

Under Your Skin

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Rating: P16

Summary: ((AU)) There was a Soulmate out there for almost everyone. But as time passed, John Watson began to doubt that the same was true for him. Never once did he consider that maybe, he was just looking in all the wrong places.

Disclaimer: Leave it all to the BBC, Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. I'm just playing with them (if only...) and promise to give them back healthy and in one piece.

Author's Note: That was supposed a short story, part of my 221B series. And then the plot bunny raced off and left me to write and write and write and...

Inspired by this post on Tumblr: <http://jensendaddy.tumblr.com/post/76388887267/maybe-the-little-bruises-and-cuts-that-show-up-on> ---- *maybe the little bruises and cuts that show up on your body seemingly out of nowhere are actually little injuries that happened to your soulmate and you get the same marks on your skin as them*

The first time he felt it it scared him. He'd been told about it; of course he had, everyone learned from early on what to expect. Yet no one was able to tell when it would start, and nothing could have prepared for what it would feel like. It was the strangest of sensations, so wrong and yet so right, something ripping him apart and assembling him anew, body and soul. A numbness remained, and the faintest feeling of something tugging at his heart; his very being.

John Watson was sixteen when it first happened. Rather late, compared to others; but then had John's body always taken its time when it came to certain developments. In his youth, he was constantly torn between being glad he still had time when others were already dealing with, if not fighting off, all the changes that came with puberty, and being angry that he remained the only one who didn't know first-hand what everyone else was talking about. But as the years went by, he found himself rather relieved not to feel that need to find who he was meant for this early in his life - because he wasn't remotely ready.

To John, it was a disturbing concept. Somewhere out there, *anywhere* on this huge planet, existed one's Soulmate. A nameless, faceless person amongst billions who to find people went to great lengths. They didn't have to live in the same city, the same country, not even on the same continent. They could be literally anywhere; even in the depths of the jungle, the eternal golden planes and mountains of the desert, the never-ending world of glassy whites and blues at the north pole.

Worse, though, was that whatever happened to your Soulmate, you were going to feel. It was a scary concept; one John admitted to be afraid of. Feeling the pain of another; getting injuries and scars on your body when the other got hurt? He knew that fatal wounds weren't transferred; he knew that only minor marks appeared on the other's body. He also knew that it depended on the strength of the link. He had heard of cases in which a Soulmate did suffer major injuries because the link was so strong. And while a deep connection was desirable, he still hoped that he would never have the same. He worried what it could mean if either he or his significant other got seriously hurt.

His worries, however, were unfounded. Premature even. Because all this took having a Soulmate as a given. And John seemed to be further away from it than anyone else around him. Even when he entered puberty at the age of thirteen nothing happened. Nothing indicated that there was someone out there for him.

It was his parents' biggest grievance, of course; and his sister's. And his aunts' and uncles' and that of every other family member who he thought shouldn't even have seen it as their business. Yet they did. They all did. They

fretted with sheer tireless energy, and smothered him with their concern, their questions. They all had their own theories and ideas why he wasn't yet feeling a connection, and the more time passed, the weirder those ideas got.

One family get-together at Christmas, two months after he had turned sixteen, brought the, for the whole bloody bunch, most shocking of ideas so far:

"Maybe he doesn't have a Soulmate," one of the aunts whispered when they were all sitting in the Watson family home's living room and chatting away about everything and anything that John deemed unimportant and the usual gossip. As soon as the words were spoken, a quiet filled the room, as if no one even dared to breathe anymore.

Five full minutes - he knew because in his ambition to avoid everyone's looks he stared ahead, right at the grandfather clock - it took his mother to break the heavy silence with protest. "What? Don't be silly," she chided, defending her son's lack of companionship. A mother loved, no matter what.

"But he's sixteen," the aunt insisted, emphasizing his age as if it was some kind of *he's practically dead already* moment in life. "Maybe he's one of those Lonely Souls. I've read about them; just the other day there was an interesting article in--"

"Margaret, please," now his father as well came to his defense, his hard stare demanding the older woman to shut up. John breathed a sigh of relief when he, after all these months and years, was assured that at least from his parents he'd get support when needed, even if they still nagged him in private. He understood that his parents cared about his happiness, although he insisted that he was fine. After all, how could he have been missing something when he didn't know what felt like to own it in the first place? Everyone else talking about something didn't make you knowledgeable, and everyone sharing their experiences with you didn't give you the opportunity to go through it yourself. John was sure that he'd forever remain the one who simply didn't know.

For exactly three more months he didn't know. The nagging stopped, then, that was a relief - losing his light-hearted approach of the issue, not so much. Because a change occurred. An unmistakable change; the notion of something gained, but also something missing.

And the burning pain of a cut on his arm.

