a mix of fierce feelings that soon superheated to meld into something furious and indignant. He tapped out a quick text.

_You have some kind of bollocks, I’ll give you that. Trust me when I say I’m better off._

His phone buzzed in his hand.

.TXT from CustSvc: The message was not delivered. The recipient has chosen not to receive messages.

John nodded and tossed the phone at the far end of the sofa, where it landed facedown with a soft thump. John shook his head. He recognized that he had perhaps strung Glen along, hoping to make a staid and steady relationship with him fit into John’s generally unsteady life, and perhaps that did not make him the most perfect of gentlemen. But John had to hand it to the guy; Glen Harding had got the last word. Twice.

Snow was starting to fall as John walked up Baker Street toward Sherlock’s flat, with two plastic bags full of groceries (he had phoned Sherlock to grumble about there being too many kinds of chicken; Sherlock had implored him not to be such a stereotypical male but walked him through it, kitchen noises audible in the background of the call) and another paper bag with two bottles of wine (Sherlock had texted the name and told John to read it out to the shop owner, who John had jealously teased Sherlock about being on a first name basis with until he met the man, who was eighty if he was a day). The forecast was for heavy snow all afternoon and throughout the night, the kind of storm New Englanders called a nor’eastern, and Sherlock had insisted they lay in supplies in case they were snowed in the next day. John had no illusion that their afternoon practice would be cancelled, but he might be persuaded to call off his captain’s practice in the morning if they
were ordered to stay off the roads, as was frequently the case in such weather.

John could hear Sherlock thudding down the interior stairs to answer the bell, and he barely let John step inside the closing door before he was kissing him, simultaneously liberating one handful of carrier bags from John’s grip.

“Hello, you.” John grinned. “How was it with your friend Jeremy?”

“Quite fine,” Sherlock answered, and they trundled the groceries and themselves up to his flat. “Brendan found you the Beaujolais, I assume?”

“He did, indeed. Why so particular?” They deposited the loot on the kitchen table and Sherlock began unpacking it while John shrugged off his coat and hung it on the hall tree, then—noticing Sherlock’s bare feet—toed off his wet shoes and left them by the door.

“My plan is for a sweet and salty chicken dish that wants a reasonably acidic, fruit-forward wine. This one’s rather nice, and since I happen to know Brendan ordered a case of it per my request, I feel I’m obligated to buy out the stock eventually. Do you like spicy food?”

“Well, I’m English,” John replied.

“I’ll be gentle,” Sherlock said slyly.

“See that you don’t.”

Sherlock put John to work chopping things: the ends off the haricots verts, a small yellow onion, two cloves of garlic he made John keep after until they were practically granulated. Meantime, Sherlock heated sesame and olive oils, set a pot of broth on a low burner at the back of the cooktop, dried chicken thighs with paper towels and threw heroic amounts of salt at them.

In under an hour, they were face to face across the formica-topped kitchen table, each with a plate of gingery, lemon-kissed rice and invitingly sticky-looking chicken, beans laid out side by side like cigarettes in a packet. Sherlock poured the wine and stroked the sole of his bare foot over the top of John’s sock-clad one as they tucked in.

“This is amazing,” John told him after a few mouthfuls. “God, you can cook, too. You know, Holmes, you’re going to make some man very happy one day.”

Sherlock looked pleased, then raised his eyebrows suggestively and replied, “It’s you I plan to make happy, all night long. And then again in the morning.”

“Ah, excellent,” John replied, and licked his lips between sips of the wine. “An excellent plan.”

Sherlock’s mobile distantly sounded out an alarm tone, and Sherlock excused himself to quiet it. He went into the bedroom, stopped in the bath for a few minutes, then returned to the table and resumed his seat.

“All right?” John asked.

“Fine. Just a reminder,” Sherlock half-explained, without elaboration, and they carried on eating. It was still only late afternoon, but the sky was already dark and through the kitchen window John could make out the flurrying, swirling motion of heavy snow thrown on strong wind.

“Do storms knock out the electricity, around here?” John asked.
“Not that I recall.”


“We’ll turn out the lights and lower the heat,” Sherlock offered, smiling at John in a way that he never had before their dynamic shifted, but which he now did frequently, much to John’s delight. “But this way we’ll still have the kettle and the TV set. Los Angeles is at Hamilton tonight; we could get under the duvet and watch it on the laptop.”

“Another excellent plan.” John chewed thoughtfully then asked, “So. . .here’s one. You’re invited to a costume party; what do you go as?”

“Oh, I love disguises,” Sherlock replied. “Eighteenth century libertine: embroidered velvet coat, ruffle at the throat, knee-length breeches with silk stockings. Louis the sixteenth and friends just loved a shapely male calf.”

“We have that in common, then.”

“Tri-corn hat, walking stick. Two inch heel on the shoes—like putting your arse on a pedestal, why won’t they come back in fashion—and a beautiful, bejeweled eye mask, in the spirit of the thing.”

“You reeled that out like you knew I’d ask.”

“I wore it to a masquerade fundraising gala two years ago. I dream of it.”

“Tell me more about the stockings that show off the calves? That bit was interesting. Do you still have them?”

Sherlock rocked his head gently on his neck and pursed his lips, playing coy. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yes. I would, very much. Yes.”

“In time, John.” Sherlock threw him a wink. They set about clearing their dishes from the table; John pushed back his sleeves and filled the sink with water and suds. “What about you, at the hypothetical masquerade?” Sherlock prompted.

“Indiana Jones, probably.”

“How rugged.”

“Bit brainy but still very cool,” John agreed. “Suits me.” He washed the dishes while Sherlock rearranged clutter on the worktop.

“Who was your best friend in childhood?” Sherlock asked, flipping through a stack of unopened mail.

“As a little kid, back in England, it was the boy three houses down, Stephen Hill. Cars were our thing, just lining them up in rows, making his bedroom into a giant carpark.”

“Where is he now?” Sherlock asked, binning the mail.

“Social media tells me he’s married to a woman named Lila, they have a couple of kids—both girls I think—and live in Wimbledon. He does something with city planning or engineering. Did you have a best friend, there at the boarding school?”
“No.” He opened a drawer, looped his forearm around a pile of detritus on the worktop, and slid it in. Closing the drawer became impossible, so he began to finesse things with his hand thrust inside, out of sight. “My role was the archetypal odd duck. Finnish is a notoriously difficult language to learn and although I managed to learn it well enough, I refused to speak it aloud until I was well into my teens and on the verge of leaving Finland. My school was full of international students but we had no common ground as they were all the scions of wealthy families and I was only the English teacher’s son, too middle class and too single-minded in my focus on hockey. To the students, I was an urchin with a crass hobby; to the locals, I was a galling interloper.”

“Poor little duck,” John said, and as he was up to his elbows in suds, he leaned toward Sherlock and motioned with his head to summon him. “Come here. That gets you a kiss to make it better.”

Sherlock’s lips curled upward and he tilted his face. John kissed him, three times, and let him go. Sherlock looked sweetly pleased.

“Were you a lonely kid, then?” John asked casually, letting the dirty water drain away, rinsing the last handful of cutlery under the hot tap.

“Yes.”

John waited for more—the ‘but,’ and whatever followed. Yes, but I had hockey. Yes, but I loved reading books. Yes, but I had an imaginary friend called Virgil. Something to take the sting out of it. But Sherlock offered nothing more.

John shook his hands dry over the sink, then swiped them on the legs of his jeans a bit before reaching for Sherlock’s waist, settling a hand on each of his hipbones and turning him into an embrace.

“I’m not anymore,” Sherlock protested, though he let John hold him close and plant nuzzling kisses on the side of his neck.

“Lonely? Or a kid?” John asked, leaning away to study his face.

“Neither,” Sherlock said quickly. “Both.”

“Well, I’m glad of that, but you won’t begrudge me, will you?” John kissed the corner of Sherlock’s jaw, then the tip of his chin before Sherlock’s lips met his.

“M-nh,” Sherlock allowed.

“Ah, good.”

After a few minutes sharing kisses in the green-lit kitchen, the only sound the gentle soft smacking of lips and the loud tick of a wall clock’s marching second-hand, John whispered against the back edge of Sherlock’s ear, “What would you like?”

Sherlock let go a small but audible gasp and his hands cupped John’s buttocks and squeezed, drawing him even closer, so John had to check his balance with a half-step forward. John leaned back to see Sherlock’s bright, pale eyes and dirty-smirking mouth as he replied, “I want to get my hands all over you. We’ll see where it takes us.”

John stepped backward, lifting Sherlock’s hands off his arse by the wrists, and glancing behind him to find his way as he backed up toward the bedroom, pulling Sherlock with him. “You’re full of bright ideas, Holmes,” John grinned. “Kudos on another excellent one.”
Within a few minutes John was belly-down on Sherlock’s bed, chin propped on his stacked fists, as Sherlock, straddling his thighs, drew tickling curlicues across the flat expanses of his shoulder blades and into the creases of his triceps, then dragged down his spine, the spaces between vertebrae making his fingertip jump with a gentle *bump, bump, bump*. Sherlock hummed now and then, sounding curious or satisfied, and John let his eyes close, gave himself over to Sherlock’s exploring fingers.

“Tell me about your tattoo,” Sherlock murmured, and when he shifted his weight, John felt the sting of broken adhesion as the skin of Sherlock’s thighs pulled away from his own.

“Got it in the off-season the year my marriage ended,” John told him, and felt gooseflesh rise on his upper arms as Sherlock traced the design across his upper back. “As one does.”

“So it’s not just about hockey,” Sherlock prompted, his fingers seeking the edges, brushing up and down to sense the scar tissue that held the ink, and how it differed from the virgin skin beside it.

“The word is; the tattoo isn’t.”

In elaborate black and grey script, John had the word DEFENDER inked across the back of his shoulders.

“I like it,” Sherlock told him.

“Thanks. I’ve thought for a while I’ll get an 18 added to it somehow. Probably when I retire.”

“You like rites of passage,” Sherlock said. “Rituals to mark an occasion.”

“I suppose I do, a bit,” John allowed, though the thought had never occurred to him.

The mattress shifted as Sherlock leaned to kiss the back of John’s shoulder, then moved to nip at the back of his neck. John tilted his head down so his forehead rested on his fist where his chin had been, lengthening his neck to allow Sherlock more space. John felt the edges of Sherlock’s teeth press at either side of his cervical spine, a threat of harm entwined with a claim on him. A hot flush spread across his chest, up into the sides of his neck.

Sherlock dropped low over John’s back, his breath warm against the edge of John’s ear as he spoke. “You’re beautiful.”

John hummed, reveling in the compliment.

“I like touching you. I want to touch you all over,” Sherlock said quietly, and rose away and returned, whispering in John’s other ear. “Every little hair, every freckle and scar, everywhere. Everywhere. Outside and in.” His lips were damp and cautious as they feathered along the curve of John’s ear, dipped behind the lobe and then onto the far back corner of his jaw. A soft puff of a sigh: “John.”

John turned his face, wanting to catch a kiss, and Sherlock obliged, his chest dropping onto John’s upper back and his cheek resting on John’s forearm as their mouths met, soft at first but quickly running wild, their breath hot and quick, bodies rocking toward each other, and Sherlock caught John’s hand beneath his own, sank his fingers between John’s fingers and clutched at him, desirous and reassuring at once.

Sherlock moved his legs from outside John’s to inside, guided him with one hand in his hip-crease to raise his pelvis off the bed. John reached for the bedside table and passed a packet of slick over his shoulder, leaving his upturned palm beside his own hip while Sherlock tore the corner of the
foil with his teeth.

“Good?” Sherlock murmured, and John felt a cool, viscous dollop pressed into his palm by cool fingers.

“Yeah,” John confirmed, and then shuddered at the pleasure of the first stroke of his slippery palm and fingers around the crown of his cock. After some thrilling, inadvertent touches against his backside and thighs with Sherlock’s wrist and fingertips as he slicked himself up, Sherlock thrust his prick in a slow slide along the cleft of John’s arse, and he draped himself over John’s back, his chin settling into the hollow of John’s neck and shoulder. The hair of his chest bristled against John’s upper back, and John felt the press and release of Sherlock’s belly against his low back in time with each breath.

They moved, each at odds with other, losing contact, letting go noises of dismay as they tried again to find the place where they could meet. Sherlock leaned heavy toward John’s left side, steadying John’s hip as he slid hot and hard between John’s buttocks. John let his chest rest flat on the mattress, turned his head to the side, digging the corner of his forehead against the edge of Sherlock’s pillow. The weight of Sherlock behind and over him was taut and constantly shifting, hard chest muscles, contracting belly, his bicep flexing against John’s tricep. With his arm semi-pinned beneath him, his hips barely high enough to leave him room, John gripped and twisted his slick fingers around himself, no room to pull, frustrated shoves forward into his palm and backward against Sherlock’s slippery cock.

“Beautiful,” Sherlock groaned, stretching it out for what seemed like long minutes, giving it more sounds and syllables than it ever had before, and his lips when they kissed John’s jaw were dry, seeking purchase, and John could hear the scratch of his second-day stubble catching in the tiny creases of Sherlock’s perfect, pink lips.

At last they found their way, a steady roll, breath coming hard, John’s gasps pumped up and out his throat by the downward pressure of Sherlock’s body on his back. John drew his thighs together fractionally and Sherlock whined, indulged in a serpentine pelvic roll at half-tempo before resuming their mutual rhythm. His cock brushed over John’s hole and John sighed, “Sherlock...” and got a lick-lipped kiss on the corner of his mouth in response. Another few moments and Sherlock began to thrust just a shade deeper, more forcefully, and beside John’s ear came soft breathy grunts in time with it. “Feels good?” John murmured, knowing the answer, wanting to be told.

“Yeah. Yeah.” Sherlock worked his mouth against John’s shoulder, then resettled, heavily covering John’s back with his long, sturdy torso. “How do you feel?”

Safe. The word flared hot in John’s head, sent a warm chill down his neck into his chest, his nipples rubbing rough—a sweet irritation—against the white bed sheets. Sherlock weighed him down, pinned his hips, caged him with a flexed arm, kissed him, took what he liked.

“So good,” John gusted.

“Why haven’t you licked me out yet, John?” Sherlock demanded, and there was an edge in it that John recognised: a good-natured taunt; Sherlock could easily predict how that particular graphic discussion would affect John. “Don’t you want to?” Sherlock lowered his face, nose and lips against John’s cheek, breath damp beside his ear. “Don’t you want to eat my arse? Don’t you want to hear me moaning for you? Begging you...”

John groaned, adjusted his grip on his thrumming prick.
“Don’t stop…” Sherlock muttered, then hummed, and John could hear his tongue wetting his lips. “John, don’t stop…”

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck.”

“Mm,” Sherlock agreed, then his voice broke around a, “Yes...yes...John...”

*Manipulative sonofa...* John couldn’t finish the thought for the hot buzz in his brain, the rush of blood in his ears like breaking waves. “Oh god I’m gonna come.”

“Yeah, I’m desperate for it, your tongue inside me, fucking me. Licking me. *John*!”

Their movements became hectic, shattered apart as each of them raced toward his edge. Sherlock began to cry out in time with rough shoves along John’s cleft, became even heavier on his back, driving him down flat on the bed, and John could only wriggle in half-circles, now and then thrust into his fist, and when they came it was in a tangled tumble of shuddering shoulders, juttering hips, shouts and groans, and messy, bad-angle kisses they gasped into.

Sherlock lay sprawled across John’s back, both of them panting, and then losing themselves to quick ripples of post-orgasmic laughter. A kiss on the back of John’s shoulder, then one low on his neck.

“You knew you could talk me off,” John accused, grinning against the pillow as Sherlock unpeeled himself and lowered his muscular body onto its side next to John. “In a hurry?”

“Mm; I’ve got a date.” Sherlock swept the back of his fingers down the side of John’s back, affectionate, raising gooseflesh.

“Don’t let me keep you.”

“He’ll wait.”

John shifted around to face him. “I’m sure he will. You’re worth it.”

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered and rolled, dismissing the compliment. “Be that as it may, we have just enough time to shower before the puck drops in Hamilton.”

John laughed out loud, that Sherlock would put a rush on a delicious fuck to be done in time to watch a hockey game, and drew Sherlock into his arms, kissing him soundly. “You’re something else again, Sherlock Holmes.”

“I am, indeed. Ask anyone.” He rolled away to sit on the edge of the bed, turned to reach back for John’s hand. “Come on, then.”
Hours later, they were nestled down in the bed with the laptop between their thighs, watching the final minutes of Hamilton’s Thrashers soundly spanking the Condors, 6 – 3. They each had another glass of the wine John had been ordered to buy for dinner, and John found it much mellower than it had been earlier, silently congratulated himself for noticing. Once the game ended, Sherlock shut the laptop and John crossed the room to nudge aside the window shade and check the weather. The snow was still falling in giant clumps, blown by the wind, and what he could see outside was an allee between the north and southbound sides of the street, walkway and lawn blended into a single, glistening blanket of white, trees drooping under the weight of snow gathered thick on their branches. A plow scraped by, followed by a salt truck, but otherwise the street was empty. A pair of bundled pedestrians standing close together—a couple, jumpy and animated, John marked them out as college kids—waited for the light to change despite no real need to allow for passing traffic.

“Still coming down,” John reported. Sherlock held out an arm, beckoning him back to bed.

“Come here and keep me warm.”

John smiled. “Bien sûr, moitié.” As he slid between the still-warm blankets, he said, “I suppose I’ll end up cancelling captain’s practice in the morning.”

“Slacker.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” John drew Sherlock close, fitting his arm beneath Sherlock’s neck, finding the bottom edge of his pullover sweatshirt and slipping his hand beneath to rest on the warm skin of Sherlock’s side. “Your parents made you learn French because of hockey, too, then?” he wondered.

Sherlock let go a scoffing snort. “Far from it,” he said, both his fists curled beneath his chin, gripping the edge of the quilt. “My paternal grandmother was French; we spoke it with her.”

“You have brothers? Sisters?” John felt a twinge of guilt he had never asked before. Then again, Sherlock had never mentioned any siblings, either.

“In childhood I had two brothers. Only one survives.”

“Oh, god, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. My eldest brother is a taxidermied grouse who condescends for England.”

“You don’t get along, then?”

“He finds me barely tolerable and I find endless pleasure in discovering ways to make him squirm.”

“So, typical sibling stuff, then,” John said. Their voices were low, snuggled together in Sherlock’s bed that was so like a hotel bed John felt more at home than he likely had a right to on his second night in Sherlock’s flat.

“Is it?” Sherlock mused rhetorically.

“He has an unusual name, too?”

“What’s unusual about Holmes?”
John wriggled his fingers against Sherlock’s side, making him squirm and grin. He grabbed John’s wrist and twisted his arm until he’d pinned it behind John’s low back, which drew them closer together as Sherlock’s arm wrapped around John’s body, and John took advantage of the proximity to kiss his smirking mouth.

“His name is Mycroft,” Sherlock said at last.

“You should have let me guess; that would have been my first one.”

“My late brother’s name was Enoch.”

“How did he die?” Sherlock released his wrist and he slid his hand beneath Sherlock’s shirt once more, slowly petting the dip of his waist.

“Neglect,” Sherlock said bitterly, then amended it with, “Suicide.”

“Jeezus, that’s awful.” John shivered, thinking of his sister Kim, trying to imagine the shock of such a thing. “How old was he?”

“Just shy of twenty. I was seventeen.”

John drew him close once more, kissed his eyebrow and the hollow of his cheek. “I’m sorry. I can’t begin to comprehend.”

“Thank you, John.”

They both went quiet for a long moment.

“How did your parents die?” Sherlock asked, his voice just above a whisper.

“My father had a heart attack. Died in his sleep. About four years later, my mother’s liver gave out on her. He smoked. She drank.”

“I’m sorry for you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” John said wistfully. They exchanged a few quick kisses; John felt blurry and almost warm enough. “I like you all dressed for bed, like this,” he said.

Sherlock smiled. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” John gathered up some of Sherlock’s sweatshirt-sleeve lightly in his fist. “You look so different, all undone. Even your face is different, and the way you stand, the way you walk.”

Sherlock hummed something like amusement. “Well, you know this isn’t how I dress for bed,” Sherlock reminded.

“And thank god for it. But you know what I mean. We’re in the bed, and this is how you’re dressed.”

“Yes, well, I like your grand-dad pyjama bottoms, as well.”

“That’s the second time you’ve called me a grand-dad. You have grand-dad issues.”

“Oh, probably. My grandfather wore very sheer silk socks and I would be only mildly surprised to learn they went all the way up. It was all very confusing for a young boy.”
John laughed. “I had a CRUZR date once who wanted me to wear stockings over my head—like a bank robber—while he sucked me off.”

“Did you?”

“God, no. Didn’t want to shame the poor sod, but that wasn’t up my street, so I made an excuse that I suddenly wasn’t feeling well and left him smiling.”

Sherlock looked thoughtful. “I might have done.”

“I imagine you might,” John smirked at him. “Shall I add it to my list?”

“If you like, but put it near the bottom.”

“You must have had a weird one or two, yourself,” John prompted.

“Oh, a few,” Sherlock allowed. “There was one who lived in an absolute death-trap of a hoarding situation, who had to steer me carefully around the towers of magazines stacked nearly to the ceiling, like rats in a maze. His bedroom was reasonable, though; I had a sense the madness was not his but that of someone else living there with him.”

“Oh,” John grunted sympathetically.

“Tried to meet up with one with a gorgeous big cock I wanted to jack off while I fucked him, but it didn’t pan out.”

“What a fool,” John went along. “Didn’t know what he was missing.”

As they nuzzled up to each other, licking lips and parting them, taking great inhalations in anticipation of holding their breath a bit, the lights flickered off for a second or two, then on, then off again immediately. After a few long moments, they came back on, the low background hum of the building’s many machines resuming.

“Damn, I thought maybe you’d arranged a blackout for me,” John whispered, mock-disappointed.

“I did try,” Sherlock grinned; John could feel the smile against his own lips. “Here,” he added, and drew back. To John’s dismay he slid out from under the covers and away, ambling out of the room for a long minute, then returning and circling, adjusting curtains and clicking off lamps as he went. He settled back into the bed, swinging up his long legs, and once he had resumed his stretch in the loose embrace of John’s waiting arms, he leaned over to douse the last of the lights. John blinked at the dark and felt but did not see Sherlock snuggling up nearer to him, feeling for him, finding his elbow and sliding his hand up John’s arm to his shoulder, into the hollow of his neck, up to his jaw.

Sherlock’s kiss was not gentle, none of the conversational tentativeness left in it, and when John wound an arm around his back, he felt Sherlock’s body strung through with desirous tension. John relished the quick-rising heat their bodies generated within the chrysalis of the bed sheets and blankets, the heavy quilt on top. The edge-of-too-much warmth reminded him of Sherlock’s nearness, of the cozy intimacy transforming into something fiercer, with an edge.

When they came away for breath, John opened his eyes and found he was nearly as blind as he’d been with them closed, only the vaguest silhouettes here and there around the room, near the windows with their slim border of ambient city light.

“How’s that?” Sherlock murmured, and slid a warm hand down John’s side, down and around to
clasp his buttock.

“Ideal,” John told him, about the made-to-order blackout, as well as about their kiss. He felt his way to Sherlock’s waist, found the drawstring on his Brawlers’-licensed warm-ups and tugged the tails loose. Sherlock’s hips twisted and his hands arrived to help John slide the trousers down; Sherlock shed them and they were gone. John leaned in to kiss, found the thrum of pulse in Sherlock’s throat, mouthed at it as he guided Sherlock’s hip toward him, and over.

Sherlock hummed dirty delight at being so arranged, and even in the dark John managed to offer Sherlock a pillow he doubled up under his belly. John could hear his face burying into, his hair whispering against the bedclothes as he nestled into place.

“Comfortable?” John asked. “You could be there a while.”

Sherlock let go a mild groan. John burrowed down the bed, found space for his elbow and hip and managed to keep his feet from hanging over the mattress edge, found Sherlock’s ankle in the dark, and swept both hands up his calf, the side of his thigh, to the firm curve of his rump, made a frame of his pointers and thumbs and delivered tender, exploratory kisses in the middle of Sherlock’s cheek, his hands dragging this way and that as he wandered, as high as the dimples beside Sherlock’s spine, as low as fold in the crease of his hip, down to his thigh. He cradled Sherlock’s bollocks in one hand, gently squeezing, lightly brushing the rumpled skin, as he kissed along the lower edge of Sherlock’s buttock, moving inward with deliberate slowness, listening to Sherlock breathe.

He traced a light line with the tip of his finger, from behind Sherlock’s sack, ticklingly up along his perineum, trailing the crease all the way to his spine. Sherlock sighed, open-mouthed, and his torso grew heavy, settling a bit lower as he exhaled and softened. John hummed his approval of Sherlock’s slight, sleepy surrender.

“You smell so good,” John told him, and shifted himself up until his mouth met his fingers, and he licked a tight, tiny spiral just at the topmost apex of the cleft, licked his lips, began to kiss with parted lips and darting tongue, to each side, deep into the middle, palms flat against Sherlock’s cheeks, smoothing outward without force. He moved slowly, so slowly, tasting the salt and musk of Sherlock’s skin, listening for the sounds he might make, feeling for the shifting of his muscles, the ripple of gooseflesh rising on his thigh and buttock.

Just as he neared Sherlock’s tight-puckered hole, John slid his hands toward each other, flickering his tongue in quick rippling motions against the now-closed-together crevice between his extended index fingers. Sherlock whimpered in response, delicious distress that John had changed course just as he was about to hit the spot, and he shivered at the tickling sensation of John’s tongue against his skin. John kept at it, gently teasing with light touches of his tongue until he elicited another whimper, more whining, needy, then drew back and released him, massaged with his thumbs, nearly there but not quite, as he licked his teeth, wetting his mouth.

John felt a low, hungry growl rising up inside him, feeling Sherlock’s hips rocking under his hands, listening to his heavy breaths and occasional frustrated noises. John smoothed his hands down Sherlock’s outer thighs to reassure and settle him, calm him, coax him back a few steps. A quick upward sweep and he found the landmarks he needed, and he leaned in and started to lick.

Sherlock moaned aloud, and something went on at the far end of the bed—a crush of the pillow in his folded arms, or a jolt of his head and shoulders—as John lapped slow and long with a flat tongue, slicking and wetting him, gently massaging with the pads of his thumbs, pressing and releasing, and Sherlock shouted, “Oh!” into the pillow. John hummed, working circles with the tip of his tongue, applying light pressure with one thumb and the first two fingers of his other hand.
John licked in hard, tongue firm and pointed, and drew swirling esses, his thumb tip discovering Sherlock’s resistance easing, muscle relaxing to let John inside. John stilled, and groaned, and resumed.

Within a few minutes John was able to lick around the softened edges, making Sherlock whine and shudder. Finding a firm grip on Sherlock’s thigh, John held him in place as he pointed his tongue and fucked Sherlock with it for a few strokes, went back to fluttering licks for a bit, then thrust in again.

Sherlock’s thighs were shaking, and he was humming, moaning, rocking back to meet John’s mouth. John went on licking, kissing, dipping in a finger now and again, taking his time. His cock ached with need and his mind was flooding with images of what could come next—fingering Sherlock and pulling his prick; fucking him from behind, curled over him and grunting; Sherlock sucking John’s cock, eager to repay his pleasure—but John carried on as long as he could bear the aching. Sherlock let out bone-rattling groans in time with gusting breath, low and loud and sounding so on-the-verge John knew it would require very little to take him all the way there.

John pulled himself away, shoved Sherlock sideways, went seeking in the dark for the sweat-dampened hair around Sherlock’s stiff cock. Licked his lips. Listened to Sherlock panting. Lowered his mouth wide around Sherlock’s length and sucked, quick and hard, at the crown of his cock.

“John!” Sherlock’s voice was frantic, his hands reaching for John’s head, his shoulder, gathering the bedclothes in his fist beside John’s ribs. John had barely got a finger inside him before Sherlock was muttering urgently, “John—no—oh, oh. . .OHHH!”

John let his lips part, pushed away the thick of Sherlock’s fast-pulsing cum with his tongue so it coated Sherlock’s crown and John’s lower lip, gathered in the corners of his mouth, spread across John’s chin. He spat in his palm, licked his fingers, and shoved his hand down the front of his pyjamas. He stroked himself quick and light, already nearly there, with his head resting on Sherlock’s open thighs and Sherlock’s cum cooling at the edge of his lip. John came with a shouted curse and a profound sensation of outward melting, every inch of him oozing away toward the far corners of the bed. They panted themselves back to their senses, and John heaved himself up toward where he remembered the head of the bed to be, flopping hard onto his back beside Sherlock, who rolled close and kissed fervently at John’s shoulder and up the side of his throat. John hummed contentment and petted the back of Sherlock’s hand, thrown possessively across John’s chest.

“I can feel your heart pounding,” Sherlock told him, and flattened his hand to press it a bit tighter over John’s breast.

“Yeah?” John smiled at the dark. He wondered how long it would take him to get used to Sherlock’s plain pronouncements of affection and tenderness, and then instantly hoped he might never.

“I can’t breathe,” Sherlock whispered, though John could feel the cool exhalations against the skin of his neck. There came a brittle, good-heartbreak sensation in his chest, just beneath Sherlock’s splayed hand, and a jolly flutter in his belly.

“I’m ruined, moitié,” John whispered. “You’ve ruined me for good.”

Sherlock purred, verging on a growl. “We’re very good together,” he agreed.

“Messy, too,” John said, smiling, relishing it. “I’ll go get something.” He squeezed Sherlock’s
hand and then slid out from beneath his arm, shuffling on the rug through the darkness and squinting to make out the edges of furniture on his way to where he knew the door to the bath would be.

Later, with minty bedtime mouths and swiped-down faces and hands and all-the-important-bits, they shed their clothes as an excuse to draw each other’s bodies close beneath the burrow of blankets; John curled against Sherlock’s long, muscular back with a heavy arm draped over his waist, their hands curled together like stacked bowls in front of Sherlock’s chest. The wind howled between buildings and wet snow slopped now and then against the windowpanes, and John swirled his nose into Sherlock’s hair, a sort of kiss, and he fought against the pull of sleep because Sherlock had made a blackout just for him, and Sherlock was not at all what he had expected, and Sherlock was breathing soft and low in John’s arms.
“We missed a real blackout,” Sherlock murmured, as John stretched and yawned his way to the surface of wakefulness.

“Hm?”

“My phone is full of emergency text alerts from the state about power restoration estimated in sixty minutes, thirty minutes, two hours, thirty minutes. . . So it must have been out for a while in the early morning.”

“Time’s it?” John asked, one eye still squinted shut, the other only half-open.

“Nearly eight. Go back to sleep if you like.”

“Mm, no. I should text the boys and cancel my practice.”

“I already did. Your phone’s unlock pattern was easy to guess; you should change it.”

“Yeah, apparently so.”

“I won’t make a regular practice of snooping in your devices; it’s just I didn’t want to wake you.”

“But just this once. . .” John prompted, unsure whether or not he was angry, which he reckoned probably meant he was not.

“It’s no wonder you and the man in Seattle didn’t work out.”

“How do you figure?”

Sherlock brushed his fingertips along the surface of John’s bare chest, as if clearing him of crumbs. “The photos of the two of you together. You could be brothers. What’s exciting about dating yourself?”

“I enjoy dating myself fairly regularly, as a matter of fact,” John smirked. “Helps me sleep.”

“You were too alike. Friends, perhaps, but there couldn’t have been any chemistry.”

“There was a sort of chemistry,” John protested lightly.

“The fizzy kind, baking soda and vinegar. Not the explosive kind—”

“Breath mints and diet soda.”

“I was going to say potassium in water.”

“I must have missed the viral video of that one,” John grinned.

“Anyway, he wasn’t your type; he was practically you. Oh. Maybe he was my type. Let me see the photo again.” Sherlock made moves like he might leave the bed to find John’s phone, and John pulled him back down onto his chest. “In that case, perhaps a threesome. Do you think he might be persuaded? I know he’s shown you the door, but I’m quite charismatic.”

“Shut up,” John laughed. “C’mere.”
John was aware of his morning mouth and so kissed Sherlock’s cheek, then two of his fingers and the back of his hand. He could sense Sherlock being patient, waiting him out.

“Can’t stop kissing you,” John said, semi-apologetically, and kissed the inside of Sherlock’s wrist.

“I don’t mind,” Sherlock replied.

“When was your first kiss?” John asked. “How old were you, I mean. Was it with a boy or a girl?”

“I was a late bloomer.”

“What, fifteen, sixteen?”

Sherlock was silent.

“Seventeen? What a year; best and worst of the teen years, I think,” John mused.

Sherlock ducked to kiss John’s neck, between his ear and jaw, and he wriggled his hip, brushing up against John’s thigh, lightly suggestive.

“Trying to distract me,” John said, catching him out. Sherlock made a noise of mild distress.

“What, eighteen? That’s sweet.”

“I was twenty-one,” Sherlock intoned.

“Really?” John felt his eyes go wide. Sherlock kept his face dug in at John’s neck.

“I was focused on hockey, and the degree my father made me get, and then my career. By the time it occurred to me I could have been spending time with my hands in other boys’ trousers, I was woefully behind.”

“I’d say you’ve caught up.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Who was he?”

“His name was Steven; I bought my coffee from him every morning on my way to the rink. I imagine I was a bit moony; he had a ridiculously perfect profile and architecturally interesting hair. But I would have gone on mooning forever had he not insisted I come to his apartment one afternoon, ostensibly to watch a DVD.”

“He could smell the innocence on you,” John said knowingly. “Wanted to shag you dirty.”

“Probably. I was quite naïve. We watched the movie and he only moved to kiss me as I was putting on my coat to leave.”

“How was it?”

“Shocking,” Sherlock said, at last leaning up and away from John’s neck, his gaze turned to look back at his past self. “I remember the way I hung on to his t-shirt for dear life, and it felt like he was groping me all over, though it was probably not as invasive as I thought at the time—one hand on my neck and one on my arse.”

John smiled. “It’s hard to imagine you overwhelmed like that. It’s a bit darling, actually.”
“I was a quick and determined study, though, so within a few weeks we’d gone through every variation and I felt I’d pretty much mastered it all. I got tired of trying to make our schedules work so I moved on.”

“That sounds more like you.”

“Mm. What about you?”

“My very first kiss, I was twelve and she was fourteen—an overdeveloped fourteen, wearing lipstick and altering her school uniform to the very edge of legality—Catherine was her name. She tasted like cigarettes but I can’t say I cared. She put her hand on my cock; I nearly came in my trousers.”

“You sound like a cautionary school film about teen pregnancy and truant behaviour.”

“Don’t I? First boy I kissed, I must have been fifteen. We were stumbling home drunk from a party at the weekend, trying to sober up in the cold—it was dead cold, windy as hell, it was the Christmas school holidays. He tripped, or pretended to trip, and caught himself against my arm and didn’t let go, and there was that moment—you know...that moment when you know what you both want but no one’s saying so and you’re not sure it’s going to happen and then you are sure—and then I just put my arms around him and kissed him. He held my arms, right here.” John indicated just above his elbows. “Like he might push me away. But he didn’t.”

“And then you thought you were the only queers in town so you became boyfriends until he left for university.”

“Worse. Next time I saw him he pretended he’d been too drunk to remember. Made a big noise about how pissed he’d been, wondered who brought him home, all that. I knew he was lying but I wasn’t going to out myself, making a scene about it. I let it go.”

Sherlock kissed his cheek. John thought for a moment, then ventured. “I can’t get used to that word —queer.”

“No?”

“Still feels like an insult, to me. Every time I hear you say those words my gut clenches a little, still.”

“What words?”

“Homo, shirtlifter, queer, poof.”

“I don’t say poof. Even nelly old grand dames still wearing cravats and speaking Polari don’t say poof anymore.”

“Well, you know. I’m only saying.” John felt vulnerable and raw—Sherlock wasn’t dismissing him, exactly, but he didn’t sound particularly sympathetic, and certainly he was nowhere near apologising for having made John uncomfortable by his choice of vocabulary. “I know it’s probably different for you because you’re bit younger than me and you’re...” he didn’t finish.

“They’re only words,” Sherlock said mildly.

“You think I’m over-sensitive,” John accused.

“No. Do you think you are?”
“I’m not offended; it’s not that I think you’re insulting me. It’s only that I have a gut reaction to hearing those things. I only brought it up as a point of interest. Just. . .” John shrugged. “Thinking about it, because you said queer just then.”

Sherlock nodded, using the motion to nuzzle up beside John’s head and nosing into his hair a bit. “If we’re not presently going to have homosexual relations, I need food.”

“Who says we’re not?” John turned to drop a crooked kiss on his cheekbone. “Be right back.”

Once John had ducked into the bathroom to do as he must—mouthwash and a piss, both badly needed—he slid back into bed beside Sherlock, and happily found Sherlock rolling straight into his embrace, into his kiss, as natural as if they had rehearsed the motion. If it were possible for something so comfortable to feel thrilling, John was thrilled by the ease with which they found each other in such moments, so soon after declaring their desire to pursue this arrangement of sharing a bed, sharing the stories of their lives before breakfast. Sherlock’s hands were restless, now on John’s hip, now squeezing his bum, at the back of his neck, on his jaw, maneuvering his thigh to slot between Sherlock’s thighs. John met him with kinetic energy, kissing him fiercely, holding him hard, tilting him from side to back and drawing away from him long enough to catch his eye, neither of them smiling.

In no time John was thrusting up between his open thighs, Sherlock’s hand a bridge over both their sloppily-slicked erections, so that John was held close between Sherlock’s palm above and his cock beneath. Sherlock’s free hand gripped his backside, pulling in time, and John grunted moaning breaths as he felt Sherlock’s palm riding the squeeze and release of his gluteal muscles.

“Christ, I love fucking you,” John muttered, shifting his weight from straight arms down onto one elbow. Sherlock let go a quick sigh and raised his head and shoulders, kissing as long as he could bear the awkward posture—John felt the way Sherlock’s belly sank away from him as it tightened to hold him up—before falling back, open-mouthed, closed-eyed, onto the mattress.

Sherlock slapped both palms against John’s arse, pulled and held, shortening John’s strokes by not letting him rock back as far. John jerked up quick against the slick length of Sherlock’s prick, shifted once more to brace himself, hovering above the lean, pale expanse of Sherlock’s chest with his hard little nipples flushed the same pink as his lips. The flex of his biceps as he held John where he wanted him. His rosy cheeks and the edges of his teeth just visible.

“Sherlock. . .oh god oh god oh my god.”

“Yes,” Sherlock urged. “Come.” His eyes flew open to watch John’s face. John slipped one hand behind Sherlock’s neck, holding him as John shuddered through his orgasm, a stuttering spatter painting Sherlock’s stomach and even up onto his chest. “So hot, making you come like that,” Sherlock muttered, and John moved away so Sherlock could stroke his own cock, glistening with slick, the thick vein standing out along the underside until his hand covered it. “John.”

John knelt up between Sherlock’s thighs, held his hips—not petting him, not wanting to distract him, only connecting—watching his fingers slide up and roll over the crown of his cock, then down again. John shivered aftershocks of pleasure at the sight of him.


A strangled, needy noise from Sherlock, and he stilled, and his cum was cream-white and streaming, long narrow threads crossing the thick trails John had left on his belly. He let out a shuddering groan and his shoulders shook.
“Mmm, so nice,” John said quietly, and lowered himself over Sherlock, hovering in a push-up just long enough to brush their lips, which were dry so they licked them, then kissed quick, and John pressed himself up and away.

“You are a master of dirty talk,” Sherlock told him, as John passed him a hand towel he’d brought back with him from the bathroom.

“Thanks,” John grinned, sitting on the edge of the bed and stretching, pressing his elbows backward at shoulder height. “You don’t mind it,” he added, feeling just self-conscious enough to want reassurance.

“Not a bit. Did you not see what just happened in its wake?”

John laughed. “Shower first, or food first?”

“Since we’ve nowhere to be this morning, and I’m ravenous from all this shagging, I’m inclined to say food.”

“. . .which removes any final doubt I may have had about your genius.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

I can tell you Lovely Readers are getting tired of so much sex and conversation, so here's another chapter of sex and conversation! But they do have a practice. . .

* Quick-Up: Moving the puck quickly up ice to an available receiver

* THERE WILL NOT BE A CHAPTER ON MONDAY. :-( I am attending a writers' conference this weekend [trying to get a literary agent interested in the scrubbed/original" version of At Night in the Floating World] tomorrow, Sat, and Sun) and needed to take a couple things off my plate in the next few days. I am going to post a little fun something in the Notes/Glossary doc for Monday, though, so check that out to tide you over. We're back to normal come Thursday.

(If you're interested, I will tweet as much as possible from the conference. Follow @FicAuthorPoppy, or if you don't use twitter you can read my tweets online at twitter.com/FicAuthorPoppy)

By late morning, the snow had stopped and the sunlight was making itself known, thin and silvery, behind a narrow layer of clouds. The city’s trucks rumbled by at intervals, clearing and salting the roads, and soon after, the sound of scraping plastic shovels drifted up to the flat from the street below as Sherlock’s neighbours began claiming their parking spaces.

“Where’s your car, by the way?” John had asked, holding the heavy velveteen drapes aside with the back of his hand.

“There’s parking under the building. They’ll have everything clear by the time we need to leave for practice.”

“Good. Yeah.” John had harrumphed and fidgeted with his mug. “About that.”

So in the end, John elected to walk the mile between their flats, mostly straight down the cleared center of Boylston Street as there was barely any traffic so soon after the end of the storm, and called the team’s car service for a lift to the Garden. After all, they had never arrived at practice or for a game together before. Just in case. And anyway, John should fetch his mail and make sure the place was still intact, and he could pack a bag to bring back to Sherlock’s place afterward—he needed fresh clothes. Sherlock hadn’t argued, hadn’t seemed bothered, kissed him beside the closed door to the landing before releasing John to the still, cold quiet of the city.

His too-big, empty flat seemed even more ridiculous and horrid after a few nights at Sherlock’s, which despite being shabby and smelling vaguely of burnt dust when the heat came on, was more welcoming and cosy. Of course, most of that was down to having spent the best part of two days and nights in bed with Sherlock, but there was something to it. It felt much more like a proper home. John thought about getting a plant. A dining table would also not go amiss.

