The Wedding Garments

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by cwb

Summary

This is the story of a young consulting detective who wants nothing to do with marriage and an army doctor who wants to find true love. It's 2020 post-Brexit England and the British government is encouraging arranged marriages. Candidates meet through state-run agencies and date in hopes of finding love (and tax benefits). Sherlock doesn't need or want a spouse, at least not until John Watson shows up. Hesitant to give in to his more carnal urges because of the way they derail his mind, how will Sherlock progress toward the more intimate aspects of a relationship? The answer lies in a very special wedding gift.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This fic is dedicated to my BFF Happierstill, who adds happiness to my life on a daily basis.

Russian translation here!

Every Monday the green folders came, and every Monday the green folders went. Sherlock was aware of the pile's shifting height on the corner of Mummy’s otherwise immaculate desk, but he never touched them. He never touched them, and he never wanted to hear about them.

Mummy, of course, had other ideas. So did Daddy and his older brother Mycroft, but they were easier to ignore than Mummy.

Sherlock hadn’t touched them since the very first ones had arrived, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t curious, because of course he was curious. He knew they were stuffed with sheets of paper, information typed up neat as a pin, and he knew there were photographs, usually black and white headshots, sometimes colour candids. He knew there was one handwritten personal note, as well, and a small card with several check boxes. He’d tried once to check one of those boxes, but even though he had checked the box that said “NO INTEREST,” it had signalled to Mummy that Sherlock was interested in the process, so now he left it all to her.

He would generally wait an hour or two after the courier came so that Mummy would have a chance to go through them herself, and then he’d sneak into the library under the pretence of picking out or returning a book to one of the dozens of built-in shelves, and he’d peek. That’s all he would do. Peek.

With one glance Sherlock would know if the stack was growing or shrinking, because every Monday the courier would deliver more green folders, but he would also take some away with him. Sherlock had yet to figure out how to intercept the courier and give him all the folders, but he supposed it didn’t really matter. The green folders would keep coming. They’d keep coming until Sherlock picked one.

This was why Sherlock often found himself seated at luncheon with a small pile of folders just to the left of his plate. He might never touch them, but that didn’t keep Mummy from talking about them. Over grilled asparagus and seared tuna steaks, Mummy would call out names.

“Oliver Greenwald, have you heard of him, Sherlock? No? How about Thomas Puttermann? His father was at Oxford with Daddy. No? Sheldon Longchamp? Surely you’ve heard of him? Well then, I expect you to look at these and let me know by tomorrow teatime to which I should extend an invitation.”

But Sherlock never would.

Sherlock was never going to until he absolutely had to, but as of yet the Government hadn’t made
The Programme obligatory. Everyone knew they might, that it was probably a matter of time and some low-level analysis done by some half-witted committee before they moved forward. Would it at some point become law? It could.

It had started in the years after Brexit when the United Kingdom had all but floated down the English Channel into some morass of unknown political and economic backwater. British expats had come flooding home looking for the jobs left by the immigrants who were expected to leave but never actually did, because why would they? England was their home just as much as anyone else’s.

And then the United States of America had gone to hell in a Trump-held handbasket, and that sealed the deal. The expats from the USA came home in the thousands, and Theresa May had grabbed at the chance to keep them there. She could only produce so many jobs, only build so many housing developments, but if she could keep the British married to each other, perhaps she could keep them, and their British offspring, on British soil. And wasn’t that the whole point? To give the United Kingdom back to the British?

Families who participated were matched by tiers, and those tiers were determined by the applicant’s score on an inventory filled out by themselves and their parents. Education, career, income, ancestry, property and other assets, number of children; all of this was put into a computer where it was processed and mangled by an algorithm which then spit out a tier. Sherlock, of course, was in the highest tier, as were the people who came sniffing around his door.

Successful matches resulted in enormous tax cuts for the family, and in some cases, promises of tax breaks for that family’s generations to come. Other benefits could be bestowed at the agencies discretion. Sherlock had heard of property being granted, significant discounts on homes, and in one case, the as of yet unconceived offspring of a couple going to the top of the waiting list at Broadhurst, Knightsbridge, and other high-demand, posh nursery schools.

Sherlock had read the news as it trickled out to the public, first scoffing, then incredulous. No government should serve as a matchmaking agency, not for any purpose whatsoever, and if that’s what was going to happen, he would stay well away. He hadn’t, however, anticipated his mother’s eagerness to participate. She had all but jumped at the chance to marry off her eccentric younger son, registering Sherlock immediately with their local Oxfordshire County agency and filling out all the necessary paperwork for him when he refused to do so.

It could have been worse. In the beginning, when the folders first started arriving after his 18th birthday, they were green and blue. That had been almost laughable, but to laugh would have shown amusement, and there was nothing amusing about the blue folders. It had only taken a quiet word between always-interfering Mycroft and Mummy for the blue folders, and names such as Missy Kennedy, Cookie Clement, and Glinda Morgenthaler to disappear altogether. Sherlock thought it might halve the number of folders that arrived each week, but Mummy simply filled in the gap with even more green folders.

Sherlock had even considered calling The Agency from which the folders came himself to tell them that he was no longer available, but he knew that his word would mean nothing over those of his mother and that The Agency would know he was lying anyway, because if The Agency didn’t have the information, the information didn’t exist. That, at least, was the impression he'd gleaned from the thick pamphlet that had come with the first batch of folders, over two years ago now.

*The British Isles Guide for Society Arranged Marriages*

*Chapter Four: Proper Reporting of an Arrangement*
Section 3, Article iii: Until such time as both families report the agreement of an arrangement to The Agency through certified post or face-to-face reporting to a Representative at the Office of The Agency, neither candidate shall be removed from the Roster.

Sherlock had considered what was referred to as ‘timing out,’ as well, but the BIG-SAM, as it was referred to, was very clear about his likelihood of doing so.

Chapter One: Eligibility

Section 2, Article i: Candidates may opt out of the Roster on or after their 21st birthday, but only if at least one of the Candidate’s parents also agree to the removal. This is highly unrecommended.

Mummy would never change her mind, and that meant Daddy would never be allowed to change his. At age twenty and three months, Sherlock had nine months to try to win Daddy over, but his efforts were half-hearted given the likelihood of success.

So, the folders kept coming, and Sherlock kept not looking at them, because what was the point in meeting someone who would ultimately reject him for being himself in the first place? Mummy, however, did look at them, and if Sherlock didn’t inform her as to which candidates he’d be willing to meet, Mummy would pick them herself. Sherlock couldn’t always escape the meetings, but he could make himself as unappealing as humanly possible, and so he did. Experiments with sulphurous acid and pig intestines rendered his clothing unacceptable; refusing to shower or brush his nest of curls was another no-no; making his violin screech and scream was definitely off-putting; being twenty-five minutes late didn’t impress people, and neither did his tendency to deduce the less savoury aspects of one’s personality within ten seconds of meeting someone.

Eventually, Mummy caught on and started to schedule appointments without telling Sherlock. Then, she would wait for the candidate outside the front door of the manor and when the unlucky fool arrived, Sherlock would be called down for some errand or another. She fooled him twice that way, but there was nothing she could do about his boorish behaviour, and after that Sherlock simply stopped showing up when she rang for him.

And so it went. Sherlock scanned the size of the pile of folders to assess the potential influx of candidates but refused to review them himself. He escaped most encounters by the skin of his teeth and riled Mummy to epic heights of irritation.

He wondered then, on a fine spring day in April, what it meant when he passed the library, poked his head in, and saw only one green folder on the lower left corner of Mummy’s immaculate desk. Sherlock wondered a lot of things. He wondered why he’d never heard the doorbell, and who let the guest in, and where Mummy had gone. He wondered how the man had known where to go, and why he smelled so good, and why Sherlock lost the ability to speak when the man spoke.

After all, he’d only said five words.

“Sherlock Holmes? I’m John Watson.”
Sherlock had gaped like a fish. He was sure of it. He had wordlessly gaped at the fit blond man with the cane standing in front of him in the parlour, and when he was finished gaping, he had said, “What can I do for you, John Watson?” and John Watson had said, “Well, I think you’re supposed to marry me. Did no one tell you I was coming?”

Sherlock shook his head. He closed his mouth. “Where’s my mother?” he asked, suspicious, as if perhaps this John Watson fellow had done something with her.

“I don’t know,” John Watson had said. “I got a note to arrive at this time.” John pulled a paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and shrugged. “It says the door would be open and to come to the first room on the left. So, I did.”

“Clever. Mummy is very clever, isn’t she? Well, now that you’re here you can turn around and go.”

“But you don’t even know me yet. Something against blonds?”

Sherlock took a deep breath. “No, but I do have something against arranged marriages, and I actually do know you well enough. I know all about your time in Afghanistan and your shoulder and your psychosomatic limp, and I know about your sibling and your efforts to rehab them, and that you’d like to open your own medical practice, and I know that your score on the BIG-SAM Inventory was only barely high enough to let you into this tier of the stupid Programme. I think that’s enough to be going on, don’t you?”

John widened his stance and put his hands on his hips. “You didn’t get all that from my file.”

“I haven’t read your file.”

“Then how did you know all that?”

Sherlock sighed and rubbed two fingertips over his lower lip before answering. “Tan lines, watch, fingernails, haircut, shoes, and the size of your suit. If there’s nothing else, you can let yourself out the way you came in.”

Sherlock was halfway across the Persian carpet when John called his bluff. “Can I get a cup of tea?”

There was no way out of it. No proper British person, and Sherlock considered himself that at the very least, would refuse a guest, no matter how unwanted, a cup of tea. He stepped closer to the doorway and pressed a discreet button set in the wall, pivoted on his foot, aimed himself at the nearest cluster of olive green velvet couches and chairs, and sat.

“Tea shall be here shortly. Do sit down.” He wondered if John had even tried to suppress the smirk on his face, and decided that he had not.

It was then that Mummy made her entrance, all clicking heels and swirling skirts. She was fiddling
with the gold chain around her neck with one hand and waving that single green folder in front of her with the other.

John Watson stood up to greet her, and Sherlock flopped over on the divan and closed his eyes, but not before rolling them.

“Excellent! I see you two have met and that Sherlock has called for tea. John, I do hope you found us with no difficulty?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Perfect. Let’s begin, shall we? This is the first time I’ve had Sherlock and a candidate in the same room together in I don’t even know how long.” Mummy sat down next to Sherlock and poked him in the leg with one meticulously manicured nail.

“I’m glad I made the cut, then,” John Watson said.

Sherlock huffed out a disbelieving breath. Yes, if making the cut meant sneaking into one’s house, then he had made the cut.

“Well, that he’s here, decently groomed, has called for tea, and hasn’t deduced you within an inch of your life does seem promising, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, he’s done the deducing thing. He definitely did that.”

“And you’re still here? Fascinating.”

“Well, so were his deductions, to be honest. I have no idea what my watch says about anything, but everything he said was brilliant.”

“I am in the room, you know.” Sherlock bounced up from his horizontal position and glared.

“Oh yes, there you are. Do be good and remain upright, will you?” Mummy said.

“Did you really think so?” he said to John Watson.

“What, that you deducing me was brilliant? Absolutely.”

“People usually tell him to go do something rather rude,” Mummy said.

“People are idiots,” John Watson responded.

“Exactly!” Sherlock exclaimed.

Mummy smiled. “Well, now that we’ve established Sherlock’s brilliance, why don’t we find out a bit more about you, Mr Watson?”

“Please, call me John.”

“John. Very well.”

Mummy asked questions, John answered, and tea was served. Sherlock stared at them over the rim of his fine bone china cup as they talked.

“Are you one of the Benedictine Watson’s, John?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Benedictine was my great-great-grandmother on my father’s side. Of course, I never met her, but we have some family portraits and she looks like a formidable woman.”
“Indeed, I’ve heard some stories of how she single-handedly created one of the finest Highland Cattle pedigrees to still exist today.”

“That’s true. Unfortunately, my grandfather gambled the rights to the line away, or I may have found myself in very different circumstances today.” John laughed and shrugged and Mummy gave her head a tilt to the side that Sherlock imagined was meant to convey something like a light pat on the hand.

“I was ever so sorry to hear about the passing of your parents, John. That was just recently, wasn’t it?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Mummy hadn’t heard about John’s parents passing. She’d never even heard about John’s parents, seeing as how they’d have sunk to a layer of Great Britain’s class system with which she had no affiliation. No, Mummy had read the file and knew everything about John that she was now asking. Sherlock found it insulting.

“My mother passed away five years ago, Ma’am, and my father a year before her. He was very unhealthy for quite a while before he died.”

Sherlock was grateful that Mummy lacked his skill at deduction, as John’s change in posture told Sherlock a fairly complete story about his father. The man had squandered what was left of the Watson fortune and turned to drink, a vice that eventually killed him.

“Well, I am sorry to hear that. You seem to be in very good health, except for that leg.”

Oh, my God, Sherlock thought. Next thing she knew she was going to ask to have a good look at his teeth.

“Just a little souvenir from Afghanistan. Supposedly, it’s psychosomatic, but that doesn’t keep it from twinging now and then.”

“Hmm.”

There was little in the questions or answers that Sherlock couldn’t have figured out himself, but watching John Watson’s body language gave him so much more than any of Mummy’s inquiries could have.

John was proud despite having been invalided out of the army. He held his smaller than average and compact body in a way that spoke of unexpected strength. He was lonely, too, and eagerly participating in the Programme. In fact, Sherlock could see the edge of a folded copy of the BIG-SAM peeking out of the satchel he’d carried in when he’d arrived. He was picky, though, as this was only the fourth, possibly only the third, meeting he’d had to date, and he’d been in the Programme for several months. And, Sherlock thought with a raised eyebrow, the first two had been women.

“You’re bisexual.”

“Sherlock!”

“Well, I think it’s only fair I know the sexuality of someone you expect me to marry, Mother.”

“I have no such expect—”

“Yes. I am. Is that a problem for you?”

“Not at all. I was just testing a deduction.”
“Amazing.”

Mummy slapped the green folder shut and stared. Sherlock knew she’d regained her senses when she started blinking. “Sherlock, why don’t you show John the old walled garden? So few estates have them these days. Does horticulture interest you, John?”

“I guess?”

“Excellent. Off you go.”

As Sherlock waited for John to cross the carpeted expanse between them, Mummy hissed in his ear, “Be nice!”

They had a good view of the back of the manor from where they stood, surrounded by cowslip, primrose, and wisteria in the walled garden, so Sherlock pointed things out to avoid having a proper conversation. “That’s the guest house, and the stables are over there, and Daddy had a pool and tennis court added in ’97, those are that way, and my laboratory is in an old greenhouse that way, and—”

“You have your own laboratory?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

“You want to see my laboratory?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“This way.” Sherlock led them out of the walled garden and through the cottage garden with its herbs, fruit trees, and rows of vegetables, then to one of the old greenhouses that they no longer used. Sherlock had set up a microscope and a tray of slides on a small garden table as a young teen, and slowly taken over the entire structure. There were benches with varying sizes of microscopes and test tubes, trays of glass slides and tubs of petri dishes, labelled powdered chemicals in stay-dry containers, jugs of liquid chemicals, and assorted detritus on every other surface imaginable, including the large work surface set at the middle of it all.

Sherlock gave John a thorough tour of the place and explained what he was working on, and by the time John left that afternoon, Sherlock knew a few things for certain. John was a surgeon who would never operate again, a soldier in need of a battle, and a man comfortable in his own skin—as long as that skin was in danger. He was four years older, six inches shorter, and far more experienced in just about every element of life than Sherlock. That was hardly a surprise, as Sherlock preferred to lock himself in his lab rather than interact with other people, and life seemed to happen when other people were involved. Sherlock also knew that John respected Sherlock, which Sherlock found intriguing.

Few other candidates had. Most of them, by the time they had Sherlock alone in the walled garden, or the rose garden, or the herb garden, or by the tennis shed, or the pool house, or the dock, had already touched him, or tried to. Some of those touches were more innocent than others: a tap on the shoulder, the brush of a lapel, the squeeze of a wrist. They were all offensive to Sherlock, who knew that the first person to touch another person in any encounter was the one who took power over the other. Sherlock wanted power over none of them, but neither did he want them to assume they had anything over him.

Some of the touches had been less innocent: the caress of the back of his neck, the grab of a butt cheek, and several forced kisses. Sherlock had warded them all off with his knowledge of
Bartitsu and left them not wanting to come back for more. He knew that others found him attractive. What he didn’t know was why anyone thought they had the right to claim him as their own.

John, though, John with his short blond hair and ocean’s depth blue eyes, those thin pink lips and that square chin, had barely looked at Sherlock, he’d been so taken with Sherlock’s chemical apparatus, his scribbled notebooks, his test tubes and growths and decompositions. At one point he had even asked if Sherlock had tried using silver as an oxidizing agent for copper while examining an older experiment gone wrong. Sherlock had been surprised once again by the man but had willingly discussed oxidation-reduction equations until John had wrapped his arms around himself and given them a brisk rub.

They’d been talking for hours, it turned out, and as the sun set and left a pall of chill around them, Sherlock realised he’d enjoyed his time with John. He was even somewhat disappointed when John ended the appointment and rushed back to the house to fetch his satchel and jacket and give his goodbyes to Mummy.

Sherlock had followed, trying to sort out the disparate facts in his head which indicated he didn’t completely despise another human being, and when Mummy asked John if he could join them for dinner the following week, Sherlock didn’t object.

He went to his bed that night feeling unsettled, not unlike the sensation he got in his stomach when sailing, just when the boat sat at the highest peak of a wave before plunging down to slap against the surface.
Chapter 2: Dating

Section 1, Article i: Timing

A Date may be arranged any time after the first month anniversary of two candidates meeting, as long as two other meetings involving one set of parents has taken place. Should one or both candidate’s parents be deceased, the candidate’s sponsor, previously defined as a sibling, aunt, uncle, or legal guardian, may attend.

Section 1, Article ii: Chaperones

Should either candidate in a pairing be nineteen years of age or younger, one or both parents or sponsors must be in attendance on each Date prior to engagement. No chaperone is required if each candidate in a pairing is twenty years of age or older.

Section 1, Article iii: Suitable Dates

No pair of candidates shall define a Date as any gathering of only the two of them in any private place. All Dates shall take place in a public setting with at least three other adults in the general vicinity. Proper Dates include dinner at a rated restaurant, attendance at a concert, visiting a museum, a picnic in a park, exploration of a Nationally Registered Historic Place, etc. Please refer to Appendix 3 for a complete list of acceptable Dates (first, second, third, etc.).

Sherlock could not have cared less about the parameters for a date, nor did he care if he went on one or not. His understanding was that most dates could be better defined not by where and how they were allowed, but by the words schmoopy, goopy, fondling, and a waste of precious time. He was, therefore, pleasantly surprised when John showed up in an older model Range Rover instead of a limo and took him to a Funk and Soul concert at Camber Sands Holiday Camp in East Sussex, instead of the recommended London Symphony Orchestra. There were waffle fries instead of caviar, beer instead of champagne, ice cream instead of chocolate-dipped strawberries, and a tattered blue and green tartan blanket instead of red velvet chairs.

The May evening was clear and dry, the sky above dotted with orphaned wisps of clouds, the grass below them fragrant like cut hay. The music was fine, but what Sherlock enjoyed the most was the people watching. Here, on his own blanket island with a rapt audience of one, Sherlock could deduce to his heart’s content and be told he was brilliant. And if Sugarhill Gang played in the
background, so be it.

Under Sherlock’s watchful eye, strangers’ family closets were opened, affairs were aired, kleptomaniacs singled out, kinks uncovered, all for the benefit of John and his whispered ‘incredible, unbelievable, fantastic.’

So caught up in the game was Sherlock, he didn’t notice John reaching out to brush a curl off his forehead until it was too late. John’s fingers made contact with Sherlock’s proud brow, Sherlock jerked away and wrapped his arms around his pulled-up knees, and the deductions stopped.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Sherlock stared out at the crowd of people and sighed. “I don’t like to be touched very much. I apologise. I should have told you right away so that you wouldn’t have wasted so much of your time.”

“It hasn’t been wasted. I’ve enjoyed every moment.”

“But, now you’ll be on your way.”

“Well, no. I mean, I’d love to touch you, but only if you want to be touched.”

Sherlock turned and studied John’s face. It seemed he really was sincere when he said he didn’t want to be on his way.

“Do you think you might want to be, at some point? Maybe when we know each other better?”

“I have no data on which to base that conclusion, John.”

“In other words, you don’t know.”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you, except that my brain is my most important asset, and I find anything that distracts from my ability to think clearly and process data to be extremely unsettling. The nature of the chemistry work I do now and the work I hope to do in the future is dependent on my brain running at full capacity. Being touched … it derails me, somehow.”

John mirrored Sherlock’s position with his arms wrapped around his knees and a safe distance between them. They sat for a while, staring out across the field, and Sherlock tried to anticipate what John might say next.

“What do you want to happen here, Sherlock?”

Sherlock knew exactly what he wanted to happen. He wanted to go back to a time when none of this had been a possibility. He wanted to go back to pre-Brexit, pre-Trump-held-handbasket-dumpster-fire, to a time when he would have been free to make the decision to never marry, to never date, to spend as much time with other people as he deemed necessary, which would have been zero time. Seeing as how that was impossible, he had to face certain facts.

Arranged marriage in the United Kingdom had been a successful endeavour in the eyes of the public. Mycroft, who still had the audacity to claim he held but a minor role in the government, had filtered news to Sherlock whenever he could about the Arranged Marriage Programme, and it was looking
more and more as if the Cabinet might move to legislate what was so far a volunteer effort.

Sherlock and those of his class (that being the upper-upper-upper) would be the first targeted. If he didn’t take some control over who he ended up with, someone else would, and he would be damned if he ended up with the likes of Oliver Greenwald or Thomas Putternan, people who would want certain things from him, and on a regular basis. No. He could not allow that to happen.

He looked at John, who was still looking at him with a look of expectation and curiosity. “I want to survive this process with the least amount of inflicted damage and the most control as possible.”

John blinked at him. “You’re really not all that keen on getting married, are you?”

“No. Are you? Why are you?”

“I want companionship and affection, mostly. I think I have a lot to offer someone, if they’ll have me. I’m not a bad bloke, you know. I had planned on being in the Army for, well, for a lot longer than I was. And I had planned on being a surgeon as well, but things have changed. If I’m going to lead a civilian life, I’d like to make the most of it. I’d like to do it with a partner. I’d like to figure out the best way for me to go back into medicine. You know that my parents are gone and that they left me the estate. It’s nothing compared to your family home, but I’d love to be able to fix it up and have it as a second home for me and my spouse should I ever have one.”

“And you would pick me as your partner? I could not possibly be anyone’s idea of suitable marriage material. I’m rude and crass and I play with decomposing body parts for fun. I uncover the worst of people in a matter of seconds. I don’t talk for days on end, or I never shut up. I play the violin, but I also do horrible things to it at times. I’ve driven several tutors and au pairs out of the house with my ‘bad attitude’.”

“You didn’t uncover the worst of me in a couple of seconds, though, did you? Maybe I’m not looking for someone else’s idea of ‘suitable marriage material.’ And I’d love to hear you play the violin sometime.”

No, Sherlock hadn’t deduced the worst of John Watson upon meeting him, had he? Could he do it now? Probably. Somehow, though, he found he wasn’t at all interested in the worst about John Watson. No, he found himself quite curious about John and his complicated layers. And if the worst turned out to be that he had killed people in a wartime effort, or failed to save others, was that worthy of negative judgment? It was more fascinating than anything else. John Watson, pulling a trigger. John Watson, pulling thread through a suture site. John Watson, leaning on a cane he didn’t need, standing by his alcoholic sister, pursuing a date and potential spouse with a person many people would call a sociopath. In fact, some people had.

“You’re right. You’re not horrible.”

John laughed, barking up at the sky and shaking his head. “That’s not the worst compliment I’ve ever received, I’ll give you that.”

They finished the date listening to the sounds of the concert and the night around them, and when John dropped Sherlock off at close to midnight, he lifted his hand as if to touch Sherlock, then seemed to think better of it and let it rest back down on the gear shift. Sherlock nodded in the face of John’s restraint, thanked him for the evening, and went inside.

The dates continued throughout the months of May and June. John took Sherlock to unlikely venues and Sherlock appreciated his efforts if not always his destinations. The least successful dates involved places in which Sherlock was expected to behave himself, and the most successful were
those in which Sherlock could openly people watch and explain the bizarre and confounding aspects of human nature to John. It seemed there was nothing he could deduce that would turn John away. The only times John said something was perhaps a bit not good was when Sherlock failed to recognise that the deduced might be deserving of a bit of compassion, or when Sherlock took the deduction too far and made an unflattering comment directly to the person he was deducing.

They visited food trucks, museum archives, vintage car lots, exotic flower gardens, beer halls and breweries, filming locations, science libraries, and once, a birdhouse manufacturer. Sherlock was completely bewildered by that last one until he realised that John had selected a birdhouse for Mummy as a gift, and although cynical about John’s efforts to win over Mummy if he couldn’t win over Sherlock, he had to admit it was a genius strategic move. The authors of the BIG-SAM would approve.

Their best date, however, came toward the end of June when Sherlock invited John out for the first time and arranged for them to meet at New Scotland Yard.

“Are you in some sort of trouble?” John asked.

“No,” Sherlock laughed over the phone, imagining John bouncing up on his toes and licking his lips. “Sorry to disappoint you. I know a detective inspector who lets me help out with cases when he’s out of his depth.”

“And how often is that?”

“Always.”

Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade met Sherlock and John in the lobby where he signed off on their clearance and directed them to an elevator.

“So, who’s this, then?” he asked Sherlock while gesturing toward John.

“He’s with me.”

“Yes, I gathered as much, but I need his name for the paperwork.”

John held out his hand. “I’m Doctor John Watson.”

“And what are you doing with this guy?” DI Lestrade asked, shaking John's hand.

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s not. John Watson would like me to marry him. This is a date.”

“Lord help you.”

“Do you have a case for me to solve for you, or do you not?”

“This way.”

Eight hours later John and Sherlock ended their date chuckling over dinner and a bottle of wine at Angelo’s Ristorante. They reviewed their adventure: several forced suicides, a pink suitcase, part of a named scratched into the bare wood floor of an abandoned building, and a cranky cab driver with a fatal bullet through his shoulder.

“You killed a man for me tonight,” Sherlock said into his all’ arrabiata.
“Might have done, yeah.”

“Does this mean I owe you now?”

John pushed his plate away and tapped the blunt tip of his finger on the table to get Sherlock’s attention. “I saved your life because you’re an idiot and you were going to take that pill, and because your life is worth saving whether you’re with me or not. You don’t owe me a damn thing, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock swallowed and nodded. He was having a hard time meeting John’s eye, but he did it anyway, and if Sherlock could barely get out the words, ‘thank you,’ he knew John had heard him by the slight jerk of his chin.

Sherlock announced that he would spend the night at the family’s flat in Baker Street, and then took John’s good-natured ribbing that they only had such a flat to balance out the expansive luxury of their Oxfordshire manor. Sherlock rubbed his fist over the stubble growing over his upper lip and considered whether or not he should invite John up for a drink. If he remembered correctly, ‘drink’ was code for a shag, or at least for some serious fooling around, and although he was enjoying John’s company more and more, he knew that he wasn’t ready for touching in any sort of intimate way.

They said goodnight at the tube station, and then again over text.

_You haven’t seen my cane, have you?
_You left it at Angelo’s. SH

_Why didn’t you tell me?

_Because you don’t need it anymore. SH

_Amazing. Thank you.

_You’re welcome, John. SH

If Sherlock slept restlessly that night, he blamed it on the wine.

Chapter End Notes

This is the [music festival](#) that John takes Sherlock to.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you happierstill, who helps make everything better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock woke the next morning to the sound of his phone burping the tone he’d set for Mycroft. Whereas Sherlock thought it most fitting, he knew Mycroft didn’t like it, and that made it even more enjoyable.

“What do you want?”

“Good morning to you, too, brother mine. Have you seen anything but your pillow this morning?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I’ll take that as a no. You may be interested in this morning’s breaking news if you can tear yourself away from those twelve-hundred count sheets.”

“I had assumed you were going to tell me the news yourself. Surely you haven’t called just to be jealous of the sheets?”

He heard Mycroft sigh and could imagine him rolling his eyes and tapping the tip of his signature umbrella on the parquet floor of his ‘I serve a minor role’ office. “Fine. Parliament is meeting this morning to discuss legislation for required arranged marriages. They plan to start among society families such as ours, and work their way down through the ranks until they deem enough of the establishment has married and put down roots. How are things going with your John Watson? Have you scared him off yet?”

“He’s not my John Watson, and again, that’s none of your business.”

“My God, he’s not there with you now, is he?”

“Of course not!”

“Very well. If you’ve managed to keep him interested for the last three months you may wish to encourage a proposal. If you mess this one up, you might not have a chance to choose again. No one is certain how the Programme might change if it becomes regulatory. There’s a possibility that you could be matched with no say whatsoever.”

Sherlock wasn’t ready to discuss that with Mycroft, so he huffed his goodbye, ended the call, and turned onto his back. He spent several long minutes staring up at a minute crack in the plaster ceiling. He’d feared it would come to this, eventually. It was just a matter of time until the government took control of its citizens’ personal lives. Maybe Mycroft was wrong, though. Maybe the Cabinet would meet but wouldn’t make such an extreme move. Maybe someone would stand up and explain exactly why taking such control over one of the most base choices a human could make—taking a partner—was a horrendous idea, and maybe everyone would listen. Sherlock flexed and rolled his ankles, stretched his neck back and forth, and rubbed his hands over the flat of his belly. He thought about eating and then realised that if he was putting food above the news, he was in worse denial than he
thought.

He spent another moment debating the pros and cons of toast and marmalade over a hard-boiled egg, then made his way to the bathroom, took care of his business, and wandered into the kitchen. Mrs Hudson, his landlady, had left a small plate of scones on the table with a note that read, “Glad to see you spending some time here, Sherlock. I just happened to see you saying goodbye to your very handsome young man last night! Hope to meet him, too! Mrs H.”

Sherlock grinned in spite of himself. Mrs Hudson’s enthusiasm was infectious. He did have a very handsome young man, didn’t he? At least, he did if he wanted to have him. To marry him. Did he want that? It was looking less and less like he’d have any choice at all, and if he was going to have to marry, he’d choose John before the government chose for him. He might choose John even given the right to choose for himself. Yes, he thought he might.

He was a good man, John was.

He popped a bit of scone in his mouth and tugged his bedsheets tighter around his waist, then settled into his favourite chair and turned on the television. Any hopes he’d had that common sense would prevail flew right out the two tall windows overlooking Baker Street. The Cabinet had met and heard from the Arranged Marriage Programme Committee. They had already voted, and arranged marriage was now a requirement in England. Further news would be forthcoming about who this affected, and when, and how, but for now it appeared that those who did not choose a spouse through the Programme would have one chosen for them through some sort of algorithm that matched candidates by class, race, income, and other demographic variables. There would be countless hours of commentary by pundits both for and against the legislation. No doubt there would be protests and parties, celebrations and calls for action.

For now, though, Sherlock turned off the telly and popped another bite of scone in his mouth. He picked up his phone and tapped through to the text app with one hand, holding the scone in the other.

You’ve seen the news? SH

I have. I’m sorry.

Why are you sorry? SH

Because now you’ll have to do something you don’t want to do.

Yes. But it’s not too late for me to choose my own path if we must go in this direction. SH

You might choose a partner?

Before one is chosen for me? Yes. SH

You have someone in mind?

Sherlock thought. Is this how he wanted to tell John that he would marry him? Did it matter? He was hardly a romantic, and it would be better to let the man know as soon as possible.

I think I do. SH

Well, that’s good. Are they a good person?

Don’t play coy, John, it doesn’t suit you. SH
Sherlock wasn’t so sure, however, that coy didn’t suit John.

LOL. Sorry. That’s good, though, that you have someone in mind. I do, too.