Now that he knew his Soulmate existed, and that a connection had been established, his search had to begin after all. For years he had watched those chosen for each other by biology meet eventually. But where John hadn't been a *usual* case before, he didn't start being one now. Just as it had taken him years to feel the link at all, it also seemed as if it was going to take him another while to find who was meant for him.

And so he watched as all his friends found their significant others, the ones to spend their lives with, to cherish, protect and be protected by. One by one his mates settled down with a nice girl, or even the occasional boy, happy and content to have found the one, and to be able to finally start their life properly, with the person at their side who extended their soul; who completed them. Meanwhile he had to live with that emptiness that was eating at him more and more with every passing day; and cope with the pain inflicted on him because of his Soulmate's apparently dangerous lifestyle.

In the years he was studying medicine he often ventured out, tried to let his inner compass guide him; hoping it would bring him to the right person. Sometimes he would feel something, something that was *nearly* right. But never was it *the one*. He ignored how it made matters worse, all his little, desperate adventures, and just continued to pursue what he, deep down, knew he would never find this way.

At the age of twenty-five, he began to give up hope to ever find his Soulmate. Whoever knew where she was. He received his medical degree, but instead of settling down as a doctor, as he had once planned, as he had once imagined it would be - him being a healer, a husband and a father - he decided that he couldn't just sit and wait; he had to move on with his life, make the best of it.

Joining the Army wasn't a decision made by his rational mind, but his frustration and hopelessness. He didn't even try to claim otherwise. But he needed to get away, needed a change of scene, something to distract him from the fact that he might, seeing as luckless as he was, be alone for the rest of his life. Afghanistan wasn't his idea of an ideal retreat; nothing the like. The cynic in him, however, didn't object - at least the desert made him forget for a while.

He saw a lot in Afghanistan he'd never wanted to see. If he had known before - and by God, had he been naive - he really would have thought twice about all that. Joining the Army, taking the assignment. He went there as a doctor to take care of comrades and locals; of those who needed his knowledge, his skills, his help. That's what he had been trained for; what he had always wanted to do.

The things he saw followed him into his nightmares, sometimes even into daydreams, unbidden visions of the horrors he had to witness. In a world where everyone had someone to take care of, to look after, not only because it was natural instinct to be there for one's significant other, but because their safety was essential to one's own well-being, John couldn't even begin to understand how people were still able to hurt each other.

Whenever someone was brought to him, with the most gruesome of injuries, he found himself also wondering about the other half of the whole that formed this human being; body of one, soul of the other. He worried about them as well; that's what he'd been taught as a doctor. You never treated just one patient at a time; there were always two of them. And maybe, just maybe, the other one was oblivious to the identity of their Soulmate; they just felt agony, unable to do anything.

"She'll be waiting when you return," one of his comrades, Luke Holden, a man of John's age with dark hair, dark eyes and a smile that never failed to reassure, told him one evening when they were sitting together in his tent.

"She doesn't even know who I am. Nor do I know who she is," John protested, but tiredness weighed on the words.

"I heard that when you are separated long enough, it can strengthen the connection. When you return there'll probably be a huge, glowing arrow in the air leading you to her."

"That assumes that she is in London, or at least England. And not even that I know for sure."

"But haven't you said that back home you felt her being close? So she has to be around there somewhere," Luke argued, and John knew he had a point. Maybe his situation wasn't so hopeless, after all.

He just had to survive the war - physically and mentally.

The tiny marks that he one morning found in the crook of his elbow, marks apparently made by a syringe, broke his heart. He knew what it meant; he knew his Soulmate was an addict, and she was destroying her life. Everything he'd been able to deal with; the bruises, the occasional scratches. None of those wounds had ever truly shown up on his skin, either; he had felt them, but they didn't affect him much beyond that. But those marks... they showed. Like an accusation, pointing out his failure, his inability to show enough devotion and find who he belonged to. The knowledge that the one meant for him was throwing away what she was supposed to hold dear... it filled him with incredible sadness. He felt responsible; he believed that if he hadn't chosen to fight in the war, had concentrated on finding his significant other instead, he might have been able to prevent this. What if his Soulmate died? What if something, anything, happened to her before John met her?

He didn't need to contemplate those questions for long. Not where it concerned the effect of her health - or lack thereof - on him.

For a moment, when the bullet penetrated his skin and muscles, split them open and activated every nerve ending to send an unbearable message of pain into his brain, all he could think of was that now he would never know who his Soulmate was. Was she clever? What did she look like? What did she work as? Soon though the thoughts were pushed aside as he struggled with unconsciousness, desirable and yet possibly what was going to seal his fate.