Do you still have that credit card I gave you?
TXT from Sister Kim: Yeah, I’m using it to finance the record I’m dropping.

He’d given her a card and told her to use it freely and not worry about the bills—she’d never even see them—but his accountant reported she rarely spent more than a few hundred dollars a month on it—usually to take a friend out for a meal.

Do me a favour and order me a dining room table and chairs. Just pick out whatever you like.

TXT from Sister Kim: Yeah, OK. Feathering the nest, are you?

See if you can order me a plant, too? Something tough.

John did pack some fresh clothes in his duffel, and then wandered aimlessly about the place, opening kitchen cupboards with next to nothing inside, binning an old styrofoam takeaway container in the fridge without bothering to check its contents.

Survived the hike. Bit lonely here.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Here, too.
It may interest you to know that I’ve received three CRUZR messages since you left.
One from a firefighter.

Just since I left? How many did you meet up with?

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Well, the firefighter, obviously.

Obviously.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: And just one other.

All that in a half hour.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: I’ve told you before I’m not good at Alone.

Thank them for me, then, keeping you in good spirits in my absence.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: They also emptied a drawer for you and arranged some clothes hangers.

John laughed out loud.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Stop smiling.

“Quick up! Quick up!”

They were playing their last few minutes of scrimmages after a practice full of drills Coach Lestrade insisted upon, as he thought the team was lately abandoning their trust in the basics and overthinking plays, resulting in sloppy execution. LoPresti, the back-up goalie, had worked for about thirty minutes, and Sherlock was coming up on the end of his time, having put in about twenty minutes and making noise that he was about done.

Hammel banged his stick on the ice to let his linemates know where he was, and Sullivan threw back to him with barely a glance over his shoulder, rushing on to set himself for the tip-in. John, defending against the second line, gave Sully a little shove as he passed too close on John’s right.
Hammel passed to Thurston, Thurston went for a one-timer Sherlock knocked aside with his stick, and John fought Sullivan for the rebound, eventually skating him into the corner, digging in with his shoulder to make Sully work for the puck. In the end, Thurston skated in to steal it and wrapped around to put it in the goal beside Sherlock’s skate.

“You’re worse than a fucking mosquito, Cap,” Sullivan complained.

“Take the long way if you don’t want to get pestered. You can set up for a tip-in without tempting the D to take a shot at you. Don’t crowd the net; you don’t need to. Trust Thurty and Hammer to get where they need to be and don’t be in such a hurry.”

“Yeah, but,” Sully replied, only to get the last word, as there was nothing else from him.

“Face-off, let’s run one more so Holmes can quit,” Lestrade shouted, and the lines changed out. John skated past the crease and called out, “Looking all right today, Holmes.”

“I beg your pardon,” Sherlock fired back. He hunkered down, rolled his shoulders back, then tossed his head side to side. John watched him as he set his stick, catching glove at the ready, and despite himself, John had a flash of memory, of Sherlock—only recently up off his knees—wiping John’s cum from the corners of his mouth and asserting John would never see him in the net, with deep-bent knees, in quite the same way. Crediting Sherlock that wholly accurate prediction, John turned to lean over the dasher and grabbed a water bottle; sprayed his face, wishing for colder water and calculating the minutes until he could again have Sherlock in bed, flat on his back and breathless.

“Cap, yo, check in,” Bouchard called, and John blinked himself back to reality, skating into the huddle and taking a knee beside his teammates. Sherlock, as ever, leaned back against the cross bar, his helmet tipped back, smiling like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. After Lestrade gave them a short breakdown of the practice, what they needed to focus on, what was looking good, he peped them up for the following night’s nationally televised game against the Shoreham Shock, then dismissed them.

In the dressing room, John yanked the hook-and-loop tapes of his pads with force, producing a satisfying ripping sound, and shrugged out of them.

“Koc, you in for dinner at Legal’s?” Mellon asked from across the room. “You, Boosh?” Both men declined, citing their kids and wives waiting at home for the too-rare event of a weekend family meal.

“Yeah, all right,” Mellon acquiesced. “Leaves you out too, eh, Hatchet? How about you, Cap. Looks like us single guys are gonna get dinner.”

“I’ll pass this time,” John said, smiling good-naturedly and shrugging. “Thanks, though.”

“Holmesy?” Mellon turned to him with beseeching, open palms. “You’re our last hope.”

“I have a date.”

This drew hoots and whoops from several of the men. “Look at this playah!” Mellon urged, smacking Sherlock on the back of the shoulder. “Got a date on a fucking Tuesday night like no one’s got work in the morning.”

“Means he’s dating someone without a job,” Thurston threw in. “Watch your wallet, Holmes.”
“He has a job,” Sherlock corrected, half-smiling as he peeled off his compression shirt and shoved it in his duffel.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Mellon challenged.

John had his back to the room, arranging his helmet and gloves to his liking in his locker. He could hear the grin in Sherlock’s voice as he reported, “He’s a firefighter.”

“I feel like I should look into this thing you have about firefighters,” John muttered, smiling against Sherlock’s open mouth between panting kisses.

“I’ll take you around the local firehouse one of these days; you’ll see.”

John kneeled up and began to manhandle Sherlock’s legs, catching him behind a calf, in the bend of a knee, and Sherlock allowed himself to be guided. “Pass the slippery,” John commanded, with a quick tip of his chin toward the bedside table, as he settled Sherlock’s legs upright across his chest, calves resting on his stronger shoulder. Sherlock did as he was told, and crossed his ankles, shifting his torso and hips to bring his tight-pressed thighs closer to John’s body. Sherlock’s lips were swollen and dark from kissing, and there were shadows around his half-closed eyes; as he maneuvered his body, every muscle in view flexed and stretched, etching chiaroscuro shadows along the sides of his belly, across his chest, down the lengths of his miles-long arms. “You should see yourself right now,” John muttered, licking his lips as he drizzled the slick across his palm and onto the backs of Sherlock’s upright thighs. “You are the most gorgeous man.”

“So fuck me, why don’t you?” Sherlock smirked at him.

“Oh, I’m going to,” John assured him with a knowing grin, watching Sherlock slick his cock as John did the same. Sherlock shivered a little and his eyes drifted shut as he began to stroke, dragging back slow to unsheathe the pink head of his prick, glistening with the minty lubricant and his pre-cum, which gathered into a pearly bead at his slit before he rolled it over with his thumb. John clamped an arm around Sherlock’s thighs, pulling him close against his chest, and Sherlock wriggled upward a bit, making room for their hips to move. “Here,” John grunted at him, and, “Yeah,” and he guided his cock into the tight slit between Sherlock’s thighs and began to pump, not gently, not slow. “Can you come quick? I want to. Can you?” Sherlock hummed affirmation and John rubbed his cheek against the instep of Sherlock’s long foot, there beside his face; Sherlock spread his toes.

“Tight,” John groaned, and wound both arms around Sherlock’s legs, squeezing, bracing himself as he fucked the backs of them, slipping wet and noisy in and out, relishing the tickling irritation of the wiry hair of Sherlock’s thighs against the so-sensitive skin of his prick. John grunted in time, and the bedclothes rumpled up beneath them, Sherlock’s body inching up the bed with each quick push.

“Wanted to bend you over a bench and lick you out, right there in the dressing room,” Sherlock moaned at him. “Lick the sweat off you. Taste you. Make you shake. . .and shout.”

“Oh, Christ.” John slowed to a thudding pace, shoving hard forward, quick back. . .in. . .in. . .in.
“Wanted to open you with my fingers and press my tongue in. Wanted you fucking back on my tongue, fucking my face.”


“Want to taste you, John. Sweating and so hot. Sucking the sweat off your bollocks while I fuck you with my fingers.”

The violence of John’s orgasm matched the force of his fucking, and he clutched Sherlock’s thighs to his chest in a tight embrace, his cock pulsing hot between Sherlock’s thighs, his cum sliding between, making everything much wetter, and Sherlock pulled frantically at his own prick with quick, squeezing strokes, his teeth clenching and breath hissing out between them.

“My god, you are so beautiful,” John groaned, and he was, god he was. John smeared open-mouthed kisses against his ankle and the curve of tendon behind it, licked the arch of his foot. Sherlock let out a cry that sounded like frustration, and John’s gaze darted from his cum pulsing out over his knuckles, to the range of expressions quick-flickering across his flushed face.

They collapsed side-by-side, Sherlock face up and John face down, wrung out and sticky and smiling. Once their breath was mostly-caught, they inched their faces across the mattress—John had lost track of the pillows, the quilts, their clothes, and whether they’d remembered to shut the door to the landing—to exchange grateful kisses, both humming contentedly, purring like a pair of windowsill cats.

They fell away from each other, but not far, and after a few long moments of quiet, with Sherlock’s fingers absently stroking his waist, John asked, “Still thinking about your firefighters, then?”

Sherlock’s voice was thick and slurry with near-sleep. “What’s a firefighter?”

“Damn right.”

They hadn’t been dozing long when Sherlock’s phone began hectoring from somewhere on the floor, probably in his jacket or trousers. Sherlock roused with a startled grunt.

“I’ll get it,” John volunteered, making a move to get up.

“Nope,” Sherlock said simply, and sniffled as he sat up, dragged his palms up his face and back through his hair, which was delightfully mad at the back. John thought Sherlock looked especially delicious—edge-softened and pink all over—just after sex, and he felt his grin spreading even as he let his eyes close and surrendered to the pull of near-sleep. Sherlock planted a smacking kiss in the center of John’s arse cheek as he scooted down to the foot of the bed and off, which made John smile more. Momentarily Sherlock’s phone was shut up and he vanished into the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him with a sound click. John heard the tap running briefly, and the squeal of the old metal hinge on the mirrored cabinet over the sink, then in reverse, and he dug his head sideways against the mattress to keep from hearing anything more. It was not for him to eavesdrop; if Sherlock wanted him to know why his phone reminded him every day at half-five to go into the bath and open the medicine chest, he’d have told him by now. John wasn’t stupid anyway—he could guess, and probably get quite close to the truth—he’d seen Sherlock’s tied-shut bags from local pharmacies in every hotel suite they’d ever shared. If Sherlock wasn’t going to volunteer information, John wasn’t going to pry.
The bath cascaded to life and Sherlock cracked open the door. “Come take a shower; we can discuss dinner plans.” Two offers John couldn’t refuse.
Thanks for bearing with me Monday; I hope you enjoyed the film list and/or Sherlock's chicken recipe!

The writers' conference was energizing and informative--I learned so much, and though the agent I met with did not feel my work is something she could sell given its genre and her contacts in the industry, she gave me positive feedback on my pages (said my sentences are beautiful and as a reader, she was engaged immediately in the world and characters), and helpful advice about tailoring my query, in future.

On to the smut!

John woke before Sherlock, had a good look at him sleeping for a few lingering moments before he rose and did as he must, threw on soft clothes, and went through to the kitchen to start coffee and find them something like breakfast. It gave him a good excuse to open every cupboard, though there was nothing scandalous or surprising in any of them aside from pin-ups of nude men torn from porn mags and taped to the insides of some of the doors, and inside two others, recipes for Lemon-Cream Spaghetti, Roasted Teriyaki Mushrooms, and Mrs Waite’s Buttermilk Scones. John smiled to himself; Sherlock was nothing if not complex.

As he gathered an armload of jam jars, honey in a plastic bottle shaped like a bear, a hunk of Stilton studded with candied lemon, and a packet of sliced salami to fancy up a sliced baguette they’d left over from the previous evening’s late dinner, John found himself grinning again; their relationship to that point almost exclusively comprised having sex, eating food, and playing hockey, which seemed to John such an ideal situation it could barely be believed. If that’s how it was having Sherlock Holmes for a boyfriend, nevermind the terms, just show him where to sign.

He toasted the bread under the oven’s grill—nearly forgot it but managed a nick-of-time rescue that did not require scraping off any burnt edges—divvied it up, then threw the rest on a couple of plates, and poured the coffee. As he sugared each cup, there was distinctive, grateful groaning from the bedroom as Sherlock stretched himself awake.

“Game day,” Sherlock pronounced from the bed, and shortly he emerged from the bedroom in his expensive black briefs, a black Brawlers t-shirt technically too small for him, and a wine-coloured dressing gown left open.

“Mm,” John confirmed, and passed Sherlock a mug of coffee. “Ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

Sherlock’s tongue tip dipped out to moisten his lips and the two exchanged a quick kiss over their cups.

“Hungry?”

“I know the feeling.” John set down the plates on the kitchen table and they tucked in, making quick work of everything he’d found for them to eat, and refilling their coffee cups twice each. As they neared the end of the meal, Sherlock rose to fetch their phones from the tangle of charging cables on the big table between the windows in the sitting room, and delivered John’s, resuming his seat as he scrolled his own.

“We’re still first in the conference,” Sherlock reported almost immediately. “New Jersey lost to the Aeros last night, 4 – 3 in overtime.”

“You saw Buono’s day-to-day?” John asked. “Lower body injury; he’s missed the last two.”

“I doubt we’ll see him tonight. Shoreham’s called up a left wing from the AHL on an emergency basis. Connect the dots; it isn’t difficult.”

John hummed. “They’re breathing down our necks, now, two points out. In a week, maybe two, we could be in a must-win situation to hang on to first place.” When John glanced up at him, Sherlock had a sparkling look in his eyes, and his lips were curled up.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Sherlock said, sounding conspiratorial.

“It really kind of is,” John agreed.

“First place is more enjoyable when there’s a threat of falling out of it.”

“I want to say I don’t mind either way, so long as we make the play-offs,” John said, skim-reading his social media feeds. “But the truth is, I really want to be first, and I want to roll into the play-offs like a tank, and just fucking crush every single thing in our way until we’re hoisting that Cup.”

“That’s a very healthy attitude,” Sherlock confirmed. “But Shoreham and, I think, Washington, could make us work a bit before we get there.” There was a quick silence as they both went back to their phones before Sherlock added, “I think we could draw Hamilton in the first round.”

John shut his eyes. “Please, no.”

Sherlock’s head drifted and tilted to the right; he frowned and his eyebrows went up. “It’s a plausible scenario.”

“Shush.”

“Only saying.”

“Let’s not.”

Sherlock exhaled a laugh through his nostrils, but let the subject drop.

“There’s a thing at one of BayMed’s satellite hospitals tomorrow—old folks—will you come?” John asked.

“It’s not in my calendar,” Sherlock replied, as if that was a sufficient response. “But speaking of the schedule. . .do you suppose we can have sex twice today before it’s time to report?”

“I reckon we can, if we get an early start.”

“Don’t suppose you’re free right now?”
They’d kissed themselves breathless, took each other in hand, moaned into each other’s mouths, ended laughing. A long and thorough shower together, almost too hot, turning them both pink. John let Sherlock shave his face, both men wrapped in bath towels at the waists, which they wore even as they rummaged for sustenance—cold meat sandwiches, huge handfuls of snack-crackers, two apples apiece. John repacked his duffel in anticipation of returning to his own flat, and Sherlock stuffed a laundry hamper’s worth of dirty designer pants and sweaty workout gear and balled-up socks and soft-as-skin tailored shirts into a cloth bag he set out on the landing.

“Your landlady does your wash?” John asked, incredulous that a person would do such a thing for someone not her own spouse, or child.

Sherlock barked a quick laugh. “Definitely not; that was made clear the day I moved in. The laundry picks it up when they bring back the last batch.”

John stood and crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you some kind of lord, or baronet? Come clean now; I’ll find out sooner or later.”

“Yes; I’m the Marquis of Men-Moaning. I’m heir to the Duchy of Cocksuck.”

“Forget me speaking out of turn, sir.”

“Do mind yourself in future, peasant.”

They were both grinning as John closed the space between them and tugged two fingers into the edge of the towel snugged up around Sherlock’s hips. They kissed as he tugged, found the corner and pulled it loose, and their arms went easily around each other. John let go a contented hum; it was already so easy, being close, generating fresh, breathtaking heat or petting each other back into place in the wake of its dissipation. In three days he’d made himself at home in Sherlock’s flat to the extent of helping himself to the contents of the fridge, claiming his side of the bed and discovering his favourite pillow, knowing where to charge his phone, leave his shoes, hang his coat. Every minute was comfortable, whether side by side or face to face. Nothing about it wasn’t working.

Further proof of their easy agreement: long minutes later John was face down on the bed with his favourite pillow under his belly, his legs wide-spread, and Sherlock was eliciting positively obscene noises from him by ingenious use of tongue, lips, and those long, knotty fingers.

“Sherlock. . .” John slurred against the sheets, and Sherlock acknowledged it with a gentle pinch of John’s arse cheek and a hum that John felt reverberate up his entire spine, depositing a tingling starburst at the base of his skull. Sherlock licked him slowly—deliberately, exceedingly precise—and John bit the pad of his own thumb as his thighs began to tremble. He relished the flex of his shins as he dug his splayed toes into the mattress, and fought an urge to fuck his cock against the pillow that tilted him up toward Sherlock’s mouth, that mouth John could never kiss enough to please himself, never get enough of. Despite his determination to keep still, John’s hips began to roll. Sherlock’s tongue was everywhere at once, following his fingers in a spiral, and John wanted to open for him, wanted more of his lips sucking, his tongue licking, his fingers—oh god, oh good christ—fucking and twisting inside him.

“Sherlock. . .more. . .” John moaned, his voice muffled by the bedding as he rolled his head. “Will you? Please more.”

Sherlock groaned, and two slick fingers slid in, then deeper. He pressed the spot and John’s whole body responded with a quick, involuntary jerk. A shimmer like static rolled through him, just beneath the surface of his skin, and he may have whined.
“Want you so bad,” John heard himself murmur, and Sherlock’s fingers rocked in and back a few times before he drew away, gently touching the side of John’s thigh—a wordless but reassuring check-in—as he walked on his knees across the mattress, tossing John gently on the waves he created, and fetched up a condom from the bedside table, sitting on the edge of the bed to slide it into place and coat it with extra slick.

A hand on the back of John’s shoulder, and Sherlock twisted to kiss his temple. “Here,” he said, low and soft. “Come here. Come and sit on my prick.”

John did not need to be asked twice, and in a moment he was standing, his hands on Sherlock’s hands on his hips, and Sherlock leaned forward to place a kiss in the middle of his back, between his shoulder blades. John set his knees wide, outside of Sherlock’s, and together they lowered him until the crown of Sherlock’s prick was just brushing against his cleft. Sherlock reached to guide himself up as he persuaded John down, and John caught his breath in a dry rasp as Sherlock penetrated him. Smearing kisses across the back of John’s shoulders, Sherlock clutched at the tops of John’s thighs as he pressed up and in, seating his cock fully inside.

“Jeezus,” John swore under his breath, and inched his pelvis a bit, seeking to relieve discomfort he knew could not be relieved except by getting on with it, and his thighs burned with the effort of raising himself fractionally upward. Sherlock moaned and set his forehead against John’s spine, and he dragged his fingers up John’s thighs, through the hair there, onto his belly, and then one hand conformed to the crease where John’s torso met his thigh, and the other skated up his front to dig and swirl through the hair of John’s chest. John moved minimally at first, waiting for his body to adjust—forcing it to adjust—and Sherlock hissed damp breath against his back, kissed and licked the back of his neck.

“You’re so hot inside,” Sherlock muttered, and his fingertip teased at John’s nipple. “Holding me so tight.” His teeth scraped gently over the skin of John’s shoulder.

John set his hands on Sherlock’s knees for leverage and began to fuck himself on Sherlock’s cock, eyes squeezed shut, grunting at the effort to lift and lower himself even as Sherlock added to his thrust with a hand on John’s hip, rocking in time with him. John thought about Sherlock’s prick squeezed tight inside him, wanted it thrumming and swollen with wanting him, wanted Sherlock to shudder and spark with the deep pleasure of the sink and slide. He wanted to make Sherlock come.

His own cock was bobbing in time with his fucking, oozing wet at the crown; it would take hardly anything at all to finish him, and so he held off touching himself, or asking Sherlock to touch him. All at once Sherlock’s hand at his chest flattened and spread, over John’s heart, and the muscles of his upright forearm, his bicep against John’s ribs, tightened to gather John close to him.

“Go slow,” Sherlock urged, and his mouth was wet and open against John’s neck, a hand on his throat as he tipped John’s chin up, then long fingers meandered in his hair. He held John close and went on spreading hot kisses as he resumed his grip on John’s hip. “Slow. . .” he hushed. “Slow.”

John hummed and settled his back against Sherlock’s chest, both of them sweat-sheened, sticking. Sherlock’s elbow bent around John’s waist, and John settled into a gentler pace, though the effort required to control it was significant, and John’s breath came out in complaining moans. John braced himself with his hands on his own thighs, needing to lean forward even as he dragged himself up, but Sherlock held him fast, constraining his movement, and John could feel the heaving of Sherlock’s chest and belly as he breathed against John’s back. That mouth, god that mouth, wide and greedy everywhere he could reach, until at last Sherlock settled upon a soft bite in the hollow of John’s neck.

There was a sudden twitch beneath him, inside him, and John couldn’t resist a renewed urge to fuck
harder, faster, Sherlock panting moans in time with it, and Sherlock’s fingers dug in a bit against his chest, then his palm pressed hard, pulling John closer though they couldn’t be closer, and holding him in that powerful embrace, Sherlock spoke against his neck.

“How do you feel?”

Adored. It throbbed in his head but John bit his lips, then groaned, wordless, and at last gusted out, “So good. Sherlock.” He punctuated it with the even less elegant, “Fuck!” and reached for his prick, curling his hand loosely around so that the motion of his hips thrust it up into his palm as he bounced himself on Sherlock’s lap, dropping his head back. Sherlock’s open, groaning mouth dropped messy kisses here and there across his upper back and up the length of his neck.

Sherlock’s hips rocked in a serpentine grind and John shuddered, then sank back and down into Sherlock’s embrace, onto Sherlock’s cock, and went still and taut as he came, spilling across Sherlock’s inner thighs and shouting a groan. Sherlock held him hard and thrust up and up, quick and sharp, until he, too, was groaning. John shivered a sob and Sherlock held him close against his chest, both of them panting.

“That was stunning,” Sherlock murmured against his hair, just behind his ear, and his lips clicked a quick kiss there. “You were,” he added, correcting himself, clarifying. John felt molten and useless; Sherlock lifted and shifted him, guiding John up and off as he pinched the base of the condom to keep it in place. John half-crawled onto the bed, then sprawled on his belly, and Sherlock stroked his low back, down over his arse, the length of his thigh, then again.

“Wake me in half an hour?” John asked a pillow he found crumpled beneath his face. “Have to go back to mine first.” A thirty-minute nap would leave him time to dress and gather his bag, get a taxi to his flat in time to meet the car that would take him to the Garden for the game.

Sherlock hummed assent, and vanished into the bathroom to bin the condom. John heard the rush of the taps followed by some soft, random clanks and clatters, and let himself drift, soft and sinking in the crumpled white bedding of Sherlock’s wonderfully comfortable bed.
Chapter 36

By the time John rushed into the room, most of his teammates were already mostly dressed for the game. He’d underestimated every bit of timing and ended up missing his car and having to summon another, pacing the lobby of his building and feeling unaccountably like it was Sherlock who had made him late, when in fact Sherlock had told John to stop being ridiculous and just let him drive them both. It was John’s own rigidity and poor planning that had made him late, of course, but in his urgency to be annoyed, he automatically shoved the blame away from himself.

Music was playing in the room, Sullivan’s playlist of heavy rock music with growling vocals and aggressive, thudding percussion. Mellon’s tongue poked out the corner of his mouth in his concentration, taping the blade of his stick just so. Thurston was shadow-boxing, throwing jabs and uppercuts at his empty locker. Young Sawyer stared at his phone, thumbs flying over the screen, then he took a shirtless selfie and nodded smugly at the result. John slung his duffel at his locker and kept his back to the room as he started to undress.

“Yo, Holmesy, how about that date you had last night?” Bouchard called across to him, and John cut a sideways glance; Sherlock was sitting on the bench in front of his locker in full uniform, fidgeting with his helmet in his lap, fastening and unfastening the hook-and-loop straps with sharp tearing sounds. His expression stayed cool and he didn’t look up.

“Perfectly pleasant,” he replied.

“Sawyer’s got something serious going,” Hatch threw in. “Heard he’s got her sitting with the wives.”

“Girlfriends aren’t wives,” John piped up, automatically scolding.

“Yeah, no worries, Cap, the wives let her know,” Sawyer said grumpily. “She won’t be sitting with them again.”

“What about boyfriends?” Mellon asked, jerking his thumb in Sherlock’s direction. “I bet the wives wouldn’t mind if Holmesy sent them up one of his boyfriends.”

John was about to say something about boyfriends definitely not being wives, was ready to make a joke they could all whoop at, when Sherlock made a disdainful noise and followed it with a scoffing, “I don’t have boyfriends.”

John felt gut-punched. The word in Sherlock’s mouth sounded acidic. Boyfriends. I don’t have “boyfriends”.

“Warm-ups, fellas, let’s go!” Coach called from the doorway, and the players made final quick adjustments, set their helmets in place, grabbed their freshly taped sticks, and started stomping out to the tunnel. John was by then mostly dressed, taking a seat on the bench to pull on his skates.

“You’re late, Watson?” Coach Lestrade asked, sounding disbelieving.

“My car didn’t come,” John lied through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, all right, come on then,” Coach said in a tone that made it clear it was not all right. John stood, slapped his helmet on his head, grabbed his gloves and stick, and trudged out to the tunnel, sniffing and chewing his lips. The blast of the team’s warm-up music—his favourite, at that, one that unfailing got him feeling amped up and aggro—reminded him to get his head in the game. Defend the house. Lead the team. Get the points. His skates hit the ice and there was nothing else.
“Four minutes and change left to play in the first; the Shoreham Shock are giving these Brawlers players everything they’ve got tonight, Brick.”

“Absolutely. We’re seeing real physical play from the Shock tonight—that big hit on Chris Sullivan in the first couple minutes that got Brawlers fans riled when no call was made on Neil Guinness, maybe thinking the hit was a little high, up on the numbers, because Sullivan made the quick last-minute turn that put him in a vulnerable position against the boards. Since then both teams have been ready to go, Shane Thurston and Clinton Malveau squaring up after a face-off, and then Mellon’s penalty for tripping David Lewaneski. Both teams playing with a lot of aggression, taking hits to make plays, nobody hesitating to make contact.”

“Looks like end-of-season hockey! Both teams in contention for first place and, barring disaster, both sure to make the playoffs. Bouchard wins the faceoff, and Sullivan throws across to Mellon. Mellon the one-timer, deflected in front by a Shock defenseman, loose puck, Malveau will skate it up through the neutral zone, Brawlers defenders Watson and Hatch scrambling into position just ahead of him. Hammel tries to disrupt the pass but Shayner takes control, here comes Malveau behind for the wrap-around, Watson there, loses an edge and Shayner like a bullet train collides with Watson against the corner boards. There’s a pileup in front of the goal, and there’s the whistle. Brawlers captain John Watson is very slow to get up after an accidental but brutal collision with Brett Shayner.”

“Yeah, Watson lost an edge and just stumbled into the path of Shayner, headed for the back of the goal—maybe looking to put a hit on Hammel—but Shayner was coming with huge speed and unfortunately Watson got the worst of that—went into the boards at an awkward angle. That left shoulder is the one that’s given him recurring problems, and it’s hard to see here exactly where the contact was with the dasher, but it looks like it could have been that shoulder leading the way, maybe even the helmet on the glass.”

“Here comes the Brawlers trainer, Mike Forrest. I don’t know that Watson has even moved since he landed on the ice—if so, not much—so there’s definitely some concern there for the Brawlers captain.”

“If it was an actual hit on Watson at that angle, with that force, coming from behind—no question that would have registered several penalties. But this was just an unfortunate situation of Watson going down, out of balance, and Shayner just had no time to pull up or change direction. A bad collision, but... nothing illegal there. Still, as you say, Jack, pretty concerning that Watson is still down on the ice.”

“Black sweaters gathering around their captain. Bouchard bent over and looked to be talking to him; hard to tell from this angle what kind of response he got, if any, from John Watson.”

John blinked against the blinding white. There was a high, annoying whine in his ears. First things first: he reached for his shoulder.

“Watson’s grabbing at that left shoulder, which could be bad news if it’s reinjury to a trouble-spot, but it’s good to see he’s mobile and conscious. Mike Forrest is attending to him now; we’ll see if Watson can skate off under his own power.”

“Watson! Know where you are?” Someone far away was shouting at him. John checked the sleeve of his sweater. It was dark.

“Home.” He drew up his legs, got his knees under him a bit, then let them slide away again until he was back to flat on his belly.
“Yeah, where’s home?”

He started to say Hamilton but caught it as the initial sound escaped. “Huhhh. . .” Made it into pained sigh. Blinked. So fucking bright. “Boston.”

“Know what day it is?”

The guy between the benches had come out onto the ice and was sticking a microphone in players’ faces. He was bald and wore specs. The network guy.

“Wednesday.”

“Anything hurt? Anything numb? Feet and hands working OK?”

John got to elbows and knees, his head weighed a ton but was light inside. He tipped it forward onto his fists, then forced himself to lift it again. Black skates fidgeting nearby. The trainer’s blue nitrile glove. John grabbed at his shoulder once more.

“All right,” he said, could barely hear himself because of the whine in his ears. “This damn thing again.”

“Here, get him up.”

Hands on his arms, and he got to a knee, then halfway up, still bent over at the waist because of the enormous weight of his empty head. Bouchard and Hatch at his sides, skating him off. A rumble of thunder that he felt in his chest, but which couldn’t drown out the mosquito-buzz in his ears.

“A huge cheer of relief from the crowd, teammates hammering the boards with their sticks, as the Brawlers captain skates off on his own two feet, and heads straight down the tunnel. We’ll be checking the bench for his return, but in the meantime the Brawlers and Shock will gather for a face-off and we have another three minutes, forty-seven seconds left in the first.”

John was manhandled all the way to the therapy room, where he was laid out on his back and his sweater was cut off, pads loosened and wrestled away, then his compression shirt cut.

“What do you think?” the doctor asked, shining a blinding pinprick of light into each of his eyes, frowning. “Feels broken?”

“No.” John shut his eyes at the first opportunity. The whine in his ears was quieting, but he felt himself spinning, as if he was drunk. He was glad to see it was the orthopedic doctor, not the ER doc, which let him know no one thought his life was in danger.

“How’s the pain? One to ten.”

Head’s a fucking fifteen, John thought. Shoulder, though. “Six,” he said. “Seven.” The doc started poking and manipulating. “Nine.”

“Sorry. I’ll give you something. Nauseated?”

“Yeah.”

“Feels OK, good range of motion. Some swelling, bruises, but nothing broken. We’ll run fluids, some pain relief, and compazine for the nausea, and see how you are in twenty minutes or so.”

“Yeah. All right.”
John had to get back on the ice. He wanted to sleep. The whine in his ears was down to a low buzz. He half-opened his eyes and saw the doc prepping the IV. He let his eyes close. They were coming up on the intermission; with some pain meds on board, he’d be ready to go by the second.

“Still no score; here they come,” the doc told him a few minutes later, the needle taped to the back of his hand and his gut already settling. He heard the noise of his teammates returning to the room for the first intermission, chatter and equipment-noise. Thurston ducked his head in.

“How’s it, Cap?”

“All good, Thurty,” John replied, and gave a thumbs-up with his free hand.

“Rang your bell, eh?”

“Nope. Just the shoulder again.”

“Ahh, good one. Mellon and Kocur put some good hits on him and I took a poke at him but he wouldn’t drop the gloves. See you back in the second then.”

“Yep. On my way.” John forced his eyes open, though he squinted against the glare of the overhead fluorescents. He thought the meds were starting to work; the room had stopped spinning. He considered hoisting himself up a bit, maybe to rest on his elbows, but thought he’d give the pain meds another few minutes to do their thing. The back of his hand was itchy and cold where the needle was stuck in.

He heard the distinct sound of Sherlock’s massive leg pads waddling in, and Sherlock’s face appeared above his, mercifully blocking some of the overhead light.

“How long were you out?” he asked, and his tone was neutral but his eyes were wide.

“No, it’s just my shoulder.”

Sherlock’s eyes went from worried and wide to suspicious and narrow. “The replay looked like your head hit the glass.”

“Well, sure, a bit. But nothing serious.”

“The crowd wanted a penalty but it was clearly accidental contact,” Sherlock said casually. “Once you lost your edge there was no way for Shayner to stop; he just had too much speed.”

“Right. Happens sometimes, just unlucky,” John agreed, silently thanking Sherlock for filling him in on what the hell truck hit him. “I think I got either his elbow or stick in my ribs, though. That’ll smart in the morning.”

“I imagine we won’t see you back tonight.” Sherlock’s eyebrow went up, and his gaze shifted toward John’s shoulder. “It’s quite swollen; could be a sprain.”

“I’ll be back. Few more minutes of this—I’ll be feeling better than when we started.”

Sherlock straightened up and tugged at the neck of his sweater, shifting his pads around on his shoulders. He said mildly, “Don’t be a hero,” and waddled away, his leg pads shushing against each other at the knees.

Coach Lestrade, the ortho doc, and the primary care doctor all came in then, and Coach’s frown
dug deep creases beside his mouth and between his eyebrows. The orthopedist went back to prodding John’s shoulder with smooth, cold hands.

“Y’awright?” Coach asked, his lips barely moving.

“Yeah, I’m good,” John said, and made to sit upright, leaning heavily on his good side, feeling as if his skull was full of soup sloshing from one edge of a tilting bowl to the other as he lifted his head off the table.

“He’s done for tonight,” the orthopedist said. “I want him at Mass General tomorrow to get an MRI. Probably just soft tissue injury but with the history—”

John started to protest, saw flecks of black lightning at the edges of his vision when he shook his head. “I’m going back in, it’s fine. Tell them to get my sweater ready.”

Coach employed a different frown and shook his head. “Doc says you’re out. Go in for the scan and we’ll see how you look for Saturday.”

John sat up anyway, knowing he’d been out-voted, and quietly relieved he would not have to skate back out to squint against the blinding white of the rink, have his head rattled by the noise of the crowd and the blaring music over the P.A. He tilted his gaze toward his shoulder to find it fat with fluid and already turning black and blue. He hadn’t lied to Sherlock about taking a stick handle or elbow, either, and his side was painful just above his last ribs. He let his head settle into place, focusing his gaze at a spot on the far wall, his legs dangling off the edge of the table. He was still in his padded hockey pants and the long, gold-striped black socks over his leg pads and long underwear, his skates still fastened on his feet. Whatever was in the IV was quality stuff; he felt tingly and relaxed, and what pain he had felt wrapped in cotton and at a slight distance. He could skate; he knew he could. With just a few more minutes for his head to get straight, a few more minutes with the miracle-mix in the IV, he’d be ready. A night off, though, never hurt a guy, and the MRI wouldn’t show anything that would keep him out. He was good. All good.
Once the fluids were finished and the second period had begun without him, John changed back into street clothes under the watchful eye of the doctor—who helped him with his sleeves, and was probably watching him for signs of imbalance or wavering, listening to him as they talked to be sure John wasn’t going stupid from a concussion.

They put John in a car with his duffel, his coat pockets stuffed with sample packets of pain meds, a printout with details of his next day’s appointment at Mass General, and a scribbled note about which pharmacy near his flat held his prescription for more of the good stuff. He wound down the window in hopes the frigid winter air in his face would keep him from vomiting as the driver glanced at him again and again in the rear-view, clearly concerned.

In bed at last, with one of his cold packs balanced on his shoulder and another draped against the left side of his head just above his eye—which the bathroom mirror had showed him was blackened, the white sclera flooded with blood—and with two of the pills down his throat, John turned down the brightness on his phone and tapped a text to Sherlock.

Sleeping it off. Let’s have breakfast, though? Call me.

There was another text waiting.

TXT from Sister Kim: Get in touch or I’m coming down there. You’d better be intact.

He replied, I’m OK. Shoulder again. Scans tomorrow but it’s just bruised. Talk soon.

He had to close his eyes for a long time, and must have dozed, as his phone buzzing against his throat startled him awake.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Tell your doorman to let me in.

John found the number and phoned the desk, did as he was told. Sitting up was more of a whirling-headed adventure than he’d imagined it would be, and he paused there on the edge of the bed as long as he dared, then went to unlock the flat’s front door. Sherlock was just coming off the lift when John stepped out into the corridor.

“You didn’t have to come.”

“I did, in fact.”

Once they were inside and John had turned the locks, Sherlock’s hands were on him, one protectively wrapped around his elbow, the fingers of the other gently skimming over his bruised eye socket, dragging his fringe aside to look at his forehead.

“I’m fine,” John assured, then again, more emphatically. “Sherlock, I’m fine.”

“You took your time getting up,” Sherlock accused, shedding his coat and looking for somewhere to hang it. John took it from him and draped it over the back of the sofa.

“I’m not saying it didn’t hurt like a motherfucker,” John half-smiled. He started to shake his head but spread his hands wide instead. “I feel like a bus hit me. But I’m OK.” He started toward his bedroom, motioning for Sherlock to follow. “Oh... did we win?”
“Yes, 2 – 1. Bouchard early in the third, Shoreham answered in sixteen seconds, then Mellon with just under three to play.”

“Ah, good. How many for you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Good man.”

In the bedroom, John gestured toward the en suite as he lay gratefully back in bed and began to arrange his ice packs, returning the one to his shoulder but laying the second over his lower ribs. “Bath’s just there.” He found his phone by his pillow and set it on the bedside table with the packets of pills, the printout about his appointment, two old, empty coffee mugs, and a stack of unopened junk mail.

Instead of retreating to the bath to ready himself for sleep, Sherlock arranged himself close by John’s side, leaning up one elbow, careful to keep his shoes off the bed, his suit jacket buckling in several places. He lay one careful hand in the center of John’s bare chest, and loomed over John’s face a bit, his eyes sweeping uncertainly over John’s features.

“John,” he began, sounding solemn and sheepish, “When I said I don’t have boyfriends. . .”

John had all but forgotten his hurt feelings of before the game, as they were rather drowned out by the extreme volume of his physical pain.

“Nevermind.” It came out near a whisper, and even as he said the word, John was fairly certain he didn’t mean it—he minded, and not a little—and he wanted Sherlock to mind, too. Sherlock ignored his brush-off, either way.

“I only meant.” Sherlock’s mouth pinched; he looked sad, and John felt it in his throat. “To keep this private. . .It’s what I would have always said before, so it just came out. And anyway it’s true I don’t. Or. I haven’t.” He watched his fingers a moment as he brushed them back and forth over John’s sternum. “I’ve only ever had—have—one.”

John caught Sherlock’s hand and held it there at his heart. “Who? Me?” he said, and managed a smile that elicited one from Sherlock, momentarily repairing the sad expression he’d been wearing as he stumbled through his apology. “You think of me as your boyfriend?”

“Well,” Sherlock deflected, shrugging and looking away. “My man. But the concept is the same.”

“That’s. . .” John began, though he couldn’t decide on a word, and only smiled, giving a little shake of his head despite the way it rattled his aching brain inside his skull.

“Anyway,” Sherlock said, “I realised quite quickly how it must have sounded. To you. I apologise.”

“Forgiven. Completely, instantly forgiven. Give us a little kiss, will you.”

Sherlock’s smile melted into a sweet, lingering kiss like an ellipsis: dot. . .dot. . .dot. Eventually he drew back and asked quietly, “Will it bother you to have me in bed with you? If you’re afraid of my bashing against you in the night, I can sleep on the sofa.”

“It will only make everything better to have you in bed with me, moitié,” John assured him. Sherlock bumped and dragged the tip of his nose up along John’s cheek, making John grin and close his eyes. He found he was in no hurry to open them again; he was heavy with exhaustion—
answering the door and their short conversation had left him feeling as if he’d just skated an over-
long shift; John was gassed.

“I’ll clean up and be right back. Can I use your toothbrush?”

“That’s a bit intimate,” John teased, “even for boyfriends. But, yes, it’s better than the alternative.”

Sherlock gave him a quick cheek kiss and rolled away and off the bed, shedding his jacket and then ducking down to untie his shoes. John forced his eyes open to watch him for a few moments, feeling deeply envious of the ease of Sherlock’s movements, his relatively pain-free body. Quite soon, though, his eyelids began to feel leaden and John let them close with a sense of relief he felt all the way to his ankles. Pain still sang all down the left side of his body, but the pills were doing their job of dulling it, with the side effect that he didn’t mind much about the pain, either way. He felt quite content and peaceful, even with the dull throbs of pain, and he allowed himself to sink.

John had a brief, vaguely thrilling, foggy sense that Sherlock was beside him again, all soft hot skin and lips against John’s good shoulder, near his ear, and Sherlock’s hand was busy near John’s hip, down along the front of his thigh, and John felt a flush of heat and longed to turn and catch him, to kiss him and kiss him, but the weight of fatigue bore down on him and he couldn’t even be arsed to raise his head off the pillow, or even to open his aching eyes. Sherlock hummed, and whispered something in his ear John didn’t quite catch. He fell quiet and kept close, and that was fine—just fine—so John sank down once more.
John woke aching for a piss and was surprised when his mobile’s screen told him it was already near ten in the morning. Sherlock was nowhere to be seen, no doubt having woken at a reasonable hour and perhaps gone for a workout, or to forage for sustenance. John groaned and growled as he shoved himself out of bed, his entire body stiff from having slept flat on his back the night through; his right ribs and left thigh bruised; his left shoulder tender beyond belief and the inside bits feeling torn and overstretched. He wasn’t dizzy, but he had a shrieking headache that started behind his left eye and arced in a starburst over his scalp. He frowned at it but that only made it worse. He looked to the bedside table for the sample packets of pain pills but there were none; he wondered if he had taken them in the night and forgotten about it, but to have taken every one of them since midnight would surely mean he would not have woken even by ten o’clock, if he had woken at all.

He retreated to the en suite to do as he must, swished cold water around his mouth, spit it, then gulped some. He scanned the vanity top and behind the mirrors; no pills. Shuffling out of the bedroom scratching fingers through his chest hair, then comforting the bruised spot on his right side, John discovered Sherlock dressed in a pair of John’s warm-up trousers lying with his ankles crossed atop one of the sofa’s arms, with the TV remote resting on his t-shirt clad chest.