His lips curled up and he felt his chins multiply in a smile, but then Sherlock paused. Certainly, John meant him, didn’t he? Or did he? John had never mentioned seeing other people, but he would have had plenty of time to do so. He and Sherlock had dated once a week or so, and just because Sherlock wasn’t having dates with other people didn’t mean John wasn’t. God, what if he was? What if he was at this very moment weighing one candidate against the other? What if John picked someone that was not Sherlock, and Sherlock was forced to marry someone less … less … John?

He put the scone down on the table next to him and held the phone with both hands.

You’ll probably need to decide soon. SH

I guess I will. As will you.

Yes. SH

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I’ve got to run, I have a meeting with my solicitor about the estate. Chat later?

Chat later. SH

Sherlock exited the app and slunk down in his chair, resting his head against the back. John had begged off to go to a meeting. John had not asked him out on another date.

His phone burped.

Better get your ducks in a row and to a chapel quickly, brother mine.

Do shut up. SH

Sherlock made a half-hearted attempt to look around the flat for a copy of the BIG-SAM. He knew there was one here; Mummy had made sure of it. She and Daddy rarely stayed at Baker Street, preferring to stay at Ham Yard or the Four Seasons where they could see and be seen and spend gobs of money, but that didn’t mean that she hadn’t stocked the flat with everything she thought Sherlock might need, or should need by her own expectations.

He found a pristine looking copy on the mantelpiece underneath Billy the skull and took it back to his chair with him.

Chapter Three: Proposals

Section 1, Article i: Who

Proposals shall follow protocol to be considered valid. In each pairing, the candidate who extended the invitation to meet shall be referred to as the proposer, and the candidate who accepted the invitation shall be referred to as the proposee.

Section 1, Article ii: When
After three months of Dating, a proposer shall be entitled to propose to the proposee.

Section 1, Article iii: How

A written proposal may be delivered to the primary address of the proposee through either 1. Certified post, 2. Messenger service, or 3. By hand. A verbal proposal may be delivered in person at the primary address of the proposee.

Section 1, Article iv: What

Acceptance of the proposal shall result in the newly engaged couple sending a notification to their mutual Agency by the protocol established in Chapter 7. The agency shall be responsible for placing announcements in the media channels of the couple’s choice, including up to two newsprint options and three online options.

Clear enough. If a marriage was going to take place between him and John, John would have to propose to Sherlock. A written or verbal proposal would have to be delivered at the Oxfordshire estate, as it was still Sherlock’s primary residence. Sherlock imagined Mummy would take care of all the little details with the Agency, and Sherlock would show up on his wedding day and do whatever one did at a wedding ceremony, and then—

And then he would be touched. Surely John would expect to have marital relations with his husband, would he not? And surely John was entitled to that? But wasn’t Sherlock also entitled to have his privacy respected if he didn’t feel he was ready for that kind of encounter, or if he felt that such intense physical sensations would detract from the things that really mattered? His ability to think and reason and deduce: those were the things that mattered the most. Speaking about this with John sounded about as easy as ice skating on the rings of Saturn.

Sherlock took a deep breath and picked up the scone again. No need to get ahead of himself. He didn’t even know if a proposal would be forthcoming.

He was just brushing the crumbs off his lap and wondering if he’d left his navy blue suit and purple shirt at Baker Street the last time he stayed, and if so if Mrs Hudson had had them cleaned, when his phone buzzed again.

Forgot to ask, can I take you out again tonight?

Sherlock’s stomach fluttered a bit at the thought of having a date now that they both knew the stakes were higher. He didn’t have other plans, though, and if John was going to propose there were a few things they needed to discuss before that happened. Sherlock figured chances were high John wouldn’t want to propose after they discussed the topic at the forefront of Sherlock’s mind: sex.

Yes. I’ll still be at 221b. Would you like to swing by here or shall I meet you somewhere? SH

I’ll pick you up. :) 7:00 p.m. okay with you?

Yes. I’ll see you then. SH

Sherlock didn’t bother with any punctuation faces, although they did intrigue him. The one John had just typed was obviously a smiley face, but adding a symbol to identify that he was happy seemed redundant. Sherlock had just agreed to go out on another date with him; of course he was happy.

Sherlock had seen other punctuation faces that confused him. Was ;) a biracial person? Why would anyone text him that? And what about :p? Was that person drooling or otherwise not in control of their tongue? It would be so much easier if people just said what they meant. He played around with
the characters on his phone and thought about the date to come.

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This might be their last date before a proposal. There might come a time in the future when tonight would hold significance to John, the way some days were special to Sherlock's parents. The day they met, their first date, the night his father had proposed, their marriage anniversary, and so on. Would it ever be like that for him and John? Sherlock felt something confusing inside where he supposed his feelings for John should be. He liked John. In fact, he liked John quite a bit. He was by far the least annoying and most interesting person he’d met in a long time. He was attractive, and he wouldn’t actually mind touching John. He’d like to know the texture of his skin and the tension of his muscles, and he’d given some significant thought to how soft John’s lips might be and what his hair would feel like slipping between his fingers. But could Sherlock let John do the same?

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He showered for a small eternity, spent extra time on his hair, and found the suit and purple shirt. He spent the afternoon letting Mrs Hudson fuss over him while she pretended she wasn’t dusting and cleaning and he pretended he was listening to her as he flipped through a box of cold case files that Detective Inspector Lestrade had dropped off the last time he visited 221b.

At 6:55 p.m. Sherlock was standing next to one of the tall windows at the front of the flat, peering out onto the street below. The light was muted at this time of day; still bright but soft around the edges, slightly more golden than harsh white. There wasn’t much pedestrian traffic anymore, but taxis zipped back and forth, rushing their patrons to their homes and to business dinners, and to dates, like he was about to do.

At precisely 6:59 p.m. a taxi pulled up to the kerb and John Watson popped out. He smoothed his hair down in the reflection of the window as he waited for his change and tugged down the cuffs of his shirt. Sherlock smiled as he watched him. He liked that John wanted to impress Sherlock because that meant John thought Sherlock was worth impressing. He didn’t take him for granted, didn’t act as if Sherlock would be lucky to have him. John had done quite a job courting Sherlock, and tonight was probably the date that would seal the deal in his mind.

Sherlock realised with a start that he didn’t want to blow it. He wanted John to ask him. He was still catching his breath when he heard John ring the downstairs bell.

Chapter End Notes

Check out Mummy Holmes favourite hotels, [Ham Yard Hotel](http://example.com) (generally over $600/night) and the [Four Seasons Hotel London at Park Lane](http://example.com) (currently over
$1000/night).
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you, again, happierstill!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock could hear Mrs Hudson talking a mile-a-minute as she led John up the stairs to Sherlock’s flat. John was getting in the occasional mmhm and I see and then there was one murmured lovely, and they were there, at the open door to the flat.

“Sherlock!” Mrs Hudson cooed. “I’ve finally met your young man and now I’m even more upset with you for having kept him hidden away for so long!”

“We’ve only known each other a few months, Mrs Hudson, I’ve hardly been—”

“That’s long enough. Now tell me,” she said, clasping her hands together, “what are the two of you getting up to tonight?”

Sherlock looked at John and raised his eyebrows over widened eyes.

“I’m taking Sherlock for drinks and dinner in Greenwich, Mrs Hudson.”

“Oh, how nice! What’s the name of the place? Maybe I’ve heard of it. Mrs Turner’s ones go out to eat all the time.”

“Em, it’s called Champagne Plus Fromage, actually.” John smoothed one finger over his right eyebrow, a sure sign that he was feeling self-conscious. Ah, Sherlock thought. He’d heard of Champagne Plus Fromage. As their name implied, all they served was Champagne and cheese. Champagne. That’s what people ordered when they wanted to celebrate, wasn’t it?

“Ooh, I’ll remember that one for sure. I always did love a bit of the bubbly myself. Well, I’ll leave you to it, then. Have a good time and don’t stay out too late!” Mrs Hudson waggled her fingers at them, then made her exit back to her own flat, the sound of her heels clicking and clacking down the stairwell as she went.

Sherlock and John stood across the room from each other, John with his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels, and Sherlock near the window, still as stone and blinking. John looked very handsome, Sherlock had to admit. He was wearing a deep blue shirt under a tweed blazer and a neat pair of fitted, dark blue jeans. The shirt did something to his eyes, something quite magnificent, Sherlock thought, and the jeans did something for his, well, for his everything. Sherlock noticed that John was giving him the same once over that he’d been giving John.

“You look really well, Sherlock. That shirt, it … it’s a great colour. And it’s … quite fitted.”

Sherlock looked down and realised one of his top buttons had popped undone. He reached up to redo it and saw the way the other buttons strained when he moved his arms. Was the shirt too tight?

“I can change.”
“God, no! Why would you do that? I should have just said what I was thinking, which is that you, and the shirt, and you in that shirt, are all gorgeous.”

“Oh. Thank you. You look quite handsome yourself, John.”

“Thank you. Would you like to get going, or maybe have a drink here first?”

“A drink! Yes. Excellent. I’m pretty sure my parents left some Scotch or something around. Let me look.” Sherlock fled to the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards until he found something that looked drinkable. He fetched ice and two tumblers as well, and then set it all on a tray and carried it back to the front room where he set it down on the coffee table.

“Jesus, Sherlock, that’s 33-year-old Glenlivet.”

“Yes. I saw the label.”

“Are you sure it’s okay that we open that?”

“Why wouldn’t it be okay?”

“That bottle of Scotch costs over £300, that’s why. Maybe your parents are saving it for a special occasion?”

“Maybe this is a special occasion.” Sherlock felt the blush of his cockiness spread up his neck and over his face.

“Ah. Okay, then.”

He poured them each two fingers and sat next to John on the couch, close as he dared. John held up his glass, so Sherlock did the same, but when John clinked the crystal together and licked his lips as if about to make a toast, Sherlock burst out with, “Is this our last date?”

“I was going to say ‘here’s to a great date ahead of us, and wherever it may lead,’ but it seems you have something else on your mind.” John sipped his Scotch and made an appreciative noise that went straight to Sherlock’s gut.

Sherlock took a sip and made a choking noise.

“Easy there, yeah? Just take a small sip.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have interrupted you like that.”

“Hey, no, it’s all right. But can I answer your question with another one? Why would tonight be our last date?”

“I’d like to withdraw the question.”

“Right. Okay, that’s fine. I’ll just say that I hope it’s not our last date, okay?”

“Okay. Can I ask another question?”

“Of course. You can ask me anything you’d like.”

“Are you seeing other people?”

John looked taken aback. He looked down at his hand and rearranged his fingers around his glass,
and then looked back up at Sherlock.

“I am, yeah. Are you?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“You’re taking other candidates on dates?”

“Well, I am, but—”

“No, it’s okay. You don’t have to explain.”

“I feel like I do. See, for you, arranged marriage dating is something that you have to do. You haven’t wanted to do it, and your parents have pressured you, and now the Crown is going to make you do it. You’ve done it with reluctance. I suspected that you were only dating me, and I’ve been truly honoured by that.

“I want to get married. I want to spend the rest of my life with the same person, because I want that kind of continuity, and the opportunity to grow old together with someone. I want to know someone as well as I can know them. It’s a big decision for me, and I guess I want to make sure I don’t leave any stone unturned.”

“I’m not a rock.”

“God, no, of course you’re not a rock. That’s not what I meant. You’re… you’re … very much not a rock.”

“How many rocks are you overturning?” Was he really asking these questions? He sounded like a jealous spouse questioning where his partner had been until 3:00 in the morning, but suddenly it was paramount that he understand the nature of the competition he was up against.

John laughed, though, which Sherlock took as a sign that he wasn’t bothered by the question.

“Well, I’ve stopped dating a couple since I’ve met you, so just one other.”

Sherlock could hardly stand it. The thought of John out there with another rock—another person—made the hair at the nape of his neck stand on end. It wasn’t right. And that person was probably letting John touch them, and they were probably touching him, too. Maybe even a lot. Maybe, even though the BIG-SAM strongly discouraged sexually intimacy with someone before engagement, John could even be having intimate relations with that person.

So, here they were, on the precipice of what? Were they going to drink Champagne to their future together? Or maybe they were going to drink Champagne and wish each other well as they went their separate ways? Or maybe they were going to drink Champagne because John liked Champagne?

Sherlock settled his gaze on John’s face and took a good, long look. John was objectively gorgeous, Sherlock was sure of it. John was objectively good looking not only because of his blue eyes and his blond hair and his blinding smile, but because John was confident. John was kind and steadfast and most important, he was good to Sherlock. And those things made Sherlock want to touch him, by God, they really did.

There was only one thing for it, then, one way to show John that he really was serious about this and
that he wouldn’t let himself be ruled out as some sort of cold fish without feelings for some floozy who’d lie down and spread his or her legs for a quick ride. No. He knew what he had to do, and he wanted to do it.

Sherlock set his Scotch down on the coffee table in front of them and turned toward John. He swallowed, audibly, and he saw John glance down at his Adam’s apple. John’s eyes stayed there and Sherlock involuntarily swallowed again. Slowly, as slowly as he could without spooking John or talking himself out of it, Sherlock reached forward with his right hand, curled and uncurled his fingers, and then lowered that hand onto John’s left knee.

John looked Sherlock in the eye, took a sip of his drink, and laid his hand over Sherlock’s.

“Okay?” John said over the rim of his glass.

“Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“This seems new for you, that’s all.”

Sherlock nodded. It was new for him, and it was fine. It was better than fine. John was alive and warm underneath his hand, flesh and bone and pulsing blood, and Sherlock wondered what it would feel like to touch that pulse, to reach up and draw his finger down from under John’s ear to that place under his chin where his blood pounded away to other destinations. He stared at that spot then looked down at their hands resting together on John’s knee. His hand almost covered John’s entire knee.

“Just because this is the first time I’ve touched you doesn’t mean it’s the first time I’ve … you know, touched, or been touched.”

John jerked his head up and down in agreement. “No, yeah, of course not.”

“I haven’t very much, though.”

“No, I didn’t think so. And that’s okay. That’s kind of sweet, actually.”

Sweet.

“I’m not sweet, John.”

“No, you’re not, at least not in the way that most people would describe someone as being sweet. But you are very … something special. Unique. At least, you are to me.”

“Thank you. I think.”

They spent a few more minutes sipping their whiskeys in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, and when they were done John picked up the glasses and brought them to the kitchen sink. Sherlock’s hand was warm from where it had rested on John’s knee and twitched with wanting to place it back in the exact same spot for another hour or so. Instead, he had to settle for watching John look around a bit, taking in the assortment of science equipment, chipped crockery, and dry food goods scattered over the table and countertops. There was a packet of dark chocolate Hob Nobs on the counter, and John looked over at Sherlock and smiled. “You’ve got quite the sweet tooth, though, haven’t you?”

“As much as one’s teeth can be sweet, then yes, I suppose I have.”

“I hear they have great puddings at this restaurant. Shall we go?”
“I’m ready.”

And Sherlock was ready. He felt as if he were ready for either the altar or the chopping block, whichever it would be.

Chapter End Notes

Champagne + Fromage is a place, and it looks divine.

NOTE: AO3 did something funky (or I did something funky) and had Chapter 5 listed as a draft and therefore unviewable. Confused, I hit the post button. Chapter 5 is there, but I've lost all of your wonderful comments. Please know that if you left one I answered it, and didn't delete them on purpose!
Chapter 6

Thank you, happierstill, for beta-ing like a champ!

John ordered them each a flight of Champagne and a shared gastro board with a large assortment of cheeses, charcuterie, and tapenades. They sampled everything with enthusiasm, divvying up their favourites and discussing which of the bubbies they preferred with which of the cheeses and meats. Eventually, they had to order more of everything out of both enjoyment and hunger.

They sipped and ate as the sun sank lower on the horizon, and they caught up on what they had done that day and what they had coming up in the next few days. Although Sherlock had done little more than eat scones and peruse cold case files (he had solved four of them from the comfort of his chair, including one about a dwarf with a blow dart gun), John had been busy speaking with his solicitor about the family estate, the funds his parents had left him and Harry in their will, and what it might take financially to revive the old place. Fortunately, it sounded like it would be within his reach to move forward with his plans.

Sherlock found that the more Champagne he sipped, the more aware he became of John’s physicality. John’s eyes couldn’t possibly be becoming bluer, but they appeared that way to Sherlock. His lips were getting pinker, too, and his hair shinier. Sherlock stared at his flute glass with suspicion, then took another long sip. John had delicious squishy cheeks when he smiled, with deep indentations where he’d eventually have laugh lines. His eyes turned into half-moons of mischief and his forehead bunched up just a bit, too. He watched John laugh, then brush his fringe to one side and scratch at the side of his nose.

John Watson had a very specific nose shape, Sherlock thought to himself, but he couldn’t find the exact word he was looking for. Was the Champagne interfering with his brain and making it harder to think? He imagined a tide of the fizzy drink washing through the spongy tissue, flooding Broca’s area in the left hemisphere, where language was stored, drowning all the right words like slope and button and adorable. No, no no no, adorable was not in his vocabulary. Was it?

John was talking about Highland cattle and grazing, or something along those lines, but Sherlock was distracted by his inability to find the right words to describe John’s hands. Strong? Yes, that word was right. Cute? No. Agile? Maybe. Dexterous? Yes. Maybe. Sexy? Yes. That was the right word. God, what was wrong with him? He needed to focus on something other than John’s skin and fingers and eyes and smile and lips and ears and eyelashes.

He took another sip of his fourth glass of Grande Réserve Brut, slumped in the opposite directions of the bubbles and said, “Whoever came up with the idea of pairing Champagne with cheese is a genius.”

“I agree. Genius. It’s like they’re made by the cheese and wine gods to go together,” responded John, who had at that point consumed the equivalent of a bottle of Champagne.


“Sharp? Tangy and sharp?”
“Nooo. What’s the opposite of tangy?”

“Smooooth,” John drawled, moving his hand, palm down, over the length of the table.

“Yes. Tangy and smooth. Maybe they, whoever they are, are right.”

“‘Bout what?”

“Opposites attract.”

“So they say.”

“So I should probably not marry an eccentric chemistry post-doc with a penchant for solving crimes.”

John nodded, serious as could be.

“And I,” he said, holding up one finger, “should stay away from damaged army surgeons who can’t help people anymore.”

Sherlock put his glass down with a loud clink and scowled. “How dare you talk about yourself that way!”

John shrugged. “It’s true. The prodigal son returns home to his sole remaining family member, a sister who couldn’t give a shit about him, by the way, and he can’t walk without a cane, can’t work in the operating theatre, and isn’t much good to anyone at all.”

“You don’t need the cane anymore.” Sherlock noted that someone in the vicinity, maybe himself, was slurring.

“Thanks,” John said, pointing and squinting at Sherlock, “to you. You’re good for me.”

“You’re good for me, too. To me.”

“Am I?”

“Of course. My life is far more interesting with you in it.”

“Interesting?”

“When I spend time with you I see a different perspective. I see people the way you see them, and I’ve been told it’s not a bad thing to not always see people as idiots.”

“Not everyone is, you know.”

“Exactly. You aren’t an idiot, at least not most of the time.”

“Oi. Am I enough of a not-an-idiot to, eh, you know?”

“Have cheese with? Yes. Def’nitely.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Oh. What were you going to say?” Sherlock said, drawing circles on the tablecloth with his finger and looking up at John from under his lashes.

John planted one elbow on the table, narrowly missing a smear of brie, and rested his chin in his
palm. He leaned toward Sherlock and licked his lips, and then he whispered. “What would you say if I asked you, Sherlock Holmes?”

“If you asked me … what?” Sherlock’s heart started racing as if bursting out of his mouth was of topmost priority.

“To, you know. Marry me.”

Sherlock gulped the rest of the Champagne from the flute in his hand and tried to breathe.

“I think you know what I’d say.”

“Maybe I want to hear you say it. Give a guy some encouragement and all.”

“Maybe I need to hear the question first. Give a guy some hope and all.”

“You can’t possibly need any hope, Sherlock. I’m mad about you.”

“But you’re also dating another candidate.”

“I don’t have to be. I didn’t realise that maybe I didn’t need to be.”

“You don’t need to be.”

“That’s good to know.”

Sherlock took a mental step back and grabbed at all the words floating between them, shoved them all in a box in his mind palace, and stuck a post-it on top that said ‘for immediate and frequent review.’ When he resurfaced John was filling his glass with a freshly delivered bottle of Champagne.

“One for the road.”

“A whole bottle? I thought that saying usually referred to one drink.”

“We deserve a big drink. I feel great. I feel really fucking great right now. S’all because of you, Sherlock. You make me feel great.”

Sherlock blinked. He was hardly the kind of person who made other people feel great. “Really? That’s not what people usually say.”

“Don’t care what those plonkers usually say. They’re all wankers and idiots. You have this way of looking at me that just, I don’t know, it just makes me feel seen. Do you know what I mean?”

Sherlock did know, and it was a phenomenon he had only recently discovered. The sensation was different than being harped at by one’s family, or stared at by someone who thought you were a freak. It was an experience in which Sherlock felt pinned beneath a gaze, not inspected, but held close and appreciated, memorised, cherished. John made him feel special, so he said so. “Adored.”

“Adored?”

“I feel adored,” Sherlock said, fiddling with the fork on the tablecloth in front of him, “when you look at me. Especially the way you’re looking at me right now.” He burst into a huge grin then, the kind that took over his face and tripled his chins, but he couldn’t help it and he couldn’t care less.

“Well, that’s good, because I do ‘dore you. I do.”
John Watson adored him.

“Sherlock, I know you said you didn’t like to be touched, but I’d really love to kiss you right now. Can I kiss you?”

John Watson wanted to kiss him.

Sherlock’s nodding head said ‘yes’ before his brain could come up with an answer based on any reasonable analytical process. The table was between them though, and John was half out of his seat and straining over it when he laughed and started giggling. “Maybe we could go back to your place? And I could kiss you there? Would that be okay?”

Sherlock thought that sounded much better than sharing their first kiss over the remains of camembert and manchego, not to mention in view of the other patrons in the restaurant. “Yes. Let’s go.”

John settled up while Sherlock hailed a taxi, and before he knew it they were sitting in the back seat of a quiet cab, weaving their way back toward Baker Street. Thoughts of kissing hung between them, clouding the atmosphere with something thick and heavy. Sherlock stared out his window and tried to make room for the tension in his mind. Next to him, John shifted and brushed his pinky against Sherlock’s. Sherlock left his own hand there and let the warmth of that tiny part of John mingle and multiply with his own body heat, and he thought that it wasn’t so bad, touching John like this.

John didn’t move again for the duration of their trip, and by the time they pulled up in front of 221b, the effects of the alcohol had partially worn off, but Sherlock found he was still very much looking forward to his first kiss with John. He managed to get the door unlocked after two bungled attempts, then held the door open for John, waved his arm and said, “After you, Dr Watson.”

John started giggling and repeated the phrase, saying, “No, I insist, it’s your flat, after you, Mr Holmes.”

“No, you’re my guest, please,” Sherlock said, and so John crept up the stairs, still giggling. He stopped short of the door to Sherlock’s flat and stood aside so that Sherlock could let them in. Sherlock moved to take John’s coat, but he wasn’t wearing one as it was lovely outside, so he offered to take his jacket, instead. John shrugged out of it and handed it to Sherlock, and Sherlock folded it vertically and folded the sleeves along one side and then draped it over the back of the chair that faced his own in front of the fireplace.

“Would you like some more of that expensive stuff from Scotland?” Sherlock asked, trying hard to be the consummate host.

John crossed the room, shaking his head, and made a sound along the lines of ‘nuh-uh,’ before stopping right in front of Sherlock and getting a very serious look on his face.

“I haven’t forgotten, Sherlock. I still very much want to kiss you.”

“I haven’t forgotten, either.”

“And you’re still okay with it?”

“I’m okay with trying. I would very much like to try.”

“Sherlock. Has anyone ever kissed you before?”

Sherlock stuck his lower lip out and pouted while shaking his head. He could feel his curls swishing
back and forth. “No.”

“That is a ridiculous thing, Sherlock, that no one has ever kissed you before. Well, no, it’s not, because that means I get to give you your first kiss, and I am a very lucky man indeed.”

John stepped closer then and put his hands on the sides of Sherlock’s face. His touch was light, almost tentative, and when he pressed and slid his fingertips over Sherlock’s temples and cheekbones, Sherlock knew that he was meant to angle his head down toward John, so he did.

John angled up then, and Sherlock watched him stare at his lips, and watched as John seemed to follow his own gaze, moving closer and closer, never looking away from Sherlock’s mouth. When John closed his eyes Sherlock realised that his own vision was going blurry, so he closed his eyes, and then he felt it: just the slightest brush of firm and warm and soft over his mouth, and then a gentle pluck at his lower lip, his top lip, then a sliding between them, and a moist pulling away that made the smallest of slick sounds.

Sherlock kept his eyes closed and his lips parted and waited, because he hoped John would come back. He hoped he would, and he did, with a bump of their noses and a huff of breath and then another kiss, firmer this time, longer, and the angle was different, more insistent, so Sherlock experimented by turning his head a bit more to the side, and John hummed.

Sherlock was spinning with sensation, all of it yanking him out of his head and into physical feelings previously unexplored, close to all that he’d been afraid of. Still, Sherlock kept his eyes closed, and when John asked, “You okay?” he only nodded and hummed and John came back again, again and again. Sherlock felt the tip of John’s tongue slide along the edge of his lower lip so he opened his mouth more and brought his tongue out to meet John’s. John’s tongue was sweet and wet and only just flirting with his own, but that’s when he felt his mind skitter to a halt. He froze, and then John’s tongue was gone and John was smiling against his mouth.

“You’re perfect,” he said, and Sherlock opened his eyes and blinked back at this man who had just been kissing him and now was saying the impossible.

“Did I do it right?”

“Oh, Sherlock, how can you even ask me that?”

The kissing surrounded him, pulled him apart, set him buzzing in a way that had little to do with his mind and everything to do with his body. It startled him, how easily he could switch tracks like that and lose sight of what he most valued, the focused thinking by which he defined himself. It was only a handful of kisses and there he was, lost and floundering. If that’s what a kiss did, what would so much more touching do?

“John,” Sherlock said. “I think maybe you should leave now.”

“Are you sure?” John didn’t look upset or annoyed. He looked a little amused, maybe, and was still staring somewhat deliriously at Sherlock’s mouth.

“Yes. But thank you. This has been an exceptional evening. I’ve enjoyed it very much. Especially the kissing. But I think it’s enough for now.”

“Then enough it shall be. Thank you for, as you put it, a most exceptional evening. And be sure, Sherlock, you’ll be hearing from me again very soon.”

“I look forward to that, John.”
And with that, John retrieved his jacket from the back of the chair, slipped back into it, and walked to the door. When he got there he turned back to look at Sherlock, nodded his head, smiled, and then went down the stairs. Sherlock waited until he heard the front door close, and then he went to lie on the sofa and retreat into his mind palace. He had much to do.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to happierstill who makes the beta process a breeze!

Sherlock’s mind palace was in shambles. For weeks now, for months, he’d been throwing things through the front door, letting things land wherever they may. He stood just inside that door now and surveyed the scene before him. There were folders everywhere, some loose snapshots laying around on the floor, a couple of boxes. He stepped into the mess and picked up one of the photos closest to him. It was one of John at the concert a few weeks ago. John was holding a beer up to his mouth, and his lips were wrapped around the head of the bottle. The evening sun was glinting off his hair in a golden glow, and his eyelids were closed, his lashes laying on the silky skin above his cheekbones.

He collected the scattered photographs, taking only a minute to flip through them. He and John out to dinner, John laughing, John flirting, John listening with a rapt look on his face. He conjured up a box the colour of John’s hair, made it sturdy with silver grommets and a tight-fitting lid, and dropped the stack of photos into the bottom. They looked paltry there, and Sherlock realised he’d made the box so big so that he could add plenty more to it in the future.

Next, he picked up the box that he had created just that night for the conversation they’d had, the one where they’d danced around the question of a marriage proposal, with words like encouragement and hope and mad about you. Sherlock sorted out the words into the proper sentences, and then those sentences into the conversation itself. With a quick flick of his fingers, he turned the conversation into a short film, one he’d be able to watch over and over again. He wasn’t sure he could watch the kiss again in that moment, and wondered how watching it in his mind palace would affect him, since kissing John outside of it had led to a mental derailment.

Sherlock continued straightening up the space until he had put all the folders containing conversations into one box, and all the folders containing the logistics of their dates into another. Those, along with the box with the short film and the one containing the photographs were piled up against one wall. He looked around at the doors and hallways leading away from the foyer and decided to head into the wing that held his bedroom, where his most personal memories were stored. He summoned the boxes to follow him, and they floated behind as he walked toward the room.

Once there, he opened his walk-in closet and wandered in. The shelves there were already packed with childhood memories of him with each of his family members, including his now deceased grandparents and a few favourite aunts. No, this wouldn’t do, he thought, there wasn’t enough room. He turned and walked out and looked under his bed. Redbeard. No. John was special, but not to be confused or muddled with Redbeard.

The balcony was mostly free of clutter and he wished it to remain that way. The bathroom was spotlessly clean and stored only a few memories of the times throughout his life he’d been ill. He sighed. The solution was there, but he was reticent to admit it. John was going to need his own room. He shifted the desk facing the bed to the right by a few feet and created a new door. He imagined the room he would find behind this new door and added built-in shelves along the walls, a wood-framed, glass-topped showcase in the middle, and a daybed for resting when he would want to spend significant time in the space. Finally, he painted the walls of the room the exact colour of John’s
eyes, carefully edging around the two large south-facing, sun-filled windows.

When the room was ready, he opened the door and waved the boxes in. They were quickly sorted onto the shelves created to hold them. Sherlock crossed the room and opened the box of photos, pulled out one, and placed it in the middle of the otherwise empty showcase. He closed the glass top and blew a speck of dust off it, then stepped back to make sure that the photo was perfectly positioned in the middle. It was. His first kiss. His and John’s first kiss, everything saturated in warm tones of gold and pink for John, and ivory and ebony for Sherlock. He tapped the glass over the photo, turned on his heel, and left the room. He closed the door behind him.

Creating the new room wasn’t a new experience for Sherlock, but it was one that left him wondering how his current living situation would change if John proposed and he accepted. Certainly, he’d be expected to leave his family home and live with John. He made a mental note to ask John about his home and what space might be available for his laboratory equipment.

Next, Sherlock went to the chemistry labs in his mind palace, which were dusty with disuse. He flipped through some folders of old experiments he’d worked on and filed those away, then reviewed the work he’d been doing when he first met John. Would he be able to work after sending his brain spinning with that kiss? How long did the effects of physical touch on his thinking process last?

At its most basic, he knew, chemistry was the process of creating something new from two or more existing elements. You could mix two different elements to disastrous results, or mix two different elements and create something truly special. But in doing so, he knew, you lost the properties of each original element.

How much of himself would he lose by giving himself to someone else? Would he be expected to become someone lesser than who he believed himself to be now, through the process of compromise and sacrifice, or would his union with John create someone stronger and more complex due to the very same dynamics? And what about the intimacy? How was it possible to give so freely of absolutely everything one was and not be altered? To lose complete physical and mental control at the hands of someone else was against everything Sherlock valued. And yet, when he thought of John and his smile, his hands, his mouth, he understood why people did the things they did together.

Sherlock tidied away a few more things in his lab and made his way back to the front door. He shuttered windows behind him, turned off the lights, and locked the front door. His life's work and experiences to date were in this mind palace and he treated it as a precious repository to guard at all times.

He resurfaced in Baker Street to find it was already dawn; he'd been away for hours. Pulling a blanket off the back of the couch and covering himself against the chill, Sherlock drifted off to sleep with a plan to wake in the late morning, head home, and give Mummy the news she'd been waiting to hear. The green folders that had been so much a part of her life for the last two years might finally become a thing of the past. God knows what she'd find to fill her time next.

Of course, Sherlock should have known better. Mummy took the news of Sherlock's possible engagement with the excitement of any mother handed the gift of one of the biggest society weddings of the season. She'd already called two of her three preferred party planners when Sherlock reminded her that the proposal had not yet arrived.

“Poppycock, Sherlock. If what you said is true, there will be a proposal here within the week. We have work to do!”