What would happen to her now, he wondered then. Did she feel the pain like he had felt hers before? Was she in agony? And when he died - would she find another Soulmate? Was it possible that someone took his place? *I hope she'll be happy*, was the thought he'd later remember to have been the last one before his mind dove into darkness.

He didn't die. It wasn't his time. But when he woke up in the hospital bed, in pain and for the moment disabled, he almost wished death hadn't deserted him. What if his chronic ache was transferred to his significant other? Being responsible for someone else's suffering was terrible to imagine. One was supposed to keep such torturous moments and times away from the other, not inflict them. If only he knew the full outcome for the other in such situations. He tried to ask people about it - but no one held an answer. No one had ever questioned it. There were Soulmates and people were drawn to the one they belonged to, unless they turned out to be Lonely Souls. End of story. Despite all of humanity's curiosity, there had never been any extensive research. Humankind tried to uncover the secrets of the DNA, but the concept of Soulmates? It was accepted without so much as a second thought.

John was a broken man, in every sense of the word, when he returned to London. He was without his significant other, and without hope of ever finding her; he had to attend physiotherapy for his shoulder where the bullet had hit, and he had to see a psychologist for... he didn't even know anymore. Phantom pain in his leg and the limp it caused, PTSD, probably also *his bloody solitude*. It didn't matter. It was an endless routine, and whatever other people said, he didn't have the energy to continue looking. He was in his thirties now; this inner pull one was guided by to the Soulmate had started to lessen, as it was normal with progressing age, despite what Luke had made him once hope for. What he felt stopped being of importance; it were faint, curious sensations, but he only noticed them when he paid attention. And he almost never did anymore.

Living a life without purpose, all he could do was force routine upon it where there was none. He didn't want to end up like one of those invalidated veterans he often saw sitting on street corners, begging for a bit of spare change. Those men once praised by the nation, but then forgotten because when they stopped serving, everyone else seemed to stop caring.

So he embraced the numbness inside him and in his life, and accepted it as part of him. It didn't make him happy, but at least it helped him to bravely face every new day, as bleak as his existence ever was.

Walks were what his doctor had prescribed him. Just go out and take walks; the fresh air will help, he had told him. Never speaking the secondary message aloud: *The more you walk, the more you will hopefully get tired of your limp and realize that it's just in your head*. John wasn't all that sure how, but he did as suggested - ordered - anyways; it wasn't as if he had anything better to do. Or anything else to do at all.

Mild temperatures, partly cloudy sky, not a breeze in the air - he was never going to forget that day. He'd been walking around for a while, spurring on his leg even though it hurt. If there was nothing else left for him, he at least needed that bit of success; the knowledge that his will power remained. It was the sound of his mobile's text message alert startled him mid-step, broke his brooding he was lost in. *Dad in hospital. Call me asap*, his sister wrote, in her typical fashion of forcing her brother to take responsibility and action.

Of course did his battery die just then. Of course was there no public phone around. Of course was the cafe he'd just passed closed for the afternoon - family matters, *go figure*. If there was a price for misfortune and failure, John surely deserved the lifetime achievement award. There was only one option left, and he didn't give it any further thought when he approached the house entrance - 221B it read over the antique-looking knocker - right next to the cafe.

He didn't need to wait for long after he had rung the bell. An elder lady opened the door, smiling widely as if she had expected him.

"Hello, young man," she greeted him happily and then ushered him inside, "just go upstairs, it's the first door on the right." Before John could answer, the lively woman was gone again, vanished in what he believed had to be her flat. He eyed the stairs for a moment, then let his gaze drift back to the ground floor's flat. It was a twinge in his leg

that reminded him that he had to train the same; maybe stairs weren't such a bad idea after all. And for some reason he found himself curious what or who could possibly be upstairs.

As if something was calling out to him.

Limping up the stairs, John paused on the landing to catch his breath before he lifted his hand to knock. His knuckles never got to touch the wood before the door was opened. Before John's world screeched to a halt.

It was biologically impossible *not* to recognize one's Soulmate. Without a shadow of a doubt, the man standing before him was indeed the one. The man. *It was a man*. No wonder he had never succeeded in his year-long quest. He had of course been looking for a woman. He had always imagined he'd be with a woman one day. He had only ever been interested in women; he had never felt even the slightest kind of attraction towards men.

He was not gay.

Everyone he knew had found their Soulmate in a person of the gender they sought. He had never heard of a case like his seemed to turn out to be one now. What was it, then? A biological glitch? A mistake in genetics? A hormonal confusion? He wasn't that young anymore; maybe all that time waiting for the one had made him desperate enough. Was there something like a substitute choice? Had his true Soulmate given up waiting and found someone else, and now he was provided by fate and biology with the second-best alternative?