“There is not a crumb of food in this entire flat,” Sherlock reported.

“Yes, I think I told you,” John agreed, looking at Sherlock through just one squinting eye. “Did you see what I did with those pills the doc gave me before I left the Garden?”

“Mm. I put them in your pocket, there,” Sherlock told him, motioning at John. He reached into the deep hip pocket of his pyjama bottoms and found the five or six little packets there. He drew them out and stared stupidly at them in his upturned palm. What he desperately needed was a bucket of coffee and about six more hours of sleep. Sherlock was intent on the television, too bright and hectic for John to look at, a million people talking at once, too loudly.

“Can you turn that down a bit? Why did you—”

“I have to ask you to keep those on your person at all times.”

“Oh,” John said stupidly. “OK. Yeah.” He went through to the kitchen, tore open one packet and tossed back the pair of white pills, chased them with the coldest water the tap could muster. Back toward the sofa, and Sherlock made room for John to take the middle cushion, then draped his legs over John’s lap. “And why do I need to? Keep them?” John inquired.

To his great relief, Sherlock tapped the remote and the TV went blank and silent.

“I’m a recovering addict,” Sherlock said plainly. “Just over five years clean but it started with pain pills.”

John blinked at him, and felt his eyebrows move up and toward each other. “From a hockey injury?” he asked after some moments.

“Yes, and not one that likely required narcotic pain relief, though don’t they give them out like candy. As it turned out, in addition to being overprescribed, I was vulnerable—my brother having ended his life within the preceding year—and. . .” Sherlock shrugged. “I enjoyed them overmuch.”

John did the math. “But you said you were seventeen when he died? Five years clean. . .That’s a long time using pain pills. Six years? Seven?”

Chapter 38
“Ah,” Sherlock said with a wryly sarcastic grin, “But I wasn’t using pain pills all that time, you see. Within a year, I was using heroin.”

“Wow,” was all John could think to say. “Wow. And how did you stop?”

“I was newly arrived in Boston, and even through a significant opiate haze, I could see it was do-or-die time, if I was going to ever going to make myself worth a damn.”

“So you—what?—just decided to ‘do’?”

“Oh, no. First I died,” Sherlock told him. “In this building, as a matter of fact.” He pointed at the ceiling. “In a flat that looks almost exactly like this one. I overdosed, and the only reason I am here speaking to you right now is that my trick had a naloxone shot in his messenger bag because he’d already had one junkie OD on a date.”

“Trick?” John quavered. “You mean a hookup.”

“One who gave me drugs in exchange for sex, so, yes and no.”

“Oh, Sherlock . . .”

Sherlock waved it away. “Don’t.”

“Yeah, no,” John corrected himself. He wanted to wrap Sherlock up in his aching, busted arms, but settled for stroking the thigh angled upward beside his own. “It’s just. It’s hard to imagine.”

“So. Things you may have noticed about me,” Sherlock went on breezily. “I did everything I could to avoid coming into this building ever again, and then you had to go and get yourself bulldozed by Brett Shayner and let the car service bring you back here instead of taking you to mine.”


“It’s surprisingly OK,” Sherlock reported. “It was ages ago and not in this particular flat. And now I’ve got you to cluck over, which is a helpful distraction.” Sherlock’s tone shifted, indicating a return to the list of things John may have noticed. “Also, my half-five phone reminder.”

“Yes, I did wonder,” John admitted. “I thought it must be medication, but I figured if it was anything communicable you’d have told me, so I didn’t want to pry.”

“You thought, what, antidepressants? Anxiety? Maybe steroids or Ritalin.”

“I didn’t really think that far, but more the psych stuff. Or who knows, a lot of guys take all kinds of weird supplements. . .kale milkshakes or powdered gorilla fetus or whatever.”

“Are they doing gorilla fetus powdered now? I’ll have to ask around.” Sherlock’s expression was exaggeratedly crumpled with feigned interest and made John laugh. “Anyway, I’ll explain the generalities first. Of course you know about placebos—those smelling salts that get passed around right before play begins are a good example.”

“It’s not a placebo, though. The reek of the thing,” John protested lightly. “Is it? No. It does. . .something. Must do, or why would so many guys use them?”

“It’s been proven that any physical reaction—vasodilation, mental focus, enhanced energy—dissipates within seconds. At best it’s a cue, made into a habit by using them regularly, in the same circumstance. That reek and the repellent feeling it produces become a reminder that it’s time to
focus up and get ready to play. But if you think it gives you speed or concentration, it is more likely because of the placebo effect.”

John digested this. “Well I’m not going to bother sticking that shit under my nose anymore, if that’s the case,” he asserted, half-smiling.

“There was an interesting study a few years ago that determined the placebo effect is so powerful, even people who knew they were ingesting a placebo could experience reduction in symptoms of whatever ailed them simply by telling themselves the do-nothing pill they were taking was going to help. One woman was taking a calcium supplement she bought over the counter, which she needed anyway, and told herself it would relieve her irritable bowel symptoms, despite no evidence calcium would benefit that condition. Her symptoms faded.”

“Really? That’s amazing.”

“Indeed, I thought so, too. My addiction specialist was willing to work with me as I ran a related experiment. I did the usual detox, inpatient rehab, outpatient rehab, the whole dirty business. But we developed a long-range schedule to stabilise me with buprenorphine, then wean me from it, and eventually replace it with a placebo. Although I’m not sure of the exact progression, I have been taking a sugar pill in place of an opiate-blocker for at least a year, perhaps as long as two. Which is excellent on many accounts, not least of which the fact I couldn’t drink wine while I was taking suboxone.”

John was fascinated, and felt a weird flush of something like shame as he noticed his limbs warming and his concentration becoming a bit liquid as his own narcotics took hold.

“So, you still take it even though you know it’s not actually doing anything?”

“Junkies like rituals. And so do hockey goalies, for that matter. So, every day at the same time I put my sugar pill under my tongue, give myself a good look in the eyes, and then—” Sherlock cut himself off abruptly, as if realising he’d said too much.

John raised his eyebrows and gave Sherlock’s knee a squeeze.

“There are some words,” Sherlock finished dismissively.

“What? Like that prayer the alcoholics use? I sort of like that one; it’s sensible.”

“Not that. But, yes, similar. A mantra.”

“Oh,” John said, once again not wanting to pry despite desperate curiosity stoked by this entirely new facet of Sherlock, who was seemingly full of endless surprises. “I thought you had to ask a mountaintop hermit for one of those.”

“Or a woman named Kate who teaches mindfulness meditation to addicts in recovery.”

John imagined a fiftyish woman with reading glasses on a chain around her neck, spiky salt and pepper hair, and a scarf draped just so around her shoulders. “So, what?” John prompted. “*Hare Krishna*, that kind of thing?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, “If you’re going to take the piss. . .”

“No, I’m not,” John promised. “I’m only trying to understand. Keep it to yourself if you like.” He shrugged. “Whatever you need to do.”
Sherlock looked at him for a long moment before he spoke again.

“You look high.”

John turned his face away. He cleared his throat.

“Give me your house keys; I’m going to put on proper clothes and find us something to eat,” Sherlock announced. “You should go back to bed. I don’t want you shambling about the place, tripping over the furniture and breaking your nose in the fall.” Sherlock swung his legs off the sofa and got to his feet. He extended his hand to John. “Here, I’ll walk you.”

“Tuck me under the covers?” John teased.

Sherlock put a hand on John’s good elbow and did, in fact, walk him to the bedroom, though he let John put himself in the bed, biting his teeth together hard and squinching his eyes as the pain of rearranging his limbs broke through. Once he’d settled, feeling heavy and exhausted, his eyes and mouth dry, he watched as Sherlock shed the sweats and walked naked back and forth across the room, picking up his discarded trousers and shirt from the previous night; he made a disgusted huffing sound at the rumpled state of them.

“Leering at me, you filthy pervert,” Sherlock smirked.

“Yes I am. It’s a perk of the arrangement.” As Sherlock pulled on black socks, seated on the far edge of the bed, John volunteered, “I won’t take any more. I’ll get rid of them while you’re out.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s obvious you need them. Honestly all that’s required is that you keep them in your pocket.”

“But if it’s too much for you—” John started.

“I’ll tell you,” Sherlock assured. He caught John’s hand and held it. “Five years clean; the whole world is a minefield of reminders and temptations. But this isn’t even the most challenging scenario I’ve faced, and I found my way successfully through all the previous challenges. Credit me having shoved the pills in your pyjamas rather than crushing and snorting them while you were asleep.”

“Yeah, of course,” John replied, feeling chastised.

“And credit me not taking advantage of your weakened state while my hand was in the vicinity.” Sherlock winked.

John grunted a laugh.

“What will you eat?” Sherlock demanded.

“Whatever you bring back. And I need all the world’s coffee.”

Sherlock lifted John’s hand and ducked to kiss its back, still bruised from where the IV had been inserted by the team doctor. “This reminds me, what time for your MRI?”

“Two.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“I’ll call a car, it’s fine.”
Sherlock’s mouth went small, and after a brief pause, he stood and smoothed his hands down the front of his shirt. “All right, then,” he said with finality, and moved to leave. John watched him go, his eyes finally sinking shut against the image of Sherlock’s triangular back framed the bedroom doorway.
“John.”

It was hard to swim up; he was so terribly sleepy and the closer he got to the surface the more he hurt. His shoulder, of course. Low ribs on the other side. Hip, on the first side. All down his thigh. And his head, god his head. Like diamond-tipped drill bits, not drilling, just lined up and ready, pressing sharp and still and so fucking irritating into the soft grey sponge of his brain. At least a dozen of them. Maybe twenty.

“John.”

He was rolling, falling sideways, caught himself with a jerk that jolted every ache and pain. His head weighed ten tons and took hours to roll from one side to the other. He hummed, or tried to. Could feel his eyebrows rising but his eyelids refused to follow.

“Wake up, I want you.”

John groaned. “Hurts,” he managed to croak.

“The post-orgasmic endorphin rush is a natural analgesic.”

“I can’t. . .” John muttered. Sherlock was peeling back his blankets, kissing the side of his throat as he hovered over John’s prone body. “Sherlock, I can’t.”

“Let me, then,” Sherlock said near John’s ear, and kissed his closed eye, his cheek, the corner of his lips. John puckered loosely and tried to give chase. “Just say it’s all right. I’ll go easy.”

By then John was fully awake, all his injured places vying for his attention, his headache still stabbing and jagged. Sherlock arranged himself on all fours, caging John beneath him. John caught his eye and Sherlock smiled at him, something halfway between fondness and predation in it.

“You know I’m a left-hand shot,” John said, glancing toward his bad left side. “It’s a problem.”

“We’ll be creative in the meantime,” Sherlock assured, and he sank backward to drop his arse toward his heels, arms extended, hands resting lightly on John’s upper arms, and kneaded his forehead into John’s belly, rolling his neck, letting out a purr. “Let me?” he pleaded, his voice muffled, his hair brushing over John’s skin.

“I’ll never say no,” John told him, and with his good right hand, reached to stroke Sherlock’s bicep, the fibrous shoulder. “How could I say no?”

“Mm, good,” Sherlock murmured, and slid down and down, shifting, shuffling his knees, winding his arms around his torso as he yanked his shirt up and off, and John watched him through heavy eyes.

“You’re gorgeous, have I said?”

“You’re gorgeous, have I said?”

“Once or twice. Feel free to never stop.” Sherlock slithered onto his belly between John’s knees, his upper chest resting on John’s parted thighs. Long fingers slipped under the waistband of John’s grand-dad pyjamas and shimmied them down. John’s prick was by then mildly interested, somehow lagging behind his brain, which despite feeling like an irritated puffer-fish had come completely on board with Sherlock’s request some minutes before. Sherlock hummed something
like satisfaction and shivered his fingertips through the hair of John’s thighs, then around the base of his cock. By the time he leaned in to deliver slow, open-lipped kisses over the surface of John’s still mostly-flaccid cock, John had let his head sink back and his eyes close, unable to bear craning his neck to watch.

Wet. Wandering. Pinching, pulling lips and velvety, wide tongue swirling. Dragging. Fingers in his pubic hair above, tickling his bollocks below. Sweet, damp kisses placed side by side by side from the crown to the base. A curl of fingers around to shift his cock to lay the other way, and more of those kisses trailed up the other side. A pleased sound from Sherlock as his prick plumped up, and he found Sherlock’s hand and touched the back of it. Sherlock hummed, and there followed a slow swirling that seemed endless, unhurried, Sherlock’s fingers steadying him, the other hand resting on his low belly, a reassurance, a claim. Behind John’s closed eyes floated green and pink oblong stains, and he felt heavy everywhere, sinking deep into the mattress. Sherlock went on lapping spirals, now and then closing his lips around, press and draw, and he let go little sounds as if John were delicious, perfectly salted and warm on his tongue.

John drifted, drowsing, now and again summoned back to the surface by a sudden and particular thrum of pleasure. Sherlock’s tongue was hot, rough, drier then wetter, soft; and his lips were tight, slick, gentle; and his throat was open, deep . . .

Sherlock whispered encouragement as John shivered and spilled, moaning long and low, surfacing from the weird, comfortable half-sleep where Sherlock had left him.

“Come and kiss me,” John invited, and Sherlock did, body long and hot beside him, hard limbs and belly, swollen mouth, his hand bumping John’s thigh as it worked inside his half-open trousers. They kissed until Sherlock couldn’t manage it anymore, and his head fell down to John’s pillow, breath huffing hard against John’s temple. “Beautiful,” John told him, glowing, gooey, grateful. “Sherlock. You’re incredible.” The pain in his head was quieter, less sharp-edged. “You genius,” John said, and Sherlock half-laughed and kissed his cheek. He sucked air and hummed a growl, and John loved that he could smell of the two of them, at last in his own bed so he could keep it a bit.

Sherlock shuddered, moaning sighs with his forehead pressed to John’s temple, then softened, kissing John’s hair, the edge of his ear, the corner of his jaw. After a few moments he murmured, “How’s your pain?”

“Less,” John admitted.

“I prescribe orgasms as needed for pain,” Sherlock smirked, rolling away and vanishing into the bathroom. He returned with a damp hand towel he handed to John as he fastened up his trousers and reclaimed his shirt from the floor. “This is the third time I’ve put this shirt on since last night,” Sherlock complained. “After your scan, you’re coming to stay at mine.”

“Oh am I.”

“Yes, you are. This is untenable. I need to keep you close so I can nurse you, and this flat is a misery. You haven’t even got a proper table; do you eat in bed?”

“On the sofa,” John told him. “Or standing at the kitchen sink.”

“How civilized. After we’ve eaten, I’ll pack you a bag to bring back to my flat.”

John started to hoist himself and Sherlock moved to rearrange his pillows behind his back. “Can I eat in bed just this once, though?” he asked, grinning up at Sherlock with exaggeratedly pleading
eyes.

“I suppose so. We won’t be lying in these sheets tonight.”

Sherlock left the bedroom and because he’d drifted down again, it seemed to John that Sherlock quite soon returned with a tray holding two hot coffees and two iced, all of them as big as they came, and a paper shopping bag from an upscale, overpriced grocer two blocks up from the Tremont. He lifted out two nubbly-cardboard containers and John was delighted to see they were loaded with spicy fried chicken and oily-crusted roast potatoes. Another dip into the bag brought out a plastic shell packed with spinach salad lousy with candied pecans and creamy goat cheese, and a paper bag full of sweet, cakey cornbread. John hardly knew where to begin.

“Coffee, please,” he defaulted. “The cold one.”

Sherlock obliged him, and the two demolished the meal with all speed, barely taking time to breathe, let alone engage in conversation. John was perhaps slower than he might be, as he was reliant on his non-dominant right hand, but he managed to slap Sherlock away from the last piece of chicken and claim it for himself. Sherlock surrendered and fell back against the headboard, licking his fingers then twisting them in a rumpled paper napkin he balled up tight and dropped in the empty shopping bag.

Sherlock gathered the refuse and the two reclined shoulder to shoulder to finish their coffees.

“Did you watch the video?” Sherlock wondered, and fished his phone from inside his jacket.

“Which?”

“Of your collision with Shayner.”

“I’d say Shayner collided with me,” John corrected sardonically. “Very much doubt he’s had to have his pain cured with oral sex this morning, or have his breakfast brought to his bed.”

“Cured it, you say.” Sherlock looked impressed with himself.

“Nearly,” John replied, taking him down a peg. “And no, I haven’t seen it. You have it there?”

Sherlock swiped and tapped, then turned his phone sideways and held it between them.

John found it difficult to see the player of his exact size, skating in his style, with his posture—hell, wearing his number—in the video as himself. The clip started just a second or two before he lost his edge, stumbled into Shayner’s path, and was smashed against the boards and glass, crumpling straight to the rink’s surface as Shayner moved away. His body lying face down on the ice did not move for several excruciating seconds.

“Damn,” John muttered.

“You see why I asked how long you’d been out.”

“No, yeah,” John agreed, even nodding a little despite the fact it activated all the drill bits pressing on his brain. “Yeah, it looks bad. Very bad. But no, I was just dazed a minute.” John lifted the phone from Sherlock’s hand and backed up the video to watch it again. Shoulder and chest first, then the front left corner of his helmet. His visor had cracked. Shayner’s elbow in his ribs. John flat and unmoving. He counted the seconds in his head even as he watched the video’s clock. It seemed like forever before he reached for his shoulder. Seven seconds.
By the time the clip ended the second time, Sherlock was up and off the bed, headed for the
bathroom. “Sure I can’t drive you to MGH for your scan?” he called, and there were handwashing
sounds in the background.

“Thanks, no.”

“Well, you’ll come to mine afterward,” Sherlock said in a tone that left a faint chance for John to
negate it, not a question, though not entirely an order. The water was shut off and shortly Sherlock
emerged, smoothing his damp palms down the back of his neck, catching the open button placket
of his shirt and smoothing it between pinched fingers and thumbs.

“Yeah, I’d like to.”

“Practice at three,” Sherlock said briskly. “If you beat me back to the flat Mrs Hudson will let you
in. I’ll ask if she has another key to give you.” John noticed Sherlock did not say extra key and it
seemed significant enough that he wanted to remind himself to think later about what that might
mean. “If not, I’ll get one made.”

“You don’t have to,” John said, and started the laborious process of rising from the bed, with an
aim to dress at least in warm-ups; something more like clothing and less like what a convalescent
invalid would wear. Once he’d groaned his way off the mattress and found what he needed in the
drawers, Sherlock arrived at his side, holding his elbow while he stepped out of his dropped
pyjamas, ducking to help him slide up his briefs and then the pair of plain grey sweats, gingerly
arranging the sleeves of a dark blue Henley while John grimaced against the jostling of his
shoulder.

“If the boys could only see this,” John commented with a little half-shrug and a huff of laughter.

Sherlock finished the thought. “They’d be jealous.” John sat on the edge of the bed and with quick
efficiency, Sherlock took a knee and slid first one bunched-up sock, then the other, onto John’s
feet, smoothing them up onto his calves.

“Of which of us?”

“Both.” Sherlock sprang to his feet. “There. Shoes?”

“Just the slippers.”

Sherlock brought him the vinyl slides all the players wore to avoid each other’s fungi in the
showers—and because one of the equipment sponsors provided them for free—and set them on the
floor by John’s feet.

It seemed like the moment when Sherlock should be asking one more time if he could drive John
to his appointment, but he didn’t ask, only kissed John’s forehead on the less-bruised side as John
summoned a car.
John slept through most of his ride to the hospital, then through most of his scan, thanks to a top-up
dose of pain medication, a valium to prevent claustrophobic panic, and noise-cancelling
headphones the technician gave him, playing classical music John would never be able to describe
well enough to ask Sherlock about later.

All the real and artificial parts of his shoulder were where they needed to be, and he was let go with
a caution to take it day by day, work with his trainer and the team docs, as well as a fresh
prescription for non-narcotic analgesics. He turned out his pocket, leaving the remaining sample
packets of the good stuff with the radiologist. Sherlock would never again look in John’s eyes and
tell him he looked high.

*Scan looks good except for this unabsorbed twin they found? Teeth and hair, the whole bit.*

*TXT from Sherlock Holmes: He sounds incredible. What’s his number?*

*Be at yours in about 10 min, I think.*

*TXT from Sherlock Holmes: I’ll race you.*

By the time Sherlock returned from his run Saturday morning, John was just waking up. He had
been sleeping quite a bit—about eighteen of every twenty-four hours. The less-good pain meds did
not come close to giving him relief. He was easily fatigued—a few laps around Sherlock’s flat left
him feeling weak-kneed and heavy—and just plain sleepy. A few stationary minutes in the
armchair he’d claimed as his own, or at the kitchen table, and he’d be nodding. Once he’d sat on
the edge of the bed to plug in his phone, and the pull of the pillow was completely irresistible; he
sank like a stone and didn’t wake up for three hours. Sherlock was sporting about it, making sure
he was fed and watered, even minding him in the shower so he didn’t fall, and because he couldn’t
reach everywhere that needed scrubbing. They lay side by side on Sherlock’s bed and Sherlock put
a movie on the laptop John saw no more than five minutes of. Once he woke mid-evening to
Sherlock playing something soft and gentle on his violin, out by the windows in the sitting room,
and John shuffled himself to Sherlock’s side, and kissed his cheek, and lay down on the sofa to
sleep some more.

Sherlock stripped off his hoodie and toed off wet running shoes, a flurry of motions. John was
standing by the kettle. “Game day,” he announced, then added, “I’ll have one, if you’re making it.”

“Hm?”

Sherlock gestured. “Tea? I’ll have a cup, if you’re making tea.”

“Right,” John twigged, and sprang to action, finding mugs and tea sachets, the sugar bowl set out
on the worktop with its shell-shaped spoon dug in.

Sherlock stood by, slow-motion rolling his sweatshirt into a wad between his hands, readying it for
the laundry bag. “How’s the shoulder?” he asked, though it was obviously not his actual question.

John cleared his throat, poured the water. “I won’t be able to play tonight, for sure. Gonna try to at
least skate on Monday, though.” He heaped sugar in Sherlock’s mug, then put a third as much in his own.

Sherlock accepted the mug John offered, stood holding it in front of his chest. John set his own tea on the table and went into the fridge in search of something he could call breakfast.

To John’s back, Sherlock said, “You slept forever.” John hummed assent, and considered frying eggs but the NSAIDs were wrecking his guts, which rebelled at the thought. What he wanted was bread, and lots of it. And then maybe ice cream. Sherlock took a loud inhalation and blurted, “John, I’m worried you might have—”

“Is there bread? Jam on toast!” John said briskly, and swerved away from the fridge toward the worktop where there was, in fact, a half-loaf of sturdy rye bread wrapped in plastic. “Nothing to worry for,” he added, sounding more dismissive than he meant to, throwing Sherlock what he deemed a reassuring smile. He changed the subject. “Haven’t watched you in a game since I was playing for Hamilton; I’m actually kind of looking forward to being upstairs tonight.”

As with all players placed on injured reserve but still mobile enough to show up, John would watch from the Brawlers’ ninth floor suite. He made toast enough for both of them, slathered it with butter and tart cherry jam, and set it on one big plate in the middle of the table. Sherlock took a few strides to toss his balled-up sweatshirt into the bedroom, then slid into the chair opposite John’s, helped himself to toast between sips at his tea.

“We should work out a signal,” Sherlock suggested. “A way for me to say hello.”

“Mm. You could grab your best bits,” John agreed. “Or, oh! When you lift your mask, you can simulate fellatio on the handle of your stick.”

“I would never degrade my stick in such a fashion.”

“What, never?” John smirked and winked. Their hands slid together across the table and John gave Sherlock’s a squeeze.

“Now you’ve got me thinking things one oughtn’t think when one is eating toast with butter and jam.”

“What—thinking about other uses for butter and jam?” John ventured.

“Mm.” Sherlock raised and lowered his eyebrows, and John laughed.

After another swallow of toast, then of tea, John changed his grip so he could fiddle with each of Sherlock’s fingers, tracing his knuckles, tickling the pad of each fingertip with the edge of his thumbnail. Watching their entangled hands on the table top, John cleared his throat and said, “I know you know what’s going on with me. But.” He turned his hand palm-up beneath Sherlock’s, curling and uncurling his fingers to tickle his palm. “I’m not ready for that at the moment, so if it’s all the same to you, please let’s don’t talk about it?” His throat was thick and sticky; he tried to clear it again—loudly, twice—but the muck wouldn’t go. He sniffed and kept his eyes low, away from Sherlock’s penetrating gaze.

Sherlock caught John’s hand in his and held it, petting with his thumb. His voice was low and serious. “I’m sorry, John.”

“Nope.” John pulled away, sitting back in his chair, waving it away with both hands. “Definitely not ready for all that. That counts as talking about it. Sorry, no. None of that, please.” He gripped his mug tight in both hands and stared into it. He was frowning so hard his lower lip pouted out.
“All right,” Sherlock said quietly, acquiescing. He nodded soundly, then slid his chair back from the table and headed toward the bedroom. Over his shoulder, in an exaggeratedly coquettish tone: “Bring the butter. Leave the jam.”
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

After Monday's bite-size chapter, here's one of regulation length! For those of you who were missing the hockey...you'll like this one.

PLEASE NOTE: There will not be a chapter posted on Monday; it's that time of year when family obligations are numerous and though the margin is razor-thin, family comes first. I know you feel me! See you Thursday.

John was kept from press avails before the game, and the roster was published with his name on the Injured Reserve, the typically vague “upper body injury” given as the reason. True enough; his upper body was well and truly injured. Sherlock had helped him into his shirt and suit jacket; John had worn his wool coat slung over his shoulders like a cape until he got to the Garden, then carried it folded over his good arm as he walked in, trying not to squint too much in the blaring white television lights, sparing a quick smile when the columnist from the Globe sports page asked how he was feeling.

Up to the ninth floor, and John stopped in to greet Jack and Brick in the BSN broadcast booth; they both knew better than to inquire about specifics regarding John’s injury, only made head-shaking, teeth-sucking displays of sympathy over the collision with Shayner, and wished him well. The Brawlers’ suite was fairly empty; just a pair of head office guys in American-made suits, who shook John’s hand too hard and then took seats at the opposite end of the rail from him, giving him space.

John could see the benches from where he was, the pyramids of practice pucks standing on the dashers beside the doors. In Hamilton, unlike most arenas, injured players had seats in the stands, behind the penalty boxes, and it had been a long time since John had sat in a luxury box to watch a game. It was a weird angle from which to see the rink, even higher than the perspective from the BSN cameras when he watched the compressed, midnight reruns or saw highlights on the morning’s sports news.

The lights went down and the PA announcer urged the crowd to welcome your! Boston! Brawlers! as music amped up and flashing coloured lights swirled over the rink’s surface. His teammates skated out, lead as usual by their goalie, and John felt an insistent urge in his belly to be moving forward fast, smacking the carefully-arranged pile of pucks onto the ice and sweeping one along ahead of him against the tape of his stick-blade, leaning from inside to outside edges, psyching up. He felt caged and a little deflated, as he always had when he’d missed games in the past. The Brawlers passed pucks, skated fast, warming their muscles. Sherlock went through an abbreviated version of his fresh-ice ritual, roughing up the surface of his crease with his skate blades, sliding left and right, digging in. He hunkered down, tossed his head on his neck three times, set his stick, and only then did his teammates start making practice shots. Sherlock flicked them away with his blocker or stick, caught them in his glove and tossed them down to be picked up by another forward skating around to take a shot. John admired his smooth movements, calm demeanour, the businesslike air around him. Sherlock Holmes was a regular guy, a worker. He also happened to be a preternatural hockey genius who could see the end of a play one second after it began, and adjust accordingly. John smiled as much as his aching head and bruised face would allow without a fresh
twinge of pain. The server came in and John asked for a local, seasonal beer—one perk of sitting out—but held off on a meal in favour of sharing one with Sherlock, later, back at the flat. He’d get by with the spread of free snacks—chips and cheese and vegetable platters, all the usual suspects—just to keep him busy, crunching down hard to release tension.

The Milwaukee Muskies were having a good season, surely playoff-bound, and they were statistically interesting for having the biggest players of any team in the league—averaging 6’2” and 210—a size differential they used to their advantage, crowding out the opposition with sheer bulk, hitting hard and heavy when they could. That said, late in the season they were a bunch of hurting cowpokes, with two of their top-scoring forwards and their quick, young hot-shot defenseman all out with injuries, long term, and the rest of the team frequently succumbing to fatigue and the resultant sloppy play. John watched them warming up, and they looked steady, methodical. They looked to be playing solid hockey, nothing fancy, no slacking off—an attitude that was a formidable match for the Brawlers’ very similar ethic. John accepted his bottle and glass from the server, and as the anthem began, made a quick pass by the buffet table, heaping a plate with potato chips and pretzels—three handfuls each—and settled in to watch the game.

Despite the fact the Muskies were shooting the puck like mad—eighteen shots on goal to the Brawlers’ measly four—the first period ended with the Brawlers ahead, 1 – 0, on a bullet Kocur fired past the Muskies’ goalie on the glove side, high. John had wanted to jump up as he would have off the bench, to offer his glove for Kocur to bump as he skated along the boards, but had to settle for clapping his more mobile right hand against his held-steady left, trying not to jostle his shoulder too much. When the lights came up in the arena and the players filed down the tunnels, John abandoned his seat by the rail for the gents’, admiring his shiner in the mirror as he washed his hands. On his return, he sank into one of the overstuffed armchairs in the back of the suite, and it was a struggle not to rest his eyes; the weariness was coming on him again, and he thought of lying on his back in Sherlock’s lovely bed, pulling the weighty pile of quilts up onto his chest, a back-of-mind vision nearly erotic in its appeal.

His phone buzzed and he fished it out from inside his suit jacket.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: You saw my signal? My stick practically fainted with pleasure.

Oh, no, I missed it!!! You’ll have to do it again. Maybe several times.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Shall I not save you some?

OMG, save it.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: I always do.

John smiled and dropped his phone back in his pocket, rubbed gingerly at his temples with two fingers each, even though it did him no good. Eventually, he ordered a second beer and resumed his seat up front. Knowing the BSN cameras could cut to him at any minute, John had to remember not to rub his head, wince, frown too hard, rest his eyes too long, or otherwise look as if anything was really wrong with him. Hell, he’d even refused a sling offered to him at Mass General, knowing to be seen using it would set the rumour mill rampant. John Watson, D, Upper Body Injury, Day-to-Day, was as much as anyone outside the organization was allowed to know. John had never given this a second thought—it was just how things were done—but suddenly it bothered him. He was in significant pain, and there was no doubt when he eventually—almost certainly too soon—got back on the ice, he would still be in significant pain, possibly semi-numbed with a massive dose of pre-game painkillers, and yet he would still play all his minutes, at full speed, at risk of taking another hit or another stumble. As the lights dimmed and the psych-up music came over the PA, the scoreboard imploring the crowd that it was NOISE TIME!!! (sponsored by Gillette), John gritted
his teeth. The drill bit-pincushion that was his brain throbbed and stung. He knew things would get worse before they got better; after Monday’s morning skate, he had been ordered to report for physical therapy.

The Brawlers were on the back foot all through the second, as Milwaukee put the offensive pressure on, taking shot after shot on Sherlock’s goal like they were mad at him and his mother. By the end of the period, Boston’s D was looking ragged, Thurston and Mellon had each spent five minutes in the box for fighting, and the Muskies had made a mind-blowing forty-one shots on goal over two periods, more than any team’s average per game, and there were still twenty minutes to play. To Sherlock’s credit, the score was still 1 – 0, and if he could keep up his concentration despite being so busy, he might yet get the shutout.

John was in the restroom swallowing a giant ibuprofen pill out of anyone’s sight when his phone went again.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Your colleagues are lost without you.

Making you work.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: That’s not in their job description. Quite the opposite.

John knew better than to mention the score and jinx it, so instead he texted, Can I get a ride from you after?, feeling the double entendre was sufficiently obvious.

TXT From Sherlock Holmes: My pleasure, Captain.

Despite how steamrolled with exhaustion John felt, he’d prop his eyelids open with toothpicks if necessary to stay awake for sex with Sherlock. The NSAIDS were less effective for keeping his pain at a distance, and they were hell on his stomach, but at least they didn’t knock him out. No, his current creeping sleepiness couldn’t be blamed on opiate painkillers. He dropped his face into his hands and massaged his forehead with the flats of his fingers. Christ, his fucking head.

The opening five minutes of the third saw two almost-fights, and a couple of good looks for the Brawlers that didn’t put any more goals on the board, but once the puck dropped on a defensive-end faceoff, the rest of the game was a nonstop assault on Boston’s net. After Sherlock’s fiftieth save of the game—of the game! in regulation minutes!—John had to stand up off his glorified barstool leaning his chin hard on his propped-up fist and tugging at his lower lip. He set his foot on a low rung of the chair and bobbled his knee up and down, fidgeting. The Garden crowd was cycling through its goalie-centric chants: the charge music followed by a massive, many-voiced cry of SHER! LOCK!; an aggressive, three-step chant of his name, punctuated with handclaps and foot stomps—Sherlock HOLMES! Sherlock HOLMES!; and each time Sherlock turned the puck away from the goal, the low rumbling moan of Hoooooolmes! that made it sound as if the place was populated by seventeen thousand threatening ghosts.

The Muskies, still trailing one-nothing, naturally aimed to tie and force overtime, and they kept up the pressure, every passing sequence ending in a shot. Fifty-five saves. . .Fifty-eight. . . John chewed the skin of his thumb, the just-a-bit-ragged corner beneath the edge of the nail. Sixty saves in under sixty minutes. A whistle blew the play dead and Sherlock reached to the top of the net for his water bottle, sprayed a torrent into his mouth, between the wires of his face mask. John turned his gaze momentarily to the wall-mounted television set in the suite, showing BSN’s coverage. Sherlock always purposely turned toward his stick side, slightly away from the mounted cameras, and out of view of the rink-side ones, so the shot was mostly of his back, and his mask was down. He jammed the bottle back into its holder and turned to re-set himself. A tight shot, close as they could get it, and he threw his head back and forth on his neck, right, left, right, looked down
between his skates, then straight ahead. His eyes were steely with focus. John had momentarily forgotten his pain.

A faceoff in the Brawlers’ end, and Bouchard won it, Mellon taking it back through the neutral zone only to have it poked away from him by a Milwaukee forward, who immediately skated it back into the Boston zone. The Muskies wing made a tape-to-tape pass to his linemate, who fired a bomb of a one-timer that Sherlock deflected with his blocker up high. There was a scrum for the puck, it got loose, and Sherlock had to hustle to center himself, ended up taking a shot right against his sternum, which dropped, and he covered it with his catching glove, ending the play.

John exhaled.

There were only seventeen seconds left in the game, and the faceoff was to Sherlock’s glove side. He slid to the corner of his goal, then slotted backwards just a bit, and his shoulders seemed to broaden as he sank into his knees. He became remarkably still. The crowd was shouting his name again, even the players on the Brawlers’ bench thumping their sticks against the floor in time with it: Sherlock HOLMES! Sherlock HOLMES! Hammel got thrown out of the faceoff, and as he was replaced there would normally have been a brief reprieve from the tension, but the chant devolved into a wordless, raucous racket of screaming and applause. The puck dropped and Sherlock twitched and Thurston couldn’t keep his stick on it. The Muskies forward shot wide, another swooped in behind the goal to pick it up, curled in to try for the wraparound. Hatch gave a Muskies player crowding the crease a good shove, Sherlock made a stick save, loose puck, battle for it, wrist shot, SAVE BY HOLMES! Juicy rebound, Hatch sent it sailing into the neutral zone. . .and there’s the horn! A sixty-two save, shutout win for goaltender Sherlock Holmes!

John forgot himself completely and pumped his fist, which sent a ripping sensation through his shoulder that made him gasp, but what else was there to do? Sherlock Holmes was a damn good goalie. Damn good. John watched his team lining up to take their turns tapping their helmets against Sherlock’s mask, and he got a lot of extra shoulder pats; fellas grabbing the back of his head and giving him a good, affectionate shake; one armed hugs; and swats on the backside. John longed to be down there with them; he’d have been the first to reach Sherlock for that particular ritual, and he’d have told him you were amazing.

He reached for his phone and texted, Fucking brilliant. Just fucking brilliant.

When he looked up again, the guys in suits were leaving the suite, nodding goodbyes. John settled into one of the comfortable armchairs to watch the post-game while he waited for Sherlock to shower and dress so they could leave. He leaned his temple against three fingers, rubbing in a slow, hard circle. His eyes wanted to close, and there was no one left to see, so he let them, just for a minute.

Sherlock came in, wearing those medium-grey trousers John especially liked on him, and a silky dark shirt open at the throat. Dirty-smiling, without a word, he planted a knee at each side of the chair’s seat and walked himself up John’s lap, settling close, licking his pink lips as he took John’s head in his hands and tilted his face up, readying John to be kissed. . .

His head jerked upright, firing a flaming arrow down the back of his neck, on the left. There was a buzzing. Phone.

TXT from Sherlock Holmes: Coming out in five minutes, if you still want that ride.

I do. Yes.
John fell asleep on the drive home, despite the sheer terror of riding shotgun with Sherlock Holmes at the wheel. Once inside Sherlock’s flat, John immediately swallowed his scheduled dose of pain relief, for what little good it might do, and upon entering the bedroom, found Sherlock lying nude with the sheet carefully draped to cover his best bits. The contrasting sharp, white edge of the sheet against the tempting drift of dark hair descending Sherlock’s low belly did more to enliven John than anything else could have. He shed his clothes in a hurry, bowing down in front of Sherlock’s chest for help pulling his shirt over his head. Sherlock balled it up and tossed it.

“Wish I’d been playing,” John told him, already having praised him for his remarkable performance before dozing off in the passenger seat. “Unbelievable what a game you had.”

“Just doing my job,” Sherlock said, with modesty simultaneously genuine and false, in that way he had. As John slipped into bed, Sherlock rearranged himself, helping with pillows behind his back, straddling John’s thighs. “Pass the slick and a condom; I’ll get us ready.”

John let out a harsh whuff at the demand, and did as he was told.

Sherlock backed up a bit, then licked his hand and gave John’s cock a few long, slow strokes before unrolling a condom onto it, John barely restraining himself from rocking up into the gorgeous hands. As Sherlock applied a generous daub of their favoured lubricant to the fingers of his right hand, he shot John a wanton glance and commanded, “Talk.”

“You are the handsomest fucking thing,” John blurted, looking his fill of the naked chest with its beautifully defined pectoral muscles, the solid shoulders, the way Sherlock’s torso tapered down from them to his slim waist. “Your body is amazing,” he added and Sherlock’s lips curled up as he used his thumb to spread the slick over the lengths of his fingers. “I’ve an idea: you should always be nude when we’re together.”

“You’d get tired of it.”

“I would never.”

Sherlock shifted position again, dropping himself down to one elbow and nudging John’s nose with his own before their mouths met in a deep kiss. John slipped his good arm up to caress the alternately tensing and softening muscles of Sherlock’s back. Sherlock bowed his torso to one side and his hand vanished behind him; he kissed harder.

“Can I touch you?” John asked against his spit-damp lips, and Sherlock nodded and then hummed. John reached between their bodies and took Sherlock in hand. “I love fucking you. Every way. Love it so much.” They kissed and kissed, and Sherlock now and then rocked gently into John’s slow, teasing motion against his prick. John dropped his voice, lower, quieter, “Are you touching your hole?”

“Just a bit,” Sherlock replied easily, and flicked the tip of his tongue against John’s lower lip, then kissed him.


Sherlock hummed, and his hips stilled, then moved back fractionally, and he exhaled loudly.
“That’s it,” John encouraged. His prick was aching, surely filling the tip of the condom with pre-cum already. He curled his fingers to brush them beneath Sherlock’s bollocks, then slid up his length again. Sherlock’s prick dripped onto John’s hip. “You’re so hot inside, yeah?”

“Yes.”

John raised his hand to rest it lightly against Sherlock’s backward-turned arm, felt for his movements, raised his head just enough to kiss him.

“Can’t wait to see you riding me, bouncing on my cock. Fuck, Sherlock, I want you so much. So much.” Sherlock’s expression was warring pleasure and discomfort, his eyebrows drawing up and together, biting his lips. “Opening yourself for my cock...christ, that’s gorgeous. Is your finger slipping in and out? Nice and slippery for me?”

Sherlock grunted, then muttered a breathy, “Yeh.”

John pressed his teeth against Sherlock’s throat, then sucked the spot. “It’s so pretty the way you go all soft and open for me. Ready for another?”

Sherlock’s arm stopped moving, his hips went still, his cheeks and throat were flushed dark pink. With a desperate, “oh!” he dropped in for another kiss, his tongue thrusting in and out between John’s sucking lips, and John moaned.

“Stretching yourself wide for me...you like it though, don’t you, fucking yourself.”

Sherlock hummed agreement, rocked his forehead against the pillow beside John’s cheek; John took advantage of the angle to whisper in his ear.

“I’d like to watch you...prop you up on a pillow with your knees up, two fingers inside, while you pull your prick...Will you let me sometime? Watch you fucking yourself with your gorgeous hand?”

“Mm! Yes!” Sherlock’s hips rolled in a serpentine shape, and John reached up once more to feel the flex and shift of his forearm, Sherlock fucking himself in steady rhythm, probably deep, with two of those lovely long fingers.

“Can you take three? Four?”

Neither confirming nor denying, Sherlock hummed a deep groan.

“Ready,” he huffed, and caught John’s lower lip between his own before he reared up and shuffled forward, lifting himself high up on his long thighs. John reached down to steady his prick and Sherlock touched his hand, fingers on John’s wrist and knuckles. After an expectant moment that stretched on and on, John felt him, the first push of resistance, then the ease of the slide, so tight and christ so hot. Sherlock wriggled himself to settle and John let out a quiet cry.

Sherlock looked at him then—that particular glint in his eye, like the two of them were a pair of thieves getting away with it—and John tickled the hairs on Sherlock’s thighs. Quick work was made of snapping the cap on the plastic bottle and coating his prick, and he was so still, surrounding John so close and so warm...then began a slow, indulgent rocking that made John hiss and suck his teeth. Settling his hands on Sherlock’s hips, John watched Sherlock’s talented hand, lazily stroking himself in time with his undulations. His eyes closed and he rolled his head in a slow, backward circle, beautifully baring his long, sturdy throat. John cursed.

