The Case of the Vanishing Pants

by SwissMiss

Summary

Five times John and Sherlock lost their pants in the course of a case.

Notes

This fic was written prior to series 3, so is not series 3 compliant.
Sherlock and John find themselves in a bit of a sticky situation.

It was the week between Christmas and New Year. Sherlock had been back for six months, but John had been reluctant to join him on cases, despite repeated invitations not only from Sherlock but also from Greg, and, once - disturbingly - from Mycroft. John was still living in the basement studio flat he'd moved to after Sherlock's 'suicide'. Sherlock was back at 221B, the interim tenants having been encouraged to decamp by means which John had no interest in knowing about, but which were undoubtedly dubious if not illegal. Sherlock had asked John to come back, but John was still hurt from the betrayal, even if he knew now what Sherlock's reasons had been. He simply wasn't ready to entrust his life - and his heart, now that he knew it - to Sherlock again.

It was true that Sherlock had made an effort - an admirable one, for him at least - at making up, starting with an honest-to-God apology, followed by sitting quietly while John raged at him until his anger was spent, and respectful observation of John's requests not to pop up during his dates. (Although, truth be told, there had been one or two lately where John would have been glad for the excuse. It seemed like there simply weren't any interesting women left in London.)

Another truth was that John had missed Sherlock like hell, had been slapped in the face with exactly how much Sherlock had meant to him, and in what ways, but after the first year, he had forced himself to move forward. He had mourned not only his friend, but the life they had led together, and once Sherlock returned, it was difficult to reverse that process. Now, six months later, he felt the renewed itch to join his erstwhile best friend and current ... well, undefined something-or-other - on an investigation, and as a sort of Christmas present (at least in his own mind, although it was never explicitly stated as such), he'd agreed to tag along on Sherlock's next case.

Which was why he was currently sneaking around a complex of buildings at an industrial food processing facility in the dead of night in sub-freezing temperatures at the end of December, trying to gather information on a meat smuggling ring that may or may not have branched out into fleshly trade of another sort altogether.

God, he'd missed this.

The air was frigid and heavy with the smells of decomposing organic products and vehicle exhaust. Sherlock insisted that they not use torches, so as not to draw attention to themselves, meaning they were reduced to feeling their way along the side of a metal shed. John was glad for his black Haversham jacket and new Christmas jumper from Harry. Sherlock, of course, was wearing his ubiquitous Belstaff - the same one he'd jumped in, which... well, macabre didn't even begin to cover it, but Sherlock seemed to view it as a good-luck charm of sorts, so John had learned to keep his mouth shut about it.

A sound up ahead, boots scraping against icy gravel, caused Sherlock to thrust his arm back toward John in a signal to stop moving. Through the ventilation grates in the next shed, they could
see muted, cursory flashes of light, as if someone were aiming a torch around inside.

Sherlock drew back to whisper in John's ear, "There they are." John could hear the delighted grin. "Get your gun ready."

"I'm not shooting anyone, Sherlock," John insisted under his breath, but he reached behind him to extract the SIG from its holster under his jumper.

"Just a precaution," Sherlock said, fluttering his fingers dismissively in John's direction. "These sheds only have one door. They're sitting ducks."

He began creeping forward, with John following and scanning the rooftops and shadowy corners around the lot as well as he could in the poor lighting. They slipped across the gap between the sheds, and Sherlock stood on one side of the closed door, his arm extended across it to grasp the handle, while John crouched against the wall on the other side, holding his gun in both hands, angled toward the ground. His heart was thudding solidly in his chest, the familiar rush of excitement steadying his hands and focusing his attention on the door and whatever lay beyond it. It was as if the past two years had been erased, and wasn't that a frightening thought.

He nodded once, and Sherlock yanked the door open as John rotated on one leg to extend the gun into the dark space, alert for any reactions. There were none. Slowly, he stood up and reached around the wall, feeling for an intuitively placed light switch. He didn't find anything, but Sherlock had come over to John's other side and was working on a locked control box attached to the outer wall. He had it open in a matter of seconds, and flipped a couple of switches.

A sickly, yellow light flickered into existence inside the shed, revealing several rows of metal trolleys on wheels, so tall that they reached nearly to the ceiling of the low room. The trolleys were outfitted with brackets, enabling each to carry a couple of dozen trays, like oversized cafeteria trolleys. At the same time, a low drone began, which soon escalated into a gentle roar, as the overhead fans inset into the ceiling came to life.

There were no signs of any other people.

They slipped inside the shed, keeping their backs to the wall. Sherlock put his finger to his lips and lay down on the gritty floor, checking beneath the trolleys for feet as far back as he could see. He shook his head and indicated that John should move further into the shed; surely the culprit was hiding somewhere toward the back.

Using the trolleys for cover as much as possible, John made his way through the shed, his adrenaline level ratcheting ever higher as it became more and more certain that the last corner would reveal their quarry.

It was thus something of an empty punch to his gut when the last row of trolleys yielded nothing more sinister than a small pile of brownish sludge.

John stepped back out where he could see Sherlock and shrugged, replacing the gun underneath his jumper. He waited to speak until he was next to Sherlock and could be heard over the sound of the fans.

"Must have been something else we saw," he said.

"There was a light," Sherlock insisted, letting his eyes dart around the tight space, gauging other possible hiding places. There weren't a lot of possibilities.

"What now?"
"Now they know we're here," Sherlock said. His annoyance was evident.

"Come back another time, I guess," John was a bit disappointed too, but maybe it was better that tonight's adventure ended here. He was out of practice, and he wouldn't have liked to become a liability. Work back up to it slowly. And God, that said it all right there. He already knew he'd be joining Sherlock next time, too.

Still shooting suspicious glances into corners, Sherlock went to open the door. And stopped. It wouldn't open. He depressed the handle firmly and pressed his shoulder against the door. Nothing. He whipped around, his gaze suddenly fixed on the ventilation grates high up in the walls. "God," he groaned, clutching his head. "Stupid!"

"What?"

Sherlock gestured violently at the grates. "They shone the light in from the outside, to lure us in. Oldest trick in the book, and I fell for it!"

John reached over and tried the handle himself, but as expected, to no avail. A cold feeling gripped his gut. Sitting ducks, indeed.

"Sherlock, get away from the door." He grasped Sherlock's sleeve and retrieved his sidearm again.

"Oh, they're long gone," Sherlock said in disgust, but allowed himself to be led back and pulled down to crouch behind the first row of trolleys. From there, they could still see the door from between the trolley frames, but they at least had a modicum of cover.

"You don't know that," John said, incredulous at the man's utter lack of self-preservation instinct.

"If they're not, they're stupider than even I'd give them credit for, and they're not stupid to have been able to evade us this long."

"You, anyway," John said, licking his lips. They were dry from the cold, and he actually knew better than to lick them, but it was a bit warmer in here than it was outside anyway, and it eased the stiffness.

Sherlock frowned. "Us, John. You've been with me on this from the beginning."

It could be true, John supposed. Sherlock had talked at him about this case a couple of times when they'd met in cafes, and once for dinner at a Chinese place, over the past couple of weeks. The thought caused a flush of warmth to flood his chest.

"All right, us then," John allowed. "I didn't realise- I mean, it wasn't explicitly stated. I thought you were just making small talk."

Sherlock looked at him in mild horror. "Have you met me?"

John huffed in amusement.

"We're a team, John." Sherlock spoke quietly, fumbling with his gloves, which he'd now taken off.

There was that feeling again, combined with something else that made his throat tighten up and the back of his nose prickle. He inhaled deeply as he stood, and tucked the gun away for a second time. If the smugglers had wanted to do anything other than escape, they would done it have by now.
"Well," John said with forced gusto. "Guess we should see about getting out of here, if they're gone."

Sherlock stood as well and put his hand on John's arm. "John, you know that- You're important. To the work." His grey eyes fixed on John, caught him and pinned him and made all of the past pain and uncertainty beat against John's ribs.

John licked his lips again. "Yeah, I-" He began, but quickly changed his mind, frowning slightly. "No, I didn't know. Don't know."

"Obviously. I've always worked better with you around. I honestly don't know why you're still hesitant about making it official again." He sounded petulant.

"Sorry- Official? There was never anything official. You were the consulting detective, and I ran after you and tried to stop you from getting your head bashed in."

Sherlock flashed a grin. "Precisely." His face rearranged itself into a mask of persuasion. "John, haven't you missed this?" he wheedled. "I grant you that tonight hasn't panned out quite as I had hoped, but you remember: the suspense, the chase, the glorious climax!" He shook a triumphant fist between them.

John chuckled helplessly. "And Chinese for afters."

Sherlock beamed back. "So we're good then?"

John pressed his lips together in good-natured exasperation. "I'll think about it," he said. "I do have a day job, you know."

"Yes, yes, boring clinic, boring colleagues, deathly boring, endless paperwork. It's clearly a difficult decision."

"Let's just see about getting out of here first, shall we? Think you can pick that lock?" He gestured at the door.

"Padlocked from the outside, John; really, you are out of practice. No, we'll have to find an alternate escape route."

They walked around the room, eying every possible weakness in the walls and ceiling. The ventilation grates were too small for either of them to fit through, even if they could have prised one off. The recesses for the fans would have been large enough to accommodate one of them, but they would have to disable one of the fans first in order to safely squeeze past the blades, and even then they couldn't tell if there was any direct connection to the outside that would be large enough.

At the same time, it was growing steadily warmer. Both of them had removed their coats and hung them over the trolleys.

"What do you reckon they use this place for anyway?" John asked. "Storage?"

"Smokehouse," Sherlock responded, climbing down from a trolley he had used to get a better look at how the fans were powered.

John half-choked. "Sorry, smokehouse?"

"Or industrial dehydrator. Lucky I didn't happen to turn on the smoke function."

John felt an urge to flee screaming from the premises coil in his belly. Either that or to whack
Sherlock soundly across those perfect cheekbones for failing to mention that small fact earlier. The extra adrenaline prickled under his arms and up his back.

"So, are you saying-" John began, then decided it was really time to take off his jumper, and hauled it up over his head. "Are you saying," he continued, his hair standing on end from static electricity, "that if we don't get out of here soon, we are going to be turned into beef jerky?"

"It's only around twenty-seven degrees, John, really, no need to get dramatic."

"Yes, now it's only twenty-seven degrees," John said, slowly and clearly, since Sherlock did not seem to have grasped the gravity of the situation. (Hello, lack of self-preservation instinct!) "But soon, it will be a good deal hotter, if what you've said is true."

Sherlock had removed his scarf, and now shrugged his sinfully well-tailored suit jacket off as well, revealing the impeccable lines of a made-to-order pale blue shirt with a pearly sheen.

"You've been in the desert," Sherlock said. "How hot did it get?"

"Could get up to fifty degrees in the shade," John allowed. Not that he particularly wanted to relive that.

"And you survived to tell the tale. We have nothing to worry about. Humidity in here is extremely low as well. We should be fine for a good while yet."

"And then? How hot do you reckon it's going to get?"

"I'm not sure exactly what I pushed," Sherlock said, unconcerned (and perhaps more than a little excited at the uncertainty of what might be coming).

"You're not-" John looked down and covered his eyes with one hand.

"Saunas generally have temperatures of over seventy degrees, sometimes significantly higher."

"People don't generally spend all night in a sauna."

"We won't be here all night."

"No, you're right, we won't, because I'm texting Greg." John went over to where his jacket was hanging and got out his mobile.

"No one's been murdered yet, in case you haven't noticed," Sherlock sniped.

"Someone may well be by the time he gets here," John muttered as he poked out the words of the text.

"Do you really have so little confidence in our ability to get out of this?"

"Truthfully? Yes. We're locked in an oven, Sherlock. An oven that is turned on. The walls are solid steel and the only exit large enough to accommodate anything bigger than a fortune cookie is locked from the outside, with no possibility of reaching the lock. So, yes. I'm texting Greg. You go ahead and think a hole through the wall. There. I've done. I've texted Greg." He snapped his mobile closed and jammed it into his trouser pocket.

Sherlock scowled. "He's never going to let us hear the end of it."

"I have surprisingly very little problem with that. I'll tell him it was all your idea."
"You just need something to eat. Lack of food always makes you testy."

"Where-" John laughed incredulously. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Fortune cookie. You mentioned fortune cookies."

"Yeah, I was thinking about Chinese food. Which we could be having by now if you hadn't got us locked in a bloody oven." His voice escalated toward the end until he was nearly shouting.

"Dehydrator," Sherlock corrected him. "It won't get hot enough to actually cook us."

John's mobile dinged. He read the text, then said, "He's off duty. Be here in about an hour. And you'd bloody well better hope you're right about that," he added, pointing an accusing finger at Sherlock. He wiped a bead of sweat out of his eye. "What do you think we're up to? Thirty-five?"

"Mm," Sherlock hummed in agreement and started unbuttoning his shirt. No vest underneath, of course. Would probably ruin the lines or something.

"Sherlock, what are you doing?"

"I should think that rather obvious."

"You're not- Oh Christ." John looked pointedly away when Sherlock started on his belt.

"You're welcome to drown in your own sweat if you wish. In fact, you could stand to lose a couple of pounds. All those months of inactivity have done nothing for your physique."

John glared at Sherlock, then regretted it immediately as his trousers dropped off his hips. Tight black pants. Of bloody fucking course. He turned around to glare at the back of the ... well, not shed anymore. Industrial grade food dehydrator-slash-smokehouse. He managed to stand it for exactly two and a half more minutes, listening to Sherlock rustle about and finish divesting himself of his clothing, before he unbuckled the holster and began shoving his own shirt buttons through their holes, muttering obscenities under his breath. So he was a few pounds heavier than before Sherlock had leapt off the roof of Bart's. Five pounds. Maybe seven. All right, truthfully, more like ten. It wasn't like he was fat, for God's sake.

He hooked the holster and his shirt over the nearest trolley, leaving his vest on. He considered leaving his trousers on too, but really, it was hot and there was sweat dripping down the backs of his legs. It wasn't that he had a problem with nudity per se. He'd had to change in front of other people - men and women - for years in the military, and even after he'd been injured, he'd never been self-conscious about getting naked with any of the women he'd dated. It was just... well, he didn't know what it was. Maybe it was that felt more exposed with Sherlock than any of those other people. The man practically had psychic powers and x-ray vision even with all of one's clothes on.

He worked his shoes and socks off, trying to keep his toes curled up so as to minimise contact with the very dubiously sticky floor, then unzipped his jeans and pulled them down. The air circulating against his skin, evaporating the sweat in the gentle breeze from the overhead fans, was an immediate relief, if only temporary. He knew it was only going to get hotter.

He hung his jeans up next to his shirt, picked up the holster with the gun again, then turned back around -

- only to find Sherlock sitting completely naked on top of his coat, which he had spread on the floor under him.
"Jesus Christ, Sherlock!" John screeched, too shocked to do anything but stare at the pale, lean body, contrasted with the dark patch of hair and soft flesh in the middle of his crossed legs. John knew that Sherlock had a relaxed attitude about nudity. The incident at Buckingham palace was proof enough of that, and he'd lounged around their flat in nothing but a sheet at other times as well, when it was hot outside, or when he'd simply not bothered to pick up his clothes from the dry cleaner's. But he'd never gone full Monty right in front of John before.

"Just think of it as a Turkish bath," Sherlock said, unconcernedly flipping through the display on his smart phone.

"Put your pants back on," John said. "And in a Turkish bath they at least have towels."

"I don't particularly relish the thought of having to continue to wear the same sweaty underwear once Lestrade gets here."

As if in proof, a trickle of moisture chose that exact moment to work its way down between John's butt cheeks. He suppressed the urge to wipe at it and said, "I don't particularly relish the thought of Greg walking in and seeing the both of us starkers together."

"You still have your underwear on," Sherlock pointed out. "If it bothers you so much, you can go sit somewhere else."

John thought about the pile of sludge behind the last row of trolleys, and sighed. He took his jacket down and plopped it on the floor next to Sherlock. It wasn't like they were going to touch each other. He didn't even want his own skin touching itself, he was already so sticky. Sherlock's point about having clean clothes to put on afterward made more sense than John wanted to admit. He lowered himself carefully onto his jacket, laying the holster and gun down next to him, and took off his vest. He held his arms slightly away from his body so that the air could get into his armpits. He was probably going to start stinking soon, if he didn't already.

Sherlock glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. John knew he was looking at his scar. He'd never actually seen it before: John was much more fastidious than Sherlock about wearing clothes around the flat. And, they had been living apart now for longer than they had lived together in the first place.

"You can look," John said.

"I really have no interest in your body, John," Sherlock said, pretending to be busy with his mobile.

"I know that, but you are interested in my scar. So you can look at it."

"I really don't need."

"Fine, don't then," John snapped.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "If you insist."

"I don't! I don't care, I was just- That's all, really. I don't care if you see it. I never tried to hide it from you. I know you've always been curious, and now you can see it. I'm giving you permission, so you don't need to pretend you're not looking."

"Thank you," Sherlock said, somewhat awkwardly. "You can look too."

John was confused. "You don't have any scars. Do you?" He took a quick look at Sherlock's chest, studiously not - absolutely not - looking down at his lap. "I mean, maybe little ones, yeah,
the kind of things everyone's got, but nothing spectacular."

"I didn't mean my scars, I meant my penis."

John's brain short-circuited.

"I can tell you're interested. It's only natural. Little boys comparing theirs in the bushes at the playground, teenagers secretly checking each other out in the changing room, making sure they're within the norm."

"I cannot believe we are having this conversation. We are not having this conversation. Did I just say that out loud?"

"Since you've kept your pants on, and are sweating profusely into them, which can only be uncomfortable, I assume there is some other issue of."

"Do not go there, Sherlock," John warned.

"Mine is three and a half inches long when flaccid, six when erect."

John very much wanted to put his hands over his ears and start humming God Save the Queen.

"Thank you," he said instead, very calmly. "Thank you for that... entirely useless piece of information."

"Uncircumcised, of course. But then you can see that."

"No, I- I am not looking at your penis, Sherlock."

"Okay. I only wanted to give you permission, because I can tell you're interested."

"I'm not-" But he cut himself off, because that wasn't really true. He was, both in the little boys in the changing room sort of way, and because he'd never thought of Sherlock as a man with functioning... parts. He was such a completely nonsexual being. Except with Irene, but John really hadn't got as far as imagining what Sherlock and Irene might have got up to, when she had him alone in her bedroom (other than her jabbing him in the neck with a drugged needle, of course). That still bothered him. The being alone in her bedroom part more than the drugged needle, oddly.

But here was the incontrovertible proof that Sherlock was just a man, just a normal human being, everything in working order, and it's not like either of them was getting off on this, just sitting there next to each other, naked (or very nearly so, in John's case), waiting to be rescued, as the temperature continued to rise.

Somehow, it seemed a good thing that the pedestal John had, in many ways, put Sherlock on, was turning out merely to be a pile of clay.

"You think it's hit fifty yet?" John asked, when the air was so hot it felt like he was drinking it into his lungs.

Sherlock paused in his perusal of what looked like the weather report.

"Fifty-three," he said.

"God," John gasped. Hearing the number made it suddenly infinitely hotter. That and Sherlock's jab about John's supposed 'issues' had him on his knees, shimmying out of his by now thoroughly damp boxer shorts.
Sherlock at least had the decency not to comment. Just to make absolutely sure, though, John said, "If you value our friendship at all, you will keep your mouth shut." He settled himself down on his jacket again, bending his knees up so he could rest his elbows on them.

"Of course I value our friendship. I should think that would be obvious." Sherlock sounded more troubled than impatient, and when John glanced sideways at him, he saw that the corners of Sherlock's mouth were pulled down and he was fiddling distractedly with his mobile, not really looking at it.

John sighed and leaned his head back against the wall, looking up at the fans indifferently forcing ever hotter air down onto them. "I know, Sherlock," he reassured him. "I do too. It's just... We can't go back to the way things were. Not exactly, anyway. There will always be... what happened. With Moriarty, and all the time you were gone."

"I've said I was sorry," Sherlock said, his distress and frustration evident.

"It's not-" John shifted so that he could look Sherlock in the eye, nudity be damned. "I know you're sorry. And that really says something, because there's not a hell of a lot in the world that you'd ever be sorry about, much less actually say it. So, I know. I think it's that-" John had to take a moment to steady himself. "You know, I had everything invested in you. You were... the most important person in the world to me. More important than my sister, or my other friends, or my girlfriends. More important than any job, or the law. More important than my own life, really."

"John-" Sherlock started, looking broken.

"No. Wait, just... just wait. So, I... I don't know if love is even the right way to say it, because that seems too small a word, but I loved you." That sounded wrong, using the past tense, and if he was baring his soul here along with his chest and his arse and everything in between, he might as well go all the way. "I do. I love you," he said firmly. "That doesn't go away. That won't go away. And I really want us to still be friends. I mean, we are. You're absolutely my best friend."

Sherlock turned his hand over to squeeze John's back. His grey eyes were round and bright, and he let out a big breath.

"But I don't know if I can give you everything again, or if that was even a healthy situation for either of us. I think there's still a part of me that's afraid of losing you again, and I can't go through that again. Not the way it was before."

"I will never do that to you again," Sherlock said, so solemnly, and John knew that he meant it, as much as he had ever meant anything.

"I think you would," John said sadly. "If you knew it was the only way to keep me safe."

They held on to each other, eyes and hands, sharing the pain and joy of the truth, knowing that this was as natural as breathing, and that no matter what they or anyone else did, this would always bind them together.

"I'd find another way," Sherlock began, but John shook his head and said, with infinite gentleness, "You know I'd do the same thing. Right?"

Sherlock swallowed and nodded slowly. "We'll retire then," he said, with a conviction that was touching in its innocence. "I'll give up consulting."

John smiled. "No, you won't. You can't give up being you. You're going to carry on being brilliant and mad, and I'm going to carry on following you down holes and up fire escapes and
"...one day," Sherlock interrupted, his voice steadier than John could have made his, "we're going to look back, and say, 'I would do it all again, if only because you were with me'."

John's smile became even broader. "I think you're developing heat stroke," he said in mock concern. He let go of Sherlock's hand, because: sweat. "And God, I need to try and get some fresh air."

He stood up, unconcerned about wagging bits because oxygen to the brain was more important than false modesty, and clambered up awkwardly onto one of the trolleys to get his face near one of the ventilation grates at the top of the wall. It was slightly cooler there, but as the air pressure inside was greater than outside, causing the air to flow outward rather than inward, it didn't help much.

"What temperature are we at now?" he asked, panting slightly.

Sherlock's voice came from immediately below him, and John looked down to see him steadying the trolley so that it wouldn't roll around with John standing on it. His face was shining with sweat, and his hair was stuck to his forehead and jaw. "I'd say around seventy," he answered. "Bloody hot, at any rate. Does that help any?"

John shook his head. "Not really. Psychologically." He pressed his cheek against the grate. He was about to get down and offer Sherlock a turn when he heard a voice from outside, over the drone of the fans.

"Sherlock! John!"

"In here!" John yelled back and banged on the ventilation grate. "Greg, we're in here! The one with the lights on!"

A few moments later, there was a pounding and scraping at the door as Greg and whoever he'd brought with him applied themselves to the padlock. Meanwhile, John scrabbled to get his clothes back on over his wet, sticky skin.

"I need your vest for a moment," Sherlock said before reaching for his own clothes.

John, fuzzy from the heat and used to following minor, non-dangerous instructions from Sherlock, plucked up his vest once he'd got his shorts on and handed it to Sherlock, who proceeded to wipe off his body with it, including under and between his legs. He then held it back out to John.

John looked from Sherlock to the shirt and back again. "You know what? Keep it," he said. He was just reaching for his shirt when there was a mighty CRACK from the door, and it swung open, revealing Greg and a uniformed policeman John didn't know, holding a crowbar.

Sherlock took the opportunity to step into his pants and pull them neatly up, then adjusted his genitals.

"Having fun?" Greg said, a look of stunned disbelief on his face, then took a step back. "Good Christ, it must be a hundred degrees in here. What is this, an oven?" He looked up at the structure.

"Industrial dehydrator, and cheers," John said. "Just testing the limits of human endurance. Typical night."

He hastily wrapped his jumper around the gun and holster, gathered up the rest of his clothes and
shoes and hurried over to the door, where he stopped at the threshold, wearing only his shorts and his open shirt, and gulped in the cold, fresh air.

"I assume the..." Greg gestured from John to Sherlock. "Do I even want to know?"

"Got locked in with the heat turned on," John said. He set his clothing bundle on the ground and put on his trousers.

Greg looked past John at Sherlock, who was doing up the buttons on his shirt. "This doesn't have to do with the Lepowsky case, does it?"

"Just having a look around," Sherlock said. "I think you can add attempted murder to the list of charges, though."

Greg shook his head and put his hands on his hips. "I've told you before, you cannot go off on your own like this. Any evidence you might have found couldn't have been used against them anyway."

"I wasn't on my own; John was with me." There was a touch of pride in his voice, and when John turned around, Sherlock was smiling at him with a warmth that made the temperature in the room seem frigid in comparison.

"Yes, and John should know better as well." Greg sent a pointed look in John's direction.