But why did he feel so drawn to this person, then? This pull inside him, a subtly throbbing feeling of needing to go somewhere, *arrive* somewhere, this feeling that had become part of him in these past years, like a dull but chronic ache, had stopped the moment the dark-haired stranger had opened the door. Would the impression of having found the right one be this strong if the other man wasn't his true Soulmate, but only a second-best choice? He remembered all those stories of couples who met decades ago, formed a profound bond and were happy to the day; but no one had ever described a feeling as he was having it now. Not that it was describable. It was so powerful as if every cell in his body screamed at him: *We have done it. We have arrived.*

While John was still struggling for words - and possibly his sanity - the other man didn't make an attempt to say anything at all; he just stepped aside to allow his visitor entry into the flat.

John had expected to make a phone call to his sister and learn of his father's condition, then leave again and maybe head to the hospital.

He certainly didn't expect to be told that it had been false alarm, that his dad was fine, and to instead find himself, not even ten minutes after first laying eyes on 221B's front door, flatmate of one *Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective, the only one in the world because I invented the job*, as he introduced himself.

It wasn't that the ten minutes didn't include at least a bit of hesitation. Holmes was a stranger, and that in more than just one sense. But John also knew that there was a connection between them, and apparently a strong one. He couldn't yet believe they were Soulmates; or more to the point, he didn't want to believe it. It didn't negate one fact, though: the moment John decided to move in with Sherlock, something changed inside him. Like a too-tight knot snapped open, like a breath was finally released. It was a relief, it was like lifting a weight off his heart and soul. And if nothing else - this made it worth to give it a try.

Maybe he would have thought twice about it had he known how hard it was to live with Sherlock Holmes. The man was brilliant, a genius that had no equal. The way he deduced everyone in seconds, learned secrets from people by just looking at them, but seemed to know next to nothing about human nature, about feelings, emotions, and socially adequate behavior, was more than just mildly intriguing. And irritating. It should have driven John crazy, should even have repelled him. Instead he found himself more fascinated by it every new day.

What his fascination didn't include were body parts in the fridge, or potentially dangerous experiments in the kitchen. A violin played, and not always for the most soothing tunes, at all times of day and night was also not his

idea of homely comfort. Sherlock's brother, Mycroft, was an infrequent visitor and not any less a nutcase on the social side, even though he was yet another Holmes of exceptional intelligence. And, as it seemed, also one of significant influence. Though without significant *other*. More than one and half a decade after first hearing about it John finally learned what kind of person a Lonely Soul would be.

The worst thing about Sherlock, however, was his recklessness. No matter how often John reminded him of their connection and what it meant when one of them suffered any kind of injury, his friend and flatmate would not stop to risk his health, if not life, time and again in his ambition to keep himself from getting bored.

Often John was at work - after Sherlock had managed to 'cure' him of his limp, he had taken up an occupation as a doctor at a local clinic - when he had to take spontaneous breaks because a sudden pain pierced through him. Sometimes, he'd be out grocery shopping, running errands, meeting friends, when a notion of danger and marks on his skin would force him back to 221B. And sometimes, he'd sit at home, after the most idiotic genius in the whole wide world had run out again without telling John, and pace the room like a caged animal while trying to ignore the discomfort of injuries Sherlock acquired. Plotting ways to murder his Soulmate instead were a sufficient distraction.

It was one of these afternoons, ten months into their living arrangement, when John, after his breath had been knocked out of him several times in the two hours prior, was standing in the middle of the living room, waiting with his arms crossed. Sherlock came home as bruised as he had expected, but John was past concern; all he felt was furiousness. Maybe it was only there to hide his worry; in that moment, though, all he could think of was yelling at the other man from the moment he stepped through the door to their flat.

"You egoistic idiot!" he called him when Sherlock shrugged off his coat, revealing a torn shirt soaked with blood.

"You know what it does to me when you get hurt and you don't even bloody *care*," he accused when his flatmate made his way through the living room and kitchen, John on his heels.

"Why do you never ask for my help, why do you never let me come with you?!" he demanded to know, and finally the genius came to stand in the hallway that led to the bath- and his bedroom.

John ranted and complained and reproached, all the while Sherlock just stood there, unmoving and silent. As if he didn't bother to listen; or to *hear*. Every time Sherlock went out on one of his missions John didn't know whether he'd finally learn first-hand what happened when your Soulmate died. He could only wait for whatever sensation, whatever feeling, would befall him, and hope that the other man made it home alive after all.

"I'm here to protect you!" John finally finished, out of breath. It was then that Sherlock took the chance to speak.

"So am I." There was no strength behind the words; nothing to emphasize them. They tumbled out of his mouth like he was indifferent to them being spoken at all. It just so happened they were.

"Then do it! Stop going out there on your own, running blindly into what one of these days will result in your death!"