Mummy went about making phone calls to caterers, landscape designers, and orchestras, and Sherlock skulked around trying to surreptitiously check the mail without looking too enthusiastic
while doing so, just in case someone did see him. Daddy tended to not notice much of anything unless it was right under his nose, and even then he had to sometimes be told what it was. Mycroft, on the other hand, was a different matter altogether.

“Do tell, little brother, when do you expect this proposal to arrive?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sherlock said as he rifled through some junk mail for men’s hair growth products and real estate agents. He tossed the men’s flyers in Mycroft’s direction and flounced off to his room. It had been three days, and there was still nothing in the mail for him.

On the fourth day, he got a text.

*Sorry you haven’t heard from me in a while. I’ve needed to take care of some business before taking care of some other business.*

Sherlock didn’t respond. Obviously something was getting in the way of John’s proposal, and Sherlock was frustrated with the situation, but mostly frustrated with himself, because who even was this person who had gone from holding the institution of marriage in such terrific disdain to one who stalked the mailbox and chewed on his fingernails as he waited for a proposal to join said institution?

A besotted one, apparently.

On the fifth day Sherlock received another text:

*Is it okay if I stop by tomorrow? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you and your parents. I’d rather they be there.*

Sherlock thought long and hard about why John needed to speak with his parents. It didn’t make sense. Only Sherlock would be required for a proposal, unless John planned on marrying all three of them. Sherlock thought about John’s recent silence and of his admission that he’d needed to take care of business. Perhaps that business was with the other person John had been dating? Perhaps he had proposed to *that* person.

Maybe John was going to apologise for leading Sherlock on, and withdraw his candidacy. It was the only thing that made sense. He even knew why John was withdrawing his candidacy. It was because of Sherlock’s issues with being touched. It was because he wouldn’t do more than exchange a few mostly-chaste kisses on their last date. He was frigid, and no one wanted a frigid partner.

*Come by if you must. SH*

*Are you all right?*

*As ‘right’ as can be expected. SH*

*I’m not sure what that means, but I’ll pop by around 2:00 p.m.*

Sherlock huffed and puffed all through dinner that night, until Mummy finally set down her wine goblet and demanded he tell them what kind of bee he had in his bonnet.

“I’m meant to tell you that John Watson will be calling at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh!” Mummy clapped her hands together. “Isn’t that good news? Why the long face?”

“Because he wants to meet with you and Daddy, not just me. He’s obviously calling it off.”

“Sherlock, for the love of God, you really can be an idiot sometimes.”
“Yes, so you’ve said. That’s no doubt why he’s calling it off.”

To prove how unfair he found the situation, he refused his dessert and retired to his bedroom early. After tossing and turning for hours, Sherlock finally wrestled sleep down to join him, and then dreamed of being rowed out into the middle of a silent sea and left there to die of boredom. He only slept for a few hours, waking well before dawn, and instead of lying in bed wallowing in his rejection, decided to head to his lab and work the hours away. That’s what he’d be doing for the rest of his life, wouldn’t it? Or, at least until the government found some so-called worthy object of his pitiable affections? Chemistry was what he had, and chemistry would not fail him. It never had, and it never would.

Sherlock lost himself in a complicated experiment involving the Briggs-Rauscher reaction, in which oscillating chemical reactions and their periodicity were used to tell time. He lost himself in his thoughts while working with the so-called chemical clocks and did not hear Mummy’s telltale clicking heels on the paving stones leading to the greenhouse or her voice calling for him until she was in the lab and all but screeching for his attention.

“SHERLOCK! Have you completely lost your mind? It’s two o’clock and here you are, covered in … in …”

Sherlock looked down at his smock. “Potassium iodate, malonic acid, and hydrogen peroxide.”

“Dear God above. I don’t care if you’re covered in liquid gold. Clean yourself up and come to the parlour. John is here and we’re all waiting on you.”

Sherlock untied his stained apron and tossed it over his lab stool, then gave his hands a cursory scrub and wiped them on his trousers. He threw on his wrinkled linen blazer and patted down the lapels. Into battle, then.

John stood up and grinned when Sherlock entered the parlour, then gave him a quick look-over and grinned even more. “Working in the lab?” he asked.

“Yes. I apologise for my tardiness.” Sherlock stood ramrod straight, ready for his rejection to be delivered. He would remain strong, he would be calm and stalwart in the face of John Watson’s departure.

“No problem,” John said, still grinning like an idiot. What was he grinning about? Breaking up with people was not a grinning matter.

Mummy was sat on the edge of a sofa and patted the empty space next to her. At first, Sherlock thought she meant for him to sit there, perhaps thinking that sitting by his mother would help soften the blow, but she looked at John as she did so and John nodded and took his place next to her. Sherlock sighed and took a seat in one of the wing-backed chairs next to the sofa, closest to John. He should be a part of the breaking up conversation, too, shouldn’t he?

Daddy wandered over from near the window he’d been standing at and sat down on the sofa across from Mummy and John, and once they were all seated John rubbed his hands together and blew out a loud breath. Yes, John, do take a deep breath, Sherlock scowled to himself, for what you are about to do is criminally unfair and you should be well-prepared when you commit your crime of abandoning me at a half-built altar.

“Thank you for seeing me this afternoon. I know that I could have met Sherlock privately, and I hope to have some time with him alone after this, but for now I felt it important that I make my intentions known to you, his parents, as it’s customary in my family to go about things a certain way.
“As you’re well aware, I’ve been dating Sherlock for several months now.” Here John stopped and grinned at Sherlock again. Good God, man. “I’ve had the great pleasure of getting to know more about him, and I find him to be uncommonly intelligent and good company, as well as insightful and engaging. He has a very dry sense of humour, which is exactly what I like, and, well, the bottom line is that he’s everything I could ask for in a partner.”

John paused here, and Sherlock counted the seconds leading up to the giant But…

“I don’t think I need to spend much more time with Sherlock at this point, really, to say what I need to say now. Mr and Mrs Holmes, may I ask for Sherlock’s hand in marriage?”

Daddy beamed, Mummy screeched and hugged John in a way that seemed entirely inappropriate, and Sherlock gaped.

“Excuse me, but what did you say?” he finally managed to ask.

“I asked your parents if I may seek your hand in marriage.”

“That’s not what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting?” John asked while gently prying Mummy’s arms off of his shoulders and fishing in his sport jacket pocket for a handkerchief to offer her.

“I thought you were going to break up with me.”

“Good God, Sherlock, why would I do that?”

“Because he’s an idiot, that’s why.” Mummy messily snotted into her tissue. “Darling, let’s have a toast, shall we?”

“It’s not a done deal yet, my dear,” Daddy said, but he moved toward the discreet bar set into a bookshelf across the room all the same.

“You aren’t breaking up with me?” Sherlock sat up a bit straighter. “By all means, let’s proceed.” Sherlock scooched to the end of his seat, and John dropped to his knees.

“Oh, my God,” Mummy snivelled. “It’s happening! It’s really happening!”

“Come here, Gloria, and give them their moment.”

“Sherlock, I know we haven’t known each other for long, and I know there are still things to learn about each other. To be honest, I hope there always will be. It would be my greatest pleasure to have you as my own—”

“Yes.”

“—to have and to hold in good times and in bad.”

“Yes.”

“So, Sherlock Holmes, would you do me the great honour of—”

“Yes.”

“—becoming my husband?”
“Yes. I will. I play the violin when I’m thinking. Sometimes I don’t talk for days on end. Would that bother you? Potential husbands should know the worst about each other.” Sherlock could barely see, his eyes were so scrunched up from smiling. He moved closer to John then, slipping right off the edge of his chair cushion, and landed on his knees facing John.

“Come here, you git,” John said, then grabbed Sherlock by his collar and pulled him forward. He kissed him on the side of his mouth and whispered in his ear, “I’d love to kiss you, Sherlock, really kiss you, but I want to be respectful of your privacy in front of your parents. Maybe later?”

“I think that can be arranged,” Sherlock murmured into John’s hair.

There was a clinking sound of a spoon on crystal as they both moved to sit on the couch and accept the short pours of whiskey Sherlock’s father was offering.

“To John and Sherlock! If you both have even half the happiness I’ve had with my Gloria, you’ll be endlessly happy, indeed!”

“Oh, love, always such the romantic!”

They made several toasts to marriage and each other, and to their families, including John’s absent sister and deceased parents, and when all was said and done Sherlock was warmed through with drink and affection, and John was still grinning like an absolute idiot.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by da bestest of the best: happierstill. Thank you!

Chapter Five: The Wedding

Section I: Planning

Each couple shall arrange a wedding that suits their needs and desires. Agencies shall provide planning assistance upon request. There are no requirements for a certain number of guests other than one officiant and two witnesses. Food may or may not be served. Music, entertainment, and the like is left to the discretion of the couple.

Section III: Filing with Your Agency

Each couple shall file a copy of their marriage license and certificate of marriage with their agency within thirty (30) days of their wedding ceremony. Please be sure that witness signatures have been obtained before submission. One photograph of the couple post-ceremony should be attached with a paperclip. No staples, please.

Mummy took care of everything and Sherlock was happy to let her do it. He had fought for a small, intimate gathering for about eight seconds, and then had given up. She wouldn’t hear of it, she said, not knowing that this was the only wedding she’d ever get to plan.

Mycroft’s was years ago, she said with a flap of her hand, and she hadn’t been allowed to help at all, despite her repeated offers, then requests, then dramatic pleas to be involved in planning that wedding. She still held a grudge against Mycroft’s mother-in-law, and seeing as how John had no mother to help him, she was thrilled to go double-duty and plan the entire event.

Every few days she would call Sherlock into her study and ask him to look at a colour swatch, or ask if he was free for a fitting or a tasting or something called a styling overview. Every once in a while, he would say he was absolutely not available, even though he almost always was. She would ask him to ask John things, too, which was a very convenient way for him to be in almost constant contact with his betrothed. Sherlock got to ask John for his measurements, his birthday, his grandparents’ names, his preference for quail over Cornish hen, the schools he attended, his class rank, his favourite wine, his favourite writers, quotes, artists, musicians, and so on and so forth.

A lot of the answers were already in John’s green folder, and Mummy probably assumed that’s where Sherlock was getting the information, but the truth was that Sherlock had taken the file and stuffed it in a desk drawer and not looked at it again, because it was so much better to send John texts, or talk on the phone, or pick his brain in person. Sherlock felt invested in getting to know John in a way he almost never had with anyone else. In his past, it had been easy, and best, to withdraw and not engage with anyone based on his assumption that the other person wouldn’t want to get to know him. Why waste his time? But John Watson was going to marry Sherlock, so he was very sure that John was going to be around long enough to get to know him, and vice versa.
There were quick answers that begged no follow-up (green, Hamish, Harriet Katherine, 157, Viognier, neither quail nor Cornish hen), and there were answers that required a little follow-up (3:00 p.m. or 5:30 p.m.?, chamber or sinfonietta?, with a C or a K?, but why the clarinet?), and then there were answers that made Sherlock want to tie John to a chair until he had told Sherlock absolutely every last detail.

Whereas Sherlock wasn’t terribly interested in John’s sister’s addiction or the process of her rehabilitation, he was interested in what may have been going on in John’s childhood home to cause Harry to pick up the bottle, and how those things may have impacted John.

Tell me about your childhood. SH

What part of it?

All of it. SH

Um… that would be a lot for a text.

I have time. SH

You tell me about your childhood.

Boring. SH

Turnabout’s fair play.

I was a precocious, privileged, pandered-to child. SH

A spoiled brat, you mean? ;)

And now I’m your spoiled brat. SH

Sherlock sent that last text before he could think too much about it, then wondered if it were too affectionately possessive for two people who didn’t know a lot about each other but were engaged to be married. John’s answer reassured him.

And I’m glad for it.

Over texts and late night phone calls, dinners and walks and chats at the occasional crime scene, Sherlock pieced together a fairly comprehensive picture of John as a child, teenager, and young adult. From what he could tell, it had been a near idyllic childhood up until a point. John spoke of a stable upbringing in a modest home in a suburb of London and summers spent at his grandparents’ ranch in Perthshire. He had wonderful memories, rich memories of those times spent with his grandparents, and even a few of his great-grandparents, who had lived with his father’s parents until passing away around the time John turned ten.

There were memories of walks through the low lying hills of the Highlands and along the River Tay, long strolls in view of the mountain Beinn a’ Ghlò and its three Munros, and stories that his grandmother told him of growing up on a cattle ranch, of the calves she helped birth, of going to dances as a young girl, and of meeting his grandfather at such a dance.

John and Harriet, or Harry as she now liked to be called, had been close then, good friends as well as siblings. His parents had been good parents, too, affectionate with their children and with each other. Sherlock could see all of these foundations in the man that John had become, loyal and affectionate, kind and strong, as well as a good storyteller.
It wasn’t until his teenage years that things began to fall apart for the Watson family. In one short evening of card playing, influenced by a bout of drinking, his father’s father had gambled away first the herds of cattle and then the land, stopping short of the estate itself only when he passed out in front of his bottle. That was when things began to go south in the Watson household. John’s father grieved the loss of what he thought would, at some point, become his own prosperity. Secrets of great debt were uncovered and his parents began to argue. John’s father began to drink more, and then more and more again, until it seemed he was rarely ever sober.

Harry came out of the closet soon after, and John’s father channelled all of his rage and disappointment onto the younger sibling. John tried his best to protect her from their father’s emotional abuse, but Harry retreated further and further from the family, moving out when she was only seventeen and severing ties with her parents. They never did resolve their differences before they passed away, and in her grief, Harry, too, began to drink until she was unable to maintain her relationship with her wife, or hold a job, or get through the most basic of daily activities. John was glad she had never had children because he couldn’t imagine what their lives would be like now.

Sherlock would’ve been able to deduce that John wanted to be a doctor even if his relationship with his sister was all he ever knew about the man; watching beloved grandparents pass away and caring for an alcoholic sister tended to create a need to help in men like John. What intrigued Sherlock, however, was that John had wanted to be a doctor in the army.

It was enough to tell Mummy, when she asked, “Captain in the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers,” but Sherlock needed to know so much more than that, and preferably the information would be accompanied by pictures of John in his uniform.

_I need to know more about your time in the Army._ SH

_Like what?_

_Like everything._ SH

_That might take a while._

_We have a while._ SH

John explained, half-amused, half-exasperated, that without his grandparents’ financial rock to depend on, John hadn’t been able to afford medical school. The army had offered him education and training in exchange for service, and a deal was made in which everyone benefited.

But had John wanted to go into an active war zone, Sherlock wanted to know, because wasn’t that a fascinating dynamic if true? And John had wanted to, very much, he explained, because that’s where those who were doing the most good for others would be the most in need, and that’s exactly what John had been looking for. Getting shot in the shoulder, well, not so much, but not everything could always work out for the best, could it?

_What was war like? _SH

_I cannot possibly talk about this in a text, Sherlock. Let’s have dinner tonight._

_What were you doing when you were shot? _SH

_Trying to save the life of someone who died after I was shot._ Dinner?

_I’m sorry. I’m not sure why I’m saying that, as I wasn’t there, but I am sorry._ SH
Thank you. Dinner?

Were you aware of what was happening to you after you were shot? SH

Not very. I was sure I was done for. DINNER?

What were your final thoughts when you thought you were dying? SH

Please, God.

Am I that annoying? SH

No, I meant that’s what my final thoughts were.

Oh. Did you hallucinate? SH

I did, about the gorgeous nurses taking very, very good care of me.

There will be no more gorgeous nurses, John. Should you need care that I cannot provide I shall hire absolute ogres to care for you. SH

Good to know. Good thing I had Bill and the others when I had them, then.

Who is Bill? SH

A gorgeous nurse. ;)

I'm not sure I like this Bill. Yes, let’s have dinner. SH

No, Sherlock thought, things did not always work out for the best, at least not in the moment, but he was selfishly and somewhat guiltily happy that John had been sent home because it turned out to be working out the best for him.

John had come home and found Harry even worse off than she’d been when he left. He couldn’t move her into his small army bedsit, but he could check her into rehabilitation, and so despite her arguments and resentment she eventually agreed and allowed herself to be admitted. Sherlock wanted to believe that he’d be as selfless as John when it came to caring for a sibling in such distress, but he couldn’t imagine Mycroft ever asking for help, let alone needing it. Mycroft had always been in control and in charge of those around him, whether they wanted him to be or not. Sherlock had been on the controlled end of things many times and would prefer to never be there again.

And so, the wedding planning went on, and Sherlock gleaned what he could about his husband-to-be, but was less forthcoming with information about himself. What was there really to tell, he thought to himself, other than the most important bits that John already knew? Sherlock had gone to the best grammar schools and colleges, had studied postdoctoral chemistry at Cambridge, and then fashioned himself into a consulting detective for New Scotland Yard.

He had one very annoying older brother who claimed to play a minor role in the government despite practically running it and several others, and both his parents were still alive. While John had summered in Scotland, Sherlock had summered in France, and as a result, he spoke French fluently, as well as six other languages. Sherlock was good at languages. Sherlock was good at just about everything, including being the youngest student to ever receive his postdoctoral from Cambridge, playing the violin, and avoiding marriage until he ran right into one John Hamish Watson.

He was good at everything, perhaps, except relationships. John didn’t need to know about that,
though, and he most certainly didn’t need to know about Victor. That was all in the past.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Thank you, happierstill, for everything!

“The other thing she needs from us is our guest list, John. I have no one to invite, so currently, my side includes three hundred assorted relatives and family friends that I have absolutely no interest in seeing.” Sherlock stared at the uniformed foot guard across the park from where they were sat on a bench.

“I can give you my list right now: Harry, if she’s out of rehab by then, Bill Murray, Mike Stamford, and James Sholto.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“You’ve mentioned Bill before, but who are the other two?”

“Mike is a friend, someone I studied with at Bart’s Hospital before I went to Afghanistan. I ran into him in the park when I got back and we had coffee. He’s actually the one who helped me get going with the Programme application. I wasn’t going to do it but he was quite encouraging and helpful. James Sholto was my commanding officer. We were quite close for a while. I’ll text you their names and addresses right now.”

John pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket and started typing.

“You haven’t mentioned James before.” There was something in the way John had said ‘quite close’ that made Sherlock sit up a bit straighter.

“He’s had a spot of trouble recently so I haven’t seen him for a while. I’m not sure if he’ll come, but I’d like to invite him.”

Sherlock felt a little tingle move up his spine at the mention of the word ‘trouble.’

“What kind of trouble?”

“He led a group of new recruits into battle. It’s standard procedure, but they were ambushed by Afghan infantry and all of the recruits died. James was the only one who survived. He’s been hounded by death threats from family members of those who died, and as such has been living the life of a recluse since he came home. From what I hear, he also sustained some disfiguring injuries in the battle.”

Sherlock glanced at John and took note of the expression on his face. Dismayed, sad, angry. “And you haven’t seen him since he came back?”

“He doesn’t want to see me. Or anyone, really. But I’d still like to invite him.” Sherlock’s phone pinged as John slipped the phone back into his pocket.
“Of course. You can invite anyone you’d like. The more the merrier,” Sherlock said, although he was thinking that James Sholto didn’t sound very merry. “Someone needs to balance out the hordes of strangers Mummy is inviting.”

“It means a lot to your mother,” John said, looking away from the foot soldier long enough to smile at Sherlock. “You should let her invite who she wants.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes, John. It’s a wedding, not a coming out party. Are we going to let her decorate our flat for us too, just because it would mean a lot to her?”

John giggled and rubbed his thumb over Sherlock’s knuckles on the bench between them. “It really is sort of a coming out party, if you think about it. But no, of course not. This is different than decorating, though. Moms dream of this stuff from the time they first have kids, or so I’ve been led to believe. And it’s only one day, albeit a really big one.”

Sherlock watched the tourists come and go and pose next to the soldier they were watching. “It’s our day. We should be able to do whatever we want. We should be able to sneak away and sign the papers and have it be done if we so choose. John, maybe we should do that, and then she could just throw a big party.”

“Sherlock, we’ve discussed this, and we’ve agreed that it doesn’t really matter to either of us, right? She could march us up to the altar on goddamn African elephants if she wanted and it really wouldn’t matter.”

Sherlock shuddered. “God, hush your mouth. If she ever heard that she’d steal the idea. Have you seen what elephant dung does to a lawn?”

“Well, no. But that’s not my point. My point is that she’s going to have control of a few short hours —”

“She’s planned a three-day weekend for over three hundred people!”

“—of which we only need to show up for a small part, and then the rest of our lives are ours to do with what we please.” John bumped Sherlock’s shoulder with his own and squeezed his hand.

Sherlock felt the small tremor-like vibration move down his arm and into the hand that John was now holding. He pulled his mind back to the topic of the wedding, as it appeared that his hand and its vibrations had very little to contribute to his thought processes.

“Fine. But now she’s started to talk about the honeymoon, too, John.”

John’s eyes went wide and he stared at Sherlock with a look of mock horror on his face. “The honeymoon? Oh, well that’s just not on. No. I’ve already got plans for the honeymoon.”

“You do? Why didn’t you say anything? What are they?”

“It’s a surprise. A gift to you, of sorts.”

“Is it a trip? Tell me.”

“Do you not know the meaning of the word ‘surprise’? Let me talk to your mother. I’ll make sure she leaves the honeymoon plans well enough alone. And I’m not telling you another word, so don’t even ask.”

“Fine,” Sherlock huffed. He watched a tourist with a camera crowd up against the foot soldier and
take a number of photographs that seemed too close for comfort, then zip up a camera bag that looked better suited to holding a violin than a DSLR.

“Our foot soldier is getting off duty and his life is very much in danger. You go help him, and I’ll nab our would-be murderer.”

“You’ve solved it?”

“Just now.”

“Brilliant.”

That night, Sherlock laid awake and tried to deduce where they might go for their honeymoon. He could rule Afghanistan right out, he was sure of that. John had expressed interest in Sherlock’s childhood summers in France, but John was too down-to-earth for the French culture’s flair for drama. No, John liked straightforwardness. That would also rule out Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece.

Perhaps they were going to Germany? Sherlock hoped not. The United States? He really, really hoped not. Scandinavia? No, he just couldn’t see them there. Iceland might be interesting. What was the crime rate like in Iceland? Would John let him solve crimes on their honeymoon?

His thoughts were stalled by a ping to his phone; he had tried to record and use John’s giggle as his text alert, but John had figured out what he was doing and thwarted his efforts.

*Have you given any more thought to what we talked about this afternoon?*

*I still posit that chocolate ganache is better than vanilla cream. SH*

*Not that, you git. :)*

:*--} It is, though. Yes, I forgot to tell you but I talked to Mummy and Daddy and they said it was fine for us to live at 221b Baker St. SH*

*I’m still a bit uncomfortable with the thought of moving into your family’s home, Sherlock.*

*I’t not my family’s home. It’s my family’s pied-à-terre and they never step foot there now that I’ve made such a mess of it. SH*

*Yes, there’s also that.*

*I could maybe just straighten it up a little bit. SH*

*I want to be able to provide a place for you to live. I’m not feeling like a good provider.*

*Don’t even start with that nonsense, John Watson. I’m not your wife, nor am I your wife-husband, or any other expression that would encapsulate some set of stereotypical gender roles in which you provide for me and I flounce around in fuzzy house slippers and recreate meals from Julia Childs’ cookbook which we would then eat by candlelight. SH*

*That sounds kind of nice, though.*

*Shut up. SH*

*Just kidding.*
John, as we’ve discussed, you made it into this tier of the Programme on your family name and history, not on your assets, and I made it into this level of the Programme, well, on family name *and* assets, I suppose. But anyway, my point is that if we’re going to be married it doesn’t really matter who’s the proposer and who’s the proposee. We’ll be married and make these decisions together. SH

Yes, okay, but there are containers of acid in the kitchen cupboards at 221b.

I will clean those out. Mrs Hudson said she may let me use the upstairs bedroom as a lab if I need the space. SH

No chemicals in our bedroom, either, please.

As if I’d ever … well, yes, okay. Fine. SH

Okay. We’ll live at 221b. I can’t move you into this dismal bedsit, that’s for damn sure.

Stop worrying and go to sleep. Meet me at NSY tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. SH

What’s happened now?

Beheadings. SH

Brilliant. Can’t wait.

Sherlock put his phone down and let his head rest against the back of the armchair he was sitting in. What would it be like, he and John living together at Baker Street? Despite it being his family’s flat, he was really the only one who ever spent any time there. Over the years he had transferred everything Mummy didn’t want in Oxfordshire to 221b and the space had become more and more cramped with mismatched furniture, stacks of chemistry journals, cold case files, newspaper clippings, shelves upon shelves of books, odd specimens, laboratory equipment, and of course, the skull that she had absolutely refused to let him bring into the house. For the love of all that was sacred, he reflected, it wasn’t as if he’d tried to bring home a wild animal. It was a skull, its owner long-deceased.

Sherlock thought about the bedroom at 221b, with its double bed and single armoire and dresser. Would John have a lot to bring with him? Would he mess up Sherlock’s sock index? Would he allow Sherlock to make a sock index for him? These were the nitty-gritty matters of marriage, weren’t they? He envisioned an extra toothbrush next to his and what it would be like to share the sink in the morning as they both shaved, jostling around each other for towels and hair product. It felt … cautiously comfortable to have that type of companionship, and it didn’t hurt that the companionship was going to come packaged in the shape and form of one attractive doctor-soldier, John Watson.

And what of the bigger issues? He was going to see John naked when John moved in. Well, actually, he’d see John naked the first night of their married life, wouldn’t he? And the only reason John would be naked would be because they would be expected to have sexual relations, and what was Sherlock going to do about that? He’d have to be naked, too. Oh, there’d be so much skin-to-skin contact, and Sherlock wasn’t sure he’d be able to cope with that, not if it meant ceding control of his body to John and losing control of his mind.

He had talked to John about it, but only just a little bit. John had known since the beginning of their courtship that Sherlock didn’t like to be touched but Sherlock had never fully explained why. And how could he? How could he explain the kinds of things that were likely to happen if he gave
himself over to feelings of passion? It was a nightmare waiting to happen. He was going to have to talk to John before the wedding and establish some expectations. Sherlock took a deep breath and typed a text.

Are you still awake? SH

Yes, even though you told me to go to bed. ;)

We need to discuss sex. :-o SH

Sherlock let out the breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding.

Don’t worry about sex, Sherlock.

I’m not sure how you can say that when you don’t know what my precise worries are. SH

What are your precise worries?

That’s what we need to talk about. SH

OK. Do you want to talk about them now?

I don’t know. Yes. Maybe. I don’t want you to have very high expectations of me. Bad things happen when I have sex. SH

I thought you said you hadn’t had a lot of experiences? Which is fine, by the way. And fine if you have. It’s all good.

I haven’t. Because of the bad things that will happen. SH

Sherlock. Please don’t worry about this. I’m not going to do anything to you that would make something bad happen. I’m never going to hurt you or ask you to do something that you don’t want to do. We can take it slow.

You don’t know that nothing bad might happen. SH

I do.

We can discuss this another time. Go to sleep. SH

Okay. ZZzzzz

What is that? SH

Me sleeping.

For the love of God. SH
The doorbell rang in the middle of a dream Sherlock was having about a dominatrix and a plane full of dead people. His brain incorporated the sound into the dream, signalling that the plane’s intercom system had been activated. The second time it rang he woke up and thought Mrs Hudson was ignoring the door. The third time it rang he remembered that he wasn’t at 221b, and wondered if anyone was going to answer it. The fourth time it rang he got out of bed, wrapped his sheet around his naked body, and went to open it himself.

Scratching his head and tugging the sheet tighter around his waist, he yawned and opened the front door. It was John. John was at his door on an early Friday morning.

“Oh, my God, you are adorable when you first wake up.”

“I am not adorable. What are you doing here?”

“You are the most adorable thing I have ever seen. Can I come in? I won’t stay long.”

Sherlock stepped back and opened the door as wide as it would go, yawned again and checked his sheet. He closed the door behind John and shuffled into the second parlour, which was more casual and family-friendly than the first parlour. He gestured to the couches and then flopped down on one, taking it up in its entirety.

“Can we get some tea?”

“TEA!” Sherlock bellowed.

John got up and walked to the button panel near the door frame, pressed it, and went back to sit on the couch across from Sherlock who was close to falling asleep again.

“Wake up, love.”

Sherlock shot one eye open. What had John just said?

“What?” John said while he twiddled his thumbs and looked anywhere but at Sherlock.

“What did you just say?”

“I told you to wake up.”

“But what else?”

“I asked for tea.”

Sherlock opened both eyes and sat up. He stared at John through eyes squinted with concentration. John was nervous. Was John nervous? Why was John nervous? Was John nervous because he had said something he wasn’t ready to say, or because he was ready to say it but wasn’t sure how
Sherlock would receive it? Or, maybe he just couldn’t really be himself until he’d had his tea?

They sat, Sherlock looking at John, John looking around the room and clearing his throat, until the tea came, and then John poured and stirred and sipped and took a deep breath, relaxed his shoulders, and said, “I just really wanted to see you today, because tradition says I’m not supposed to see you the day of the wedding and I figured now might be my best chance.”

“We’re not supposed to see each other tomorrow?”

John pulled out a battered copy of the BIG-SAM, thumbed through the pages, and read the relevant section.

Chapter 9: The Wedding

Section II: The Day of the Wedding

*Your Agency highly encourages you to follow certain longstanding traditions regarding your wedding day. Doing so will allow you to reflect back on your special day with the knowledge that you participated in a beautiful rite of passage …*

“Blah blah blah, let me just get to the relevant part here,” John said, skimming the passage until he found what he was looking for.

... *that a couple not see each other before the ceremony on the day of the wedding for fear of bringing bad luck onto their union. Under no circumstances should a couple spend …*

“Never mind, that doesn’t pertain to us,” John finished.

“What doesn’t pertain to us?” Sherlock asked.

“Spending the night before the wedding together. You know, it smacks of a throwback to virginal brides and all that nonsense. Just ignore it.”

“But we could have been spending all of our nights together up until now, and tonight, too, considering how much disdain I have for that ridiculous guide, had I not been so …”

“So what?”

“So frigid.”

“You're not frigid. Who cares if we could have been? We could have been sleeping on the roof of St. Bart’s Hospital, too, if we wanted, but we didn’t want that, so it doesn’t matter.”

Sherlock worried at the hem of his sheet and took a sip of his tea, then set the cup down in its saucer and pushed it away from him. “But can you honestly say that you wouldn’t have liked that, spending your nights beside me?”

“I can honestly say that what I want most is what’s going to make you the most comfortable, okay? And after tomorrow night we will be spending our nights together, right? If you want to, I mean.” John sipped his tea.
“Right. Of course.”

“Okay, so I came here to see you again because I won’t see you tomorrow before the wedding.”

“We could.”

“Well, we could, but to be honest I tend to be a bit superstitious and I’d rather not risk any bad luck if it’s all the same to you. You can take the garter toss and cake-feeding and all that other shite and shove it, but I’d rather not see each other tomorrow until the ceremony.”

“Garter toss?”

“Well, we won’t have one, but it’s a tradition when there’s a bride. Have you actually read the BIG-SAM?”

Sherlock sighed. “I’ve read the parts that I’ve needed to when the occasion has arisen, but I try not to. What other traditions are we suffering through tomorrow?”

“Hasn’t your mother given you a run down?”

“There’s a memo around here somewhere.”

“Of course there is.”

Sherlock picked up his violin and plucked at the strings, letting the weight of it in his hands settle and soothe his feelings about nights not spent together and the absurdity of wedding traditions.

“Will you play something for me?”

“If you’d like.”

“I would. Very much.”

And so Sherlock did. He stood, tightened his sheet so it wouldn't fall, and played for John, picking music as he attempted to analyse and sort his feelings for the man sitting across from him. He started with Samuel Barber’s Violin Concerto, with its slow and inquisitive opening movement, but quickly abandoned it for the bold and forward first movement of Antonin Dvorak’s Violin Concerto. Immediately after that, he launched into the heart-achingly beautiful middle movement of Max Bruch’s Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, then spun himself into Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D Major, with its jaunty and somewhat intense cadenza breaking up his underlying contemplative mood.