John licked his lips, still watching Sherlock. "Yeah, we'll keep that in mind," he said. Overwhelmed with relief at being rescued and at having got out the things he'd said in their conversation, and at the sheer ridiculousness of their situation, he felt a fit of giggles coming on. He almost lost it at the sight of Sherlock’s lips twitching as well and had to bend over and work on his socks and shoes in order to maintain his composure.

"Come on, then," Greg said, torn between amusement and exasperation. "We'll have to write up a report for that padlock."

"I'll leave that to you, Detective Inspector," Sherlock said as he joined them, all put back together and with his coat slung over his arm. His face was still flushed and his hair damp. John was sure he didn’t look any better.

"Hey, Sherlock, you can't just leave-" Greg said as Sherlock walked past him, John automatically moving to follow in his wake.

"Tomorrow," Sherlock called over his shoulder. "We'll be at the station at ten o'clock. Right now, John and I have a date with a fortune cookie."

Chapter End Notes

The NHS very helpfully has a page on penis size in the UK here. Because facts are important.

Thank you to similarfrowns on LJ for the beta reading.
The Plutonium Pellets

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John visit a nuclear reprocessing facility. Chapter warnings for suicidal ideation and cancer.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to obsessionality on LJ for the excellent beta reading. This is really much more coherent now.

The new year found Sherlock accepting an assignment from Mycroft. It was a fairly straightforward case of weapons-grade nuclear material being sold under the table, but the regular intelligence channels hadn't been able to uncover the pipeline. Quite frankly, it wasn't the sort of thing that Sherlock normally took on, especially since it entailed doing Mycroft a favour.

When John asked Sherlock why he'd agreed to do it, he mumbled something about being bored, and then insisted that John come over to 221B right away to discuss it, even though it was nearly ten p.m.

"You don't need an excuse to see me, you know," John told Sherlock when he arrived half an hour later, bearing a takeaway bag of döner kebab.

"I wouldn't need one if you'd move back," Sherlock said, following John into the kitchen. He unpacked the foil-wrapped sandwiches and serviettes while John got out the plates.

"Ah, so this is just an excuse to get me up here. What did you do, leave your phone across the room again?" John teased.

Sherlock smiled and shook his head. "I can function perfectly well without you, you know."

John sat down and gave him a look that was simultaneously amused and questioning.

Sherlock picked up his kebab, trying to find the most strategic place to start on the overstuffed pocket. "I just don't want to," he continued, and took a bite, sending bits of onion and drips of sauce onto his plate.

A tingle that had nothing to do with the garlic sauce lodged itself in the upper part of John's chest as Sherlock caught his eye. "Keep that up and I just might take you up on it," John said, trying to keep his tone playfully light. It wasn't easy.

Sherlock smiled and winked, and John cleared his throat awkwardly and cast about for another topic, because: what? He and Sherlock did not flirt. Even in that warehouse, when they'd both stripped down to the altogether, there hadn't been any hint of coquetterie. Well, aside from John declaring his undying affection, and Sherlock inviting John to ogle his bits and offering to give up consulting for his sake. Nothing much really.
Christ Almighty. Maybe they did flirt now.

John was helpless to stop his heart rate from increasing at that little insight, which wouldn't escape Sherlock's notice, and suddenly, he was really rather desperate for a change of topic. John honestly didn't know where he wanted to take this, or even if he wanted to take this anywhere. He wanted more than anything - despite his better judgment - to have Sherlock in his life, and to be a part of Sherlock's life, but a romantic involvement would be even more complicated and fraught than their previous relationship had been. He'd said he needed to keep a part of himself separate, and that was still true. He couldn't, in all fairness both to himself and any potential partner, embark on a personal relationship knowing that he wasn't ready to share his heart completely.

And despite knowing that Sherlock could see right through him, and that he was taking the coward's way out, he deflected by asking about Mycroft's case. Sherlock easily shifted gears - although not without first giving John a long, searching look - and outlined the basics, at one point going over to his desk to retrieve a folder for John to flip through.

"So, let me see if I understand," John said after he'd skimmed through the hastily put together sheets of information. "They know where the plutonium's being taken from, but they can't tell how it's getting out?"

"Precisely."

"Seems pretty straightforward. Monitor all the shipments in and out. I mean, these containers are pretty big," John pointed at a photograph of a lorry passing through the gates of the facility. "It's not like someone's going to sneak one out in their briefcase."

"We're only talking a couple of kilograms in total so far," Sherlock said. "Enough to make a rather nasty bomb, at any rate. It's entirely likely that someone is, in fact, sneaking it out in bits in their briefcase. Except security is obviously very tight. The workers undergo searches and scans before leaving to prevent exactly this scenario from happening."

"One of the guards is being bribed," John said with a shrug.

"Possibly," Sherlock concurred. "But if so, they're very, very good. They've had an internal investigation going on for two weeks now, and they're still coming up with missing material. The Home Office is extremely keen to plug the leak, for obvious reasons."

"So you're - we're -" he corrected himself when he saw Sherlock open his mouth, "supposed to have a look, see if we can find the crooked guard?"

"Or find an alternative explanation." Sherlock licked some sauce from his fingers, his mischievous expression making it clear which scenario he preferred.

John quickly looked away from the pink tongue flicking over the long, lithe fingers, instead picking up the folder and shuffling through the photographs again. One of them showed the plutonium pellets as they came off the assembly line.

"You know," John joked, "these remind me of licorice allsorts. The round ones, you know?" He grinned and held the picture up for Sherlock to see.

Sherlock stared at it for a moment. Then his eyes went round, and he exclaimed: "Oh! Yes, John! Yes!"

John was so distracted by the vision of Sherlock shouting his name with a look of blissful epiphany that Sherlock had to ask his followup question a second time: "Have you ever heard of a
drug mule?"

"Sorry, drug mule?" John blinked stupidly, still in a daze. "You mean- Hang on," he said, pushing all thoughts of other scenarios in which Sherlock might cry out his name like that from his mind, "you think someone's eating the plutonium?"

"Yes!" Sherlock said with unconcealed glee. "It wouldn't show up in a body search, not even on a low-level x-ray."

"Wouldn't the radiation still be picked up by a Geiger counter?"

Sherlock grabbed the file and pawed through it, looking for a reference. "Plutonium only emits very low energy radiation," he said, pointing to a line on a printout. "It wouldn't penetrate the layers of skin, fat, and muscle. Brilliant."

John, however, was still sceptical. "But wouldn't it - I don't know - kill the courier?"

Sherlock stood up and began talking very fast, waving his hands around. "Eventually, but when it's bound in this form, plutonium's fairly non-reactive. They're only taking a few pellets at a time. If they swallow them at the end of their shift, get out quickly, and expel them as soon as possible once they're outside, the exposure should be minimal." Sherlock whirled around and fixed John with glittering eyes. "We've got them."

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They didn't have them. Not quite, anyway.

"Eight more minutes until the shift's over," John reminded Sherlock, glancing nervously at the door to the employees' locker room. They were both suited up in blue workers' coveralls similar to the ones used at crime scenes.

Sherlock, his eyes closed and his ear pressed against the yellow locker, ignored him completely. Two more delicate half-twists of the combination dial, and the locker clicked open.

They were nearly through with the entire row, looking for evidence for Sherlock's 'alternative theory' for how the plutonium was being smuggled out. So far, they'd found a baggie with four joints (which Sherlock proclaimed 'medicinal'), another one with two joints and two grams of loose marijuana ('recreational'), six party pills ('barely street quality, she was cheated'), a pornographic magazine ('closeted homosexual, repressing'), several condoms ('desperate', 'affair', 'overcompensating', 'for God's sake, why is he even bothering'), and various prescription and over-the-counter medications ('boring!').

While Sherlock worked, John thought once more - he hardly thought of anything else these days - about returning to Baker Street, and the possibility of a new dynamic between them. Now that he was involved in Sherlock's work again, he had to admit it would be more convenient if he were on the premises. There hadn't been an urgent summons to a crime scene since John had started accompanying Sherlock again, but John wasn't sure how exactly it would work if Sherlock had to wait for him to make his way across the city in the middle of the night; chances were Sherlock would either rip someone's (most likely Anderson's) head off before John got there, or John would arrive to find only the clean-up crew left.

It seemed that Sherlock really did work better with him around. Whether that was because he needed a sounding board, or that he could focus better knowing that John was watching his back, or that John actually was able to contribute something, as he had with the hint about the allsorts, the important thing for John was that he felt needed. He had a purpose, he could apply his skills in
a useful way, and there was almost always some degree of excitement, whether in the form of a chase, or playacting, or simply the thrill of seeing Sherlock crack a riddle.

In fact, he probably would have agreed to move back in already if it weren't for the complication of this new... thing. Yes, John loved Sherlock. He wanted him to be healthy, and happy, and John was healthier and happier when he knew that Sherlock was. All well and good, and if they shared a flat, it would be easier for both of those things to remain true. It didn't really need to go any further than that.

However, since Sherlock's return, there had been times when John had felt they were on the cusp of something else, something that apparently went both ways. Their first time back at Angelo's, in the same booth they'd had the night of the Hope case, they'd been sharing a bottle of wine and dawdling over their meal. Sherlock had been staring out the window, and John had jokingly asked if he was looking for a taxi. They'd looked at each other then, Sherlock returning John's playful grin with a quiet smile, almost shy, both of them obviously remembering their conversation from that first night. But neither of them had said anything, and they'd let the moment pass.

There had been other moments, too, the latest one being the other night, after they'd finished their kebabs and discussed what they'd need to get into the facility today. It had been nearly midnight, and John had said something about needing to get home, and Sherlock had said, "Why don't you just stay." He'd been at the window, one finger holding back the curtain so he could look down at the street, and then he'd turned to John, who was sitting at the desk. Their eyes met, and John knew Sherlock wasn't just offering him the couch for the night. It would have been so easy to reach out and take his hand. He'd almost done it. Instead, John had looked away and said he needed to hurry to catch the last train.

Even then, if it had been only John having these moments, if he had been the only one having to deal with an unrequited infatuation – something he had gathered ample experience with by this stage of his life - he wouldn't be having cold feet about taking up residence in his old room again. He could handle that. He could quite happily live with Sherlock, loving him quietly, simply enjoying his friendship and the cases and the madness.

The complication was that John didn't think he was the only one experiencing these feelings. Sherlock seemed to be asking for something too, testing the waters and gently prodding, and John knew that if they ever did agree to try this out, there would be no going back. And that meant it could quite possibly ruin the best friendship either of them had ever had.

John's thoughts were interrupted by Sherlock holding out a small injection bottle he'd found in the latest locker. "Sandostatin," he read from the label. "John?"

John took the bottle and studied it. "I'd have to check in the drug dictionary to be sure, but I think it's an anti-diarrheal. Powerful one, not a first line medication."

"And Tagamet," Sherlock said, shaking a blister pack from the same locker. "I think we've found our man. J. Phillips." He read off the name written on masking tape stuck to the top of the door. He flicked his fingers at the jacket. "Approximately sixteen stone at five foot nine-ish. Carrying a nice amount of padding, enough to outsmart a Geiger counter, although if he's been expelling his stomach contents regularly over the past couple of weeks he may have lost some weight."

John glanced into the locker. There was a snapshot stuck to the inside of the door, showing a woman and a teenage girl sitting in a garden. Even John could guess they were probably the man's family. "Why would he need something to slow down his digestion?" he asked. "I would think he'd want to move it through as quickly as possible."

"He needs to stop the pellets from entering his intestine at all. I'll bet when we look it up, that-"
Sherlock pointed at the vial that was still in John's hand. "-will be shown to delay the evacuation of the stomach into the duodenum. He'll have the syrup of ipecac in his car."

"God, that's-" John stopped midsentence as the door opened, and a gaunt man in a coverall identical to the ones they were wearing came in. He took one wide-eyed look at John, Sherlock, and the open locker, did an about-face, and fled.

John was after him in a second, but got tangled up with a woman entering the room. By the time he got out into the corridor after stammering out an apology, he found himself facing several more blue-clad employees coming towards him. He pushed his way through them with Sherlock hot on his heels, and just caught sight of the man slipping through a door at the end of the hall.

"I thought you said he was overweight," John yelled as they dashed after him.

"His jacket says he is. I didn't know he already had cancer. There's always something!"

They had to stop at the door for Sherlock to slide his badge through the card reader and punch in an access code.

"That's not something he's just picked up in the last few weeks," John pointed out. "He must have had it before he agreed to steal the plutonium."

The door unlocked and they rushed through in time to see another door halfway down the next corridor swing shut.

"Yes, and that's why he's not worried about getting sick from it," Sherlock said as they ran. "He's going to die anyway."

The second door led to a stairwell, where they could hear footsteps clattering below them. They flew down after the suspect, passing several floors before Sherlock grabbed John's arm to stop him and signal for silence. They heard another door open and close somewhere below.

"Two more," Sherlock said, and leapt down the next flight.

They emerged into a bare concrete corridor, lit only by red emergency lights on the ceiling, their wire caging casting strange shadows on the walls. Off to the right, they could hear footsteps, although the lights didn't reach far enough for them to see anything.

"Where does he think he's going?" John hissed. "He can't imagine he's going to escape. I mean, we know who he is!"

"That hardly matters. He only needs to get this last batch out and ensure that the agreed-on payment is deposited in his wife's account. And I don't think he's trying to get away from us."

Sherlock started, unhurriedly, down the corridor in the direction of the footsteps.

"What, a trap?" John asked. "One unarmed man in the terminal stages of cancer with a belly full of plutonium? What's he going to do, explode on us?" It was ridiculous. On the other hand... "He can't, right? Explode, I mean," he clarified.

"Hardly," Sherlock scoffed. "As I said, the pellets are largely unreactive. He'd need several kilograms for a sustainable reaction.

"And the unarmed part..." John ventured, moving more cautiously now, peering ahead into the red-tinged shadows. "Do you think he has a weapon stashed? Is that why he's brought us down here?"
"Always possible, but the chances that he's managed to smuggle a firearm into a nuclear facility are slim at best, and even if he has, it hardly makes sense to have left it in such a hard-to-reach place. He couldn't possibly count on being able to get down here if he were ever found out. No, I rather think he's making this up as he goes along, but he does have the home court advantage. Ah. And here we are."

J. Phillips was standing in the middle of the corridor, one hand on a metal wheel attached to a thick pipe that ran down from the ceiling to the floor.

"You're going to stop right there," he said, breathing hard from his run. "And I'm going to nip into the lift here, go back upstairs, and walk out. And that's the last anyone will ever see of me."

"I presume you have some reason why we should agree to this plan," Sherlock drawled, confident.

"You'll have stopped the leak. And my family will be provided for."

"Yes, we figured that part out long ago," Sherlock said disdainfully. "But tell me: why shouldn't we stop you from walking out now? Why should we let you make your last delivery? No one's holding your family hostage. At worst, if you're caught now, they'll be left with a payout from your life insurance when you eventually succumb to your..." Sherlock looked him over. "...pancreatic cancer? Which they wouldn't get if you go through with your current plan to kill yourself."

"How did- Never mind," Phillips said. "I'm doing them a kindness. The medical bills are only going to get worse, and they don't need to watch me being eaten from the inside out. The insurance would only have paid fifty thousand pounds. The people I'm doing this little assignment for are paying ten times that."

"Then you're being cheated. You should have held out for a least two million."

"Sherlock," John said, giving him a warning look. Then he turned to Phillips. "Look, I know your situation is desperate, but think of what these people will do with the plutonium. They're hardly going to use it to provide humanitarian aid. Why don't you cooperate, help us find them and recover what you've already delivered."

"What do I care if some maniacs in the Middle East want to blow each other up?" Phillips asked, sounding slightly hysterical. "They're going to do it either way, might as well get some use out of it."

"And what about your own family? Whether they condone what you've done or not, believe me, they won't thank you for killing yourself." John took a chance and advanced one step closer. He couldn't see a weapon, and Phillips' body language wasn't telegraphing any intent to attack. It was going to be strange enough saying what he needed to with Sherlock present, so he wanted to give himself at least the illusion of a private conversation.

"I know how it feels," John said. "Someone I-" He hesitated, unsure which tense to use, but decided to go for the simpler one. "Someone I loved very much killed himself. Right in front of me. And I-" John closed his eyes, unable to stop the emotions from surfacing at the wretched memory. "It destroyed me," he continued in a whisper.

When he had control of his voice again, he opened his eyes and went on. "I lost my father to cancer. Kidney, untreatable. And yes, it was bloody torture watching him go, knowing there was nothing I could do, that anyone could do. But we had time. We talked, and went through all his old photo albums, and he had his old mates round, and he and my sister even made a kind of
peace before he went. Cancer's a bitch, but it's just something that happens. You can understand it. But killing yourself-

He looked Phillips in the eye and spoke with all the force and conviction of two years of believing that Sherlock was dead. "The people you leave behind, they will _never_ get over it. Ever. They'll always wonder if there was something they could have done, why they didn't see the signs, why they weren't enough, why their love wasn't enough. The fact that you're dying anyway won't change that. And trying to make it into something that you're doing for them... that's just setting them up for the worst kind of survivor's guilt.

"You have a daughter," John said. Phillips was watching him, his eyes wide with grief and desperation. John waited until he nodded before continuing. "Do you want her to go through the rest of her life knowing her father killed himself for her? How will that make her feel? Do you think she'll ever have enough self-assurance to live up to that?"

"Maybe. Maybe," Phillips said, his voice trembling. He shook his head. "I'll think about it. But I have to complete the delivery. Either way. Are you going to try to stop me?"

"We have to," John said gently. "You understand that."

He took another step forward, but Phillips tensed and gripped the metal wheel with both hands.

"This is a pressure release valve for the cooling tanks. The water's not radioactive enough to burn you right away, but you'll want to get it washed off as quickly as possible. And I wouldn't advise wandering around, either. You'll only spread the contamination." He looked John in the eye, and he clearly meant it when he said, "I'm sorry. There's an alarm a few yards back that you can use to call a decon team. I'd appreciate it if you'd give me thirty seconds at least." And then he spun the wheel.

John and Sherlock both darted forward, John reaching for the valve and Sherlock for Phillips. A high-pressure stream of hot water was already spewing out, gushing across the concrete and soaking them both.

"Sherlock, stop! Christ!" John shouted as he grappled to turn the wheel back, momentarily more worried about being scalded by the hot water than about radioactivity.

Sherlock tried to skirt the stream and pursue Phillips, who was already stepping into the waiting lift, but he couldn't avoid the water blasting him along one side.

"John!" he bellowed, hesitating between reaching an arm out to block the lift and going back to help John.

With one more mighty wrench, John succeeded in closing off the valve, just as the door to the lift shut on Phillips.

Sherlock stood there with an angry scowl on his face. "We could have had him!"

"We got him, Sherlock, we know who he is," John said tightly. "Turn the information over to Mycroft. He'll have someone pick him up." He stalked back down the corridor until he found the emergency box Phillips had mentioned, and pulled the lever. A squawking, intermittent siren began sounding. John tried to find a dry spot on his coverall and gingerly wiped at his face.

"It was a bluff," Sherlock spat. "That water's no more radioactive than tap water."

"It's been nice knowing you then," John quipped. When Sherlock's expression didn't change, John shook his head and said, "I couldn't take that chance. What if it was? What if it is? I had to try and
"And your safety?" Sherlock demanded. "Look at you, you're soaked."

"You didn't exactly get away scot free yourself," John noted, pointing at Sherlock's left side, where his coverall was stained dark blue and his hair was dripping down over his ear. "If you'd stayed back, you wouldn't have got any on you."

Sherlock glared at John, then stomped around, flicking the water out of his hair and stabbing at his phone, which wasn't picking up a signal. It wasn't long before several workers showed up in head-to-toe white protective gear, brandishing Geiger counters and herding John and Sherlock into the (now empty) lift.

Sherlock tried to impress upon them the importance of stopping Phillips before he could leave the premises, but since no one had been informed of Sherlock and John's visit, it took them the entire trip to the ceramic-walled decontamination chamber before one of the team members grasped exactly what was going on. Even though someone hurried off to make a call at that point, it was disappointingly clear that any intervention would be too late.

John already knew what was coming after that; he'd drilled decontamination following a chemical weapons attack when he was in the army. First, their clothing was removed with care to minimise the chance of any contaminants on the outside layers coming in contact with their skin as they were disrobed.

Sherlock was still disgruntled over Phillips' escape, and wasn't looking at John. It was hardly an intimate atmosphere, anyway, with each of them having a worker who looked like a cross between a beekeeper and an astronaut fussing over them (John couldn't even tell if he was being undressed by a man or a woman; not that it mattered), and two more taking readings on their discarded clothing and furiously making labels and taking notes.

"Seems like this is becoming a habit," John said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Sherlock frowned at him crossly as the worker assigned to him helped him out of his trousers.

"Us ending up naked and the suspect getting away, I mean," John explained. Black pants again, he noted. He wondered fleetingly whether Sherlock owned any other colours. He, of course, had the bog standard white boxers with the open fly. He tried not to worry whether they were clean as his worker shimmied them expertly down his legs. He looked down at the kneeling figure. Whoever it was, they clearly had practice with this.

Sherlock snorted in grudging amusement. John felt the soft glow of proprietary satisfaction at causing the reaction, and at the same time was relieved to see that Sherlock had his head turned away as John was exposed. It wasn't clear whether he was purposely looking in another direction, or whether he was genuinely interested in the two workers who were doing the paperwork at a table off to the side. Of course, Sherlock had seen him before, in the dehydrator, and hadn't shown any particular interest then, either.

"We should probably work on improving our collar rate," Sherlock agreed. John secretly noted that he didn't say anything about changing the part where they ended up naked. Well, all he cared about was solving the case, after all.

And there went Sherlock's pants.

Standing, John had a better view of the three-and-a-half inches. Once again, he noted that Sherlock's penis (obviously unexcited by the situation, not that John was either) and scrotum were
darker than the rest of his skin, and his testicles hung low and loose. No. No, he was not looking at Sherlock's genitals. He was looking at... Sherlock's ribs. Yes. As a doctor and a caring friend, he was pleased to note that they weren't as prominent as he'd thought they might be. Sherlock wasn't really too thin, he just had a slender build. And now he saw that Sherlock was watching him looking him over out of the corner of his eye, the hint of a smirk on his face, and John really needed to just keep his eyes forward.

Parade rest, Watson.

And time for a distraction before things became really quite awkward. John looked down at the worker in front of him, who was now peeling off John's socks.

"Maybe Donovan was only decontaminating Anderson," John said, glancing in Sherlock's general direction, but not - not - looking any higher than his feet. "You know, when you deduced her..." John pointed at his own knees.

Sherlock grinned, then chuckled. "God, I hope so. Makes for a much more pleasant image."

John laughed in return, maybe more forcefully than was appropriate, but he needed to let the tension out somehow.

And now came the fun part.

Once their clothes were bagged and tagged and they'd been subjected once more to the indecency of the clicking Geiger counter probe, two of the workers left, and the other two unhooked the hoses from the wall. Sherlock and John were instructed to close their eyes and keep their mouths shut, and then came the sound of water on tiles.

As the (surprisingly warm and pleasant) stream beat down on him, sluicing off any potential poison, John thought again about Sherlock's apparent lack of discomfiture at being naked around him. Maybe Sherlock wasn't even interested in a sexual relationship, John considered. Maybe he was just reacting to the signals that John was sending out, engaging in mirroring as he tried to figure out what was expected of him. John was aware that his behaviour had shifted since Sherlock's return, and Sherlock, hypersensitive as he was, would definitely have picked up on that. Maybe he had always seemed like a nonsexual being because he was, in fact, asexual. He clearly wanted John around, wanted to live with him; but he probably just wanted things to go back to the way they were before he left (impossible, but that didn't mean he couldn't want it).

Or maybe it wasn't impossible. Maybe if John went back to acting the way he had before - no more pining looks, no more double entendres, no more projecting his own emotions onto Sherlock - then things would actually be the way they were before.

Except John would continue to be aware of his feelings of strong affection for his flatmate, feelings that would never be returned in kind. But if he never acted inappropriately, never gave Sherlock any reason to be ill at ease - it could work. It would work. John was - if not miserable, then at least discontent - with the way things were now. He missed Sherlock when he wasn't with him, and got a little thrill every time they were together, even when they were being locked in ovens or sprayed with radioactive waste. It wasn't all about the thrills, either. It was about belonging, and being understood. He wasn't complete without Sherlock, and he suspected that Sherlock felt much the same.

As the shower ended and they were checked over once more for residual radioactivity, John let himself look over at Sherlock. The water was running in rivulets down his shoulders and chest, accentuating his lean lines. He did have a lovely body, and John allowed himself the admission, because he knew now that he wasn't going to act on it or do anything to jeopardise their
friendship. But he could admire Sherlock, and appreciate all the good things about him, of which there were more than most people realised.

Sherlock's hair was plastered to his head, which made his face look even longer and his features more prominent than they actually were. He opened his eyes, blinking the water out of them, and met John's gaze.

John grinned and wiped a hand over his face to get rid of the water before he spoke.

"Do you still have a room free?" he asked. "It's just that if we're both going to be glowing in the dark, it's probably best to keep the zone of contamination limited."

"Yes, I know how important public safety is to you." Sherlock appeared amused.

"Public safety is... No, you know what? Screw public safety. You and me together, we're a goddamn hazard to public safety, is what we are. If I move back in with you, the city of London's threat level's going to bottom out at 'substantial'." John was smiling so wide his face was going to hurt, but he couldn't help it. The prospect was delightful.