"If I die," Sherlock said, voice just above a whisper, "nothing will happen to you. I researched it; all the effects one Soulmate has on the other in different situations and conditions. But if something happens to you... and it is my fault..." His own vocal cords failed him then. He didn't attempt to end his sentence; he just kept his eyes fixed on an undefined point in the empty space between them.

Rubbing one hand over his face, John asked, "Why do you think something could happen to me? You know, I'm pretty good at defending myself. I fought in the *bloody war*."

"This is not Afghanistan, John."

"Really. Thanks for reminding me, I almost forgot."

Resigned, Sherlock shook his head. "Our lives are a transitory affair. No one knows what will unfold; where our paths take us. We take life for granted; people live with a romanticized notion of security."

John had an idea where this was headed, and yet he was clueless. Certainly was he the last person that needed to be told that one's time on Earth was only temporary. People were mayflies in the grand total of history. He knew all too well. He'd had been there, on this threshold between life and death, after all.

"I don't believe I romanticize anything, but I do like to believe that I have more than few days left, because I've been on the other side of that thought once too often." He took a deep breath. "I have a vivid memory of what I saw in those years in the conflict zone; I'm reminded of it *every freaking day*. What keeps me alive is the self-assurance that--"

John stopped when a sickening feeling engulfed him. Something clamping his lungs and heart and stomach, making every breath feel like countless needles piercing his body. A shudder ran through him, one of those indicating that his soul had realized it was secondary pain he felt - transferred from the Soulmate. At first he thought that Sherlock's injuries were worse than they appeared; but when he checked the man in front of him, he found him standing straight, almost relaxed, no muscles tensed. He didn't wind in pain, as he, in theory, should have, considering that even for John the discomfort was immense already, as all-consuming as it was--

Emotionally. It was emotional pain.

The realization came out of nowhere and hit him completely unprepared. Was it even possible to feel non-physical pain of one's Soulmate? Affect someone else by thoughts and worries alone, by one's own sadness and despair? He had never heard of it; not even at med school where he was sure every possibility had been covered. Maybe because Soulmates usually took care of one another and tried their best to keep any sorrow away from the other. And what a marvelous job he and Sherlock were doing when it came to that.

It was unbelievable to him. They were not supposed to receive the full range of everything the other felt. The link on the physical level bore enough potential for hindrance of an everyday life as it was; but with an additional emotional side? How was one supposed to exist and function properly like this? No, this had to be a mistake; maybe it hadn't been an echo, but instead his own subconscious reliving the menace war was.

When he looked up and met Sherlock's eyes, though, he knew the other man could read his contemplations, the recognition, in his. And a shudder ran through him when his flatmate slowly nodded. No, it couldn't be. It mustn't.

"But how...?" John asked, his own voice foreign to his ears.

"Approximately one out of ten thousand Soulmate couples not only shares physical pain and marks, but also emotional. Whatever the other suffers from, they will experience as well; to a lesser degree, but still as uncontrollable like the physical share," Sherlock explained, a too-rational voice in a situation that robbed John of all reasonable thought. Everything fell onto place now.

Needle marks on his arm when he was in the desert. When he saw everyday's horrors. Dreamt of them. Dreaded and feared them. When he sympathized with those who got hurt, or were killed, and their families, their significant others. Added the pain of others to his own.

That twinge of guilt whenever he felt even remotely happy with another conquest, a woman he made himself believe could be the right one. When he had a few hours of physical bliss, only to shortly thereafter find his body scarred yet again.

Hopelessness and resignation when he returned, when he gave up looking for his Soulmate, because he had long since lost all faith to ever find her. Him. A neverending sadness inside him, as if it was bouncing off an invisible cocoon, like a signal echoed back and forth, back and forth.

Had he caused Sherlock's drug addiction? Had he forced his Soulmate's heart, now declared to be closed off to sentimentality, to turn into stone with his obliviousness and his lack of dedication? Had he shattered his *soul* with his decision to fight in the war? Had he failed this precious, delicate, alien-like human being?

So many thoughts, so many questions. How was he supposed to understand? He hadn't studied the nature of Soulmates, contrary to Sherlock, who apparently had put much time into it. He was a simple man in that regard. A part of him wasn't even yet capable of grasping the choice nature had made for him with his Soulmate, much less the complex link it entailed. He just knew, had now gotten confirmed, that something had gone horribly wrong in their past, in both their lives. It still was.

"If our connection is that strong, if... if you know it is, then why do you run off? Why do you risk your life? And why won't you at least let me try and help, try and protect you?!"

"You know the answer." And right in that moment, he indeed did. He would have been damned to not know it by now. How did he miss it? They were friends, weren't they? And they had only known each other for not even a year.

"Sherlock..."