Sherlock rode the downward motion of his tilting head until he was grasping John’s upper arm—
the good side—and his face hovered close. Sherlock rocked softly up, pushed slowly back—on, and on, and on—making John groan, ducking to brush his lips over the purple bruise staining John’s cheekbone.

“How do you feel?” A murmur against the hair at John’s temple.

_Really fucking fortunate_. John imagined himself to be the luckiest man on earth just then, and most of the rest of the time, too. He said nothing, caught Sherlock in a kiss until he raised himself up again, gently counterbalanced himself with just his fingertips and thumbs against the sides of John’s belly, avoiding bruised places, and began to ride John’s cock hard, fucking himself with deep, sharp jabs, groaning _Oh. . .Oh! . .Oh. . ._on each downstroke. John caressed his thighs, tweaked his nipples, let out desperate noises of his own.

His brain swelled up, balloon-like, pressing hard against his skull, wanting out.

“Love your big prick,” Sherlock panted, leaning back with one hand on John’s shin, changing the angle, trying to hit the spot. “Look how hard you make me.” He reached for his cock, stroking in time.

There were bruises from John’s waist to his knee on his left side. Sherlock’s bent thigh and long calf were tucked up tight against them. John’s head throbbed a drumbeat that threatened to deafen him. He let out a sound he hoped did not sound like distress. Sherlock was gorgeous. Fucking him was delicious. Orgasm was a cure for pain.

Sherlock’s weight shifted forward once more. “All right?”

“Feels so good,” John told him, and licked his thumb, rolled it over the crown of Sherlock’s prick, eliciting a lovely sound from his throat. “I wish you could see yourself.”

Sherlock hummed and resumed rocking, bobbing, sucking air, humming. His long torso was arced, concaving his belly, and the effort in his muscles reshaped the surface of his skin. John shut his eyes; the pressure in his head made them feel buggy and strange so he opened them again, but watching Sherlock’s steady motion made him seasick. His hands resting on Sherlock’s thighs gripped tighter.

“Fuck. . .Sherlock. . .”

Sherlock rolled forward like a wave breaking, a fresh angle, and John thrust up into him, digging his heels into the mattress. Sherlock’s jaw beside John’s temple, his groaning breath noisy in his dry mouth. Lucky to have him, to be the one to make him moan that way, get him off, make him. . .

“Want you to come,” John muttered, his good hand pulling hard at Sherlock’s arse, Sherlock’s knee crashing against his sore ribs, the motion of their bodies cruelly jostling his shoulder.

“Mmm. . .I wanna ride all night. . .” Sherlock was breathless and slurry, John should have been relishing it, but good as it was, he needed it to be done. His ears were ringing; his whole body felt uncomfortably warm.

Despite himself, John let out a sound that he knew could not pass for pleasure. Sure enough Sherlock stilled and arched his back, raising himself up a bit.

“You’re not all right.”

“No, it’s good,” John protested. “You’re so hot.”
“You’re wincing.”

“No.”

“Open your eyes, John.”

John refused, and bit his lips; his erection was withering. Failure. “The light,” he said. It was true the light was killing him, but it was also an excuse not to look at Sherlock just then, as he lost his hard-on in the middle of what was objectively a pretty spectacular fuck.

“I’m an arsehole,” Sherlock said. “I should have known better.” A massive shift of weight, Sherlock’s finger and thumb holding the condom in place as he lifted himself away. In a moment he was lying snug at John’s side. “Can I touch you?” he offered, fingers skating a spiral over John’s low belly, drifting lower.

“I feel like my head will burst,” John replied, apologetic, eyes stinging. “But you go ahead.”

“I’m all right.” He inhaled deeply, sighed out a huff. “I’ll get your meds?”

“Sorry, moitié.”

“Don’t apologise.” Sherlock was up and off the bed even as he said it, and John rid himself of the condom, flinging it carelessly—uselessly—onto the floor as his prick finally gave up for good. He rubbed his eyes with the pads of his fingers, humiliated.

Sherlock returned with pills and a glass of water; John quickly gulped the meds, then pulled the edge of the bedclothes up over his hips to hide his shame. The drillbits in his head were dug in and spinning, pain crackling electric over the surface of his brain. He thought the least the universe owed him in exchange for a busted head was a working prick, but as ever, nothing outside of sixty regulation minutes of hockey was required to be fair.

“That’s fucking embarrassing…” he spat, and felt Sherlock resume his place on the bed.

“Hush.” Sherlock kissed the corner of his eye, his cheek, and stayed nestled up close beside him; John felt Sherlock’s cock still mostly hard against his thigh. Sherlock told him, “You should sleep,” then leaned away to shut off the bedside lamp, and the darkness was such a relief John thought the pleasure of it might get him half-hard again. Sherlock petted John’s chest with slow-stroking fingertips.

“You’re not finished, though.”

“I’m fine.”

John caught his wrist and guided it down, encouraging him to take himself in hand.

“I want you to come,” he said again. With his eyes closed, lying still, and with his pulse slowing—no longer throbbing in his skull—it wasn’t as bad. “Couldn’t wait to get to you, tonight. You were so brilliant.”

Sherlock’s voice carried amusement. “You liked that, did you?”

“Watching you? Doing the thing you do better than anyone else in the entire fucking world?” John murmured. “Yeah, I liked it. It was hot as hell. You’re amazing.”

Sherlock’s hand started to move, brushing and bumping against John’s hip.
“To be the one who gets to take you to bed? That’s amazing, too. I’m the luckiest bastard on earth right now.”

Sherlock’s mouth opened; John felt the change in his breath there against his cheek.

“Wish I could do more. . .god, I wish I could. Fuck you breathless.”


“Ah, good. That’s good.” Sherlock’s movements were more urgent, his long legs taut and quivering. “Just now though, think about someone else. Some really good fuck you once had, one you still think about.”

Sherlock made a frustrated sound.

“What made it good?”

“Dangerous,” Sherlock sighed out, then sucked a sharp breath. “Someone close by.”

John made an encouraging sound. “Someone who could find you? See you?”

“Yeh.”

“Was he on his knees?”

“I was.”

“Sucking him?”

“Ah! Getting fucked.”

“Trying to be quiet, trying to come quick?”

“Yeh.”

“But once he bent you over, got a good look at that luscious arse of yours, he wanted to fuck you and fuck you and never be done.”

“Unh! . . .Yeh. Yes.”

“He got a good grip and fucked you hard, and it was noisy. Smacking against you.”

“Mm!”

“Did you hush him? No, you wanted to get caught. Didn’t you? You were loud. You whined for him to keep it up.”

“Yeh. . .oh. . .yes. . .fuck me. . .oh, hard. Harder.”

“Yes.”

“Harder. Oh. . .more.”

“That’s it. Did he try to keep you quiet? Shoved your face into the bed? Stuffed his fingers in your mouth.”

“My god, m-hm. Just that.”
“You sucked them like a cock.”

“Oh, *fuck*. . .” Sherlock complained, and shuddered, his chest and hips and knees rocking and bumping against John’s side, his cum erupting onto John’s thigh, slippery-warm, then quickly turning cool.

“You’re amazing,” John told him.

Sherlock hummed lazily, then slurred, “Kiss,” and John wet his lips in time to be kissed, surprisingly gentle and sweet after all the filth he’d just spewed, and all that had come before it, Sherlock riding him hard and deep, before his betraying brain fucked him over and murdered his hard-on.

“Sorry again,” he said, eyes still closed, pain in his body perhaps slightly less as the pills had begun to work.

“*Hushhh*. . .Everything is as it should be,” Sherlock said, so quietly, right against John’s ear. With some discarded piece of clothing, he cleaned the mess away, then dragged up all the wonderfully heavy quilts, pulled close around their naked bodies to keep the heat in through the night.
Chapter 43

Five games later, John was still day-to-day, wearing the red no-contact jersey when he practiced with the team and letting the alternate captains, Kocur and Bouchard, run his captain’s practices. He spent his time off the ice enduring physical therapy for his shoulder, watching his bruises fade from purple to green and yellow, and oversold his shoulder injury in order to buy himself a little more time to rest his head. Sherlock covered for him to what degree he could, letting John sleep through their films on the team plane—the pressure changes and dehydration brought on jangling, light-sensitive headaches if he tried to stay awake. But with only two weeks left in the regular season, John was constantly taking his own temperature, urgent to get back on the ice before the playoffs. He had a draft email in his phone, addressed to no one, where several times a day he made notes about his progress: hours and quality of night time sleep, daytime drowsiness or naps, intake of pain meds for his headaches, types of headaches, pain rated on a one-to-five scale, duration of headaches, effectiveness of meds, headache triggers, dizzy spells, waves of nausea, the things he sometimes saw in the corners of his eyes, the buzzing he sometimes heard in his ears.

The television made him crazy. The noise in the arenas made him wince. The light from his phone was too bright even on the lowest setting. Alcohol brought on headaches he felt in his eyes. He was irritable, raw-nerved. His stomach hurt from the NSAIDs. He wasn’t getting better fast enough for his own liking, and he was painfully aware that every day there was a meeting outside of his hearing about him, and how he was doing, and when he might be ready to shed the red jersey. Outwardly the organization was supportive—no hurry, don’t push it, just do what you need to do to get healthy—but John could feel the impatience radiating off Coach Lestrade, the GM, and his teammates. They’d lost more than they’d won so far without him—no reassurance there. In private Sherlock was sporting and said all the right things, but even so it was obvious he was getting frustrated—possibly bored—with their limited options for activity and position. John was usually good for a go in the morning, but by the end of most days sleep was more appealing—and more necessary—than sex, so their nights ended with kisses and murmuring, and more than once John had woken to turn over in bed and found Sherlock was not there beside him.

How long could you tolerate a sexless relationship?

**TXT from SisterKim**: Is there NO ONE ELSE you can ask that kind of thing?!?!?

I know you’re a girl, but I can extrapolate.

**TXT from SisterKim**: I don’t know. Maybe three weeks?

I’m fucked, then.

**TXT from SisterKim**: You are because you aren’t? Hahahahaha

You’re hilarious. We’re in Hamilton week after next. We’ll have dinner.

**TXT from SisterKim**: I can’t wait to meet him! <3 <3 <3

If he hasn’t dumped my Injured Reserve arse by then.

**TXT from SisterKim**: Get creative. Think outside the box. But don’t tell me about it, you’re my brother.

Yeah, no worries.
TXT from SisterKim: Seriously, though. You’re getting better, right?

Yes. Just too slowly.

TXT from SisterKim: Just take care of yourself.

John was surprised when his eyes prickled at the message. He wasn’t usually soppy about anything to do with his family, but John was certain his sister knew exactly what it meant for him to be missing games, feeling useless and set aside. Even before their parents had died, he’d always felt like the two of them were all they had to rely on. It wasn’t to himself alone he’d made promises about his future, in the event of the very injury he was now suffering with. He had a momentarily flash of memory, of Kim back at the little house she’d been proud to have bought all on her own even though John had offered to help her. When she’d come out of hospital after that sonofabitch beat her so badly, she’d been like a cat constantly stealing naps for the few days John stayed with her, getting her settled and reassuring her, changing the locks on her doors.

You were concussed that time.

TXT from SisterKim: Yeah, they said probably. Got better. Too slowly.

John nodded and bit his lips.

Love you.

TXT from SisterKim: Love you, too, dude. You’ll be OK.

Thurston got a stress fracture in his tibia so John had company in the luxury boxes for a few games. On a Saturday night at home, Thurston was taking advantage of IR status to buy them a couple of rounds of the good stuff, and between the first and second periods, Thurston’s green eyes glinted in such a way John knew he was about to either be dragged into trouble, or be forced to drag Thurston out of it.

“We’ll just go see who’s got a good party going. You know who goes hard? The investment bankers. Their box is always rowdy,” Thurston said with something like admiration in his tone.

“We don’t need a party,” John scolded, though he couldn’t keep the smile off his face; he was so goddamn fed up with not playing, and Thurston’s troublemaking streak was undeniably infectious.

“We’re just going to say hello. They’ll buy us drinks, we’ll sign their jerseys. …come on, Cap, you know it’s fun.” Thurston’s hand landed on the back of his shoulder, friendly encouragement that made John flinch. “Maybe meet some women, get some numbers.”

“You’re playing hurt, don’t forget.”

“It ain’t my dick that’s broken, Cap,” Thurston roared. “You know this! Yours neither!” He guffawed, and John laughed along. Yeah, not technically, he thought bitterly.

Just that day, late morning in Sherlock’s bed, John had been blessed with one of Sherlock’s fantastically skilled and thorough blow jobs (John’s bollocks and arsehole and even his nipples attended to), while Sherlock had been shortchanged on reciprocity; all John’s breathless panting followed by prolonged divers’ breaths caused a headache to flare up, bad enough to nauseate him. In the end Sherlock finished himself by hand while John whispered growled nothings in his ear. He claimed not to mind that so many of their recent encounters seemed to end the same way, but when
he went for the shower afterward, there was no invitation for John to join him.

Thurston barreled out the suite door and charged down the hallway; John followed with a weird blend of reluctance and anticipation.

They were past the BSN broadcast suite by the time Thurston stopped. But instead of striding in, cocksure and jolly, to a party in full swing where an actual Boston Brawlers forward was sure to be a welcome crasher, Thurston’s body squared up and he charged forward in a motion John recognised all too well. He double-timed to catch up.

“Yo, needle-dick! Get your fucking ape-hands off my sister!”

Thurston was puffed up, one fist clenched, red-faced. One of the Brawlers’ ice girls was standing at a distance, blinking and flicking the tips of well-manicured fingers beneath her lashes. Four clean-cut, obviously drunk, overgrown fraternity brothers wearing golf shirts and pleat-front khaki trousers shouted back at Thurston—a jumble of defenses; apologies; dares to fucking go! You wanna fucking go, bro?; and threats to sue.

John did a quick check-in with the young woman—he thought her name was Morgan but it could have been Madison—resting a hand on her elbow and asking if she was OK. She nodded, wobbly-smiled, said she was fine. John tipped his head toward the door, and she did not need any more encouragement to leave. The fans and Thurston were still arguing in raised voices, putting on an ostentatious display of chest-thumping.

“Thurty!” John shouted, and his eyes hurt from shouting.

“This guy had his goon-hands all over our sister, Cap,” Thurston defended.

“Forget it,” John soothed, trying to quickly defuse the situation. “Just a misunderstanding. She’s fine.” Didn’t they usually send the ice girls to the suites in pairs and trios? Wasn’t there supposed to be a male staffer on hand to keep an eye on things? Several head office guys were going to wake up to angry emails about how one of the women ended up in a box with four drunk men and no security escort, that was for damn sure.

Thurston stepped back, held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, letting his captain be the alpha dog even though he’d been the one to charge in, barking his head off.

“Let us buy you guys some coffee for the road—you’re not driving,” John prompted, a question that wasn’t a question. Thurston ducked his head out into the corridor looking for a server. The fans went complacent and apologetic rather quickly, assuring John they had a limo, it was Danny’s bachelor party, they were going to the Golden Banana after this, maybe you want to come along. John suggested they take some photos, congratulated the groom. He and Thurston posed for selfies with the men, made sure the server took care of them—tried to persuade them, though, that maybe they should lay off the alcohol and just enjoy the game, they’d never get into a strip club if they showed up wasted—and bid them goodnight.

They returned to their box as the second period got underway, the Brawlers leading the Avengers 1 – 0. “The fuck was that?” John demanded. “You can’t be threatening fans on game night, Thurston.”

“But you said—”

“Very bad form. You’re lucky they didn’t call security,” John scolded, and shook his head in his disgust and frustration. Thurston’s shoulders dropped and he tried to stifle a sigh. John’s tone was
much lighter as he added, “Should have stayed in school, shit-for-brains.”

Thurston smacked John on the back as they laughed.

“Seriously, though,” John said after a minute, sobering. “I admire the impulse, and by the looks of her, she was in some trouble. But a guy your size? Not to mention, a fucking Boston Brawler. All you had to do was walk in there and it would have been done. You probably didn’t even need to say anything.”

“No disrespect, Cap, but I’d have done the same no matter who the girl was. It didn’t look right.”

“I get it. I do. You’re a good guy, Thurty, no question.” John was hyper-aware of the captain/player dynamic undergirding the discussion. Thurston was not all that much younger than him, and obviously a tough customer, but there was a subtle, wordless acknowledgement of hierarchy, of respect and deference. “Your instincts are always good. But you have to take a half-second to consider if your first idea is the best one in a situation like that. It was a professional risk for you.”

“Fuckin’ risk to their jawbones,” Thurston scoffed. “Buncha predators. Fuck’em.”

“You’re kind of making my point.”

“Fuck’em though. Seriously. Putting their hands on her like they fucking own her. Probably don’t even wash them after they jerk off. Money can’t buy class.” He took a long pull from his beer bottle and belched aggressively.

“You’re right about that,” John grinned.
They arrived at their D.C. hotel near two in the morning. John had slept through the flight, only roused by the changing pressure in his ears as the plane descended, mercifully short and quick but nonetheless exceedingly painful, then fell into a doze on the bus; in the midnight dark, with the high seat backs obstructing most views and the cover of a pilfered airplane blanket and Sherlock’s coat bundled in their laps, John decided not to discourage Sherlock’s hand from resting on his thigh. Once inside the suite, Sherlock hung their coats while John chugged bottled water he liberated from the mini-fridge.

The Brawlers had lost to New York’s Avengers, 2 – 1, and Sherlock emerged from the room looking unusually downtrodden. John had given him a pat on the back and a “Good game,” as they made their way to Sherlock’s box. Normally Sherlock donated the seats to children’s charities, but he’d made good on his promise to invite the bloggers, Mike and Mags, and he wanted to say hello. John had teased him about wanting to kiss up to them so they’d use more gifs of Sherlock in his sharp suits to punctuate their posts. The young women were friendly, gracious, one wearing a Brawlers jersey and the other a t-shirt supporting her hometown Hawks. The four chatted just long enough for John to come away impressed with their humour and quickness—the women traded patter as if they were an improvisational comedy duo—as well as their obviously deep knowledge of the game. They rattled off playoff predictions as casually as they name-checked players from around the league, calling them by the clever nicknames used in their blog posts.

As much as he enjoyed their talk, John was done in, and there was still a flight to Washington ahead of them, so after what he reckoned was a polite amount of small talk he gave a meaningful glance Sherlock silently acknowledged before excusing them to get to the bus for their flight to D.C. Sherlock wished the women continued success and they thanked him effusively for the invitation. A couple of photos, handshakes and hugs, and the men bid goodbye and made for the bus that would carry the Brawlers to the airport.

“How are you feeling?” Sherlock asked as he hung the coats and then shed his shoes, leaving them flung carelessly on the floor, not bothering to close the cupboard door. John noticed that he avoided asking, how’s your head?, and was aware of a poorly hidden agenda behind the question. Sherlock was feeling him out, asking without asking, the inquiry about John’s status an offer to buy him a drink before inviting him to join Sherlock in the gents’.

“Not too bad, actually,” John told him, which was mostly true. His head was aching, but he’d had worse, and images flashed through his mind of Sherlock nude, flushed, panting. Headache be damned, John felt a deep need just then to incite Sherlock to riot. “I like that suit, by the way. Have I ever told you?”

Sherlock’s suit was pigeon-grey, shot through with subtle threads of peacock green-blue, with close-cut trousers uninterrupted by pockets or pleats; his shirt featured grey mini-dots on a field of the same dark teal as the suit’s accent weave. The jacket’s single button meant the deep V showed more of his shirtfront, which John found sexy in some way he couldn’t quite name (all his own suits were the traditional three-button type, a workaday standard he’d never thought to question).

“I don’t think you have,” Sherlock admitted with a faint curl of his lips.

“It’s your most tarty one,” John grinned at him. “Gives a man ideas.”

“Such as?” Sherlock approached him, hands going to John’s throat, picking at the knot of his necktie, and John tried not to see the part of Sherlock’s expression that looked impatient, a
complaint that it was *about the fuck time things got back to normal*. John reached for Sherlock’s jacket button and slipped it through the buttonhole, snaked his hand beneath the lapel to stroke upward from Sherlock’s belly to his chest, fingertips seeking to rough up his nipple through the crisp cotton of his shirt. Sherlock met his gaze and raised his eyebrows, still awaiting John’s reply.

“Like getting us both all tangled up in your trousers while I eat that gorgeous arse.”

Sherlock let out a sharp exhalation and slithered John’s necktie loose, went to work on his shirt buttons. John began backing away, Sherlock following, toward the bedroom.

“I think about your prick getting hard behind those buttons, oozing for me so I can see the damp spot wrecking your trousers. Ripping your shirt buttons loose. Trapping your arms behind your back with the sleeves so I can lick and bite your nipples—” Here John gave his nipple a pinch though the fabric, “Suck them until you’re begging me for more—to suck you, fuck you, rub up against you and come all over your fine clothes.” John raised his hands to shove back Sherlock’s jacket from his shoulders.

Sherlock let out a broken, heavy moan.

“Like that idea?” John muttered, and they were desperate to half-undress each other, fumbling out of their jackets, John’s shoes, the ring of John’s belt buckle coming loose, tugging at each other’s shirt cuffs and working each other’s shirt buttons just free enough. Sherlock lifted John’s hand to his mouth and bit down on his wrist. John sucked a dark mark onto Sherlock’s throat. “I’d just love to dirty you up, pretty boy.”

“Yes,” Sherlock encouraged, and he fell onto his back on the bed, digging in his heels to shift himself up along it, corner to corner, mussing the fresh, taut bedclothes. “John.”

John hummed hard and dragged his palm upward over the front of his own trousers. “See what you do to me? Can you see?”

Sherlock made a high, distressed sound behind his nose, and opened his shirt front, licked two fingers and rolled his nipple.

“Open up those trousers and turn over. Don’t take them down though; I want to.”

Sherlock dirty-smiled, hummed lasciviously, and did as he was told, staring hard at John as he slipped free the hook, then unfastened six oyster-shell buttons and folded back the placket. His cock strained beneath its edge, what John could see of it already pleasingly pink against the dark nest of hair.

John rolled his finger in the air to indicate, and Sherlock moved to his stomach, open shirt cuffs revealing tantalizing glimpses of his forearms and wrists as he settled. He hummed deep and low against the duvet, gathered it up under him like a pillow.

John undressed to his pants, knelt up beside Sherlock’s thigh and slipped his fingers beneath the hem of his shirt, pushing it upward to reveal the undulating surface of his low back. Dipping to leave a trail of rough kisses along the newly-bared patch of skin, John dragged one hand up and down Sherlock’s thigh, scraping the nubby weave of his trousers with the edges of his fingernails, feeling for muscle. Sherlock’s hips rolled ever-so-slightly, seeking friction against the bed or inviting John to make use of his arse, possibly both, but whichever it was, it made John growl and press his teeth into the soft flesh at the outer edge of Sherlock’s waist.

“Pretty boy,” John said again, praise and scold in one. He traced the very edge of Sherlock’s
waistband with one fingertip, then dipped in both hands and slid Sherlock’s trousers halfway down his arse. “Look at you,” John murmured, and drew his finger down along the cleft, barely brushing the skin. Sherlock hummed against the bedclothes. John kissed, teasing, hungry, across and over the surface of each partly-uncovered cheek, sometimes sucking, sometimes biting. Sherlock rose to meet him, his breath coming louder and harder. John finally took pity and tugged the trousers down to his thighs, dug his nose into the crease at the top Sherlock’s thigh, kissing and licking, finding the plumpest part of his bum and giving it a firm bite. Sherlock groaned and tried to move his legs apart, but they were caught in the restraint of his pulled-down trousers.

John sensed Sherlock’s urge and circled Sherlock’s hips with his hands. “Up,” he ordered, and guided Sherlock’s pelvis up off the bed. Sherlock got his knees under him, his thighs still closer together than he wanted, and he let out a frustrated noise. John sat back on his heels to look at Sherlock half-undressed, his tailored shirt sliding toward his tilted-down shoulders baring his beautiful pale back, with his pricey trousers trapping him just above the knees. And of course there was his muscular backside on display for John, vaguely swaying to entice him.

“I’m going to lick you until you scream,” John promised, then dipped his fingers into the cleft of Sherlock’s arse, spreading him open, and lapped a hot upward stripe. A delicious moan from Sherlock, and John repeated the motion, holding him hard apart, wetting him, tasting him. After a few more slow, sloppy passes, he switched to tickling with his tongue tip, flicking licks and flutters, spiraling, barely-there, then closer. Deeper. Kissing. Gently sucking. John closed his lips over Sherlock’s opening and hummed delirious pleasure; Sherlock cried out.

John kept at it, holding Sherlock in place, opening his mouth and stretching his tongue to lick down between, nearly to his bollocks, then kissing his way up to the base of his spine. He dragged his teeth-edges down the curve of Sherlock’s bum, then settled back to kiss him, lick him, blow and suck air to make him hot and cold. Sherlock began to whine in time with his straining breath, and his thighs quivered.

“Stay,” John told him, and sat back again, licking his his palm, spitting into it. Sherlock’s arse was mottled pink along the crease, everywhere John had been, and the sight of it made John groan and reach into his pants to stroke his own cock. He felt light-headed. “God you are fucking gorgeous. You taste so good,” he muttered, a stream of blather as he worked his prick, ignoring sharp starbursts fireworking beneath his scalp. “There’s marks all over your pretty arse, from my teeth. And from sucking you, licking you, fuck. . .” He abandoned his own prick to split Sherlock open and dig his face in once more, pointing his tongue, licking, moaning, kissing hard and deep. Sherlock let out a high-pitched cry into the blanket held tight in his teeth, and John responded with a thick, encouraging groan against him.

Once Sherlock had at last surrendered to the urgency of his own need to be noisy, was crying a gruff, Oh!, on every gusted exhalation, John reached around his shaking legs to stroke his cock. He found it dripping, Sherlock’s foreskin rolled far back, and caught strands of the wet ooze on his fingertips to roll around the crown of Sherlock’s cock. Sherlock’s cries lowered in pitch as he rocked shallowly through the close ring of John’s thumb and fingers. John held tight, licked and kissed and groaned hotly against Sherlock’s arse. In no time at all, Sherlock began to come, his cries shattering wildly, his buttocks clenching so that John had to fall back, and it seemed his orgasm went on and on.

“That’s it, my pretty boy,” John encouraged. “So fucking hot, jeezus. . .” He let Sherlock go on fucking into his hand for a few strokes until he settled with a bone-rattling sigh and a deep shudder along the entire length of his body, and eventually sank down onto his belly, panting. John knee-walked up the bed to lean over Sherlock, shoved down his pants and licked his palm. “I’m going to come all over your delicious arse.”
Sherlock purred at him, reached back to touch the side of John’s knee. John felt his pulse pounding in his temples—no dull throb, but a vicious railroad spike pounding—and his brain was too big for his skull. He stroked himself slow and firm, looking his fill of his disheveled partner, half dressed and sated—exhausted—all because of the way John had touched him, licked him, given him orders, praised him—and as pretty as Sherlock was laid out beneath him, John was stroking his own ego as much as he was his prick, and his pride mixed with his pleasure and finished him, sloppy spatters of cream-white cum streaking Sherlock’s pale-and-pink backside.

Sherlock let out a grateful hum as John shuddered and shouted. The orgasm was a thick roll of pleasure all through him, but his head, jeezus his fucking head...

John collapsed onto his back beside Sherlock, the two of them diagonal across the big hotel bed, and John grabbed a pillow and clamped it across his face, then rolled onto his good side and tried to dig his head into the bleach-scented down of it, wanting to relieve the pressure in his skull, dull the sparkling agony of the diamond-tipped drillbits piercing his pincushion brain. He moaned, loud, not with pleasure.

Sherlock’s hand on his hip. “John?” Sherlock curled up close behind his back.

“My fucking head,” John sobbed. He tried willing his heart to slow down—to fucking stop—because the pounding was killing him. The pain was enormous, much bigger than his head could possibly contain. His scalp was going to tear, his skull crack apart, his brain pop and spill out onto the bed. He pulled at the pillow so hard, enveloping his head, that his fingers hurt. He let out another terrible moan, and his throat was thick with muck, his eyes burned, and his nose filled. “Stop my heart!” he blurted, begging, demanding. “My fucking blood. It’s too much. It’s too much.”

Sherlock held him tightly from behind, clenching his fist around John’s, peeling his fingers loose from the pillow. “Breathe,” Sherlock told him, his voice deep and sweet. John wanted to squeeze Sherlock’s hand but was too afraid he might break his bones. Sherlock pinched his thumb and forefinger hard against the base of John’s thumb, nuzzled up to his ear and quietly told him, “Breathe and be calm.” He went on pinching, digging in his thumb uncomfortably hard in the back of John’s hand, but John’s head was such agony he couldn’t really be bothered about a pinch on his hand. John purposefully drew in as long and deep a breath as he could manage, trying to concentrate on all that deep-breathing bullshit people yammered about, like filling his belly with air and breathing in one nostril to breathe out the other. His breath rushed out of him in a hurry—he was still panting and couldn’t control it—but he inhaled longer on the next breath, and his exhalation was more controled. A few more breaths, long and slow, with Sherlock’s chest and belly pressed up against his back, Sherlock’s finger and thumb really pinching the hell out of his hand —what the fuck was that about? distraction? If so, well done, it was pretty fucking distracting all right—and the pressure in John’s head, the relentless pounding in his temples, began to subside, though the dotted veil of concentrated shocks remained.

Sherlock kissed his cheek. John’s eyes were pouring tears. He felt furious and small.

“I’m playing on Tuesday,” he asserted, aware it was a non sequitur.

“All right,” Sherlock replied. Plain and simple. No argument that John could use more time—just look at him, weeping into a pillow over a headache.

“I’m fucking weeping with this.”

“I know.”
“Sorry.”

“Nope.” Sherlock finally released his pincer-grip on John’s hand, and gave the sore spot a gentle massage between thumb and fingers to make it up to him. “The last thing you need do at the moment is apologise,” Sherlock said, and there was a sly joke in the background of his tone. “I’m destroyed. They’ll need you Tuesday because I can’t play because I’m dead because you’ve killed me.” He placed a gentle kiss on John’s bad shoulder. “I’m about to clean cum off my arse with the duvet I’ll be sleeping under tonight, all because I’m too weak to stand in the shower.”

John hummed a laugh. “There’s always the other bed,” he offered, and the two of them began to stir toward shedding their remaining clothes and shifting toward the head and foot of the bed.

“Too long a trek,” Sherlock dismissed.

Once they’d settled beneath the blankets and the lights were out—John still felt the falling darkness as something so merciful he nearly wept with gratitude—John asked, “What’s that pinching thing about?”

“Acupressure. There’s a headache point there. I thought it was worth trying.”

John found Sherlock’s hand and dragged it up to his mouth, kissed Sherlock’s knuckles. “Good man,” he said. “I really am going to play Tuesday.”

“I know.”

After a few quiet minutes, the blissful drift of almost-asleep, John murmured, “Ow, my god damned head.”

Sherlock whispered, “I know.”

“Worth it, though.”

“Oh, I know.”
Guys, I have JURY DUTY tomorrow. So I suppose there's a chance there might not be an update Thursday (if I get seated for a multi-day trial, which I have in the past so anything's possible). Just thought I'd mention it.

Sherlock was oddly quiet over breakfast, and he stalked the suite like an anxious feline afterward, drifting in and out of the bedrooms half-dressed with a pair of socks in his hand, taking things out of the mini-fridge then leaving them on the writing desk, checking his phone every couple of minutes and then putting it away without actually doing anything.

John was stretched out on the sofa with an ice pack on his forehead, telling himself he’d make a stand about practicing in his usual jersey later that afternoon. His eyes at half-mast tracked Sherlock’s movements whenever he swung into view.

“What’s going on with you?” he asked at last.

“That’s a bit of my thing,” Sherlock reminded.

“This is a different sort of weird. It’s pretty fucking annoying, to be honest.”

“I have a video call scheduled.”

John waited for further explanation, but after a few beats of silence, he prompted, “OK. And?” He imagined it might be with Sherlock’s agent or attorney, something related to the leading edge of contract negotiations as the season wound down.

“There’s a reason I only speak to my parents once every six weeks,” Sherlock intoned.

John perked up at this unexpected pronouncement. “Your parents?

“Feel free to stay in the next room,” Sherlock offered.

“Fuck, no!” John grinned. “I’m going to be looking over your shoulder the whole damn time.”

Sherlock looked hilariously agonised; John wanted to take pity but couldn’t quite bring himself to.

“When?”

“Five minutes.”

“Amazing. The man and woman who sired no less a man than the world’s best hockey goalie, not to mention the hottest arse in the northern hemisphere.”

“I beg your pardon,” Sherlock sniffed. “I’m hot on a worldwide scale.”
“You’re right, of course; I stand corrected.”

“Perhaps we’ll set that aside, though. It’s my parents.”

“I’m sure they know you’re hot. Say, do you look like your dad?” John raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“I swear I will smother you with a pillow.”

John sat up from the sofa and trailed Sherlock into his bedroom, where he set up the laptop on the desk and perched on the edge of the bed, framing himself, tilting the screen. John sank into the nearby armchair, out of sight of the camera. “You’re a proper nervous wreck!” he grinned. “You’ve never threatened to kill me, before.”

“Shooosh!”

Sherlock fiddled with the trackpad and buttons, then sat back, waiting.

“Ah, there, I’ve done it.” An elegant male voice quite like Sherlock’s in tone and depth, but with more scratch and the unhurried phrasing of one used to people waiting around for him to finish speaking. John realised that although Sherlock had talked about his mother being a teacher, he had no idea what Sherlock’s father did.

“Hello, dear heart! Oh, look at you.” Sherlock’s mum, wittering. Sherlock’s mouth was a tight line and he nodded.

“What hour is it?” his father asked. “Still in your dressing gown.”

Sherlock ignored the comment. “I trust everything is all right there?” he offered, and already he sounded impatient.

“Your mother has a list, for when you’re home. What date are you arriving?”

“I haven’t sorted it yet. We’re going to the playoffs.”

“And that ends when?”

“It’s different every year,” Sherlock’s mother scolded. “You’ll come in July. There’s things need doing, up the ladder; your father gets vertigo. And the shed needs a clean-out. I’m thinking of having a car boot sale.”

“Call Mycroft and he’ll hire someone to do whatever you need,” Sherlock said.

“Oh, we needn’t bother Mycroft when you’re coming anyway. It’s only a few things, and you’re built for it.”

John snorted sharply through his nose—he couldn’t help it—and slapped his hand over his face to stifle it.

Sherlock glanced up at the ceiling, then back at the screen. “They’re asking me to find out from you if you plan to attend the trip,” Sherlock said then.

“What’s that? Who’s asking?”

“They. The head office. About the Dads’ Trip—the weekend.”
Every year the organization put together a trip for the parents—alternating fathers and mothers—to spend a weekend with the team, attending three games together (the broadcasters loved getting shots of the moms or dads all decked out in their sons’ jerseys, all jumping from their seats to celebrate a Brawlers goal), a few meals with the team, and whatever other trouble they got them up to while the team practiced. Of course John’s father was gone, so he hadn’t given it much thought, but neither had it occurred to him to notice Sherlock hadn’t mentioned anything about it, either.

“You wouldn’t want me to come to that,” Sherlock’s father said dismissively. John’s mirth died an instant death as he watched Sherlock cross his arms and absentely stroke his own bicep with curving fingers. He held his gaze away from John.

When he replied, Sherlock’s tone was synthetically casual. “I didn’t imagine you’d want to come, but they’re after me for a definitive answer.”

“That must be quite a dear thing,” his father said. “A trip like that.”

“I have no idea,” Sherlock said. “I’d take care of it, of course.”

His mother quickly negated him. “You can’t spend your savings so casually, dear heart.”

“It’s really nothing,” Sherlock said, on the edge of testiness. “If you want to attend, just say so and I’ll arrange it. All you’ll need do is pack your case and the rest is taken care of.”

“It’s not for me. You know it isn’t.”

“Fine. I’ll tell them no.”

Sherlock’s mother immediately changed the subject. “Did I tell you Mrs Waite called and said she’s coming home for a few weeks?” she asked, the subject of the Dads’ Trip clearly done and over with, boxed up and set aside.

“I visited her a few months ago; she mentioned it. Will you see her?” Sherlock asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s a long way to go and your father doesn’t like the drive. Traffic. Or if the weather is bad.”

“Hire a car, Mother, for god’s sake.”

“Don’t you spew curses at your mother, sonny Jim. Who do you think you’re speaking to?”

“I wasn’t—” Sherlock blew a hard sigh out his nose. “I apologise. Only, really you could just hire a car, go into the city and have lunch with your friend. Shopping—whatever you like. She’s only in London once a year, isn’t she?”

“It’s too much!” his mother protested.

“Mother, I gave you those credit cards so you needn’t worry about the cost of things.”

“I’m not spending your money to go in a taxi to London when your father can drive me.”

“You just said he won’t.”

“I’ll drive her,” his father gruffed, in a tone that left much space to wonder whether he really would.

John cleared his throat and rose from his chair. “Oi, Holmes? Have you got any plasters? I’ve—
Oh, sorry, didn’t know you were busy.” John walked toward the bed and leaned into Sherlock’s space, waved apologetically. “Hello there. Sorry to interrupt.”

“My teammate, John Watson,” Sherlock said, and gestured to him. John sat down beside him, his arm purposely pressed against Sherlock’s arm. “Watson, my parents.”

“Mr Holmes, Mrs Holmes. Nice to meet you. Your son’s on quite a hot streak the past few weeks. I’m sure you know about his sixty-save shutout win.”

“That’s a lot!” his mother chirruped.

“Is it? How many does he usually save?”

“All of them,” Sherlock deadpanned. “Actually it was sixty-two.”

John smiled. “That’s true. Sixty-two in a single game! And a shutout, no less.”

“Oh!” Sherlock’s mother exclaimed then, and touched her temple. “Sherlock, dear heart, have you spoken to your brother recently? He’s going to a meeting in Germany, something about global trade and the World Bank. Special invitation. And there’s a ball!”

“I’m sure he’ll have a lovely time shopping for a gown, in that case,” Sherlock replied, and John laughed. Sherlock’s father—thin, with white hair swept to one side across a broad, high forehead bearing Sherlock’s same horizontal creases, wearing wire-rimmed glasses high on his nose—looked impatient, frowning; his mother’s face pinched with disapproval at the joke. Her skin was softly slack and powdery-looking—a proper grandmother’s face, John thought—and she wore a lightweight pullover and cardigan set, both in mint green, with a single small pearl on a fine gold chain around her neck.

“Sherlock,” she tsked.

“Do you think you’ll be home before July?” Sherlock’s father asked. “The garden will be overgrown by the middle of July if no one gets after it.”

“I’ll hire a gardener. Is twice a month sufficient?” Sherlock sounded edgier by the minute, talking through tight-bitten teeth.

“Don’t you dare!” his mother chided. “Your colour’s a bit high; are you feverish?”

“I’m fine. Anyway, I was only checking about the trip. We’ll talk again just before the playoffs start, all right?”

“Of course, dear heart. Take care of yourself!”

“Haven’t I always?” Sherlock replied, and John slid one hand across to squeeze his knee. “Goodbye, then.”

His father made a grunting sound and his mother smiled, then reached forward for their computer’s keyboard, and they were gone.

Sherlock let go an angry sigh.

“Does your father really not come to the dads’ weekend?” John asked. “My dad loved it.”

“My father has no interest in hockey, traveling, or meeting new people,” Sherlock said. The two of them shuffled their way up the bed to recline against the pillows side by side. John fetched up
Sherlock’s hand and traced absent spirals in his palm.

“Yeah, but,” John said. “You?”

“He also has very little interest in me. Except as the only person on earth apparently capable of clearing out the shed or trimming the hedges.” Sherlock’s eyes were closed, but his entire face was frowning.

“Well, you are built for it,” John joked mildly, and Sherlock’s face corrected itself slightly. “You know some of the fellas invite other relatives—uncles or grad-dads or whatnot,” John suggested.

“Perhaps I’ll invite my brother. I’m sure he’d find no end of fun in it. He can wear my jersey over his three piece suit and look down his beak at everyone while complaining about the accommodation.”

John kissed Sherlock’s inner wrist. “I don’t believe he could be as bad as you make him out,” he protested.

“I’ll take you to meet them, one day. You’ll see.” Sherlock turned on his side to face John and idly plucked at his shirt buttons, only fidgeting. “Do you have anyone coming for it?”

“No one,” John said. “But my sister did the moms’ trip last year.”

Sherlock smiled at this. “That’s nice.”

“It was,” John agreed.

They were quiet for a bit, and Sherlock dipped his face to beg a kiss, which John gladly obliged. Within a few moments, Sherlock’s sweet kisses took an assertive turn, and his hand slid in flat oblongs over the expanse of John’s chest.

“Mmm,” John hummed, and drew back from the kiss, was chased, drew back again. “We have practice in a few hours. I was going to have a kip. I don’t want to get a headache.”

“I’ll be gentle,” Sherlock assured softly, dropping whispers of kisses down the side of John’s face, over the lingering faded bruises there by his eye.

“The trouble is, I can’t be,” John replied. “I can’t be gentle about it. With you.”

“Keep up that kind of talk you’ll never be rid of me,” Sherlock purred.

“I never want to be rid of you,” John told him, and accepted another kiss, their tongue-tips brushing for just a flickering instant. “But if I’m going to start skating full-on, that’s sure to fuck up my head, and I should probably take it easy the rest of the time. You saw what happened after last night.”

“Last night is what’s got me wanting to repay the favour.”

“You are a cruel man, ma moitié,” John groaned. He couldn’t remember the last time he prioritized sleep over sex; it made him angry at himself that he was even considering it. Sherlock stretched out atop him, slotting his thigh between John’s thighs, bracing himself on his elbows and leaning down to kiss John’s neck below his ear. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but . . .” John let it trail off, in hopes Sherlock would let him off the hook, but Sherlock went on kissing, tilting his hip against John’s.
“You won’t get a headache,” Sherlock whispered, and smeared his lips against John’s ear.