Sherlock grinned giddily as he started to towel off with the thin, white flannels they were given. "The only drawback is, I'm afraid Mycroft will be rather pleased."

"I think causing a radioactive spill might balance things out all round. Especially if we say he's the one who provided your badge."

"Oh, I made a slight alteration so that it actually is his name on the badge," Sherlock said smugly. "Call me 'Mycroft'," he added, sotto voce.

John laughed. "Oh God, he's going to fry us alive."

"Serves him right for roping me into this." Sherlock put on his best self-righteous face.

John took one of the fresh blue coveralls they were being provided, as their clothes would have to be washed separately. As he did, he smirked to himself. John wasn't entirely stupid, and Sherlock had been fairly transparent about his reasons for taking the case. John wouldn't say anything about it, though.

He was going to be very good about not saying anything.
The Resiniferatoxin

Chapter Summary

John does the laundry.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta reader, K, formerly similarfrowns at LJ.

It was disturbingly easy for John to slot back into Sherlock’s life. Not the other way round, mind. John’s life had bubbled up like melting plastic when Sherlock left, and hardened into blackened blisters with hard, jagged edges. Now, the plastic was being shoved and molded back into an approximation of the original form, but with new striations and irregularities, imperfections that couldn’t be rubbed out. They took some getting used to, but there was also beauty to be found, unique little patterns and surprising colours when the light hit the surface just so.

Doing the washing at Baker Street was not one of them.

John had only been back a couple of days when he found he needed to do a load of whites. He stuffed his pants, vests, and socks into the washer-dryer tucked underneath one of the work surfaces in the kitchen, then went hunting for the detergent. He'd brought the rest of a package of washing powder with him from his old flat, but he didn't want to have to go up to his room and dig it out of the removal boxes unless it was absolutely necessary.

The plastic container they'd used to store the washing powder in wasn't in its usual place under the sink. Nor was it in any of the other cupboards, in the bathroom, or on the bookshelves. Sherlock must have washed his clothes at some point over the last seven months. Or had he taken everything to the dry cleaners? John was about to give up and fetch his from upstairs when his eye lit on the refrigerator. Surely not... But then this was Sherlock.

John opened the door, rummaged around a bit, and sure enough, behind a tub of ... something grey and slimy, was the washing powder. It even still had 'washing powder' written on it in indelible ink, in John's handwriting. God alone knew why Sherlock had needed it cold, but he'd used it nearly all up. There was only a small amount left in the bottom of the container. John poured what was there into the machine, then had to run up and fetch his after all. He added enough to fill the dispenser in the machine, then dumped the rest into the plastic container and replaced it under the sink.

He was about to turn the machine on when Sherlock's door popped open.

"Oh excellent, are you doing a load? You won't mind if I add some of mine, will you?"

Before John could say anything, Sherlock practically leapt to the machine, opened the door, flung in a handful of (dark) clothing, pressed the door closed again, and pushed the 'on' button. Water started running in.
"You didn't- Sherlock, that was a load of whites."

"Hot, yes, perfect."

"No, not perfect. You just put your black pants in with my white ones."

"John, washing our underwear together does not imply anything about similar contact between our analogous body parts."

John just stared, because how could he not proceed to picture exactly that happening?

Sherlock responded with an expression of bemused innocence.

John was able through sheer force of will to tear his mind away from the question of frottage versus spooning, finally recovering enough to explain: "It's not- My vests are going to come out grey now. And my socks."

"No one's going to see them," Sherlock said, quite reasonably. "Or were you planning on going out wearing only your underwear?"

John sighed, because Sherlock was right, of course. He didn't even have a girlfriend at the moment to worry about having clean underwear for. In fact, although he'd dated several women since Sherlock's return, he'd only slept with one, an ill-advised affair whose sole purpose had been to reassure himself that he was still attracted to women (he was), and whose consequences included the willful destruction of the phone Harry had given him three and a half years earlier, following one texting incident too many at a delicate juncture (it had been time for an upgrade anyway), and the uncomfortable realisation that he was going to need to get Sherlock out of his system before he attempted another intimate relationship.

Which looked like it was going to mean quite a long period of celibacy.

Which, again, was fine; it was only what he'd expected, after all. He didn't have such a high libido that he'd become unpleasant to live with if he went without. Masturbating a couple of times a week was sufficient to take care of the physical side of things. He really only sought female companionship for the emotional side of the equation. It was just nice to spend time with someone who didn't make him feel stupid or leave him standing in the rain at a taxi stand or use his email address to register for some very questionable forums indeed.

Admittedly, Sherlock hadn't done any of those things in the months since he'd been back. John had the suspicion that this was entirely due to lack of opportunity, however, which had largely contributed to his resistance to returning to Baker Street.

Now, after three days back, John was cautiously optimistic. Sherlock had been surprisingly circumspect in his comments - in fact, now that John thought about it, he couldn't recall Sherlock directing a single derisive remark at him over the last few months. Nor had he abandoned him, forgotten about his presence, or misappropriated his belongings.

The thing with the laundry was no big deal, really. It wasn't as if he'd taken John's clothes on purpose and used them for an experiment with lemon juice and epoxy sealant (which, in the event, had turned out to be rather interesting, even if it had meant the loss of John's second-favourite cardigan).

They didn't have an active investigation going at the moment, so they'd spent the last couple of evenings in, John watching telly and slowly repopulating the living room with his things, and Sherlock occupying himself with some experiment or other. It was disgustingly domestic.
The first day, it was true, had been slightly awkward. Sherlock had been downright solicitous, shifting piles off the second desk, stuffing a set of nunchuks down under the cushion of his chair, opening the window to air out the lingering scent of burnt hair, and hovering in the doorway and talking a mile a minute about a cold case (apparent heart attack, but he thought it was a poisoning) as John started unpacking his boxes.

John was careful not to read anything into Sherlock's behaviour other than excitement and relief at having someone to once again act as a sounding board and buffer to the world of normality. He was very careful not to look Sherlock in the eye for more than a couple of seconds, or to brush against him as he walked back and forth, or to grin too stupidly when Sherlock said the spaghetti he made for dinner was 'good'.

It was like they were just two regular blokes sharing a flat. A flat with biohazards in the kitchen, full-colour 8x10s of a bloated corpse pinned up in the living room, one flatmate playing the violin at all hours, and the other taking apart and cleaning his gun every night, then reassembling it and sleeping with it next to his bed. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

As part of the whole just-two-flatmates thing, John felt that it was important to maintain other contacts and friendships, particularly those who had stuck with him through the entire terrible two years of Sherlock's absence. So, once the washing was running, he texted Mike and arranged to meet him at a pub.

He felt a twinge of guilt at leaving Sherlock alone, especially when he settled down at his microscope, avoided looking at John and mumbled, "Right, I'll just... Right. Have fun." He almost invited Sherlock to join them, but he knew that: a) Sherlock did not hang out at pubs, and b) he needed to have at least a part of his life that didn't revolve around his flatmate.

So he went out, met Mike, had two pints, only texted Sherlock three times (victoria line's down; bloke here with a rat on his shoulder; on my way home now) and received exactly three replies (Car broke down, they're switching it out now; Black one? That'll be Tommy; Good, flat already feels empty).

He took a deep breath to quell the tingling in his chest and read that last one again as he sat in the Tube station, waiting for the train. All it meant was that Sherlock wanted an ear for his poisoning theories, he told himself. It wasn't personal. Well, all right, it was personal; Sherlock and John understood each other in a way no one else did, and Sherlock wouldn't put up with just anyone, and he'd said that their friendship was important. But it wasn't personal.

When he got home, Sherlock was sawing away on his violin - he'd apparently got bored with or finished his experiment - but put it down as soon as John came in and launched into a monologue on obscure African plants. John smiled and nodded as he turned on the drying cycle on the washer-dryer, then relaxed onto the couch. As he'd suspected: Sherlock had needed someone to bounce his theories off of. That was all right, then. John understood this role and didn't need to put any effort into filling it.

Under the disinhibiting influence of the beers, while Sherlock talked, John allowed himself to enjoy the smooth rumble of Sherlock's voice, the intensity with which he expostulated his thoughts, the quasi-balletic way he moved around the room, putting his hands on his hips, waving them in the air, running them through his hair.

At some point, Sherlock stopped mid-sentence and peered at John from where he was standing near the wall with his notes and pictures pinned to it.

"Are you following all this, John?" he asked with a suspicious tone.
"Yes, sixteen billion Scoville units," John said, because he had actually been following; it had only been two beers after all. "Very, very hot."

"Mm, yes." Sherlock didn't look entirely appeased. "Come here and tell me what you make of this." He tapped at a paper on his desk.

John heaved himself up to take a look at the post-mortem photo. Sherlock stayed close so that he could indicate a large area of redness on the upper left quadrant of the dead man's chest. He was practically hovering over John, the front of his shoulder brushing against John's back.

"Skin's inflamed," John said, ignoring the urge to lean back just a bit. "Hard to say much more without seeing it in situ. What's the autopsy report say?"

"He suffered from arthritis. This was supposedly a side effect of the topical cream he was using." He shuffled some papers around until he found the reference. "Capzasin."

"Sure, could be," John said. "But you don't agree?"

He turned his head toward Sherlock. He was very close. John couldn't help his gaze first going to Sherlock's mouth before rising to his eyes. He could smell him, his deodorant and the light undernote of his sweat, familiar most recently from their night in the dehydrator and now indelibly associated with a well-formed, pale chest decorated with a smattering of fine hairs, and two long legs cradling a darker swell of hair and flesh. Shit. This was going all sorts of pear-shaped very quickly.

"Certainly," Sherlock said, and John might have imagined the breathy quality of Sherlock's voice, but he was definitely not imagining it when Sherlock's eyes flicked down at John's mouth. John's heart thudded heavily in his chest and his cock reported an interest in the proceedings. He froze. This was exactly the kind of situation he'd promised himself he wouldn't get into.

Sherlock had stopped talking. His lips were slightly parted. It would be so easy. If he'd been standing here with one of his dates, John would have just leaned in... But Sherlock was not interested! John reminded himself firmly. John had told him how he felt, and Sherlock had been relieved when John said he didn't want to take it any further than being friends. Sherlock had stated that he wasn't interested in a physical relationship. He was, at most, curious as to what John would do. Mirroring, he was just mirroring. John took a steadying breath.


Time restarted. Sherlock snapped back into himself, frowning and looking down. He leaned back fractionally and moved the papers on the desk around without really seeming to see them. "Sorry, yes. Yes. The concentration was much too high. He'd been using it for years, never had a reaction before."

John slipped away from the desk and retreated to the safety of his armchair, making serious sounds at appropriate points as Sherlock went back to his elucidations.

When he went up to bed later, feeling both frustrated and vaguely guilty while grimly congratulating himself on not making a fool of either one of them, he lay on his back and crossed his arms over his chest and thought about old, bloated, dead bodies until his cock got the message that nothing was going to come of its insistent twitching. Nothing at all.

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The next day, John needed to be at the clinic, so he got up early and went down to the shower, taking his work clothes with him so that he could get dressed in the bathroom. He made a detour
through the kitchen in order to get some underwear out of the washer-dryer. As expected, his things were all now a filmy off-white, although honestly not as bad as he'd expected.

Sherlock was already in the bathroom, but John didn't have to wait long before the door opened and Sherlock rolled out in a cloud of steam, pink and fresh and with his dressing gown only loosely tied around his waist. As far as John could see, he had nothing on underneath. John directed his greeting at Sherlock's shoulder and stood carefully back so that there was enough room for Sherlock to walk past without them brushing against one another.

It was bad enough that he was now going to be unable to avoid picturing Sherlock in the shower he was about to enter, remembering what he had looked like at the nuclear reprocessing facility: the water glistening down his back and the curve of his arse, dripping off his nose and his lush lower lip, beading on his chest, around his nipples, and caressing the sinfully long stretch of his legs.

He didn't indulge in a wank, although he knew he wouldn't be able to put it off much longer, what with all the input he was getting recently, if he didn't want to awaken to an unpleasant surprise some night soon. He was painfully aware that Sherlock could very well be listening out in the kitchen, able to deduce what he was doing from something like the sound of the water droplets hitting the tiles, or the fact that he missed shaving the corner of his jaw.

When he went back into the kitchen, Sherlock was just coming out of his room, checking the weather on his phone and dressed in one of his come-fuck-me shirts and trousers that clung to his every muscle. John's cock tingled, almost painfully. Christ, he wasn't even going to make it to work at this rate. He yanked open the refrigerator and tried to hide behind the door so that he could deduce what he was doing from something like the sound of the water droplets hitting the tiles, or the fact that he missed shaving the corner of his jaw.

He closed the fridge, only to see Sherlock standing with his back to him at the sink, reaching for a mug and shifting his hips in an awkward sort of dance. He put the mug down and scratched at his arse.

John couldn't think about that though, because now there was really something going on in his pants, and it was not pleasant at all. In fact... "Christ!" It was burning like a UTI. John pulled back the waistband of his trousers and pants together to look inside. He couldn't see anything amiss, but the stinging was getting worse, and when he pulled up his shirt, the skin of his stomach was bright red. He immediately recalled the picture of the dead man with the red patch on his shoulder.

"Sherlock..." John said, a terrible suspicion growing. "Have you been experimenting with- Fuck! What did you put in the shower gel?" He struggled to get his shirt over his head without undoing any of the buttons, then tore off his vest. His entire front was red and burning, and his back felt the same.

"Nothing!" Sherlock insisted as he hastily undid his own trousers. "God, it feels like fire ants!" He dropped trousers and pants in one motion and twisted around to try and see his own arse. It was pert and red, and he swatted and rubbed at it in what would have been a very distracting manner, had John not currently been involved in getting rid of his own trousers as quickly as possible.

"Are you sure this has nothing to do with the- What was the stuff? Resin toxin?" John groaned as the stinging in his urethra made his eyes water.

Sherlock had turned on the kitchen tap and was standing on his toes, thrusting his hips forward over the sink and splashing water onto his penis. "Resiniferatoxin, but I don't see- John!" Sherlock twisted half around, his eyes wild. "Did you- There was a container in the refrigerator!"
"You mean the washing powder?" John was making for the bathroom now, albeit hobbled by his trousers and pants around his ankles, because cool water on his burning genitals sounded like a very fine idea.

"That wasn't washing powder!" Sherlock shouted and ran past John into the shower, disrobing as he went. "Quick, soap, lots of soap!" He turned the water on full blast and hopped in. "Get in, you have to wash it off! Water alone won't work, it's hydrophobic."

John didn't need to be told twice. He kicked his clothes the rest of the way off and stepped into the bathtub with Sherlock, who shoved a bottle of shower gel at him with one hand while he furiously rubbed a bar of soap over his groin with the other.

John dumped out a generous portion of the gel and lathered up every part of himself that he could reach. There really wasn't room for both of them to comfortably manoeuvre, and there was much bumping of elbows and exclamations of discomfort.

"See, Sherlock," John said quite loudly, "this is why labels are important!"

Sherlock scowled while he rubbed soap over his backside. "Why are you so fixated with labels?"

"Labels are what protect us from getting hot pepper extract up our dicks!" He twisted his arm around to try and reach his back, which felt like it had a bad sunburn.

"Ah, so you use labels to keep things that society deems inappropriate from getting into your pants."

"Shyeah! I'd like to know exactly in what situation sprinkling hot pepper on someone's genitals is considered 'appropriate'."

"Oh, come on," he scoffed, elbowing John aside so that he could rinse off his rear, "we're not talking about a capsaicin analogue here."

"Uh, yes, yes I am. What are you talking about?"

Sherlock pressed his lips together. "Do you want help with your back?" he asked instead.

"Yes," John said grudgingly, and turned around, bracing his hands on the wall so that Sherlock could run the soap over his back.

It was only about two seconds later that he realised this was a spectacularly poor idea. Sherlock's hands slicked over his skin, not so much clinical and efficient as lingering and thorough. He pressed his thumbs in around John's shoulder blades, gripping his shoulders, defining circles and swirls, then downwards, his thumbs tracing John's spine as the rest of his fingers smoothed down his sides, ending on his hips.

John couldn't stop the little grunt of pleasure, although he tried to cover it up by clearing his throat.

"Um, thanks, that's... That ought to do it," he said with forced briskness.

"Turn and rinse." Sherlock put his hands on John's shoulders and turned them both around so that John's back enjoyed the full benefit of the shower spray.

They were now standing facing one another, John with one hand on the wall to steady himself, and no space to retreat. He looked up at Sherlock, who was looking down at him. They were very close. His hands were still resting on John's shoulders and his breaths coming quicker than normal. Something brushed against John's hip. He swallowed but didn't look down.
Right.

Sherlock was... This was definitely him taking the initiative. He wasn't just following signals from John, or playing along with something John had started. Maybe he never had been. Maybe John was the one who had been projecting. He was the one who was scared of getting involved. He was afraid that this might ruin their friendship because he was afraid that he would be the one to mess it up. He would be the one to break it off, he would be the one to decide he couldn't go through with being in a relationship with a man.

He was the one who would rather have this half-something, half-nothing, partners yet not, sharing everything yet not, hobbling their emotions, because he was uncertain of his own ability to be everything he thought a partner should be.

Sherlock pretty clearly had decided what he wanted, and was waiting for John to catch up, as always.

John did want this. He wanted to show Sherlock how much he valued him, how brilliant he was, to give him everything he had, body, heart, and mind. But he couldn't make this decision now. Not like this.

"We're not going to die, are we?" John finally ventured.

Sherlock's mouth quirked up. "The concentration was probably very low. The wash will have diluted it quite a bit, and the contact was fleeting. There was no system of delivery for it to be absorbed. So, no. I'd say we're in the clear."

"Good." John tried to laugh, to defuse the tension. "Don't think this is how I wanted to go."

Sherlock smiled a little more. "Me either. Although..." He glanced down. "There are worse positions to be in."

John felt whatever it was against his hip again. He had to close his eyes because whatever it was seemed to be twitching and his own whatever it was stirred at the thought, and there was no way Sherlock wasn't going to notice that. John's resolve not to give in to what he was feeling at the moment was rapidly going the way of the water down the drain. He needed more time. They needed to talk about this, and not while naked in the shower, suffering from first degree chemical burns.

He grasped Sherlock's elbows and bent his neck to rest his forehead on top of Sherlock's shoulder. The water continued beating down on his back, and the slowly dulling sensations of the chemical throbbed across his skin. Sherlock was standing stock still, and John didn't know whether it was because he wasn't sure how to proceed, or because he didn't want to scare John away.

"I don't know what I'm doing," John said finally, his voice muffled by the water and because he was talking down into Sherlock's collarbone.

Sherlock squeezed John's shoulders briefly, but didn't say anything.

Aware that nothing was going to happen unless he made a move, and that he wasn't ready to do that at the moment, especially not with both of them still stinging from the accident, he licked his lips and lifted his head again.

"Right, um..." John chuckled, embarrassed. "This is awkward." He let go of Sherlock, and Sherlock did the same, holding John's gaze steadily, a mixture of amusement and uncertainty. "How's your..." John chanced a glance downward.
Sherlock's penis was half-raised, and oh God, he really was reacting. 'Possibly not asexual after all' shot through his head while mixed feelings of pain and pleasurable anticipation tingled in John's groin.

"Quite well," Sherlock said. After a moment, he added, "Oh, you mean from the resiniferatoxin. Still burns. It'll take a few hours, I imagine. You?" Sherlock raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Yes, also... well," John said, unable to suppress a crooked smile. "I should maybe go down to Boots and get some aloe vera gel." He shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. The floor was flooded, as they hadn't bothered to close the shower curtain. He shivered, both from the cold air and from the pleasure hormones still coursing through his body.

"Your stomach does look painful," Sherlock said. There was a red line where John's waistband had pressed and rubbed the impregnated material against his skin.

"Yeah, it's... it'll be fine." John took his towel from the rack and dried off, gingerly patting his sore skin. Next to him, Sherlock did the same.

"John, I hope I haven't made you uncomfortable," Sherlock said quietly from where he was bent over, drying his feet. "I don't quite know..."

"It's all right, Sherlock. I'm the one who's made us uncomfortable."

"I don't mean the resiniferatoxin."

"I know what you mean. And it's me." John tied his towel around his waist and gathered his clothes from the floor. They were sopping wet. "I guess we both need to adjust to living together again."

Sherlock also wrapped his towel around his waist and started fiddling with a bottle of hair product. "What you said, about things having changed. After I... left. I think they have. For me, anyway, and I thought, from what you said-"

"Yeah. Me too." John let out a breath he'd been holding. "I just... I need some time, all right? I thought I knew what I was doing, and now I don't. I don't- Look, I have to call the clinic, let them know I'll be late. Do you want me to pick anything else up for you from the pharmacy?"

Sherlock shook his head.

"Dinner?" John suggested.

Sherlock looked up, almost shyly. "I'll order something."

"Let me cook?" John asked.

Sherlock looked pleased. "All right."

John nodded and was about to leave when Sherlock added, "Oh, you'd better buy salt, if you want to use any for dinner. I re-filled the shaker with aluminium sulphate."

John grinned and went to find some dry, non-toxic clothing. They were definitely going to need to work on labeling.
Sherlock and John attend a meeting of naturists. Chapter warnings for cancer, mastectomy, and homophobia.

"I don't see what the problem is. You've nothing to be ashamed of," Sherlock said as he typed something into his laptop.

"It's not that," John said with one eye on the match. "I just don't fancy parading my bits around for a bunch of perfect strangers to ogle."

It had been another long day at the clinic, and he'd been looking forward to plopping down in front of the telly with a beer and a box of fish and chips, and turning off his brain. Sherlock, on the other hand, didn't have an 'off' setting, and was all fired up about a new case.

"Really, John, they're naturists. They're not there to look at you; they're there because they feel more comfortable without clothes."

"I won't feel more comfortable."

Sherlock hunched his shoulders and scowled at his screen. "You don't need to go then. Although it would be more convenient if you did. A single man showing up is bound to be looked at askance, and this is the first halfway interesting murder in months."

John tore his attention away from the telly and regarded Sherlock with a mixture of fondness and exasperation. His enthusiasm for mysterious deaths was disturbingly infectious. As was the nonchalance with which he presumed John's participation.

"So, you'd want us to pose as a couple," John said, just to be clear. "As a cover."

"We don't need to get matching tattoos and call each other 'pet'," Sherlock said, sounding mildly irritated. "Just act the same way you always do. People will assume what they assume."

They're not completely wrong, John thought, but didn't say it. They weren't actually a couple, but things had happened and been said over the past couple of weeks that definitely put them on the far side of 'just friends'. They weren't all the way there yet, and John still wasn't sure if they should be. Dinner last night - albeit pleasant - hadn't brought any clarity to their situation. John had come home from work exhausted and sore from the laundry mishap, and his brain had simply been too fuzzy to deal with complicated emotional entanglements.

It was clear that there was an attraction between them, and a mutual affection, but there was also the trust issue. John needed to be able to believe and trust Sherlock, wholly and completely, in everything, and he didn't know if he could yet, or if he would ever be able to. He knew that this was as much his fault as Sherlock's; his psychological assessment said so.
For example, John found it slightly suspicious that Sherlock had come up with this case the day after the disastrous incident with the washing. He knew this was irrational: Sherlock couldn't possibly have induced the president of the Central London Association of Naturists - otherwise known as the CLAN - to send an email this morning if he hadn't urgently needed their help. The murders themselves had taken place over the course of the last month, long before their mutual shower. The suggestion that Sherlock might have killed two people merely in order to get John naked again was uncomfortably close to the actual accusations that had been levelled at Sherlock in the days leading up to his fake suicide. John decided then and there not to dwell on it any further, and to trust that this was all just an insane coincidence.

He hung his head in defeat. Of course he was going to say yes. "Did you say they have hot tubs?" he asked, hoping to maintain at least a scrap of dignity through all this.

Sherlock clicked to another window and quoted briskly from the web site: "'Visitors are welcome on Saturdays from five p.m. onwards for textile-free relaxation in the swimming pool, jacuzzi, and sauna, accompanied by refreshments and drinks in the pavilion'.”

John rubbed his eyes and licked his lips. He'd had quite enough of saunas, thanks much, but a whirlpool with jets of warm water massaging his back and legs wouldn't be entirely unwelcome, especially after the stress of the past couple of weeks. "All right, I'll come along, but I am going to sit directly in the jacuzzi and not move until you're done with whatever observations or investigations you need to make.” In addition, the water should give him enough cover in case he became distracted by Sherlock walking around naked.

He'd had a guilty wank the night before to images of what might have happened in the shower the day before, minus the chemical burns, of course. They were both recovering well, with only mild redness and irritation remaining. Sherlock had offered to apply the aloe vera gel to John's back this morning before he left for work, but John had thought, on the whole, that was probably a project best left to another day.

"Fine," Sherlock said in answer to John's stipulation, managing to sound both grudging and smug at the same time.

Oh God, he was done for.

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By the next day - Saturday - John was feeling much improved, and was even looking forward to the evening. After having been broiled, exposed to radiation, and burnt during their last three cases, the prospect of warm, soothing water on his battered skin sounded heavenly. The worst that might befall him as a result of this investigation, he reckoned, would be a case of athlete's foot.