He played with his eyes closed, swaying as one with his violin, letting the music flow through and out of him. Exhausted, wrung-out, fearing he’d played his heart right off his sleeve and into John’s hands, he abruptly stopped, laid his violin and bow down on the desk and took a deep breath.

He heard John take one of his own. “Can I kiss you?”

Sherlock stared at his violin, then at John, and then sat down next to his unfinished cup of tea. Kiss? Kiss. “Yes.”

John put his own tea down and stood up, then came to sit next to Sherlock in his sheet with his fuzzy just-woken-up looks and his half-drunk cup of tea. He put his hand on Sherlock’s wrist where it rested on his thigh and smiled at him. “You’re quite talented, you know.”

“So I’ve been told.”
“And I think you’re quite gorgeous as well.”

“You do?”

“I do. Very much. Is this okay?” John ran his hand up Sherlock’s forearm, over his bicep, and let it rest on his shoulder.

Was it okay? It seemed okay. “It’s fine.”

John’s hand squeezed Sherlock’s shoulder and he leaned in a little closer, then licked his lips as he stared at Sherlock’s mouth. It was hard to not lick his own lips with John staring as he was. Sherlock blinked.

John moved forward. “You’re going to be my husband.”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I’m going to be your husband.”

John came in closer and pressed his soft, warm, lips against Sherlock’s and Sherlock’s brain went completely offline almost immediately. He pressed back, just a nudge of his chin at first, and then a tilt, pressing harder against John’s lips. John hummed and opened his mouth just the slightest bit, and Sherlock tried his hardest to block out all other thoughts. Just a bit more. Just a bit more … lips …

John’s hand was firm and hot against the nape of Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock had no idea what his own hands were doing. There was just his mouth on John’s mouth, and the tip of his tongue being incredibly brave and fresh and reaching out to touch the tip of John’s tongue. The contact was delicious and completely to the exclusion of everything else in the world. Sherlock was sure he couldn’t come up with one single thought other than John’s mouth.

There was a noise, a slick wet noise, and then a vocalisation, something slightly more than a hum, maybe a moan, and the flesh on flesh sound of John’s hand roaming around the side of Sherlock’s neck, wandering over Sherlock’s jaw and cheek. Sherlock leaned into John’s palm and opened his mouth more, and John leaned in closer and did the same. John’s tongue was exploring and Sherlock gave it free access.

Sherlock felt the thoughts coming and tried his hardest to think of only the kiss. His mind wandered close to a thought about marriage, something about a wedding, a wedding to a man named John Watson, his John Watson, and then something else about the guest list, about … he couldn’t help it, he reached for it … something about John’s family. Brother? No. Sister.

Sherlock broke the kiss but couldn’t close his mouth in time to stop the words.

“Your sister won’t come to the wedding because she’s an alcoholic and she’s in rehab.”

Shit.

John stared at him.

He’d done it again. He’d gone offline, said something inappropriate, messed it all up, and now John was going to stand up and walk out and there would be no wedding, no marriage, no nothing.

John laughed. “Yeah, I figured as much, but if that’s what you’ve deduced then I guess it’s probably
what’s going to happen. Can I kiss you some more?”

“That might not be a good idea. The more you kiss me the more I’m going to say things.”

“I don’t care.”

Now Sherlock’s brain was in serious trouble because if John did not care, and John kissed Sherlock, and Sherlock’s brain continued to jump the rails, God knew what he might say. He could say anything, everything, rude things, thoughtless things, dangerous things.

“Yeah, the blinking is getting a bit weird now.”

“Kiss me once more, then help me find Mummy’s memo about what we’re supposed to do tomorrow.”

John kissed him again, long and sweet, and Sherlock noticed that although his brain was skipping around like a scratched-up record, his body was falling into a smooth groove of buzzing heat. It was hard to not want more and that was new to him. It was easier to not want at all than to deal with these confounded emotions and physical sensations. Why was this different with John? Why did he melt into these tingles and chills and physical floods with John, when it had always been so abhorrent a thought before?

Sherlock tested his thought processes. He allowed himself to feel John’s hand sliding down his arm, allowed himself to be aware of the way John was gripping his hand and twining their fingers together, then he tried to have a coherent thought. Nope.

John pulled away with a last lick at Sherlock’s lower lip, then smiled at him. “You’re amazing. I could kiss you forever. Thank you for letting me.”

Sherlock blushed, he was sure of it, then cleared his throat and made some noise about finding that memo.

John just sat there and grinned at him, then cleared his own throat and patted his knees. “Okay, the memo. Let’s find that, figure out what the day holds tomorrow and say goodbye until then, shall we?”

Sherlock nodded and did a quick scan of the parlour from where he was sat on the couch. Perhaps it was in the library? He stood to head in that direction and it was then he realised he was still wearing only a sheet. No wonder John was grinning like a kid let loose in a candy shop. Sherlock smiled to himself and set off for the library with John trailing behind, no doubt enjoying the view of the ever-drifting sheet over his backside.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is about twice as long as the usual ones, but it's THE WEDDING!
I'm posting this from my phone while sitting in a pub on Achill Island, Ireland. Remote doesn't begin to describe it.
Thank you, happierstill!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the end, the memo was moot, because Mummy and her event planners frog-marched Sherlock through the day of the wedding without regard for free time or free will. From the time they woke him up until the time he stood at the foot of the aisle, it was Sherlock come here, Sherlock do this, Sherlock do that, Sherlock put that down, Sherlock hold this, be still, stand straight, and stop fidgeting!

When he had two seconds of time to himself he spent it staring out his bedroom windows at the circus taking over the garden. There were tents for musicians, tents for caterers, tents for cocktails, and tents for meals. There was barely a spot of green left on the massive lawn and what he could see was crawling with carpenters, electricians, and other assorted workers. Inside, the house was overtaken by hired staff to oversee everything from baking to boutonnieres, candles to cakes. Sherlock let it wash over him, imagining himself as the one fixed boulder in a rushing stream.

Mummy was having a field day.

“No, no, no, Lindsey! The centrepieces need to stay in the shade until the last moment! Jessica, tell the ice sculpture people to use the freezer in the garage! Margo, where on earth are you going with the candle bowls? Bring them right back to the kitchen so the florist can finish them! Isabel, Abby, what did I say about letting the musicians in the house? Thomas, get control of your people, and you, Kate, tell the caterer we’ve had four last minute cancellations but ten last minute additions. Juliet, if you have time to lean you have time to clean! Go find Tana and tell her the limousine hasn’t arrived yet!”

Sherlock sat at the kitchen island and let someone file and buff his nails while the florists bustled around him with stalks of white dendrobium and delphinium. When Sherlock’s father walked in, Sherlock raised his free hand in a gesture of surrender, and he came and sat next to him.

“Bit of a spectacle she’s putting on here, wouldn’t you say, Son?”

“She’s certainly in her element, but it’s all a bit much. I just plan on showing up when she tells me to.”

“The chaos may be a bit overwhelming but at the end of it all, it’s a big day for you, Sherlock. We want you to look back fondly on it for a long time to come.”

“I know, but you also know that John and I would’ve been just as happy going to the village clerk and having this done in less than five minutes.”
“I know, I do. In case I forget to tell you later, I’m very proud of you.”

“For what?”

“Everything. You’ve made your mother and me very proud with your studies and your work with New Scotland Yard, and now with your choice of spouse. I know marriage was never on your radar and I know that arranged marriage was even further from your mind. In a way, though, I think it’s good, considering how you’ve always said that love is a paralytic and all that. You know I don’t agree, but if marriage had to happen for you, then I think it’s best that you found someone you like as much as you like John.” His father stood up and rested his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Well, we’re getting close to starting time, I think. I’m going to go get my monkey suit on.”

“Okay.” Sherlock watched his father start to walk away. “Oh, and Dad? Thank you for everything.”

“You are most welcome, Sherlock.”

When Sherlock’s nails were perfectly manicured, someone came and fussed over his hair, and when each curl was perfectly placed someone else came in, tapped her pencil on her clipboard, glanced at him, checked something off, glanced again, checked off something else, and said, “All right, then. It’s time for you to get dressed. Ethan is waiting for you in your bedroom and will help you with your morning suit.”

“I hardly need help getting dressed.”

“Talk to your mother about it.” The woman with the clipboard flipped her hair over her shoulder and disappeared down the hallway.

Sherlock made his way to his room where he immediately dismissed Ethan. “Into battle, then,” he said, taking the suit out of his armoire and holding it at arm’s length. He slipped out of his robe and pulled on his crisp white shirt, stepped into his striped grey trousers, and did up the buttons of his light lavender waistcoat. He knotted his matching tie and pulled on the darker grey cutaway tailcoat.

In all that was yet to come, he would keep his eye on John and let the rest fall away. Mummy would march him up the aisle and insist on several hundred photographs before serving a seven-course meal, but as far as he was concerned, this was about him and John, and only him and John.

Mummy rapped on the door a moment later and came in with his boutonniere.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she said as she set the bound rosebuds on the desk. “This is why I sent Ethan up here to help you. It looks like a capuchin tied your tie. Come here.”

Sherlock did as he was told and let her undo and retie his tie, then fix the boutonniere into his buttonhole. She patted his lapels and smiled.

“I never thought I’d see the day, Sherlock.”

“To be honest, neither did I.”

“Are you happy, dear?”

“Happy? I suppose so. I like John and I think we have a lot in common. If the rest doesn’t come, at least we have that.”

“The rest?”
“Love and all that. You and Daddy married for love. I haven’t been given the same opportunity.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in love?”

“True enough.”

Mummy stepped back and gave him an appraising once over. “Well, then. We’ll start shortly. John’s car arrived not ten minutes ago. Do not eat or drink anything and do not go anywhere. Are you listening to me?”

Sherlock nodded.

“Excellent. Someone will be up for you soon. You remember what to do?”

Sherlock nodded. He had no idea what he was supposed to do.

Mummy sighed and took a glance around the room. “Where’s my memo? Do you need a reminder?”

“Possibly, I do.”

“It was on page seven. You and John will enter from opposite ends of the veranda and meet at the start of the aisle. You’ll be preceded by two flower girls and two ring bearers. When you get to the top of the aisle you’ll stop and face each other. The bishop will guide you from there. Clear?”

“Yes, Mummy.”

“All right, I’m off to find your father and take our seats. Oh, and Sherlock?”

“Mummy?”

“I love you.”

“I … thank you, Mummy. I’m quite fond of you at times, as well,” Sherlock said with a wink.

Mummy shook her head and laughed as she closed the door behind her, leaving Sherlock to stand there in his wedding suit. He went back to the windows and peered outside. He had a perfect view of the rows of chairs that had been set up and were now filled with guests in all manner of colourful dresses, hats, and fascinators. Between the two sections was the white satin aisle running up the centre to the altar. Mummy had somehow arranged for a trellis of white roses and ivy to stand where there’d never been a trellis before. It would perfectly frame him and John as they said their vows.

It was all a bit disgusting, he thought to himself.

Sherlock gave himself another few minutes to gather his thoughts and focus his attention on the fact that he’d be seeing John shortly, then made his way downstairs and to the door leading to the veranda. His parents were nowhere in sight.

“You’re up next, sir,” said a young woman who materialised at his side. She, like everyone else, was holding a clipboard.

Sherlock took a deep breath. Outside, his parents’ processional march came to an end and Bach’s *Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring* started. The woman next to him whispered, “Off you go, sir! Good luck!” Sherlock stepped out onto the veranda. Across the length of it stood John, dressed almost exactly like Sherlock but for a navy blue tie and waistcoat.

Meeting in the middle, John looked up at him and smiled the biggest smile Sherlock had seen yet,
and Sherlock couldn’t help but grin in return. No doubt the photographer was getting fantastic shots of his quadruple chin, but he found he couldn’t have cared less.

“Hello, handsome,” John said.

“Hello, John. You look quite well yourself.”

“Thank you. Are you ready for this?” John nudged his chin toward the seated guests and the trellis beyond them.

“It’s all a little over the top, isn’t it?” Sherlock watched the flower girls and ring bearers toddle their way up the aisle. The girls were tossing flower petals in front of them, leaving a trail of pink and peach that John and Sherlock would walk over. One of them was being rather over-enthusiastic about it, alternating between throwing handfuls of the floral confetti over her head and bombing fistfuls of it toward the ground.

“A bit, yeah.”

The woman with the clipboard cleared her throat somewhat aggressively, so with a roll of his eyes John turned and held out his hand for Sherlock to take. Sherlock assumed his position next to him and placed his hand in John’s. Following the flower girls and ring bearers before them, they began their walk up the aisle.

Sherlock was aware of everyone’s eyes on him and John, but he kept his own eyes forward and concentrated on the feel of John’s steady arm against his and the progression of their footsteps. The music swelled and receded as they reached the altar and took their places facing each other. Sherlock heard his mother sniffle and rummage through her purse, probably for a tissue.

The bishop began to blither on about love and honour, and then there was something about John’s courage and bravery, and Sherlock thought to himself that yes, John was very brave to marry Sherlock, even if that probably wasn’t what the cleric meant. It was difficult to concentrate on the man’s words when John Watson with his gorgeous little body in his gorgeous little morning suit was standing across from him with that enormous goofy smile on his face while holding his hand and staring at him with those ridiculous blue eyes.

The bishop’s blathering droned on for at least fifteen minutes, a veritable eternity, and then John was sliding a ring on his finger and talking, so Sherlock tuned in again in time to hear him repeat his name, his promises, and then say, “I do.” Sherlock felt a small chill move up his spine at that, because John had just vowed to take Sherlock as his own, to have and to hold, and wasn’t that an amazing thing?

Sherlock had a near out-of-body experience while he said his own vows, racing ahead of the bishop, saying it all at once while John chuckled and raised one eyebrow in amused fondness. He heard himself saying the words and saw himself from above, promising to stand by someone he had only met four months ago, someone who had literally slipped into the house and then through all the cracks in Sherlock’s resolve to not care, to not feel, to not love.

“Yes, yes, yes, I, Sherlock Holmes, do solemnly promise to take this man as my lawful wedded partner, blah blah blah, having, holding, sick times, healthy times, good and bad and all the rest of it, ‘til death do us part, etc. I do.”

A murmur rippled throughout the seated guests and then there was a chuckle from his father and an overly loud sigh by his mother, but Sherlock couldn’t be arsed to care. Whatever there was between him and John was exactly that—between the two of them, and no one else needed to hear flowery
words describing who they were now or who they might become through this new association.

Sherlock had been asked if he would, and he did, and so that’s all he felt obligated to say. I do. John seemed perfectly chuffed by it and that’s all that mattered, and instead of all the talking, Sherlock just wanted to progress to the kiss. There were a few more words from the bishop and then the words Sherlock had been waiting for.

“I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may now…”

Sherlock was halfway to that kiss before the bishop was done talking, and John met him and sealed their lips together as the bishop declared that they could. Sherlock was neither aware of nor interested in the clapping taking place around him; he was married to John Watson, he was kissing his husband.

All in all, it was a much shorter kiss than Sherlock would have liked, more of a peck, really. Sherlock supposed it would have been a bit not good to carry on in front of their guests, but Sherlock had grown quite fond of kissing John, and if there was one place he thought it would be appropriate to lose control of his mind, and therefore what came out of his mouth, it was at his own wedding.

“I had hoped for a proper snog after such a momentous event, John.” And there he went, saying the first thing that escaped his left frontal lobe and slipped past his tongue.

John smiled up at him with a look of utter adoration and said, “I believe that comes later, all right?”

It was hard to look away from the small sun he had just married. “I'll hold you to that, John.”

The festivities commenced and Sherlock found himself standing next to John at the head of a long receiving line. He had no idea how he was expected to greet, smile at, and speak to over three hundred people, almost none of whom he knew, so he eliminated the smiling part first, then shortened the greeting part, and eventually settled for various iterations of, “Meet my husband, John Watson. John, meet someone my parents know.” Mummy was not amused but Sherlock did not care. He had found someone who wanted to be with him and that person wasn’t any of the people waiting to shake his hand.

The only person that gave Sherlock pause was Major James Sholto. Sherlock could tell by the way James looked at John and shook his hand, and by the way John pulled the man into a hug and grinned at him while not taking his hand off his upper arm, that the two had meant something to each other once.

As James moved down the line to meet Sherlock’s parents, Sherlock tried to deduce more about the man, but then there was someone else to meet, and someone else, and a seemingly endless line of someone else’s.

Pictures and cocktails followed the receiving line, but by the time Sherlock and John were done with all the posed photographs Mummy wanted, the drinks hour had ended and the guests were moving on to the dining tent. Sherlock grabbed a bottle of Veuve Cliquot from a server and passed it to John, who took a long chug and then passed it back.

“Probably should get some glasses for this,” John said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Drinking Champagne from a glass tends to impede the flow into one’s mouth, therefore, I recommend we continue as we’ve started.” Sherlock took another swig and gave John the bottle. Another server appeared out of nowhere with two Champagne flutes, but Sherlock waved him away, grabbed a second bottle from behind the servers’ station, and beckoned for John to follow.
They spent a delightful ten minutes alone in the moonlit greenhouse-turned-lab drinking Champagne and giggling about Sherlock’s rushed vows before Sherlock pulled a large box out from under the counter and set it in front of John.

“What’s this?”

“Oh, John. You see but you do not observe. Can you not tell from the silver wrapping paper and large white bow that it’s a wedding gift from me to you?”

“Ah, I see. Thank you. Shall I open it now?”

“Yes.”

John put the bottle of Champagne down and tugged on the bow, then carefully slid his finger under the tape on either side and along the bottom of the wrapping. The paper fell away revealing a white box, and when John lifted the lid off he was met with piles of scrunched up, silver tissue paper.

“Ugh, this is ridiculous!” Sherlock complained. “Must we kill a tree just to wrap a gift?” He grabbed a handful of the tissue paper and tossed it to the floor. John joined him until most of it was scattered around their feet.

Inside laid a black, old-fashioned doctor’s bag with the high sheen of the many polishes it had received over the course of its useful life.

“Wow. This is gorgeous,” John said as he lifted it out of the box and turned it this way and that. “This is a real doctor’s bag, from what, the late 1800s?”

“1895, to be exact.”

“It’s fantastic. Thank you.” John went to put the bag back in the box and give Sherlock a hug, but Sherlock stopped him.

“The real gift is in the bag.”

“Oh?” John put the bag back on the counter and undid the leather strap that held the two sides closed. He rummaged around in more tissue paper until Sherlock eventually leaned over, too.

“There, at the bottom.”

“This paper?”

“Mmhm.”

John fished the folded paper out of the bottom of the bag, read it, then closed his eyes and exhaled. “Sherlock, you cannot give me the title and licence to a medical practise as a wedding gift. It’s too much.”

“It’s not really. I can afford it, I mean, you and I can afford it, and I know you’ve been meaning to get back to medicine and set up your own practise.”

“I was planning on working for a surgery that would have me, not buying my own bloody offices and staff!”

“This is better. You’ll be your own boss. You don’t want to be at the beck and call of some scattered front office manager who doesn’t respect your time or mine.”
“Yours?”

“Well, I assumed you might like to help me solve some of these cases when you aren’t working. Not that I think you shouldn’t work. I did just give you a medical practise, after all.”

“Sherlock,” John said, rubbing and pinching his brow with his thumb and index finger. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say, and thank you doesn’t begin to cover it, but … thank you.”

“Thank you is perfectly sufficient, John. You’re welcome.”

“I have something for you, too, but it’s in our rooms if you’re okay with waiting?”

“Of course.”

It was then that Mummy sent the hounds to find them, marking the end of their alone time. On the way back to the dining tent Sherlock began telling John all about the case he’d been solving in Dartmoor, and that story carried them through the first three courses of their meal, at which point they were interrupted for telegrams, emails, and toasts.

Sherlock listened to those with half his attention, choosing instead to focus on the warmth radiating off of the man next to him. He was so small to be such a furnace, wasn’t he? But sitting this close, thigh to thigh, Sherlock could feel the heat of him through his trousers. That caused him to shiver, and wasn’t that ironic? Sherlock pressed his leg a little harder against John’s and John glanced at him and smiled, then patted his knee.

“You’re brilliant, you know that?” he said to Sherlock, and Sherlock felt himself go red in the face.

“How so?”

John nudged his head in the direction of the microphone. Mycroft was talking about the time Sherlock solved his first case by identifying poisoned cream on a young man’s shoes, and John was beaming at him with pride.

“It was simple enough once the police let me examine the shoes,” he replied.

“Shh. Later. I want to hear these stories about you.”

The stories were told, the courses eaten, the wine sipped, and when the meal was over someone with a clipboard came over and announced that the first dance would start soon.

Sherlock smirked. Mummy had tried to arrange even this detail and Sherlock had pretended to let her get away with what she thought was appropriate—some Frank Sinatra song about flying to the moon or some such claptrap—but when she was otherwise occupied Sherlock had had a talk with the orchestra leader. He wanted to be on the dance floor when the music started so that he wouldn’t have to deal with his mother, so he took John’s hand and led him to the parquet floor in front of the musicians. He saw a flurry of an apricot-chiffon wrapped Mummy out of the corner of his eye when the first notes of his song started, but he kept his eyes on John and started to move, leading John in their dance.

“This is not the song your mother picked, is it?”

“No, it certainly is not. Why should she have all the fun?”

“I don’t think I’m familiar with this version of this song. Care to enlighten me?”
“This is Sinead O’Connor’s 1990 cover of Cole Porter’s classic, “You Do Something to Me.” She did it as a part of a fundraiser album for AIDS, and I’ve always had a fondness for it.”

“It’s lovely. And you do.”

“I do?”

“Do something to me.”

“Ah. As do you. To me.”

“Nice to know.” John pulled Sherlock closer and Sherlock lost his rhythm for a moment, adrenaline coursing through his body. John pressed up tight, chest-belly-hips-and-thighs, and it was almost more than Sherlock could process. John smelled divine, felt divine, looked divine, and Sherlock was with him, at the centre of his life with him, silently screaming at his brain to please, please, please keep his feet moving. Then John rested his head against Sherlock’s shoulder and Sherlock felt John’s hair tickle his cheek and neck, and everything, including his feet, came to a stop.

“You okay?”

“Very okay, but you may need to lead for a while.”

John took his turn leading Sherlock around the dance floor, and Sherlock was completely oblivious to the other couples that joined them, oblivious to the twinkling white lights strung up above their heads, oblivious to the clinking of glasses and the murmur of voices, oblivious to his own thoughts and everything but the slow stretch of the song and the gentle rise and fall of John’s chest against his own as they breathed through their first song as husband and husband.

You do something to me
Something that simply mystifies me
Tell me, why should it be
You have the power to hypnotise me?

Let me live 'neath your spell
Do do that voodoo that you do so well
Cause you do something to me
That nobody else could do

Chapter End Notes

Bach's Cantata, BWV 147, Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring. (It's a lovely song, but really I chose it because of the name...)

Sinead O'Connor's cover of Cole Porter's "You Do Something to Me."
John giggled and tried not to drop the top of the wedding cake that he’d balanced on a too-small plate as they escaped from the party to their suite of rooms. They would spend this one night at the house and leave for their honeymoon the next day. John still hadn’t told Sherlock where they were going but neither of them was thinking about that now.

“I can’t believe,” John laughed, “that you just took the whole top of the cake!”

“Well, it took me weeks to arrange for this cake to be swapped out with the one Mummy ordered. They weren’t going to do it until they had her approval, so I finally just ordered this one myself and had the other one conveniently disappear on its way to the house this morning.”

“Did you see her face? Oh, my God. I thought she was going to start breathing fire!”

“Poor Mummy, no traditional fruitcake for her son’s overly traditional wedding. Nope. I wanted chocolate mousse and buttercream and that’s what we got. Don’t drop it!” Sherlock held a hand out to steady John and John hummed and licked the chocolate off one thumb before taking the cake in both hands again. “Besides, if I hadn’t taken it she would’ve had it wrapped up and frozen for our one-year anniversary, and there’s no way I’m eating frozen, freezer-burned wedding cake one year from now.”

Sherlock made his way down the dark hallway ahead of John, stopping when he got to one of several closed doorways. “You don’t mind if I go in?”

“Why would I mind? It’s your house.”

“But this is your room.”

John shrugged. “I cleaned up best I could before the ceremony started, so I doubt you’ll see my pants hanging off a bedpost or anything.”

Sherlock felt his ears turn hot and pink. John hadn’t meant anything by it but the comment about his pants started certain wheels spinning in Sherlock’s brain.

He turned the knob and stepped in, then took the cake from John and set it on the desktop. There was an ice bucket with another bottle of Champagne in it and two flutes nearby, no doubt placed there by one of the ubiquitous clipboard girls. Hands-free, Sherlock was quite unsure what to do with himself. He fidgeted with the cork of the bottle.

“Hey, despite all her nagging and micromanaging, she planned a wonderful day for us, and I’m very grateful.” John stepped closer and closer again, then placed his hands on Sherlock’s hips.

“She did. It was … nice.”

“You git. It was more than nice.” John went up on his toes and planted a quick kiss on Sherlock’s
lips and Sherlock responded with several quick blinks and a step backward.

“You okay?” John asked.

“Yes. I’m just fine. Absolutely.” He took another few steps backward.

John followed Sherlock until the backs of his knees hit the bed, then reached out for one of his hands. He rubbed his thumb over Sherlock’s knuckles, looked up from under his blond lashes, and smiled.

Sherlock swallowed hard and wondered if he could convince John to either eat more cake, drink more Champagne, or maybe watch a movie. Something long and dramatic and exhausting, like The Godfather or The Deer Hunter.

“You don’t have to worry, Sherlock. I’m not going to attack you or anything.”

“I understand if you have certain expectations of tonight, John. I may be inexperienced but I am not stupid.”

“Never said you were.”

“Yes, well. It is our wedding night.”

“Yes. And you’re right, I do have certain expectations. I just don’t think you’re right about what they are. So why don’t you go get cleaned up and I’ll get your wedding present, okay?”

“My wedding present?”

“Yeah, remember? I got you something, too, something that you might want to use tonight and going forward.”

“Oh.”

Sherlock retreated to the bathroom in a mild state of panic. Think, he told himself, think! What kind of gift would someone give their spouse that was intended to be used on their wedding night? What else could it be but something that fit with the sexual expectations John must have? An outfit of some kind, the men’s equivalent of lingerie, whatever the hell that might be, or, oh God, maybe a toy, or … or … a collar! What if John was into kinky things and expected Sherlock to wear a collar?

The only thing Sherlock knew for certain was that he couldn’t keep pacing the same four steps of the bathroom. That, and he really needed to clean his teeth after drinking all that Champagne and eating all that cake. When he was done cleaning his teeth he stripped out of his trousers, waistcoat, tie, shirt, and socks, and put on one of the thick terry cloth robes hanging on the back of the door. Should he take off his pants, too? He assumed they’d be coming off soon enough, but a man had his pride, and Sherlock’s pride was currently woven into those pants.

With a deep breath and quick glance down to make sure he was covered, Sherlock opened the bathroom door and strode across the room to the bed. John was sitting on the edge with a large box on his lap, digging his bare toes into the carpet. He had taken off his jacket and tie, too, and looked relaxed and content. He smiled at Sherlock and rolled his shoulders a few times before sighing.

“Feels good to get out of the suit, doesn’t it?”

“I find I’m actually quite comfortable fully-dressed.”
“Come sit down next to me.” John patted the bed next to him.

Sherlock sat down and tugged the sides of his robe closer together. He crossed one leg over the other, then switched legs, then switched again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Sherlock looked at the box. It was too big for a collar or a sex toy, or even some type of sexy underwear. The box wasn’t wrapped, but was glossy white and embossed with a pattern and logo that Sherlock vaguely recognized as that of a high end designer. He slowly trailed one finger along the edge of the box.

“It’s not going to bite you, you know.”

Sherlock bit his lip. Was John saying these innuendo-laden things on purpose?

John slid the box over to rest on Sherlock’s lap, then cleared his throat. “Sherlock, I just want you to know that my only interest going forward with our physical relationship is that you be comfortable.”

A velvet-lined collar, maybe?

“Are you going to open it or just stare at it all night?”

“Sorry, I’m sorry.” Sherlock positioned the box more squarely in his lap and tuck his fingertips under the lid, then lifted it and set it on the floor. There was a sheet of tissue paper folded over the contents, sealed with a sticker, so Sherlock gently peeled the sticker away, as if doing so carefully enough would maintain his dignity as well as the structure of the delicate paper, and then he peeled the layers of tissue paper apart.

In the box lay several neatly folded and wrapped bundles that looked to be articles of clothing, at least half-a-dozen, from what Sherlock could gather. Upon further inspection, he found that they were all the same fabric, white silk, and appeared to be of the utmost quality.

“I meant what I said, Sherlock. I want you to be comfortable.”

“Yes, they look very comfortable, but I’m not sure I understand why you’re giving me clothing to wear on our wedding night.” He lifted the first piece out of its wrapping and held it up in front of him. It was a sleeveless vest with a low, loose-fitting neckline and a string tie, plain and unassuming.

“They’re wedding garments, Sherlock.”

“Wedding garments?”

“Have you not read this chapter of the BIG-SAM?”

“It would appear that I have not.”

“Sherlock,” John said, placing one hand on the box as if it were Sherlock’s knee, “Chapter six of the BIG-SAM is all about the honeymoon and, well, marital relations, for lack of a better way to put it. Article three of that chapter goes into great detail about how to handle the situation if one partner is not ready for intimacy. One of the suggestions is these, the traditional wedding garments, which were regularly used years ago when it was more likely that one of the spouses, usually the wife, was still a virgin.
“The idea is that you wear whichever of these you want, and I cannot touch anything covered. See? You set the pace, you do what feels best to you, and we don’t even have to talk about it. You’ll never have to tell me that something is too much, or that you aren’t okay with what we’re doing. You come to bed dressed however you want and I respect those boundaries. You can come to bed in all of it if you want. Whatever you want.”

“Wedding garments?”

“Wedding garments. Why don’t you go back to the bathroom and get dressed, then come out and we’ll start again, okay?”

Sherlock’s head was spinning. Here he’d thought that he would most definitely have to get naked and let John do as he pleased, and what did John do? He gave Sherlock all the power. All of it. And, he seemed happy to do it. It made Sherlock feel as if something hard inside him was melting. It made him feel as if he needed a whole new wing in his mind palace for John Watson, and it made him feel as if maybe he didn’t want to wear any of these, after all. But he did. He knew he needed to figure out how to handle being touched when it meant losing so much control, so back into the bathroom he went with the box tucked up tight to his chest.

Once again, behind the closed door, Sherlock undressed. He hung the robe back on its hook and slipped out of his pants. He tucked those into the pocket of the bathrobe, then sat on a small chair tucked into the corner of the room and pulled the wedding garments out, one by one. There was the sleeveless vest, and then a blousy, long-sleeved shirt with a high boat neck. There was a long pair of pyjama bottoms with a drawstring waist and pockets, and pair of short pants, and two pairs of underwear. The first was boxer briefs, ordinary in every way. The second, though, was barely more than a scrap of fabric, just a small pouch with a g-string. Underneath it all was a long robe, not unlike the terry cloth one he’d just taken off, but this one was in the same smooth, white silk as all the other garments.

There was nothing for it, Sherlock thought. He knew how he’d be most comfortable, and if John was sincere in his wish that Sherlock be comfortable, then John wouldn’t mind. He stood up and pulled on the pyjama bottoms, then slipped the long sleeve shirt over his head, adjusted the seams to rest on his shoulders, and tucked the cuffs down. John must have been much better at observing than Sherlock had given him credit for because the fit of both items was perfect. He looked down at his feet, where the bottoms pooled gently along the high arch of his foot, and he looked at his hands, where his sleeves fell to just below his wrists. Lastly, he slipped the robe on, tied the sash, and left the bathroom so that John could have his turn.

John looked him up and down when he entered the room again but there was no judgment on his face, only warm regard. Without a word he slipped into the bathroom with his overnight bag and closed the door behind him.