John inhaled deeply, sighed it out. He drew his hands up the length of Sherlock’s back, and Sherlock rolled against it like a cat being stroked. John tipped Sherlock’s chin up with one hooked finger. “I’m sorry.”

Sherlock searched his face, blinked, and then pressed himself up and over, rolled away to sit.

“Don’t be upset. You know how much I want you? You can’t imagine.”

“It’s fine.” Sherlock stood up and rounded the foot of the bed to fetch up his phone off the top of the chest by the television set. He tapped the phone’s edge against his lips. “Can I get you anything? Before your rest?”

John rolled onto his side and curled up a bit. “Just the lights?” he asked. Sherlock crossed the room to click off the bedside lamp. He stroked John’s arm well below his bruised shoulder. As he turned to leave, John said, “You know, if there’s anyone nearby, you should go ahead.”

Sherlock stopped short but didn’t turn around. “It wouldn’t bother you?”

“No.”

“I’ll have the desk ring to wake you in 90 minutes?”

“Thanks, yeah.”
As I said in a comment Monday, there's A LOT of plot between now and the end, so if I'm tight-lipped in my replies to comments, it's likely because I don't wish to give things away.

"Welcome back to the Shaw Center in our nation's capital, Washington D.C., for period three of this last meeting of the season between the Boston Brawlers and Washington Generals. You're watching BSN, the Boston Sports Network, your source for Hub Sports, and I'm Jack Edwards, here with Andy Brickley. Brawlers fans and teammates alike breathed a collective sigh of relief this afternoon, Brick, when the roster was published including the return of the Boston captain, defenseman John Watson, who missed eight games after an accidental collision with Milwaukee Musky Brent Shayner resulted in some upper body injuries. So far tonight, how do you see Watson's performance?"

"It's never good to go long stretches without a key player like John Watson—not only because he's a veteran D, and a high scoring one at that—but because this late in the season, there's a rhythm of play, a sort of group-think that's evolved over the course of the season. Playing without a key player like Watson, who usually plays big minutes, is going to disrupt the established patterns of play, and as we've seen while he's been sitting out, the Brawlers have in fact struggled a little, losing three of the eight they played while he was on the Injured Reserve. Tonight, he's on track to play only about two-thirds of his usual minutes, getting back in the swing of things, maybe still nursing the last of his injuries—I don't want to say saving himself for the playoffs, but there's always that impulse."

"Sitting in first place now, with a guaranteed spot in round one, it's true the Brawlers could be tempted to take it easy, but I'm seeing the same John Watson we've watched all year in Boston, and even historically in his NHL career—exploding off the bench, ready to go, defending the goal, and making offensive plays whenever he's got an opening."

"No doubt Watson looks aggressive and focused tonight, Jack, but the shorter shifts, fewer shifts. . .it does point to a guy who's maybe not yet one hundred percent, but getting there."

"A quick break here, and when we come back, the puck drops for the start of the third. Brawlers currently leading the Generals, 2 – 1."

On the bench, John focused his gaze at his skates; keeping his head tilted down meant no cameras would catch him with his eyes shut, or involuntarily frowning at the noise, the bright lights, the endless motion everywhere he looked so there was no calm place to rest his eyes. The arena lights went down and were replaced with strobing splashes of colour, the music blared, the crowd cheered. John shut his eyes. Under his helmet, he wore ear plugs. In his shoulder and hip, pre-game injections of cortisone numbed his residual pain. In his head, the drillbits were poised to spin and dig, but so far the game-related adrenaline dulled their impact.

That morning before practice he'd opened his email-to-nobody to review his recovery log, and it provided plain, black-and-white proof typed by his own hand that the primary trigger for his very worst headaches was physical exertion. Damned if he could avoid that; he'd have to play through
it. As such, the other thing he’d done that morning before practice was shag Sherlock senseless, and playing through the pain for long minutes blissfully sliding their cocks together in the circle of his fist had been as perfectly rewarding as he imagined playing through the pain during his first game back would—eventually, later, in the quiet dark of a hotel bedroom—prove to be.

On the ice, during his shifts, he felt no pain; it was the minutes between that were giving him grief. And the idea of afterward flying to Hamilton, through pressure changes and dehydration, with his brain on the verge of bursting, was nothing to savour. But while he was on the rink, all he knew was to make plays, keep his head up, and guide his team. So far, so good—going into the third, they were ahead. He directed a stream of water into his mouth, swished and spit it, then fitted his mouth guard into place. Sawyer offered an already-broken, stinking packet of smelling salts and John held up his hand in refusal. Then it was time to go, and he and the other starters swung themselves up and over the dasher and onto the ice.

“Forgot something?” Sherlock asked. He was already naked in bed, with the television tuned to the home improvement channel and the sound kept low; it was nearly one in the morning. John went on rummaging in his duffel, then into his shaving bag. He could not bring himself to tell Sherlock that what he’d hoped to find was one last sample dose of the good stuff; even the jumbo-sized ibuprofen pills he’d taken hadn’t touched the pressure and pricking in his head after the game, and he desperately wanted to sleep.

“Yeah, no,” John stalled, not wanting to lie, any more than he wanted to say. “Just.”

Sherlock flung back the bedclothes and patted the mattress beside him. “Here,” he commanded. John finally allowed himself to admit there was nothing to find, and quickly shed his clothes, slid into bed beside Sherlock. “You played well tonight,” Sherlock told him. “I’d have thought you were nearly one hundred percent.”

“If you didn’t know better,” John grumbled.

“I can’t not know it,” Sherlock defended. “But that aside, you looked like yourself.”

“That’s something,” John allowed, and Sherlock wormed downward on the bed to insert himself under John’s arm; John’s chin rested lightly on the top of his head. Both their gazes were aimed at the television, where it appeared Silicon Valley billionaires were shopping for islands. “Could’ve played more minutes,” John complained. Coach Lestrade had set him a schedule to ease him back into his usual twenty-plus per game just in time for the playoffs less than three weeks away, over John’s protestations that he was good to go. No one in the organization acknowledged that John might have an injury beyond what he’d officially copped to, and he wondered if he’d been just that clever in covering it up, or if it should be chalked up to the institutional bias against ever admitting a guy who came away from a big hit less than paraplegic had taken one to the head. Probably a bit of each.

“How is it?” Sherlock asked, and reached one long arm behind his own head to touch the back of John’s.

“Hurts,” John replied, then added, “I’ll survive it.”

“I’ll interpret that to mean it doesn’t hurt only a bit,” Sherlock said. John dropped a kiss in his hair.

“You’re fluent in the language of the Injured Reserve, then.”
“Mm.” Sherlock used the remote to raise the volume on the television just a few steps, so the words spoken, not merely the voices, were audible. He left his hand at the back of John’s neck, gentle fingers slow-motion massaging upward to his scalp, then back down. John let his eyes close, and they didn’t talk any more about it.

Kim threw her arms around Sherlock’s back before John had finished introducing them, and then kissed his cheek and leaned back with her hands gripping his elbows. Sherlock lifted his eyebrows but otherwise took the exuberant greeting in stride.

“This is so cool!” she enthused. “Damn, you’re gorgeous.”

Sherlock looked alarmed and John touched the back of Kim’s shoulder. “This is Michel Bouchard.” Kim gave him a wide smile and a quick embrace. “And Shane Thurston.”

Once Kim leaned away from brief embraces with the two players, Thurston grinned, “I know. . . I’m gorgeous, too. You don’t have to say.” He threw his thumb over his shoulder toward Bouchard. “That one looks like the missing link, though.”

Kim took a turn introducing some of her and John’s mutual friends. Mona had been her best friend since primary school, and her brother and John had played on some of the same youth teams; she was like a bonus kid sister and greeted John warmly. Christine and Alan were neighbours she’d become friendly with since they’d bought the little house next door to Kim’s own.

“I’m a fan,” Alan admitted as he shook the men’s hands.

“Of the Brawlers?” Bouchard asked, with some playful suspicion, as they all took seats at the big restaurant table. Kim had booked a private dining room and already there were appetizer platters and bottles of wine on the table, even as the server came around offering cocktails.

“Well.” Alan looked caught out. “Hockey.”

“You’re in Hamilton, you’re allowed to be a Thrashers fan,” John assured him, and offered a basket of bread to Sherlock, who helped himself to three slices. “No harm in it since as of last night, we definitely won’t be playing against them in the first round—thank Christ.”

“I didn’t know whether to be worried or excited by that,” Kim threw in.

“I’m sure it would have been fun for a lot of people,” John grinned. “Just not for me.”

“Maybe round two, then,” Sherlock said with an expression of obvious troublemaking.

“They’ll never get by the Hawks,” Thurston threw in.

“Are you kidding?!” Kim interjected, “The Hawks are the biggest choke artists in the league. They haven’t been to a second round since the ’90s.”

Thurston looked surprised, but pleasantly so. “So maybe it’s their year. They got that new coach. Offense is crazy, and their guys are pretty healthy.”

“Don’t bet your beer money on the Hawks, dude,” Kim told him, her nose wrinkling with disgust at the idea Philadelphia had a chance against the Thrashers.
“I got Cristal money, short stack,” Thurston fired back.

“That’s not what your babies’ mothers say,” Kim retorted. John whooped, Sherlock barked a laugh, and Thurston clapped his hands together slowly a few times, nodding affirmation he’d been bested.

“Your sister’s clever, Watson,” Sherlock said then.

“Kind of unfair she got the brains and the looks,” Thurston said with a shrug.

“Isn’t there someone to take our orders?” John asked, looking around for distraction from the potential path of the discussion. “Boosh? You’re awfully quiet.”

“So far I haven’t heard anything to argue about,” Bouchard shrugged.

The table rippled with laughter and then split off into smaller conversations. John discovered Alan and Christine were real estate brokers and he picked their brains about where he might look for a house to buy; he’d never had the urge to own property in Hamilton until well after he and Kim had sold their parents’ house, and then only after he’d been traded to Boston. He supposed a little homesickness was causing him to consider putting down roots.

During the meal, Sherlock engaged with Kim and her friend Mona, and John only caught snippets of the conversation, but at least some of it was about wine, and at another point in the evening Kim gave a highlight-reel version of her big project at the retailer she worked for, which garnered several questions about shoplifting and employee theft.

“So say I go in a dressing room there to try on some of those dad clothes,” Thurston posited. “Like some pimpin’ pink Bermuda shorts with the little green sailboats, and a kickass golf shirt.”

Kim gave him a half smile, waiting for him to finish. John had a weird feeling, like he wanted to bark at Thurston. His eyebrows lowered and he shifted in his chair.

“Pop that collar,” Thurston clarified. “We’re not homeless, for crissakes; we’re classy as hell. Anyhow, when I’m in there putting my—excuse me, girls—gentlemen’s agreement in there, first of all, is one of those alarms going to go off because it knows I’m packing heat?”

“His dreams are so vivid,” Bouchard chided, drawing laughter.

“And my second question is, when I’m doing my runway walk there to the three-way mirror, who’s watching those cameras?”

“Only the best people,” Kim assured him.

“Cute girls?” Thurston pressed, and John cleared his throat. Sherlock turned a smirking look John’s way.

“Maybe,” Kim said. “Or dudes near retirement who sit on their donut-eating arses all day.”

“Know what, whatever,” Thurston replied. “I just want to know they appreciate it.”

“I’m calling in the morning to put that outfit on hold for you to go try,” Kim threatened. “I’ll tell Hank and Darius to look for you.”

“Hot,” Thurston enthused.

John noticed the word “fuck” had not passed Thurston’s lips all evening. Beneath the table, Sherlock nudged John’s ankle with the toe of his shoe. He covered his mouth with his napkin,
swiping nothing from his lips. “You look mental.”

John dipped his head away from the table and muttered, “My actual sister.”

“Who’s for sauternes?” Sherlock piped up. “I saw there’s a strawberry-rhubarb tart on the dessert menu that it would pair with beautifully.” He motioned to the server.

After cheese and dessert, Sherlock’s choice of an amber-coloured wine that tasted of honey, and more lively chatter, there was a scrum for the bill that bordered on a riot. In the end, Kim claimed it and quickly passed the folio and her card to the server, over significant protest.

“You don’t have to—” John scolded.

Kim leaned toward him and stage-whispered, “It’s the card you get the bills for, anyway,” which drew enormous laughter from John’s teammates. As the party broke apart, amidst embraces and well-wishes for playoff outcomes, exchanges of business cards and promises to keep in touch, John pretended not to notice when his sister Kim and his teammate Thurston traded phones for long enough to tap in strings of digits.

Kim offered to drive John to the hotel and he agreed; Sherlock disappeared to the gents’ and the two siblings lingered at the table as the bussers cleared it, finishing the last few swallows from Sherlock’s bottle. Bouchard and Thurston caught a car together, and Kim’s friends waved their goodbyes with promises to call her soon.

“Mona looks great,” John said.

“She’s doing this thing where she doesn’t care what she eats, what she weighs, or when and whether she works out,” Kim told him. “She’s happier, at least.”

“Happy goes a long way.”

“For sure.” She fiddled with the wine glass’s foot. “PS: Sherlock Holmes.” She mugged astonishment.

John smiled. “I know.”

“That’s the good stuff right there, dude.”

“I know.”

“No, like. Seriously.”

“I know! I promise I know.”

“You guys should come over to my place, though, so we can hang out just the three of us. Will you have time before you go?”

“Maybe,” John said, mentally skimming the calendar.

“Just a couple hours. I can call out of work if it has to be in the day time.”

“No, that’s fine,” John argued.

“I want to! I want to see how you are when it’s not...” she gestured in the air.

“I’ll figure it out and let you know.” He bit down on an urge to warn her off Shane Thurston, for
no legitimate reason he could think of. He longed for a legitimate reason—his actual sister!—but the truth was Thurston was an OK guy, no worse (and probably a little better) than any other hockey player in terms of tomcatting, a fighter but disciplined about it—he was the team enforcer, but off the ice he kept it to the boxing gym he owned. He and Kim were alike in age. John decided to trust it, she could do a lot worse, and kept his mouth shut.

Sherlock returned and the three walked out to Kim’s car. She slipped her hands through their arms, pulling them close to her sides as they went.

“I’m so glad you’re both here!” she enthused. Sherlock reached across his chest and patted her hand.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said.

“Hey,” John put in, mock-outraged.

“Kim invited charming friends and chose a restaurant with a more-than-decent winelist, booked us a private room, and arranged for food to already be on the table when four hockey players sat down at it. She deserves thanks,” Sherlock replied. He held open Kim’s car door and shut it after her once she was seated behind the wheel, then walked around to take the seat beside her. John huffed and settled in the back. “Thank your sister, Watson.”

“Yeah, thanks, dude,” John said somewhat grudgingly.

“You don’t call him Watson, I hope,” she said.

“No, I call him John.”

“Not pooky-woo?” she prompted, sounding disbelieving. “Sugar-buns? He’d make a good Cutie-Pie, I’ve often thought.”

“Just John,” John said, sounding fully irritated that he was being teased like a kid in front of Sherlock.


Sherlock leaned well over, as if John wouldn’t hear when in low tones, he told Kim John’s pet name for him. He turned back quickly and mimed a kiss in John’s direction. John rolled his eyes a bit, but inwardly was a bit melted.

“Oh my god! That’s literally the cutest fucking thing,” Kim exclaimed, and banged on the steering wheel. “Who knew you had that in you, dude?”

John, actually rather thrilled they were getting along, but growing to greatly dislike the idea Kim and Sherlock might eventually take to each other enough to ally themselves against him, only moaned, “Are we there yet?”
Chapter 47

The best they could manage with their two-day stay in Hamilton was to make a breakfast date with Kim on game day. She had set out a nice spread of carbohydrates: pastries and bagels and sourdough bread with butter and jam and flavoured cream cheese. Kim scrambled a dozen eggs, and fried a pan of back bacon that smelled so good and familiar to John he nearly swooned.

Sherlock helped where he could; he chopped a bunch of scallions, then grated a block of parmesan he had found in the depths of Kim's fridge, then sliced a bit of fuzz off, insisting hard cheeses never went bad, only got smaller. John parked himself on a barstool at the small kitchen island, watching their backs as they negotiated for space near the cooker.

"So tell me how this went," Kim implored, shoving pillowy piles of yellow eggs around in the pan with a silicone spatula. "No details, remember... but John said you were already kind of in a relationship before you were actually in a relationship?"

"Is that what he said?" Sherlock cast a glance over his shoulder at John, who shrugged.

"I think I said we'd been having sex for a while."

"You did; I remember the creepy feeling it gave me," Kim said, with a stagey shudder. "My brother! But, so, OK. You were doing it for fun or whatever... because you're boys and boys want sex all the time. Like even when you don't want it, you want it, I don't get it, seriously, what is wrong with boys?"

John answered, "Too many things to list."

"Not a thing," Sherlock said, simultaneously, and Kim laughed.

"So anyway, like, I guess what I'm asking is who was the one who said first, that it should be something different than that?"

"Sherlock called me John, and kissed me."

"Is that all it takes? To call you by your name?" Kim looked completely incredulous.

"Well, no. But it definitely made me sit up and take notice. I was..." John grimaced, and Sherlock looked at him, and they shared an up-to-something pair of grins. "Distracted at that exact moment," John went on, "And when every man you know calls you nothing but Watson, and one suddenly calls you John, it makes an impression. So he said my name and then he kissed me."

"Yeah, but..." Kim floundered, and Sherlock took pity.

"I don't kiss, generally," he said. "To avoid catching colds and the like. So we never had."

"OK, I'm learning some things here," Kim smiled, filled plates and dealt them out; the three moved to the kitchen table. "Is this a boy thing, or just you?" She looked from Sherlock to John. "You guys?"

"I'm a fan of kissing," John reported with a shrug, "But sometimes, you know. Not everyone is. If it's just casual, hooking up kind of thing. But either way, I'd say it was Sherlock who made the first move toward something more serious."
"But you were so quickly receptive," Sherlock said, pointing his fork at John, "I suspect you might have been nearly there already. Which is part of what spurred me to give you a little push to see if you'd tip over the edge."

"I'll say I tipped over," John grinned. "Of course I hesitated; he doesn't have boyfriends."

Kim's eyes widened. "Not at all?"

"One and done, he said," John informed her.

"Wow. That's." Kim frowned. "What's the boy version of slutty?"

"I think the word you're looking for is wise," Sherlock smirked at her.

"You know, you're probably right. Maybe I should have had that policy in my twenties," she agreed. "OK, so, now you're more official than whatever that was—I'm choosing to think you were just holding hands—and how's that, with being around the team so much? Has no one caught on?"

"No one seems to have," John told her. "I think it probably just wouldn't occur to them. Sherlock's out, but..."

"Wow. Pressure," Kim said.

"It's fine," Sherlock assured her. "We've talked about it. It's hockey. I understand it's not easy to be out to teammates. If John prefers to keep his private life private, I can respect it."

Kim turned to John but gestured at Sherlock. "Enlightened," she said. "He gets it."

"He's a genius, he gets everything."

"OK, so put me down in favour. You look good together, and it's about time I had someone to share the burden." She turned slightly toward Sherlock. "You know he hates his flat and worries about not getting the championship before his legs give out?"

"I suspected as much," Sherlock replied easily, slathering butter on a bagel, then piling on a forkful of eggs. He chewed once or twice, then said around the mouthful, "Have you seen the flat?"

"No; is it sad?"

"It’s not sad," John protested.

"It’s horribly sad," Sherlock corrected him. "You know it is. You’ve barely spent a minute there in weeks."

"It’s actually a nice flat; I almost feel guilty that I dislike it so much." John admitted. "It’s just not for me. It’s over the top. It’s for rich people."

"I have news for you, dude. . ."

"Yeah, I know, I know. But you know what I mean. If I picked a place to live it would be normal. A house like this." He gestured around them. "Not fucking multi-million dollar new-construction with park views and a doorman."

"He mostly stays at mine, now, anyway," Sherlock offered.

"And what's yours like?" Kim asked. "Not a multi-million dollar penthouse?"
“It’s a tip,” John interjected. “But it’s miles better than my place.”

“You think it’s a tip?” Sherlock asked, and his expression was priceless—clear indication he was genuinely surprised to hear John’s assessment.

“Come along; you know it is. All the landlady’s old, mismatched furniture. Barely an empty surface anywhere.”

Sherlock looked thoughtful.

“Maybe you’re just used to it,” John said. “But it’s objectively a bit of a mess. And anyway, it doesn’t matter; it’s comfortable.”

Kim was looking back and forth between them, with the slightest smile teasing at the edges of her mouth.

“Don’t say cute,” John warned.

“It’s fucking adorable,” she exclaimed. “Approved, blessings on you both, keep it up, I want to be Best Man at the wedding.”

John cleared his throat and—amusingly—so did Sherlock, his cheeks flushing pink.

“Remind me to kill you later,” John told her.

“Yeah, whatever. Tell me what you do together. Do you go on dates? What do you have in common besides hockey?”

“And besides enjoying anonymous sex with strangers?” John teased.

“Ugh, stop! OK, we’re even. Cut it out.”

“We watch a lot of films together,” Sherlock told her, putting an end to the sibling sparring with a more matter-of-fact tone. “On the plane.”

“He never has his own ear things,” John reported.

They carried on chatting—Kim asking a lot of questions, John and Sherlock dutifully answering, then listening to whatever gossip she had to share about people John knew or at least had heard of. More than once, John gave Sherlock a sympathetic look or a squeeze on the knee, letting him know John appreciated Sherlock’s tolerance. For his part, Sherlock was relaxed and seemed genuinely un-troubled by the domesticity, Kim’s prodding, and the ongoing bickering between the siblings. After they’d eaten, they helped clean the dishes and Kim deemed it late enough in the morning for beer, which she offered and they declined in deference to game day. As the three gathered on the squashy furniture in Kim’s sitting room, the conversation turned—as they’d all known it eventually would—to hockey.

“So you’re playing Seattle in round one?”

“Indeed we are,” Sherlock said. “I predict we’ll win it in five.”

“You can’t go around saying those things out loud!” John protested.

“Oh, here come the superstitions,” Kim jibed, rolling her eyes exaggeratedly. “Make sure you eat the same breakfast every day,” she scolded, shaking her finger at Sherlock. “Don’t forget to touch your locker shelf four times.”
“I don’t do any of those things,” John defended.

“You’re all a bunch of freaks. Does he still say, Let’s go to work?”

“Every game,” Sherlock affirmed.

“Anyway,” John said, though he was smiling; he did really like that his sister was one of the guys, even if she hadn’t kept playing past Under-12’s. He was suddenly moved to ask, “Do you think you’d have kept playing if Dad had encouraged you more?”

Kim looked surprised at this, but appeared to think it over. “I don’t know. Maybe. It was obvious you were the one he was focused on, and I liked it but I didn’t love it. And at that age, none of the girls in my gang were playing, and it was just more important to me to spend time with them doing their stuff.” She shrugged. “Plus, I saw how hard he was on you, and how high his expectations were. If you think I wanted to jump in front of those bullets, you’re crazy. It wasn’t worth it to me, to put up with him. Not that he was all that interested, anyway—it was always Mum at my games, hardly ever him.”

“You got shortchanged,” John said, with a combination of scorn for his father and sympathy for his sister.

“Nah, it’s all right.” She waved it away. “There’s only room in this family for one superstar.”

“Yeah, so where does that leave me?” John protested, throwing up his arms. Kim threw a pillow at him.

All at once both his and Sherlock’s phones started buzzing away, in a manner that couldn’t be easily ignored. They apologised as they reached into their pockets and Kim waved it away, sipping from her beer can. Once they’d each had a moment to scan the screens, Sherlock filled Kim in.

“Our former teammate Thomas Gerhardt was in court this morning.”

“The piece of shit who tortured his wife all night long?” Kim’s question was tartly rhetorical.

“He’s taken a plea deal that will have him in prison for four to six years,” Sherlock said. John was still skim-reading.

“Then he’ll be deported.”

“He’s not a dual citizen? What about the wife?”

“She’s German, too. I guess maybe the kids are American citizens, though? So I don’t know what that would mean,” John said. “What a mess.”

“He’ll be out long before the four years are up,” Kim guessed, then added acidly, “Somebody should cut off his prick.” John and Sherlock agreed the punishment was light, given what they’d heard of Gerhardt’s marriage. John thought of what Kim had been through and barely survived, and his throat felt thick. Kim glanced across the room at the clock above the TV set and became instantly restless. “You guys probably need to get on the road; I didn’t realise how late it was.”

The three had a hurried goodbye amid thanks for the meal and promises to see more of each other in the coming summer and a reminder Kim should bring enough people to fill the seats John had bought for that night’s game. It was a perfect excuse for John to hug her, and he held on tight, for a long time. Kim let him.
On their free day in Seattle between games three and four of the first round, Sherlock was restless and John was bored, so they ditched out on the team-organised outing to batting cages and a driving range—to be filmed for the Brawlers’ behind-the-scenes TV series—and decided to walk around Capitol Hill; the weather was warming now it was mid-April and though there wasn’t much sun to speak of, the air was warm and what trees they passed were beginning to bud; John felt a bit cheerful and spring-feverish about not needing heavy coats or a toque, walking out in just his jeans and one of the striped pullovers he’d bought in every colour there was.

“How is it?” Sherlock asked him, as they strolled with no particular destination. It was the shorthand he’d come to use to inquire about John’s recovery, in particular about his head.

“After last night’s game it was pretty bad, but not as bad as it was, say, two weeks ago. And it didn’t last as long. I fell asleep OK. Today I feel fine.” John was wearing gold-framed aviator shades with deep-blue tinted lenses to shield his eyes from even the overcast quality of daylight on one of Seattle’s stereotypical grey days. “You don’t have to keep asking,” John told him. “I mean, it’s kind of you, but. . .we don’t have to check in about it every day. It’s really so much better than it was in the beginning.”

“I want to check in,” Sherlock said mildly. “Seems like the kind of thing people do.”

“Right,” John allowed, stopping to examine the lunch menu posted in the doorway alcove of a brew-pub. “This looks decent, what do you think?”

Sherlock made a cursory glance and acquiesced. Once they were seated, scanning menus handed them by Michael; I’m the very lucky guy taking care of you today, Sherlock made a quick decision and set his aside. “You should talk to Sawyer,” he said abruptly.

John glanced up at him quizzically. “About?” John said.

“He’s been reckless lately, quizzically. “About?” John said.

“He’s been reckless lately, showing off.”

“Kind of his thing,” John shrugged. “He’s a showboat. I guess we still haven’t beaten out that high school hot-shot, early draft pick, rookie ego. I’ve seen a little less hot-dogging from him in the past few months.”

“I agree that was true until you went on the IR. He started getting out of hand while you were sitting; since you’ve been back it’s only gotten worse.”

“He’s scored one a game for about ten in a row, though,” John argued.

“It’s still a long road to the Cup and he’s teetering on the edge of thinking he’s a one-man team. He would have scored half-again as many if he was more focused on his team and less on himself.”
John knew he should trust Sherlock’s perception and judgment—his analysis of such things had proven itself again and again all season—but he was annoyed with himself for not having paid enough attention to the way Sawyer was playing while he was sitting out; he should have noticed without Sherlock having to point it out.

“You’re right,” John said at last, with a slight sigh. “Of course you’re right. I’ll get in touch with him some time before tomorrow’s game.”

“Sooner the better, he’s the type who’ll be rattled that he’s getting a spanking from his captain, and he’ll need time to sit with it or it will get in his head during the game.”

John nodded. “How did you get like this?” he wondered with a small smile.

“Some say genius is inborn; others suggest it’s environmentally influenced,” Sherlock replied with an exaggerated shrug.

“What about weirdness?” John jibed.

“Definitely inborn. But I’ve crafted it purposefully and quite carefully over the years.”

“It suits you,” John told him, and if he didn’t know better he’d have thought Sherlock’s ears got a bit pink.

The server took their orders, and his gaze lingered on Sherlock’s hands as he removed the menu from them. John cleared his throat, and gave a meaningfully false smile. The server returned a quick grin that was as good as showing his belly in submission, and he retreated.

“Bit rude,” John commented.

“He probably didn’t think we were together,” Sherlock said, dismissing it. John thought this over. Why would he not? Two men in casual dress having lunch together on a weekday, in a gay neighbourhood. . . John thought they might pass for a vacationing couple—the pullover draped and tied over the shoulders of Sherlock’s powder-blue polo shirt, his off-white designer jeans, and the Italian deck shoes he wore without socks marked him out as not from around here, the land of flannel and cordouroy—not to mention their accents—but apparently the server had assumed Sherlock was cruise-worthy while John was—what?—Sherlock’s brother? His friend from work? It was one thing when people assumed they were two straight men, with whatever attendant story they told themselves to make that a plausible conclusion, but why would someone who’d picked up that Sherlock was gay not then extrapolate that the man with him might be his date?

John took a long pull off a glass of beer, then topped it off from what remained in the bottle.

Sherlock said, “All right? You’re thinking.”

“No, yeah. Just. The thing with Sawyer,” John said, which was technically true—it was in the back of his mind, at least—so John did not feel he was lying.

Sherlock unfolded a slip of what looked like receipt paper pulled from a cash register, held it up for John to see. It had the server’s name, Michael, and a phone number, and beneath that was hastily but legibly printed, If you ever want to share your daddy. John snorted a laugh and grabbed for it but Sherlock snatched it out of his reach, refolded it and slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans.

“I don’t know whether I do want to share my daddy,” he said in hushed tones, giving John a coy look from beneath his lashes.
“I don’t believe that for a second,” John accused.

“Well, no; of course I’d share,” Sherlock surrendered instantly. “But at the moment, I want to eat lunch.”

“What the hell was that about ‘he might not have thought we’re together,’ then?”

The young man brought their meals just then, and gave John a demure look as he drew away, assuring them they should just let me know if there’s anything at all that you need. John was completely distracted, and Sherlock raised an inquiring brow at him.

“I’m thinking it over,” was all John said on the topic, and they ate their lunch, chatting about nothing, with a taut thread of possibility strung between them, tangling in even their most innocent, off-topic discussion. Time was of the essence; they had practice in the late afternoon followed by a scheduled team dinner, but the next day was game day and John would attend the optional morning skate, then was obligated to press availability before game time. As soon as they were showered and dressed, they were on a plane back to Boston to prep for Game Five. And of course there was his still too-often-sore head to think of.

Just as he was about to suggest they skip the team meal and instead invite their new friend to the hotel suite for the evening, John heard a voice that sounded weirdly familiar say his name.

“John? Hey. . .I thought it was you but for a second I couldn’t believe it.”

It was Glen Harding. He had another man with him—a taller, wispier version of Glen himself, but with greyer, thinning hair—who stood just behind his left shoulder, looking bored and quite sure of himself. John was shocked enough that he forgot he should probably stand up, instead accepting an offered handshake while still seated with his lunch half-eaten on the table in front of him.

“Glen, wow. Small world. We’re playing in town—last night and tomorrow—against the Aeros. It’s the playoffs.”

Glen made one of those air-gulping, aha nods—a supposed indication of having been reminded, but a dead giveaway one was being fed brand new information. “How’s that going?” Glen asked.

“We’re up two games to one,” John reported, then, knowing the level of Glen’s hockey knowledge, quickly added, “It’s best of seven. First round.”

“Well, keep up the good work, in that case,” Glen smiled, and it looked genuine, and John was disarmed for a split second before he remembered Glen Harding had ditched him via text. For his boyfriend in Canada. Which must mean. . .

“John Watson,” he said, offering his hand to the other man, who stepped forward to shake it.

“Paul MacGowan,” the man said.

Before anyone asked how do you two know each other?, John gestured across the table. “My teammate, Sherlock Holmes.” More handshakes, then Glen settled back on his heel with his arms across his chest, looking hard at John.

“You look very well,” he offered. “You’ve been doing all right?”

“Got a bit bashed up about six weeks ago and had to sit out a few, but I’m on the mend,” John offered.
“Sorry to hear it. You’re back to playing now?”

“I am,” John nodded, and smiled a bit, since his teeth were already pressed tight together, he figured he may as well. “And you? Job’s going all right? Still one of the good guys?”

“Trying to be. I’ve brought Paul down from Vancouver to work with us on a contract; he’s a brilliant data analyst.” Glen smiled across at Paul; clearly John had been correct in assuming Paul was the one who’d seemed a better prospect than John had. Wiry and balding. Working with computers. How could a fit and horny pro athlete possibly hold a candle to that?

“Well, that’s heartening. Can’t say I’m rushing to join Twitter, though,” John offered, then told Sherlock, “Glen does work that aims to mine personal data to sell to companies—but only a little bit. Nothing too private.”

Sherlock gave him a nudge on the shin under the table, which John felt was utterly unnecessary. He did not need to be notified he sounded sarcastic; he’d done it on purpose.

He turned to Paul then and said, “Sherlock’s the best goalie in the NHL. On track to win a trophy to that effect this year; his fourth one.” He was absolutely dying to add something completely inappropriate, about Sherlock’s prostate stimulation skill perhaps, or the fact that over a thousand men (and counting) had wanted him quite desperately based on just a photo of his bare chest. That the two of them were weighing a scheme to bed the cute young waiter together. Instead he said, “I know you aren’t a hockey fan, but trust me, it’s quite a big deal.”

Glen gave Sherlock a small, forced smile. “Ah, excellent. Best of luck then. I’ll keep an eye out for the announcement.” John prickled, wanting to call out the obvious lie.

“Listen, great to see you,” John said, his tone making clear he was dismissing Glen Harding and his Canadian boyfriend. “We’re talking some strategy here, so really sort of on-the-clock,” he half-explained, then reminded, “Playoffs.”

“Best of luck with it,” Glen said, and even John could hear that it was genuine, and for a moment he felt a bit softened by it, even slightly guilty for being brusque and judgmental before remembering Glen Harding had apologised for dumping him, but then immediately blocked his number.

“Yeah, thanks. Take care.”

“Well,” Sherlock said, once the two had moved on, to a table as far as was geometrically possible from John and Sherlock as they could manage. “You handled that quite.. .manfully.”

John grumbled. The worst part was knowing his bitterness over Glen Harding was far out of proportion to how John had actually felt about him at the time. From his current position—well set up, by anyone’s measure—he could see quite plainly he and Glen would not have worked out. John had wanted someone, and Glen Harding was nice on paper. But Sherlock—a puzzling monster on paper—who John would not have ranked anywhere at all in a list of Top 100 Potential Boyfriends, routinely tucked himself under John’s arm to listen to John’s heart and at least once a day asked how his head was.

“I shouldn’t have introduced you as my teammate,” John said, in a low voice only Sherlock would hear over the ambient noise.

“But I am your teammate.”

“Glen knows who I am. And obviously that other one is his boyfriend.”
“The one he threw you over for,” Sherlock smirked, teasing.

“The very one,” John said sardonically. “So he probably knows, too. Anyway, I should have—”

“Nevermind it,” Sherlock dismissed the semi-apology before John had even finished.

“I’m just not used to it,” John said, feeling the sentiment deeply but knowing it probably sounded like just a lame excuse for sorry behaviour.

“Honestly you needn’t worry about me,” Sherlock said, with a smile and a slight shrug. “This way, keeping it private, it’s a bit of cloak and dagger—makes it more exciting. We’re a two-man band of spies. An underground resistance.”

John smiled at Sherlock’s metaphor, feeling something like relief. “Yeah?”

“Mm. We’re the Bader-Meinhof. The Angry Brigade.”

“Yeah. . .those were terrorist organizations,” John half-grinned.

“We’re undercover,” Sherlock said, and threw John a conspiratorial wink that stoked John’s affection, and his lust, both at once.

John held his gaze and murmured, “You look delicious, by the way.”

“That’s because I am.”

John immediately began digging for his wallet and threw a fifty down on the tabletop between their only mostly-empty plates, and got to his feet.

“Let’s see if we can’t work me up a good headache in time for practice,” he grinned.
Thank you guys for hanging in! I appreciate all the kind comments.

As for this chapter. . . I hope yr air conditioning’s working. (It’s hot)

(This is probably also a good time to mention that if you’re into it, hockey RPF fic is DEFINITELY a thing. Search box is up there ^^^. Enjoy.)

TXT from SisterKim: Hey, dude, have you seen WTH, Dummy? lately?
You’ll have to clarify, please.

TXT from SisterKim: Those girls with the blog. Mike and Mags.

Hang about.

John had never known the blog’s title, and wondered what it had to do with hockey, as he searched for the page and waited for it to load. The banner across the top included a cartoon drawing of the women he and Sherlock had chatted with a few weeks earlier. He scrolled down a bit.

WTH, DUMMY?’S MOST POPULAR POSTS

~~ WTHD’s FIRST EVER BLIND ITEM! ~~

Mags and I were at a game a while back and afterwards, the player hosting us in his box that night came to say hello. No deets, but the famously photogenic—yet also famously camera-shy—player brought along his eternally-single, veteran teammate, and I’m here to tell you, WTHD? fans. . . the two of them repeatedly made unmissable goo-goo eyes at each other.

Below the first paragraph was a gif of a cartoon skunk with its heart beating out of its chest and huge red hearts over its eyes.

Could it be that the shippy dreams of countless hockey fangirls just might be coming true at last, as love blooms between two players? Teammates, no less? I think I read that particular bit of fanfiction, once.

A gif of a young actor John didn’t recognise, his mouth contorted with dramatic shouting, bearing the caption: Only like A THOUSAND TIMES!

An RP ship sailing right into the sky box after a hometown win? Like, for serious??? On the way to the apartment where we were staying, I had to check my head so I was like, Miiiiike?? Am I crazy, or. . . ? But she was on it like Sam Kroeger’s on an express train to the minor league if he doesn’t quit clowning, and I swear this was her face:

There was another inserted gif, of a closed-eyed woman, shaking her head and snapping her fingers back and forth in front of her face with the caption: Gurrrrl. . . I know.
So we talked about whether to post this or not.

Another gif, of a guy slapping his hand over his mouth, captioned: ¡ESCANDALO!

We’re not here to cause drama (which is why we have disabled comments on this post), and people’s business is their business. But our ~<3~SQUEE~<3~ over this thing we both saw happening with our own four eyes is just uncontainable. We waited until the regular season ended, and we’re being as vague as possible on purpose. Just a reminder—we went to over 60 games this season, about 45 of those as guests of players or teams.

A gif of Mae West, winking. Thanks, fellas!

But seriously, watching these two beefsteaks tenderize each other with fond gazes was like

The final gif in the post was of a cartoon unicorn with hearts for eyes, vomiting a rainbow.

We just had to share, even though it’s vague (and no, we’re not answering tweets or emails about this either—you’ll just have to keep your guesses to yourselves). Please, oh please, gods of all that is Hockey, let it be true that two of our faves have favorited each other. Please let lots more players make lovey-dovey faces at each other. I can suggest some pairings. And maybe some coffee shop AU fanfic prompts.

John texted Kim the second he’d finished reading.

The fuck is all this?!

TXT from SisterKim: Maybe it’s not you guys.

I’ll get back to you.

TXT from SisterKim: Dude, don’t freak out. They’re just goofy fangirls with a comedy blog.

Sherlock was in the shower; they’d just come back from a run. John pushed open the bathroom door and demanded, “Have you seen that blog? Mike and Mags?”

Sherlock replied from behind the shower curtain, amid splashes and trickles of water. “That might not be about us.”

John threw up his hand and groaned out his exasperation. “Why would you not tell me about it, if you’ve seen it?”

“I think the reason is fairly obvious.”

“Please, Sherlock, do not take the piss out of me about this.”

At last, Sherlock stuck out his head from behind the curtain. “Of course I’m not. But you have to admit it’s just silly. And there’s nothing they said that’s exclusive to either of us.” He disappeared again and turned off the taps. John dragged a towel off the warmer to hand to him. Sherlock added, “My money is on Bird and Voytek from the Vikings.”

Sherlock pulled back the curtain and accepted the offered towel, which he wrapped around his waist, then reached for another to turban around his head.

“You know it’s us,” John grouched. He felt an awful, years-old panic fluttering in his gut, which made him feel unaccountably angry.
Sherlock used a third bath towel to dry his torso and limbs, then draped it around his shoulders. “Well, yes,” he acquiesced. “Of course it’s us.”

“So what do we do about it?” John asked, feeling caught somewhere between blind fury and abject terror.

Sherlock looked puzzled. “Ahh...ignore it?”

“We have to tell them to delete it,” John said, scrolling it up and down, passing by all those stupid gifs. Twenty-seven hundred views. “Look how many hits this has. The mainstream sports press must have picked it up; the next most popular post only has four hundred views.”

“In that case, it’s already out there. No one’s going to connect it to us. The commenters on that blog are mostly female fans, and they go there specifically to avoid the male-dominated comment sections of the traditional press—I think it’s fairly unlikely they’ll post their theories on NHL.com. And you know as well as I do the mainstream is willfully blind to the entire issue. They honestly believe that in the league’s hundred-year history, not a single player has ever sucked a cock.”

“Maybe only at summer youth camp,” John drily joked, his edges smoothing as Sherlock talked him down. He sighed. “It’s just...”

“I know,” Sherlock said, and kissed John’s cheek on his way through to the bedroom. “We just keep on as we have been, and unless and until someone asks, we can pretty much pretend to know nothing about it. They’re just fangirls doing a comedy blog.”

John pivoted. “That’s what Kim said.”

“Well, she’s right.”

“No. I mean those are the exact words she used.” He clicked to Kim’s texts and held his phone out for Sherlock to see. “Goofy fangirls with a comedy blog.” He gave Sherlock an accusing look.

“She knew you’d be upset. And to her credit, she wondered if I might be as well.”

John was torn between thinking it was diabolical that the two of them were brainstorming out of his ear shot about how to handle him, and thinking it was actually a bit kind of them to have been concerned. He blew a sharp sigh out through his nostrils and sank to sit on the unmade bed’s edge. As Sherlock dressed in warm-ups—they had nowhere to be until the bus took them to the Aeros’ arena at four—John idly scrolled the post, rereading, triple-checking there was nothing to identify them. Famously camera-shy definitely put Sherlock in the mix, but John could think of at least a dozen other players who also didn’t do press, but felt safe assuming it wasn’t because they ran a don’t-give-a-fuck risk of outing themselves. John checked the date on the post.

“So this came out last week,” John said, and Sherlock picked up the meaning: he and John’s sister had discussed it behind his back, then purposely not told John about it right away.