When he arrived home from work that afternoon, ready to go to the club, Sherlock was sitting in his chair, checking the weather on his phone. John was surprised to see that he had slicked his hair and parted it on the side so that it lay in thick waves across his head. In addition to a pair of black-framed glasses, he was wearing jeans and a faux turtleneck shirt with a burgundy cardigan over it. The outfit was more casual than Sherlock's usual attire, but still smart. It was as if Sherlock had taken John's style and brought it to the pages of GQ. John wasn't sure whether to be flattered or humiliated. Or, just a bit turned on.

"He could be your boyfriend," a voice inside John's head told him. In fact, he is, it added smugly, for the purposes of today's excursion, so it's perfectly fine to ogle him.
John tried to ignore the nervous flutter these thoughts instigated and asked, as neutrally as he could, "Who are you supposed to be?"

"You tell me," Sherlock said as he stood, snapping his phone shut. "Pick a name you're not likely to forget."

"Do we need a disguise for tonight?" John was still wearing his work clothes, consisting today of his red shirt and brown cord jacket. He flipped mentally through his wardrobe, trying to come up with something that might work as a disguise. Aside from military items, there wasn't much.

But Sherlock answered impatiently, "Not you, John. My picture from the papers is still too fresh, especially for those with an interest in remaining anonymous to me."

John's picture had been printed too, of course, but Sherlock was right: he was the only one who ever got recognised.

"So." Sherlock pulled at the bottom of the cardigan to straighten out the wrinkles. "To keep things simple and minimise the chance that you'll slip up, you are a GP with a private practice. We needn't mention anything more than your first name, which is common enough. I, on the other hand, am an industrial chemist, and my name is..." He looked expectantly at John.

John ignored the frankly insulting suggestion that he couldn't maintain a false identity, because Sherlock had awarded him a private practice. Instead, he crossed his arms and studied Sherlock, trying to come up with an appropriate name for him. Something that suggested brains, something he wouldn't forget, nothing that was either too mundane or too outlandish, but still a bit special. Wendell? Oliver? No, how about: "Lionel?" he suggested.

Sherlock nodded. "Lionel. Fine. Shall we?"

He picked up a black coat from the back of his chair and put it on as he went to the door. It was like a shortened version of his greatcoat, with big lapels and ending at his hips. He looked like a Burberry advert.

"You certainly went to a lot of trouble" - and expense, John thought, but didn't say - "with the wardrobe, when you're only going to be taking it all off once we get there."

"It helps me get into character," Sherlock said, already on his way down the stairs.

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The CLAN was housed in what had once been a cricket pavilion, Sherlock told John as they emerged from the taxi - the fact being 'obvious' from the gables, cupola, and long porches. The former cricket field behind it had long since been chopped into parcels, but the club retained a good-sized garden surrounded by a high wall to shield it from curious eyes. When the weather was clement, CLAN members could indulge in textile-free sunbathing, lawn games, and picnics, they were informed by Peter Agarwal, the club president, who greeted them – clothed - at the door.

He was several years older than John and had a receding hairline and a paunch of a belly. John immediately relaxed a notch about spending the next couple of hours naked with a bunch of strangers. For all that he considered himself generally uninhibited and progressive in his views, he had been secretly harbouring insecurities about his less than rock-hard physique. Sherlock had seen him in all his dubious glory several times now, and didn't seem to be disgusted by his body (quite the opposite, if his little display in the shower were anything to go by), but John was very
much aware - especially when he compared himself to Sherlock's slim, muscular lines - that he was past his physical prime and settling slowly but surely into the sags and spread of middle age. He'd been picturing the members of the CLAN as some sort of fitness-crazed hardbodies, bulging with muscles and silicon, but if this was their president - a very ordinary-looking gentleman of no particular physical prowess - then John didn't think he needed to fear looking too out of place.

Agarwal ushered Sherlock and John into the office, thanking them profusely for taking the case. He offered them seats and proceeded to go over the basic facts. It seemed that two of their members had died over the past month after imbibing sports drinks dosed with antifreeze. The police – under the aegis of Dimmock, who refused to let Sherlock anywhere near his cases (which didn't mean Sherlock hadn't already accessed everything about the investigation in NSY's database) - were tapping in the dark regarding both a motive and the source of the drinks, but as the only known connection between the victims was their membership in the CLAN, the investigation was focusing on the club.

The bar did sell the same sports drinks which the two unfortunates had died from, but everything had been seized and tested - twice - all the way back to the manufacturer, and not a trace of the poison had been found. Sherlock snorted, as if to say that had been a waste of time and resources, but let Agarwal continue.

Needless to say, everyone associated with the club was distraught, not only because of the deaths of their friends, but due to the fear that the killer might still be at large among them. Attendance at their gatherings was becoming abysmal. If the perpetrator wasn't caught soon (and hopefully found to have no connection whatsoever to the CLAN), the club would have to be disbanded and its assets liquidated to pay for the legal proceedings.

"Right, I think we have enough to be going on with," Sherlock said suddenly, leaping up out of his chair in the middle of Agarwal's hand-wringing. He was buzzing with nervous energy, and John could practically see the theories slotting into place behind his eyes.

"So, any ideas yet?" John asked, attempting to remain casual as they took their clothes off in the changing room Agarwal directed them to. There were no cubicles, just benches down the middle and the standard rows of lockers lining the walls. They were the only ones there, having arrived early so they wouldn't miss any of the other guests.

"Several," Sherlock said as he skimmed out of his form-fitting trousers, unveiling his - by now unsurprising - black pants. "Only two are even slightly interesting, however. I'm afraid the whole thing is going to turn out to be rather obvious." He sounded perturbed.

"God forbid the killer didn't make it complicated enough for you. Wouldn't want you to be disappointed," John teased and stepped out of his pants.

He concentrated on folding his clothes and stowing them neatly in one of the lockers. God, he was only now realising that he was going to be spending the rest of the evening trying to avoid staring at other people's privates, not just Sherlock's. It was going to be like their first interview with Irene times fifty. He deposited a one-pound coin into the locker, closed it, and removed the key, which he fastened around his wrist. Maybe he'd just slip into the jacuzzi and shut his eyes for the remainder of the evening.

Sherlock closed his own locker, and John was about to follow him out into the main club area when he nearly ran into the bench, because: what had Sherlock done to his... down there?

He wasn't going to look, he really wasn't, but even at the periphery of his vision, he noticed that something was different - and there was something deeply wrong about the fact that he could tell at a glance that the appearance of Sherlock's genitals had changed overnight, but there it was.
They looked bigger. That wasn't physically possible, was it? He wasn't aroused; his penis was hanging the same way it always did - and again, the fact that John knew how Sherlock's penis 'always' hung was not something he wanted to become public knowledge. But there was somehow more of it. It was more obvious, more...

All of a sudden it hit him. Jesus. He'd shaved. Sherlock Holmes had manscaped. He hadn't completely denuded his groin; there was still a closely cropped bunch of hair right around the base of his shaft. But the skin of his lower abdomen, the inner creases of his thighs, and his scrotum were entirely hairless, and John suspected he would find the same was true of his perineum, if he cared to check. Which he didn't. No. No, he didn't.

"John?" Sherlock had stopped, too, and was watching John with a curious expression. "Is everything all right?"

John shook his head and forced himself to meet Sherlock's gaze. "Uh..." was all he got out. And then he looked again. Stared, really.

"It's all part of the character," Sherlock said.

"Sorry?"

"Lionel. The industrial chemist. John, please, it's not brain surgery. Do keep up. Lionel prefers to keep himself well-groomed for his partner." Sherlock gestured toward John, somehow conveying that he was talking about the fake GP John-with-no-last-name who John was supposed to be playing, as opposed to the real trauma specialist John-with-a-last-name who was Sherlock's partner albeit not in the same sense, although even that was becoming debatable, and... oh fuck, this was going to be complicated.

"He does," John echoed faintly. The thought that Sherlock had done this for him... but no, it was all just play-acting. His character. Nevertheless, he wanted - God help him - he wanted to touch.

"I thought 'John' would appreciate the visual aspect of Lionel having a certain amount of hair," Sherlock was saying. "Especially as he himself prefers to remain au naturel. But not so much that it would get in the way when they engage in-"

"Sherlock!" John squeaked as images of what exactly 'they' might engage in that involved keeping hair out of mouths appeared tantalisingly before his mind's eye. And yes, it was true that he'd always found the completely hair-free genitals of both the female and male variety which were often featured in pornography somewhat disconcerting. But how had Sherlock known? Or had he invented a persona for 'John' that only happened to coincide with some of John's own traits?

Sherlock's expression became thunderous at John's outburst. "Lionel," he hissed. "If you aren't going to be able to keep up your end, you might as well leave right now."

"Sorry. Lionel." John swallowed and clenched his fists. "It's just that 'John' would prefer it if 'Lionel' didn't discuss things in a public setting that they might get up to in private."

Sherlock paused, watching John shrewdly. When he finally spoke, it was with a cold edge. "Of course. You don't want anyone to get the wrong idea."

"No. No," John repeated firmly. He stepped close to Sherlock and grasped his wrist. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to be speaking as himself to Sherlock or as fake-John to Lionel, but it was all getting jumbled up now anyway. He caught his eye, cloudy blue meeting cool grey. "I'm not ashamed of you, or of you and me together. But when you say things like that... Are you trying to get us kicked out for public indecency? This is difficult enough. Lionel," he added after a second,
so that his words could be taken as part of the game.

Two spots of high colour appeared on Sherlock's cheeks, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed heavily.

"Besides," John continued, "I'm not in it for the shock value, or to prove something to anyone. Although I'm sure the look on some people's faces might be entertaining enough." He let his eyes dance with amusement.

"It's nothing they don't already think anyway," Sherlock said, his expression relaxing a bit as well.

John grinned. "Couldn't you just see Don-"

"Oh, hello!" a woman's voice broke in.

John turned to see they had been joined by two women, pleasant looking and maybe in their early thirties. And, of course, he and Sherlock were standing there naked. Holding hands, more or less. Well, here went the trial by fire.

"Hi," John said, reminding himself of the role he was now playing. "Erm, sorry, first time here." He forced himself to walk over to the women, holding out his hand to the closest one and hoping that he wasn't breaking all kinds of rules of etiquette by approaching them completely naked while they were still fully clothed. "My name's John."

"Jen," the first woman said as she shook his hand, keeping her eyes casually trained on his face. She had short-cropped brown hair and a friendly smile. "And this is Deidre. It's her first time too, but I've been a member for a few years."

"This is my partner, Lionel," John said, congratulating himself on not stumbling over either the name or the relationship.

Sherlock had come over as well and was hovering behind John's shoulder, close enough that John could feel his body heat, but not actually touching him. He reached around to shake Jen and Deidre's hands as well.

Jen went over to a locker and began shucking off her clothes as she continued chatting. "I think it's great that the two of you are going textile-free together. My ex never really got it. I mean, he came a couple of times, but it was all like a peep show to him, you know? But see, Dee," she said to her friend, "not everyone's like that." She leaned over to confide in a loud whisper to John, "She thinks all the blokes here are bound to be gaffing idiots."

"Or gay," Deidre muttered from where she was trying to discreetly remove her clothing, keeping her back to the room. Her head whipped around toward John and Sherlock in mild mortification. "Oh God, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I only meant, the decent ones are always gay, and the straight ones always only have the one thing on their mind."

"I mean, the point is, it's not a meat market," Jen went on, unconcernedly shrugging her bra off. "It's just a place where we can be ourselves and let our skin breathe and interact without any barriers." She turned around, revealing that one side of her chest was scarred and flat where a breast had been removed. "Oh. Cancer," she explained cheerfully as she saw where John's eyes had drifted.

"Nice work," John said, because it was; there was hardly any puckering or puffiness. "Looks to be longer than five years, congratulations."

"Uh, yeah, six and a half, actually," Jen said, "but how-"
"Sorry, I'm a doctor," John explained sheepishly. "And, gunshot." He nodded down at his shoulder.

"God, really?" Jen made a half shocked, half sympathetic face.

"Yes, Afghanistan, he's something of a war hero," Sherlock interjected. "Well, this has all been simply fascinating, chit-chat chit-chat, we'll let you get to it. And you needn't have gone to all the trouble," he said to Deidre, flicking his eyes clinically over her body, "she's entirely heterosexual. John?"

"Lionel," John scolded him as he allowed himself to be pulled through the door, "that was rather rude."

"Oh, neither of them are involved in what we're here for." Sherlock waved his hand dismissively. "And I was only being helpful. Better she know now than make a fool out of herself all night."

John couldn't help admitting that Sherlock might have a point. He only wished there were someone who could give him the same type of advice.

They each picked up a complimentary towel from the stack by the entrance - both for drying off after water-based activities, and for sitting on to keep the surfaces hygienic - and took up their positions: Sherlock perched on a stool at the bar, and John in the jacuzzi up on the deck, with a panoramic view of the garden. London was under a level three cold weather alert, and it looked absolutely frigid out, with long icicles hanging from the roof, and the remnants of several light snowfalls swept by the wind into forlorn piles under the brown, dry bushes. The contrast made the hot, bubbly water he slowly lowered himself into even more soothing. He angled himself so that he could see nearly the entire room and propped his elbows up on the edge of the tub.

Sherlock was talking to the man behind the bar, who was exactly of the type John had imagined would populate the club: in his early twenties and with perfectly sculpted muscles that moved sensuously under his smooth, tanned skin. He'd already served Sherlock a drink - something golden in a wide tumbler, with ice - and Sherlock was running his fingers around the rim of the glass, leaning forward, focused on the other man, listening intently to whatever he was saying. John found himself clenching his jaw and making a fist with his left hand, an uncomfortable tightness in his chest, before he caught himself, forced his hand flat and looked away.

It was just an act, he reminded himself. Sherlock was playing a part, trying to get information to stop a killer from striking again. Well, correction: he was trying to get information to prove he was cleverer than either the police or whoever had poisoned the drinks. But as the upshot was the same, John preferred to focus on the justice and prevention angle. And anyway, regardless of Sherlock's motives, he and Sherlock weren't really a couple. Were they? He wasn't sure. He didn't want to ask. Sherlock was free to chat up anyone he wanted. Not that he ever had in the four years John had known him. (Really only two years: during the two years Sherlock had been gone he might have worked his way through the entire cast of Cirque du Soleil, for all John knew.)

More people were coming in now. Jen was introducing Deidre to Agarwal near the bar. Deidre looked slightly ill at ease, with her arms crossed and her shoulders hunched inward. Another man, probably in his sixties, with white hair and a drooping, creased backside, was heading for the pool, visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the room next door. In fact, as John scanned the members and visitors trickling in, he noted that the majority of them were over forty. Leathery wrinkles and pasty flab dominated. There were, of course, other young people, such as the very tattooed couple who were obviously friends of Jen, going by the friendly hugs that were exchanged, and the group of four athletic-looking men and two equally fit women who tumbled in, laughing and snapping their towels at each other on their way to the pool. John watched as
they executed some very impressive dives. The overall impression he had was no longer of a soft porn den, but more of a retirement club for hippies.

As John swept the room with his eye, he tried to see anything that might indicate a potential killer. He didn't really have a firm opinion on profiling, but sometimes a person would give off a certain vibe of something being not quite right, a bit off. It was harder to tell from a distance - although Sherlock would probably be able to pick out a killer from a crowd at fifty feet. John considered that, if he were really serious about being Sherlock's partner - in a professional sense - and not just his sidekick-stroke-assistant, he should probably be talking to people, rather than hiding in the corner.

He was about to lever himself up out of the tub when Jen came up on the deck.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Not at all." John waved a hand at the otherwise empty tub and gave her an easy smile. "Was beginning to wonder what I'd need to do to get some company."

Jen stepped in and settled next to John. John shifted away the arm he had draped over the edge of the tub so that it wasn't actually around her shoulders.

"What about your boyfriend?" she asked.

"Who, Lionel?" he asked, momentarily thrown by the label. He had a boyfriend? Of course, he had a boyfriend. He'd been thinking of Sherlock (well, Lionel, but really it was Sherlock) as his 'partner', but to most people, that would be synonymous with 'boyfriend', and Christ, that really laid it out there, didn't it? His boyfriend.

He was uncomfortable with the word. He associated it with immaturity, impermanence, and frivolity. Yet if he and Sherlock went ahead and added a sexual element to their relationship, others would view them as 'boyfriends', in the same way that he referred to the women he'd dated in the past as his girlfriends. There was something disquieting about putting Sherlock in the same category as those women. He was so much more. Even though John had always vaguely imagined he'd end up in a permanent relationship with a woman, he'd never met a woman he actually wanted to spend his life with. Sherlock, on the other hand, was the one person he couldn't imagine living his life without.

He had to focus. He'd have time to think about all of the implications later, but right now, he had a part to play, and he was well on his way to bollixing it up royally. In order to answer Jen's question, he looked around for Sherlock and found him still at the bar, talking to a middle-aged, balding man on the stool next to him.

"Lionel's...having a drink," John said, aware of how lame that sounded.

They should actually be together. That was his role, to provide Sherlock a reason for being here; they were supposed to be on a date, a couple exploring the naturist lifestyle together, and here he was, hiding in the jacuzzi with a woman he'd just met while his supposed boyfriend was chatting with random men at the bar.

"I erm...The jacuzzi just looked so tempting," he tried to explain. "Been a bit of a hard week. And you?" he said in an attempt to redirect the conversation. "What happened to Deidre?"

Jen nodded toward a table in the far corner, where Deidre was talking and laughing with a thickset, dark-skinned woman with short-cropped, bleached hair and several tattoos running down her shoulder and arm. "Tammy introduced her to Ray. Best thing she could have done. Things got
a bit awkward after Lionel..."

John cringed. "Yeah, sorry about that. He tends to spout off like that sometimes. If it makes any
difference, he did think he was being helpful."

"I guess he was. But how did he know? I mean, I had no clue, and he doesn't even know us."  
John shrugged. "He's pretty good at reading people." He chuckled. "The first day I met him, he'd
never laid eyes on me before, but he accurately diagnosed my PTSD, as well as my sister's
substance abuse – based on her phone. The next day, he outed a couple who were having an affair
in front of all of their coworkers."

Jen erupted in peals of laughter. "Oh my God, no he didn't! What, is he also a doctor?"

"No, chemist, actually. Not the kind that dispenses drugs, the kind with test tubes and lab
goggles."

For some reason, this struck both of them as so patently ridiculous that they exploded in a bout of
mutual giggles. John was gasping for air when a hand grasped his shoulder and a deep voice
sounded in his ear.

"John."

John turned his head to see Sherlock crouched next to him. His long, lean thigh was positioned so
that John couldn't see his groin, but the pebbling around his nipple and the firm pressure of his
hand on John's shoulder were enough to make John's mouth go dry and set his heart racing.

"Um, Lionel. Hi," he said, still grinning as his laughter subsided. He lifted his hand to place it over
Sherlock's on his shoulder, because it seemed the natural thing to do, and he really, really wanted
to touch him. "You remember Jen."

Sherlock eyed her coolly and said, "Yes," before returning his focus to John. "If you can spare the
time, I need you for a moment." His voice was as tight as the hand on John's shoulder.

"Yeah, all right." John stood, and Sherlock let go of him and went to stand by the window. "It
was nice talking to you," John said to Jen, adding awkwardly, "I may be back..."

'Sorry,' she mouthed at him with an apologetic look and shooed him off.

John picked up his towel from the chair he'd draped it over and went over to where Sherlock was
standing.

"What's going on?" He shivered a little and blotted the water off his skin to minimise his heat loss.
The room was otherwise kept at a comfortable temperature, but next to the window, he could feel
the cold seeping in.

Sherlock took John's elbow and pulled him closer so their conversation could be kept confidential.
His body was warm, and John leaned in automatically, close enough that their thighs brushed. He
kept his line of sight very carefully directed at Sherlock's face. It didn't help much. Memories of
their previous nude encounters filled in every line, bulge, and shading of colour from the neck
down. John realised with a flush of embarrassment that he was well on the way to what must
certainly be an egregious faux pas. He didn't know what the CLAN's policy was on the public
display of stiffies, but he hadn't seen any others.

"It would be easier to convince people that we're here together if you weren't sitting over here
flirting," Sherlock said in a low, steely tone.
"I was not flirting," John protested with an incredulous laugh, all while secretly thrilling at the intimate timbre of Sherlock's voice. "And you're one to talk, the way you were going after that Adonis behind the bar. I'd say you were practically undressing him with your eyes, but-

"That was part of my character."

"So is Lionel a cheat, or a tease?" John challenged him.

"That's not what was going on, and you know it!" Sherlock snapped.

"Yes, I do, but not everyone else does," John replied coolly. "And that's all that matters, isn't it? How we appear to everyone else?"

"No, that's not- I mean, yes, of course, but-" Sherlock stumbled over his words as he tried to untangle the real-them vs. fake-them strands of their conversation.

John put a calming hand on his arm and took a deep breath. His own thoughts were none too organised, but if even Sherlock was getting flustered, the chemistry between them must be even more powerful than he'd assumed. "All right, stop. I think we're both overthinking this whole thing. Let's concentrate on why we're here. We can sort out ... the other stuff later." He held Sherlock's gaze until arousal swirled dizzily in his abdomen. He concentrated on the feel of the wooden deck against his toes, the towel between his fingers, and tried to breathe shallowly so that Sherlock's smell wouldn't be so strong in his nostrils. Did Sherlock not feel that too? How were they not kissing yet?

Sherlock darted his eyes away. "Yes. Yes, you're- Of course." He frowned and dropped his hand from John's elbow. "This is exactly why-"

"Hey, hey," John said gently and caught his eye again, sliding his hand down Sherlock's arm to entwine their fingers. He tried to quiet his own racing heart and force calmness through their joined hands. "I'm here for you. Just tell me what you want. Tell me what you need me to do."

For a brief moment, all of Sherlock's shields and layers of obfuscation fell away; he wasn't Lionel or a high-functioning sociopath or a deductive genius or even a reluctant hero who would die to protect his friends. He was just a man, without a name, his heart open and raw and beating in John's hand, and John didn't know - he didn't know what to do with it. He needed someone to tell him, because he couldn't do this. He couldn't be responsible for it; there had never been anyone in his life who was this important to him, and he had absolutely no fucking clue how to make a relationship work, really work, with arguing and laughing and being bored and having sex and loving each other through it all, no matter what, because you both wanted - needed - more than anything to help each other be the best you could be, and that is what Sherlock deserved, nothing less. And at some level, even if John wasn't sure he deserved it, he knew that if didn't get at least something back, he'd bleed out all over both of them, and that would be the end, really the end, and he couldn't go through that kind of loss again, and he didn't think Sherlock could either.

"You want to be part of this," Sherlock said, half question and half conclusion. John knew he was talking in layers again, and God help him, he did, he wanted it so badly he couldn't think straight, but that was the problem: he wasn't as clever as Sherlock and he couldn't afford to make a mistake or lose everything over a misunderstanding at this point.

And so he said, "Of this investigation, yes," as if that's all that Sherlock were asking, and pleaded silently with him to understand, to allow him the loophole and not take it as a rejection.

But with those words, Sherlock's mask fell back in place, supplemented by the carapace of glasses and hair gel. "Fine," he said, drawing himself upright and pulling his hand back. "I'll need you to
"talk to people then, as many as you can. You're good at drawing people out, making them like you." It sounded like an accusation more than a compliment.

John swallowed and nodded. He didn't like the cold, blank look on Sherlock's face, but he couldn't try and fix it now. "Yes, okay," he said. "Not Jen or Deirdre. I'll-" He let out a nervous breath. "I may need a few minutes. Sitting somewhere. Possibly in the water."

Sherlock glanced downward, while John kept his eyes resolutely forward.

"I apologise," John said flatly. "Unprofessional of me."

To his surprise, Sherlock laughed briefly, and John hoped that was relief he heard and not mocking. "No, it's... I have the perfect assignment for you, actually," Sherlock said.

John dared to look at him, and Sherlock raised his eyebrows in the direction of the jacuzzi. John checked over his shoulder. Jen had vacated the tub, and in her place were a man and a woman who couldn't have been a day under eighty.

John snorted and turned back to Sherlock. "You think you're being cheeky, but I'll bet those two know more than everyone else in this room combined, including the killer. You should be the one interviewing them."

Sherlock favoured him with a small, wry smile. "I'll trust you to report back to me on the latest in denture cleaners and hip replacements. Oh, and a word to the wise: the gentleman didn't let his lactose intolerance stop him from indulging in an ice cream with his granddaughter this afternoon." He winked and walked away, leaving John unsure whether to curse his pettiness, be astounded by his insights, or simply admire his magnificent arse.

Shaking his head, John sidled back to the jacuzzi. He held his towel casually in front of him until the last possible second, then bent quickly at the waist in order to block the evidence of his well-functioning reproductive system from the room with his leg as he stepped into the tub again.

He introduced himself to the others - Ronnie and Bill - and within short order had a fairly detailed biography of both of them as well as the CLAN. Bill in particular was keen to pontificate at length about the Gymnosophist Society, the Camp, and the Sexual Offenses Act of 2003.