Sherlock considered the bed for a moment. He had always slept on the right side but he had no idea which side John would want. The enormity of the very prospect of sharing a bed overcame him and he sat down in the bedside chair with a solid thump. It was a big bed, bigger than a double. It would be fine. He undid the sash of his robe and let it slink onto the chair cushion as he stood up. He pulled the covers back and got in, then rearranged them over him again where he was sat up against the headboard. He twiddled his thumbs. He looked around the room with its hunter green paint and burgundy paisley wallpaper and its heavy, dark wood furniture. He wished he’d thought to bring a scientific journal with him.

The bathroom door opened and John stepped out, turning off the light behind him. Sherlock stared. Sherlock hadn’t stopped to wonder if John would also wear the wedding garments, but of course he
wasn’t. John was wearing a pair of soft-looking pyjama bottoms and nothing else. His chest was bare, and it was glorious. He was fit from his time in the army, and tan, and he had a spattering of blond hair between his nipples, which were pale pink and erect. And there, below John’s left shoulder, was the scar that Sherlock had been waiting to see. It was small, like a miniature moon crater of smooth, shiny skin, and Sherlock could not drag his eyes away.

“Um, I usually sleep like this, but I could put on a shirt if you prefer?”

“No! No, you’re fine, you should definitely sleep the way you usually do. If you don’t usually wear a shirt then please, do not wear one for my benefit. I would actually not benefit in any way from you wearing a shirt, so no shirts will be necessary.”

God, what was he even saying?

John just huffed out an embarrassed sounding laugh and walked around to the other side of the bed. “This should work out well because I always sleep on the left side.”

“And I on the right.”

“See? We were made for each other.”

Sherlock started laughing then, really laughing, and John just shook his head and joined him. What crazy set of circumstances had led him to marry this man, to be tucked up in bed with him while wearing clothing that forbade his new husband to touch him? What had happened to life as he knew it?

He glanced over at John as his laughter gave way to a low chuckle, and let the sound die in his throat as he took in the sight next to him. John was sitting up, too, and the light from his bedside lamp had cast his bare chest in a lovely warm glow. His silver-gold hair was mussed from whatever he’d done to it as he got ready for bed, and he was beginning to get circles under his eyes, most likely from the exhaustion setting in after such a long, eventful day.

“What do you usually do when you first go to bed?” Sherlock asked.

“Oh, well, sometimes I read or watch television, usually just something light and easy until I’m drowsy, then I turn off the lights and go to sleep. Sometimes I bring a cup of tea to bed with me, or a glass of water. What about you?”

“I usually don’t go to bed until I think I can’t stand up anymore, otherwise, I end up lying awake for hours on end, and that’s boring. I don’t usually watch television.”

“Oh, okay. Are you tired now? Do you want to turn out the lights?”

“Do you?” Sherlock had no idea how to proceed. Did married couples take on new habits to accommodate their spouse’s routines? If he turned the light off before John was ready to sleep would John just lie there in the dark? Could he leave his light on if John was ready to sleep but he wasn’t? Need they always go to bed at the same time?

“You’re thinking too much. I can tell.”

“How can you tell?”

“Your forehead gets all scrunchy and you get two lines across the bridge of your nose.”

Sherlock touched a finger to the bridge of his nose. John was right. Fascinating.
“So then, should we turn out the lights?” Sherlock asked.

“If you want to.”

“Do you want to?”

“Sure,” John said, ending the cycle of asking each other the same question. He reached over to turn off his lamp, and Sherlock did the same. He slid down lower under the covers and looked over to where John lay. There was just enough light to make out his profile.

“John?”

“Yes, Sherlock?”

“Where are we going tomorrow?”

“To Scotland. I’m taking you home, to the family ranch.”

Sherlock felt unexpected tenderness swell up in his throat and behind his eyes. “I’m glad. I’m looking forward to going there with you.”

“I’m looking forward to taking you.”

There was a brief pause. “Sherlock?”

“Yes, John?”

“Can I hold your hand?”

Sherlock didn’t stop to consider that his hand was not covered, so technically John could hold it if he wanted. He just said, “Yes.”

John’s hand was warm over his, and his fingers found their way between Sherlock’s in the dark with no problem at all. John gave Sherlock’s hand a small squeeze, and Sherlock, with tingles spreading up his arm and throughout the rest of his body, squeezed back.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the cheerleading, Happierstill. You ease my pangs of self-doubt and motivate me to keep going, and I appreciate it so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock woke early the next morning after one of the best night’s sleep he’d had in months. The journey from sleep to wakefulness was a long one, though, and he was only partially more awake than asleep when he realised he was wrapped around another body; namely, that of his new husband. At some point in the night, he’d turned himself into a big spoon and currently had his arm wrapped around John’s waist and his fingers curled into John’s palm. His legs had conformed themselves to John’s, and his feet were stacked and pressed against the bottom of John’s. Slowly, so that John would not awaken and become aware of this most mortifying situation, he unraveled himself and turned onto his back.

Was it mortifying? Why was it mortifying? John was his husband. Certainly, a bit of spooning or other sleep-induced cuddling was acceptable? Yes, perhaps by societal standards, but Sherlock was neither a spooner nor a cuddler, and he wasn’t sure he wished to change that now. Cuddling would lead to more touching, and more touching would lead to sex, and sex would lead to him losing his mind. And what was his mind, he asked himself? It was his very self. He had yet to uncover a set of circumstances under which losing himself so completely to another person, for any reason, would be welcome.

He slipped into the bathroom, stripped, folded his wedding garments into a neat pile, and stepped into a steaming shower. When he was done scrubbing himself anew he wrapped up in the bathrobe and sneaked down the hall to his own room to find some clothes. He fixed his hair, shaved, applied aftershave, and got dressed. Ready for the day, he made his way downstairs to the kitchen. He knew John would find his way there when he was ready. After breakfast, they would pack and head out.

A few hours later they climbed into John’s Range Rover and were making their way north from Oxfordshire, passing through Birmingham and Manchester, skirting the east side of the Lake District National Park, and then through the quiet stretches of southern Scotland. The drive was peaceful and they talked easily about John’s past medical experiences and his future practise, and Sherlock’s past cases and those he most liked to work (locked room serial murders). Sherlock told John more about the detectives he worked with (Lestrade and Dimmock) and those he couldn’t tolerate being around (Donovan and Anderson).

Sherlock asked questions about the ranch, but John was shortcoming with answers, wanting Sherlock to have no preconceived notions. All he would say was that it had fallen into a bit of disuse over the years and that it needed some work. Sherlock deduced what he could from comments John had made in the past few months. John’s family had been quite well off until only two generations ago. They’d been cattle breeders before that, hearty people living close to the land, keeping to themselves with little regard for strangers.

As they drove through the small market towns of Perthshire, Sherlock imagined a large brick home, Georgian in style, with a circular drive and overgrown hedges. He was surprised when John pulled
off the narrow lane and onto an even narrower dirt path and said, “Here we are.”

They drove through a wooded quarter-mile of land before entering a cleared field on which the house sat. The house itself was of honey-coloured stone and built in an undetermined style that seemed to reflect an original Jacobean home and a large Georgian addition added some time later. The front door was off centre and flanked by two large curved windows that continued from the ground floor to the top of the first storey. The second storey was less ornate, set with six smaller windows as would have been the design of the time. There were four chimneys on the slate roof, each serving between two and six fireplaces, and a good portion of the house was covered in leafy green ivy. It was both not at all what Sherlock expected, and exactly what he should have. After only observing it for ten seconds he couldn’t imagine John coming from anywhere else.

“Let’s get the bags in first, then I can show you around.”

Sherlock kept his eyes on the house as they exited the car and went around to the boot. He took his own bag in one hand, a food hamper in the other, and followed John to the front door. Up close he could see that the wood trim was in good shape—no rot that he could discern—but the paint was peeling here and there around the door and windows. The glass panes were wavy and thick and undamaged from time or vandalism but in need of a good wash.

“Does anyone live here during the year to maintain it?”

“No, not anymore. The last caretaker moved away over five years ago, and Harry was supposed to find someone new while I was away, but I guess other things, namely the bottle, got in the way of that. I’ll have to hire someone. Maybe we can do that while we’re here.”

“It’s a grand place, John, bigger than I was expecting. The area is much more remote, as well. It would be ripe for squatters.”

John winced. “Ah, you’re right. We’ll have to sort something out.” He found the key he was looking for, unlocked an upper and lower bolt, then pushed the door open and held his arm out for Sherlock to enter before him.

It was surprisingly light inside, no doubt from the large windows set in the thick ground floor walls, but damp and chilly. Sherlock set the bag and hamper down and looked into the room to the right of him, which was part of the original structure and set up as a library. “Fascinating. I take it this was once a watchtower before it became a home?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been told. And to the left is the ‘new house,’ or so we call it, even though it’s close to two-hundred-fifty years old. That’s the drawing room through there, and if we keep going down this hallway, past the staircase, we’ll find the dining room, sitting room, a games room, and the kitchen, which was brought upstairs from the lower level at some point by my grandparents. Upstairs there’s a whole mess of bedrooms, although most of them have been closed off for decades. Hopefully, we’ll find the master is still habitable. So far it all looks like it did when I was here on leave about a year ago.”

John made his way through the rooms on that floor, opening drapes and gathering sheets off the furniture. The entire place was decorated in a mix of Victorian, art deco, and the occasional mid-century piece. There were oil paintings of Scottish Highland cattle hung in groups over the walls; Luing and Shetland, Galloway and Angus. There were Persian carpets over wide plank floors throughout, sometimes several in a room, overlapping at the edges, and the draperies were rich reds and browns, held back with thick braided cords. There was an underlying smell of mothballs, and damp from the chimney in the sitting room, and a clutter of furniture that felt claustrophobic and moody. Sherlock preferred the library, which was drier and brighter. In there he found a long leather
couch with sagging cushions, two matching armchairs with an oversized ottoman, and a fireplace big
enough to spit and roast a pig.

Sherlock explored the shelves of books while John fiddled with the breaker boxes, threw open
windows, and checked that the plumbing was in working order. They eventually found each other
again in the kitchen, where John had set a large kettle to boil on the ancient AGA and was scrubbing
down an enormous wood table that sat in the middle of the room.

“Cuppa?” John asked.

“I’d murder one right about now, thank you.”

“Any chance your mother packed milk in that hamper?”

Sherlock went to find the hamper, then returned, set it on the kitchen table, and rummaged through it.
“We’re in luck. My God, how did she fit all of this in here? A pint of milk, some scones, a roast
chicken, bread rolls, steak sandwiches, and … oh, you’re kidding me …”

“What?” John came closer and peered into the hamper.

“I didn’t even think about it this morning, but she got the top of the wedding cake in here, too.”

“Excellent. How about tea and scones right now, then the rest of it for dinner? We can go into
Pitlochry tomorrow and stock up on food and drink.”

“Pitlochry? Is that the town nearest to you?” Sherlock asked as he set the scones on the table and
started looking through the cabinets for plates.

“We’re in between there and Aberfeldy. We’re at the base of the highlands, which puts us in an ideal
location. We’re about a kilometre from the River Tay and not far from Loch Tay. We can go into
Perth, too, if you’d like.”

“I’m at your disposal, John. Whatever you’d like to do, whatever you’d like to show me.”

John’s eyes lit up with mischief but he didn’t say what was on his mind, and Sherlock didn’t ask.
Instead, he turned away so John wouldn’t see the sure signs of his blush. “Maybe I’ll go unpack
while you make the tea?”

“Sure thing. Head upstairs and take a left. The master is at the end of the hall. And feel free to poke
around. I’ve kept the other doors closed, but you can go in any of them that you’d like.”

Sherlock went upstairs and straight to the master bedroom. John had left the door open, pulled back
the drapes, and opened the windows. The stately room was filled with light from windows on three
walls, sunshine shimmering over their surfaces in wavy reflections. The room was large, dramatically
so, and there was a large, four poster bed set against the middle of the far wall. The windows to the
front of the house were underlined by deep window seats, and the windows to the back of the house
boasted views of what was once a stunning garden. Across from the bed, near the doorway Sherlock
was standing in, was an enormous fireplace, and next to that was a large armoire beside the door that
led to the en suite. On the other side of the armoire Sherlock could see a walk-in closet.

He breathed in the scent of cherry and cedar as he opened the doors to the armoire. Setting his bag at
the end of the bed, he unzipped it and pulled out what he’d packed in two large stacks. The wedding
garments, his ‘socks and jocks,’ and his vests went into one of the drawers at the base of the armoire.
He hung the one suit he’d brought with him as well as his dress shirts, and stacked a few jumpers,
khakis, and jeans on the bottom. He lined up his shoes in the space between the bottom of the
armoire and the floor, then carried his toiletries into the bathroom.

The bathroom was large and had been modernised in the 1920s. The floor was covered in small black and white tiles, and the pristine white sinks stood on stainless steel legs and had ceramic hot and cold water handles. The bathtub, to his delight, was a large clawfoot type set in one corner, and there was a glass shower stall as well, between it and the two sinks. He opened one of the two cabinets above the sinks and lined up his toiletries on the glass shelves, then went back to the bedroom, tucked his case into his travelling bag, and slid that under the bed. There, he thought as he looked around the room. He was moved in. The thought gave him a shiver.

Filled with the reality of settling into his new husband’s home, Sherlock went down to join John for tea and scones.

Chapter End Notes

Please click these two links to see the homes I used to imagine what John's house might look like.

Of Perthshire, the internet says:

"Perthshire straddles the Highlands and the Lowlands, offering a rich variety of scenery. Highland Perthshire is magnificently forested and the region has become branded as 'Big Tree Country' - a name well deserved. The wide and graceful River Tay - Scotland's grandest river - flows through the region from its source in serene Loch Tay, whilst great rolling mountains make a perfect backdrop. Hidden gems include winding Glen Lyon and beautiful Glen Tilt. Further south the mountains become heather clad moors and finally billowing hills as Perthshire descends to the fertile farmland stretching from Strathearn to Perth and up to Blairgowrie."

This link will take you to a map of the area.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thank you for betaing, happierstill!

After a dinner of roast chicken, chocolate cake, and several bottles of stout that John found in the refrigerator, the two settled into the library with cups of tea. John built a roaring fire, pulled some books off the shelves, and slouched into one of the armchairs while Sherlock perused the collection for something of interest. There was a plethora of books on animal husbandry, agricultural, and specific breeds of cattle, so Sherlock put a pile of them on the side table near the couch next to his steaming tea and curled into one corner of it.

Sherlock was unaware of the hours slipping by until John yawned, closed his book with a loud slap, and announced that he was going to bed. Sherlock looked up and blinked at him. Should he go to bed, too? There were no answers on John’s face, nor in his posture. Sherlock took a quick inventory of his own body. He wasn’t tired. In fact, he felt quite awake, but not with the usual buzz of intellectual pursuit or the dull throb of boredom. Sherlock felt awake with physical curiosity, and that was new to him. If he stayed up while John went to bed, John would most likely be asleep by the time Sherlock joined him. If, however, they went to bed at the same time, there would be a period of time during which they would both be awake. What would happen, Sherlock wondered, if he wore different wedding garments to bed tonight?

There was only one way to find out.

He forced himself to yawn, and John turned and said, “Are you turning in, too? I’ll tamp down the fire if you are.”

“Yes, I think I’ll join you. It was a long drive and I’m feeling quite ready for bed.”

“Right. Feel free to bring those books with you if you think you’d like to read a bit. Would you like a glass of water or anything?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

They made their way up the stairs, turning off lights behind them. Sherlock trailed after John at a distance, rather like a hotel guest being guided to his room. Once inside, John closed the door behind them.

“Sorry, just habit I suppose. It’s not like there’s anyone else here.”

“It’s fine. I usually sleep with the door closed, even when it’s just me.”

“Would you like to use the bathroom first? I can change out here while you’re in there.”

Sherlock nodded, then went to the armoire for his wedding garments. He chose the long pyjama trousers again, but this time, the sleeveless vest instead of the long-sleeved top. He went to the bathroom and closed the door behind him. It felt odd, on one hand, to be changing behind a closed door with his husband on the other side. But, he countered to himself, this was only their second night together and certainly a sense of modesty made sense given they’d yet to be physically
intimate. Sherlock looked at himself in the mirror. The silk top clung to the muscles of his chest and showed off his long neck and slender arms. He cleaned his teeth and waited an extra minute to be sure that John was changed, then entered the bedroom.

John was standing by the bed in his pyjama bottoms, flipping through a book, his back to Sherlock. Sherlock made a show of putting his clothing away but did so while staring at the muscles running down and across John’s back. He nearly gave himself whiplash turning his head back toward the armoire when John looked toward him unexpectedly.

“Are you done in the bathroom?” John’s eyes flicked over Sherlock’s torso before looking away.

“I am.”

John passed close by Sherlock on the way to the bathroom and Sherlock got a heady noseful of the scent of his husband at the end of the day, warm and musky and right, like tea and a good book by the fire. Sherlock could live in that scent, he thought, he could wrap himself up in it and wear it like a cloak, letting it give him comfort and strength when he needed it most. He surprised himself with this thought, shook his head free of it, and tried to settle his mind.

Alone in the room, Sherlock spent a few minutes looking at the odds and ends John had gathered over the years. He knew that people tended to keep their most personal objects in their bedroom, away from prying eyes. What would he discover here about John? On the bedside table, on John’s side of the bed, were three framed photographs. The first, the one closest to the bed, was of a couple that must have been John’s great-grandparents. It was a black and white 1920s wedding photo of the newly married couple standing next to each other with somber expressions on their face. The bride had a simple halo-style head piece with sheer lace falling around her straight, ivory gown, and she held a bouquet of flowers that cascaded from her hands. The groom stood angled toward her but looking at the camera, his arms straight at his sides, his dark suit probably the best he owned, his black shoes shined just for that day.

The second photograph was of John as a young boy and a slightly younger girl that looked just like him. That must’ve been Harry. They were standing on the banks of a river, looking at each other, laughing. Sherlock wondered what either of them had said to make them laugh like that. Sherlock wondered how long it had been since they had laughed like that, together. He imagined it had been years, given Harry’s bouts with alcoholism.

The third photograph made Sherlock’s heart twist and squeeze. It was of John and Major James Sholto, the man that Sherlock had met at their wedding just two days ago. They were both in camouflage gear and standing slightly higher than the photographer. From that angle Sherlock could see the blinding white sky behind them and the crest of a hill covered in scrub. In this photo Major Sholto was smiling at the photographer, and John was smiling at him. A moment of rest, then? Perhaps it was taken at base camp, during training, or between operations. There was someone else standing next to John, but only their arm and shoulder had been captured. Perhaps John had trimmed the photo so that it was just the two of them? Sherlock wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

He didn’t want to be caught snooping, although looking at photographs on a bedside table could hardly be called that, so he climbed into bed, turned off his light, and pulled the covers up under his arms. Uncomfortable, he sat up a bit, then shuffled down again, trying to figure out how to look casual while lying in someone else’s bed. No, not someone else’s bed. His husband’s bed, he told himself, and therefore his bed, too. What would he do at home? He’d not lie there on his back staring at the canopy of the bed, that’s for damn sure. He turned onto his side, facing the inside of the bed, and soon enough heard the bathroom door open and close.

John got into bed and scooted close, making no pretense of reading a book or going to sleep. He
smiled at Sherlock and reached out to lay a hand on Sherlock’s wrist. Sherlock startled for a second, unused to the lack of questioning before being touched, but he’d given his permission with the choice of his garment, hadn’t he?

“Are you comfortable?”

“I am. It’s a very comfortable bed, John.”

“It is. I had the mattress changed a few years ago. The last one caved in toward the middle, so we’d be on top of each other right now.” He cleared his throat, perhaps aware of what he’d just said. He trailed his fingers up Sherlock’s arm, twirling them along the tender skin of Sherlock’s inner elbow, then drifting them back down to his wrist.

Sherlock felt like a star igniting. He was grateful for the blanket that covered most of his gooseflesh.

“Can I kiss you, Sherlock?”

“Well, my mouth isn’t covered, is it?”

John barked out a laugh. “No, no it’s not. But I still feel like I should ask. I should also tell you, though, that I like kissing. I like it a lot, so you wouldn’t ever have to ask if you can kiss me. I can guarantee I’ll just about always be up for it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

John moved closer and wrapped the hand that wasn’t exploring Sherlock’s arm around the back of Sherlock’s head, drawing him a few inches closer. He was still smiling as he closed the distance and pressed his warm lips against Sherlock’s, just a small touch before moving back again. John licked his lips and looked at Sherlock’s face, his hair, his neck.

“You don’t have to stop, John. You can keep kissing me.”

“Oh, I can, can I?” John teased, but he also moved in closer again, closed his eyes, and found Sherlock’s mouth. He stayed longer this time, and the fingers not twisted around Sherlock’s curls continued to stroke his forearm, his knuckles, his wrist and palm. Sherlock moved closer, keeping his body from touching John’s, but close enough to feel their shared warmth. With a tilt of his head he opened his mouth and John hummed approvingly, licked along Sherlock’s lips, and sent his tongue in search of Sherlock’s. Sherlock met him tentatively. The first touch of tongue to tongue almost caused a complete body shut down, but Sherlock scraped together some semblance of thought and pushed ahead.

This is your husband, he told himself, this is your husband kissing you, kissing you with his mouth, with his lips and his tongue, sweet like peppermint, warm and wet and incredibly good.

John circled his fingertips around Sherlock’s knuckles, then drew his hand up in a straight line from the back of his hand, over his forearm, to his bicep. He stopped there and squeezed, humming. Sherlock wondered what was so interesting about his bicep. He wasn’t sure, but neither was he sure why it felt so good to have that bicep stroked and squeezed. Nor was he sure why just a little bit of kissing and attention to his arm would cause his penis to thicken the way it was. He shifted just enough to free it from where it was trapped against his pyjama bottoms and felt it continue to fill.

“Oh,” he said into John’s mouth at a particularly hard throb.

“You okay?”
“Yeah,” Sherlock breathed out, going back for more of John’s kisses.

“We can stop if it’s too much.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“Don’t ask me that, Sherlock. I’d never stop,” he said between kisses, “not until I had you saying a hell of a lot more than ‘oh.’”

“What would I be saying?” Sherlock managed to ask before John bit his lower lip.

“Oh, God,” John said.

“Is biting my lip that good?”

“Yes, but also, that’s what you’d be saying.”

“Oh, God.”

“Yes, like that.”

Sherlock drew back, breathing hard. John drew his hand down Sherlock’s arm and curled their fingers together.

“I’m sorry. Was that too much?”

“It wasn’t enough, which makes it too much,” Sherlock answered.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“I’ve never wanted any of this before. I’ve never wanted to be touched or kissed, and it’s certainly never had this kind of effect on me.” Sherlock took a deep breath and felt it low in his groin.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. It might just take some time to get used to the fact that I’m enjoying this. I’m still in control of my brain, so that’s a very good thing, indeed.”

John propped himself on his elbow and smoothed Sherlock’s hair away from his forehead.

“And that’s why you don’t like to be touched? You can’t think?”

Sherlock nodded, slow and thoughtful. “I can’t think properly. My brain just scrambles. All the different levels of analysis and observation get confused. Things come up that should stay down. Things that should stay on top disappear. I say things I shouldn’t say, so I can only assume I’d also not say things maybe I should say.”

“And that’s happened to you before?” John looked so serious, his eyes so sincere.

“Once, a long time ago. But when you and I kiss it happens, too. I lose myself. I … I forget where I am and what’s important.”

John flipped to his back and crossed his arms under his head. He was quiet for a moment but then said, “It seems to me like it’s actually a good thing to lose yourself when you kiss. It means it’s a really good kiss. And it’s not like you can get in trouble, right? You’re here with me, alone, in a room in a house with no one else around. Maybe you should let yourself go a little bit more.”
Sherlock turned onto his back, too. “John, losing control is not who I am. It’s not what I do. When I lose control bad things happen.”

“Like what? I mean, I can see if you lost control on a crime scene and destroyed evidence, or hurt a suspect. But how else could something bad happen?”

Sherlock indulged in a short moment of reminiscing, then blinked those thoughts away. He looked over at John, who was looking at him. “I’d rather not talk about it right now if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. Can I hold your hand?”

“Of course.” Sherlock gave John a lopsided smile and watched as he reached over to his bedside lamp, turned it off, and moved back as close as he could without touching Sherlock. On their sides again, face to face, John took Sherlock’s hand in his, brought it to his mouth, and kissed the back of it.

“Goodnight, Sherlock.”

“Goodnight, John.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and listened to the sound of his husband’s breathing. When it had slowed and evened out, he opened his eyes and stared at his profile. John Watson. John Watson was doing things to Sherlock that had never happened before, and that might be the most interesting case he’d yet tried to solve.
On the second day of their marriage, Sherlock woke up the same way he had on their first day: wrapped around his husband. He lay there for a few minutes, trying to convince himself to trust in the solidity and warmth in his arms, trying to trust himself to enjoy the sensations without jumping out of bed and fleeing, but after a few short minutes of cataloguing the feeling of John’s body rising and falling with breath and the sweet smell of the back of his neck, Sherlock did indeed get up and flee. He stood in the bathroom and stripped out of his wedding garments, then traced the path up and down his arms that John’s hands had taken the night before.

How had John made him feel so much by doing so little? The touches to his arm alone should have been innocent, not maddening. Perhaps it was the touching combined with the kisses? Perhaps it was the touching and the kissing plus the intent behind them, knowing that John wanted to give him pleasure? There was a difference between John squeezing Sherlock’s shoulder as he led him through the front door of his ancestral home, and caressing his bicep as he learned the shape of the muscle that flexed under warm skin. A loud noise from his stomach interrupted his contemplation of the variety and meaning of John’s touches. He dressed and went downstairs.

Over a breakfast of strong tea and burnt toast, the two men discussed their plans for the day, which amounted to not much at all. Itching for some kind of agenda, Sherlock listed off some items that John had mentioned wanting to do, such as hiring a housekeeper, making a to-do list of repairs, going into town to buy enough food to stock the fridge, and showing Sherlock the property.

John shook his head as he scraped burnt bits off his toast and then covered the bare spots with creamy butter. “You really are unable to sit still for long, aren’t you?”

“Unless I’m working in my lab or playing my violin, yes. Is that a game changer for you?” Sherlock tried to laugh but the words felt more serious than he intended.

“Nope. Nothing short of murder is a game changer for me, Sherlock Holmes Watson, and it seems that even murder, as long as it’s not mine or yours, proves to be an exciting addition to my life. So,” John continued, “how about we clean up after breakfast and I drive you down to the River Tay, show you some of the spots I enjoyed visiting here as a child? Then we’ll go into town and hit the shops.”

“I’m amenable to that plan.”

“Excellent.”

The fields lining the River Tay were filled with flowers, more flowers than Sherlock had ever seen in one place before. John talked as they walked, proudly pointing out his favourites.

“That tall, yellow one is gorse, and these here are bluebells, not Scots bluebells, which are also called harebells, but the more common blue flower that can be found almost anywhere. And that’s Heather, of course, and we’ve got thistle, too, and dwarf conel, and even some moss campion in this part of
Perthshire because we’re right between the lowlands and the highlands. You’ll see a lot of box myrtle in the marshy areas. It’s still green at this time of year, but in the winter it goes sort of reddish.”

Sherlock knew all of this, of course, having studied the effects of various chemicals on the indigenous flora of the United Kingdom, but he didn’t tell John he knew. He was oddly touched by how proud John was of pointing out the local plants, and didn’t want to take that away from him. He walked carefully, feeling for solid footing on the muddy ground and trying not to crush the blooms with his borrowed Wellingtons. They must have been John’s father’s, or even his grandfather’s, because they fit him and John’s would’ve been far too small. Not usually one to notice such things, he couldn’t help but admire the way the yellow of the rubber boots contrasted with the greens and purples and blues of the plants around him.

The river swirled and tossed as it flowed, narrow here close to its point of origin. The loch laid a few kilometres to the southwest and they planned to walk there, lunch in tow. They’d driven through several small towns to get here, towns that boasted nothing more than old Scottish names, like Ballinluig, Balnaguard, Grandtully, and Aberfeldy. They’d parked on the outskirts of a town called Bolfracks, and Sherlock had laughed as John put the Range Rover in neutral and pulled on the handbrake, because the entire place was made of outskirts, nothing more than someone’s farm and a scattering of cattle sitting on the patchwork quilt of verdant-hued lands that made up this part of the country.

It was near impossible to not step on the flowers as they stepped off the path and made their way toward the water. Their mingled scents rose up to meet him and he breathed them in and out, and in again, and thought about how different it was from London.

“This is special,” he heard himself say.

“Isn’t it? I used to love coming here as a kid. We’d spend the whole day, go fishing, have lunch, nap, whatever we wanted to do. My parents would bring a bottle of wine and let us run around to our hearts’ content.”

John pulled a blanket out of a rucksack and fluttered it over the ground, then tossed the rucksack down and gestured for Sherlock to set the picnic basket down next to it. John flopped down first, loose-limbed and easy, and Sherlock settled himself down next to him, sitting with his legs pulled up and his arms wrapped around them.

“You can stay, you know, in the mornings,” John said.

“Excuse me?”

“When you wake up. You can stay. You don’t have to run off.”

“Oh. I didn’t realise you were awake.”

“I woke up when you moved away and got out of bed. It was nice, I thought, waking up like that.”

“Yes.”

“Were you bothered by it?”

“I … I was surprised that I sought you out in my sleep. I, too, found it surprisingly enjoyable.”

“So stay next time.”
Sherlock didn’t say anything, choosing to look out over the water and pretend to be interested in something he saw there, and John changed the subject and started talking about the local wildlife. Sherlock listened intently, always eager to learn something new about a place he hadn’t been before.

Deer, red squirrels, osprey, raptors, and salmon were all in the area, John explained. They could even go salmon fishing if Sherlock wanted. Sherlock, who enjoyed eating what others put in front of him more than he enjoyed hunting for it, demurred and suggested they pick up some of the fish at the local grocer later that day.

John talked about Big Tree Country and pointed out the mountains that sat all around them. There was Schiehallion, Ben Vrackie, Ben Ledi, Càrn Maíg, Glas Tulaichean, and at least six more that John rattled off in a surprisingly good Scots Gaelic accent.

“Do you speak Gaelic, John?”

“Ay, I speak a few words here and there,” John laughed, turning up the accent full throttle.

Why on earth was Sherlock’s body responding to John putting on a Scots accent, he wondered. He leaned in a little closer to John and asked him to say something.

“Like what?”

“That was still English.”

“Yeah, I know, you git. What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. Whatever you’re thinking right now.”

John studied Sherlock’s face for a moment, smiled, and said, “Mi a ’smaoineachadh a tha thu àlainn.”

“And that means?”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to learn Scots Gaelic to find out, won’t you?”

Sherlock huffed. “John, as that would take me at least two weeks, I would much rather you tell me now.”

“Two whole weeks?” John teased.

“Maybe less, if I really work at it.”

“Well then, you can tell me what I just said after you’ve learned the language.” John pulled a leaf off a plant next to him and began to strip it down and flick away the pieces. “Are you bored?”

Sherlock considered the question. Obviously, John was concerned that Sherlock was bored. Therefore, Sherlock should tell him that he was not bored in order to save his feelings. On the other hand, Sherlock should be honest with his husband. He searched his mind for an answer, then grinned and said, “You know what? I’m not.”

“Don’t sound so surprised!”

Sherlock laughed and reached for the picnic basket. “What’s for lunch?”

“Guess.”

Sherlock peered inside, licked his lip, and pulled out what remained of the chocolate wedding cake
and a bottle of Champagne. “Okay, after this we really are going to the shops.”

“Seadh, mo ghràdh.”

Sherlock glared. “Give me two weeks.”

The trip into town was part tour and part shopping, and in the end, Sherlock felt he knew even more about John. Here’s where John’s family bought pork chops and canned beans, milk and cider. Here’s where John’s grandparents treated him to ice cream cones when he was little, and here’s where John posted the mail, and here’s where he bought the newspaper. Surprisingly to Sherlock, some of the shopkeepers were the same people, or at least in the same family, and they all greeted John as if they were greeting a long lost friend. John seemed to relish seeing each and every person they came across, and Sherlock came away feeling as if he was gaining a tribe, not just a husband.