“She rang me when she first saw it. It was no crisis; we only spoke for a few minutes.”

“But her texting me about it this morning?”

“I think she must have seen something in the mainstream press, or at least noticed the sudden uptick in page-views, and wanted to get to you before you heard it elsewhere.” Sherlock grinned as he tossed his damp towels in a balled-up heap in the bathtub. “She’s quite smart; you should be sure to always listen to her.”
“Trust me,” was John’s reply. He knew his sister was the more intelligent of the two of them, in every measure. She was better than John at everything from maths to understanding peoples’ hidden motivations for the things they did—she had never liked Jason Barrett, even long before he concocted a scheme to extort John’s flat in Hamilton by threatening the release of compromising photos, and on that basis alone John knew to trust Kim’s first impressions of people, and heed her advice. “I guess you’re right; we should ignore it. Maybe...” he grimaced. “No, nevermind.”

Sherlock leaned with his shoulder against the door jamb. He held John’s gaze. “Maybe not be seen coming and going together so much, for a bit?”

“No,” John protested, though it was exactly what he had been about to suggest.

“Whatever makes you comfortable,” Sherlock said, with a slight shrug. “We’re the Weather Underground. Perhaps this is one of the times we burrow a bit deeper.”

“What makes me comfortable,” John said, setting his phone aside on the night stand, “is you, in this bed, with me.”

“I just showered,” Sherlock protested, but he was smiling and it was obvious there was nothing behind it.

“Mm, I know,” John said slyly, and licked his lips.

“And you didn’t.”

“No, I know. So c’mere.”

Within a few short minutes, John might have been mentally congratulating himself for his creativity in arranging them—John’s back propped against pillows, Sherlock straddling him head-down—were he not just short of insane with pleasure. Sherlock thoroughly licked and sucked John’s bollocks, even as John held Sherlock’s arse-cheeks wide apart to burrow his tongue in, coaxing his hole from pinched wrinkle to soft opening with his eager mouth and fingertips. Once Sherlock’s thighs began to shake, and his grateful-sounding hum turned to groans between desperate pulls at John’s cock, John reached for Sherlock’s arm and coaxed it back, shadowing the motions of Sherlock’s mouth on his prick; his own mouth closing wetly around Sherlock’s first two fingers.

“Fucking hell, Watson,” Sherlock scolded, breathless, then descended again, steadying himself and keeping his mouth a tight “o” as John rocked up into it.

“Feel this,” John ordered, and guided Sherlock’s hand so his spit-sopping fingers could feel their way around his opening. Sherlock did not hesitate, tracing the edges of his opening with the tips of his fingers. “Christ!” John bit out, and his hips bucked. He imagined this might just turn out to be his masterpiece: Sherlock fingering himself in an arse John had eaten to ready it, even as he sucked the sweat from John’s bollocks, then deep-throated him. Sherlock’s fingers probed and prodded, then he sank in both all the way to the middle knuckle and began to pulse in and out, more gently than John would have predicted—a tiny flicker of movement—but steady and fairly quick. Sherlock whined around John’s cock and rolled his tongue over its head, then closed his lips and quick-sucked in time with the beat of his fingers.

“God, you are incredible,” John groaned, and momentarily his head dropped back, following the upward roll of his eyes behind fluttering lids. He quickly rose up again, though, to watch Sherlock fingering himself. “Fucking gorgeous,” John told him, and caved his chest a bit to make room for his hand, but as he moved to lick his palm and fingers, Sherlock suddenly made a high, desperate
moan around John’s cock and his lips came loose from the crown, as he came in hot streams down John’s chest and belly, his prick completely untouched by either of them.

“Ohmygod…”

“Fuck, Sherlock, fuck that’s so hot, jeezus.”

Sherlock, panting, held John steady in his curled fist, huffing heat across John’s cock and bollocks.

“Oh my god.”

Sherlock slipped out his fingers and John went after the raw-pink rim of his hole, tracing its contours with his tongue, kissing and licking ferociously, squeezing him with both hands to feel his face truly buried in Sherlock’s delicious, round arse. John hummed and moaned against the thin skin deep in Sherlock’s cleft, his tongue trailing down, and up, and Sherlock at last slipped his hot mouth back into place around the crown of John’s cock, his head bobbing so forcefully the motion was telegraphed along the length of him: back curling, strong thighs rising and falling, rocking himself against John’s chin and nose and greedy wet mouth.

Sherlock kept John close and tight between his lips as he came, then parted them to let John’s cum slide thickly down over his crown, giving him a final swirling lick that made John fall away moaning, releasing Sherlock’s hips so he could maneuver—not entirely gracefully but it was John who’d put him there so he forgave the inelegance—to lie by John’s side.

Sherlock scattered kisses over John’s still faintly-bruised left shoulder, and up into the curve of his neck. Near John’s ear he murmured, “How is it?”

John breathed, checking in with himself. The network of drillbits scattered over the surface of his brain which had been the primary source of his agony since his injury were just then nearly undetectable, a few sparking faintly here and there, but the rest wrapped in something cushiony and soft, dulling their intrusion to nearly nothing. John released the breath.

“I’m good,” he said, found Sherlock’s hand and raised it to kiss the soft-bent knuckles of his fingers. “I’m good.”

Sherlock smiled. “I’m glad. That was one of our best, I think.”

“Really fucking good,” John readily agreed. He thought of Sherlock coming from only his own fingers up his arse, and John’s cock in his mouth, an idea which produced a little aftershot of orgasm that made John shudder. He dragged one flat hand over the mostly-dry trails of Sherlock’s cum on his chest and belly, reveling.

“So, in future, when you remember a mind-blowing fuck you once had in Seattle.…” Sherlock began, and let it trail off.

“This one,” John replied immediately. “Hands down. You’re the only man in this entire city, as far as I’m concerned.”

Sherlock smiled.

“Look at you, so pleased with yourself.”

“I do always like to be in first place,” Sherlock told him. “You know this about me, surely.” He reached one arm to the night stand for the hotel phone, lifted the whole thing onto his belly, and pressed two digits. “I’m ordering lunch from room service. I will give you a thousand dollars to get
dressed and answer the door when it arrives.”

“You can’t buy me, moitié,” John told him.

“Please?” Sherlock punctuated it with a pecking kiss on John’s temple.

“Sold.”
“With the clock winding down on period three of Game Five here in Boston, I’d say we’re looking at some good old-fashioned Brawlers hockey tonight, wouldn’t you, Brick?”

“Definitely. Absolutely. This Boston team came out to win it tonight, knowing a win here would end the series and get them four rest days’ before the start of round two. In the first period we saw aggressive forechecking by all the forward lines, but especially from that second line of Hammel at center, Sullivan and Thurston the wings. The second line made all the big plays early in the game, putting Boston on top just two minutes, sixteen seconds into the game on that goal by Sullivan. They kept puck control in the offensive end, had several good looks—Hammel’s slapshot that rang the post—and just looked like the Boston Brawlers want to look: working hard, making plays, getting pucks and bodies to the net—keeping calm and keeping the game in their control.”

“And in period two we saw the Seattle Aeros mixing up their forward lines a little, a dangerous choice in a must-win playoff situation, but the new dance partners seemed to put a little spring in the Aeros’ steps as they scored two in under two minutes, midway through the period. I wouldn’t say it put the Brawlers completely on the back foot, but they took only four shots on goal in the second half of period two, to the Aeros’ thirteen shots. How are we feeling about play so far in the third?”

“I think Boston looks good. Every guy’s out there doing his job, doing just what his teammates and coaches expect—now it’s a matter of whether the Aeros continue to push for control of the puck, or if the Brawlers can take it over.”

“Well said, and with just over eleven minutes left to play, there’s still plenty of work to be done on both sides. Faceoff is in the Seattle zone, to the stick side of goaltender Neils Bendreyko, Preminger will take the faceoff for Seattle, and Bouchard for Boston. Michel Bouchard wins it, Sawyer takes control and skates it around the the back of the Aeros’ goal. A long pass to Hatch, he tosses to Watson, Watson back to Hatch. . .Hatch fakes the shot, a soft pass to Watson for the one-timer, HE SCORES! Team captain John Watson ties it up for the Boston Brawlers with a backhand low on the glove side. Bendreyko was in a bad position and just couldn’t get across in time. The game is tied, 2 – 2, on a John Watson goal—Hatch will get the assist—I’m Jack Edwards here with Andy Brickley on BSN, and we’ll be right back after the break.”

The light went on and the horn sounded; John pumped both arms, stick clenched upright in his fist, and his teammates skated in for a huddle. Mellon gave him a sound thump on the back of the helmet and John sucked his teeth, waiting for a reverberating throb in his head, but none came. He skated past the bench to bump gloves while the celebration song blasted over the PA and then took a look at the replay on the scoreboard. He thought it looked all right; he was skating well, quick and precise. He chewed on his mouth guard, juggling it from side to side, then reached over the dasher for a water bottle and sprayed some into his mouth, swallowed, then sprayed and swallowed again.

“Aw’right, boys!” he shouted, and the men on the ice skated in around him, the players on the bench leaning in. “Ten minutes left, tied up, and I don’t know about you, but fuck if I’d rather go home and sleep in my own bed tonight than get on that fucking plane with you arseholes for another six-hour flight this week. So let’s focus up, just play our game, put one more in and we can clock out. Bring it in. One, two, three. . .”

“BRAWL-ERS!”
As they skated back toward center ice for the faceoff, John glided up by Sawyer’s shoulder. “Hey, Saws, I see you there. Good looking out for the play. I know you probably wanted to take the shot.”

“Nah, no screen. He’d have seen it coming.”

“You’re thinking like a pro. Keep it up,” John encouraged, and skated on to take his place on the edge of the faceoff circle.

The Aeros came back from the second TV timeout like they were falling out of a clown car—tripping over themselves and each other, throwing passes to no one, leaving the puck on a give-and-go when there was nobody around to receive it, shooting wildly wide and high of the net. Sherlock had one diving save that was sure to be featured in the recaps—his pads stacked, stick wide, catching glove raised high to snatch away what had a seemed a sure goal for Seattle. But despite the Aeros’ apparent collapse, the Brawlers couldn’t get past their defense, and goaltender Neils Bendreyko knocked aside shot after shot.

They played five more scoreless minutes, and at last caught a break when Mellon went on a breakaway right off the bench, skating on fresh legs and like there was a hornet in his pants, chased by his four cheering teammates and five cursing Seattle Aeros.

“Mellon goes the last-second serpentine route, shoots. . .deflection by Bendreyko. A battle for it in front. . .Bouchard—SCORES! A sneaky wrist shot by Michel Bouchard puts the Boston Brawlers ahead with less than two minutes to go! This Boston Garden crowd is roaring its enthusiasm for the go-ahead goal by Michel Bouchard. Time for a break; we’ll catch our breath here in the BSN broadcast booth, and when we return. . .it’s winning time!”

That night, back at Sherlock’s flat, they ate their way through Sherlock’s kitchen—recently restocked by the landlady while the team was on the road in Seattle—then slumped in the sitting room’s comfortable armchairs, checking their phones for scores around the league as games ended further west. None of the other series would be decided that night, but they were keeping their eyes on things, trying to predict who they might face in the second round.

“I can’t tell you how much happier I am to be sitting in this chair tonight, than I would have been on the plane back to Seattle,” John commented. “A week with my feet on the ground feels like a gift right now.”

“I don’t often mind the travel, but I agree. Tonight’s was a good game, though.”

“For sure,” John agreed. “I thought they had us for a while there. A pretty good while.”

Sherlock hummed and his long index finger lazily scrolled his phone’s screen. After a long moment he said, “Bit of a pity we won’t get back to Seattle to rendezvous with Michael the waiter, though.” He gave John a slightly regretful, but mostly mischievous look.

“Well,” John said. “Haven’t got any firm plans for the summer holidays yet.”

“True,” Sherlock agreed, sounding casual. “Shall we call him?”

“What? Right now?” Sherlock suddenly had John’s full, rapt attention.

“It’s only half-nine there.”

“He might be working.”
Sherlock gave him a withering look. “You’re right. Let’s not try arranging for a techno-threesome just in case he’s working.”

“Go on then, bluffer,” John chided, and crossed his arms, waiting.

“I’m not bluffing,” Sherlock warned, blasé.

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Start considering your boundaries; things might move rather quickly,” Sherlock quipped, tapping and scrolling the screen of his mobile. John only nodded, smile-frowning, still half-certain Sherlock was only winding him up. Did Sherlock’s hard and fast one-and-done rule no longer apply to anyone? John knew it had been broken for him, for which he was enormously appreciative, but he also found himself feeling a little irked that he may not be alone on that particular pedestal.

A familiar, singsong chirping drifted from Sherlock’s phone: the ringtone of a video call.

“Hey, hiiii!” came another, quite different singsong chirping. “How are you?”

“Very well,” Sherlock said matter-of-factly, dispensing quickly with small talk. “John’s here, too.” He turned the screen toward John. Michael’s long-on-top, dyed-red hair was disheveled where it leaked out from under the edges of a knitted toque. He took a drag from a black-papered, gold-filtered cigarette and blew the smoke away to one side.

“Hey there,” John said, instantly and easily sliding into cruising mode.

“Hey,” Michael said softly, and dipped his head a bit, an obviously calculated, twinkly flirtation John spotted a mile off but fell for instantly, nonetheless. “I’m glad you guys called.”

Sherlock turned the phone back toward himself. “Are you free at the moment? John and I are—I’d say—eight minutes away from the evening’s last fuck, but perhaps you could join us if you’ve the time.”

Heat rushed and burbled through John as he listened to Sherlock issuing the invitation, watching his expression—self-assured, even haughty, with a certain hungry narrowing of his eyes John recognised well.

“Yeah, I’m free,” Michael answered. “What an awesome surprise. Move so I can see you both at once?”

John caught Sherlock’s eye and tipped his head toward the sofa, against the far wall. He checked that the doors from the landing were locked as they went, and they settled close beside each other, thighs pressed together, slumped against each other’s shoulders. Sherlock held the phone between them and they could see themselves in the tiny window in the corner of the screen.

“There you are, hi. You’re both looking handsome.”

“You as well. I like the—” John touched his own lower lip with his fingers, indicating. “This whole bit. You weren’t wearing those when we met before.” Michael wore a slim silver ring in each side of his lower lip, with smooth black beads.

“No, I guess not.” He pushed his tongue around inside and over his lip, drawing attention, moving the rings a bit. “I was working that day.” He stuck out his tongue and wriggled it, displaying a piercing there as well.
“Ah, there it is,” John said approvingly. Michael let go a low giggle and John licked his lips.

“I like the nipple rings,” Sherlock said, his voice a half-step lower than usual in tone and volume. Even though he wasn’t the one being flirted with, John felt a thrill of desire at the sound of that voice. Sherlock went on. “Wearing those?”

Michael moved his phone away from himself to widen the view, and stroked the thin fabric of his already tight t-shirt taut against his chest to highlight the shape of his nipples, the little rings through them. He found the edge of one with index finger and thumb, grasped it through the fabric, and tugged outward. “Yeah, always,” he said, and licked the pierced lip again. “You guys were already getting started?” he asked, and his image went sideways and vanished then appeared again as he settled on a mattress on the floor of his bedroom. He rented space in a converted church; there was even an arched, stained-glass window in his room.

“Nearly,” Sherlock replied, though they had not been anywhere near, as far as John could tell at the time, letting their supper settle and refreshing playoff scores on their mobiles. But Sherlock had said they were eight minutes away, and John imagined he was probably right.

“Can I see you kiss?” Michael asked, putting on his own bedroom voice.

But. “Wait a second,” John said then, before Sherlock had even made a move toward kissing him. “You’re not recording this, are you?”

Michael looked momentarily confused. “No. Why, do you want me to?”

“I don’t. . .” John said, and cast a helpless, apologetic glance Sherlock’s way. “I think I’m actually not entirely comfortable with this.”

Sherlock drew the phone toward himself and said, “Sorry. Ah. Maybe another time?” John pinched and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a thumb and two fingers, slouching away from Sherlock on the sofa.

“Yeah, sure. OK.”

“Take care,” Sherlock said, and ended the call. He set his phone out of the way on the coffee table, face down. He put his hand on John’s knee and gave a little shake to draw his attention. “What was that about?”

“I just had this sudden, awful vision of a viral video of the two of us fucking on the sofa.”

“I would watch that half a million times,” Sherlock replied.

“I’m sorry. It would have been good. Really hot. But.”

“It’s all right. I’m sure he’ll find someone else to spend his energy on; he’s young and cute. And, as I’m sure you recall, quite aggressive.” Sherlock’s hand moved from John’s leg to rest in the hollow of his neck, and his thumb dipped into the ring-neck of John’s shirt, tracing over the prominence of his clavicle. “You’re smart to be careful,” Sherlock credited. “I got carried away; it wouldn’t have occurred to me.”

“Smart, or paranoid,” John grumbled.

“A healthy dose of both, I think. We’ll just have to resort to your fallback plan of summer holidays,” Sherlock joked. “Or we’ll find another one closer to home so we can bring him back here, and we’ll be sure to leave everyone’s phones in another room, just in case.”
“We should bring them to mine, don’t you think? This place is—”

“A tip, I know,” Sherlock said, with a roll of his eyes.

“Right.” That was not how John was going to end his sentence, but he let it go. “Anyway, let’s go to bed. Now I’m thinking about the two of you. . .” John darted forward, tilting up Sherlock’s chin to press a biting kiss against the side of his throat.

“Sharing my daddy?” Sherlock finished for him, with a funny tease in it, and he ducked to catch John’s lips with his own; between warm kisses turning hot, they went on, in soft voices.

“I could maybe be his daddy, if I were extremely precocious. I could never be yours.”

“Mm, and thank god for it. So, yes, let’s go to bed.”

“Wait. Was that eight minutes, just then?”

“Shh.”
“Plus/minus” is a statistic that was very “in” a couple of seasons ago; you couldn't go five minutes in a game without hearing about players’ plus/minus stat. But statistics go in and out of fashion (gee, it's almost as if you can't predict anything based on statistics after all, and that they're ultimately interesting trivia but of no real use. . .), and I didn't hear the plus/minus mentioned even ONCE this past season, in 80ish Bruins games I watched. Basically it's a measure of whether good or bad things happen when a player is on the ice--does he score or get an assist? Does his team score? Or when he's on the ice do they get scored on, or draw penalties? Anyway, not terribly important but it's new hockey terminology in the story so I'm noting it.

Also, this is a good time to mention I don't know (and don't care!) about how contract negotiations work. Literally all I know is that contracts expire on 30 June, so at this point in the story (late April) it seems like the time their agents would be negotiating contracts.

The only references John caught in mainstream hockey reporting to Mike and Mags’ blind item were by a couple of newspaper columnists—none based in Boston—scoffing at the notion of gay NHL players and dismissing the bloggers as deluded—possibly perverted—know-nothing women. John felt sympathetic; he’d spoken with Mike and Mags long enough to know they were more than casual fans. He appreciated that they were blogging from a fresh perspective. And of course, there was the small matter of their conjecture being absolutely spot-on.

Despite his regret about the usual macho goons behaving in their usual goonish fashion, he found himself deeply relieved they were so quick to dismiss the post as a baseless rumour. John sent Mike and Mags one of those overpriced gift towers full of fancy popcorn and mixed nuts, with a card saying how much he enjoyed their blog and urging them to keep up the good work. He did not sign it.

“How was your visit with Jeremy?”

“How was your visit with Jeremy?”

“Quite fine.”

John had spent the morning at his flat, switching some of the heavy winter clothes he’d been keeping at Sherlock’s for a small case full of things more appropriate to the spring weather. He wheeled it into the bedroom and left it standing by the chest of drawers, then returned to the kitchen where Sherlock was grilling cheese sandwiches at the stove top. There were a few plates in the center of the table with olives, peppers, cheese, and meat John recognised as having come from the antipasti bar in the nearby supermarket, but Sherlock had gone to the trouble of taking everything out of the plastic tubs and arranging it somewhat neatly. John rolled up a tiny ball of olive-oil coated mozzarella in a paper-thin slice of prosciutto and crammed it in his mouth, catching a drip on his chin with one finger, which he licked clean.

“You’re feeding me to make me dependent,” John accused. “Like a stray cat. You’re trying to tame
me down.” He moved in to slide his arms around Sherlock’s waist, clinching him from behind, and kissed him just by the ear, where his sideburns were filling in, the first and only wholly respectable bit of his playoff beard to show itself. Twelve days’ growth on Sherlock’s face was still no more than a scruffy Van Dyke, his chin whiskery and his upper lip hinting at a mustache, but his cheeks still almost perfectly smooth.

“Never,” Sherlock assured him, tilting his chin to one side to invite John to kiss his neck, even as he flipped the sandwiches in the pan in front of him. “You’re no cat, anyway.”

“No?”

“I’d say you’re morphing into a bear right before my eyes.”

John stepped away a bit to lean against the worktop, and he scratched his fingertips through the whiskers on his jaw. He was not a particularly hairy fella—just the usual male pattern everything—but it was true he could grow a hell of a beard. In the past it had definitely attracted a whole different breed of men than his usual—it was like being in disguise, and he’d even thought it caused him to change his approach and patter from friendly, non-threatening, and smooth to something rougher and more self-assured. It was good fun.

“Not your type?”

“I don’t have a type,” Sherlock reminded. “It’s like having a whole new man.”

“I feel similarly. Even in your posh suits you look like a bit of rough trade, with that scruff. Like a student who fancies himself a rock star.” John gripped Sherlock’s chin and gave it a little chuffing. “It’s cute,” he said. “Don’t worry; you’ll have a proper one when you’re fully grown.”

“Fuck off.”

As they were eating, John said, “Picked up my letters while I was at my place, and as if I weren’t currently under pressure enough, my agent sent the first drafts of the proposed contract, and the Tremont sent a new lease.”

“That’s a lot,” Sherlock acknowledged.

“Have you got anything from your people yet?”

“Nothing written; I had a phone call from my agent with some figures being floated but he’s still negotiating. He lives for it; it takes him ages. I probably won’t have anything to sign until the eleventh hour, but so far what I’m hearing sounds acceptable. Eight years; free agency after five. Money, money, money.” He waved it away. “And yours?”

“It’s just a draft,” John said, trying to dismiss it.

“They all start out as drafts,” Sherlock countered, mildly. “Have you got a plan?” It could have been asked in exasperation, worry, or impatience, but Sherlock only sounded curious. His posture was soft and his tone casual.

John, taking full advantage of the fact Sherlock had not mentioned aloud what John had once told him about his self-imposed limits in case of concussion, inhaled deeply, then said, “I think I’ve got a few more in me.”

Sherlock’s only reaction was to raise his eyebrows inquiringly, attentive, waiting for John to go on.
“I’m playing well, still not a hundred percent off the ice, but I’m skating all my minutes, and my plus/minus is good. Good feedback from Coach and his staff. And not for nothing, I’ve just turned thirty-eight and they’re offering me a three-year deal.”

“No question, you’re one of the best career defensemen in the league,” Sherlock agreed. “Happy enough in Boston to stay three years?”

“There’s an out every season. But even still, yeah, I think so.” He thought to himself that if he stayed his first priority would be to get out of his horrible flat. “I’ve been pretty happy as a Brawler.”

“And, have you considered alternatives?”

“What, another team? I’ve had no offers yet that I know of.”

“I meant alternatives to continuing to play hockey.”

John was caught up short. He sat back a bit in his chair; his mouth opened, but closed again on a quick, unsure hum. He shook his head and shrugged, mugging. Dunno.

“Something you’ve been putting off? Or something you’ve wanted to try setting up but you’ve been too busy?”

“Not really,” was John’s hesitant reply. “Are you trying to say I should quit?”

“It’s not for me to say,” Sherlock said.

“That’s right,” John said quickly. He had not anticipated pushback from Sherlock—Sherlock, of all people, who was a complete hockey nerd, who had lived out his youth in a foreign country where he was afraid to speak the language just to keep playing—in fact, he’d assumed Sherlock would be thrilled to hear they could carry on as they had been: roomies on the road, seatmates on the team plane, John defending Sherlock while Sherlock defended the goal. John adjusted his tone as he asked, “Do you have things like that?”

“After I retire I want to move back to London and open a wine bar with a shop attached,” Sherlock replied easily. “My foundation will continue to support sports programs for special needs students.”

“Jeezus,” John sighed out. “You’ve got it all sorted.”

“Can’t play hockey forever. I could have another forty years to kill after I retire; maybe longer. I don’t fancy a career in coaching or management, or in broadcasting.”

“Yeah, well,” John said, feeling resigned. “I don’t really have anything else to fall back on. You could do anything—be a wine-shop owning, violin-playing, multilingual scientist. Everything’s easy for you.”

Sherlock’s shoulders jumped on a quick, humourless laugh. “No,” he said. “Is that what you think?”

“Seems to me you excel at everything you try. Frankly, it’s a little annoying.”

“Nothing is easy for me. Every single thing I do is just as an alternative to getting high. Even now I still want it all the time, and if I stop playing my violin, studying wine, watching films, playing hockey, sucking off strangers, for a single minute... It’s all difficult. What normal person would do all of that? It’s exhausting. Avoiding the Tremont when half the team lives or has lived there—
when you live there!—assuring I never get sick because I can’t take pills, chanting a mantra while swallowing fake medication, reminding myself I can’t control anything and pretending that’s fine with me.” Sherlock paused and waved one hand in a gesture of surrender. “Everything is not easy for me. The only time I don’t feel like I could slip at any second, is this.”

He gestured between them.

“Everything is impossible; this is my one easy thing.”

John was stunned. All he could think to say was, “I didn’t know.”

“Good, then,” Sherlock said, and sighed deeply even as he shrugged resignation. “All that business is paying off, if I pass as someone who isn’t fiending all day every day.”

“I’m glad,” John told him, and reached to catch his hand, stroking the backs of his fingers. “I’m glad this is easy.”

“Is it for you?”

“Not always. Not all of it. But I don’t need it to be.”

“What do you need it to be?”

Real, John did not say. He shook his head. “Just . . . whatever it is. It’s good. I’m happy.” He shrugged. “It’s just. This.” He rolled his eyes at himself. “Eloquent,” he chided.

“Everything is as it should be,” Sherlock said, interpreting what John was reaching for, and John recognised the phrase as something he’d heard from Sherlock in the past.

“I think so,” John happily agreed. “Yeah.”

“That’s my mantra.”

“Oh yeah?” John turned it over in his head, considering what Sherlock had just said about reminding himself nothing was under his control. “What about when everything’s shit?”

“It’s still true, even when things get uncomfortable. That’s when I find it most useful, actually. It keeps me from uselessly beating my head against walls.”

“I like it,” John said, and he did. “Some things we’re just not meant to obsess about; whatever caused it or whatever it causes. . . Yeah, I like it.”

By then they’d finished their lunch and the washing up, John rinsing and Sherlock drying, then effortlessly finessing a piece of cling film over what little remained, and packing the leftovers into the fridge.

“Three hours until practice,” Sherlock told him, even as John confirmed it with a glance at his watch. “However will we pass all that time?”

“I’ve an idea,” John replied.

Some time later, Sherlock was braced up on straight arms, rocking firm and steady, John’s legs holding tight around his thighs and backside, both of them groaning loudly with each slick thrust of their cocks against each other.

“Christ, that’s so good,” John cursed. He caught Sherlock by the chin, the whisper of his just-
begun beard itchy beneath John’s thumb and finger pads, and pulled him down for a kiss—open-mouthered, possessive. “Never stop fucking me,” John demanded, eliciting an appreciative growl from Sherlock, who released pressure to move quicker, drawing away from John’s kiss to fix the angle.

“Yes. Yeah. Yeah.” He grunted in time with his thrusts, and John could see he was headed straight for his end. A sudden, competitive surge made John shove his hand downward, curving his fingers around his own bollocks and kneading, rolling. “Yes,” Sherlock hissed at him, and John looked up to discover Sherlock staring at him, his expression aroused and wild, biting his lips. John let out a shouting groan as his cum pulsed out onto his belly, and Sherlock’s gaze shifted down to watch, and his movements became selfish, forceful and fast. John made a bridge of his palm over Sherlock’s cock, to steady him and help him along. “Fuck, yes,” Sherlock moaned, and his shoulders shook as he came, his head dropping between his upright arms, panting his way through the aftershocks.

There was still a web of tiny electric stings over the surface of John’s brain; they almost constantly flared and receded, but just then, he imagined he must be feeling the benefit of the post-orgasmic endorphin rush Sherlock was such a champion of. “Fine. Better every day.”

“Good.” Sherlock lifted John’s arm and arranged it out of his way, arranging himself half on top of John’s body. “Something I’ve noticed,” he said, settling to rest his chin on his fist atop John’s chest, his expression softened by his own post-orgasmic dose of feel-good hormones. “Related to what I was saying earlier about having to keep myself busy seeking out strangers to sleep with.”

There still was a web of tiny electric stings over the surface of John’s brain; they almost constantly flared and receded, but just then, he imagined he must be feeling the benefit of the post-orgasmic endorphin rush Sherlock was such a champion of. “Fine. Better every day.”

“Oh? Wait. Before you say.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows, inquiring, and John reached with both hands to cradle his face, thumbs stroking his jaw, fingers sinking into the curls at the back of his head. “It’s just. . . T’es si beau, ma moitié,” John told him, with a little shake of his head, still disbelieving his luck.

“Merci.” Sherlock smiled, almost shyly. “You’re very generous. Remember I said it was quantity more than variety that I required.”

“I certainly do. Quantity works nicely in my favour.”

“And I’ve said I don’t do Alone very well.”

“Because of the temptation to get high?”

“Mm,” Sherlock confirmed. “I imagine some might say I’ve addicted myself to sex, or at least to companionship.”

“Is that a bad thing? I mean. . . in light of the alternative.” John felt a twinge of worry he may be about to hear something he wouldn’t like.

Sherlock shrugged, punctuating it with a who-cares frown. “Maybe. I don’t think so. I’ve come to think that in the end we all swap our bad behaviours for less destructive ones; it’s just our nature to
overdo—we’re addicts. Some people become addicted to meetings. Or to identifying and judging the substitute addictions of others.”

John laughed a little, and Sherlock smiled, appreciative that John was coming along where he led.

“Anyway, about it being easy. This.”

John nodded, encouraging him to go on.

“Unlike with some other things I’ve thrown myself into—wine, cooking, picking up my violin again—I do think I seek out so much sex because it makes me feel high. Or at least, something like it. It’s a different sort of high, of course.”

“Makes sense,” John said.

“But when you and I have sex, I don’t feel high. I just feel—” Sherlock squinched his face into a frown. “Happy?” He looked as if he doubted his ability to recognise his own emotions, and to name them correctly.

John drew him up close, chest to chest, their cheeks on the pillows, and held Sherlock’s hand—their fingers slotted together—against his heart. He could feel the smile stretching his face. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, Holmes, but. . . I think you might be in love with me.” Sherlock’s eyes widened, and John nodded, still grinning like an idiot, confirming it was true.

Sherlock looked away momentarily and hummed, thoughtful, then returned his gaze to meet John’s. “Is that. . . could that be why the sex is so good?”

“Sure.”

“Because it’s been reliably good.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“And it’s been quite good right from the start.”

“Agreed.”

“Hmf.”

“M-hm.”
Chapter Notes

Another note about Hockey Stuff I Don't Understand & Don't Care To: I don't really understand how the playoff brackets are determined, and it doesn't affect my enjoyment of the games so I've never bothered to understand it. I think it's pretty unlikely this Boston Brawlers team would have played a west coast team in the first round if this were real life, for instance, but you can see why I needed to put John and Sherlock in Seattle so they could run into Glen Harding. I also gave home ice advantage to the Brawlers in all three playoff rounds because of needing them to be in Boston at certain plot-points; I don't know how likely that is to happen IRL. So if some of this feels sketchy to you because you're better at hockey fangirling than me, just know I'm aware of my shortcomings; I serve the story (but try to at least keep it realistic-ish, if not completely realistic).

Also, we lost Lovely Reader and frequent commenter ImpudentGuttersnipe somewhere along the way here. If anyone's in touch with her please let me know she's OK. I'm a mama; I worry.

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TXT from SisterKim: Damn. I was kind of hoping for a Brawlers/Thrashers series.

Sorry, dude. I don’t know how to feel about Hamilton being eliminated!

TXT from SisterKim: Relieved not to have to get your sorry behind beat by your old teammates?

Something like that.

“OK, boys. We’re playing our game, keeping up the pressure, so let’s carry on with that. Plenty of time to tie this up and force OT. Saws, Boosh, you know you have to keep them in their own end, much as you can. Mellon, keep looking for shots; seems like their goalie can’t always see you coming. Holmesy’s frustrated and his edges are showing, so let’s keep clear of him if we can. Aw’right? Let’s go to work.”

“The mood in the Boston Garden is markedly subdued as we return to period three. Just under twelve minutes to play in this Game One, and the Milwaukee Muskies lead the Brawlers 2 – 0 on a pair of early goals coming just sixty-eight seconds apart back in the first half of period one. Thanks for watching tonight, from my partner Andy Brickley, me, Jack Edwards, and the BSN crew here in the booth as well as outside in the truck. I’m a little baffled, Brick; despite what the scoreboard says, the Brawlers look good tonight.”

“They are definitely strong in the offensive zone, Jack, playing with patience and precision, but they’re just not getting shots past Muskies goalie James Ziegler, who has turned away every single one of their twenty-six shots on goal. Seems like he’s just got a read on this Brawlers team, and he’s stopping everything they throw at him.”

“The puck drops, Bouchard wins the faceoff for Boston, Sawyer throws to the neutral zone but the
puck is deflected up and out of play. And here we go! Mellon and Winnette dropping gloves, and Mellon gets in quick with a series of rights, Winnette going for the body, both sweaters are being stretched well out of shape, and now down goes Winnette. The refs step in to break it up; both players are headed to the box and the Brawlers will be shorthanded as Mellon will serve two for instigating.”

“The fuck are you thinking?” John shouted at Mellon as he glided past on his way to the penalty box. “Thanks for nothing, mate.”

Mellon made a scoffing noise and didn’t even look. John made a show of fiddling with his visor and mouthguard, using his hand to screen a string of curses about his hot-headed teammate.

“Watson, check in,” Sherlock intoned from a few yards behind John, as the other players fell into place for the faceoff. “Nothing for it. Keep your head.”

John grumbled reluctant agreement and took his spot.

Eleven minutes later it was over, and the Brawlers had lost Game One in front of the hometown crowd.

With only one day between the first two games of the series, and the team dispirited by their Game One loss, Coach had encouraged John to cancel his captain’s practice; instead John tagged along with Sherlock on a visit to his friend Jeremy out in the suburbs, hoping to clear his head and perhaps even improve his mood, which was determined but decidedly dour. Left behind in the kitchen while Jeremy and Sherlock fled to the driveway to start the work of taking shots and making saves, John took a minute to chat with Beth before he joined them.

“I imagine you come to games now and then?” he wondered.

“Once or twice a season. It’s a lot for Jeremy to take—the action, the noise and lights. But Sherlock’s always been so generous; he’ll give us his whole box and we bring my sister and her husband, their kids, some friends. We were there early this year, back in November.”

“I want to invite Jeremy to a playoff game.”

“Really? That’s so thoughtful.”

John detailed his plan, crinkling the noisy ears of a stuffed rabbit for baby Natalie as he spoke; she had four new teeth since last he’d seen her. Just as he was reaching the end, Beth smiling and nodding along, growing more enthusiastic as he outlined the scheme, from outside came a booming, “Watson! You’re needed!” and John excused himself to take his turn lobbing easy saves at Sherlock.

On the drive home, John broached the subject of another scheme that had lately been on his mind.

“So I was thinking back through the schedule,” he began, “And I think I’m due for a visit with the team doc.”

Sherlock changed lanes without signaling to pass a box truck with the unrepentant gall to be doing seventy in a fifty-five. “Oh, really?” he replied, and his casual tone was so patently false, John was sure Sherlock knew exactly what John was thinking.

“Haven’t done anything high-risk with anyone but you in about six weeks,” John clarified
nonetheless. “So I’ll order up the whole menu of tests and report back.” He cast a glance aside. Sherlock, creeping toward ninety miles per hour, was driving with one hand barely gripping the wheel at the five o’clock position while he smoothed an eyebrow with his thumb. “Maybe you’ll do the same?” John invited.

“Already sorted. I got the full rundown at the Fenway Clinic about three weeks ago.”

“But.” John frowned. He could only find one conclusion to draw, but still he doubted it, venturing, “So you’d already stopped. . .”

“Yes.”


“I knew I liked you. And I know you like fucking without condoms.”

John got a low thrill from hearing the words, despite—or perhaps because of?—Sherlock’s matter-of-fact tone.

“But.”

“Is this a Freudian thing you’re doing?” Sherlock asked, the smile audible around the words. “Subliminal messaging? Because I’m more turned on by the word arse.”

“I’m just surprised,” John defended. “You were—what—saving yourself for me?”

“Hardly that,” Sherlock chided automatically. “Though now you say it, I suppose in some way yes.”

John twisted in his seat to put his back to the car door and stared hard at Sherlock, who stole a glance at him before putting his eyes back on the road.

“What?” Sherlock demanded.

“Who are you?” John asked. “Seriously, just. . . what is the story with you? Every time I think I’ve figured you out, something new comes out that changes everything.”

“It’s my brand,” Sherlock shrugged. “I’m the weird one. Ask anyone.”

“Not weird, though,” John corrected.

“What then?”

John turned to sit properly again, and laughed a bit. “I don’t want to say. It’ll go to your head.”

Sherlock let go a long, skeptical hum, then said with exaggerated surety, “I know.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do. I know exactly what you were going to say I am, if I’m not merely weird.”

“You don’t, though, because I’ve already told you I’m not going to say it. Let’s just leave it at, you’re weird.”

“If you like,” Sherlock acquiesced. “Yours or mine?”
“Yours, of course.”

“Game day,” Sherlock yawned, arching his back high off the mattress as he stretched away from sleep. John had been hovering on the edge of wakefulness for several minutes, refusing to open his eyes, clutching tight to the last soft edges of sleep. Once Sherlock had resettled himself, John slid an arm around his waist, curled his hand around Sherlock’s forearm and pressed himself along the length of Sherlock’s back, nosing into the curls at the base of his skull.

“Slept OK?” John murmured.

“Eventually. You?”

“Woke up for an hour or so around half-three.”

“And it’s only game two of the second round,” Sherlock said.

John hummed agreement against the back of Sherlock’s neck, and littered kisses here and there over it, and onto his shoulder and upper back.

“Distract me,” John told him, and Sherlock’s answer was to pull up his knees and thrust his bum back against John’s thigh. “That’ll do nicely,” John told him, and they took their time coming fully awake, skin on skin with the covers turned back in the dry cool of Sherlock’s bedroom. John’s hands caressed and tickled, pinching, gliding, everywhere he could reach, and all the while they rocked together in lazy counter-time. It finished in a gentle fury of gasping, sighing, slippery hands and thighs, and at last Sherlock turned over to wrap his arms around, to offer and claim the day’s first kisses.

They lingered awhile, until hunger drove them from the bed, found breakfast at a coffee shop midway between their two flats, planning a low-intensity game day workout in the form of lap-swimming in the Tremont’s pool.

“You’re quite slow,” Sherlock teased from the deck, towel draped around his neck. “I’m rethinking some of my positions.”

“I’m not. It’s your freakishly long limbs, giving you an unfair advantage.” John lifted himself on to the edge of the pool, sat with his feet dangling in the bleach-scented water, shaking droplets from his hair. Naturally, Sherlock had lapped him; despite starting together, Sherlock was climbing out of the pool while John still had two laps to go.

“I’ll drive you to the Garden?”

“I’ll get a car,” John said. “I’ve got press avails at three. Come up and shower, though, before you go.” John was aware it sounded like he was offering a consolation prize.

Sherlock acquiesced and they shared a shower, strictly business in deference to the time constraints. As they finished dressing, John’s phone went: the front desk informing him there was a delivery on its way up to his flat. He wondered momentarily if Sherlock had sent him something. Perhaps a bouquet of the condoms they would soon dispense with.

What showed up were three fit, young probable-felons and several large, flat, brown boxes.

“Oh, shit,” John muttered, anxiously checking the time. “How long do you need?”
“An hour. Little less,” the senior felon replied as the three began arranging the unassembled bits and pieces of the dining table and eight chairs John had completely forgotten he’d asked his sister to arrange for him. Sherlock, standing by with his arms crossed over his chest, eyed up the situation through narrowed lids. The deliverymen carried on, ducking to avoid hitting their heads on the chandelier that had been awaiting placement of a table beneath it for nearly a year.

“So you are the John Watson that plays for the B’s,” the guy ventured. “I thought it must be, when I saw the name and the address but these two didn’t believe me.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” John shook hands all around, then gestured. “My teammate, Sherlock Holmes.”

The foreman said, “Hanging out in your free time.” John was suddenly acutely aware of his and Sherlock’s state of dress—running shorts and compression tees and the plastic slide-on shoes they wore in the locker room—and of the fact both of them still had hair damp at the ends. He wondered what it must look like; he knew what it would look like to him, in the reverse situation.

“We had lunch,” John non-explained. “Listen, speaking of the Brawlers, I’m due at the Garden in twenty-five minutes . . .”

“I’ll stay; go ahead,” Sherlock volunteered.

“You don’t mind?”

“It’s fine.” John couldn’t quite place Sherlock’s tone of voice, but he was about to be late so drew out his mobile and ordered a car.

“You’ll still make it for half-five,” John said. “Thanks.”

“Just one more to sign, boss,” the felon-in-charge said, passing John a tablet computer in an indestructible case. “Take a look to verify nothing’s damaged.” John made a cursory scan of the furniture in pieces everywhere and scribbled his signature. “Girlfriend didn’t like eating standing up, huh?” the guy joked. “Nah, but. We need them to civilise us, don’t we?”

John went along, nodding and smiling, and in the background, Sherlock snorted something akin to a laugh. Within a minute or two, John was out the door, in the lift on his way down to the car he hoped would be waiting for him by then, and he had an urgent, unsettled feeling that made him pat his pockets and take a cursory glance inside his duffel.

TXT from SherlockHolmes: What do you reckon are the chances?