Ronnie, on the other hand, seemed to be suffering from an impairment of either her hearing or her short-term memory, as she asked John twice over the course of five minutes where his wife was. When he informed her both times that he wasn't in fact married, she told him, twice, "Oh, dear, I know how that is. My Freddie's dead and buried himself, not that he was a good husband, bit of a ladies' man he was. Well, we're better off without them, dear."

Bill ignored Ronnie's interjections and steamrolled on with details of his holidays on Sylt in the 1960s. John had to admit that Sherlock might have known exactly what he was doing. It didn't look like John was going to be able to get anything useful out of this pair.

The third time Ronnie asked John where his wife was, he bit the bullet and said, "Actually, I'm gay" – a more accurate explanation seemed too complicated - "and in a long-term relationship with that man over there." He pointed at Sherlock, who was standing, wide-legged, his hips undulating slowly in what John recognised as a sign of distraction and suppressed impatience, as he talked to an elderly man leaning on a cane.

This time Bill stopped his monologue and took note. "You mean the leggy chap with the hair what's talking to Bruce?"

John nodded – he didn't know who Bruce was, but the rest of the description certainly fit Sherlock
"Is that so?" Bill gave John an appraising once-over. "Yeah, I can see it now."

"Sorry, what can you see?" John asked, perfectly politely.

"Oh, it don't bother me," Bill assured him. "Had an uncle what was bent." He leaned in, put a hand on John's shoulder, and whispered, "It was the cravats gave it away," while gesturing at his neck. He leaned back again. "Had a couple of those on our street, too, back in the eighties, shacked up together bold as you please; said as they was just housemates, but we all knew what was what. Never had a spot of trouble until the one up and died. That AIDS thing. Big to-do over the house, ended up being repossessed, and no one wanted to buy it once it all got out. Ruined the property values in the neighbourhood, let me tell you. It's a good thing I never wanted to sell."

"Yes, unexpected deaths can be messy," John acceded, gritting his teeth against the urge to run roughshod over the man's blithe stereotyping and prejudice. He recognised that a few words from a relative stranger such as John wouldn't put so much as a dent in a lifetime's worth of misinformation. And there were over twenty more people he needed to talk to before the night ran out. So he decided to cut to the chase, especially as Bill's callous comments gave him a way to bring up the poisonings without being too obvious about it. "Speaking of, I read in the paper that two of the club members here might have been poisoned?"

"Don't you believe a word of it," Bill railed. "Suicide pact, or I'm a monkey's uncle. Jonestown all over again. They were having an affair, and someone found them out."

John's ears perked up at that, although he knew not to jump to any conclusions yet. Everyone would have their own theories as to what had happened; the deaths must have been a popular topic at the CLAN in recent weeks. "How'd you know that?" he asked.

"Think how you could trick someone into drinking antifreeze unawares," Bill said scornfully. "They'd have spit it out in a second."

"Oh, no, it's very sweet," Ronnie piped up. "We had a dog once that licked up a spill as if it were ice cream. Awful convulsions, died that night." She looked eerily cheerful as she related the tale, then peered more closely at John. "Where's your wife?"

John sighed. "Over there," he said, nodding in Sherlock's direction. Deeming himself to be once again physically presentable and in possession of all the useful information he was going to get out of the pair, he stood up and excused himself.

"All right," John said, once Sherlock had finished with Bruce and they were able to claim a table to sit down and talk privately. "Aside from a possible case of early-stage dementia, we have the theory that it was a suicide pact. Could the two victims have been having an affair?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No, they never had contact outside of this room."

"Bill also said something about Jonestown, although I think he was getting his stories mixed up because the Jonestown massacre didn't have anything to do with a secret love affair being found out. You do know about Jonestown?" John asked.

"Yes, yes, the mass cult suicide in Guyana," Sherlock said quickly. "It would be brilliant if this were something like that, might even be worth my time, but Agarwal is no Jim Jones, and it doesn't make sense for there to be only two deaths and so far apart."

"Well," John continued, "antifreeze is apparently sweet-tasting, so the victims would likely not have noticed they were drinking it. Although I don't think that says anything about whether it was
suicide or murder. If I were going to poison myself, I'd certainly rather take something that tasted pleasant."

"Of course, ethylene glycol, that's why so many accidental poisonings of children and pets occur."

"Yes, Ronnie said her dog died of it, in fact."

"Ronnie?" Sherlock glanced behind John at the jacuzzi. "The old woman?"

John nodded. "Although I'm not sure how much of what she says is true and how much is fantasy. She seems a bit confused."

Sherlock's eyes gleamed with interest. "Tell me everything she said."

John went over everything he remembered, skipping the bit at the end where he'd said that Sherlock was his wife, because it was really very much not relevant, and anyway, it was Lionel and 'John' who were liaised, not he and Sherlock.

When John was finished, Sherlock got a faraway look for a few seconds. Then he reached across the table and grabbed John's shoulder.

"Oh, John. Oh-ho-ho! John! I knew you were the right man for the job!" He beamed and drew in a sharp breath, rising slightly from his chair as if he were going to lean across and- John wasn't sure; kiss him, possibly? But then he jerked back into his seat and fluffed his fingers nervously through his hair, disturbing the smooth, slicked-down style he'd adopted for his disguise.

John glowed under Sherlock's praise even as a little tingle sparked in his chest. "You've got it?"

"Well." He glanced at John, then quickly away and tapped his finger against his mouth. "It's pedestrian. Disappointing. But yes, I think I know what happened."

After that, things moved quickly. Ronnie readily admitted to having brought the doctored drink bottles from home and giving them to the two victims, whom – in her confusion - she'd imagined were her late husband and one of his flings. Jen volunteered to help Ronnie get her things together before she was taken out to Dimmock and the two uniformed officers summoned by Agarwal.

"So you're actually Sherlock Holmes and John Watson," Jen said, as they stood outside the club and watched the police cars drive away. It was dark and the air was so cold it hurt to breathe, and the taxi John had ordered wasn't there yet.

"Guilty," John admitted with a rueful smile. Sherlock, once more sans glasses, didn't even look up from his phone.

"This was really rather exciting," Jen said, rubbing her gloved hands together against the cold. "So the whole thing... the disguise and your stories... It was all part of the investigation?"

"Well, I am really a doctor," John said. "And Sherlock really does know his way around a chemistry laboratory."

"And the part about you being together?" The question was both hesitant and hopeful, and John had absolutely no idea what to answer. He didn't want to announce it to a perfect stranger before he'd discussed it with Sherlock.

Sherlock looked up sharply at the sound of a car honking.

"Our taxi, John. Come." He took hold of John's arm and started walking toward the kerb.
"Read the blog," John called over his shoulder at Jen before he disappeared into the stuffy, overheated interior of the waiting car.

"Baker Street," Sherlock told the cabbie and settled into the far corner of the seat.

"Brilliant as usual," John said as the taxi pulled away. "Tragic, though."

Sherlock made a noncommittal sound and stared out the window. He didn't seem as pleased as he usually was after solving a case and showing up the police. He'd been in a much better mood after both the Lepowsky investigation and tracking down the plutonium smuggler, even though neither one had ended with them apprehending the culprit.

"You're disappointed there wasn't more to it?" John ventured.

"It went much as I expected it would," Sherlock muttered.

John didn't say anything for a while as they drove through the icy streets. He wasn't sure what was bothering Sherlock, but if they were still Lionel and 'John', he'd reach over and take his hand and suggest they go to Angelo's for dinner.

He waited until the next traffic light.

"Hey." John slid over and put his hand over Sherlock's, where it was resting on his leg. "I could use something to eat." He waited until Sherlock turned to look at him, then squeezed his hand and rubbed the back lightly with his thumb. "Angelo's?"

Sherlock moved his thumb to capture John's fingers and smiled. "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

This is unbetaed because it was delayed long enough already by vacation, surgery, and the temporary kidnapping of my laptop, and I didn't want to wait any longer to post.

On another note, the CLAN is entirely fictional and not based on any specific club.

And finally, incredibly, there is no legislation in the U.K. that requires bittering agents to be added to antifreeze in order to prevent poisonings, although some manufacturers add it voluntarily.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John follow up on a cold case. A very cold one. Chapter warning for PTSD.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What does he need a wheelchair for?" Molly whispered to John. Her breath wafted out in a fine white cloud and she shivered in her thin lab coat. They were standing outside the service entrance to the morgue at Bart's. The sun had barely risen and the sky was overcast, making everything pale and grey.

John frowned through chattering teeth at the sight of Sherlock trying to force the bulky metal contraption into the hatchback of an orange and black Fortwo. "I've no idea," he said resignedly. Sherlock had woken him up at an indecent hour, more properly night than morning, with the news that they were heading north as soon as the car hire on Marylebone Road opened, to pack an overnight bag, and that he'd explain the case on the way.

"I should know better than to ask," Molly sighed. She wasn't working today, but she'd come down at Sherlock's summons just as readily as John had. "Um, Sherlock?" she said hesitantly. "You will bring that back in one piece, won't you?"

It honestly didn't look like the wheelchair was even going to make it out of the driveway intact, not the way Sherlock was applying his weight to it.

"They do fold up, you know," John commented.

"Are you referring to the chair or the car?" Sherlock sniped. "I told you we needed a bigger one."

"This is what we can afford," John replied calmly. They hadn't received payment for a case since the one from Mycroft a month ago. Mr Agarwal had said he'd send a cheque as soon as it was approved by the CLAN’s board, but God knew how long that would take, and John had incurred additional expenses when he'd broken his lease and moved back in with Sherlock. Basically, they were running on empty.

"You never used to be so hung up on money," Sherlock grumbled as he poked aggressively at the recalcitrant chair.

"No, I did. That's why you started taking cases from my blog, remember?" John took a big sip of the coffee he'd grabbed from the cafe across the street.

"Maybe you should start writing it again, then." Sherlock scowled, then turned halfway to eye John with suspicion. "Why haven't you?"

John shrugged. "Mycroft wouldn't let me write about that one we had last month." It was true, but that wasn't the real reason. The real reason was, John was afraid of drawing attention again. He
didn't want to give the Moriartys of the world any more information about their life.

Sherlock scoffed. "Oh yes: radioactive spill, national security. I can hear him now."

"Wait- What?" Molly said, her eyes darting between John and Sherlock with a hesitant smile, as if she wasn't sure whether he was joking. "There was a radioactive spill?"

"All contained, Molly, nothing to worry about," Sherlock said and closed the hatch firmly, having finally subdued the wheelchair. "Get in, John. We've a long drive ahead of us." He walked around to the passenger side and twitched his coat around his legs before squeezing himself in.

"Where are you going then?" Molly asked.

"Up north," John said. "Apparently it's cold enough now." Minus twenty that morning, after a solid two weeks of temperatures below zero, Sherlock had gleefully informed him.

Molly giggled nervously. "Have fun?"

John slid in behind the steering wheel and tucked his coffee into the cup holder. "How could we possibly have anything but?" he said dryly, and started the engine.

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John tried to keep an eye on the road as he yawned broadly. He'd barely slept the night before.

It seemed like everything was happening so fast since that night in December when he'd started going on cases with Sherlock again. Their fragile re-acquaintance had snowballed into nude embraces and playacting at being boyfriends, which very much hadn't felt like playacting by the end of last night.

When Sherlock had first come back, John had tried to maintain a respectful distance as they'd awkwardly renegotiated where they stood with each other. He had been careful not to initiate anything that Sherlock didn't really want, but as with all things Sherlock, the boundaries were nebulous, and over the course of the past month or so, it had become fairly clear that Sherlock was at least interested. Perhaps even frustrated at John's lack of reciprocation. What it boiled down to was, at this point, it was more a question of what John wanted.

Back when John had thought his affections led down a one-way street, he'd adjusted pretty quickly to the fact that he had romantic feelings for a man. It wasn't like anything would ever come of it. Far from languishing in unrequited love, in fact, he'd been quite content with knowing that he was, as far as he could tell, the only person of significance in Sherlock's life. He didn't feel guilty, either – not exactly, anyway – when he dated other people. After all, Sherlock clearly wasn't interested in him in that way, and Sherlock had always been accepting, after his own fashion, of John's girlfriends.

Looking back now, John had to admit that Sherlock had probably been jealous, at least of the time that John spent with those women, and maybe even of the affection and attention he directed at them. But he had never demanded that John stop seeing them, hadn't threatened to move out or evict John over it. Had never issued a 'me or them' ultimatum. And John had never formed an attachment with any of them deep enough to require a painful choice.

Maybe those two facts were connected.
However, once John realised that this ... thing between them might be an actual ... thing, could become an actual thing with lips and tongues and arses and cocks – not that John was in any way put off by any of those, in any combination whatsoever; in fact, he was quite intrigued by several of the permutations – but once hearts were racing, hormones were surging, and developments were developing, John's proverbial fan had shut itself down before any shit could hit it.

Because, really, he and Sherlock: this was not a good idea.

Until it was.

Because last night, pretending to be Sherlock's boyfriend, he'd realised something: he and Sherlock were already in a committed relationship.

John might flirt with and be attracted to women, but he wasn't ever going to abandon Sherlock for one of them. That had become clear over the course of their first eighteen-month stint together, and even more so through the string of half-hearted dates he'd gone on since Sherlock had returned.

Last night, as he'd lain sleepless in bed, he'd tried to imagine living apart from Sherlock again. It had made his chest hurt. He'd thought about what would happen if he contacted Jen from the naturist club and asked her out. He was certain she'd say yes. But now he also knew that Sherlock wouldn't like it. And that was enough to stop him. Not that Sherlock would try and control him (well, he'd make snide remarks about her intelligence and pretend to forget her name, which amounted to the same thing, come to think of it), but the point was that John didn't want to do anything that would hurt Sherlock in that manner.

So, he was for all intents and purposes already pledging fidelity to Sherlock, even if they never slept together.

John glanced over at Sherlock, certain that his train of thought was screamingly obvious, but Sherlock was poking at his phone, holding it at various angles as if trying to find better reception. Honestly, the thing was practically a security blanket, John thought fondly before returning his eyes to the road and his thoughts to their current situation, which was unerringly heading in one specific direction.

Because regardless of how annoyed they might get at each other (and John was under no illusions that he didn't annoy Sherlock from time to time at least as much as Sherlock annoyed him), they were both happier together than apart. They shared a mutual affection (John wasn't sure exactly how far Sherlock's affection for him extended, but it was probably a safe bet that he felt more deeply for John than for anyone else he wasn't related to). They were good for each other - or at least, they were more good for each other than they were bad for each other.

The question was, would adding sex to their repertoire change any of that?

From John's point of view, sex had, up to now, always been a good idea. He'd never had a relationship ruined by having sex. Lack of sex, yes. Lack of commitment. Lack of emotional investment. Lack of common interests. Lack of interest full stop, for that matter. Lack of shared goals.

As John ticked off the reasons for each of his past failed relationships, he realised with a mixture of trepidation and cautious hopefulness that he and Sherlock would pass on each and every point.

Oh, John knew that good, solid friendships had been known to fall apart when the people
involved decided to sleep together. But in his experience, that was because expectations changed. One or the other person wanted to spend more time together, or get married, or thought they now had a say in who their partner associated with, or felt that blow jobs were currency to be traded against housework, or expected to hear declarations of affection every day.

Again, John was under no illusions regarding any of those points, and he didn't imagine that Sherlock would be, either.

When all was said and done, he couldn't deny that they had a strong physical attraction. John didn't know if it was pheromones or a result of his long dry spell or something much more Freudian, or really, just the plain and simple natural consequence of having fallen in love, but the physical desires he (and, apparently, Sherlock) were experiencing had reached a crisis point. It was starting to affect both their friendship and their working relationship in a negative way. John could barely look Sherlock in the eye anymore. He couldn't focus properly on his job or their cases, and he suspected Sherlock was suffering in the same manner, if to a lesser degree. It was clear that things couldn't continue like this.

The thing was, how did you come out and say you were pretty much over your sexual identity crisis and wanted to have a bit of a ride?

John looked over at Sherlock. He had stopped playing with his phone and was staring out the side window, one hand tapping nervously against his wedged-in knees. He had pushed the seat as far back as it would go, but it wasn't quite far enough to accommodate his legs, due to the wheelchair behind them.

"You want to stop for a bit? " John offered.

Sherlock frowned. "Don't tell me you're hungry already."

"I just thought – I don't know, you could stretch your legs or something."

"I'm fine," Sherlock said in that tone of voice that meant he was very much not fine. It wasn't his demanding 'I'm bored' tone or his exasperated 'you're an idiot' tone or even his sham-cheerful 'bugger off' tone. It was low and tight and it made John want to shake him by the collar until he owned up to what was going on.

John drove on in silence for another couple of hundred metres, then on impulse reached over and covered Sherlock's tapping fingers with his.

Sherlock glanced at him in irritation. "What?"

John took a breath. "Nothing, I just..." He squeezed Sherlock's hand gently. "Okay?" His heart was beating very fast and he kept his eyes straight ahead on the road.

Sherlock didn't reply for a moment, but he didn't take his hand away either. "Okay," he said finally, softly.

John's stomach swooped. He smiled and chanced another glance at Sherlock, but he had his head turned to the side again.

It was another five kilometres before Sherlock turned his hand over to grasp John's in return.

Jesus, John thought, as his cock stirred; he hadn't been this turned on by holding hands since he
was fourteen.

"So, um," John ventured, acutely aware of his hand beginning to sweat despite the fact that the heater was just barely able to raise the temperature in the car from frigid to nippy, "why don't you tell me what we're doing." He felt Sherlock tense briefly, and realised what that had sounded like. "With the case," he clarified. "And the-" He jerked his head toward the rear of the car.

Sherlock shifted, angling his body back against the door so that he was half turned toward John, but didn't let go of his hand. "It happened a few years ago. A couple of teenagers snuck onto a private estate for a swim in the lake and found a badly decomposed body on an island in the middle of it. Well, I say island, but it's just a bit of land with a weeping willow and some scrub. There's barely room to stand. Forensics found evidence of cytolysis consistent with freezing, placing the body there at least since the previous winter."

John nodded and rubbed his thumb against Sherlock's hand to show he understood.

"I take it it wasn't simply a case of accidental death by exposure," John said.

Sherlock shook his head. "He was shot in the chest. The bullet was recovered, lodged in the tree, along with the rifle, lying near the body. There's no question that the shooting took place there and that it was set up to look like a suicide."

"But of course it wasn't."

"Obviously," Sherlock scoffed. "Even the local police saw that. It would have been a fairly open and shut case at that. The rifle belonged to the estate owner, a man by the name of Jones, and the victim was one of his employees, Robert Biggs. It was common knowledge in the village that the two men had a long-standing disagreement about the running of the estate. And Jones had shot at trespassers before."

"Could it be a case of mistaken identity? Jones mistook his employee for a trespasser and shot him, panicked when he realised what he'd done, and tried to make it look like a suicide?"

"Or wanted it to look like that, when in fact it was planned all along. That way, even if he did get caught, it would be the difference between a charge of manslaughter and murder."

"So, clever?" John asked hopefully. Sherlock needed something to challenge him after the string of disappointments their last few cases had been.

"Oh, it's more than that." John was pleased to hear the hint of excitement in Sherlock's voice, accompanied by a tightening of his fingers around John's. "You see, Mr Jones couldn't possibly have done it. That's why he's never been charged, even with manslaughter. But of course he did do it, which is the brilliant part."

John grinned. "How do you know?"

"Because the murder took place on that island. There was no conceivable reason for either of them to be there. If it had simply been a matter of wanting to commit the murder in an isolated place and keep the body from being found, there are any number of places less exposed than the lake. The local kids sneak in all the time. Ergo, there was another reason for being on that island. And the reason was, because it would completely remove Jones from the list of possible suspects."

Now John was becoming intrigued. "Why?"
Rather than answering straight out, Sherlock countered with a question of his own: "How did they get to the island?"

John obviously didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of figuring out the answer, but Sherlock was waiting for him to play the straight man, so he obliged.

"Boat?"

"There are no boats on the lake, never have been," Sherlock answered with glee. "Yes, it's possible that he brought in a boat and got rid of it afterwards, but he would have needed an accomplice. I forgot to mention, Jones was eighty-three years old at the time of the murder and has been in a wheelchair since contracting polio at age fourteen. He was also in no physical condition to swim, much less drag a fourteen-stone man to the island with him. So, due to the fact that it was quite impossible to place him on the island for the murder, he's gone uncharged."

Ah. That began to explain why they were hauling a wheelchair with them, although John didn't quite see yet what they were going to do with it.

"Right," John said, "and there was no accomplice because..."

"Immaterial," Sherlock said, waving his free hand. "They couldn't have used a boat anyway."

"Why not?"

Sherlock gave John a mysterious look. "That is exactly what we are going to see."

John chuckled and shook his head good-naturedly. He knew it would be useless to try and get Sherlock to reveal his theory before he was good and ready to. Instead, he gave Sherlock's hand one last squeeze and returned both his hands to the wheel so he could concentrate on the traffic again, as they were coming up on a stretch of roadwork. All in all, this was shaping up to be a rather good day, despite the inauspicious start. Sherlock was mentally engaged, they were getting out of the city, there was absolutely no danger imminent, and they seemed to be moving toward a mutually pleasurable juncture in their relationship. And tonight...

Oh God, tonight.

His stomach gave a twinge of nervous anticipation. Sherlock had made a reservation at a B&B, as it might be late by the time they were done and it was a long drive. John wondered whether he'd booked one room or two. They'd had to share a room on more than one occasion before, but only when they were forced to by circumstances. John hardly thought that a bed and breakfast out in the back of beyond would be full in weather like this. So probably two rooms. Unless Sherlock had planned on... but no. Of course not. He'd certainly booked two rooms. Which was fine. Good. John would just see what happened. Let things take their course. And this time, he wouldn't stop them.

Oh, God.

They stopped shortly after twelve at a service area along the motorway. Sherlock only ordered a coffee at the little self-service restaurant, then proceeded to steal more than half of John's chips while deducing the other travellers. John laughed, and didn't move his foot away when Sherlock bumped into it when stretching his legs. Sherlock didn't move his foot away either. John could
hardly meet Sherlock's eye without a ridiculous grin appearing on his face. Sherlock pretended not to notice.

After they finished eating, John browsed the racks in the travel shop while Sherlock went to the loo. Without any conscious thought to the matter, he found himself standing in front of the condoms with his heart in his throat. His eye ran over the little boxes of Durex, Mates, the familiar Pasante brand they stocked at the surgery. Were there special gay condoms? John realised he had no idea. But what he did know they'd need was... yes, there, the shop even carried lubricant. And oh God, again, he had no idea. Pleasure Waves or Life Styles? Was it the same kind for men and women? He knew that oil-based was bad, but were the ingredients listed on the box?

The reality of the situation suddenly loomed large and in overly sharp focus. Was he really going to do this? He wanted to be close to Sherlock, he wanted to share physical intimacy with him - Jesus, just the thought of it now was making his chest tingle and his groin throb - but he didn't want it to be like his first few less than stunning performances with a woman. Oh, it had felt fantastic, and he thought his girlfriend at the time had mostly enjoyed it too, but it had been messy and awkward and he was nursing something of an inferiority complex regarding Sherlock already. He didn't need to worry about bad sex on top of everything else. Of course, they didn't have to jump right into intercourse. Not tonight, anyway. They hadn't even kissed yet. Although maybe Sherlock wanted to. Have penetrative sex, that is. If Sherlock were a woman, they'd probably be having sex tonight. After all the buildup over the past few weeks, now that the admission had been made (hadn't it? Had John made it clear enough yet, with the touches and the looks?), it would be only natural.

John was well on his way to a minor nervous breakdown when he heard Sherlock's voice: "Ready?" He was standing immediately behind John, his body brushing against John's back.

John started and redirected his gaze to the next shelf down. His heart was hammering so hard he was certain the movement was visible, even through his jacket. "Erm, yes," he stammered, "thought I'd … Razors." His hand darted out and grabbed a plastic-wrapped packet.

"That's not your brand," Sherlock said, amused.

"Well, it's just one day, I think I'll survive." John stepped away from Sherlock, ready to beat a hasty retreat to the till, before he realised he was doing exactly what he'd told himself he wasn't going to do anymore. He stopped, took a breath, and turned back to Sherlock with a tentative smile. "Coming?"

Sherlock let his gaze flick once over the display, then followed John.

"I would have had one you could use," Sherlock said once they were outside again, on their way to the car.

"Sorry?"

Sherlock looked pointedly down at the package in John's hand. "A … razor. You could have used one of mine."

John frowned. "But you don't... You use an electric shaver."

Sherlock nodded, a smug smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Yes."

Oh, God.
They arrived at the village just before two. It looked like they'd entered the tundra, and the ice crackled under their tyres as they drove slowly up the High Street. They ended up having to ask for directions to the B&B at a pub; it turned out the hand-lettered sign signalling the turnoff had been obscured by a cap of snow.

The house was narrow and rustic, and their rooms - Sherlock had indeed booked two - were up in what must once have been the attic. They each had a tiny en suite toilet and shower, and it looked like they would be the only guests for the night. It was on the tip of John's tongue to say they'd only need one room after all, but he figured they'd end up having to pay for two anyway, and it would just make for complications and discussions in front of the landlord. Besides, who knew what would happen between now and this evening?

Sherlock only gave John enough time to deposit his bag in his room and use the lav before insisting they set off for the lake.