Back at the house, they unpacked their bags of groceries. Sherlock liked standing next to John in the kitchen, deciding what should go where. Putting the eggs on the second shelf of the fridge, putting the cans of soup on the third shelf of the pantry, leaving the packages of biscuits out on the counter; all of this was like building themselves from the ground up. Sherlock put away luncheon meats and bread, tea and sugar, pickles and apples and tangerines and bananas, and by the time they were done he was ready for the tea John was brewing.

Feeling productive, Sherlock suggested they start on the repair list, so with a notepad and pen in hand, the two went from room to room to inventory what needed to be done. As they went, John gave Sherlock the background of the different rooms, such as what they’d originally been used for, the significance of certain pieces of furniture, funny stories that had taken place there, and so on. More than any story or piece of information, what Sherlock liked most was the sense of continuity and longevity in the house.

There were paintings throughout the rooms of ancestors dating back to John’s great-great-great-grandparents. John had deep family roots, much like he himself did. He suspected, however, that he would have liked John’s family more than he liked his own. His family was boring. Mummy was a mathematician, Daddy was a teacher, and Mycroft was the government. Before that, his relatives were mostly landed gentry and it didn't get much more boring than that. Sherlock was by far the only one in generations who had done anything exciting, and that was mostly because he liked to blow things up.

But cattle ranching and losing the family fortune over a hand of cards? That was the stuff of legend.

They split up to go through the upstairs rooms and Sherlock found himself in what must have been one of the guest rooms. Similar to downstairs, the room was a hodgepodge of different styles and eras. The dark wood four-poster bed held court in the centre of the room, its navy and gold coverlet complementing lighter blue curtains and a pale yellow rug. Sherlock took note of the condition of the linens and fabrics, which were dusty with disuse but not moth-eaten. He scanned the ceiling for damp and noted a few cracks that should be repaired, then checked the windows for cracks or rotting wood. He stopped to look at a cluster of paintings on the wall, mostly pastoral scenes of cattle grazing in the hills, a few hunting dogs leading a group of men on horses, and a brightly coloured mallard.

On the way to the en-suite bathroom, he turned to look at the bedside locker furthest from the door, then stopped and took a step closer, drawn by something he’d seen. There, sticking out of the drawer, was the edge of a folder. A green folder. It looked exactly like the colour of his own green folders, the ones that had cycled in and out of his parents’ house before he’d met John.

He took a step closer and ran his finger across the edge of the inlaid walnut cabinet. Maybe he could
Just open the drawer and settle the folder back inside so that the drawer could close properly? Sherlock hooked a finger around the gold handle and pulled it toward him. He pulled harder. The drawer came open to the rattle of its contents being jumbled about. Under the protruding folder were several more, all of them sitting on top of an assortment of discarded mementos: postcards and receipts, bookmarks and photographs, pens and pencils. He tapped his finger on the folder and sighed. Did one of these files belong to the other person John had been dating at the same time as Sherlock?

Not that it mattered now. John was Sherlock’s husband. John had chosen him. Still, it would be interesting to know who else the agency had deemed suitable for John Watson, wouldn’t it? It couldn’t hurt to know who Sherlock’s competition had been. It might be in his own best interest to know. Would it be in his own best interest? How would it be in his own best interest? Sherlock sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the stack of folders onto his lap. He heard the bumping and shuffling of John moving about several rooms away. He would only take a quick peek.

He opened the first folder and scanned the summary sheet that sat on top of a thick stack of papers. Jonathon O’Connor, 26 years old, teacher, one sister, rugby aficionado, amateur chef. Boring. He scanned again, reading between the lines and saw the clues float off the page and into the space in front of him. Daddy issues, foot fetish, in debt up to his eyeballs, lives in sister’s basement. Sherlock scoffed and slapped the folder shut. He moved on to the next one.

Charles Smythe, 28 years old, tax accountant, only child, wine connoisseur, cyclist. And then, dyes his hair blond, into S&M, looking for a sub, and hates children.

Nathan Foster, 20 years old, Army Reserve, studying law at University College London, avid hiker, two sisters, one brother (deceased). And then, still a virgin, anger management issues, anti-social, and commitment issues.

Daniel Cotter, Sherlock read, sliding the first three folders to the bottom of the pile. 25 years old, director of IT services, one brother and one sister, both parents retired, volunteer at the Royal Society for Blind Children, one dog. Sherlock let his mind search the subtext for clues, but could find nothing incriminating. Loves children, invests for retirement, reads historical fiction.

This must be the one, Sherlock thought. The man was near perfect. His picture showed a fit, good-looking man with dark hair, clear skin, and a genuine smile. Why would John not have picked Daniel? Daniel was a poster child for the AMP, a veritable golden child that anyone would be happy to bring home to their family.

Footsteps coming down the hall startled Sherlock out of his concentration on the folders in his lap. He tried to press the stack of them back into the drawer and ease it shut but the drawer wouldn’t close all the way. Panicked, he stood up, shoved the folders between the mattress and box spring, and fluffed the bed covers back into place just as John poked his head in.

“Hey, how’s it going? How does this room look?”

Sherlock waved his hands around and looked up at the corners of the ceiling. “No damp, just a few cracks in the plaster to be repaired, windows are in good shape. I was just going to check the ensuite.”

“Great. I’m going to do the bedroom across the hall. Meet me in the kitchen when you’re done and we’ll take a break.”

That night they made a simple dinner of pasta, cherry tomatoes, and salmon, which they ate in the library with a bottle of Viognier. Sherlock put thoughts of Daniel out of his head and poured over
some Scots Gaelic books he'd dusted off as John worked on the estate’s books. Gaelic wasn't much more difficult than Sherlock had anticipated, with its eighteen letter alphabet, masculine and feminine nouns in four cases, and verb-subject-object word order. Sherlock was reassured he'd have it mastered in two weeks. The first thing he did before learning any verb conjugations or checking out loaner words from other languages, was to look up what John had said to him earlier in the day. That required skimming the rules of letter pronunciation, but within a minute he had his answer:

*I think you're beautiful.*

Sherlock was grateful that John had his face buried in his ledgers, as his own face was warm and must’ve been an alarming shade of pink. He closed his book and leaned back against the leather armchair. It wasn’t the first time John had complimented Sherlock’s looks, and it wasn’t the first time Sherlock had blushed under the knowledge that John found him attractive. Sherlock was used to being told he was a genius. He’d heard that since his first Montessori class at age three. He was used to being complimented for his honours in chemistry and music, for his powers of observation, and more recently, even for his detective skills. Being complimented for his looks was entirely different.

For the longest time, he'd been made fun of for being too thin and lanky, for his too curly hair, his paper-pale skin, squinty eyes and angular face. His peers at school had never stopped letting him know that he was awkward, gangly, the ugly duckling in the crowd. Was it possible he’d fulfilled that particular story arc and become something of a swan?

John seemed to think so, but of course, John had only seen his arms, neck, hands, and feet up until now. Sherlock would have to up the ante when he selected his wedding garments later in the evening. Perhaps he'd only wear the pyjama bottoms and see how John responded to what Sherlock thought of as his scrawny chest. Maybe, he thought, he wasn't so scrawny after all? And, if he had to be completely honest with himself, which he didn't, but was doing anyway, he wanted more of John’s touches to more of his body to test his reactions. Each night so far had left him on the verge of slipping over the edge of his mental control, but so far he hadn't said or done anything completely irresponsible, over-the-line, or damaging.

Curious about what lay ahead, Sherlock tidied his books, excused himself, and headed up to bed. He hung up his clothes, cleaned his teeth and face, and was just slipping into the bedroom wearing only his pyjama bottoms when John came in to join him. John stopped in his tracks, stared, and then plastered a huge smile on his face.

“I like the trend you've got going with your wedding garments, I have to say.”

Sherlock undoubtedly blushed again, only this time John could probably see the blotches of his embarrassment on his chest as well as his face. At this rate, following John's logic, Sherlock would be naked in three more nights. He knew himself well enough to know, however, that the current trajectory of eliminating one garment per night might not hold. Instead of confirming John's statement, Sherlock slid into bed and started thumbing through a Scotland tourism magazine he'd picked up at the shops earlier that day.

Within a few minutes, John was in bed next to him, on his side and facing Sherlock. Sherlock kept reading about Scone Palace as John moved closer and settled one hand on Sherlock’s bicep. Sherlock had a hard time focusing on the history of the home as John began to lightly caress his arm. “John, we’re only forty minutes from Scone. We should go see the palace.”

“Mm. If you want.”

Sherlock couldn't care less about the castle and wasn't entirely sure why he'd said anything about visiting.
“Have you been there before?”

“Many times,” John said as his hand slid up and down Sherlock's arm.

“Then I suppose it'd be boring to you. We don't have to go.”

“No, we should go. If you want to see it we'll definitely go.” John's fingertips were grazing the side of Sherlock's pectoral.

“I'll think about it,” Sherlock answered, his voice breaking halfway through the sentence. He doubled down on his efforts to read the article about the Georgian Gothic house, but read the same sentence twelve times after John's hand came to rest directly on Sherlock's chest. Sherlock was used to feeling scrambled by physical touch, not frozen. They stayed like that, John's thumb rubbing small arcs on Sherlock's skin, Sherlock staring at the jumble of letters on the page.

*Scone Abbey ... severely damaged in 1559 ... Scottish Reformation ... mob whipped up ... famous reformer, John Knox, came to Scone ... Dundee. Having survived the Reformation ...*

John's hand wandered lower and his thumb bumped over Sherlock's nipple. Sherlock became vaguely aware of the magazine hitting the floor.

“You okay? Your breathing's gone all funny.”

Sherlock tried to regulate his breathing but found himself completely ineffectual in that endeavour. Instead, he whirled to face John, aiming his mouth in the general direction of his husband’s. John’s hand skidded up to Sherlock's bare shoulder and their noses bumped. The kiss landed harder than he'd planned, but John didn't seem to mind. He grabbed at Sherlock's arms to pull them closer and kissed back just as hard. John rolled half on top of Sherlock, making sure to keep his hips on the bed and his legs not touching Sherlock's. His chest though, was angled over and pressing into Sherlock's, and the weight of John's body on Sherlock’s was intoxicating.

A thousand impressions flashed in the forefront of Sherlock's mind: *firm muscles, soft flesh, tickling hair, erect nipples, frantic touching, harsh breathing, taxed lung capacity, rising body temperature, open wet mouths ...*

Only the sound of John huffing out an indecent moan brought him back to centre, in bed with John, kissing John, under John. That, and the fact that John was sliding down the bed inch by inch. When he could no longer reach Sherlock's mouth he started to kiss Sherlock's jaw and neck and collarbones, and then John was pressing his hands into Sherlock’s lower back and the curved space between his shoulder blades, and he was kissing Sherlock's nipples, and the entire world spun off its axis and went careening directly to Sherlock's groin where it did a terrific job of screaming *hello!*

Losing control of himself, Sherlock arched his back off the bed, seeking as much of that hot wet mouth as he could. John went up on one arm and moved back to give Sherlock space but Sherlock closed the distance by rolling to his side and coming up over John, placing one hand on the back of John’s head and pressing his chest down against his open mouth. From that angle, he could see over John’s shoulder, and what he saw was that John had removed the picture of James from his bedside table.

John gave one hard nip to Sherlock's nipple and Sherlock, anticipating that he would stutter out a groan, opened his mouth and heard himself say, “What happened to the photo of you and Major Sholto that you had by the side of the bed along with your other cherished photos of loved ones?”

Dammit. This did not bode well for continued nipple sucking.
John huffed out a laugh and shook his head, flopped onto his back, and said, “You're asking that now?”

“I warned you.”

“About what?”

“Saying the wrong thing when I'm being touched in an intimate way.”

“Well, if that's as bad as it gets, I'm really not too worried. I put it away to make room for one of our wedding photos.” John turned his head and smiled at Sherlock. His face was flushed and his lips were wet and swollen. His hair was messy from Sherlock's fingers raking through it and he was still breathing a bit heavily.

Sherlock closed his eyes and blew out a deep breath. How to tell this beautiful, kind, trusting man that that wasn't even close to how bad it could get?
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you, as always, to happierstill for betaing, which always includes tons of comments like:

I've read this a dozen times and I'm still in awe at how hot this is
dead
!!!!
Pants on FIRE
I LOVE THIS LIKE I LOVE CHOCOLATE, WHICH IS A LOT
kill me now I love this
this is too sexy for my text to read app. it keeps crashing. which means this is damn good

Sherlock woke up the next morning in what was becoming his customary position: wrapped around John. Thinking about John’s encouraging words at the river the day before, Sherlock fought the urge to leave and stayed where he was. In fact, he moved closer. He buried his nose in the back of John’s warm neck and brushed his fingers tentatively along John’s arm where it lay close to his chest.

John sighed in his sleep.

Sherlock ran his fingers further down John’s arm and bumped them over John’s knuckles, then lower over his fingers. He wanted to slot his fingers between John’s and hang on tight, but he stopped. What if his touch woke John and what if John didn’t want to wake up? He was being silly, wasn’t he? John wanted Sherlock to touch him. John had made it abundantly clear that he liked it when Sherlock initiated closeness between them. He was still lost in these thoughts when John took Sherlock’s hand in his and hummed a sleepy, “Good morning.”

“I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“I’d rather be woken by you than wake up alone, Sherlock. You know that, right?”

“You may have said as much before, yes.”

“Well, it’s true.” John shuffled back a bit until his back was pressed up against Sherlock from his shoulders to his waist. He kept his hips angled away, which was probably a good idea considering how very appealing it was to Sherlock to have so much of John touching him. Any more appeal and John was going to feel a particular body part of Sherlock’s from quite some distance. He squeezed John’s hand and was rewarded with a strong squeeze back.

John tugged Sherlock’s arm tighter around him and angled his head around for a kiss, so Sherlock lifted himself up a bit and kissed John on the side of his mouth.

“Sorry, morning breath.”

“Don’t care. It’s not a proper good morning without a kiss.”

“Is that so?” Sherlock said into the smooth space below John’s ear.
“That’s so. So come back here and give me a proper kiss.”

Sherlock lifted up again and leaned over John. He kissed him square on the mouth, smiling, happy to give John what he’d asked for.

“Thank you,” John said, returning the smile. “What do you want to do today? Which is not a suggestion that we get out of bed anytime soon, mind you.”

“I’d like to see more of the grounds, if you don’t mind.” Sherlock had enjoyed hearing John talk about the area he lived in when they’d gone to the river the day before, and wanted to see and hear more about the place he’d spent so much of his childhood.

“I’d be happy to show you around. It’s mostly wooded, but there are some hiking trails and a few fields where we played as kids, and an old tennis court that’s gone to seed. Do you play tennis? We can get it repaved if you’d like.”

Sherlock kissed the tip of John’s ear. “John. Look at me. Look at my family. Of course I play tennis. You don’t have to fix it up for me, though, I’m not that avid a player.”

“All right. Whatever you want.”

Sherlock knew that John meant it. Whatever he wanted. He wondered how it was that someone who had known him for just a few short months could dedicate himself so freely. He wondered if he could say the same back. Could he give John anything he wanted? So far John hadn’t asked for anything that Sherlock couldn’t give. He wanted simple things, like smiles and kisses and a hand to hold, lingering meals and childhood stories, someone to gaze at the stars with at night, someone to share his bed.

Those things, Sherlock could give. The other things, the intangible gifts of mutual pleasure, he was letting the wedding garments teach him to give, night by night. Sherlock shifted his legs under the blankets and felt the soft silk of them shifting between his thighs. The feel of them, the thought of what they meant, caused more heat to stir between his legs. John turned in Sherlock’s arms and wrapped one arm around Sherlock’s bare back. He traced up and down Sherlock’s spine, then trailed his fingers down and along the waistband of Sherlock’s pyjama pants. His other arm was curled between them, that hand making slow progress across Sherlock’s chest, his fingers inching toward one nipple.

Sherlock looked down just as John’s fingers found their target and watched as his nipple hardened and peaked, and as the small hairs stood up and gooseflesh rose across his pec. He sucked in a sharp breath and felt John’s fingers cup and caress his chest as it expanded under his hand.

“You like that,” John said, not bothering to make it a question. His voice was low, quiet.

“Yeah,” was all Sherlock could manage.

“I like how sensitive you are. And I like it too, to be touched there.”

“I’m sorry, I should have—”

“Shh. Nothing to apologise for. I’m just telling you so you know. I also love to have my neck kissed, and my ears, but I’m ticklish along my waist and under my chin. Just so you know. But we can learn these things together. I want to find out things about you. I want to know how you react when I touch you in different places. Like here.” John rubbed Sherlock’s nipple again and then pinched it.

“Oh, God.”
“Yeah, I’d say you like that.”

Sherlock loved it. He loved it and he wanted more of it, on both nipples, preferably with John’s talented mouth, but John’s words about how he liked it, too, were still ringing in his ears. He brought his hand up from where it was resting on his thigh and lightly brushed over one of John’s nipples. John huffed out a short sound of pleasure as his pec gave an involuntary flex.

“I like … I like your chest, John.” Sherlock glanced up at John as he said it, caught John’s eye, and looked down again.

“Yeah? What do you like about it?”

Sherlock took a deep breath. “I like how smooth it is, except for the hair in between your pectorals, here, and I like that hair. I like your … nipples … how small and tight they get. I like your pectorals. They’re firm but not overly so, and I find their shape very appealing.”

“You can touch them. I’d like that.”

Sherlock blinked in the face of John’s statement, but then flattened his palm over one and gently squeezed. John was warm and hard and smooth and Sherlock could feel the nub of his nipple pressing into his palm. He cupped the slight rise of John's pec and used his thumb to rub at and tease the nipple, then slid his hand toward the other and repeated the movements.

John’s breathing had picked up considerably and his own hand had left Sherlock’s chest and come to rest on his waist, opening the space between them. John watched Sherlock’s hand, then licked his lips. Sherlock got the best idea.

He licked the tips of his fingers and then curled them over John’s nipple, plucking slightly, and John moaned and shrugged one shoulder back, arching his chest into Sherlock’s hand.

“You … like that?” Sherlock asked.

“I fucking love that.”

Emboldened, Sherlock slowly leaned down. John breathed out hard and then moaned again when Sherlock’s tongue flicked out and met the hardened flesh. John flopped over onto his back and Sherlock followed him, rising up on one elbow and leaning over to lick at John’s chest. He concentrated on one nipple, then the other, and then kissed over the flushed skin between them. John wove his fingers into Sherlock’s hair and tugged, and every nerve ending in Sherlock’s scalp came alive and sang out loud.

It was becoming more difficult to ignore the hardness between his legs. He was throbbing and he could feel the damp spot on his pyjamas catch on the head of his erect cock. What he wanted, more than anything, was to rub himself against something, preferably John’s thigh. It seemed the longer Sherlock’s mouth worked over John’s chest, the harder he got, and the harder he got, the more demanding his mouth became of the flesh underneath it. They were both breathing hard now, and writhing.

“Come here, come here,” John panted, tugging Sherlock up to meet his mouth. His kiss was hard, demanding, and Sherlock felt himself falling onto his back as John pushed him over. The next thing he knew, John was straddling him, careful not to come into contact with Sherlock’s pyjama bottoms, but caging him from above with his strong arms. John gave Sherlock one last open-mouthed kiss, then worked his way down, smearing his lips and tongue in messy kisses down Sherlock’s neck and chest and lower, kissing over his sternum and into the softer flesh of his belly. He brushed his lips
back and forth through the hair disappearing into his pyjama bottoms, and Sherlock heard himself whimper.

He dug his fingers into John’s rounded shoulders, not sure if he was trying to encourage him or stop him. John decided for him, stopping after he kissed a line parallel with the waistband of his pyjamas, then grabing Sherlock’s wrists and pinning them above his head. From that position he leaned down again and nosed his way down the underside of Sherlock’s arm, over the pale skin of his forearm, into the tender curve of his elbow, kissing his way over the swell of Sherlock’s taut tricep. He stopped at Sherlock’s armpit, blowing to make the hair there flutter, then breathing in deeply.

“God, I want you so bad, Sherlock, you have no idea.”

Sherlock thought he had a pretty good idea. From his vantage point, he could look down and see the obscene bulge in John’s pyjama bottoms, tented almost comically. John’s cock had to be standing straight up at this point, and like his own bottoms, John’s were sporting a damp spot.

John licked across Sherlock’s collarbone and up his neck, back to his mouth. He hovered there, not quite touching his lips to Sherlock’s until Sherlock couldn’t stand the distance anymore and surged up to claim John’s mouth with his own. The kiss was powerful and hungry, and Sherlock knew he was losing control. He groaned, and John moved on to suck on Sherlock’s earlobe, his ragged breathing flooding Sherlock’s ear. He licked into the shell of it, his tongue flickering in and out, his chest brushing back and forth against Sherlock’s. Sherlock imagined John resting his full weight on top of him, imagined his thighs pressed tight against Sherlock’s spread legs, his ass flexing as he rutted against Sherlock’s eager body.

He could feel John’s heat all around him, beckoning him, and Sherlock knew that if he lifted his hips just a few inches they would be in contact. He also knew that that would somehow break the agreement they’d made when Sherlock accepted John’s gift. By wearing these pyjama bottoms Sherlock had sent a message that he was not ready to be touched there and John had mentally prepared himself for that and respected it. If Sherlock were to break the rules now and push himself up and against John …

Sherlock couldn’t finish the thought. His mind was spinning with the possibilities. Image after image flitted through his head, thoughts of the first moment he would see John naked, of the first time John would touch his rigid cock and stroke him, thoughts of John’s strong hands on Sherlock’s arse cheeks, kneading and lifting and pulling. John licked around the curve of Sherlock’s ear and Sherlock’s brain fed him the sensation of that wicked, warm tongue on his cock, twirling over the head, licking at the leaking fluid, those lips spreading and slipping down, down, down.

Sherlock bucked up and made contact, his cock briefly rubbing against John’s, and the power of every nerve ending in his body coalesced in his throbbing erection. His thighs tensed and his toes curled, his back arched off the bed and he gasped with the twitching of his cock.

“Oh, God, John, I think I’m, I’m going to—”

John threw himself off Sherlock and landed next to him on his back, his fists gripping the sheets, pulling them up tight on either side of his thighs.

Sherlock wanted to melt into the bedding, wanted to disappear, wanted to swallow the words and go back just ten seconds to when his brain didn’t turn traitorous on him. He couldn’t do that any more than he could demand that his cock wilt back down to flaccid from its current state, somewhere between raging hard and blissfully pulsing.

“I’m sorry, God, I’m so sorry.”
Next to him, John shook his head and threw his arm over his face. “You have nothing to apologise for, Sherlock. You’re so fucking hot. Everything you say, everything you do, you’re just so fucking hot and I want you so badly. I got carried away and I put you in a position that I shouldn’t have put you in. I should be the one apologising to you. I know you’re not ready for that kind of intimacy, and I was selfish, and I, God, I’m just sorry. I’ll leave you alone now. I’ll go downstairs and you can, I don’t know, just … I’m sorry.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but John was up and gone, fleeing downstairs before Sherlock could form words.
He lay there, muscles clenched, hard-on throbbing, and tried to let John’s words temper his own embarrassment. How could he *not* be that aroused when John, strong, gorgeous, compassionate John was doing those things to him? He played it back in his head from start to almost-finish, and tried to figure out where he’d lost control not only of his mind, but of his body, and came to the conclusion that it was just about the same time.

Interestingly, however, Sherlock had not deduced anything ridiculous this time, had not blurted out anything insensitive about anyone else. Instead, he had blurted out something about himself, something that shocked himself with its unforeseen immediacy, something that made him look and feel like a fourteen-year-old schoolboy caught looking at dirty pictures on his friend’s phone.

He was more forgiving of losing control of his inexperienced body than he was of his mind, and even that seemed less grievous now than it had a month ago, a week ago, a day ago. Why was that, he wondered? He looked down the length of his body to his slowly softening erection. Losing control of his thoughts, of his ideas, of his body, was more acceptable now than it had ever been before because it was happening at John’s hand and because Sherlock trusted John. It was more than that, though, he realised. He had feelings for John, very strong feelings. In fact, Sherlock would bet that if he did a thorough analysis of the nature of love, he would be hard-pressed to deny that he wasn’t falling, falling like a stone, in love with his husband.

Sherlock had a hunch that he’d find John in the kitchen, so after he dressed, haphazardly at that, he made his way downstairs and rapped at the swing door before entering. He stood there for a minute, feeling the door whoosh back and forth behind him, and closed his eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I know that you did not sign up for a blushing virgin with the staying power of a trembling blade of grass when you signed up for this marriage.”

“Stop. And open your eyes. You have nothing to hide from.”

Sherlock opened his eyes. John was fiddling with a cup of coffee and a spoon but pushed it away long enough to get up and fetch a cup for Sherlock. He poured it full and pushed it across the table.

“Do you have any idea,” he continued, sitting down again and gesturing for Sherlock to join him, “how incredibly hot that was? You see it as a sign of weakness, but Sherlock, I swear to God, knowing that I have that kind of effect on you is like a spark to a powder keg.”

“And that’s why you fled the room so quickly?”

“I fled the room, as you put it, because number one, I got the sense that you wanted space more than you wanted to come in your pants at that particular moment, and number two, because if I stayed I wasn’t going to be able to control myself, and I need to be able to control myself.”

Sherlock stared into the black depths of his coffee. He could see himself and John in the big bed
upstairs, see himself squirming in his damp pyjama bottoms, his cock hard as wood, see John losing control. He could see John dropping himself down and grinding against Sherlock, could see himself hanging on tight, grinding back, could hear—

“—scares me how much I want you, Sherlock. And you’re not ready, I know you’re not. Even though your body is telling you that you are, I need to know that you are really ready, both emotionally and physically. And when it happens, when I touch you that way, for that purpose, I want it to be because we’ve both agreed that it’s going to happen in that moment, not because it was an accident.”

Sherlock tapped his finger against the side of his cup. “You know not everyone is like you, right? That not everyone would be this patient? I can’t think of a single other person I’ve met that would have even thought of the wedding garments, let alone have given them as a gift. Who gives a gift that keeps you from getting what you want?”

John sighed and shook his head. “Then you misunderstand what I want, Sherlock. I want you to be happy with me, to trust me and know that I respect you. I want that more than I want the things I want to do with you, and believe me, I want those things an unbelievable amount. Do you have any idea how sexy you are?”

“No.”

“You are as sexy as the strength of what I feel for you, and as sexy as the urgency of what you felt before, before when you said—”

“I know what I said. Let’s not review the most embarrassing moment of my adult life.”

John left his place at the end of the table and came to stand close to Sherlock; close, but not touching. “Don’t be embarrassed. It was incredibly sexy. Now, I promised you a tour of the grounds, yeah?”

Sherlock finished his coffee and agreed to meet John on the back terrace in ten minutes. John needed to get dressed and Sherlock needed another minute to process what he was feeling. He had started to put it together upstairs when he’d thought about why he was okay with touching and being touched by John. He was more than okay with it; he had begun to crave it. He was also ready to acknowledge that nothing truly grievous had come out of his mouth so far. Sure, he’d made a few gaffes here and there, but John had laughed those off. There was no guarantee, however, that something worse might not come flying out when his brain was left to its own devices while his body was otherwise overwhelmed.

But surely, he told himself, he had deduced everything there was to know about John at this point? Nothing damning was lurking in the shadows, and even if there were, wouldn’t John be more forgiving of Sherlock than Victor had been? But on the other hand, what Sherlock had said to Victor … no, it didn’t bear review.

Just a few minutes ago, Sherlock had thought he was falling in love with John, but now, after hearing John’s words about what he wanted for Sherlock, after hearing him describe how much he wanted him to be comfortable and ready, and knowing that John was putting Sherlock before his own desires, Sherlock had no doubt. John valued Sherlock’s inexperience, because it was part of who Sherlock was. That, perhaps, was the last piece to fall into place, because when John opened the door to the terrace and stepped outside, and when Sherlock looked up and saw his husband’s face, he knew. He knew that he was absolutely gone on John Watson.

“John!”
“Hey there. Are you okay? You look flushed.”

“I’m fine. I need to tell you something. It’s important.”

“Okay.” John closed the space between them and took Sherlock’s hand in his own. “What is it?”

“I realised, just now, well maybe I’ve been realising for some time, I’m not completely sure about the timing, but it’s probably not important, that is, I have come to the conclusion…” and here Sherlock had to stop, because John was holding his hand and beaming up at him as if Sherlock had just discovered alchemy, and truly, he had no idea how to say the words he wanted to say, no idea how to unstick them from the lining of his heart, from the back of his throat, from the tip of his tongue, so he licked his lips and swallowed and said, “... the conclusion, that I really do want to see that tennis court you were talking about.”

John burst out laughing, then shook his head and said, “I love how you are so passionate about the most inane things, Sherlock Holmes Watson,” which made Sherlock love John even that much more.

Sherlock missed most of the next two hours, feeling as if he were tethered to and floating just next to John. John led him around the grounds in a large circle, pointing out copses of birnham oaks, fortinngall yews, and a rare 16th century Blairquhan dool that Harry had fallen from when she was seven. She had broken her arm, and John said it was the first time he knew he wanted to be a doctor.

He showed Sherlock the overgrown, heather-strewn prairies in which he’d played rugby with his cousins as a young boy and took him to see the small wading pools that were made by tributaries from the River Tay. They surveyed the areas John’s grandparents had considered for a swimming pool before they’d lost everything and inspected the crumbling tennis courts with the boarded tennis hut, standing proud, if not a bit decrepitly, to the side. Sherlock was vaguely aware of John talking about turning the old structure into a guest house for guests who wanted more privacy, but had a hard time staying in the present, focused as he was on what he planned to wear to bed that night, and the parts of his newly exposed body John would be able to explore.

At the end of the tour John held his hands up and said, “So, that’s the whole of it. I hope I didn’t bore you too much,” and Sherlock had stared at John’s strong hands and his modest smile and shook his head back and forth, disbelieving that John could ever do anything boring.

“No, I wasn’t bored at all. It was perfect. It’s all perfect. We could put in that pool, and fix up the tennis courts and the tennis hut and make it a guest house. Whatever you want. Whatever you think. I think it’s perfect.”

John looked at him with a bemused look, but then smiled again and rubbed his hand up and down Sherlock’s arm. “All right, then. I’m glad you like it so much. It is our home, after all. We can spend as much time here as we want.”

“Yes. As much as we want. I agree.” Sherlock didn’t care where they spent their time, as long as they were together. They could live in the tattered tennis hut for all he cared. He could just move a few meager belongings in, and his wedding garments, and they could throw a mattress on the floor and never leave.

God, what was wrong with him? This was worse than blurting out people’s deepest darkest secrets. This was him turning into a brainless ninny, a lust-induced, selfless fool using his body to pray to the altar of John Watson. He needed to get a grip. He took a shot at sounding normal.

“Should we go into town? We still haven’t done anything about finding a housekeeper and that was high on your list of things to do.”
“Sure. Let’s wash up and drive into town. I can put up a sign on the bulletin board at the food co-op, and maybe one at Victoria’s.” John turned on his heel and headed toward the house. Sherlock was left standing there, watching the way John’s body moved when he walked, which he thought was quite unfair because John’s body moved as if it wanted to tantalise and hypnotise everyone who got to see it in motion. And who, exactly, was Victoria?

“You coming?” John called out, and not wanting to be caught staring, Sherlock rolled up his sleeves against the heat of the September sun and trotted in after his husband.

The trip into Pitlochry was a short one and within twenty minutes John and Sherlock had parked and were walking toward the top of the main street. “Victoria’s is just a bit further,” John said, “so let’s go there first.”

Sherlock, determined to keep his jealousy at bay, said nothing, and then was glad he’d kept his mouth shut, as Victoria’s turned out to be a restaurant and coffee shop. Victoria herself came out and gave John an enormous, matronly hug, then stood back and gave Sherlock coy looks until John remembered to introduce them.

“Victoria, I’m delighted to introduce you to my husband, Sherlock Holmes Watson. We’re actually on our honeymoon. We arrived just a few days ago.”