Well I assume they’ve all spent time in prison, so one never knows.

TXT from SherlockHolmes: Give my best to your girlfriend, btw
Some hockey terms: "triangles" are the preferred formation for passing.setting up shots in the offensive zone. "Holmes makes his run for the bench"--I think we've talked about an empty net before; a team can pull their goalie to put in an extra offensive skater, usually a forward, in a last-ditch attempt to score a goal (usually only seen in the last minute or two of a game). "Give-and-go" is what it sounds like: the man with the puck skates away from it, anticipating a teammate is close by and can take immediate control of it while the first man gets in position to receive a pass (and usually take a shot). A "muffin" is a shot that's easy for a goalie to save.

Very rarely, a goalie will draw a penalty (the only time i can recall seeing it is in a situation like the one in this chapter); a teammate serves his time in the box, leaving the team shorthanded, but not goalie-less.

“The Boston Brawlers are down 5 – 1 with just about two minutes left in this Game Two, and the hometown fans are heading for the exits. Faceoff coming at center ice, Hammel wins it for Boston, Thurston skates it through the neutral zone, triangles developing, Thurston with a soft pass to Sullivan. Sullivan ahead to Hammel. Muskies defensemen are big as houses and Hammel tosses behind to Thurston. Around the boards for Sullivan, but Milwaukee forward Pili Leukkens is there. The race is on to center ice. . .Thurston puts a big hit on Hutchison and Hammel scoops up the puck but can’t keep his stick on it. Leukkens into the Boston zone with the Brawlers on his heels. Leukkens ducks around Kocur, wrist shot—he scores.”

“Sherlock Holmes clearly frustrated tonight, Jack; we don’t normally see any reaction from him after an opposing goal, always keeps his cool, but with a six – one loss pretty much a done deal for tonight, the Brawlers headed to Milwaukee for games Three and Four, I think it’s no surprise we’re seeing a different side of goaltender Sherlock Holmes than what we’re used to.”

“Indeed, that crossbar just got a heck of a beating from the stick of a raging Sherlock Holmes. Faceoff at center coming up, a minute and three left to go. Boston takes it, defenseman Siven dangles as Holmes makes his run for the bench and the Brawlers get the extra skater. Siven a hard pass up the boards—Holmes heading straight down the tunnel—and Michel Bouchard fresh off the bench skates it ahead, tape-to-tape across to Mellon for the one-timer, deflected by Ziegler. Bouchard the rebound, takes it around the back of the goal, tries for the wraparound, a scrum for the puck, Mellon poking at it, and there’s a whistle as the linesmen lose sight of it.”

John was chewing the hell out of his mouthguard, fists clenched inside his gloves. He watched Sherlock come through the door, barely getting past the bench before he tore off his mask and hurled it at the floor. As he stomped down the tunnel, John could hear him roaring—wordless—furious with self-blame. With Sherlock out of sight, John watched the last minute of the game unfold, knowing it was hopeless, willing the clock to speed up and just get it behind them. It was the first time in ten months with the team that John actually had a hint of doubt about their ability to get the championship. Oh-And-Two was not a promising start to a series that was about to move out of town. Two more wins like the ones the Muskies had just got and the Brawlers’ season would be over in less than a week. He sprayed water on his face, down his neck, and spit at the floor. The
horn went and the Brawlers fled down the tunnel to the room.

Holmes was nowhere to be seen, his leg pads and catching glove ditched on the floor in front of his locker; John assumed he’d ducked out somewhere private to finish his tantrum and collect himself.

Where are you?

TXT from SherlockHolmes: Not now.

All right. See you on the plane.

Sherlock did not reply.

John played a few hands of poker with some of his downtrodden teammates, then watched two episodes of an FBI drama on his phone, while Sherlock reclined in the seat beside him wearing a sleep mask and ear buds. The fingers of his left hand were continually busy, as if he were tapping out a code, and eventually John realised he must be following along with the violin part in whatever he was listening to. Similarly, on the bus to the hotel Sherlock gave only quick grimacing half-smiles and uninterested hums in response to any glance or comment directed his way. They were already well into the business of settling themselves into the suite—switching on lights, hanging their jackets, toeing off their shoes—by the time Sherlock finally spoke.

“I need to sleep alone.”

John felt the words like a shove, but only cleared his throat mildly and nodded. “Yeah, all right.” He wanted to say something about the game, Sherlock’s playing, the Muskies’ luck. . . .something to help Sherlock shake it off. He’d never seen him so completely rattled—closed-off and simmering—and so only asked, “Will you be able to sleep?” which was at least three questions at once; Sherlock could choose which version, if any, to answer.

Sherlock looked grim, his body angled toward the bedroom door, more than ready to disappear through it. “Probably not,” he said.

“Well. If you need—anything.”

“Mm. Goodnight.”

“Night, then.”

John ordered breakfast enough for them both, then went silently into Sherlock’s bedroom, where the drapes had been left partly open and Sherlock sprawled belly-down, diagonal on the bed, one knee raised and bent, the bed covers draped and tangled around him as if purposely arranged to offer only teasing glances—the side of one buttock, the sole of his bare foot, one shoulder, one sinewy forearm. His nose was pressed crookedly against the pillow. Sliding down beside him, John dropped tender, quick kisses on Sherlock’s shoulder, the softly twisted back of his neck, and trailed fingers down his back, until he could lift the sheets back and away, baring the bumps of his spine. As John kissed his way soft and slow down the length of Sherlock’s back, the edge of his bicep, inside his elbow, Sherlock’s breathing changed, and he shifted gently, stretching, unfolding, but still mellow and yielding, sleepy, welcoming. John was just nudging aside the sheet that covered his buttocks when Sherlock finally made a decisive move, rolling onto his side to expose his half-hard prick, which John readily slipped his tongue and lips around, coaxing Sherlock along, stroking
his palm in long swathes up and down Sherlock’s thigh.

John fancied he could taste stale saliva, and a salty bitterness lingering beneath the edge of Sherlock’s foreskin. He imagined Sherlock—as John had done—wanking himself to sleep, maybe watching porn or exchanging dirty texts with a stranger. . .the scenarios playing out in his mind intensified John’s motions, the pressure and speed, and in no time Sherlock was gasping, sighing out moans, sucking his teeth, and John reached down to pull his own aching prick in time with it.

All at once, Sherlock’s big hands were cradling John’s jaw, the back of his head, and he drew John away from him and rumbled, “How do you feel?”

Weird. Losing my edge and stumbling. John let his eyes half-close and he growled, “I want you to come on my tongue, moitié.” Sherlock thrust a thumb into John’s mouth and he swirled his tongue around it, closed down to suck. Sherlock guided his prick with his free hand, dragged the sticky-wet crown through the hair of John’s beard, withdrew his thumb from between John’s lips and painted them with a bead of pre-cum, then slid forward, John making space for him, tightening his lips, dropping his tongue out of the way.

Caressing Sherlock’s thighs, his luscious bum, John slid back until he was barely there, flicked his tongue-tip then swirled it, closed down to suck, bobbing his head. Sherlock let go whining whimpers behind his nose, humming through bitten lips then at last moaning out a desperate, “Oh!”

His prick swelled up and he dug his fingers into the hair at the crown of John’s head—almost pulled, didn’t quite—and John sucked, swallowed, sucked softer, swallowed the last of it. He dug his nose and mouth into the crease of Sherlock’s hip and thigh, kissing messily, licking, biting, as he jerked himself to his own end, Sherlock’s knee brushing up against his ribs.

“Fucking gorgeous,” John muttered, sounding almost angry in his awe of it. He let his breath settle before making to move up the bed, to greet Sherlock properly and perhaps gauge if he was still lingering in the previous night’s dark mood. But even as he wriggled and shifted, Sherlock rolled away, sitting on the bed’s edge with his back to John while he scratched fingers through his hair, then across his chest.

“Morning skate?” he asked, stretching his back with his arms above his head.

“Yeah. You’ll come?” John was still off-balance. The team captain part of him wanted to give Sherlock a pep talk, remind him to shake it off and focus up, just win the next game and don’t worry about the previous ones. The other part of him wondered a hundred things he was too cowardly to ask.

Sherlock shook his head and said drily, “No.”

“Look, Sherlock, it was a bad night, but you have to—”

“Shall I order breakfast?”

“Already did.”

Sherlock stood and went into his suitcase—already open on its stand—for his clothes. John reached out an arm, urging, “C’mere a minute.”

“No right now,” Sherlock demurred, stepping into his briefs. “I just need to be up.” He dropped a t-shirt over his head, swung it into place around his torso. “That was nice,” he added.

“I’m glad,” John told him.
“I’m likely to be quiet for a while, still,” Sherlock told him, rubbing thoughtfully at his chin as he avoided John’s eyes. “I feel like I need to regroup or…” After a long second, he shrugged.

“Whatever you need,” John assured, “I’m good.” He smiled and Sherlock returned it for an instant before his face fell back into an exhausted-looking frown, the creases in his forehead and between his eyes markedly deeper than usual.

The bell went.

“I’ll get it,” Sherlock said, already halfway out the bedroom door. John felt himself sliding, a sickly, weightless feeling edged with a desperate desire to grasp impossible control. Whatever it was with Sherlock, it wasn’t just about the previous night’s game. John burrowed under the covers momentarily, in a fetal curl, closing his eyes and wishing for more sleep. He heard voices, muffled thuds and shushes, a soft metallic clang, and the distinctive sound of the coffee carafe being lifted from a plastic tray.

“Watson. Food.”

John slid to a sudden, painful stop against the boards. “Yeah, in a minute,” he replied. Sherlock’s phone was face-up on the night stand and John was tempted, but left it. He reached into Sherlock’s suitcase to borrow warm-up trousers to wear, or a pair of running shorts. If he happened to dig around perhaps more than was strictly necessary, it was only to calm the sick flutter in his gut that he couldn’t quite name. Socks, a shaving kit zipped shut, workout gear and two belts coiled up tightly in one corner. A pair of dress shoes lying toe to heel. A strip of foil-wrapped condoms. A blue plastic cigarette lighter. A few bills folded into a silver clip with a fifty showing. No clues there, and for his trouble he got to carry the guilt of betraying Sherlock’s trust by snooping through his things.

John went to the bathroom, shut the door, and splashed cold water on his face.

“Mellon leaves it for a give-and-go, Sawyer picks it up, fires a bullet—SCORES! The Boston Brawlers have tied it up thanks to Taylor Sawyer; Jake Mellon gets the assist. It’s 2 – 2 with fourteen and change left to play.”

John threw himself at Sawyer, and they were both quickly crushed by their three teammates piling in to congratulate him. “Good look, Saws,” John told him. “That’s how it’s done.”

At the TV timeout a few minutes later, Coach Lestrade gave them a soldierly-sounding talk about keeping to the plan, not getting cute, attack, attack, attack. Bodies and pucks to the net. You’re a fifty-foot wave; roll on and crush’em. Hit’em with all you’ve got. No point in holding back now, yeah?

Sherlock was leaning against the dasher near the end of the bench with his mask tilted up on top of his head, worrying at the interior of his catching glove with his other hand. Once Coach had finished, he glided forward and as he reset his gear, he reported, “They’re going to go for speed, and they want to keep us in our end. We need to disrupt.”

“We’re going hard on offense,” John argued.

“If you can ever get there,” Sherlock said skeptically, too frankly for his teammates’ liking. Kocur and Bouchard frowned; Sullivan skated a few yards away, fidgeting, or faking a fidget. “If they get us to defend, they’re going to skate rings around us. And having Kocur in front of me won’t help;
“Coach says offense, so we’re going to focus on offense;” John said, loud and sure, directing his gaze from his spot on the bench to the clump of players on the ice. Kocur shifted his skates forward and back, a sign he was getting annoyed. “Thanks for the insight.” He gave Sherlock a firm glare, which Sherlock returned, his jaw set hard. The lighting changed and the PA blared heavy rock music as the timeout came to a close. Sherlock lowered his mask and skated toward his net; the five on-ice players headed out to take their places for the faceoff. John shifted backward on the bench; he wanted to punch something.

After their lazy tryst, lying diagonally across his hotel bed, Sherlock had remained distant through the rest of the previous day, disappearing for hours after he’d put in his time at practice, and not returning to the suite until after John had gone to bed—in his own room; clearly Sherlock wanted space—then lingered behind his closed bedroom door until late morning. John had invited him to go for a run, and he’d declined, his head bent over his phone, eyebrows knitted tight in the middle.

John could no longer fight the part of him that wanted—needed—to be Sherlock’s team captain, so as he stood by the suite door, wearing his running shoes and with a pair of sunglasses tucked in the ring-neck of his t-shirt, he finally surrendered to his instinct. “Look, I know you had a pretty bad night Thursday but you’ve got to leave it behind you and check in. The team needs your head all the way in this thing, and we can win it. They’ve been at home doing dad-duty for two days; we’re rested and ready.”

Sherlock nodded, looking up from his phone. “I know,” he said. “I’m ready, too.”

“Well, good, then,” John said. “I’ll be back in less than an hour; you want to have lunch after?”

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed noncommittally.

“Hey,” John said, and stepped toward him with his head down. “Are we... OK? Did I do something that upset you?”

Sherlock took his time answering; every silent second was like a sledgehammer falling, and by the time Sherlock said, “It’s fine,” John was practically flattened. The answer was unsatisfactory. Sherlock’s mood was concerning. John touched his arm, just above his elbow, and chose to believe it really was just about the big loss in game two, hard on the heels of their game one loss, that was making Sherlock so sulky. The pressure was immense, and Sherlock had clearly blamed himself, then seemed to get mired in it. Perhaps it was just his way of working it through; John hadn’t known him long enough to know how he usually dealt with the pressure of playoff season.

John leaned down to reach him where he sat in the stiff hotel armchair, and kissed his temple, and Sherlock purred a quiet acknowledgement of it that settled John down so that he was able to clear his head and think of nothing during his run but the pounding of his feet on the pavement and the reassuring huffs of his breath.

“With a 2 - 2 tie and just over four minutes left, the faceoff comes in the Boston end, to the glove side of goaltender Sherlock Holmes. Bouchard takes it for Boston; Leukkens for Milwaukee. Leukkens wins it, Benton does a pirouette around Thurston and skates toward center ice, fires one, Holmes deflects, juicy rebound, Leukkens there to grab it, looking for Benton, and Holmes deflects it up and out of play. That’s going to be a delay of game penalty against Brawlers goalie Sherlock Holmes. Looks like team captain John Watson is going over to have a word with him, as Thurston heads to the box to serve Holmes’ two minutes.”

“What the fuck was that?!” John exploded, not thinking about what cameras might catch,
disregarding what the opposing players might surmise about team cohesion among the Brawlers, gesturing widely with his gloved hand.

“We need to slow them down.”

“So you take a penalty?” John was close to him now, but still shouting. The linesman was touching John’s arm, trying to push him toward the faceoff. “Very fucking cute,” John spat.

“They’re overwhelming us with speed.”

“Just do your fucking job.”

“I wouldn’t have to toss the puck out if you were doing yours.”

John’s instinct was to snarl a hearty fuck you but he bit it back, shaking his head and grimacing as he gave in to the ref’s persuasion and turned to skate away.

They played on, defending for the full two minutes of the Muskies’ power play, and when John’s shift ended and he was watching from the bench, he had to admit Milwaukee looked less sure of themselves, passing uselessly through and across their triangles but only taking one shot on goal, a slow-lobbed muffin Sherlock easily flicked aside with his stick.

“Leukkens a short self-pass as he breaks toward center ice, but Sullivan gets his stick on it and here comes Thurston out of the box, Sullivan to Thurston ON A BREAKAWAY! Shane Thurston is all alone with some exhausted Muskies giving chase to no avail, he fakes to the glove side, flicks the wrist toward the top shelf, SCORES! SHANE THURSTON MAKES THE GO-AHEAD GOAL with less than two minutes left to play! Not a few black and gold-clad Brawlers fans are celebrating in the stands here in Milwaukee, and when we come back from this break . . .it’s winning time!”
Another note about hockey things. The local guys never get to do play-by-play/colour commentary on the playoffs; the national network broadcasts those games. I hate that; I want to hear my guys with their bias toward my team--so consider this my playoff coverage fix-it. Jack and Brick Sever!

We're so near the end! I, for one, am going to miss this.

The mood in the room after the win was rowdy, and carried over to the bus that took the team back to the hotel. John decided to save a sobering scold about not getting carried away with themselves when they still had to put three games in their pockets to make the finals; they could sleep on their bravado and get back to work at the next day’s practice.

Sherlock was distracted, looking at his phone most of the short bus ride. John kept his distance. Their on-ice confrontation might have been something he could shake off had Sherlock not been acting so weird for the previous two days, but added up together, it was too much for him to let slide. Once they let themselves into the suite, John said gruffly, “Hey, put that thing away a minute, I want to talk to you.”

Sherlock gave him a narrowed-eyed glare, swiped and tapped a few final times, and set his phone facedown on the bar counter separating the kitchenette from the sitting room. John slipped his own from the pocket of his shorts and did the same.

Sherlock crossed his arms. “So talk.”

“What you did tonight was fucking outrageous. That’s what junior leaguers do when they panic—throw the puck away. In the third of a tie game, when we’re already down two games to none—” John made a scoffing noise.

“I’m aware of what the situation was; I was there,” Sherlock told him. “Anyway, it worked. It slowed them down when we needed it.” He spread his hands to ask what more John wanted. “We won.”

“Coach said hit offense. I said hit offense. You blew us off and went rogue. Do you know how that looks for me? There’s a reason they voted me team captain.”

“I didn’t vote for you.”

John clenched his fists and shook them in front of his chest. “Christ, your fucking ego!” he spat, disbelieving. “Whatever else I am,” he went on, in a harsh, raised voice, “I’m still the fucking captain of your team, and when I say we’re focused on offense, that’s what we fucking do. You don’t get to throw a tantrum like a bloody child and disregard it. I’ve earned those guys’ respect. And I deserve it. And I deserve yours too.” John was on a tear while Sherlock, tight-lipped and glaring, was almost certainly composing some cruel remark that would cut John straight to the bone, wreck him, destroy everything, but before he could unleash it, John blurted, “And you fucking know what? I really don’t appreciate how you’ve been undermining me from day one.
Day. One. You skip my practices; you blow off every optional skate. You grumble about charity work. You hang about lounging against the goal, the only one standing when I’m talking to the team. For gods’ sake, when I say take a knee, you should take a fucking knee!”

With shocking speed, Sherlock was kneeling at John’s feet, digging his fingers under the waistband of John’s shorts, looking up at him with his face held close to John’s crotch.

“Like this?” he demanded, and lowered himself by spreading his knees on the carpet, rough-rubbing his face against John’s cock and bollocks through the soft fabric of his workout clothes.

“Are you sure you want me on my knees?”

“Fuck off with this.” John pried at Sherlock’s fingers, laid a hand against his temple and pushed his head aside.

“I know you don’t want a nelly faggot like me making you look like less of a man.”

“What?!” John stepped away and fidgeted with Sherlock’s contract-rider mandated pile of chocolate bars, rearranging them to make the wrappers rustle.

From his place on the floor, Sherlock—half-smirking, grim—said, “You don’t actually want me on my knees, because for anyone else to know you’re shagging me is the worst thing you can think of.” He got to his feet, paced a bit.

“Where the fuck is this coming from?” John demanded. “You knew who I was from the start. We’ve talked about it and you’ve said again and again you don’t mind keeping it private.”

“Private is one thing but what you want to do is build a façade.”

“I don’t see the difference.”

“Old habits,” Sherlock sniffed. “You call me by a pet name when you wake up every morning in my flat, yet you’re redecorating your own just as your lease is about to expire—because you have to maintain your false front.”

John could hardly fathom what he was hearing. “So this mood you’ve been in, and sleeping alone—or with someone? where were you last night?—is over that damned table?”

“No.”

“I asked Kim to arrange it, months ago. I’d forgotten about it.”

“You asked those friends of yours in Hamilton about buying a house there.”

“So?”

“So when you’re through in Boston you’re going back?”

“I assumed so. We’ve never talked about another option.” John wanted to point out that Sherlock had folded John into his flat by virtue of his staking a claim on all John’s free time, and of avoiding the Tremont because of his history there, but had never actually invited John to move in.

“I told you they’d sent me a new lease to sign; you didn’t argue. You’ve never asked.”

“I thought it was understood. You have drawers in my bedroom and a favourite chair.”

“No key.”
“Not on purpose,” Sherlock said, as if it should have been obvious to John. After a few beats of silence that seemed to end that particular line of discussion without resolving it, Sherlock said, “It’s not about you being closeted.”

“Fucking hate that word,” John grumbled. “Have I told you how much I hate that word?”

“It’s about the fact that my life is different than it was because you’re in it, but you’ve got your same life, with me in a box off to the side. It’s like when I’m out of your sight, I don’t even exist.” He snapped his fingers to punctuate it.

“That’s not true.”

“Feels that way. Looks it. If you’re looking.”

John drew in a long breath and sighed it out in a huff, frowning and tight-lipped. His head was aching all over and there was a thick pulsating throb in his temples.

“Sherlock,” he said at last, more quietly, and moved closer, resting a hand on Sherlock’s arm and leaning up toward his face, to offer a kiss that might reassure him.

Sherlock turned his face away, shrugged John’s hand off his arm. “Don’t.”

“Jeezus, really, this is all over nothing. It’s not some symbolic gesture; it’s only furniture,” John protested. “Anyway, I’ve given you outs.”

“I don’t want an out.”

“So what do you want?”

“Well for one thing, I’d like you to at some point finish even a single meaningful conversation.”

“The hell’s that mean?”

“You let me tell you I consider you my boyfriend, but never say I’m yours. You let me nurse you through your injuries but you’re oblivious to what that means. I ask you and ask you what you’re feeling and you just give me dirty talk: So good, so hot. . .I fucking know it feels good when my hand’s on your cock; I want to know what you feel. I mean, for god’s sake, you say I’m in love with you! And I’m still waiting to hear how that one ends.”

“Please just c’mere,” John urged, and tried again to move in for a kiss. If he’d already fucked up talking, at least he still had this. He’d yet to have it go even a little bit wrong. Ask me again how I feel; I promise I’ll get it right. He put his hand on the side of Sherlock’s throat, the other slipping onto his waist.

Sherlock’s hand jetted upward to knock John’s away from his neck. “Don’t kiss me.”

The tone of it—angry, edged with contempt—alchemised John’s upset into true anger. If Sherlock had really been this fucked off about it all this time, and kept his mouth shut, and then bent himself out of joint over a goddamned stupid table. . . It seemed to John he was not the only one failing to communicate properly, and fuck that.

“I’ll kiss you,” John growled, and clutched Sherlock’s jaw in his hand, cranked it around, mashed his mouth against Sherlock’s. Bony fingers dug in at ten searing points on John’s chest and shoulder, pushing and pulling, clenching, but Sherlock opened his mouth even as he pressed John back from him; they both fell away from the kiss panting. Sherlock’s shirtfront was balled in
John’s fist.

Uncatchable breath, and dark fire glittering in Sherlock’s narrowed eyes, and there came a flurry of claws and teeth and the tortured sound of seams torn apart. John advanced, gripping tight to brand the message onto Sherlock’s skin with his hands. You’re mine. I want you. You’re mine. Sherlock’s teeth closed in hard half-moons on John’s shoulder, and then on his pectoral muscle, and John cried out and smacked Sherlock’s face, drawing an appreciative groan. They grunted, snarled, shouted pain at skin pinched too hard, mouths clamping down with intention to bruise. Wrestling, catch and release and catch again, and eventually John’s back was against a wall, his wrists held fast by his sides, and Sherlock sucked hard and long, now and then lapping with a sloppy tongue, at the base of John’s neck, a mark John could neither hide nor deny.

Sherlock moved John’s clothes out of his way—shorts and briefs down, shirt up to bare his already bruised chest and belly—and thrust one hand at John’s mouth for him to wet with his saliva, the other rolling John’s bollocks roughly in the cup of his palm. John sucked two of Sherlock’s long fingers into his mouth, bit down until Sherlock shuddered, and shouted out pain, then released him. Sherlock dropped to the other side of John’s throat, settling into the curve of neck and shoulder, pinning him with his tall, solid body, and went to work at more dark marks all over John’s neck. He drew back long enough to spit into his palm, and his hand dropped between them, and began to work.

John met him, thrusting, lifting his heels to shove his whole body up at Sherlock, fucking hard into his hand, and they both groaned and cursed each other. John dropped his head back against the wall, rolling his neck, wanting to escape Sherlock’s worrying teeth and the force of suction over the already bruised and tender places on his neck. His eyes drifted open, wanting to roll back, and he caught sight of their reflection in the tall glass balcony doors.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock hummed a groan against his jaw, nuzzling hard into John’s beard.

John laid hands on his chest and pushed. “Sherlock,” he repeated, more firmly. “A minute. The curtains.”

“Mm?” Sherlock was annoyed, and pinched John’s thigh.

“The curtains are open,” John said, wishing he wasn’t saying it, wishing desperately that he did not care about the fucking curtains.

Sherlock withdrew in one great heave, like an ocean wave trying to drag John off his feet and away from shore. “Right,” Sherlock said tonelessly. He gave a bitter, sarcastic little laugh and wiped his hand across his chest. Meeting John’s eyes for a deadly moment, he nodded, frowning. “OK.”

“Don’t be…” John said, but he was already rearranging his clothes, and Sherlock just stared and stared. Finally, Sherlock shook his head and blew out a quick, hard sigh, then turned his back, walked into his bedroom, and shut the door.

“Midway through the second here in Milwaukee and the Brawlers have a handy 3–1 lead. Game Five brought to you on BSN by Newbury Comics—a wicked good time!, and by Wainwright Bank, banking on values. What do we think is the key difference tonight, Brick, given last week’s two losses—including that big 6–1 loss at home—and the close game Saturday?”
“The Brawlers are looking more disciplined tonight, playing quick but I think more carefully, focusing on precision passing plays, careful defense, just the kind of intelligent, workmanlike play we usually expect from this Brawlers team.”

“Nine forty-three left in the second. Bouchard and Leukkens take the faceoff.”

The Muskies’ right wing, a mountainous slob called Ritter, leaned hard at John’s side, trying to tangle him up.

“Fuck off,” John invited.

“Suck my dick.”

“Couldn’t find it even if I wanted to.”

He and Sherlock had barely spoken outside of practice since their confrontation three nights earlier, keeping closed doors between them when they were in the hotel suite. John attended the recreational outings arranged for the players, at least partly because he knew Sherlock would not be there. Similarly, he looked for every opportunity to skate, work out, and practice, just to have something to do. He arranged to go out for meals with teammates, a few of whom mentioned it having been a while since he’d done so.

At night he kept to his bedroom, not wanting to know if Sherlock was out or in, alone or entertaining guests. He did not open CRUZR though the temptation was there to see if the JanuaryMan’s profile pic popped up nearby. He’d been getting by with porn, and with his own imagination, not wanting to throw away six weeks of clean living, just in case they somehow sorted themselves.

He’d typed and deleted, rephrased and retyped and deleted again, the same text over and over, but never sent it. It still hovered there in the message thread, waiting to be dealt with: So, is this over then?

“And with a sound 5 – 1 win over the Milwaukee Muskies, the Brawlers head home for Game Five in Boston on Thursday night. For my partner Andy Brickley and our Boston Sports Network crew, goodnight, see you back home in Boston!”

John’s shoulder was feeling abused, and his head ached in a more-or-less usual way—more tension than battery—so he allowed himself a sleeping pill on the flight back from Milwaukee, ignoring the empty seat beside him, Hatch playing games on his mobile across from him, the film recommendations on his tablet’s WebMovie app that he knew were not really for him. As such, he had no memory of the taxi ride he must have taken back to the Tremont around 4 a.m., and of whether Sherlock had offered to drive him. Probably not.

“Game Five ends with this Boston Garden crowd roaring over the Boston Brawlers’ third consecutive win, giving them the series lead three games to two. One goal each for Bouchard and Sullivan, enough to beat the Milwaukee Muskies in a barn-burning display of classic playoff hockey. The series moves back to Milwaukee on Saturday, we hope you’ll join us.”

John snarled every time he walked past the new dining set in his flat. All your fault. He still ate on the sofa, or standing over the sink. There was still no food in his fridge. He didn’t know where he would end up, but he knew he couldn’t live in 16D for another year. He sent an email to the management company declining renewal of his lease, cc’d it to his attorney and his agent.
At least twice a day he opened his messaging app and considered sending his text to Sherlock. So, *is this over then?* But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. If neither of them said it was over, maybe it was just a bad patch and they’d figure it out. He could live with that. It was the possible reply to his text he wasn’t so sure he’d survive.

**TXT from SisterKim:** *Is it OK for me to tell Shane about you and Sherlock, btw?*

*Shane who?*

**TXT from SisterKim:** *Thurston. Your teammate? Burly guy, crooked nose and a cauliflower ear?*

*Oh, god no.*

**TXT from SisterKim:** *God no don’t tell him or god no my sister is talking to Shane Thurston on the reg?*

*Both. Why, has he said something?*

**TXT from SisterKim:** *He wants me to fix you up. With a woman. He’s really sweet.*

*Good christ.*

**TXT from SisterKim:** *Anyway, my lips are sealed. How’s things with S anyhow?*

*Yeah, well, about that. . .*
John lay on his hotel bed with the TV’s sound turned down, tuned to one of those home improvement shows Sherlock seemed to always be watching when they were on the road. Naturally Kim had rung him the second he even hinted there was trouble in paradise.

“. . .so it all came out this jumbled mess of a thing. Like word-vomit. I don’t know. He just unloaded everything that’s ever annoyed him, all at once. I’m still trying to figure out what’s important and what’s just noise.”

“Sounds like it’s all important, dude,” Kim said. “Is it true?”

“Which?”

“He says he loves you and you don’t say it back? Because if someone did that to me, I’d rip his jewels off.”

“He didn’t say it. I told him it seemed like he might be in love with me.”

“Then just let it hang there.”

“No. I guess. I don’t know.”

“Like a fucking limp dick in the wind.”

“You really are talking to Thurston; I can tell.”

“Yeah, whatever. Can you see how that isn’t the most graceful way to handle that conversation?”

John huffed a quick sigh. “I guess so.”

“So have you ever said anything about how you feel about him, or, like visions of the future or whatever? Do you have visions of the future?”

“I have visions of me skating around the rink with the Cup over my head when we win the final. After that it’s kind of just a fog.”

“Awesome. You can sleep in the Cup after Sherlock invites you to never darken his doorstep again because you’re emotionally stunted.”
“I really don’t think I am,” John defended.

“No one could blame you; look at Mum and Dad. Look how I turned out. Come to think of it, I’m probably not the person to be asking for relationship advice.”

“That may be true, but you’re what I’ve got.”

“So are you, though?”

“Am I what?”

“Are you in love with him?”

“Yeah.”

John sat with it a second, and Kim gave him room.

“So why not tell him?”

“Sure, and then right after, I’ll show up naked to a press avail. It’s just so fucking exposing.”

“OK, but. From what you say, sounds to me like Sherlock all but sent you an e-vite to tell him.”

“But at the same time picking at me about the privacy thing, which he knows is important to me, and which he’s agreed to, multiple times. That’s like, I love you, but.” John stood up and paced, almost-circling the bed in a horseshoe pattern. “And for the record, he has not said he loves me, either. It’s just sort of. . .out there.”

“That he loves you.”

“Yeah.”

“So even though that’s out there, it still looks one-sided.”

“I guess.”

Kim growled at him, then muttered, “I swear to christ you were not this thick when you lived at home.”

“How am I thick?”

Kim’s tone changed again, delivering a bottom line. “Listen, dude. Do you want to hear what I think? Because if you just want me to say, yeah, you’re right, what a douche that Sherlock Holmes has turned out to be, you know I’m your guy and I’ll go along with that. What I really think is a whole other thing.”

“No, I want to hear it.”

“All right then. First of all, Dum-Dum—”

“Hey.”

“Dum-Dum,” Kim repeated with emphasis. “That man loves you. Like, seriously. It was obvious to me in the first ten minutes after I met him. He luhhhhs you. And that’s no worthless thing.”

“No, of course it’s not,” John agreed immediately.
“So I know you’ve spent the past however many years catting around, between bad boyfriends like that piece of shit Jason. And I have lost count of how many times you’ve told me you just want to find a decent guy, you’re old and decrepit and need someone to feed you lukewarm soup and whatever.”

“That’s not exactly how I put it.”

“Pretty close. But listen, here’s the thing. That whole time you were hooking up all over North America? I don’t think you were really looking for someone.”

“No, not every time, but sort of the overarching theme. . .”

“Nope. You weren’t trying to find a decent guy, because that’s not how you meet decent guys. You were avoiding finding one. Because somehow—in this weird, gay-man-hookup mathematics of it all—you sleeping with seventeen million guys—”

“Excuse me, it was only fifteen million.”

“Hooking up around the clock still adds up to plausible deniability, somehow. Having a man around for more than a couple of dates, though. . .that’s like, whoa!”

“Sherlock has this thing he says about being seen with a bunch of different men not throwing up flags, but being seen with the same man over and over making people suspect.”

“Well, he’d know, so I guess that means I’m right. It’s kind of weird.”

“It is,” John agreed.

“So here’s the real thing I’m wondering—and I’ve wondered this for a long time, but it’s not really my business and it never came up before—”

“Wait, did I miss a meeting? Are there things about my life that aren’t your business?”

“Shut the fuck up, already, I’m being so totally real with you right now, you arse.”


“Who are you afraid of disappointing? Dad’s gone. I think Mum would’ve been OK with it. And you know I’m good. So, like. . .what’s stopping you?”

“Disappointing?” John felt like he’d just been told a secret about himself he hadn’t even known, and was instantly ashamed of even as he felt relief to have lifted off his chest.

“I know that’s what it was with Dad. He would have thought you were less than perfect, and that would have been more of a shock than he could handle, to think you weren’t what he told himself he’d made you into. Which, by the way, is bullshit. You made yourself. He just stood by taking the credit while you did the work. You got up at half-four in the morning to skate; he only got up to drive you there.”

“Nah,” John felt an immediate need to protect his father, despite the fact Kim was right that he’d always taken more credit for John’s success than he was actually due.

“It’s true. You should think about it. Anyway, all I’m saying is, Sherlock’s willing to have your back. . . That should be a comfort. Like, honestly, dude? I believe he respects the privacy thing, maybe he just got frustrated, like you say, and threw everything into the mix just to get stuff off his
chest. But I think you’d do yourself a favour to wonder why you’re still so worried about what other people might think, or say.”

“You think I don’t know what people will say?” John asked incredulously.

“I think you worry about what they’ll say, but I don’t think you’ve given fair play to the idea that maybe the people who will be shitty about it just aren’t worth a shit anyway, and there are probably more people who’ll be supportive than you realise. And, like, if you want to be real about it, mostly people just won’t care. Because you’re not that big a deal in, like, the big picture. You idiot. You’re hockey-famous. Don’t think you’re some big fucking celebrity, because you’re not.”

“Yeah, there’s little chance of me getting a big head with you around.”

Kim’s tone softened a bit, sounding thoughtful. “It’s not the same world it was twenty years ago. And you were a kid then—of course you were afraid. But now you’re a grown-ass man. And having a guy in exactly your same position, who’s willing to go through it all with you...I don’t know. Seems like that might make it feel safer for you.”

John inhaled forever, held it. “It’s not that simple.”

“Yeah, nothing is. I used to say that to people who told me to leave Mal—that they didn’t understand it wasn’t that easy—just leave. Sometimes you have to trust that things will work out OK after you do the thing that feels too difficult.”

“Yeah,” John said reluctantly, not even half-believing it.

“Think about it.”

“Yeah.”

“So listen. Go kill the Muskies tomorrow night, and I’ll see you in Boston for the finals.”

“Shh!”

“Yeah, yeah. Superstition, I know. Have a good game.”

“Thanks.” There was a pause where neither of them carried on with goodbyes, and John said again, “Thanks for this. You’re a good kid.”

“I really am.”

The game start was at the prime-time television-friendly hour of eight p.m., so John was still debating which of his underwear was luckiest when a check of the time—half past five—reminded him of Sherlock’s daily ritual of looking himself in the eye while he recited his mantra. Drifting into the hotel bath, John flipped switches up and down and up again until he got the right combination of the least cruel lights and no noisy fan, and stood with his fingertips tented on the marble countertop. He tried looking his reflection in the eye, but his gaze wanted to dart around, checking the status of his beard’s growth, the stray white-blond hair in his right eyebrow that grew the wrong direction, the tiny and mysterious orange stain on the ring-neck of his t-shirt. Eventually he managed to focus, staring into his own eyes, and the closest he could get to feeling compassionate toward himself was a sort of scornful pity—who do you think you are, then, Watson? What have you made of yourself after all this time?—and he wondered if Sherlock found it so difficult to see himself, and if when he did, he liked what he saw.
“Everything’s shit and I want to bang my head against a wall,” John said, lacking a mantra of his own, and sneered at himself, and turned away.

“You milk-sucking assclown!” Thurston shouted. “I will beat you until you forget your name.”

“What’s your problem, man?” Leukkens was playing dumb, holding out his hands, letting the ref push between them to save himself getting one of Thurty’s haymakers thrown at his jaw.

“You guys are crowding our goalie and you fucking know it.”

“Nah, man. Nah. All those drugs you’re taking are making you stupid.”

“What are you, goddamn Doctor Drew? You want to send me to celebrity rehab? I’d fucking own it.”

Thurston had his jaw set, looking furious, but let it drop and skated back toward the faceoff circle, shaking his head like he couldn’t believe he was wasting his time.

“What the hell does that even mean?” Sullivan demanded.

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Thurston admitted. “He backed me into a corner on that one.”

John had to pretend to adjust his visor, covering his laugh with his gloved hand.

"Hammel and Leukkens take the faceoff. Hammel wins it, Sullivan takes control, tape to tape to Thurston for the one-timer. Thurston fires a bomb, knocked aside by the stick of Ziegler, Hammel gets the rebound, back to Thurston, fakes the pass, backhand—SCORES! Shane Thurston gives the Brawlers insurance with three minutes and change left to play."

As the players celebrated the goal in a smiling huddle, patting Thurston’s back, tapping his helmet, turning their heads up toward the scoreboard for the replay, they passed each other meaningful glances but naturally none dared say aloud that they had likely just bought themselves their fourth win in the best-of-seven series, and would move on to the final playoff round.

“Keep it up, boys,” John urged. “Stay steady.” He felt a weird rush of lightness through his body, from his feet up through to his head. He skated the long way around the center circle to regain a grip on himself, and on his way by, he looked across at Sherlock, who tipped his chin upward, once. John made a fist and jabbed downward, acknowledging it.

“Faceoff comes at center, Hammel wins it again for Boston, Hatch gets it, skates it behind the Brawlers’ goal and they’ll get fresh legs on the ice...”

“There’s a film new to WebMovie I think might suit us both,” Sherlock declared, swinging himself into the seat beside John. “Three hour flight and no need to catch up on sleep—plus the winning adrenaline—so I thought perhaps we could—”

“Yeah, definitely,” John agreed immediately, willing to let Sherlock lead, acting as if everything were normal again. “Have you got any—?”

“Siven, I’ll need to borrow your ear things.”

In the end, it took Sherlock forty minutes, a tour of most of the plane, and parting with fifty dollars
to stake claim to a pair of ear buds for them to use. The film was a horror comedy—a much newer one with young actors John didn’t recognise in the lead roles—about a zombie in love with a living girl. They ate pizza and crisps and shared nearly all of a gallon-jug of water as they watched, and John determined he would just let it be, not try to decipher what it might mean—Sherlock had forgiven him his shortcomings; Sherlock had decided they should be friends; Sherlock was lulling him into a false sense of security. . .or perhaps the sudden cheery ease in his manner meant Sherlock had slipped. Sideways glances at him were not enough to judge the size of his pupils, or whether the whites of his eyes were bloodshot, or the skin dark beneath from lack of sleep. Sherlock’s knee bumped John’s once, but only for a second, and not again.

They waited for their bags, their teammates roaring yawns at the empty, three a.m. baggage area, everyone waking their phones to listen to messages and read texts and emails in the wake of their semifinal win. Sherlock raised his eyebrows, but not his gaze, and said casually, “My car’s here. I can drive you if you like.”

John bit his lips, then nodded hard. “Yeah. That’d be great.”

John was buckling his seatbelt before he realised Sherlock was not doing the same, not fitting the key in the ignition, not putting his hands on the wheel. As he straightened upright in his seat, John pressed his hands briefly onto the tops of his thighs and felt his shoulders rise as they tightened. He braced for impact, his stomach freefalling, awash with a certain dread Sherlock was about to tell him it was over.

“John.”

Damn you, Watson, do something. Start talking. He looked aside at Sherlock, eyes only, caught him in his peripheral vision, fiddling quietly with the keys in his hands in his lap.

“This is difficult,” Sherlock said, and John caught the motion of him tipping his head, shrugging. “Too difficult.”

Fucking say something, you idiot, before it’s too late. He has your back. The truth. Say it!

"I shouldn’t have made you wonder whether I’m in love with you,” John blurted. “I should have said, ‘boyfriend’. I should have made it clear that I want to live with you in your flat.”

He barreled on, would not leave room for Sherlock to cut him off. He could see lights coming on here and there around the parking area, heard engines starting and watched the lights draw closer, then turn away, and the cars fade from view.

“I shouldn’t have introduced you to Glen and his boyfriend as my teammate. I should have been telling you every day—every minute—for much longer than you probably know—that you are the most remarkable man I have ever met, in every way—really, I’m in awe of you—and that I am the luckiest sonofabitch there is, to have you. All those times you asked what I was feeling, I should have told you I feel you’re much more and better than I deserve, and that I could spend a lifetime trying to catch up to you and never get close. I could tell you I can’t sleep without you, but that would be a lie; the truth is I just don’t want to sleep without you. Not one more night.”