About fifteen minutes outside of the village, they left the car at the side of the road, half in an icy ditch, and made their way across an open field. It was still bitterly cold, and the brittle, frozen grass crunched under their feet. John, of course, was carrying the wheelchair, while Sherlock directed them by means of his phone's GPS.

When they reached a waist-high stone wall, Sherlock easily vaulted over and hurried on without waiting.

"A little help, Sherlock?" John said as he tried to heave the wheelchair over without letting it fall.

"No time, John! We don't have much daylight left!" Sherlock called back over his shoulder.

John considered - not very seriously - what would happen if he turned around and went back to the car. But of course he wasn't about to do that. He was too interested in seeing the solution to the puzzle.

Several minutes later, John had managed to get both himself and the chair over the wall, but not without a considerable amount of snow ending up inside his shoes. Luckily, Sherlock was still within sight, standing with his back to John and surveying the landscape.

As John came closer, he realised that what he had thought was just more open meadow was in fact the frozen surface of a small lake. Some distance away from the shore, the skeleton of a tree drooped forlornly, alone in the icy expanse.

"So, this is it?" John asked as he set the wheelchair down. He was panting from the effort of carrying it, and sweating slightly under his collar.

Sherlock turned to him with a triumphant expression. "It's frozen, John," he whispered.

John nodded and licked his dried-out lips. "Yep." That it was. No doubt.

"Don't you see?" Sherlock jabbed an arm impatiently at the lake. "It's frozen. It doesn't always freeze over. In fact, it hasn't since the year of the murder. And of course no one thought to check whether it froze that winter. Idiots."
John tried to piece together what Sherlock was getting at. "So, the lake was frozen when Biggs was killed."

"Yes, obviously! How else would Jones have been able to cross to the island?" Sherlock hopped down the embankment and kicked at the frozen surface of the lake. "Bring the chair down."

"What, you're-" It dawned on John what Sherlock was planning to do. "You can't- You don't know whether that ice will hold."

"I will in a moment, as soon as you bring that chair down."

"But you're- I mean, someone's going to have to sit- Oh, no." John crossed his arms. "Sherlock. No. Both of us must be heavier than Jones anyway."

"If it holds us, it will certainly have held him and Biggs."

"This still won't prove anything," John pointed out. "Even if the ice does hold us now, you don't know how thick it was that year."

"Then the police and the crown will have their work cut out for them," Sherlock said through his teeth. "But at least they'll have a way to place Jones at the scene. Now give me the chair!"

John knew that if he refused, Sherlock would just go ahead on his own, so he sighed and picked the wheelchair up again. "All right, but I'll be the one who sits in it," he said as he picked his way down the slope. That way, if the ice did crack, it wouldn't be Sherlock who went down.

John stepped carefully onto the blue-white surface of the lake. It was covered with a thin layer of snow, but felt solid enough. He put the chair down and set it up, locking the supports and footrests into place, before settling down onto the seat.

"How would Jones have got down onto the lake anyway?" John wondered. "You don't think Biggs carried him and the chair?"

"There's a paved footpath on the other side." Sherlock gestured vaguely to the far side of the lake.

John whipped around to stare at Sherlock. "Hang on, why didn't we go that way then?" He half suspected the answer was because that would have been too easy, but Sherlock just said, "We would have had to go past the house."

John groaned. "Let me guess. Jones doesn't know we're here."

"Of course not. Well, I did ask for permission to view the site, but he refused. Can't think why." Sherlock grinned.

John's reply - something about being shot for trespassing - was pre-empted by Sherlock giving the wheelchair a mighty push, sending it careening across the ice.

The sudden movement of cold air across his face knocked John's breath away, and it took a moment before he was able to recover enough to fumble for the wheels with his gloved hands in an attempt to take some control over his course. "Sherlock, what are you- Jesus, a little warning!"

Sherlock smirked. "You're the one who wanted to sit in the chair."
John was finally able to stop himself by dragging his feet over the ground. It took him a few tries, but he managed to get moving again by pushing the wheels with his hands. He clumsily manoeuvred the chair through a few curves, stopping and starting periodically, before heading back toward Sherlock, who was by now openly laughing at his antics.

"John, what are you doing? The island is that way."

John had an expression of determined concentration on his face. "Just getting the hang of this thing." He accelerated until he was just a couple of metres away from Sherlock, then turned abruptly, sending a small spray of shaved ice and snow onto Sherlock's coat.

"Childish," Sherlock drawled, but he reached over and shoved the chair again.

"Oh, fuck you. Fuck you very much," John said, laughing through his words, as he skidded away. This time, he recovered quickly, wheeled around and rolled toward Sherlock again, gaining momentum as he went. Instead of stopping, though, he reached out and pushed hard against Sherlock's hip as he went past. Sherlock stumbled, but didn't fall.

"All I need to do is step off the ice," Sherlock said. "You can't get me on the grass."

"Go ahead," John taunted him as he dragged his feet again to stop. "You can't get me then either." He set himself up again, facing Sherlock, and began slowly rolling toward him once more with a predatory look.

Sherlock feinted to one side, but John just shook his head, grinned, and continued bearing down.

"Not going to fool me that easily, Holmes. I was a flanker on our casual team before I was deployed."

Sherlock waited, keeping his eyes fixed on the wheels, his hands twitching at his sides, until John was slightly more than an arm's length away and starting to reach for him. Immediately, Sherlock dove to the left, landed on his shoulder and rolled once, then came up behind John, who was still moving forward. Sherlock lunged toward the chair but ended up slipping on his patently inappropriate footwear and landed on one knee. He recovered before John was able to get turned around all the way, though, and got one hand on the back of the chair. The lopsided pressure, combined with John's attempts to turn, resulted in the chair tilting to one side and two of the wheels losing contact with the ground momentarily. It thunked back down onto the ice with a metallic sound.

"Sherlock, you- If I fall over," John spluttered before pressing his lips together. "All right. You've asked for it now." He backed off again and rolled some distance away from Sherlock. When he felt he was far enough to get a good momentum going, he set the chair in Sherlock's direction once more and started advancing.

Sherlock was on his feet again, breathing heavily and watching John with wary curiosity. He didn't try and second-guess John this time. In fact, once he saw that John was headed straight for him, he set his stance even more firmly, leaning slightly forward for good measure.

John was fairly certain that if he rammed him, he'd be able to take Sherlock down, but there was also a good chance that parts would be broken: either on him, Sherlock, or the chair. That wasn't his plan anyway. Instead, he got up as much speed as he could, his gloves - now wet from melted snow and ice - slipping over the wheel rims, and adjusted at the last possible second to just skim past Sherlock. He didn't even see Sherlock sneer at John's breaking off his attack; he was too focused on making a grab for the flapping edge of Sherlock's coat.
Sherlock, for his part, unwilling to give even a centimetre of ground and flush with premature
triumph, failed to notice the hand lodging itself deep in his pocket until he was being yanked
sideways. He tried to counterbalance and throw his weight in the opposite direction, but he had no
traction, and only hastened his feet once again slipping out from underneath him. Unprepared as
he was, he landed unluckily on his left elbow and bit his tongue hard.

There was a slow-motion moment then when John's forward momentum was abruptly halted, his
arm stretched back to where he was still attached to Sherlock's coat; if he had disengaged his hand
from the pocket right then, he probably would have got away with not much more than a slightly
overextended shoulder. However, there was no time to react, his hand stayed where it was, and
the chair slowly tipped backward. He hovered on two wheels for an interminable second, fully
aware of what was about to happen but helpless to stop it.

"Shit," was all he got out before the air was knocked out of him when he landed flat on his back
on the ice. His head punctuated the statement with a heavy thump.

There was absolute silence for the space of several heartbeats.

Then they both started to laugh. For a couple of minutes, anyone passing by the lake would have
been excused for thinking they'd happened on a pack of hyenas. John finally had to curl to one
side to have any hope of getting oxygen into his lungs. "Oh, oh God," he gasped, trying to draw
breath between fits. "Jesus, are you- are you all right?" He turned his head from where he was
lying to get a look at Sherlock, who was still chuckling deeply.

Sherlock touched a finger to his tongue. "I think I'm bleeding," he noted with a slight lisp.

This set John off again. It was a good minute before he was able to speak. "That was- What was
that even about? Molly's going to kill us."

Sherlock smiled at him. "No, she won't."

John looked up at the empty sky, grinning like a fool. "You're right." He huffed out a few last
amused breaths, then started to untangle himself from the chair. "Seriously though, are you all
right?" He prodded carefully at the back of his own head where it had hit the ice.

Sherlock sat up and bent his elbow experimentally. "Fine," he concluded. "You?" He glanced
over at John, who was getting stiffly to his feet.

"Yeah, just got the wind knocked out of me," John said, coughing lightly as if to prove the point.
He waved a hand. "It's fine."

John got the wheelchair righted and after a brief inspection deemed it to be miraculously
undamaged, aside from some scratches on the back.

"Still, you'd better leave the steering to me," Sherlock said once John was seated again. He stood
behind the wheelchair and grasped the handles.

"Right, because that's worked out so well so far," John retorted and tried to turn the wheels to get
away.

"Maybe it would if you'd give me a chance," Sherlock said. His voice had an edge to it that gave
John pause. Sherlock was only talking about pushing the wheelchair... wasn't he? John twisted his
neck around to look up at him.

"What do you-" he started, then stopped when he saw the way Sherlock had his lips pressed together, his gaze fixed down at a spot on the ice. John waited, his toes slowly turning numb.

Finally, Sherlock said, in a low voice, "Neither of us can predict what will happen, John. I'm reasonably certain we'll be all right, but there are no guarantees. I'd like to-" Sherlock crouched down and put his hands on the arm rest so that he was on eye level with John. "John, you sat in the chair," Sherlock appealed to him.

John studied Sherlock's face for some clue as to what he was getting at. "Yeees, I did," he said slowly.

"You sat in the chair, and now you won't let me push."

John was about to start laughing, because when did Sherlock turn into a whiny five-year-old? One side of his mouth was already quirked upward when it hit him what this was about. Sherlock was asking John to trust him, and not just with the chair. How many times had they been on the cusp of something over the past few months, and John had pulled back? How many looks and touches had John engaged in, how many invitations had he accepted, only to run away before the moment of truth?

A not altogether unpleasant fluttering made itself known in his belly. This is what he had decided he wanted. He just had to let it happen. He had to stop blocking himself from feeling what he already knew he was feeling. He had to allow himself to … maybe get hurt, but maybe have the best experience of his entire life. And the relatively short time he’d been involved with Sherlock (however you wanted to define that) had already been a series of bests.

He licked his lips and nodded. "Okay." He took his hands off the wheels and laid them in his lap. "Okay," he repeated, more steadily.

A genuine smile spread over Sherlock's face. "Don't worry, John," he said as he straightened up and took his place behind the chair again. "This is going to be fun. Hold on!"

This time, John was ready for it. Sherlock sent him across the ice again, in the direction of the island. Instead of fighting for control or trying to stop again, though, John lifted his feet up and closed his eyes and let himself enjoy the rush of the air over his face, the vibration of the wheels across the ice, the simple thrill of being, and knowing that Sherlock was right there with him. He opened his eyes when he felt the wheelchair slow, and heard the scraping of Sherlock's shoes behind him as he ran and slid the last few metres to reconnect with the chair.

"Is that all you've got?" John teased.

"You're heavy," Sherlock complained. "But here." He started the chair rolling again, pushing it as he ran. When he had them going at a good clip, he put the rest of his strength into it and sent John off flying.

This time, the wheels rattled somewhat alarmingly over the uneven surface of the lake, and John kept his eyes open, watching for any sudden pitfalls. The possibility that the chair might tip over at speed gave an extra edge to the game. John was well aware how irresponsible that was. On the other hand, it was pretty close to the bottom of the list of irresponsible things he'd done in his life, most of them in the company of Sherlock. He was almost at the tree when the chair finally slowed to a stop, and Sherlock caught up a few moments later. John twisted around to look at him.
Sherlock's cheeks and the tops of his ears were red, and he was smiling as he took hold of the handles on the back of the chair. He hunched down a bit, and there was a mad second when they locked eyes and John thought Sherlock was going to kiss him, but then Sherlock ducked his head away and reached into his pocket for a tissue. John realised that his nose was also watering from the cold and got out a tissue from his own pocket.

"Looks like you were right," John said. His heart was hammering, and only partly from the wild ride across the ice. "It's solid all the way across."

"It only needs to be about four inches thick to guarantee stability on foot." Sherlock stowed his tissue and pushed the chair the rest of the way toward the tree, weaving slightly and stomping to test the ice as he went. "I wish I'd thought to bring a drill."

"The police can do it. Now that we know."

Sherlock grunted. He didn't care about follow-up investigations and convictions. For him, the case was solved as soon as he convinced himself of the solution.

They stopped where a stand of dead reeds marked the shore of the island. Sherlock hopped up onto the rocky ground and went right for the willow, brushing aside the curtain of filigree branches hanging down and scattering snow over his hair and coat.

"So this is where Biggs was killed," John said, picking his own way over the patch of land. He felt a vague sense of disappointment that Sherlock had pulled away just now. However, it was quickly displaced by admiration and anticipation as he caught the signs of Sherlock moving into the high-energy end phase of an investigation. The man was in his element, and John counted himself lucky to witness it.

"He would have stood here." Sherlock gestured animatedly at a spot in front of the tree. His eyes were alight with the excitement of the moment. "Look, John, here's where the bullet hit."

John came around to see the spot. There was a ragged hole maybe five centimetres across. It looked much too big to have been caused by a rifle bullet. Sherlock was caressing it wistfully.

"They dug it out, of course," Sherlock tossed out in answer to John's unspoken question. "Shame, I would have liked to see the original hole. Still." He clapped his hands together and rested them against his chin. "We know what happened." He stood on the spot he'd indicated before and continued with his narrative, his eyes fixed at a point in the middle distance. John didn't doubt that he was able to see everything in his mind as if he'd been there. "He wouldn't have been up against the tree. No. He wasn't backed into a corner. He was confident; strong. He wouldn't have believed the old man would shoot him. Not even when the rifle was aimed at him. Maybe he laughed at him, goaded him." Sherlock swept one arm around to point to a spot on the surface of the lake. "Jones would have been right there. John, stand here."

Without waiting for a response, Sherlock jumped down to the ice and paced around, looking for the right angle. John dutifully took up position in front of the tree. Sherlock crouched down and extended an arm, looking along it at John as through the sight of a rifle. John felt uncomfortably exposed. Could Sherlock tell that his mind wasn't entirely on the case? Could he tell what he was dwelling on instead, what he'd been dwelling on all day?

"How do you think he got Biggs out here in the first place?" John asked, as if to prove that he was just as focused as Sherlock. "And with the rifle, no less. He could hardly have concealed it."
"Told him he'd seen an animal down here," Sherlock said, offhanded, as if it weren't important. "Or- Oh!" He broke off, having caught sight of something near John's feet.

John wasn't sure whether to stay where he was or move out of the way as Sherlock darted toward him.

Sherlock ended up on his knees at the base of the tree, pawing away at the rocks. "What's this?"

John hunkered down next to him. As Sherlock cleared the rocks away, a hollow space between the roots and the ground came to light. Before John could voice a warning about possibly disturbing a wild animal, Sherlock whipped his glove off and stuck a hand into the hole. He felt around for a bit, then pulled out a filthy, clear plastic bag. It looked like there was a small bundle of banknotes inside.

"Hah!" Sherlock cried triumphantly. "This is our answer."

John gaped. "What- How did you know that was in there?"

"I didn't," Sherlock said, but he sounded smug. He wiped the bag off a bit and held it up so John could see. The zip seal was still intact. There were perhaps ten or so banknotes rubber-banded together. The one visible on the top of the stack was a tenner. "Tens and twenties," Sherlock said. "What do you think? Maybe a hundred and fifty?"

"Yeah, looks like," John agreed. "Sorry, I'm not- I assume this has to do with the murder, but... so Biggs was killed for a hundred and fifty pounds?"

Sherlock scoffed. "Obviously not, since Jones didn't retrieve the money. He couldn't have risked it, anyway. His wheelchair would have left tracks on the ground, and he couldn't be certain of obliterating them. He knew that Biggs was stealing from him, though. This was the transfer point. He'd leave the goods here, and whoever his fence was would leave the cash from the previous transaction."

"Amazing," John said in a hushed voice.

Sherlock looked pleased with himself.

"What about when the lake wasn't frozen, though?" John asked. "Biggs was hardly swimming back and forth all the time."

"They probably had several drop points. This was just an opportune one for a few weeks that winter. Unfortunate for Biggs, as it may have been the only one that Jones could get to without assistance."

"But I still don't- I mean, Biggs would have noticed his employer sneaking after him in his wheelchair."

"Precisely. Which is why Jones waited for him here."

"You can't possibly know that," John said, half incredulously, because he had no doubt that Sherlock could, in fact, know that.

"It's the only way it makes sense. As you say, Jones couldn't have followed him down here. So he waited. There's no place to hide, especially with all the foliage gone, so it must have been dark."
Biggs wouldn't have come here in the day anyway, too much chance of being seen, either by Jones or by hikers or other visitors. - Oh yes, we're not the only ones to sneak in for a bit of fun on the ice. Just look at the tracks-” He gestured vaguely at the lake. John, of course, had not noticed any tracks on the ice.

John grinned. "That's brilliant."

"Not so brilliant, obviously. Jones knew what Biggs was up to."

"No, I mean you." John looked at Sherlock. There were tiny flakes of snow dusting his hair and shoulders, and two or three droplets glistening where they had melted on his eyebrows. He was beautiful. John's heart skipped a beat. This was... God, this was it, right here. Here, at the scene of a murder, no doubt soon to be chased off the property by the rifle-wielding killer himself, so cold he couldn't feel his fingers or toes, his head still throbbing dully where he'd bumped it, he was happy in a bone-deep way that nothing else could quite come close to. He leaned in a bit closer. The silence around them was absolute. There wasn't even any wind. Sitting there, inside the half-dome created by the hanging branches, surrounded by a vast field of white and blue, they might have been the only people left on earth.

"You're brilliant," John said in a soft voice. He slipped off his glove, reached up and wiped some of the moisture off Sherlock's cheek with his thumb. Sherlock held very still. John took a deep breath and plunged on. "I didn't want to need this," he said. "I couldn't let myself need this. Do you understand?"

Sherlock's brow twitched in the direction of a frown.

"I needed this- you- everything- to live, and then it was all gone, and I had to stop needing it."

The frown deepened. "John-"

"-but it never went away," John said over him. "It's still here, it always was, and it's taken me this long to accept it again. This is me, and you're a-" It was hard to keep his voice steady. "You're a really big part of it."

Sherlock's ungloved hand came up to cover John's on his cheek.

"I know a lot of people are going to think this is a spectacularly poor idea, but that's what they think about nearly everything we get up to, and it's worked out fairly well for me so far. No limp, no tremors, and as much free Italian food as I can eat."

Sherlock huffed out a laugh and squeezed John's hand gently under his.

"Okay, then I'm going to-" John said. He tilted his face a bit closer to Sherlock's. Just then, Sherlock ran his tongue ever so briefly along the inside of his lower lip. It was probably an unconscious reaction, yet it sent a spike of desire through John even as it served to assure him that Sherlock wanted this too. Still, he raised his eyes to Sherlock's once more, to be absolutely certain. The anticipation and ardor he saw there - mixed with a not insignificant dose of Sherlockian impatience - cleared away any final doubts.

He closed the last few centimetres, touching his lips gently to Sherlock's. They were cold, and his nose was cold against John's cheek. The rough-on-rough of their chins was a surprise, too. None of that mattered, though, as John's body warred between relaxing utterly as all the tension and frustration that had been building up over the past several weeks found its outlet in the slide and
curl of their tongues against each other; and building up a new kind of tension that started below his belt line and left him in no doubt whatsoever that he would be prepared to propagate the species - theoretically, at least - in very short order and in any number of creative ways. For a while, John's brain wasn't capable of registering anything more than 'fuck, this is good' and 'I could seriously get used to this', but pretty soon the fact that he was kneeling on a pile of sharp rocks in subzero temperatures brought him back to reality.

He leaned his cheek against Sherlock's and spoke down towards the edge of his jaw: "This is actually pretty uncomfortable."

Sherlock chuckled. "You could have waited until we got back to the hotel."

"No, I couldn't. I really, really couldn't." He fumbled in his pocket for his tissue as his nose began to drip again. "And anyway, there's something appropriate about our first kiss taking place at the scene of an unsolved murder. Well, wildly inappropriate, I suppose," he said with a wry smile, "but you know what I mean."

"And it's not unsolved any more, John," Sherlock said as he rose and slowly straightened his legs. He jiggled the plastic bag with the money. "I'd say this calls for a bit of a celebration, wouldn't you? I'd suggest Chinese, but I don't think we'll find anything more exotic than a Cornish pasty around here."

John wondered what Sherlock considered cause for celebration: the discovery of the last clue in the case, or the kiss. It was probably best not to think about it too hard, especially as it seemed Sherlock was going to get a good meal out of it either way. "We could go back to that pub we asked directions at," John said. He pulled his gloves on again. "It's a bit early for dinner. Maybe a couple of pints first?" Because he could probably use a bit of alcohol in his system in preparation for whatever was going to happen later on.

Sherlock pulled a face. "Beer, honestly. A couple of brandies in front of the fire, if you'd like, and then a nice bottle of wine with dinner, I'd say. We can stop off at the room first for you to change your socks."

"How'd you- Never mind." John shook his head with a fond smile. "Yes, that would be lovely. Come on. This time, you can sit and I'll push you." Now that he knew how strong the ice was, he didn't have any misgivings, and it turned out being pushed across the ice on wheels was rather fun.

"Take me around to the other side first," Sherlock said. "Where Jones was." He sat down in the chair, making a production of arranging his coat so that it didn't hang down to drag on the ice or get caught in the wheels anywhere.

John complied, then stood in for Biggs once more while Sherlock got his fill of sight lines and snapped pictures with his phone. The light - which had never been bright through the dreary cloud cover - was now fading perceptibly, and Sherlock soon agreed that he'd seen all he needed to.

They set off toward the shore again, this time with Sherlock pointing out the tracks which had eluded John's notice earlier. Those were from children playing tag. Those were from a worker or employee at the estate house, cutting across on her (yes, it was a woman) way home. And those-

"Wait, turn that way." Sherlock indicated the ground to the right.

John obediently turned the chair and followed a trail of footprints under the light dusting of snow.
They were easy even for John to see, as it appeared whoever had walked that way had been wearing spikes on their boots, which had left sharp indentations in the ice.

Sherlock turned on the torch function on his phone in order to scan the ground where the tracks ended. "Look, there. Hold this." He thrust the phone at John and wheeled himself over to a spot where, John could see in the spotlight he directed downward, a nearly perfect circle of ice about the size of a dinner plate shone up at them, as if it had been smoothed out and polished. It was surrounded by a wreath of churned-up ice shavings.

John frowned. "What do you-?" But Sherlock was already rolling away, crowing triumphantly a moment later.

"Another one!"

John trotted over to shine the light onto another of the mysterious circles. The first thought that came to him was crop circles and aliens, but Sherlock's pronouncement was much more mundane.

"Ice fishing, John. Look, here are the marks from their chair. An aluminum folding one. And there's where they set their lantern."

John nodded in acknowledgement, although honestly, one scratch on the ice's surface looked much like another to him. At this point, he successfully negotiated the logical step from 'ice fishing' to 'those circles are the re-frozen holes', but he never forgave himself for not quite making it to '-where the ice will be thinner and what the hell is Sherlock doing rolling right over that one' before everything went horribly, inevitably wrong.

It all happened very quietly. In stories, there was usually a deafening crack when the ice broke on a river or lake, but this was more like a soft crunch, an eggshell sound, followed by a muffled thud as Sherlock hit the ice when the chair tipped forward, dumping him out and landing on top of him. A wet, fingernails-on-chalkboard grinding, like bone fragments under John's fingers in an open fracture, and then the chair was tented over a black hole and Sherlock was nowhere to be seen.

It couldn't have taken more than two seconds. John had thrown the chair aside before he even realised he'd moved. He felt the vibrations from it crashing across the ice in his chest, as he was now lying at the edge of the hole with his arms plunging down into the freezing black water, groping blindly for something - anything - For a mad, terrifying moment, he was on the street in front of Bart's. His head hurt - he'd fallen down and hit it on the ground, but at the same time he was completely numb, because where had Sherlock gone? He was just here a moment ago, and now people were grabbing him, holding him back, why couldn't he touch him?, he just needed to take Sherlock's hand to make everything right again, to make sure he was alive, but his arm wasn't long enough -

He was a split second away from diving in himself when Sherlock surfaced, sending a wave of icy water into John's face and across the ground where he was lying, soaking his front and shocking the air out of his lungs. It wasn't enough to stop him reaching frantically for Sherlock, though, and he managed to get a handful of coat, which he held onto with an iron grip. No one was going to pry his fingers off again.

Sherlock was conscious and coughing raggedly, clawing at John's shoulders and back in at attempt to pull himself out. It seemed to take forever, but between the two of them, they managed to get Sherlock up on to the ice again. He was wet, his face and hair were streaming, and there was a dark liquid pooling around him. John had to get it off, had to stop the bleeding. He pushed the hair out of Sherlock's face, wiped his forehead and cheeks with oh-so-steady hands, felt the
sides and back of his head, patted down his own pockets looking for his fucking penlight so he could check Sherlock's eyes, he had to check his eyes -

"John, John, let me- I'm all right." Sherlock curled over onto his side, his body shaken by racking coughs, between which he tried to assure John that he was fine.