Victoria squealed and squawked over them until Sherlock made moves to hide behind the cake case, and then she ushered them to what she called the best seat in the house and refused to give them menus.

“I’ve known you since you were in nappies, John Watson, and you can be sure no member of the Watson clan is going to order off a menu! I’ll be back with something special for you in just a bit.”

True to her word, Victoria returned shortly with a young waitress carrying a heavy tray, and they proceeded to unload a tea service along with still-warm scones, strawberries and freshly whipped cream, a plate of meringues, and an entire Swiss roll cake.

“There, now that should keep you going for a wee while. Just let Alice here know if you need anything else, and don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“What on earth are we supposed to do with all this food?” Sherlock asked as he poured John a cup of tea.

“Do your best to eat what you can and we’ll ask Alice to wrap up the rest. Victoria will be disappointed if we leave any behind.”

Half-way through their eating extravaganza, John remembered the flier he’d written up advertising for a housekeeper, so he pulled Alice aside and asked if she could put it in the window.

“Aye, but I don’t need to put it in the window, sir. My older sister is just divorced and looking for a situation like this one. She lives here in town, so she could come to your place daily, and you wouldn’t have to have her live in. She has no kids, one of the only blessings of that marriage now that she’s divorced the lying, cheating scum, so she needn’t worry about daycare and such. If you’d like I could call her now and set it up.”

John looked at Sherlock, and Sherlock, who was fork deep in the Swiss roll cake, shrugged indifference and took another sip of tea. Alice scuttled off, leaving them with the flier and hopes that they’d found someone to keep the house clean and from falling in on itself.

Alice returned to the table a few minutes later and held out her cell phone to John. Within five
minutes of talking to Annette, they’d agreed that she’d come to the house each day of the work week from noon til 5:00 p.m., and when they’d deemed the house was back in acceptable condition, she could cut back her hours to three days a week. She’d be responsible for hiring handymen, as well, and Sherlock could tell by the smile on John’s face that she already knew which brothers, cousins, and friends would be right for specific jobs.

Afraid that Victoria would start serving them dinner if they didn’t leave soon, they gathered what was left of their sweets, thanked Alice, bid Victoria goodbye, and made their way back down the main street.

“Well, that was more productive than I thought it would be,” John said as they approached the Range Rover.

“If putting me into a food coma is considered productive, then yes, I’d have to agree with you.”

“You don’t we get you back in bed, then, where you belong.” John winked as he got in the car, leaving Sherlock weak in the knees on the footpath. If John was eager to get Sherlock back into bed, Sherlock wasn’t going to say no.
Thank you, happierstill, for all you do to make this better.

John made a half-arsed suggestion that they cook something for dinner, but put up no protest when Sherlock grabbed a bottle of Champagne from the fridge and made for the stairs leading to the bedroom.

Sherlock placed the bottle on his bedside table and rummaged through the armoire until he found what he was looking for, then disappeared into the bathroom. Getting undressed took no time at all—such was the benefit of wearing khakis and a linen shirt—and considering what he planned to wear, getting dressed should have taken even less time. Still, he dawdled, looking at his body in the mirror and trying to see what John saw. He was tall, which was generally considered a desirable trait, and thin, but was he too thin? He flexed his arms and examined his biceps and shoulders and decided that he was fit enough, but with a lean musculature. His hips were narrow, his belly flat, and his thighs were slender but strong.

Sherlock stood back and looked at himself as a whole, took in the pale landscape of his skin dotted with freckles and moles, his sparse body hair, his full, dark bush. He tried to see himself not as knobby and alien-like, but as someone attractive and desirable. He had to admit, it was easier to see himself that way when he turned sideways and caught a glimpse of his arse, fully curved and the most luscious part of his body.

He turned back to the mirror and looked at his penis, hanging long over his bollocks. Certainly, he had nothing to be ashamed of. It was a bit like the rest of him, long, but not overly large, probably average for a man of his height and build. What would John think of it? He smiled to himself. Given the way John had responded to him so far, he was confident that John would enjoy it immensely.

Satisfied that he wasn’t completely hideous, Sherlock tugged on the white silk boxer briefs that had come with his wedding garments. He shimmied them over his thighs and snapped the elastic along his waist, then stood back and stared. John had guessed the measurements of the pyjama bottoms and two tops perfectly, but perhaps measurements of a more intimate nature had been harder to gauge because these did not fit Sherlock at all.

These were too small.

Perhaps briefs made of cotton would’ve had the necessary give to more readily fit Sherlock’s thighs, arse, and package, but the silk did not give one iota, and Sherlock felt encased in a tight, second skin. The fabric was thin, too, adding a sheerness to the garment, and Sherlock didn’t have to look hard to see the dark hair underneath or the curve of his cock resting on the bulge of his balls. He turned around and looked at himself in the mirror over his shoulder, his hands automatically reaching to pull the bottoms down, but they didn’t budge. They barely covered his arse cheeks and were riding up his crack like they belonged there. Maybe they did? Maybe this was what John had in mind when he purchased them?

Sherlock ran his fingers over his chest and felt his nipples go hard. He had a flashback of John’s tongue licking at them, and the shorts immediately got tighter. Oh, God. He needed to get to the bed
and lie down before he was unable to walk at all, or before the shorts ripped right off his body. No doubt John was wondering what was taking him so long.

He opened the door and peered around the doorframe. John was already sitting on the side of the bed in a pair of track pants, the bottle of Champagne in his hands, his tongue peeking out between his lips.

Sherlock stepped forward, ringing his hands in front of his belly button, wondering if he should make a noise and call attention to himself or just walk to the bed and see what happened. What happened was that John saved him from making a decision by looking up just then and practically dropping the bottle.

“You … you … you’re wearing the …”

“Yes. They may be just a bit too small.”

“No. No, they’re not. They’re perfect. They’re absolutely perfect.”

Sherlock crossed the room and sat on the side of the bed next to John. Sitting caused the material to strain even further.

John stared at Sherlock’s crotch.

“Oh! Wait, if you’re wearing those, I’ll change too!” John thrust the bottle of Champagne at Sherlock and bounced up from the bed, making his way to the closet.

“You don’t have to,” Sherlock insisted.

“Oh, but I really think I do,” John answered, and then Sherlock understood. His legs were bare, and if John’s legs were bare, too, their legs would be bare together.

John reappeared ten seconds later wearing a pair of traditional cotton boxer briefs, and then it was Sherlock’s turn to nearly drop the bottle. John’s legs, his thighs, his calves … John’s legs were glorious. What they lacked in length they more than made up for in stocky strength. John’s quadriceps bulged over his kneecaps, and when he walked they flexed, lending them delicious definition. The hair on his thighs was dark blond and curly, and Sherlock’s tongue twitched in his mouth for want of licking a trail through it.

Sherlock’s eyes roamed upward as John approached the bed again, and the bottle slipped a little further from his fingers. Like his own briefs, John’s left nothing to the imagination. Either those pants were padded, or John was extremely well-hung. Sherlock was ready to put money on the latter. Sherlock was ready to put his hands on the latter.

John came to stand in the vee of Sherlock’s legs. He took the bottle from Sherlock’s hands, twisted out the cork, and grabbed for a flute before the bubbles could spill over. Some of it dribbled down the side of the bottle, and John licked that bit off the glass with his talented tongue. He filled both glasses, handed one to Sherlock and raised his in a toast.

“To us, Sherlock. To you, my husband, and to me, your husband. May we have many years of discovering each other.”

Sherlock clinked his glass to John’s, took a long sip, and set it down on his nightstand. John did the same, then stepped closer. Sherlock knew that if he closed his legs just a few inches they would press against John’s naked thighs, and that was a scenario far too tempting to resist, so he did it. They were warm and as strong and hard as they looked. John responded by resting his hands on Sherlock’s
shoulders, sliding them up his neck, and cupping his face. Sherlock looked up and John leaned in for a kiss that turned open and wet from the start.

John’s hands were combing through Sherlock’s hair and sliding down his back, and his thighs were brushing against Sherlock’s. Sherlock reached out and tentatively placed his hands on either side of John’s legs and John sighed into his mouth. Growing bolder, he slid his fingers up and down a few inches, and then around to the backs of John’s thighs. Their kisses deepened as Sherlock explored the musculature of John’s hamstrings, and when John began to slowly press Sherlock backward onto the bed, Sherlock let go and let himself be positioned. He expected John to crawl on top of him or lie down next to him, but instead, John kneeled on the floor between Sherlock’s spread thighs, and said, “My God, your legs.”

Sherlock stared at the ceiling for as long as he could keep his eyes open, which was as long as it took for John to close his mouth over the flesh of Sherlock’s inner thigh and suck a kiss there. John’s mouth worked its way down Sherlock’s upper thigh, but his hands, God, John’s hands were everywhere, stroking the tops of his thighs, ghosting over the insides of his knees, caressing the backs of his calves.

“How are you even this beautiful?” John said, and Sherlock, breathing hard, could only mutter, “Oh!” as John made small circles with his fingertips just at the hem of Sherlock’s briefs, high up where his balls were resting in their nest of silk. He spread his legs, giving John more room, and moaned as the fabric put even more pressure on the space between his legs.

“So gorgeous, and so very sensitive. You should never wear trousers again, ever.”

Sherlock’s cock had filled out inside the briefs and was now pressing against the confines of his waistband. He squirmed, looking for any sensations whatsoever on his sensitive skin. The thin fabric tugged back and forth over his frenulum and cockhead, and his balls drew up tight. The more he wiggled, the more the silk wedged itself between his ass cheeks and slid over places Sherlock couldn’t begin to consider.

John was kneading his hamstrings, digging his fingers into the flesh just under his arse, and Sherlock lifted up, an involuntary movement that served to rub his briefs against his erection again and to allow John’s hands to slip up as high as they could without touching the fabric. The feel of John’s hands on the crescents of arse peeking out of his shorts made his cock throb.

John stood between Sherlock’s spread thighs and leaned over him. He kissed the skin just above Sherlock’s hip and ran the flats of his hands up Sherlock’s torso from belly to chest. He teased Sherlock’s nipples and ran his fingertips up the sides of his neck and into his hair, tugging gently, then caressed his way back down. John stared down at him, his eyes heavily lidded, his lips parted, then pressed one hand to the bed at Sherlock’s side and stroked the inside of his thigh with the other. His gaze darted between Sherlock’s face and his silk-clad erection as he rubbed his thumb into the tender flesh at the innermost edge of the fabric. Sherlock grabbed onto John’s biceps and panted, open-mouthed.

“God, just look at you. I love you like this. I love you all the ways, Sherlock, refined and reserved, sharp-tongued and smart, covered in chemicals, sipping tea and reading a book, every single way. But like this? Coming apart at the seams, out of your mind with want? I’m not going to survive you. We haven’t even started yet, and your passion is like everything else you do. Overwhelmingly comprehensive. Look at you. My God.”

John’s hand continued to explore as high as he could while he talked. His fingers brushed over sensitive hair follicles and straining tendons, a constant tease, never enough to do more than endlessly arouse. When he leaned down low and blew a breath over the damp spot on the front of
Sherlock’s shorts, Sherlock spread his legs as far as he could and moaned. They’d only been at it for a few minutes but he was going to die if he didn’t get release soon.

“John, I’m … I’m having the same … I think I need to …”

“You need to come?” John whispered, moving to sit next to Sherlock on the bed, leaning onto one hip and propping himself up with one arm. He cupped Sherlock’s face with one hand and leaned down to suck on his earlobe.

“Oh my God, I’m so hard. I shouldn’t have worn these, I should’ve come to bed naked. I wasn’t sure if I was ready, but I can’t wait anymore, John.”

“Mmm. But you did wear them. So maybe you should trust yourself and not ask for something you aren’t ready for?”

John kissed Sherlock with a wide open mouth, slipping his tongue inside and licking against Sherlock’s lips and tongue. Sherlock groaned and grabbed at John’s shoulders, his hips rutting into thin air.

“I’m ready, I’m ready John, I just don’t know what I need, I don’t know how—”

“I can’t touch you, but that doesn’t mean, you beautiful thing, that you can’t take care of yourself while I watch. I’ll be right here, right next to you the whole time.”

Sherlock grunted and arched his back, his eyes closed, his mouth seeking John’s, but John slid down, covered Sherlock’s nipple with his tongue, and flicked. Sherlock’s brain was a minefield of sensations, remembrances of John’s mouth on his legs, his hands roaming Sherlock’s body, his pointed tongue on that one nipple. He didn’t think he could stop now. He could just rip the damn things off, he thought, and put John’s hand on him, but the idea made him feel oddly isolated. When he took pleasure at John’s hand he wanted John to be experiencing the same mutual experience. John’s suggestion that he take care of himself was arousing and comforting at the same time. The thought of John watching as he touched himself was almost more than he could take.

“Oh God, John.”

John hummed and ran his hand down Sherlock’s thigh again, his thumb inches from the hot flesh between his legs, and Sherlock’s cock jerked against his belly. He was both melting and coalescing, flying apart and narrowing down to one intense point of focus.

“I … I can’t … I need…”

“I’m right here.” John sucked on the other nipple and then pulled back and kissed Sherlock’s bicep, his neck, his mouth. “Show me what you need, Sherlock. Touch yourself.”

Sherlock braced his feet on the edge of the bed and slid one hand down his chest and stomach. He reached inside his shorts and palmed the head of his cock, spreading the leaking fluid over his rigid shaft before taking himself in hand. He began rutting into the channel of his fingers, gasping, while John murmured encouragement in his ear. It took just four, five, six slick, hard tugs and he was there, legs tensing, neck arching, mouth frozen open. Coming.

“Oh yes, there you go, there it is, so beautiful, God, you’re so beautiful.”

Sherlock panted through it, shuddering, toes curling, and then he felt John lie down next to him and take him into his arms. They stayed like that, Sherlock panting against John’s chest, John kissing his hair until Sherlock could take a deep breath and form words.
“I ruined my pants.”

“You sure did, and it was stunning.”

“I’m not even embarrassed.”

“Good, you shouldn’t be.”

“Oh God, what about you? I’m sorry, I’ve been so selfish, I didn’t even think—”

“Shhh. Don’t worry about me. I’ll take care of myself later. Right now, I just want to hold you and tell you how amazing that was, how hot it was to see you so on edge, that out of your mind. I can’t wait to do that together, to do that to you. I don’t care if it’s tomorrow or two weeks from now or two months from now, because I know it’s going to be spectacular.” John was speaking the words against Sherlock’s temple, stroking his arm and neck, kissing into his curls. “Come up here, let’s get you under the covers.”

Sherlock, limp as a ragdoll, let himself be manhandled until his head was on the pillow and his body was covered with blankets. John leaned down, kissed him on the forehead, and told him to sleep. Sherlock fought to stay awake, watching as John walked into the bathroom and shut the door. He listened for the rhythmic slapping that proved that John was, indeed, taking care of himself. It didn’t take long, and even though he knew John tried to be quiet, he could hear him grunting, could imagine John bracing himself against the counter, hand in his boxers, imagining Sherlock, imagining them together.

Sherlock wanted to see that, wanted to see John lose his mind the way he had, but he was too overcome with post-orgasmic exhaustion to do anything about it. He slipped out of his soggy briefs, dropped them over the side of the bed, slid out of bed and shuffled over to the armoire. He pulled on his silk pyjama bottoms, got back in bed, and waited for John to join him.

John opened the door a minute later and smiled at Sherlock, and Sherlock smiled back, a sleepy, dozy smile. John’s face was flushed and his hair was mussed—had he been pulling on it as he touched himself, or had he run his hand through it when he was done? Sherlock held the covers up as John climbed into bed, then lowered them back down. John wrapped Sherlock tight in his arms, kissed the top of his head, and hummed.

“You, Sherlock Holmes Watson, make me very, very happy.”
I feel like there are only so many ways I can thank happierstill for all of her enthusiasm for and help with this story. Happierstill, please accept this small token of my appreciation:

Sherlock let himself be held. He wriggled and squirmed until he had his head tucked under John’s chin and resting on his shoulder. His chest was pressed to John’s bare side and despite the fact that he was wearing his long pants, he had one leg flung over both of John’s. Technically, he figured, he was touching John and not the other way around. John was warm, so warm, and so solid. The sheets were a tangled mess over them, wrapping them in the middle of the big bed. He wasn’t used to this, this snuggling, but he had to admit, being this close to John after such an intimate experience was extremely appealing. He took a deep breath and used the exhale to let all of his assorted body parts relax against his husband.

“This is nice,” Sherlock said into John’s soft skin.

“Yes, it is. I’m glad you think so. I wasn’t sure if you’d be much of a cuddler.”

“I wouldn’t be if not for you. You seem to have an unusual effect on me.”

“Do I? And what’s that?”

“You get past my own boundaries, somehow.”

John hummed and ran his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, teasing apart tangled curls and combing them back from his face. “For whatever reason, you do seem to be dismantling some of those defences. I’m glad.”

It was Sherlock’s time to hum agreement. These last few days with John had been the subject of much review and analysis in his head, and he was finally coming up with some answers. He tentatively rested his hand on John’s chest and took another deep breath.

“I trust you, you know.”

“I would hope so, Sherlock. I’d hate to think that you’d marry someone you didn’t trust.”

“Well yes, but more than that, I mean. I’m beginning to realise that the more I trust you with who I am and what I like and don’t like, the easier it is to let those walls come down. You would think that would be a foregone conclusion, but it’s taken me a while to figure out why it’s becoming easier for me to keep my thoughts in order when we’re together, intimately. You may have noticed that my outbursts are less accusatory, or inappropriate, the longer we’re together.”

John was silent for a moment and shifted slightly so that he could look down and meet Sherlock’s
eye. “You’ve never said anything inappropriate when we’ve been together. Are you afraid you might?”

Sherlock shrugged and looked down at where their hands were clasped together on John’s hip.

“You can tell me, Sherlock. You can tell me anything, you know.”

And wasn’t that a novel idea? Telling John the things that had haunted him for so long? Would it keep them at the surface where he’d have to deal with them again and again, or would it banish them for good? He played with John’s wedding ring and considered. There was probably zero chance that John would abandon him now that they were married, but would Sherlock’s past mistakes alter his still-rosy opinion of him?

“There hasn’t ever really been anyone before you, John. I think you know that. At least, not like this. But, when I was sixteen there was a boy at school that I quite liked. His name was Victor. I thought that he rather fancied me as well, but I was too shy, I suppose, to approach him. I really wasn’t very good with people of any age, but my peers could be particularly cruel to anyone who was a bit different, and I was more than a bit different.

“Eventually, he approached me and we became friends. We studied together after school, and that turned into spending even more time together. We would go for hikes sometimes, or to the library. Sometimes he spent the night at my house, or I went to his.

“I was crazy about him. I spent an inordinate amount of time imagining what it would be like if he touched me, if he kissed me, if we were, you know, together. And then, one day he did. He touched me. We were sitting on the bank of a small stream near his house. It was warm and we’d been out most of the day. I remember that I was sweating and my shirt was damp and sticking to my back. His was, too. I thought he was beautiful like that, breathing hard from our hike, his clothes clinging to him.”

Sherlock let the buried image float up to the forefront of his thoughts. It was like a faded photograph of a much younger version of himself and the friend he had lost.

John squeezed his hand and Sherlock remembered to keep talking. “We stretched out on the bank of the stream to splash our faces, and then I felt his hand on the back of my neck and in my hair. I couldn’t move. He told me I was beautiful. He was there next to me, so close, and moving closer. He touched my face with his fingers and closed his eyes. He was going to kiss me, he was so close, and that’s when it happened.”

The worn out image faded away. Sherlock’s cheeks burned with shame.

“What happened, Sherlock?” John’s voice was so soft.

“My brain. It just … it was like it jumped tracks. The physical sensations of his hand on my neck, on my face, it was too much. His thumb brushed my cheek and he moved in to kiss me and I … I blurted out something horrible. I couldn’t help it, I don’t even know where it came from, from what random observations I’d been subconsciously collecting, but I said, ‘Your father is embezzling millions from his clients and having an affair with his secretary.’”

He heard John take a deep breath. “I take it the kiss didn’t happen? And that you didn’t see much of Victor after that?”

“Oh, so much worse. Victor went home and told his mother what I’d said and she told his father. His father committed suicide in the mistress’ flat. She found him hanging.”
“Oh, Sherlock.”

“He died because of me, John.”

John rolled out from under Sherlock and turned to his side. “No. No, he did not. You said something that you probably shouldn’t have said, but you did not cause Victor to go home and tell his mother what you said, and you did not cause his mother to confront his father, and you did not cause Victor’s father to do what he did. That was his decision. An awful, awful decision, but his alone.”

“If I had kept my mouth shut—”

“If you had kept your mouth shut Victor would have kissed you, but you would have still come to the same conclusions that you came to, and then what? Would you have said something? Knowing you, you probably would have, and I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing.”

“It would’ve been a bad thing no matter when it came out, if it had to come out.”

John shook his head. “I disagree. On one of our first dates you solved a crime and stopped a horrible man from killing more innocent people. You solved the case in Dartmoor and saved that man from going insane over the death of his father. And what about the boy who drowned and you found traces of poison in his shoes? You’re always doing the right thing. You abhor immorality, and you wouldn’t have been able to tolerate it in Victor’s father, either.”

“It was none of my business.”

“Maybe not. But you can’t be held responsible for what people do with the information they’re given. You don’t know that Victor’s father’s company might’ve found out about his embezzling the very next day, or that his mother would’ve found out about his affair in her own time. These things have a way of coming out, Sherlock.”

Sherlock considered what John was saying. It was entirely possible that Victor’s father, who was doing a poor enough job of stealing from his clients that even a sixteen-year-old could figure it out, would’ve been caught out soon enough. It was entirely possible that his wife would’ve caught him in the act, as well. Maybe it was guilt that had driven the man to his end, not the person who had discovered what he’d been up to.

“Still, though, John. My brain has jumped track several times when we’ve been together. I stopped our first kiss because I was afraid of what would come out. I’ve said things about your sister, and about other people I know. I’ve been rude, and—”

John pressed his index finger to Sherlock’s lips. “You’ve been amazing. You’re the smartest person I’ve ever known. There will be plenty more kisses, tons and tons of kisses. And you were right about Harry. She had fallen off the wagon and she didn’t make it to our wedding, just like you said.”

“What if I say something horrible about you?”

“What if I say something horrible about you?”

“Do you know anything horrible about me?”

Sherlock pursed his lips and blinked. He knew nothing horrible about John. John was fantastic. He was kind and lovely and sexy and without a shred of a doubt, Sherlock knew that he didn’t know a single awful thing about John, deduced or otherwise.

“No. There’s nothing horrible about you that I could possibly say.”

“See then?” John said with a smile. “We’re safe from that tremendous brain of yours.” John’s hand
found Sherlock’s bicep under the covers and gave it a squeeze.

“There’s more to it than that, though. It’s what I was saying before. I trust you. I … when we’re together, more and more, my brain seems to simmer down and allow the physical sensations to happen without me feeling like I’m losing sight of myself. It’s like I don’t have to think about anything. I can just let you touch me and my brain doesn’t have to sneak off to think about God knows what.”

John leaned over and kissed him. “Good. That makes me glad. Because I plan on touching you an awful lot.”

They were quiet then, John stroking Sherlock’s arm while Sherlock resumed his place tucked up under John’s chin. He could hear John’s heart beating, steady and sure like John himself.

“It really hasn’t been easy for you, has it? The way you deduce things and see things about people? I think of it as such a gift. I think it’s brilliant. But not everyone thinks so and you’ve lived with that for a long time, haven’t you?”

Sherlock shrugged against John’s chest.

“I think you must’ve been quite lonely. All these years, pushing people away, not wanting to meet a partner, not wanting to get married. That’s not exactly because you haven’t wanted it, is it? It’s because it’s easier to stay alone than to risk more rejection, isn’t it?”

Sherlock was completely silent. No one had ever been this close to knowing these things about him, perhaps not even himself.

“And when you let someone in, it’s scary. I know, because I’ve let someone in before and been hurt, too. It’s not quite the same situation, of course, and it was more recent than your experience with Victor, but I know what it’s like to have someone you care about turn around and walk away.”

“You’re talking about James Sholto, aren’t you?”

“Ah, so you figured that out, then? Yeah. It’s all fine now, of course. But at the time it was very painful.”

“What happened?”

John kissed the top of Sherlock’s head before saying more. “He was my commanding officer. We spent a lot of time together because I was responsible for updating him regularly on the progress of the men I’d treated. There were a lot of late hours because it was hard to find time during the day. We got to know each other, sharing stories from back home, that kind of thing.

“One night I had to tell him that we’d lost someone that we both knew well, a young kid who hadn’t pulled through surgery. I was exhausted and upset that I couldn’t save him, and James, he tried to comfort me. It was just a quick squeeze to the shoulder, nothing really, and then a brief hug, and then all of a sudden we were kissing.

“You hear about these situations all the time, about men turning to each other out of adrenaline or loneliness or the need to feel alive around so much death, and when it happens to someone else you know that it won’t last, that it’s not sustainable. But when it happened to me and James I truly believed it was something real, something that would have happened between us whether we were in Afghanistan or England or wherever.”

Sherlock wrapped his arm tighter around John’s waist and squeezed. “You loved him?”
“I thought so, yeah. But when I started to talk about what we’d do after the war he got distant. He talked a lot about keeping the focus in the present and not getting ahead of ourselves. I thought he was trying to be pragmatic, you know? Every day was unknown, anything could happen from one minute to the next. I convinced him to take leave at the same time as me. We came here. I thought that being together outside of that hell hole would prove to him that we had something real.”

John’s voice had gotten softer as he spoke. He stroked Sherlock’s arm absentmindedly, up and down, up and down, lost in the story he was telling.

“What happened?”

“He ended it shortly after we went back. He said he couldn’t in good conscience continue what we were doing because he knew that our relationship was based on the circumstances we were living under and not who we really were. He said he had great respect for me and hoped that he had earned my friendship, but that he knew what we shared wouldn’t stand in our civilian lives. It was clear he wasn’t going to change his mind. I tried to lose myself in my work, which helped a little. I had to see him frequently and there’s no room for unprofessionalism in the army, so in a way, the forced civility helped me accept it. I was shot a few weeks later and came home. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so damaged and alone in my life.

“I didn’t date again until I registered with the AMP because I had a lot of things to figure out about myself. I took my time with it. It was really important to me to make a connection based on who I am now and how I want to live my life.”

“So why me? I’m not very easy to get close to.”

“Because you are completely, one hundred percent, who you are. You are incapable of compromising who you are and what you believe in. The first time you initiated a date between us you took me to a crime scene. You don’t pretend and you don’t settle. I knew that if you went from not wanting to get married to genuinely liking me and wanting to spend time with me that your interest was sincere.

“So, long story short, I understand that after a painful rejection it can be hard to let someone else try again. And I assume that for you, when someone you care about gets too close or makes you feel too much, it’s easier to jump tracks and end the moment than to feel something for that person and chance losing them later. And it’s easier with me because I’ve gained your trust, isn’t that what you said? So, the need to sabotage this isn’t there, because I’m here, because I’m your husband and I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

Sherlock lay there, stunned.

“Sherlock Holmes Watson, I do believe you’re falling in love with me,” John said into Sherlock’s curls. He could hear the grin in John’s voice, the tone of someone thrilled with a recent turn of events.

Sherlock couldn’t stop the grin that spread over his own face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do. And it’s fine. It’s all fine. Because I’m in love with you, too.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my wonderful friend and beta, happierstill!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock woke feeling refreshed and resolute. He was ready. Today was the day, or more appropriately, tonight was the night. He was going to wear that ridiculous scrap of a g-string to bed and he was going to make it very clear that John was to remove it and consummate their marriage. Tonight would be their actual wedding night, he thought to himself. Tonight he would become John’s husband in body and spirit, because he loved him. He loved John Watson Holmes.

He slipped out of bed and showered, exploring his body in the warm stream of water and wondering if it would feel different after losing his virginity. He wasn’t precisely sure what losing his virginity would entail, but he knew at a very minimum it would include an orgasm given to him by John. After tonight, he mused as he washed his hair, he would have given himself fully to another person. John would claim him, and he would claim John. The weight of it was heady.

He dressed quietly in the bathroom and then slipped back into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. He watched John sleep for several minutes. He took in the way John’s lashes lay above his cheekbones, the relaxed shape of his mouth, the lack of lines on his forehead and around his eyes. He looked at John sleeping peacefully without a care in the world, and he knew what he had to do.

“John, wake up. Wake up, John. I have to tell you something.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you awake?”

“No really.”

“I am.”

John cracked one eye open and peered at Sherlock, then opened the other eye and smiled. “I see that, love. Why are you awake? It’s still pretty early, isn’t it?”

“I have to tell you something important.”

“And you had to shower and get dressed to tell me?”

Sherlock drew his shoulders back and raised his chin. He watched as John took in the sight of him in his suit trousers and button-up shirt, with his hair artfully tousled and his face freshly shaved. “I wanted to be out of bed so that I wouldn’t be tempted by you.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Not normally, no, but today is going to be special and being tempted by you before tonight would ruin everything.”
John rolled onto his back and ran his fingers through his hair. He scratched at his chest with his other hand and squinted up at Sherlock. “Is that what you wanted to tell me? Because I’m fairly confused, to be honest.”

“What I wanted to tell you is that tonight I am going to wear the last of my wedding garments to bed, just the g-string, and you are going to remove it for me. That’s my gift to you, John, and then, when we’re both free to touch each other wherever we please, we’re going to do exactly that. We’re going to touch each other and we’re going to consummate this marriage.”

John stared at him. For one short moment, Sherlock was sure he had made a grievous error in judgment and said something wrong. John lay on the pillow with his sandy hair flopping in his eyes and his tongue peeking out to touch his lower lip, and then he pushed himself up to sitting and leaned into Sherlock’s space. “Sherlock. Are you sure? There’s no rush on any of this. I want you to be ready.”

Sherlock nodded. “I am ready, John. Last night I told you that I trust you. You helped me see that trusting you is exactly why everything is going to be okay when we have sex. You also said that I’m falling in love with you, but you were wrong about that. I’m done falling. I have completely fallen. I am absolutely, assuredly in love with you, and you’re in love with me, and it’s time for us to not hold back with each other anymore.”

John reached out and cupped the back of Sherlock’s neck with his hand. He brought their foreheads together and held him close. “Sherlock, you lovely, amazing man. If that’s what you truly want…”

“That’s what I truly want. Tonight. Let’s spend the day together doing whatever you want. We can run errands or do things around the house. We can go for a walk or go sightseeing, whatever you’d like. Then let’s have a quiet dinner here at home, a proper honeymoon dinner, and then I want you to take me to bed.”

“Oh, God yes.”

“Do you want to go back to sleep for a while?”

John laughed. “There is no way on earth I’ll be able to go back to sleep now, you nutter. I want to get up and start the day because the sooner I start it the sooner I’ll be able to finish it, and the sooner this day is done—”

“The sooner this day is done the sooner you can take me back to bed.”

John shivered. “Jesus, I’m not going to survive any of this.”

“I think you’ll be just fine. Get up and get dressed, and I’ll make us some tea and toast.”

Sherlock kissed John, just a peck on the lips, drawing back even as John tried to pull him closer.

“Nope. I know what’ll happen if we start kissing now. I’ll be undressed in about thirty seconds flat and we’ll be halfway to tonight. I want to wait.”

“Fine. You’re right. Go then, make tea and I’ll be down in a minute.”

Sherlock slid off the bed and straightened his shirt sleeves and collar. He walked to the door, turning just once to look at John still spread out in their bed, and then left him to get ready for the day.

He was buttering slices of toast and steeping the tea when he heard the doorbell. In his anticipation of the night to come, he had forgotten that Annette, the waitress’ sister, was starting at the house that
day. He wiped his hands on a tea towel and made his way to the front door.

The girl waiting there smiled and held out her hand. She was a scrappy little thing dressed entirely in black, with short, dyed red hair and multiple piercings in each ear. A Celtic knot tattoo peeked out of the neckline of her shirt. Sherlock quickly deduced that she had two cats at home and had eaten a glazed donut for breakfast.

“I’m Annette. Are you Mr Watson or Mr Holmes?”