"I can't lose you, John. I always knew that once I met you, I never could let you go again. But you... you can lose me. If I die, you are free to find another Soulmate. You're still young enough for your biology to reprogram and connect to another."

"Wha--what the hell are you talking about?!"

"You don't want me. It occurs from time to time that a connection is only strong on one side. That one Soulmate refuses the other. It is all right. I don't blame you. Even biology and science are not always free of fault. You were meant for me, but I was never mea--"

Sherlock was cut off when he was unexpectedly pushed against the wall by his flatmate - and his lips sealed by the older man's that crushed against his.

John couldn't let Sherlock finish the sentence. The thought, even. Yes, he had never seen himself with a man. He was not gay, he didn't like men that way. But he also didn't want anyone else as his Soulmate. He had refused the connection, and the man behind it, initially, because he was too much of a coward to embrace what he was given, and rather doubted choices as old as time. If you lived more than three decades believing you'd once settle down with a member of the other instead of your own sex, when you had nursed a dream and hope of a terribly cliched family with a wife, two children and a dog in a nice little town house, mostly because you were desperate and lonely and went with what society taught you was *normal*, being confronted with the complete opposite of your ideal picture as what fate and biology had chosen for you, John didn't know anyone who wouldn't resist and deny what appeared to be just *wrong*.

He had never realized how much he hurt Sherlock with his, "We're just friends," attitude. He had also never realized how much he needed the younger man in his life; and how unbearable the thought of losing him, of him going voluntarily so John could find someone else, was to him. Unbearable and ridiculous. Because he didn't want anyone else. He wanted Sherlock. Genius, mad, clever, annoying, adorable and, most of all, extraordinary Sherlock.

For too long John had allowed that others marked Sherlock with the brutality of their hands. For too long he himself had marked him with ignorance and the heedlessness of his thoughts and emotions. From now on, he swore, Sherlock would only bear the marks of his love.

His love.

With a gasp John pulled back from his attack of a kiss, staring at the other man wide-eyed.

Love. He loved Sherlock. He was in love with him. He---

Staggering backwards, his back hit the opposite side of the hall. Sherlock was looking at him, eyes devoid of any emotion; only a question in them, although John was not quite sure what they were asking about. Or *for*. Until, all of a sudden, a movement just inside his periphery made him tear his gaze away from Sherlock's face - to see the other man's hand lift. An offer. A request. A plea?

John felt himself trembling when he stepped closer again and hesitantly put his hand in the proffered one. Strong, short and muscular interlaced with equally strong, but slender and delicate fingers when he came to stand right before his friend, only a hairsbreadth away now. On its own John's other hand lifted to cup Sherlock's face, caress these fascinating features, his thumb brushing the cheekbone just as the other man's eyes fluttered closed. Not much of a pull was necessary when John leaned in to capture those full lips again, in what he would forever remember as their first true kiss. Perfection.

For a long while it was just relishing in the feeling of these soft, warm cushions against his thinner ones. He simply pressed against them, the heat between them rolling back and forth until he forgot where he ended and Sherlock began. It was then that he started a slow, leisure movement, a rhythm almost like a dance, gently swaying to a silent melody, as his lips and tongue brushed and pecked and peppered with tenderness.

Only when Sherlock parted his lips, willingly allowing John the lead in their encounter, the older man deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue through his Soulmate's - *yes, he was indeed the one, and in every way that were and mattered* - mouth, nudging Sherlock, encouraging him, until he shyly responded to the touch.

He wanted to taste everything; he wanted to feel everything. John kissed Sherlock as if it was the last time and didn't only just begin; as if any moment, the other man could be gone. And who knew if he couldn't. It had taken him years, so many years, to find the one who belonged to him, and then he had wasted even more time because he hadn't been able to accept that his Soulmate was a man. That he could love a man. That he could love *Sherlock*. Now he took the sorrow of all those years lost, and translated it into equal parts passion and gentleness with which he now kissed this fascinating creature that was his significant other.

A whimper when his hand left his partner's cheek and slipped down to come to rest on his shoulder, and a responding sting in his own, made him end the kiss eventually. Of course, the injuries.

"We need to take care of your wounds," John whispered against Sherlock's lips, and got a hummed response, one of someone not quite happy about the interruption, yet agreeing where he knew he had no choice. John chuckled at the sound, familiar enough with his flatmate - his *Soulmate* - to identify the message behind it, and then took a step back, tugging at the hand still wrapped into his own, to lead Sherlock into the living room. "Sit down," he said and pointed at his mate's chair in front of the fireplace, "I'll be right back."

Letting go of the hand, fitting into his as if it belonged there, as if it was just an extension of his own limb, his own body, so much that he'd already forgotten he was holding it at all, was not the easiest thing. Their fingers parted one by one, and John immediately missed the warmth, this sensation of *home* it provided.