"You're not, Sherlock, fuck, you have a head injury, you're bleeding all over." John's voice sounded distant to his own ears, tinny and thin.

"No, it's-" Sherlock's hands came up to feel his face and head, rubbed his fingers together. "It's just water. It's not-" He coughed again, deeply.

"I think I'd know, Sherlock, I saw you fall, I saw you lying there, I-" He broke off, realising what he was saying. Sherlock had broken through the ice. He hadn't jumped off a building. Not this time. John felt sick. He sat back and put a hand over his mouth. It was shaking now. "Fuck."

"It's okay."

John shook his head. This hadn't happened to him in years. He stared down at Sherlock, who had an expression on his face that John had never seen before. It took a moment, but John eventually recognised it. Sherlock was frightened.

"Where's the light?" Sherlock asked, very quietly and very calmly. His eyes were still huge.

John could only shake his head. He didn't carry a penlight with him. Not anymore. Not since the army.

"My phone, John," Sherlock prompted him gently. "You were using it as a torch."

John took a deep, shuddering breath. Yes. He patted down his pockets automatically, but he must have dropped it when he dove for Sherlock. He scanned the ground; in the rapidly dimming light, he was able to make out a dark smudge a couple of metres away. He crawled over to it and closed his hand gratefully over the plastic device. It was probably ridiculous to care about the fate of an inanimate object after what had just happened, but that phone was nearly as important to Sherlock as his coat. He tapped the keys and found, to his relief, that it was still in working order. He held it out for Sherlock to take.

"Turn the light on and look at me." Sherlock was already shivering so hard it looked like he was having convulsions.

John had no idea what the purpose was, but he did exactly as he was told. In the weak light, he saw white, blue, black. No red. The pooled darkness around Sherlock's outline was just ice turned shadowy and translucent from the water.

John closed his eyes and breathed through his nausea until he felt he could speak. Sherlock was going into hypothermic shock. He could die, because John was stuck in a flashback. He forced himself to concentrate on assessment and action. "We have to get back to the car."

It was nearly dark now. Sherlock didn't say anything as John hauled him to his feet and started walking back in stony silence, one hand illuminating the way with the light from Sherlock's phone and the other pulling Sherlock along with an iron grip on his sleeve. The wheelchair was left abandoned to its fate.
John could feel the tremors running through Sherlock's arm before they'd even reached the end of the lake. He paused to shine the light at Sherlock's face. He was shivering uncontrollably. His jaw was clenched in miserable resignation and it looked like there were actually icicles forming on the ends of his hair.

"God, say something before you freeze to death," John muttered through his own clenched teeth.

"The shivering is good," Sherlock managed to say. "It's not like we have any other way to warm me up at the moment."

John unzipped his jacket. It was wet on the front and the sleeves, but the inside was dry thanks to its lining.

"No, you need that," Sherlock protested. "And my coat's thick enough it's actually helping."

John draped his jacket over Sherlock's head. "Reducing your heat loss by forty percent right there. My jumper's dry, I'll be fine." He didn't mention his sodden trousers; his thighs were no longer stinging, anyway, having moved on to numb.

Sherlock pulled the dangling ends of the jacket together under his chin and stared at the ground, holding his body stiff in an effort to control the shudders running through it. John considered saying something, but it was really Sherlock's own damn fault. If it had been anyone else, John would have called it a very unfortunate accident, but Sherlock had recognised what those circles were and had deliberately run right over them. Hell, he'd deliberately deviated from the path they'd taken on their way to the island - a path they'd tested and knew was safe - for what? Was it just his insatiable curiosity, or had he been trying to impress John? Either way, what was done was done. And it wasn't the worst that either his curiosity or need for validation had resulted in during the course of their friendship. Or would one day result in. This is what he was signing up for. What he had signed up for, that night four years ago when he'd come running to the call of 'could be dangerous'.

John squared his jaw and pulled Sherlock onward, faster this time, both in order to generate heat through muscle activity and to get back before Sherlock's temperature dropped any further.

As soon as they were inside the car, John turned the heater up full blast, which only had the effect of dousing them with a burst of icy air. John closed the vents to give the engine time to heat up and turned the car around. It was dark now, and the road was narrow and unfamiliar, forcing him to drive frustratingly slow. Sherlock wasn't saying anything, but John could hear him shivering, the dull staccato of his teeth bumping together and the breathy stutter of his respiration. John reached down and grasped Sherlock's leg through his coat. The material was stiff and leached all the heat out of his hand. John was torn between anger and despondence. It wouldn't do any good to point out what a foolhardy thing Sherlock had done. His silence told John that Sherlock was well aware of the fact.

"Give me your hand," John said, finally.

"I don't need you to hold my hand," Sherlock said sourly.

John set aside the tiny sting - when he had reached for Sherlock's hand the other times, it wasn't because he thought Sherlock was weak; it was to express affection and solidarity. But this time, it was even more practical.

"I want to start warming you up," John said evenly.
"It won't do any good to start with an extremity."

"I can't exactly wrap myself around your chest right now, just give me your hand!"

There was a hiss of annoyance, followed by a bit of fumbling as Sherlock worked his hands out of his wet gloves, and then a block of icy flesh was thrust against John's palm. John pulled Sherlock's hand toward himself, took a second to work his shirt out of his waistband, and slipped Sherlock's hand in underneath both jumper and shirt, flinching involuntarily at the sudden bloom of cold on his abdomen.

"Other one," he said, suppressing a shiver himself.

"You got soaked as well," Sherlock pointed out, his voice unsteady through his tremors. "I have a higher metabolism than you, I'm probably-"

"Give me your other hand," John insisted with finality.

Sherlock shifted closer, slid his right hand around to John's back and placed his left hand on John's stomach under his jumper. He dumped John's jacket on the seat behind him and rested his forehead against John's shoulder.

"Get your shoes off and tuck your feet up," John said. "Minimise your surface area." He flicked open one of the vents, but the air coming out was still cold. He had no feeling in his fingers, and it was getting harder to stop his body from shaking. Sherlock shuffled around, squirming and pressing against John as he tried to fold his long legs up underneath himself on the seat. When he finally settled, he'd worked his hands in even further underneath John's shirt, his palms flat against John's skin and gripping gently. John could feel the cold tendrils of Sherlock's hair against his ear.

"I didn't do it on purpose," Sherlock mumbled.

John clenched his teeth to stop a shiver. "Don't."

"I thought the ice would hold." His hands tightened around John.

"Just- Leave it, all right?" John's voice grated.

Sherlock subsided, but nudged himself in closer, so that his knees were pressed against John's thigh.

When they got back to the B&B, they both stumbled upstairs, John calling out a request for a pot of hot tea as they went. John followed Sherlock into his room, where he headed straight for the bathroom to turn the shower on. The water came out fast and hard; surprisingly so, given that they were on the top floor and it was an old house. Sherlock appeared a few moments later, completely naked. He had his arms wrapped around his chest and his lips were an alarming colour. His neatly groomed penis and testicles formed a wrinkled knot of flesh close to his body, and he was still shivering, although only in fits and starts now, rather than incessantly.

John put his hand under the water stream to test the temperature, but all he felt was pins and needles, as the circulation in his hands hadn't recovered yet. He swore under his breath and yanked his jumper off.

"You should get in too," Sherlock said.
John pulled his shirtsleeve up and thrust his lower arm into the water. It felt a bit too hot, so he adjusted the faucets. "There's not enough room; remember the last time we showered together? You need to get as much of your body under the water as possible. It'd be better if we had a bathtub, but we don't. Now in you go." He held the shower curtain open, keeping his eyes on Sherlock's feet, both to afford him as much privacy as he could, and because he was afraid of what he'd see if he looked him in the face. His near breakdown on the lake was still fresh in his mind.

Sherlock stepped into the tiny cubicle, but before John could close the curtain, Sherlock laid a cold, trembling hand on his arm.

"You're completely blue. Please."

The plea stirred something uncomfortable in John. Sherlock was treating him as if he were fragile because of what had happened, how he'd reacted. "I'll take a shower after you. You're more critical."

More than a hint of irritation found its way into Sherlock's expression. "Don't be thick, John. You're probably colder than I am at this point. You need to take off those wet clothes anyway. Now get in here before the hot water runs out. Or do I have to forcibly undress you?"

John did not let himself hear the double entendre in those words. They glared at each other for exactly as long as John could stand to see Sherlock standing with one foot in the shower and one out, his lips a disturbing shade of purple. Knowing that Sherlock might actually slip into unconsciousness before giving in, and aware that he'd end up in the shower anyway if he went so far as to wrestle Sherlock underneath the water and hold him there, he reached for his belt. It was frustratingly slow going with his stiff fingers - and Sherlock was waiting for him to get undressed before going under the water himself, the berk - but he finally managed to work the buckle open and squeeze his feet out of his shoes without undoing the laces. He glanced at Sherlock from beneath his furrowed brow, only to see that he was just a few facial twitches away from a smirk.

"Enjoying the show?" John asked belligerently as he struggled with the buttons on his shirt.

Sherlock's mouth curled up. "Very much."

That sent a shot of heat through John's abdomen, and he made fast work of the rest of his clothes, finally kicking his way out of his trousers and as unselfconsciously as possible dropping his shorts onto the clammy pile.

"It's a wonder there's any hot water left after that display," Sherlock griped, but he stepped back under the shower spray and, without a moment's hesitation, wrapped his arms around John and pulled him close so they were plastered together front-to-front, forming a single human column under the water.

"God, and that was- Not that it wasn't pleasant, but... Sudden. That's what it was. They'd kissed once and held hands - briefly - a couple of times, and that was really about it; for all the times they'd seen each other naked now, they had never actually done much touching. And now everything was touching. Everything. There were Sherlock's hands, gripping his back, skin against skin, hot and cold so that he couldn't tell the two apart; his chest, hard and flat, right against John's chest, and he could actually feel - were those his nipples? They must be, unless Sherlock had very prominent moles on either side of his chest, which John knew for a fact he didn't. And he was still cold, so of course. Sherlock's abdomen was gently expanding and
contracting against John's rather softer stomach, and if John had been in any state of mind to be monitoring Sherlock's respiratory rate, he would have noticed that it was even higher than John's own. But he wasn't, because there was definitely something slightly rubbery in contact with his lower abdomen, and if he shifted to the right just the tiniest bit, he could feel the Velcro-like catch of hair against hair. John closed his eyes and tucked his face into the crook of Sherlock's neck as the warm water pounded down onto the crown of his head and ran down the back of his neck, over his back. He brought his hands up to complete the circle around Sherlock's body. The sensation of being cold was overlaid with arousal, so that he couldn't tell any more what the source of the tightening and trembling in his muscles was.

"I don't know that this is-" he started, but he felt slow, the blood throbbing in his fingers and toes and ears as chilled skin started to come back to life, and he didn't know exactly what this wasn't. It was, it just was, it was all there was.

"Body heat," Sherlock explained, although his voice was gruff and his fingers were slipping lower, grazing John's iliac crest. "Less exposed surface area as well."

John tried to nod, but all he succeeded in doing was brushing his lips against the hollow between Sherlock's collarbone and the trapezius muscle rising from his back. Once he'd started, he found himself powerless to stop. He kissed his way along the furrow to Sherlock's neck, then up the side, lazily, slowly, learning the taste of Sherlock's skin and thrilling in the way Sherlock stretched his neck out even longer, his hands clutching now at John's buttocks, trying to pull him in even closer when there was already less than nothing between them.

Then John parted his lips and pressed his tongue into the soft indentation under Sherlock's jaw, where his jugular throbbed hot and fast beneath the thin layer of skin. That seemed to be some sort of breaking point for Sherlock. His head swooped down and he caught John's mouth with his, pausing a moment with his lips resting against John's, closed, breathing through his nose, and that was somehow more erotic than any amount of tongue-fucking they might possibly have done. Then, though, as if on cue, they both took a breath and deepened the kiss, picking up where they left off on the island. It wasn't long before Sherlock was licking and sucking and insinuating himself into every last corner of John's awareness, until John was conscious of nothing other than the points at which their bodies were intertwined, which was fucking everywhere. He was suffused in Sherlock; the sound of the water falling against the tiles was long since drowned out of his sensory inventory by the gentle grunts and exhalations that attested to Sherlock's enthusiasm for exploring John's mouth - until a sharp rapping from somewhere outside their watery cocoon drew his attention slowly back to the here and now.

"The tea-" John managed to say before Sherlock had his tongue in his mouth again. "Sherlock- Sherlock-" he said between kisses. "They've sent someone up with the tea. They're liable to come in and leave it on the table if we don't answer."

"Fine," Sherlock said and tried to dive in again.

"No, wait, not fine," John said through a chuckle, "the bathroom door's wide open. Let me-" Sherlock kissed him again. "Let me just go take it, all right?" he said into Sherlock's mouth.

The knocking sounded again.

"Coming!" John called over his shoulder.

"Leave it outside!" Sherlock shouted even louder.
The water decided to become perceptibly cooler exactly at that moment.

"Come on, let's-" John unwrapped his arms from Sherlock and nodded toward the bedroom, smiling. "Come on. Think we've depleted the boiler." He stepped out of the shower stall and wrapped a towel around his waist as he walked, dripping, to the door. His heart was racing; he wondered how much further they would have gotten, had the arrival of the tea and the departure of the hot water not interrupted. He only realised now that he was half-hard, although the cool air and the possibility of the landlord standing outside the door were both doing their part to reverse the process with alacrity.

He set a friendly expression on his face and opened the door briskly, making sure to stand with his hips shielded behind it, just in case, but there was no one in the hall. The tray with the tea things was sitting sedately on the floor just outside the room.

He brought it in and set it on the table, locking the door automatically. He then looked around for his bag in order to get out some dry clothes, before remembering that they had two rooms. It would be awkward if he left now to go across the hall. He had only wanted to put on clean pants and a t-shirt. That could be taken as either on the way to getting fully dressed, if Sherlock wanted to leave things alone for the moment and continue with their plans to go to dinner; or, it could be taken as making himself comfortable for spending the rest of the evening in the room. But if he went over to his room and came back wearing only his underthings, it might be presumptuous, and even embarrassing, if when he returned Sherlock was already dressed for dinner. His indecision decided for him in the end, as Sherlock emerged from the bathroom a moment later, himself wearing only a towel.

"Darjeeling for me," Sherlock said as he began rummaging through the overnight bag on the chair. "You should put something on if you're going to wait for it to steep."

John started and looked in surprise at the tea tray, whose existence he'd already forgotten. "My things- My bag's in the other room." He reached mechanically for the bag of Darjeeling from the assortment and dropped it into one of the cups.

Sherlock eyed John from the side, then pulled out a pair of black pants and a white undershirt from his bag and handed them to him.

"What?" John said, regarding the items in his hand in confusion. Did Sherlock want John to dress him? Iron his underwear? Finally, as he saw Sherlock taking out a pair of pyjama bottoms for himself, he realised that Sherlock was offering the clothes to John to wear. That was... strangely thoughtful. Although there was no way the items would fit him.

"No, no, I'll go over in a minute," John said. He laid the clothes down and set up a cup for himself as well, then poured hot water from the thermal canister over both.

"You needn't worry, those weren't involved in the resiniferatoxin incident," Sherlock said. He dropped the towel on the floor and pulled the pyjama bottoms on.

John had to stop himself from reaching out to caress the pale backside just inches away. Sherlock, oblivious, went over to the bed and burrowed under the fluffy duvet, making a point to flip it back on one side in invitation, all the while watching John nonchalantly. If John had had any doubts as to what Sherlock's intentions were for the rest of the evening, they all went flying out the window at that point. He could hardly get any clearer. John's heart rate increased by at least twenty beats a minute, accompanied by a pleasant tightening in his groin.
"Um. Right." John considered the merits of abandoning the tea, the clothes, and the towel, and just crawling into bed with Sherlock, naked. But the doctor in him said it was important to get warm fluids into both of them, and he really was feeling chilled again.

He plucked at the vest Sherlock had handed him. It was plain, white cotton, the same kind he usually wore himself. There was something intimate about wearing something of Sherlock's. It had always flattered the side of him that enjoyed being a protector and caretaker when one of his girlfriends had worn one of his shirts or track bottoms, either to sleep in or to have breakfast in the next day. It had also, in a caveman-like manner that he was somewhat ashamed to admit to, made him feel like she belonged to him. It was several steps away from a gold band on a finger, but the sentiment was much the same. Being on the other end of it, he now felt much the same thing, although without any shame whatsoever. He wanted Sherlock and himself to belong to each other. He wanted Sherlock to know that, and he wanted other people to know it as well. Sherlock probably didn't attach any such sentimental associations to the gesture; he had merely offered a practical solution to a minor problem, supplying John with something to cover his skin and retain his body heat with a minimum of fuss and effort. John picked up the vest and pulled it over his head. He fully expected it to be either embarrassingly long in the waist or tight around the stomach, most likely both, but to his surprise he found that it fit him perfectly.

He frowned down at himself. It was only a moment later that the realisation struck: this was his vest. Sherlock didn't wear anything under his dress shirts. He only had a couple of threadbare t-shirts with the neck stretched out that he used as pyjamas, none of which could by any reach of the imagination be called white anymore, if they even had been in the first place. This was one of John's vests, from his drawer, in his room. John was in turns disappointed by the revelation that it wasn't Sherlock's after all; indignant that Sherlock had gone rooting through his underwear drawer; and hesitantly touched that Sherlock would have thought to pack extra clothes for him in his bag. Except … Sherlock would never in a million years have done that.

"Why am I wearing my vest?" John asked. "I mean," he amended, "why do you have one of my vests in your bag? You were going to do something with it, weren't you? Hang it up at the island and shoot a hole through it to test for trajectories or something?"

Sherlock looked at John as if he'd gone completely round the twist. "Why on earth would I do something as inane as that? We didn't even bring a rifle. And Biggs was wearing several layers; shooting through a single undershirt wouldn't tell us anything."

"It's not that it bothers me," John went on, reaching for the pants. "Just curious. Why then?"

"You said I could have it," Sherlock said defensively and pulled the covers up over his shoulders, still sitting up against the headboard.

John didn't recall that, but it often happened that Sherlock took utterances like "What do you need it for?" as permission. The pants were clearly Sherlock's, he decided once he'd pulled them up and felt the stretch and pinch of the cloth and elastic. They probably wouldn't recover from being pressed into service over his arse. John thought he might just keep them. He draped the towel around his neck and finished preparing the tea, then brought both cups over to the bed.

He sat down on the side Sherlock had left open for him, and handed him his tea. When Sherlock stuck one bare arm out from under the cover to take it, John noticed that he wasn't wearing a top.

"Do you have a pyjama shirt in your bag?" John said, already standing up to retrieve it.

Sherlock shook his head and blew on his tea.
"What, you didn't bring one along?"

Sherlock eyed John warily. "You're wearing it, actually."

John's brows rose. "You mean- Is that why you took one of mine? Did all of yours finally fall apart?" Now it started to make sense. Sometimes Sherlock was laziness personified. "You could have said something. I wouldn't have minded picking up a couple of t-shirts for you." He sipped at his tea, being careful not to burn his tongue. He might have use for it yet tonight.

Sherlock lifted the edge of the duvet. "Come under the blanket. You're not properly warm yet."

John was feeling properly nervous now, albeit in a good way. They should probably talk about this. He didn't even have the first clue about Sherlock's sexual history. He knew he was a former intravenous drug user, which in itself merited at least an acknowledgement. Sherlock had seemed amenable to using a condom that afternoon... or had he really packed disposable razors? John felt he should at least tell Sherlock he'd never been with a man before, but he still wasn't exactly sure what Sherlock wanted. Did he just want to warm up together? Did he want sex? Somehow things had always been much easier with the women he'd dated; although that certainly had nothing to do with Sherlock's gender specifically. Everything always had a way of becoming sixteen times more complicated when Sherlock was involved.

"Hold on, I have to finish my tea," John said, both to stall for a bit more time, and because he really did want to get the hot liquid into his system. "Don't really want to end up sleeping in a wet spot," he joked, then winced into his cup as he realised what that sounded like. "You should drink up too, as long as it's hot." He drank as fast as he could, probably making more noise than was polite.

As they drank, Sherlock continued to watch John. John felt like Sherlock was able to read his every thought. Which, of course, he probably could do. It was both unnerving and arousing. As if there were anything about Sherlock at the moment which wasn't arousing. Damnit, Sherlock was probably able to read that thought from his face as well. John's ears were starting to burn. If he was lucky, it was just frostbite.

"Really, though," John said, more in attempt to fill in the silence than because it was important. "When did I say you could take one of my undershirts?"

That made Sherlock look down into his tea cup. He slid a leg over until it was pressing against John's hip through the cover. "You remember."

"I really don't." He watched Sherlock over the edge of his cup, even as he slipped his hand under the cover to squeeze Sherlock's knee. It was angular, and hairy, and John wanted very much to touch the rest of the leg it was attached to as well.

"The Lepowsky case." Sherlock tipped his cup up to drain the rest of his tea, then leaned over John to put the cup on the nightstand, resting his chest against John's knee as he did. After he let go of the cup, he stayed there and curved one arm around John's hip.

John made haste to finish his tea as well. "The one where we almost got turned into beef jerky?"

Sherlock nodded. He was all but curled around John now. He scooted in even more snugly so that he could nuzzle against John's chest. His breath was hot on John's nipple through the cotton of the undershirt. John's entire blood supply went south. He was barely able to get the tea cup safely
onto the nightstand next to Sherlock's. He felt like he wasn't getting enough oxygen. This was the point of no return. And he found, quite calmly and emphatically despite the rush of arousal, that he didn't want to return. He and Sherlock were a unit, and had been probably since they first met. It had been a process that brought them to this point, and John recognised that this wasn't the end of the journey for them. But he knew that wherever this or anything else led them, they would be in it together. The realisation, here in bed, possibly about to have sex with another man for the first time, with said man wrapped around him, having just suffered physical stresses and injury that would have landed anyone else in hospital for observation at the very least, was all a bit overwhelming.

"God, Sherlock," he whispered.

Sherlock paused without looking up. "All right?"

"You're way beyond all right," John said shakily and ran one hand lightly over his still-wet hair. "Think you're skirting mind-blowing, actually." He closed his eyes and tried to gather his thoughts. "Just... the Lepowsky case?"

He was curious now, because he thought he remembered everything about that night - he'd certainly replayed it in his mind enough times. When had he given Sherlock a vest? They'd taken their clothes off, certainly, but Sherlock had put his own shirt back on (it had been the shimmery blue one), and John had- Oh. Oh. Sherlock had asked John for his vest, and John had handed it over without thinking, and Sherlock had wiped himself down with it. And John had said he could keep it. He'd meant, of course, that Sherlock could bloody well carry the thing home with him and wash it, but Sherlock had apparently actually kept it as a… as a sort of souvenir. And now he was mouthing at John's nipple through his vest, and he had slipped one hand inside the waistband of John's pants at the back, and John really couldn't give a flying fuck about his vest anymore. To say nothing of the fact that his borrowed pants were currently about two sizes too small and shrinking fast.

"Mm, Sherlock, Jesus, that's-" John bit his lip and tried to concentrate on breathing. He slid his hand down Sherlock's back, leaving visible goosebumps in its wake. "Come on, you're still cold, let's-" He inhaled sharply as Sherlock lifted his vest in order to press open-mouthed kisses to his stomach and chest. '-get under the covers,' he'd wanted to say, but it seemed more efficient to simply do it.

"I'm afraid these are going to have to come off again," Sherlock said, nudging helpfully at John's clothes. He didn't sound at all regretful. "Skin-on-skin contact is the most efficient treatment for hypothermia."

There was a brief tangle of limbs as they both tried to simultaneously remove their clothing while getting as much of their bodies in contact with each other as possible.

"It's actually heat packs," John pointed out, "but I think we're doing pretty well."

"Very well," Sherlock agreed. There was then an extended period of silence, as their mouths were otherwise occupied, to their mutual pleasure.

Suddenly, John giggled.

"What is it?" Sherlock asked, continuing to lavish attention on John's jaw and ear.

"You do realise, the last five cases we've investigated have ended up with us naked at some
"Mm, yes," Sherlock said. "Rather fruitful method, at that."

John kissed Sherlock's temple. "Although, we could try it sometime without getting fried, exposed to radiation, burnt, or dunked in a frozen lake first. Or having fifty-odd people around."

Sherlock lifted his head and offered John his most woebegone face. "Oh, but John. That would be boring."

John laughed. Because, truly, it would. And if there was one thing that life with Sherlock could never be allowed to become, it was boring.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to LaDolceMia for the beta reading and sound advice.

Details on ice safety here: http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice/thickness.html. Because if there's one thing Minnesotans know, it's ice. And hypothermia: http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/education_safety/safety/ice/hypothermia.pdf.
Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock lost their pants five time in the service of a case. The last time, they kept them off.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry. I porned. It wouldn't leave me alone. Continues directly on from the end of Part Five, so you may want to go back and get a running start. Good luck.