John realised his hands were clenched together, fingers of one hand crushing the bones of the other, and made an effort to release them. He crushed his lips between his teeth. Did that make sense? Does he even know what the fuck you’re on about? Did that sound like the speech you give right before you say It’s not you, it’s me? Christ. . .
“I love you,” John clarified, his voice surprisingly steady. “I want to live with you. I want us to decide together what comes next.” At last, he screwed up his courage and turned his head to look at Sherlock looking back at him, and in the blue-pink light from the carpark’s lamp post John could see his lips were curled up in a soft smile. At last looking Sherlock in the eyes, John repeated, with an irrepressible smile of his own, “I’m in love with you. I am. I love you.”

Sherlock made a quick move to slip his hand behind John’s neck, and he pulled, and John felt a wash of relief so great it would have collapsed him except that he braced himself on the center console, his shoulder belt still pulling across his chest, and caught hold of Sherlock’s bicep as they kissed and kissed, urgent and uncomfortable, sighing, humming, once almost laughing. They ended with noses and cheeks bumping and brushing, a kiss on Sherlock’s at-last-respectably-whiskered chin, a nip and pull at John’s lip.

“‘What comes next?’” Sherlock mused, and pulled back from John, releasing him from their awkward twist. He swung down his seat belt from shoulder to hip in one smooth motion, then jabbed in the key and stoked the beast to life with a deep throbbing rumble John felt in his teeth. “What comes next is that I take you home, and we get into our bed—in our flat—and I anticipate we’ll be making each other come just before dawn.”

John leaned across and Sherlock leaned a bit to meet him as John kissed the side of his face, then ran a hand along the inside of his thigh as Sherlock began to maneuver them out of the car park.

“I love you,” John said again, and he could feel Sherlock’s smile in the motion of his jaw.
Chapter 56

*I love you* slipping off a kiss placed softly on the thick-soft lobe of his ear.

*I love you* smeared against the skin of his throat. *I love you* whispered to the hollow valley between his pectoral muscles. *I love you* breathed onto his belly, trailed by a tonguetip, blown cool and then smothered in kisses, eliciting a hum and a sleepy half-giggle.

John mapped it to the length and breadth of Sherlock’s powerful, vulnerable body, pinning data points all of equal weight and measure, every stop along the way christened the same: *I love you.* Gentle hands and un-gentle breath, searching kisses with needy or reassuring noises uttered in between, *I need you, I’m here,* the slick-slip of gliding fingers, the brush of hair, muscles tense there, and here, soft. They eased away the covers and the motion of their hips and thighs, bumping knees and ankles finished the task, inelegant, bare, close and then closer, *I love you,* a single rolling motion, slow, but slow, until they couldn’t bear slow and so quickened, gasping, messy kisses and lower sounds, *yeah, yes, yeah, oh, oh, ohhh.* . .

Lazy in the afterglow, beginning to want the blankets back but lacking the desire to untangle and let Sherlock go, John accepted a litter of twinkling kisses over his face and then his hands, fingertips, knuckles, wrists.

“*I thought for sure you were calling it off, when you said it was too difficult.*”

“No.” That sensation against John’s face, of Sherlock’s lips taut with a grin. “Too difficult not speaking, avoiding each other.” The point of his nose nudging against John’s nose. “Calling off the fight, maybe.”

“I’m relieved.”

“I want to apologise for the crass things I said about your wish for a private life.”

“Already forgiven.”

“I only said it to needle you. I think I wanted to wound you.” A slump of his shoulder that brought him closer, John half-cradling him, tucking himself in. “I don’t mind; I only want to be with you. And I want you to have a comfortable life, so if that’s more comfortable, I won’t ask otherwise.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“Because I get it, that it can put you in awkward positions now and then...god knows I get that. I want you to be comfortable, too.”

Sherlock had once and for all burrowed in and down, held snug against John’s body from forehead to chest to calf, a perfect tangled bundle, clearly with no hesitation about making himself quite comfortable.

“I just want you. I don’t care.” He sounded almost childishly petulant.

“Well, thank you, then. I appreciate that.” John placed a crooked kiss on his temple. “Thank you.” He stroked Sherlock’s bicep in a few long sweeps, then reluctantly—minimally—disentangled himself to fetch back the bed sheet and quilt, clicked off the bedside lamp and resettled himself,
gratefully accepting Sherlock back into his arms.

“Look at that,” Sherlock murmured. John blinked into the silvery darkness of Sherlock’s tidy bedroom—now theirs, or so he’d been told.

“Hm?”

“I was right. Nearly dawn.”

“Game One of the Stanley Cup Final brought to you tonight on BSN by Newbury Comics—a wicked good time!, and Wainwright Bank, banking on values. I’m Jack Edwards, with me as always is my partner Andy Brickley. Tonight the Boston Brawlers face the Shoreham Shock in the first game of what we anticipate will be a competitive series.”

“True, Jack. Both teams pretty evenly matched in terms of playing style, solid, no-nonsense play, both with long hometown hockey traditions dating back to the start of the league ninety-plus years ago. First and second in the conference most of the season. Both teams pretty healthy, not sweeping their quarter- and semifinal series, but still getting decisive wins in five or six games. I think we’re going to see both teams playing with care and precision, not taking unnecessary risks, and I don’t think this is a series that will be decided quickly.”

“Time will tell on that, Brick. One interesting dynamic to watch will be if Brawlers captain John Watson and Shoreham forward Brent Shayner share ice-time. The two have not met on-ice since the unfortunate collision that kept Watson on the IR for eight games in March.”

“I don’t expect the Brawlers to deal out any payback for what is widely agreed was an accidental hit, but you’re right that we might see the two players giving each other a little extra room.”

“Time for us to take a break, and when we come back, the puck drops for the start of Game One.”

During warm-ups, John skated by Shayner and gave him a nod.

“How’s it goin’, eh?” Shayner said.

“All right,” John told him. “You all right?”

“I’m good.”

“Good then.” John skated away, flicked a few pucks up and over the glass to kids clamouring there. Shortly after their collision, Shayner had emailed him that he felt badly that John got the worst of it; John had replied he realised it was just bad luck—no harm, no foul. They both had jobs to do, and so they’d do them.

Once the Brawlers were gathered in the room for final equipment checks and a short psych-up speech from Coach Lestrade, John pulled Sherlock aside and said, “How are you with surprises?”

“Depends on the surprise,” Sherlock intoned, looking curious.

“A good one. But don’t let it get in your head,” was all John said, then gave him a sound clap on the back of his shoulder pads, and strode off to fetch his gloves from his locker.

“On the Brawlers’ bench tonight is fourteen-year-old Jeremy Porter of Melrose; mom Beth, dad Tom, and baby sister Natalie are in the stands tonight as well. Jeremy is a lifelong Brawlers fan,
and tonight represents the Everybody Plays Foundation, which supports sports programs in schools and in the community for student athletes with special needs. He’ll no doubt get some fist-bumps from his team as they take the ice.”

The PA announcer urged the fans to welcome your Boston Brawlers! and Sherlock led the team up the tunnel. John made a point of jumping the line a bit—he usually trailed his teammates, bringing up the rear—so he was close enough to see Jeremy—standing at the end of the Brawlers’ bench wearing noise-reducing headphones and Sherlock’s jersey—#22—leaning himself at Sherlock and wrapping his arms around him, his usual greeting. Sherlock took off his catching glove and tucked it under his other arm so he could rest his bare hand on Jeremy’s shoulder before he stepped through the door and onto the ice.

A few seconds later, John, too, was on the ice, the music blaring and lights flashing, having tapped his glove against Jeremy’s waiting fist. Sherlock swooped up beside him.

“Thanks for that.”

“Happy to.” John gave Sherlock a quick swat on the backside as they parted again to line up for the intros and the anthem.

“I’m glad you’re in town. I’m glad you’re staying at my place. Just please do not have sex with Thurty in my bed,” John begged. He’d refused to put his only sister in a car driven by madman Sherlock Holmes and so had gone to fetch her from the airport in a hired car. Sherlock had stayed behind to sulk.

“We’re gonna have so much sex in your bed, dude. And on the sofa.” She was grinning wickedly. “In the shower…”

“Stop.”

“On that dining table!”

“Don’t you dare. I’ll have him arrested.”

Kim rolled her eyes, though they were both laughing. “Yeah, all right. You may be my big brother but Shane could kick you into next week, and you know it. Anyway, we’re not there yet.”

“No?”

“Well,” Kim said, “I’m in town at least until Game Five.” John felt a bit chuffed at how his sister also kept time not by the calendar, but by the hockey schedule. “And we’re going to try to go out for dinner or something. But. We’ve only really been texting and talking on the phone. So. No rush.”

“That’s good. Very smart.”

“Except that oh my god I want to sex that boy like what!”

“Christ.”

Kim scream-laughed and threw a punch to give John a dead leg.
John was in the kitchen starting coffee when he heard Sherlock’s luxuriant stretch-groans followed
by his typical pronouncement that it was, “Game day.”

“What do you want to eat, ma moitié?”

“French toast and hash. We’ll walk over to Charlie’s.” John could not argue with so sound a plan.
A few minutes later Sherlock joined him, and they exchanged a quick kiss as John fetched down
mugs from the cupboard.

“I’m seeing the doc today,” John mentioned. “So I’m going in a little early, in two hours or so.”
Sherlock raised his eyebrow, looking sly. “Is that so?”

“Oh, yes.”

“A matched set of negative test results,” Sherlock mused. “Won’t we have fun with those.”

“Oh. Yes,” John agreed. “Yes, I think we definitely will.”

“About midway through the second period of Game Two as the Brawlers look to take the series
down to Long Island, New York, with two wins in hand. Score currently tied 1 – 1, and Bouchard
will take the faceoff in the Shock’s defensive end, to the right of David MacDonald, who has saved
seventeen Brawlers shots so far tonight. Boehner takes it for the Shock. Puck drops, Bouchard wins
it and the Brawlers have control. Sawyer around the boards to Mellon, the one-timer, deflected,
Bouchard and Boehner battling for it, Bouchard gets it loose for Mellon, wrist shot, SCORES! And
the Brawlers take the lead!”

“OK, boys, before we get started everybody skate in here and take a knee.”

Sherlock leaned against the crossbar, worked his water bottle free of its holder and fired a torrent of
water into his mouth through his mask.

“Two wins in the pocket,” John began, “Great way to start a series. But don’t let’s get carried away
with ourselves, all right? No easy rides. We can’t be lazy.”

Sherlock shook off his blocker and lay it on top of the goal’s roof of netting, beside his catching
glove. He tilted his mask up so it rested on top of his head, turning his back to the crossbar to take
his usual stance, elbows up and back, on his feet.

“We have to stay focused, and we can win it, but we’re in their house tonight and even though I
don’t think that’s a minus for us, it is a plus for them.”

Sherlock glided forward until he was more or less part of the kneeling pack of his teammates
listening to John’s pep talk, and took a knee.

“Game Three is at an end, and the series is now two games to one in favour of the Boston
Brawlers, who scrapped their way to a 3 – 3 tie early in the third, but in the end, a goal by Griffin
Mulcahey won it for the Shock. Tune in Tuesday night for Game Four. On behalf of my partner,
Andy Brickley, and the BSN crew…”
Sunday brunch in the hotel restaurant meant four tables of giant eating machines in the persons of the Boston Brawlers. Despite the previous night’s loss, the players were in good spirits, passing around their mobiles so their children could wave to Dad’s teammates and scream “Go Brawlers!” at ear-splitting volume, sharing details of plans for the summer vacation they hoped was still at least a week away.

“What do you usually do in the summer?” Sherlock asked, then shoveled greasy potatoes into his mouth.

“Nothing special, really. Two years ago I went to Alaska, did some camping and some rock climbing.”

“I didn’t know that was something you enjoyed,” Sherlock commented.

“The camping wasn’t bad, and the hikes. Climbing turned out not to be my favourite,” John told him. “Too much time in my head; it was the opposite of relaxing. You go to your parents every year?”

“Mm. Someone’s got to move crates of vinyl record albums from the attic to my father’s office and back again.”

“If not you, who?” John grinned.

“I’m built for it,” Sherlock replied. Then, abruptly, “Would you like to come with me?” Quickly, he added, “I’ve a flat there; we don’t have to stay in my parents’ house.”

“To London? Yeah, of course. Sounds lovely.” John dragged the last of his toast through a left-behind puddle of egg yolk on his plate. “Meet your parents. Your brother. Are there a lot of photos around, of you as a kid?”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“Absolutely, I insist on it. If I can’t meet them, I’m not coming.”

“You couldn’t afford what it would cost you to compensate me for arranging such a meeting.”

“Don’t know if you know this about me,” John intoned, sitting back and folding his arms across his chest. “But I’m a professional hockey player.”

“I know the salaries of every player in the league,” Sherlock retorted. “All of them together couldn’t persuade me to inflict my family on someone I regard so well.”

John guffawed, and Sherlock joined in.

“I’ve a real estate agent who wants to show me some investment properties; you can be a second pair of eyes for me.”

“What, like flats?”

“Commercial real estate. Small warehouses; pubs; shopfronts.”

“For your wine bar,” John said, the *a-ha* evident in it.

“Perhaps. That’s years in the future. But in the meantime they can hold tenants.”
“Excellent. I’m happy to look at them with you.”

Sullivan, across from them at the large round table, waved the folio. “OK, boys, let’s see who gets the honour of paying.” He opened it, tugged the receipt tape free, and looked. “Aw, what the hell, man! It’s a five. That’s me again.”

“Brawlers down 2 – 1, Holmes makes a break for the bench. The forwards are Bouchard, Sawyer, Sullivan, and now Mellon for the Brawlers; Kocur and Gorzik the defenders. Sawyer to Sullivan; he throws ahead to Mellon who takes a huge hit as he sweeps the puck back across to Bouchard. Mellon takes the hit from Shayner to make the play, but he’ll head to the bench for a change, and head straight down the tunnel. Sawyer, the quick pass to Kocur for the one-timer, it’s a bullet, but MacDonald swats it away. Sawyer can’t control the wiggling puck and it’s scooped out by Miles who fires it 200 feet toward the empty net. It goes wide. . .and there’s the horn. So the Brawlers head back to Boston for Game Five, both teams with two wins in hand.”

John had thought it would be like ripping off a bandage, a quick pain that dissipated immediately, with just a little soothing. In the end, it wasn’t even as bad as that, because he was so numb it was as if he were watching it all happen to someone else. His body in the chair, behind the long black table, with the microphone bent into place by some techie with a headset. His tablet lying flat in front of him, its screen glowing with seven sentences he’d typed at half-two in the morning while Sherlock slept off a vigorous shag. Kim was there, and Coach Lestrade, his old coach and the GM from the Thrashers, and his agent and his attorney and about a dozen people who worked for them. None of the Brawlers players were there, because the only one he’d have wanted was Sherlock, and to have Sherlock there would have begged the question of why him and not some of the others—the alternate captains Bouchard and Kocur, or John’s linemate Hatch.

John cleared his throat and looked out into the small sea of sports reporters and bloggers from the papers, radio shows, and TV stations. “First of all, thanks everyone for being here. I won’t be taking questions today but I’m told my publicist has something she’ll be emailing to you. I want to thank the Boston Brawlers for the opportunity to play in a great hockey town, with some of the league’s best players; I’ve enjoyed every minute that I’ve spent with this organisation. I’m proud of the work I’ve done here, both on the ice and in the room. It was an amazing honour to be voted team captain in my rookie season.”

This elicited light laughter from the audience, who surely sensed what was coming.

“I hope to be part of a Brawlers championship team; I think I will be, thanks to all the guys’ effort all season long and especially in the playoffs. This has been my last season in the National Hockey League, my home base for eighteen years, almost half my life. Of course in my heart I’ll always be a Thrasher, but I’m proud to retire a Brawler.” He cleared his throat one last time, quick-grinned, schooling himself. “Thanks.”

As he stood from his chair, Kim appeared beside him and embraced him as cameras whirred and flashed and the room began to buzz with conversation.

“You did good,” she said, and patted his shoulder.

He left her at the Tremont, waving to him from the pavement as he rode away in the hired car toward Sherlock’s—their—flat, and he couldn’t feel his new key in his hand as he fitted it into the door lock, couldn’t feel his feet on the stair treads. Sherlock was on the sofa with his feet on the
coffee table, and his phone in his hand. He sat upright, as if to get up, but John waved him down and sank down by his side.

“BSN streamed it. You looked relaxed.”

“Thanks. I wasn’t.”

“Handsome, too,” Sherlock smiled, and John tried to return it. Sherlock’s voice went quieter. “How do you feel?”

John clutched at his face, which barely felt like his own anymore with its thick growth of beard. The room glittered and shattered. His voice broke on a hideous, unexpected sob.

“Moi—moitié . . .”

John reached, and Sherlock caught him, and drew him up tight.

“I know,” he murmured, and kissed the top of John’s head. Then again, “I know.” And he didn’t say anything more, only held John together while he fell apart.

Hammel forced a turnover and the Brawlers scrambled through the neutral zone, hustling to get in position in the offensive end. Hammel threw the puck away and Thurston ended up in a battle for it in the corner. John hovered near the top of the faceoff circle, trying to see everything at once, looking for openings. Thurty freed the puck but it rolled weakly only a few yards away from him; Hammel swooped in to pick it up.

“Hammer!” John shouted, and—trusting John to be where he belonged—Hammel passed it blind, behind him. Mellon, meantime, was keeping himself busy pesterling a Shock defenseman, shoving him and shouldering his way between him and his goalie, setting himself up to receive John’s pass for a tip-in.

The Shoreham D lost his edge and stumbled, and Mellon followed, as he’d been leaning his weight backward against the opposing player’s right side. John saw his opening, fired a slap shot from up high, aiming for the low corner of the stick-side goal.

The light came on, the horn blared, and the Garden crowd went bananas. John pumped his fist, shouting, “Yeah!” as his teammates skated in to congratulate him. When he looked up to the scoreboard—4 – 1 Brawlers, with 9:26 left to play—to watch himself on the replay, the camera cut to several groups of blue-and-white, Thrashers jersey-clad fans on their feet, dancing to the goal celebration music, cheering him on.
Chapter 57

Sherlock groaned heavily, and reached behind his hip to clutch the back of John’s head, his palm riding the gentle nodding motions as John alternated licking, tongue-fucking, and nuzzling his beard in the soft, well-wetted hollow between Sherlock’s buttocks. Sherlock’s long feet and grippy toes brushed and slid against John’s legs as he knelt between Sherlock’s spread knees, the white hotel bedding a rumpled disaster of dropped and dripped lubricant, dampened in splotches where their fresh-from-the-shower bodies had soaked it. John drew back to look, let go a growling sound of his own, and pressed close for a few more swirling licks around the rim of Sherlock’s softened hole before leaning away and pronouncing Sherlock, “Ready.”

“God, yeah,” Sherlock moaned, and they shifted and resettled, John’s fingertip resting in the dimple above Sherlock’s arse as he steadied him, pressing down a bit, with one splayed hand on his rump. There were foil packets of slick scattered all over the bed, so he easily found one, ripped the corner open with his teeth and drizzled a stream of the stuff onto his thrumming, upright prick.

“You should see how hard you’ve made me,” John growled as he spread the slippery up and down his length, “Can’t wait to get in you.”

Sherlock purred a hum into the pillow he held clutched beneath his head, and swayed his hips the slightest bit, just the sight of which made John have to clutch at the root of his cock and look up at the ceiling, trying to distract himself. He looked down again to watch the naked crown of his prick pushing against Sherlock’s body, meeting resistance, at last slipping in. They both moaned, and Sherlock’s hand reached back again, swatting and gripping, trying to catch hold of John’s hip or thigh, to pull him closer. Sherlock pressed slowly, steadily back, needy whimpers muffled in the pillow.

“Fuck. . .fuck!” John cursed, biting his lip at the delicious sensation of his cock sinking in deeper and deeper, surrounded in deep heat, slick and sliding, so hot, so hot. “Christ oh christ I wanna fuck you. . .”

“Fuck me,” Sherlock pleaded in response, and John set both hands on the crest of Sherlock’s arse and began a slow, shallow slide, slowly out and much quicker in, wanting to go hard and fast but not wanting it to be over too soon. Sherlock countered him, short backward shoves, his thighs flexing, his powerful back bowing as he curled his spine, dropping his belly toward the mattress, effectively opening himself just that much more for John’s cock.

John varied the tempo a few times over the course of long, too-short minutes, listening for Sherlock’s voice changing pitch and volume in response, gripping his hips tight to hold him still once John had found the spot, driving his cock over it again and again until Sherlock cried out for him to stop, stop, I’ll come if you don’t stop, fucking hell, I want to fuck you.

John drove hard into him twice more and came hard, pulling Sherlock to him so his body was flush against Sherlock’s luscious bum, his cock pulsing hard and hot inside, and he shouted, curled forward, then dropped his head back with a dark growl.

“Come here,” Sherlock demanded, and drew away so quickly they both gasped. John gratefully collapsed onto his back, head on the same pillow Sherlock had been pressing his face into, and they guided his knees up into place while Sherlock licked two fingers to get the slick going again, used his other hand to smear a fresh packet of lube down John’s perineum, making him shudder as if with cold, then using the licked fingers to feel his way around John’s already partially-softened hole, massaging in anti-clockwise motion with two fingers, his wrist twisting. John watched
Sherlock’s face, flushed hot and pink, both of them licking lips dried by gusts of breath. Another foil packet torn apart and crushed in a fist, and Sherlock stroked himself with a rumbling moan and a shiver of pleasure visible in the movement of his shoulders. He dropped down between John’s open thighs and guided himself home; John cursed him and grabbed at his back, his arse, pulling him in, tucking his legs around Sherlock’s hips.

“Hard,” John urged. “Go hard. I want you to come inside me. I’m dying to feel it.”

Sherlock obliged, jutting his hips in quick, sharp thrusts, grunting in time with it, dirty music to John’s ears.

“I can feel you oozing out of me,” Sherlock muttered beside John’s face, bringing on an electric aftershock that made John’s gut clench and even his withering erection twitch as if it might fatten up again for another go. John held Sherlock tighter, pulling him close, wanting to feel the powerful, muscular weight of him bearing down.

John dropped his thighs apart a bit, no longer hugging Sherlock’s hips, and Sherlock responded by drawing back farther, thrusting in deeper, his grunts ascending to articulated cries of, Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Oh! . . .

All at once Sherlock’s chest dropped heavy upon John’s, and he let go a string of curses as he came, deep inside, finished it whining and digging in teeth. He withdrew and rolled to the side, arm across John’s chest, both of them panting. Sherlock smeared a kiss on John’s temple, dragged his own bearded chin down the side of John’s face to settle his forehead against it.

“Worth the wait,” Sherlock murmured, playful and somnolent.

John turned to face him, draping one arm around his ribs, fitting his fingertips between the bumps of Sherlock’s spine.

“Never have I been so glad we have two beds,” Sherlock added, and dragged the edge of a bed sheet across the backs of his thighs, and they both laughed, then quieted each other with kisses.

“Seventeen minutes, fourteen seconds into overtime, the Shoreham Shock scores one against an almost-certainly battle-weary Sherlock Holmes, and they will live to play another day. What do you think, Brick?”

“Hate to see the Brawlers forced into a do-or-die situation when a win tonight would have got them the Cup, but I’m always excited for a Game Seven, Jack. And back on home ice, the Brawlers could definitely win it.”

“So home we go, and we hope you’ll join us Tuesday night here on BSN, your home for Hub sports. As always, from my partner Andy Brickley, our BSN crew, and me, Jack Edwards, goodnight. . . Get my pills, Martha—it’s a Game Seven! I’m havin’ a haht attack!”

The vibe in the room was intense, focused, serious though the players joked and chirped at each other, trading smiles as they went through their pregame rituals of taping sticks, a game of two-touch in the corridor, checking the blades on their skates and the hook-and-loop tapes on their pads.

“Listen up, boys,” John said, taking a place in the center of the room. “Oi, listen up.” He waited for the room to quiet. “You don’t need me to tell you what this game’s about; we all know it. We all
want the same thing, and we all want it—” He clenched his fists and mugged “—so fucking bad.” There was a ripple of knowing laughter. “Before Coach comes in here to talk you up, or the GM or whoever else thinks they have something to say... I just want you boys to know I’m proud of the work we’ve done here. We’ve had a hell of a season, and it’s been an honour being your captain. I say this now because we’ll be too busy knocking heads and popping corks after the game, yeah?”

A rousing, shouted chorus of “Yeah, Cap!”

“OK, let’s go to work.”

“From the ninth floor of the Boston Garden, high above the ice, I’m Jack Edwards here with my colleague Andy Brickley and the already roaring seventeen thousand, five hundred, sixty-five Boston Brawlers fans. Thanks for joining Boston Sports Network’s coverage of Game Seven of the Cup Final. Just two options remain for the Brawlers and the formidable Shoreham Shock of Long Island, New York: win it all, or end an thrilling season with the disappointment of not having their players’ names etched into the base of Lord Stanley’s Cup.

“It’s news to no one who the real pride of Boston Garden is tonight, though. Standing on the shoulders of giants—and some might point out that at only five feet, nine inches in height, he could use the boost—one Brawler has been in the spotlight week after week, game after game.”

“That’s right Jack: team captain John Watson is a veteran player, well respected around the league through his astonishing eighteen seasons, joined the Brawlers just this year through a series of trades after spending the past dozen years as a first-line defenseman with the Hamilton Thrashers in his adopted home town in Ontario. He’s esteemed by his teammates both on the ice and in the room, and this Brawlers team—which has been developing over the last three, four, seasons—has really coalesced around Watson in that leadership position. After last season’s disappointments, where the Brawlers barely made the play-offs and were picked off in five games during the first round, a lot of credit’s going to John Watson for bringing these guys together, raising morale in the room so that what we see on the ice in nearly every game this season has been classic Brawlers’ hockey.”

“Watson’s known for his no-nonsense, workmanlike playing style as well his cool head, and he has great hockey IQ. And speaking of hockey smarts, another player known for amazing knowledge of the game is Brawlers’ goaltender—and, small world, Watson’s countryman from Merry Old England—Sherlock Holmes, who is showing up every game throughout the long playoff run, and certainly in this final series, shutting down opponents’ scoring opportunities in a way that I’m tempted to describe as preternatural.”

“It does sometimes seem like Holmes must be getting divine messages ahead of every shot on his net, as his lowest-in-the-league Goals Against average of 1.93—and close to a 92 save percentage—proves Holmes has a truly unique talent in goal. Keeps his cool, Jack, always very settled and calm, and for a guy who’s technically not very big as goaltenders go, at six-one, one-seventy, Holmes can get big as a house to defend the net, making save after save in the clutch.”

“That he does, Brick. Who can forget the game at Milwaukee, back in March, when Holmes made sixty-four saves in sixty regulation minutes and let not a single Muskies puck get by him? And as you at home can probably guess from the absolutely deafening cheers here in the Boston Garden, the players have taken the ice; we’ll take a break and then it’s right back here for a scenario that fans—and probably players and coaches—both dream of, and dread. Sixty minutes. Three periods of play. One Game Seven to decide it all. When we come back, two options for the Brawlers and
“Leukkens to Unwerth, tape to tape, wrist shot—he scores! The Shock are the first on the board in this Game Seven. The Brawlers trail one to nothing as we head into the break.”

“Hammel to Thurston, he drops it back for Hatch, Hatch to Hammel. . .Mellon the one-timer—SCORES! Just fifty-four seconds after the Shock scored the first goal of the game, the Brawlers answer it, and we got a tie game!”

“You can see here, Jack, the Brawlers defense on the backcheck, aggressive, always wanting to move that puck up the ice, driving pucks and bodies to the net. . .it’s the kind of smart, nervy play we expect from this Boston team. . .Kocur and Siven looking especially strong there. Good backchecking throughout tonight’s game; no complaints there.”

“The size of those two guys definitely a factor in pushing the Shock toward the blue line and away from the net of Sherlock Holmes, who is looking cool as an alligator shoe here tonight, already turning aside twenty-two of Shoreham’s twenty-three shots on goal. Leukkens and Bouchard, the faceoff. Boston wins it, Sullivan skates it in, a serpentine fake, fakes the wrist shot for the backhand—SCORES! The Brawlers lead 2 – 1 with less than a minute left in the second!”

“Boehner looking for Mulcahey but it’s stolen by Taylor Sawyer, and he’s off and running, scoops the puck across to Watson, Watson dangles, ahead back to Sawyer, across to Bouchard, back to Sawyer for a tip-in but MacDonald makes a diving save and traps the puck under his catching glove. Faceoff to the left of MacDonald. Hammel and Boehner. Boehner wins it, Mulcahey fires a bullet—he scores. It’s tied up again! Two-all as we head into this break. How’s your entertainment factor tonight, folks?!”

“Sawyer still in the box for a minute forty on that roughing call. Watson digs the puck out of his skates, flutters to Sullivan. Unwerth appeals for a slashing call as his stick got shattered in half. Sullivan spoons the puck; Bouchard trying to slow Mulcahey down. Leukkens got a piece of it. Hatch, over the deadwood to Bouchard, a wrist shot, and it whistles past MacDonald’s stick-side; I don’t think he ever saw it, because he didn’t move at all. The drive goes wide and Sullivan takes it. Now Sullivan’s stick breaks! He takes Watson’s, which is much shorter; Sullivan’s a right-hand shot, Watson shoots left—Sullivan’s playing with a short, backwards stick. A scrum for the puck in front of MacDonald, and the whistle comes as the linesmen lose sight of it.

“Faceoff at center, Boston wins it. Lestrade changes out all the penalty killers for a fresh set. Just under thirty seconds to go on Sawyer’s penalty, game tied at two. Watson lines up for a pass, dangles, shoots. . .SCORES! The Brawlers are up by one with only four minutes left in the third period of this Game Seven.”

“We’re going to get a review, here, Jack. It looked like the puck went in off the skate of Mellon, so they’ll want to watch the replay to be sure he didn’t kick it in. Of course, Toronto looks at different angles, more angles, than what we have here, but I’m looking at this replay, and I don’t see Mellon
make the ‘distinct kicking motion’ that would disqualify a goal. In fact, if you look at his upper body, he’s twisted in such a way here that I wonder if he even really saw this puck coming.”

“I agree, Brick. Looks to me like a good goal. Can’t kick something you can’t see, but then again, ask anyone who’s stood behind a spooked horse and they might tell you different. We’ll wait for official word from NHL headquarters, but I think we’ve got a good goal.”

“Definitely. Good goal. Here’s Gilles Martin with the call.”

“After review, the call on the ice stands. Good goal.”

“They don’t ask how pretty—they just ask how many. And how many right now is three for the Brawlers. Two for the Shock. Four minutes and eight seconds remaining. When we come back... it’s winning time.”

“This is the most magnificent trophy in sports, and one of the hardest to win. Congratulations to the Boston Brawlers on a remarkable season. There is one player who has waited a long time to hoist this. John Watson, come get the Cup, so you and the rest of your teammates can hoist it.”

John had pulled his ball cap low to hide his eyes, though he knew it was plain enough what his face was doing. His teammates, smiling, some with glittering eyes, patted his shoulders as he skated by them and up to the table where the Cup—the beautiful, beautiful Stanley Cup—sat on a black velvet cloth. He wanted to grab it and crush it to his chest, bear hug the damn thing, but smiled through tears as he posed with two hands on it—on the Cup!—as the NHL honcho pretended to hand it to him. As soon as the guy let it go, John raised it over his head, and the sound in the arena was so unbelievably loud, an inarticulate, unending smash of noise like the ocean roaring. He lowered it, kissed it, raised it again, and maybe he shouted, turning in a slow circle. Hands on his back, shoving him forward, and he began to skate a wobbly loop—he knew the tradition, but he could barely see, and as much as he wanted to hold it there over his head until his arms gave out—it really was damned heavy—he wanted to see his teammates skating it around. He found Bouchard, met him halfway, and passed the Cup to him so he could take his lap. John wheeled away and crushed his fingers and thumb against his eyes.

About fifteen minutes later, they were in the room, and the corks were popping, and the music was blaring, and Coach Lestrade was doused with a barrel of Gatorade. The players hung off each other’s shoulders, taking selfies together, live-streaming, high-fiving, embracing. John had spent his happy tears and was laughing, celebrating, quaffing champagne from the bottle, belching and then passing it on to the next guy.

Molly Hooper was bravely moving from one player to another, live-reporting for BSN, getting players’ reactions, probably with her fingers crossed none of them would forget themselves and curse on the air. She stuck her microphone in John’s face, and the light from the camera over her left shoulder made him squint a little.

“Team captain John Watson, congratulations on a great season, and on finally getting the Cup.”

“Thanks so much. Thanks very much.”

“Obviously you’re pleased; you waited a long time. Did the way the series was unfolding have any bearing on your decision to retire?”

“No, not at all. That was something I’d been thinking about for a while. Of course, I hoped like
hell we’d end up where we have, but even if not, my decision would have been the same. I’ve had a
great career, enjoyed every minute. This is just icing.”

“A perfect ending to a long and storied career.”


“Any plans for the summer?”

John thought the whole thing through in record time, and decided to make the leap and nevermind
the landing. “Yeah, actually. My boyfriend’s taking me home to meet his family.”

Molly looked stunned, poor girl, but her smile actually widened—perhaps because she knew she’d
got an historic scoop, but maybe not just that—and her eyes were bright. Before she could respond,
Sherlock bounded up behind John’s left shoulder and crowded in close, knowing it would get him
in the shot.

“That’s me. I’m his boyfriend. It’s me.”

They both grinned and chuffed each other on the shoulders, and Sherlock fell away again. John
quickly said, “Have a good one, Molly, thanks for everything. I’m your fan.” He gave a quick,
shoulder-high wave to the camera, and moved away. Let them sort it out; it didn’t matter what
anyone else thought of him because he knew who he was. He was the captain of a Stanley Cup
winning team, and somehow on his way to the championship, he had found a weird, wise,
astonishingly gorgeous, and wholly remarkable man. A man who had his back. A man who loved
him.

*  

- END -  

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I based some of John's back story, and the course of his career on that of my favourite Boston
Bruins defenseman, Ray Bourque. After 21 seasons as a Bruin, he was traded to the Avalanche so
he could finally get his Stanley Cup. If the first two minutes of this video don't bring a tear to yr
eye, man. . .I don't know. This was a moment I, as a fan, will never forget.
“When are you leaving?”

“Tuesday.” John accepted the cold bottle of beer Beth offered, and she settled down in the padded wicker chair beside him.

“Big step, meeting the parents,” she smiled.

“Yeah, well. Having an ocean between them and us is a comfort, just in case.”

Beth lowered her voice and leaned in. “My in-laws are talking about buying that green house.” She pointed diagonally across the back yard, where through tree branches the upper rear corner of a neighbour’s house was just visible. John mugged a grimace.

Sherlock had been invited to the Porter family’s annual summer party every year since he’d met them, but it was only when John insisted he would attend with or without him that Sherlock was at last persuaded to accept the invitation. That sunny Saturday afternoon found the two of them neatly and easily folded into the extended Porter family, too many names to remember, so many children, at least four generations of family members.

Sherlock was at that moment about halfway across the wide, toy-strewn back lawn, bent deeply toward his right side, as little Natalie toddled beside him, steadying herself with her fist wrapped around two of Sherlock’s long fingers. He looked mildly alarmed, but was sporting about it.

“I saw the interview you guys did on that blog. Those girls are so funny! I’m going to have to subscribe to them.”

“They are. They are quite funny. And with hockey smarts. I like them very much,” John told her.

“What made you choose them instead of a BSN reporter or Sports Illustrated or something?—Sherlock! You can hand her off if you need to. Here, Nattie, come here and see Mumma. Bring Sherlock over here, you cutie. That’s a good girl. You’re so big and smart! Look how proud you are. Is Sherlock helping you? Come see Mumma!—Sorry. So, why the blog?”

John explained about Sherlock’s having invited Mike and Mags to a Brawlers game, and about the blind item, and John having sent them a guilt-gift to atone for them being unfairly dragged in the mainstream sports press for teasing something that was actually true.

“So we decided pretty easily that if we were going to do only one interview, we could trust them not to have the usual knee-jerk, macho reaction. And it was probably good publicity for them, too.”

“Seems like the right choice,” Beth told him. “I felt like they put you in a good light. You came across as very honest and just, you know. . .”

“Normal?” John grinned.

By that time Sherlock and Natalie were within catching distance, so Beth rose to claim her.

“Take my chair, Sherlock; I have to go inside and start bringing out the salads, anyway.”

Sherlock politely protested but ultimately took the seat, reaching across to steal John’s beer right
out of his hand and take a long pull from it.

“We were talking about the interview with Mike and Mags,” John said.

“I only meant you came across like regular, good guys, which of course we know you are, but I’m sure not everyone was on board with that idea right away.”

“No, I know,” John reassured her. “I didn’t mean that to sound snarky.”

“Nah, you’re good. Another beer?”

“I do seem to have lost mine. But thanks, no, I’ll get one myself. Can we help you with anything?”

“No,” Beth replied, then frowned a bit. “Well, yeah, actually. Here.” She plopped baby Natalie on his lap and it was John’s turn to look alarmed. “If she gets fussy, just pass her on to anyone who’s willing.” With that, Beth disappeared into the house. John offered a nearby set of plastic keys and Natalie seemed happy to manipulate them for a bit, babbling in her own particular language.

“You like children?” Sherlock wondered, and pretended to pick Natalie’s pocket, then produced the toy keys again, to a gratifying giggle.

“I do. And you do, I know,” John ventured. “Jeremy, and those kids in hospital—you’re very kind to them. This one seems to like you.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows comically high and the baby clapped her hands, wriggling on John’s thigh and making him check his grip. She was surprisingly muscular; he always expected little ones to be soft.

John cleared his throat. “Would you like to have some?” he asked. “Children?”

Sherlock was quiet a moment, still pulling faces to amuse Natalie, but then he sat up and took another sip of John’s beer before he said haltingly, “I don’t. . .think. . .so.”

“Oh thank christ!” John gusted, his shoulders collapsing with relief. “Nor me.”

“Good. There’s plenty to do for them without being. . .” Sherlock made claw hands and jabbed them forward. “In it.”

When John was making his final decision about retirement, completely adrift, with the nagging sense he had no other options, and no solid idea what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, Sherlock had reminded him that having money was very good for one thing: it bought him time. With no need to rush into anything, John had given himself permission to think it over for a year, or as long as it took, whichever came first. In the meantime, he was working more closely with his foundation, which had begun as most players’ non-profit organizations did, as a tax shelter with an amorphous goal of “philanthropy.”

He’d decided to focus on prevention of hockey-related brain injuries, and had renamed it the Heads-Up Foundation. One project just beginning was to develop a fact-based curriculum for student athletes, youth coaches, teachers, and parents about TBIs, which the foundation would provide free of charge to schools and teams, hopefully within two years. More immediately, he was beginning to speak out about the need for more accountability in pro, amateur, and college leagues, and a stricter concussion protocol—one that would be uniform from the time players entered high school all the way to the NHL. Nearest to his heart was the simple idea of placing a “look-up line” on every rink; a painted border beneath the ice that would warn players with downcast eyes they were close to the boards, and should look up. He was convinced at least one of his own
concussions would have been prevented had such a thing been in place. He’d been asked to write an Op-Ed for the Boston Globe, and after their trip to London, he had two solid weeks of interviews booked to talk about the foundation and its goals.

For Sherlock’s part, he had signed his multi-year, “money, money, money,” contract with the Brawlers, got his fourth Vezina trophy, and donated his prize money to his own foundation, Everybody Plays, to continue its sports programs for special needs students. The two of them would be looking at six potential locations in London for his planned post-hockey career as the owner of a wine bar and shop, and while they were away, John had hired cleaners to come into Sherlock’s flat—their flat, as of the first of July, when John moved in his toothbrush, his final duffel full of clothes, and his solitary paperback book—and whip the place into shape. Sherlock had made John promise—twice—the cleaning crew would not throw anything away, only clean. John had plans to work on that.

To their utter surprise, they’d recently received an invitation to the wedding in August of Molly Hooper to Coach Lestrade (“His name is Greg?” “Sherlock, you know it is.” “I know no such thing.”). The two had been at least as successful at hiding their relationship as Sherlock and John had been. John had joked that the marriage must put an end to Sherlock’s dream of one day persuading Coach to come on his face, but Sherlock had only hummed, looking skeptical, with his grinning lips pressed tight together.

The two were already expressing dismay now and then about not traveling together when the season started, and it was an ongoing puzzle John turned over in the back of his mind. Would being on the road when he wasn’t playing make him regret his decision to retire, or make him miss the game too much? Would it be too distracting for Sherlock? None of the other players had their wives or girlfriends along with them—surely the league would not want a precedent set which would lead to five hundred “why him and not me?” demands. Of course, as Kim had reminded him, John was a grown-ass man with money and could travel wherever he liked, and stay in whatever hotel he liked, so who could really stop him? It was something to consider. Anyway, he had a recurring fantasy about fucking Sherlock in front of the open curtains in every suite in every hotel they’d ever stayed in. Even—perhaps especially—the ones with other guests’ windows facing theirs.

One of the many aunts came and fetched Natalie out of John’s arms and Jeremy’s father, Tom, began delivering heaping platters of smoky, black-around-the-edges burgers, steaks, ribs, and chicken wings to the picnic tables. Beth walked a continuous loop between the kitchen and the patio, trailed by various sisters and cousins carrying bowls, pitchers, containers of plastic flatware, trays full of condiments.

“We’re definitely coming to this every year,” John told Sherlock, eyeing up the massive spread of food.

“They invite me for Thanksgiving and Christmas, too,” Sherlock admitted.

“Done!” John smiled.

John’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he screened it from the sun as he checked the incoming text.

TXT from SisterKim: We’re booking a condo in Vermont for a week right before Shane has to report to training camp. Do you guys want to come hang out?

“I’ll check with S and get back to you. Sounds good.

TXT from SisterKim: 8-D
“Sherlock! John! Come on and get a plate. I know how you guys can put it away,” Beth was waving them across the yard.

Sherlock touched the small of John’s back briefly, a suggestion, protection.

As he let himself be guided to join the party, John said, “If this is life after retirement, I have to say, it’s not bad. Not at all.”

*

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lovely Readers, for joining me on this journey. I started out writing a 15,000 word one-shot and look how it grew! I have enjoyed writing this novel as much as I have enjoyed writing anything I've written, and it's so gratifying to know you were there with me right along the way. I appreciate yr kind comments, yr loyalty, and yr enthusiasm. You humble me every day.

End Notes

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