When he returned with his medkit, Sherlock had opened the buttons of his shirt, but not yet taken it off. John was soon to learn why his friend was so hesitant to bare his body - pulling off the piece of clothing, his blood froze in his veins when he discovered the scar on the younger man's shoulder.

A scar, mirroring his own where once the bullet had tried to take his life. Looking exactly the same, only that it was a bit smaller.

"Oh God, Sherlock... that shouldn't be-- I'm so sorry," he breathed, shaking hands hovering over the rose-colored deformation on otherwise perfect almost-white skin.

"It's not your fault," the other man simply replied, shrugging.

"But it is. You only have this because--"

"You didn't get shot on purpose." It was not a question; still John felt inclined to answer.

"No, of course not."

"Then it isn't your fault."

"Does it... does it hurt?"

"It hurt when I... when we sustained it. But it only lasted for a few hours; which is, as I assume, considerably less than you had to endure. It's merely a superficial reminder of..."

When John realized that Sherlock wasn't going to end the sentence, he didn't push him; instead he leaned down and left a gentle kiss on the scar. Then he tended to the fresh wounds - and learned that a Soulmate taking care of one's significant other's injuries also lessened the effect they had on oneself. It was a relaxing task to clean, mend and secure with bandages, and soon what had looked so gruesome on Sherlock's forehead, shoulder, arm and back was wrapped in soft, white material, to protect until what was underneath healed.

It was not the only healing necessary. They had hurt each other, consciously or not, but both physically and emotionally. John more Sherlock than the other way around - and the ex-soldier was just too aware of it. It was not easy to rethink an approach to something so fundamental as the relationship with a person he so far had only been willing to see as a friend, even if they were Soulmates. A part of him still believed that it had worked well so far and feared what would happen if they shifted dynamics and added layers. Yet a bigger part of him was finally ready to admit that new dynamics and layers were exactly what they needed.

No full week had to pass before John moved into Sherlock's room.

Physicality wasn't necessary. There was no need to bond with one's Soulmate by sexual encounter. There was no activation, or initiation, of the link. Their unique situation and Sherlock's longing left aside, they could have stayed friends, sharing their flat and lives, and nothing else. Being close - and accepting the bond given to them by nature - was good enough. Being in love, as they were, was even better. Being intimate - was not required. Nevertheless was there what people called the Seal, a simple word that expressed how the depth of a connection was increased by sexual fulfillment in ways that were very different. Not important as such - Soulmates were Soulmates, with or without the physical aspect. Still it added something, something that was unique. Something that, sooner or later, almost everyone longed for.

John and Sherlock's first touch - first kiss - had ignited this kind of longing. From that moment on they knew where they were headed. They waited, let nights pass, just shared the bed, each other's warmth and presence, got used to each other, so close in an entirely different way. This step they were about to take neither of them had taken before, in one or the other way, and nervousness inhabited them.

Until, one night, the feeling of being ready echoed through both of them, suddenly, simultaneously, impossible to retrace to its origin. One of them had decided that it was time - and they both sensed it. Sensed it with the same intensity, each believing it was them to call for the next step.

Kisses and caring touches had revealed to them how much their link affected them beyond what was common for Soulmates. Naked skin meeting naked skin, however, let nerve endings fuse, forming a circuit that transported them into a different world. There was a tingle consuming his own body the more John touched Sherlock, explored him with lips and tongue and hands, taught him and advised him. It was a sensation he was new to as well, even though he had had sexual encounters before.

There was no question how they were going to complete their unification; it was an impulse they were guided by when John gently pressed Sherlock back into the sheets. Thoroughly he prepared his lover, unwilling to take any

chances, no matter how impatient Sherlock got, or how much the stimulation affected him as well. He may not have had any experiences in that particular field - not with a man - but he knew enough not to risk anything. This was going to be their very first union; it was supposed to be special and memorable, but certainly not because they were in pain. After all, they would both feel it.

Being able to wait had never been one of Sherlock's virtues, and it wasn't in the bedroom, either. He demanded and begged, even cursed, much to John's surprise - and delight. He couldn't claim that having his Soulmate, almost always in charge, at his mercy like this wasn't at least a bit intriguing. He relished in the intimacy of being able to touch and feel a response, not only beneath his hands, but also inside him - the place the yearning and emptiness had resided in all those years now taken over by a comfortable, if not addictive warmth and tranquility, leaving him to feel happy; really, entirely happy for the first time in his life.

But it was nothing compared to the a sensation that took him over only moments later. Even if he had wanted to, if it had been demanded of him, he could never have put it into words properly. If at all.