Much thanks to K for the excellent beta work. Those past progressives! Any remaining errors or awkwardness are, of course, entirely my fault.

"Maybe. But this right here..." John indicated the two of them. "This isn't boring."

Sherlock smiled slowly. "No..." He shifted his body so that the evidence of exactly how not-boring he found their current position poked John in the thigh. "No, it isn't."

John giggled. He was fully aware of his own erection throbbing with quiet urgency under the covers.

"Okay, so, we're-" He cursed his mind for choosing this exact moment to go inconveniently blank. So they were what? Going to have sex now? Committing to each other or just trying it out? Had Sherlock even ever had sex before? Sherlock was watching him expectantly, but John recognised that could easily tip over into aggravation if those expectations weren't satisfied. John closed his eyes and said, "Sorry. I'm just- I should stop thinking."

Rather than saying something like, 'Best leave that to me,' as John would have expected, Sherlock drew back so that his weight was resting on his elbow. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I just want to know-" John opened his eyes and caught Sherlock's gaze. His stomach flipped pleasantly at the obvious desire and affection he saw there. And at the same time, lest John think the uncommon display of emotion indicated irreparable damage to Sherlock's brain from his dip in the freezing lake, Sherlock's pursed lips revealed his impatience at having to wait for John to catch up to conclusions that Sherlock had probably arrived at weeks ago.

John smiled sheepishly in spite of himself. "Sorry, I know I'm slow on the uptake, but I just want to be clear what we're doing here. You know, are we-"

John floundered for what to say. It was ludicrous, but he felt that if he named it, Sherlock would lose interest. Something about maintaining the mystery. On the other hand, he really felt that he needed some guidance as to Sherlock's intentions and wishes. He'd never been able to read the man well when it came to emotional issues, which this certainly was, even if couched in physical terms.
Feeling annoyed at himself for acting like a blushing teenager, John blurted it out: "What are we talking? A bit of snogging? Full penetration? Flogging and handcuffs?" He wasn't really interested in that sort of thing - he had no idea why he'd even mentioned it - so he was slightly alarmed by the way Sherlock's eyes narrowed as if he were examining a clue.

John seized on a concrete fact in order to redirect. "You said you'd packed a condom."

Sherlock frowned in distaste. "Do you always hammer out the terms of accord like this when you get into bed with someone?"

"Well, no," John admitted. "But I've never-"

Sherlock rolled away and sat up with his back to John, taking most of the covers with him. "Yes, I'm aware you've never been with a man before. Really, if it's that difficult for you to get past, we should just forget this entire thing."

John was torn between a sudden panic that Sherlock might really mean that and fury that he thought John might be capable of even that much latent homophobia.

"That was not what I was going to say. I was going to say, I've never been in a relationship with someone who's playing ten moves ahead of me on my best day and sees - no, observes - meanings and motivations behind whether I stir my tea clockwise or counter-clockwise. So yes, I'm feeling a bit out of my depth here and am asking for some guidance." He ended his rant with his heart thudding indignantly and his arousal falling limp.

Sherlock snorted; John assumed it was in derision until Sherlock turned his head halfway and John could see the wry smirk.

"John Watson, asking Sherlock Holmes for guidance in matters of the heart."

Something warm and fragile bubbled up in John's chest. Matters of the heart. Not of physical configurations or sexual orientation. He couldn't stop a ridiculous grin from plastering itself onto his face. "Next you'll be interested in hearing my thoughts on serial killers."

Sherlock twisted around so that his face was close to John's. "I'm always interested in your thoughts."

He pecked John on the forehead and got up in a flurry of legs and sheets, half crawling, half walking over the bed to get to his overnight bag. John took the opportunity to pull the covers up over himself again, then lay back against the pillow, one arm behind his head, wondering what Sherlock was up to.

He didn't have to wait long. Sherlock crawled back up the bed moments later and flicked a plastic-wrapped square onto John's chest. His testicles hung heavy and loose, and his partially engorged penis flopped loosely against his thigh as he moved.

"In case," he said as he insinuated himself back under the covers. His skin was perceptibly cooler just from the brief foray across the room. "But we don't have to do anything. Not if it makes you uncomfortable."

John was sorely tempted to yell, 'Are you off your nut?', but a quick flash through the events of the past couple of hours tempered his reaction. Although he had been the one to initiate both the kiss at the lake and in the shower, he could see how it might look like he had been pressured - even if with good intentions - to get into the shower in the first place. And to get into bed as well, come to think of it.
"I'm not just following along after you here, Sherlock," John said quietly, studying the condom lying on his pectoral. "I know I do a lot of that, sometimes against my better judgment, and sometimes without thinking things through as much as I should. But not here. Not with this."

He picked the condom up and laid it carefully next to the teacups on the night stand, then turned on his side to face Sherlock. He picked up his hand, threading their fingers together. His heart was thumping so hard he was certain Sherlock could hear it.

"How about this," John suggested. "What I would like, tonight, is to make you feel good, and to show you how I feel about you." He pressed his lips together at that point, because his throat was becoming unwelcomely tight.

"I believe you can consider those boxes ticked already," Sherlock said. His flippant answer was softened by the fact that he pulled their joined hands close to his chest, where John could feel Sherlock's own heart beating a rapid, steady tattoo against his ribs.

"However," Sherlock continued, leaning closer until their foreheads touched and the only place for John to look was down at Sherlock's full, red lips, "lucky for you I have a slightly more ambitious, and specific, goal for the evening."

John licked his lips, hardly daring to breathe. "What's that?"

"I want -" Sherlock breathed the words across John's mouth. "- to make -" He brushed his lips against John's. "- you come." He slid his cheek against John's and nuzzled at his ear, then kissed a line along his jaw back to his mouth and concluded in a low voice, "By any means we deem mutually pleasurable."

Several scenarios hijacked John's train of thought at the same time as Sherlock reclaimed John's mouth, seeming to suggest his own favoured variants in the way he licked, sucked, stroked and thrust with his tongue.

"Yeah, that- Okay," John finally managed. "I am definitely on board for that. Um..." He put an arm around Sherlock and tugged until they were lying flush against each other on their sides. John's cock was rapidly perking up again, and he had to squirm a bit to get it into a comfortable position between their bodies. It ended up rubbing against Sherlock's penis, and the unexpected and highly erotic feel of the hot-firm flesh against his own sent a wave of desire through his entire body.

"Oh God," John said in a ragged voice. "That feels-" He kissed Sherlock messily, arousal wreaking havoc with his coordination. "That's really good. I may make a small change to my goal too," he panted. "If that's all right."

"By all means," Sherlock agreed.

John put his hand alongside Sherlock's head and gathered a handful of his hair, not pulling, just clenching, his knuckles massaging Sherlock's skull. "I want to see you when you come, and I want to be the one to do it to you."

"A worthy corollary," Sherlock acknowledged, if somewhat breathlessly, a fact which spurred John to resume moving his hips.

It was difficult to get any good friction going in the position they were in; in order to keep their cocks aligned, John couldn't pull his hips back very far, and the little jerking thrusts he was making, while still pleasurable, were slowly becoming more frustrating than fulfilling. Either feeling the same way, or divining John's dilemma, Sherlock clapped his free arm around John,
grabbed a buttock to keep him close, and rolled over onto his back, pulling John on top of him. John instinctively braced his upper body on his right arm, keeping his full weight off Sherlock’s chest.

Sherlock grinned up at him and spread his legs so that John's knees dropped down onto the mattress between them. It was, all in all, a very familiar position for John to be in. Sherlock's smug expression told him it was no coincidence.

Sherlock lifted his hips and ground himself against John's pelvis. "Better?" he asked.

John hitched himself up a fraction and dug his knees into the mattress to get better leverage, then gave a good, firm thrust. This, he could work with.

"You tell me," he said and proceeded to work his lower body against Sherlock's.

It took several attempts to coordinate the stimulation of both his own and Sherlock's cock, but he was a quick learner when it came to handling his body. Soon, both of them were gasping into each other's shoulders and John was getting close enough to start deploying some of his orgasm-delaying tactics so Sherlock would come first: tensing his feet, forcing deeper breaths, concentrating on other sensations like the slight burn of the sheets rubbing his knees and the growing ache in his arm from bearing his weight.

At the same time, there were other competing, quite compelling sensory inputs urging him to let it all go: the very faint remains of Sherlock's deodorant mixing with the increasingly heavy scent of his body, the soft, tight sounds Sherlock was making deep in his throat, the possessive fingers touching him everywhere they could reach - his arse, his back, his ears, his neck - until finally he didn't feel he could do anything more than get out in a strangled voice, "Sherlock, fuck, so good-I'm going to-"

It therefore came as something of a shock when Sherlock suddenly pushed at John in an apparent attempt to dislodge him. The impression was given further credence when Sherlock said, "No, not like this, it's not- No!"

John flumped immediately off to the side, confused and embarrassed. Had he done something wrong? Was Sherlock getting cold feet? Or maybe he didn't want John's spunk coating his stomach. John's unspent climax pulsed right on the edge of completion, and he was so far gone that he actually considered finishing himself off right then and there and to hell with Sherlock's issues. Before he could do anything, though, Sherlock pulled him back on top of him.

"What- Sherlock, I don't-"

Sherlock stuck a hand down between them and said, "Lift up a bit."

John complied, and immediately one of Sherlock's hands was around his cock, the other at the back of his neck. John's eyes fluttered shut at the blissful feel of those long fingers on his needy member.

"I'm supposed to be the one to make you come," Sherlock said and pulled John toward him for a kiss.

John mentally rolled his eyes. "You were, you bloody idiot."

He pulled back to look down at Sherlock. Sherlock's eyes were wide open and his mouth hung slightly agape. Sherlock's hand sped up on John's cock. The warm and fragile something from before cracked open and spread inexorably through John's chest, down his veins and into his capillaries, leaking into the meaty red of his muscles and the spongy, secret hollows inside his
bones. It made syllables coalesce out of the air he and Sherlock were breathing into each other's lungs and the traces of the other's saliva on their tongues. The words beat against his lips in time with his heart and he struggled to hold them in.

"I- ngmf," John grunted and squeezed his eyes shut, dipped down again to press his mouth hard against Sherlock's. I love you, I love you, he thought fiercely, willing the meaning into the kiss. He felt the surge begin, but Sherlock was moving his head to the side, pulling his lips away.

"No, John, let me see you. Please," he begged. He put his free hand alongside John's face, easing his head up.

John turned his face into Sherlock's palm, his eyes still shut tight, as a series of contractions rippled through his groin. He forgot about breathing, but his body must have carried on without him, as he distinctly heard some rather filthy sounds coming out of his mouth. When he became capable of voluntary movement again, he found that his open mouth was pressed against Sherlock's palm. He tasted salt. Sherlock's other hand was sandwiched between them, as John's arm had at some point given up holding his weight.

John shifted to the side and opened his eyes. Sherlock had his laser-sharp focus trained on John, observing him as if he had just presented Sherlock with a dismembered head bearing a message under its tongue.

"Incredible," Sherlock said.

John laughed, easy and happy and full of the moment. "I think that's my line."

John closed the space between them for a kiss, one hand against the warmth of Sherlock's neck. He almost couldn't believe this was Sherlock: cooperative and pliant and eager to please, letting John take his time, enjoying his afterglow. Most likely it was the novelty of the situation; John didn't harbour any illusions that Sherlock would always be this easy.

Sherlock manoeuvred his hand out from between their bellies, leaving a cold smear that reminded John he hadn't worn a condom. John had always worn one when he'd been with a woman, but he hadn't actually had himself tested in what was probably an irresponsibly long time. Sherlock would have to wash his hands thoroughly before he got it all over.

"Wait, don't move," John said. He sat up carefully, looking down at the mess on Sherlock's stomach. And at the very red, very engorged penis that was hovering in the air just over it. A shiver of pleasure squeezed his insides. "God, you."

He ran his thumb over Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock drew it in and sucked gently, keeping his eyes on John's. John leaned down again, balancing on one arm, and followed his thumb with his tongue. Sherlock sucked on both eagerly, making needy sounds.

John groped blindly around until he came up with something soft that wasn't part of the bedclothes: his vest, as it turned out. He sat back, a fond smile playing on his lips as he carefully dried both himself and Sherlock with it. "I think we may need to have this bronzed or something."

Sherlock looked down with interest at his penis, which John was carefully wiping around. "Really? How would we do that? And why? If you're thinking of a custom-made dildo, I believe rubber might be a better choice."

John paused, re-ran the conversation, and burst out laughing. "Massive ego much? I was talking about the shirt." He swatted Sherlock across the chest with it.

Sherlock frowned, but didn't pursue the subject. John tossed the soiled article to the floor and sat
down between Sherlock's legs. He ran his fingers exploratively up and down Sherlock's denuded penis. John was surprised by the texture, the skin much softer than he experienced his own as being. He supposed he was always much more concentrated on the nerve signals originating in his penis, rather than in his fingers, when he touched himself, so he noticed their texture more than the texture of his own phallus. He had the impression Sherlock's skin right here was even softer than that of a woman's, although that might also be the dichotomy of the freshly shaved, silky-thin skin over the solidly firm core.

"I don't think it's going to get any harder, John," Sherlock said.

John looked up at him, startled yet slightly amused. The chiding words were at odds with the quirk on Sherlock's lips.

"Then I guess I don't need to keep playing with it, do I?" John leaned forward to plant both hands firmly on either side of Sherlock's ribs and dipped down for a kiss.

"Poor form, you're not going to make me beg," Sherlock said, studiously not reacting to John's lips on his.

John shifted so that he could breathe lightly against the side of Sherlock's neck, barely ghosting kisses around the spot that had broken Sherlock's reserve in the shower. "Are you quite sure about that?" he asked. He felt the play of muscles under his lips as Sherlock swallowed thickly.

"John..." Sherlock said, half demanding and half warning. The sheet underneath John's hands tightened as Sherlock bunched it in his fists.

John couldn't deny there was a part of him that enjoyed having Sherlock like this, squirming and at his mercy, but he didn't actually get off on power trips in bed. The teasing and withholding was only fun if it titillated his partner too, as a way to extend the pleasure, and he could tell that Sherlock was in mild distress.

Part of it was John buying time; he knew what he wanted to do, but he wasn't at all sure how to go about doing it. He could just return the hand job, but he he would prefer to have his mouth on Sherlock's cock. Maybe it was the intimacy of having some kind of penetration, some variety of part A going into hole B, or maybe it was about proving – either to himself or to Sherlock, possibly both - that he didn't have a problem with a male sexual partner. He knew that anal intercourse wasn't on the table for tonight; they'd need a lubricant, for one thing, and Sherlock wasn't going to have the necessary patience to wait until John was primed at this point, anyway. It was also something that he'd only feel comfortable trying once they'd both had all necessary tests done and he knew Sherlock's sexual history. It might not even be something that Sherlock was interested in.

Fellatio, however, seemed like a viable alternative. Only he'd never done it before, and he'd prefer this to be a halfway decent experience for both of them, rather than degenerate into something awkward and possibly painful.

Still hovering over Sherlock's body, John reached down and wrapped a hand around his penis, letting the weight rest solidly in the natural curve of his fingers and rubbing his thumb gently up and down the length. He nuzzled against Sherlock's neck and his cheek, kissed his mouth, flicked his tongue against Sherlock's parted lips until Sherlock's tongue rose up to draw him in, dissipating the tension. John tried pressing more firmly where he had Sherlock in his grip, seeing what would make Sherlock's breath catch or elicit little grunts.

It was going very well, judging by the way Sherlock gripped John's arms and invaded his mouth, but when he felt the slippery slide of moisture under his thumb on the next pass, the desire to be as
intimate as possible with this man, to surround him and impress on him how important - how vital
Sherlock was, overcame his hesitation.

John lifted his head and started backing up slowly, watching Sherlock for any sign of discomfort. He kept up a steady rhythm of firm strokes with his left hand and placed tender kisses along Sherlock's chest and abdomen on his way down. His chin hit Sherlock's penis first and, mindful of the potential for stubble burn, he carefully pursed his lips and kissed gently along the length of it. Sherlock's neatly trimmed pubic hair tickled his cheek and the back of his hand before he continued down to Sherlock's testicles, cupping them and holding them up so he could kiss them as well. The perfectly smooth skin was inviting, sleek and slippery under his tongue. He was going to ask about using a condom before he got him into his mouth, but he needed to have this contact first, skin on skin, moving back up, lips skirting the corona, tongue just barely tasting salt and bitter, sweat and pheromones.

He raised his eyes to look at Sherlock, who had his chin tilted down, watching in breathless anticipation. Sherlock slid his hand up from where it had been holding John's shoulder, stuttering over damp skin and into John's hair, exerting a slight pressure against his head, tentative yet clear in intent. John breathed in Sherlock's smell, latched his lips onto the front of his shaft like a limpet and pressed his tongue there over the taut ridge of skin. He applied suction briefly before pulling off again.

"Condom?" John asked, tonguing the base of Sherlock's penis and spreading his saliva around with his hand.

Sherlock let go of John to reach toward the small table next to the bed.

"I mean do we need one?" John asked. "Have you ever- I mean, it doesn't matter otherwise, but if you've never-" He couldn't quite bring himself to ask directly if Sherlock was a virgin; somehow he had the feeling that would send Sherlock into another fit of pique.

Sherlock's arm flopped down onto the mattress. "I was thoroughly tested during my last stint in rehab. I haven't engaged in any risky behaviour since. So if that's your only concern, then no: we don't need one for this. However, I won't be insulted if you want to use one anyway." He flicked his fingers, still offering to retrieve the condom.

John shook his head. "No, I want it like this." He looked down at where his hand had stilled. "Can't promise I'll make it all the way to the end, but I want to try at least."

Sherlock put his hand back on John's shoulder. "John, you don't have to prove anything. As I said, I understand what you... what this means." He squeezed his shoulder, moving his thumb lightly back and forth.

John looked up again. "You don't seriously think I'm going to leave you high and dry like this, do you?" He grimaced. "God, no, that came out wrong. This isn't about being polite or trying to prove something. I mean, it is, but not like you mean, I don't think. It's important to me, if we're to be in a relationship that involves all of this -" He nodded toward the still mostly hard penis in his hand. "- that it's reciprocal. I want to do this, so now that the mood is completely gone, just shut up and let me suck you off, if you don't mind."

John lowered his head and took in just the tip, wetting it thoroughly with his tongue and lips, then carefully bobbed up and down, taking in slightly more on each downstroke until he'd managed about half of the length. He held the base steady with his left hand and curved his right arm over Sherlock's leg, his hand splayed across Sherlock's hip. His heart pounded furiously, a mixture of thrill, arousal, and lingering exasperation. The initial slightly pungent smell that had filled his nostrils was being diluted by the traces John's mouth was leaving on Sherlock's skin. He was
breathing harder now, his exertions requiring more oxygen than he could easily take in through his nose.

He was concentrating so intently on the sensations, the smells, the sounds, and his technique - it was more difficult to keep his teeth out of the way than he'd thought it would be - that he was a bit startled to feel Sherlock's hand grasp his. John paused, wondering if Sherlock wanted him to stop, if he was doing something wrong. He glanced up to make eye contact, his mouth still full of Sherlock's cock. Sherlock had one arm behind his head, holding it up so that he could look down his body at what John was doing. His eyes were wide and his lips were parted and glistening. Far from looking distressed, he looked utterly captivated.

John slid Sherlock's cock further in, as far as he could get it, flattening his tongue along the length and sucking in the sides of his mouth. Sherlock's eyes fluttered shut and he squeezed John's fingers together hard. His lips were pressed firmly shut and his breaths came in tight, small bursts. John took that as a good sign and redoubled his efforts. He made sounds of encouragement around his mouthful of cock and entwined his right hand firmly with Sherlock's on his hip. With his other hand, he alternated between fondling Sherlock's balls and stimulating the portion of his cock that wasn't in his mouth.

When Sherlock's legs tightened against John's sides and he uttered incoherent half-words between breaths, John realised he was close. Not wanting to choke or have to spit, he pulled away and encircled Sherlock's cock with his left hand, working it up and down as fast as he could. The position was awkward: he had little room to manoeuvre, and the grip was the reverse of how he held himself, but at this point Sherlock would probably come if John so much as blew on him.

When John lifted his head, Sherlock had an expression of intense inward concentration on his face. Immediately, he opened his eyes to meet John's. Surprise, fascination, and relief unscrolled across his features before he released control and let the orgasm wash over him. John felt more in love with him at that moment, more grateful that he'd been gifted of a life with this man, and more humbled by the love he felt in return, than his body was able to contain.

"John," Sherlock said hoarsely.

"Yeah, yeah, come on, Sherlock, God, fuck, come on." If John could have reached Sherlock's face, he would have kissed him, taken the unspoken words right out of his mouth and swallowed them down so they could become part of him. As it was, he couldn't do anything but watch and stroke him through it as Sherlock entrusted him with everything he was and everything he had. John had said he wanted to make Sherlock feel good and show him how he felt about him; now, that seemed like an inadequate child's stick figure of a proposition in comparison to the richly nuanced masterpiece of what Sherlock was giving him.

With a great sigh, Sherlock let go of John's hand, all the weight dropping out of him. John smoothed his hands over Sherlock's hips and dipped his head to kiss the jutting bone there, resting his chin against it and just breathing in the warmth from Sherlock's skin. After a few moments, he leaned over the side of the bed to retrieve his vest again and used it to blot up the moisture from Sherlock's stomach. Sherlock didn't say anything, but he skimmed his hand over John's back and shoulder, up to his neck. His fingers were warm and slightly sticky, perhaps from sweat. They were both going to need another shower.

John dropped the vest again and moved up to lie next to Sherlock, pulling the covers back over them. Sherlock had closed his eyes and his breathing was still elevated. Aware that Sherlock might be overly sensitive to touch at the moment, John resisted the impulse to sling his arm around Sherlock's chest and rest against him. Instead, he propped himself up on one arm so he could continue to watch him.
Although John thought he knew Sherlock's face better than anyone else's - even his own – and had seen every conceivable emotion cross it, both faked and real, had an indelible imprint of it, bloodied and (he'd thought) broken, seared into his brain - he felt that he was only truly seeing it now for the first time. He looked both younger and more mature; there were lines John had never noticed before; bits of stubble that were slightly longer than others where he'd missed shaving that day. He looked more real, somehow. He wasn't playing a role here: not the cool, aloof genius nor the eccentric flatmate nor the manipulative charmer. He was just Sherlock, a construct of sinew and synapses, who needed the same things that all sinew-synapse constructions needed, despite his protests to the contrary. Sustenance. Repose. Connection. John slid his hand a few centimetres across the mattress to touch the tips of his fingers to Sherlock's.

"You all right?" John asked.

"Yes." Sherlock turned his head to look at John. His mouth quirked up.

John grinned helplessly. "That was..." He searched for a word that didn't sound trite.

"That bad?" Sherlock asked wryly when John didn't finish his sentence.

John looked down at a spot on Sherlock's neck. He could see his pulse beating in the hollow at the base of his throat. "Far from the most ridiculous thing I've ever done," he said quietly.

"Far?"

"Very far," John confirmed. He slipped his hand over Sherlock's. "In fact, it's probably the least ridiculous thing I've done in... a long time."

Sherlock turned onto his side so that could face John. "Less ridiculous than moving back to the flat?" he teased.

"Far, far less ridiculous. Someone would have to be mad to want to share a flat with you." John smiled and nudged Sherlock's foot with his own under the covers.

"And yet here you are."

"And yet here I am," John agreed. Right where he needed to be.

Sherlock looked down to where their hands were still joined and rubbed John's fingers.

"I'm not good at this," he said, frowning slightly. "But... I'm glad. That you moved back, and... this. It's good. I think it's... I think I'd like to keep this. To keep doing this." He glared at the mattress, struggling to arrange his thoughts in the correct order.

"Hey," John said gently. He leaned in and kissed Sherlock on the side of the mouth, keeping his lips closed. He wasn't sure how fastidious Sherlock was going to be about kissing him right after he'd had his mouth on Sherlock's cock. "Me, too. Like I said: not ridiculous. Now." John put his hand on Sherlock's hip and gave him an affectionate squeeze. "I believe you said something about Cornish pasties and a couple of pints?"

Sherlock leaned into John's embrace, then flopped onto his back. "Wine, John," he said in an exasperated tone that John knew he didn't mean. "A nice bottle of wine."

John shoved him playfully. "Go on and get cleaned up again, then. I'll nip back to my room and do the same. Back in ten."

Sherlock swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up with his back to John. He paused, his
shoulders hunched over and his hands braced against the mattress. "You could... just bring everything over here," he said without turning around. "If you want. Might be easier."

John had to suppress a rather large and embarrassing grin. "Absolutely, yeah, I'll- Good idea," he said as nonchalantly as he could manage.

John saw Sherlock's head nod, and then admired the view of Sherlock's naked backside as he went into the bathroom. That's my boyfriend, shot proprietarily through his head. God, really? No, not his boyfriend (although that's certainly what other people would call them now). His partner. His ... well, to be honest, his life. He never would have chosen this, solely because it never would have occurred to him in his wildest imaginings. But now, he wouldn't trade it for anything.

He sat up and picked through the discarded clothing on the floor until he came up with a towel and the pair of pants Sherlock had loaned him. He also snapped up the wadded-up vest and smirked at it. Yeah. Definitely going to get that bronzed.

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