Being one with Sherlock, so intimately connected, welcomed and embraced by his heat, was so different from everything he had experienced in his life. When he had bedded women he had believed - made himself believe against better knowledge - could turn out to be the one, he had sought this sensation; this feeling. In the end he had been happy to feel something, anything, even if it wasn't this powerful link one shared with one's Soulmate. Physical encounters with the one who belonged were more intense, for not only bodies, but also souls united in those moments, and only now John realized how wrong he'd been in his believe he had at least come close to it in the past.

He struggled to not be overwhelmed by the feeling; by all his feelings and emotions flooding him. His and Sherlock's, as he now knew. His lover, as it seemed, had already given up on staying in control; the mask, usually in place so carefully, had slipped away, his face now an open book, and John couldn't help but lean forwards to kiss the other man. He received a lazy response, and a moan when he shifted inside Sherlock, reminding him of a completion yet to come, one desired now all the more.

Pushing his arms beneath the other man's shoulders so he was able to hug him and at the same time have his hands free to caress his face, brushing the dark curls off his forehead, John began a slow movement with his hips, drawing out and pushing back in until they found their rhythm.

What followed was a skillful dance, step after step and swirl after swirl, taking and giving and finding themselves equal, a choreography of two who had had life-long practice with each other, even though they only just started. But when one didn't have to think and wonder, the heart and soul were free to choose their own rhythm. It was also a dance they willingly ended with a fall, tipping, diving even, over the threshold and into blissful oblivion, shouting out their climaxes with each other's breaths, experiencing the other one's height through their own response as their feelings and emotions mingled in an satisfying haze.

Even after countless minutes they weren't ready to let go again, and clung to each other, limbs entangled and lips seeking contact. The music had stopped, their dance was finished - but the rhythm remained, vibrating deep inside them, in every fiber of their body, and their souls.

It was a rhythm that would accompany them for the rest of their lives.

There was nothing more satisfying than sharing everything with one's Soulmate, John had to realize. Even though it shouldn't have been, their connection was very different after their first intimate encounter. *They* were different. It was like the affirmation that they had each other, no matter what; an affirmation manifesting itself in an odd yet addictive feeling of yearning whenever they were too far apart. They were a unity now, two halves of a whole not properly functioning without the other, and they were it so much more than other couples around them.

Sherlock needed some convincing. But in the end, he accepted John working with him. His Soulmate's knowledge and experience, especially in the medical field, turned out to often be of significant help; and he was a quick

learner, adapting the genius' ways of working, even if they both knew he'd never become as good. But neither expected John to - he had his very own qualities. And ultimately, what was important was that they were a team.

Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, Consulting Detectives. The only two in the world.

Years passed, years of comfortable routine in a home they defined just as much as it defined them. But as eventually Mrs. Hudson said her last goodbye, 221B Baker Street became too-quiet a place for them to be, as many memories as it ever held, and they found themselves moving out of the city and to the countryside, to call a small cottage their new home.

It never stopped bothering Sherlock that they were leaving most of the crime-solving to those who were supposed to do the work. Retirement certainly wasn't his most preferred time in life, and John would often quietly chuckle when his mate had one of his moments, those in which he sulked and blamed his Soulmate for their lack of purpose. Then John would forward an email or two with private clients asking for help, and Sherlock would pretend he didn't notice the messages came from John, and he would solve the case as quickly as ever, or they would yet again venture out, a bit slower, a bit calmer, a bit more relaxed and less frantic, but with the same enthusiasm as ever.

One of the most curious aspects about Soulmates was that when the time to leave this world and live neared, both felt it at almost around the same time. It only happened when both were about to die of old age; when natural causes were about to conclude their physical existence. One of them then would feel it first, this kind of inner peace that let them contently decide to accept the end of this life; knowing there were many more to come. They would prepare and wait for their significant other to feel it as well, before they bid their farewells.

John and Sherlock had never done anything like other people. And their time approaching wasn't going to make an exception. One quiet evening when they both sat comfortably in their chairs in front of the fireplace, they looked up - suddenly and at the exact same moment. Words weren't needed.

The bed they had taken with them from 221B held so many memories. Their first night together, and many thereafter. Resting hours in each other's embrace, with bodies pressed close and limbs entangled. Times in which nightmares disturbed and soothing words were spoken in half-sleep. Moments in which sickness had to be taken care of, wounds had to be healed. Now it would carry them, hold them in its soft embrace as they set out to their last journey.

They lay down next to each other, just as had they had done every evening, for so many years. Wrinkly hands tightly entwined, they leaned in to share one last, tender kiss.

"To the next life. To our souls meeting once more," John whispered, a gentle smile on his lips, and his eyes full of love.

Sherlock's expression mirrored his Soulmate's when he replied, just as quietly, "To us, holding on. Forever."

And they fell asleep.

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