“Sherlock Holmes Watson. Please come in.”

“In a minute. I’ve got some things in the car that I need to carry in. Maybe you could help me?”

“Of course.”

The two of them made their way to the girl’s small, somewhat beat up car, and Sherlock stood back as Annette hauled out a bucket of cleaning supplies, a broom, a mop, and a bag of rags.

“I wasn’t sure what you had here, so I thought it best to bring my own supplies for now,” she explained.

“Good thinking. Make a list of what you need and we’ll make sure you’re sorted.”

Back inside the house, Sherlock led Annette to the kitchen where John was standing with a piece of toast in one hand and the sugar bowl in the other. He put the bowl down and reached across the table to shake Annette’s hand, grinning and welcoming her through his mouthful of breakfast.

They talked over tea about the jobs to be done and then showed Annette around the house. She took notes and asked questions, and half-an-hour later John shook her hand again, thanked her for taking on the job, and had her enter his and Sherlock’s phone numbers into her phone.

They finished the tour back in the kitchen, but when John made moves to clean up she waved him off, saying, “That’s my job now, Mr Watson.”

Sherlock and John puttered around for another few minutes before grabbing their wallets and keys and heading out to the Land Rover. Sherlock was happy to get out of the house and away from the temptation of dragging John back into their bedroom. It was a bright, clear day and Sherlock stretched out in his seat and turned his face toward the morning sun.

“Where to?”

“I thought we’d go to Scone Palace,” John answered. “You’ll love the history and we can walk the grounds and have lunch in the cafe.”

They rode in silence for the time it took to get to the landmark site, Sherlock with his hand resting on John’s thigh, John glancing over with a smile every minute or so. They parked in the gravel lot and followed the signs to the ticket office, holding hands until John had to let go to retrieve his wallet and pull out a credit card. Tickets purchased, they walked to the meeting point and waited with a small group of tourists for the tour to start.

If Sherlock thought that by leaving the house he’d effectively put up defences against the strong physical pull between them, he’d sorely miscalculated. It was impossible to keep their hands off each other. In the state drawing room, Sherlock stood behind John with his hands on John’s waist and his chin resting on his shoulder. As the crowd moved into the next room, John waited at the door and pecked Sherlock on the cheek as he went through. In a 17th century bedroom, John stood next to
Sherlock and slipped one hand into his back pocket. In the throne room, with the famous Stone of Scone, Sherlock pressed himself up against John and kissed the back of his neck. Holding hands, leaning against each other, brushing a hand over a lower back; all the little touches and glances were packed with longing and an unspoken awareness of what awaited them.

The energy between them ratcheted up even more as the tour progressed. Standing side by side while the guide discussed the role of the Stone of Destiny in crowning Scottish kings, John wrapped his arm around Sherlock’s back and slid his hand down until he could cup one side of Sherlock’s arse. Sherlock responded by sliding his own hand down from where it rested on John’s shoulder until it was low on John’s hip, his fingers dipping into the waistband of John’s jeans. Lingering behind the rest of the tour group, John grabbed Sherlock’s wrist and held him back.

“How about now?” Sherlock said, pointing to John’s lower lip. John poked his tongue out but missed it.

“Gone?”

“No. Here,” Sherlock said again, this time reaching out to brush the crumb off himself. His finger reached John’s lip just as John’s tongue darted out again, and he froze there, John’s tongue making tiny circles against the pad of his finger. It felt like an eternity before John pulled back, leaving Sherlock’s finger hanging in the space between them.

“How about now?”

“It’s … gone.”
“Let me know if it happens again, yeah? Or, you know, feel free to take care of it yourself.” John winked at him and Sherlock quietly congratulated himself for not choking on his tea. “You sure you’re not hungry, love? This is delicious.” John held out the piece of banana bread toward Sherlock. “Go on, try it.”

Sherlock leaned closer to his husband and, eyes on John, opened his mouth wide. John guided the bread between Sherlock’s lips and let the tip of it rest on his tongue. Sherlock bit down and chewed, feeling the textures of the moist bread and creamy butter mix on his tongue. It was sweet and tangy and he was still staring at John as he hummed in appreciation and swallowed.

“I’m not going to make it until tonight,” John said under his breath. “There is not one single thing about you that I don’t find incredibly sexy right now, Sherlock. Even the way you chew, for God’s sake.” John took what seemed to be an overly aggressive sip of his tea and set his cup down again. He took a deep breath and blew it out.

“John. Let’s wrap up here and stop at a market on the way home. We’ll get things for dinner, go home, cook together—the meal, I mean, and then go to bed. We can make an early night of it.”

John stroked Sherlock’s thigh absentmindedly. “Okay. Just, try to not be so goddamn sexy all the time, okay?”

Sherlock smiled. This nonstop adoration would be very easy to get used to. He reached out and gripped John’s knee. “If I look sexy to you it’s because of the way you make me feel.”

They sat, shoulder to shoulder, looking out over the gardens, and sipped their tea. John finished another piece of banana bread, then pushed back from the table.

“Ready? I know a great place to stop for groceries on the way home.”

“Lead on, John.”

A short while later they’d picked out two delicious-looking sirloin steaks, ingredients for jacket potatoes, a couple handfuls of green beans, and a ruby-red cabernet sauvignon. Neither had wasted a second thought on whether or not they needed dessert. They didn’t.

A short while after that they were back in a spotlessly clean kitchen. Annette had left a note saying that she’d cleaned half of the ground floor, including the library, sitting room, and dining room, and that she’d be back the next day at 10:00 a.m. to keep going.

They moved around the kitchen, John working on the food prep while Sherlock set the table, rummaged for candles, and filled their wine glasses. When he was done with that, he joined John at the counter where he was snapping the ends off the green beans.

“What else can I do to help?”

John nodded toward the groceries piled up on the counter next to him. “Why don’t you chop those spring onions and grate the cheese? The oven is almost hot enough for the potatoes. The beans can steam for a few minutes just before the steaks are done. I’d say we’ll be ready to eat in about forty minutes.”

Sherlock chopped and grated, standing close to John, jostling his elbow and looking up to smile at him every now and then. When they were both done, John picked up the glasses of wine and held one out to Sherlock.

The wine was plummy and smooth in Sherlock’s mouth; it made his tongue tingle and his lips taste
sweet. He took another sip and hummed his appreciation.

“Come on,” John said. “Let’s go sit outside and relax while the potatoes cook.”

Sherlock followed John outside and set his wine down on the worn wooden table so he could pull out a chair, but John waved him off, moved a chair into a sunny spot on the terrace, and sat down in it himself.

“Come here,” he said, patting his lap and reaching for his wine.

Sherlock hesitated. John wanted him to sit on his lap? He took a sip of his wine and considered. He was six inches taller than John and a full-grown adult. Still, though. He took another sip of wine and sat himself carefully in John’s lap, angled to the side so he could see John’s face. John smiled up at him and wrapped his free hand around Sherlock’s back.

“Am I hurting you?”

“Nope.” John trailed his fingers lightly up and down Sherlock’s back and over his shoulder. He stared out at the overgrown garden and drank his wine, seemingly content to sit in the silence and contemplate dusk settling over the tall grass and weeds. After a few minutes, John set his glass down on the table, took Sherlock’s glass out of his hand and set that down, too, then reached up to take his chin in his hand.

“Everything okay?” Sherlock asked.

“Perfect,” John answered as he caught Sherlock’s mouth with his own. John was warm and sweet with wine, and Sherlock couldn’t resist the urge to lick in for a stronger taste. John shifted underneath him, spreading his legs just a bit, and pushed up into the kiss. He wound one hand into the curls at the back of Sherlock’s neck and let the other drift slowly up and down Sherlock’s leg.

“I like the way you taste,” John said without pulling away. He deepened the kiss and squeezed Sherlock’s upper thigh. “I like everything about you.”

Sitting on John’s lap was a blessing and a curse; he was close, but not close enough. Sherlock felt emboldened; maybe it was the wine. In one fluid motion, he lifted himself up, turned, and repositioned himself so that he was straddling John’s thighs.

“Tell me what you like, John.”

“About you?”

“Mmm,” Sherlock purred through a kiss.

“I like how smart you are. I like the way you see things no one else can see. I like that you keep your distance until you’re comfortable, you don’t just throw yourself at people, you don’t ingratiate. You have good ideas and fascinating interests and no matter what you do, you do it with determination. You’re honest, steadfast, incorruptible.”

Sherlock had been nibbling along John’s jawline as he spoke, but he stopped at that last word and rubbed his nose against John’s. “I wouldn’t say I’m incorruptible. I’d say you’ve corrupted me completely.”

John rested his hands low on Sherlock’s hips and squeezed. “Maybe not quite completely, but soon now.”
“Very soon. Would you like to hear what I like?”

“About me?” John tilted his head back and quirked an eyebrow.

“About you.”

“Tell me.”

Sherlock studied John’s face and pressed his lips to his forehead. “I like that you’re so sure of me. That you bring so much energy to everything we do. You’re strong-willed and you don’t easily give up. You value where you come from and are grateful for what you have. You have a generous spirit.”

John stared up at him, not speaking. He licked his lips and cleared his throat. “You really see me that way?”

“I do.”

“C’mere, you.” John buried his face in Sherlock’s neck and whispered, “Thank you. I think we should go in now before I either kiss you to death or the potatoes are ruined, whichever comes first.”

They finished preparing their meal and carried it into the dining room. John had lit the candles and Sherlock had found some soft music to play in the background. The food was delicious and the wine went down easily, but Sherlock was too distracted to finish. John kept one hand over Sherlock’s on the table, as if trying to settle him.

“Hey, we’ve got all night, okay?”

“I know. I’ve never been one much for food when there’s something else I’d rather be doing.”

“I get it. Let’s finish the bottle and then I’ll clean up.”

Sherlock drained the last of his wine. “I’ll help you,” he offered.

“No, you go up and get changed. I’m dying to see you in the g-string. I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

Sherlock pushed back from the table and picked up his half-finished meal and the empty bottle of wine. “I’ll just bring these into the kitchen.”

He looked around at the mess they’d created. It would take John a while to clean up on his own, but maybe that would give him time to take a shower and get thoroughly clean for whatever the evening held.

A half an hour later he was scrubbed clean and dripping wet on the bathmat. He dried off slowly, dragging the towel over his neck, chest, and arms. He ran it across his arse and over his bollocks and penis, then up and down his thighs and calves. Everywhere he touched thrummed with anticipation.

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With still damp hair, Sherlock left the bathroom and stepped into the bedroom. He went to the armoire, opened the doors, and lifted the lid off the box of wedding garments. There at the bottom was the g-string. He held it out in front of him and marvelled at its design, barely a scrap to hold him in front, and a delicate thread of fabric to nestle between his cheeks and keep his arse bare. He felt himself thicken just looking at it.

Sherlock stepped into the garment carefully and pulled it up his thighs. He settled the top band low
around his hips and shimmied until he felt the g-string stretch into place between his legs and arse. With one hand, he gathered himself into place and smoothed the front placket over the resulting bulge. It was obscene looking, he thought to himself. He smiled. John was going to love it. He turned this way and that in the mirror, examining the various perspectives. He thought John would appreciate the view of him in profile with the curve of his arse counterbalanced by the prominence of his cock nestled to the front. Hell, who was he kidding? John would love any view. He’d love seeing Sherlock head on, or from behind, or lying down. He’d love Sherlock bent over, spread out, on his hands and knees. Sherlock touched himself through the white silk.

What was taking John so long?

He went to the bedroom door and opened it a crack, listening for sounds below. He heard the sound of running water and dishes clinking. He heard faint music and John humming. He heard silence emanating from the rest of the house, sleepy with darkness and disuse. He was about to close the door and retreat to the bed, to recline against the pillows, maybe to play with his nipples and caress his inner thighs while he waited for John.

Then he heard another noise, a most unexpected noise. The doorbell. Sherlock opened the bedroom door wider and stepped onto the landing. He heard John cross the foyer. He could imagine him wiping his hands on a tea towel, brow crinkled, lips pursed.

He heard the door open. He heard his night falling apart.

“James! My God, what are you doing here?”

Chapter End Notes

Scone Palace looks absolutely wonderful, doesn't it?
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to happierstill, as always.

Sherlock froze. For several seconds he was only aware of the sound of his breathing and the roar of disbelief in his ears. When he was able, he took another step onto the landing and then another, padding barefoot down the hallway until he was just out of sight at the top of the stairs.

“John. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“No, but you wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important. Come in.”

Sherlock heard the front door close with a gentle click. John and James’ voices grew distant as John led the other man into the parlour. Sherlock wanted to sneak down the stairs but remembered how he was dressed and thought again. He went back to the bedroom and threw his robe on, belted it tightly around his waist, and made his way back down the long hallway. He focused on stepping lightly so that the ancient floorboards wouldn’t creak. There was only so far down the stairs he could go before he risked being seen. The voices were muffled, but bits of words and phrases drifted up to him from the room below.

“Quiet place … you’d be away … won’t stay …”

“… nonsense … can we do?”

“… at this point … the authorities …”

“… who else knows … did the right thing … any idea who …”

Sherlock gripped the banister and bit down on his lower lip. Why, for the love of God, had John’s ex-lover shown up on this of all nights? Why had he shown up at all? His mind spun away from the fragmented conversation below and retreated to a place filled with doubt. Was John going to let James stay? Was he going to set James up in one of the guest rooms down the hall from the master suite and then presume to make love to Sherlock for the first time? Did he think that Sherlock would be able to give himself to John while John’s ex was within earshot, or while he was in the house at all? It was preposterous. Or, perhaps John would stay downstairs tending to James while Sherlock waited upstairs like the naive, virginal, fool he was. Perhaps John had already forgotten about what awaited him in their bedroom. In their bed. God, the same bed that he and James had shared.

Sherlock felt sick.

He had a vision of himself marching down the stairs and into the parlour, imagined himself standing there in his white silk robe, barefoot, his hair still damp from his shower. He would insert himself into the scene unfolding below and demand answers. And then what? Would John cross the room to join him? Would he wrap an arm around Sherlock’s waist and explain to James that tonight was a very special night and that he would have to leave? Or would he excuse the intrusion, brush it off?

Did James know that John and Sherlock were here when he started his journey? Would he have come otherwise? What if he did know that John was here and what if he came because he was
desperate to see him? What would drive one man to visit an ex who had just married someone else? Did James want John back? Surely, anyone in their right mind would realise that leaving John Watson was a resoundingly stupid mistake.

Sherlock retreated up the stairs. John would never kick a friend in need out of the house, an ex or not. And James was certainly in need; he’d never have come otherwise. But Sherlock was in need, too. He was in need of his husband, in need of the intimacy that would create that final connection between them, the one they’d been inching toward since the day they’d met. He was in need of John, of John’s hands on him, of John’s gentle encouragement and praise. His love. Sherlock was ready to lay himself bare, to receive the most intimate of touches, to sacrifice complete control of his mind and his body to their relationship. But not with James here. That was simply not going to happen.

Closing the door softly behind him, Sherlock made his way to the bed and lay down on top of the covers. He pulled a pillow to his chest and wrapped his arms around it. He felt his anger in the pounding of his heart and the tightness of his throat. The g-string was an irritant now, no longer arousing. It dug into his skin and chafed against delicate places. He tugged the robe closer around his legs and tamped down the desire to yell obscenities out loud, to smash something, to tear at his hair.

By the time Sherlock heard John’s footsteps coming down the hallway his brain was primed to explode. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes when the door opened. He heard John come into the room. He heard him close the door. He felt him sit down on the side of the bed, his hip pressing into Sherlock’s thigh. He didn’t open his eyes.

“Sherlock? I’m sorry, love. We’ve had an unexpected visitor. I think you’ve probably figured that out by now.” He gave Sherlock’s shoulder a light squeeze.

Sherlock ground his teeth together and shrugged John’s hand away. The instinct to turn away, to escape, was almost overwhelming.

“Sherlock, I need to explain this to you. I know you’re disappointed. I am, too.”

Sherlock’s rage overtook him. He opened his eyes and glared up at John. “Disappointed? Disappointed, John?” he hissed. “Your ex-lover shows up on our honeymoon, on tonight of all nights, and you invite him into the house and sit downstairs and entertain him while I’m up here preparing for the most important night of our relationship, and you think I’m disappointed? What I feel eclipsed disappointment the moment you opened the front door.”

John sighed and nodded his head. “I get it. I do. He didn’t know we were here. He’s in trouble and needed a safe place to stay.”

“And this is a safe place for him? Was he going to break in?”

John looked down at the pillow Sherlock was still clutching. “He has a key.”

Sherlock sat up and backed away from John. His back hit the headboard and he pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. “He has a key? To this house?” Pain started to take root in Sherlock’s temples. “I didn’t realise he was so familiar with the place. How nice for him to have this home away from home.”

“It’s not like that, Sherlock.”

“The hell it isn’t.” Sherlock tossed the pillow aside, stood up, and backed his way toward the bathroom. “Do you know who has a key to my flat in London, John? No one. No one has a key to
my home.” When he hit the bathroom door he reached out blindly for the doorknob.

“Please, let me explain.” John took a step forward and held up one hand as if to hit some imaginary pause button between them. “I told you last night that he was here with me when we were both on leave. I gave him a key so he could come and go as he pleased while we were here. Shortly after that we broke up. Then I was shot and sent home and I forgot all about the key.” John paused, watching Sherlock the way one watches something wild backed into a corner. "I was in touch with him after his own accident, to see how he was doing. He was going through hell, hounded by the press, vilified by the public, and I told him he could come here whenever he needed to get away. I think he’s been here once or twice since then. He’s sent thank you cards a couple of times, but I don’t know the details because we’re hardly ever in touch. That’s all this is, a quiet retreat for a friend.”

“How convenient for him. How very thoughtful of you. But why on earth wouldn’t he try to call you before coming here? Why wouldn’t he ask if it were okay, first?”

John looked down at his feet and sighed. “He said he didn’t call because he didn’t want to interrupt us on our honeymoon. He didn't realise we'd come here.”

Sherlock opened the bathroom door so hard it hit the wall behind it. “Well, that’s really rich, isn’t it? But God, John, here he is, in our home, on our ... on our real wedding night.”

“It still can be, Sherlock.”

“How can you even say that?” Sherlock withdrew to the bathroom and slammed the door closed behind him. He sat on the edge of the bathtub and lowered his face into his shaking palms.

“Sherlock, please,” John said from the other side of the door. His voice was soft and pleading and Sherlock hated himself just a little bit in the moment, hated himself for not letting John explain, for not giving him a chance to fix this. It was too late now. The night was ruined.

“His life is in danger, Sherlock. That’s why he came here. I told you about the mess he’s been in ever since the incident with the recruits. Today he found a note inside his house, a death threat. He didn’t know where else to go.”

Sherlock stared down at his feet. He watched the way his toes gripped and released the nub of the bathmat.

“I can’t ask him to go, Sherlock, not knowing his life’s in danger. I don’t think you would ask that of me, and I don’t think you’d do the same, yourself. Sherlock?”

Sherlock kicked the bathmat across the floor and stood up, his hands in fists and his shoulders hunched up. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t open the door. He paced back and forth but didn’t respond as John continued to plead with him to open the door. On some level, he recognised that strong emotions were overruling his ability to react in a rational way. On another level, he didn’t care. John was right, Sherlock was disappointed, but it was so much more than that. To have such a special and highly anticipated experience be so utterly derailed was one thing. Had a fire broken out or one of them broken a leg or gotten food poisoning he would have been disappointed but he would’ve managed. The introduction of James, however, not even twenty-four hours after John had confessed to Sherlock that he had loved the man and had his heart broken by him was more than he could process. Shutting down was not a conscious decision. He slipped deeper into the morass.

Some time later Sherlock realised the space around him had gone quiet. He placed his ear to the door but couldn’t hear anything. John appeared to have left the room. Sherlock eased open the bathroom door and peered around its edge. The room was, indeed, empty. He went to the armoire and stripped
off the robe and g-string. He threw the scrap of silk into the back corner of the upper shelf, pulled out his long pants and the long-sleeved shirt and got dressed again. He put the robe back on and tied it around his waist, tight. He was protected now, covered, untouchable. Sherlock wouldn’t have to say a word to communicate the change of plans to John. His decision was a visible pronouncement made clear in layers of white silk.

He stared at the bed, considering his options. He could sleep in a guest room but he didn’t want to risk encountering James. No, he would stay in the master bedroom. He wouldn’t sleep in their bed, though. He couldn’t. It would be too difficult. He plucked up one of the pillows and tossed it onto the floor on the far side of the bed. He fished around in the closet until he found a spare blanket, folded it on the floor into the shape of a sleeping bag, and crawled into it. The floor was uncomfortable and cold and every part of his body felt rigid with regret and anger. The house around him was quiet. God knew where James and John were. He didn’t care. He wouldn’t care.
The next morning Sherlock woke up on the floor with a cramped shoulder, shooting pain in his hip, and John’s arm flung over his waist. He shuffled back until John was pressed up against the length of him and felt John sigh against the back of his neck.

“I’m so sorry, love.”

Sherlock remembered then, a rush of memory flooding back and dropping his gut. He scooted away from John and pulled himself into a ball. He stared at a dust bunny lodged under the nightstand and wondered if Annette would find it and leave a polished bit of floorboard in its place. He had a sudden and urgent need to scrub the house clean of everything that had come before him, dust and spiderwebs, fingerprints and scuff marks. Other people.

He pulled at a loose thread on the blanket beneath him. “There was no need for you to sleep on the floor, John.”

“There was no need for you to sleep on the floor, either.”

“The bed wasn’t nearly as appealing a place as it had been before last night.”

Sherlock heard the rustling sound of John sitting up. He turned his head just enough to see him in his peripheral vision. He was wrapped in a different blanket, one Sherlock didn’t recognise. He must’ve spent the night lying next to Sherlock but not under the same covers. Respectful then, but not wanting to be too far away.

“Sherlock, I’m sorry.”

“So you said.” He pulled a little harder at the thread.

“Can we please talk about this?”

“Is he still here?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s really nothing to talk about. If you prefer I can pack up and head back to London. The two of you can sort things out. You can keep him safe, whatever that entails. I won’t get in your way.”

John huffed out a breath. “For God’s sake, Sherlock, it’s not like that and you know it.”

“All I know is that your ex showed up last night, unexpected, unannounced, and in need of protection. That he first thought of you and this house speaks volumes. His presence has completely disrupted our honeymoon and the progression we’d been making towards … other things. Important things.” The thread snapped off in his fingers. He rolled it into a ball and flicked it away.
“I know. I know that and I hate it as much as you do. The timing could not be worse. But he didn’t know we’d be here and his life is in danger, Sherlock. I swear, if he had come for any reason other than a death threat I’d have sent him away last night. You have to believe that.”

Sherlock started unravelling another thread. “Surely, there is somewhere else he can go? Some military protection program? A safe house?” He turned to look at John, who looked haggard and worn, exhausted. Sherlock wanted to reach out and comfort him, but God, he was still so angry.

John closed his eyes and leaned back against the bed. “He’d have had to go to London for that, and he felt compelled to disappear completely rather than place his trust in unknown people and circumstances. He’s an extremely private person.”

“Are you glad he’s here?”

“Of course not.”

“What happened last night?”

“We talked about why he was here. He wanted to leave. Sherlock, I swear to God I almost let him, but I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if he left here and was killed because of it, no matter how small the risk.”

Sherlock flattened the loosened thread with his index finger and stopped worrying at it. “You chose him over me.”

“No. No, I did not, Sherlock. It’s not that simple. I chose to protect his life over sending him out there with nowhere to go, knowing that you and I can pick up where we’d left off. You chose to sleep on the floor.”

“Can you blame me?”

John sighed. “Not really, no.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No. I’m mad at myself. I mean, I wasn’t anticipating that you’d be as upset as you were, but maybe I should have. Things have been going so well between us, and I think I forgot that you haven’t, I don’t know, you haven’t done all this before. Dealing with exes and feeling like you aren’t a priority and all that. First fights. God, this is such a mess. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let you down.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and gave himself a mind palace smack-down for contributing to that mess. This was not the time to be a drama queen. He was Sherlock Holmes, for Christ’s sake. He had always relied on logic to understand the world around him and he needed to do so now. The solution for this situation would not be hard to find if he applied a few basic rules of deduction.

He knew that John would not lie to him, and therefore he could trust that 1. John was not happy that James was here, 2. James did not know that the house would be occupied, and, 3. James did not come for John. What else did he know? He knew that John wouldn’t turn away a friend in need and, if he were honest with himself, he respected that. Also, John loved him. And he loved John.

He needed to trust John. They needed to figure this out together.

Sherlock reached out a tentative hand and placed it on John’s knee. John covered it with his own and smiled, but didn’t open his eyes. Sherlock tried not to think about what they’d be doing right now had things gone according to plan. For one thing, they’d be in the bed and not sitting on the floor
next to it. Maybe they’d still be asleep, or maybe they’d be waking each other up with slow kisses and roaming fingertips. Either way, he was sure they’d both be naked and ready to celebrate the previous night of sex with even more sex. Sherlock wondered if they’d have stayed in bed for hours and hours, bringing each other pleasure before slipping back to sleep, then waking to do it all over again.

He had to accept that the evening they’d planned didn’t happen, but as he sat there and looked at John, John who was tired and worried and also disappointed, he knew that he also had to accept that they would, eventually, have their night. They’d have lots of nights and mornings and afternoons. John was sitting right there within arms reach and Sherlock knew deep down that their surprise visitor didn’t change a thing about the fact that John was his husband, loved him, and wanted to be with him. They’d get there.

They just had to get rid of James, first.

“So, what now?” Sherlock asked.

John rubbed the back of Sherlock’s hand and opened his eyes. “I know I have no right to ask this of you, Sherlock, but I have to. Can you help me?”

“With what?”

“I can’t ask James to leave until I know he’ll be safe. Help me figure out who’s after him. If we can figure that out, he can go home, or leave here at the very least. Please.”

Sherlock rubbed at his sore hip and rolled his neck on his shoulders. Much as he didn’t want to admit it, the idea had merit. He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders and sat back against the bed at John’s side. They stared out the window at the early morning light stretching its way across the sky.

“You said it was a death threat? I suppose it is the sort of thing I’d usually enjoy getting involved in.”

John chuckled. “My husband finds death threats fascinating.”

“You love that about me.”

“God help me, I do.”

“I don’t like being mad at you, you know. It’s extremely unpleasant.”

“I know, love. I’m sure it won’t be the last time, but we’ll manage.”

“And I’m sorry that I wouldn’t talk to you last night and that I wanted you to kick him out.”

“I would’ve wanted the same thing had I been in your shoes.”

Sherlock crawled into John’s lap and John hugged him tightly. “I’ll help, if only to get him out of here as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

The bed loomed large behind them and in Sherlock’s mind. “I look forward to that. And just think, had James arrived one night later we could’ve had make-up sex the next morning.”

“Make-up sex sounds pretty good right about now.” John ran his hands up and down Sherlock’s back and tilted his face up, angling for a kiss.
“Can we have make-up sex if we haven’t actually had first-time sex yet?” Sherlock asked.

“We can do whatever we want.”

“I bet there’s something in the BIG-SAM about this. ‘Newly married couples shall not engage in make-up sexual relations before consummating their marriage. All make-up sexual relations shall occur within twenty-four hours of the argument that preceded the need for the make-up sexual relations. Should the couple argue about the time and place of the make-up sexual relations, an additional round of make-up sexual relations will be required.’”

John laughed and kissed the side of Sherlock’s neck. “Twenty-four hours, huh?”

“You can’t hold me to that. It’s fictitious. But John, seriously, I’m afraid you and I are going to be on hold until this thing with James is taken care of.”

“How on hold is on hold?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “What are you proposing?”

John cradled Sherlock’s face in his hands and kissed him. “Surely the BIG-SAM doesn’t rule out a little fooling around while a newly married couple endeavours to solve a case?”

“If the BIG-SAM talked at all about solving cases I might have read it.”

“Sherlock.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s still really early. Can we get in bed?”

Sherlock removed himself from John’s lap and dropped the blanket to the floor. He untied his robe and let that drop, too, then pulled back the covers and crawled onto the bed. The sheets were cool and the mattress was soft after the unforgiving hardness of the floor. He watched John stand up and wince as he stretched his arms over his head and behind his back.

“Sleeping on the floor really did a number on your shoulder, didn’t it?”

“Bit, yeah.”

“Get in bed and I’ll rub it.”

John gave Sherlock a grateful smile and flopped down belly first next to him. Sherlock kneeled on the side of John’s bad shoulder and pressed down with his palms, working in broad strokes to warm up the sore muscles. The angle was odd and when John wiggled his hips and suggested that Sherlock sit on him instead of next to him, Sherlock scooted up and onto John’s arse.

“Are you sure I’m not too heavy?”

“Nope. You’re fine.”

Sherlock tried to relax his body over John’s as he repositioned his hands and began smoothing them over John’s shoulder again. Having John’s body, any part of John’s body, pressing against his tended to arouse him, but spreading his thighs over John’s backside while John made soft grunting noises of pleasure was more intimate than he’d anticipated. He was glad that John couldn’t see what was happening to the front of his pyjama bottoms.
He dug his thumbs and the heels of his hands into those tight muscles and swept them upward and outward over the scar tissue and toward John’s neck and shoulder. His movements became steady and repetitive.

“Is this okay?”

“It’s great. You can go a bit harder, too, if you want.”

Sherlock dipped forward and applied more pressure and John groaned underneath him. When Sherlock pressed up and over John his testicles brushed over John’s lower back, and when he pulled back they nestled into the upper curve of John’s buttocks. Over and over he rolled, his hands and thighs and groin heating up from the activity.

“Feels so good,” John murmured, and Sherlock closed his eyes and imagined John saying that in an entirely different context.

“Yeah?”

“God, yeah. Your hands are magic. Don’t stop.”

“I’m going to work the other side, too. You could be overcompensating with the uninjured side when the damaged side hurts.”

“You can work on whatever you want.”

Sherlock switched sides and massaged John’s good shoulder for a few minutes, then made his way down John’s spine with softer, circular movements. He shifted down a few inches to get to John’s lower back, causing his erection to slide against the crack of John’s pants-covered arse. Sherlock shuddered but didn’t stop the massage. He watched his long fingers and hands glide over the smooth skin and firm muscles of his husband’s back, noticing small freckles and moles scattered here and there. He looked at John’s profile where his face rested on a pillow, at the small smile on his face and the hair tucked behind the top of his ear. He took in the calm, sensual moment and compared it to the slow build of arousal between his legs and the charge of overwrought emotions from the night before.

Human connection was complicated. There were so many layers, some in direct opposition to others. He understood that taking care of someone wouldn’t always feel good, and being intimate with someone wouldn’t always be sexual. In that moment, with the shadow of his anger receding and his hands easing John’s pain and the blood throbbing in his cock, Sherlock felt wrapped in a cocoon of rich emotions. Their relationship would be based on a foundation of countless interactions, negotiations, compromises, and solutions, like a mountain rising up from the earth with its multi-layered strata, its peaks and valleys, its cliffs and meadows.

Underneath him, John’s breath had evened out. Sherlock lowered himself down to John’s side and wrapped an arm and leg around him. He tucked his nose against John’s neck and took a deep breath. Slowly, the erection that was nudging up against John’s hip settled down and went away. Sherlock was tired. The house was quiet. He closed his eyes and slept next to his husband.
Sherlock dressed while John showered, then slipped downstairs to see what awaited him. He crept into the kitchen, not wanting to give James a heads up that he was coming, but what greeted him was more a scene of quiet domesticity than creeping ex’s and assassin’s death threats. James was seated at the kitchen table, a cup and empty plate to his left, his phone in his right hand. Annette was standing across from him, scrubbing a stack of copper pans that she’d taken down from the overhead rack.

They both looked up when Sherlock entered, Annette nodding a hello and asking if he’d like tea and toast, James jumping to his feet and approaching with his hand held out for Sherlock to shake. For a brief second he considered dismissing the handshake, turning on his heel and leaving the room, but he realised the effect his behaviour would have on John. He could no longer think only in terms of himself, and he found the thought more grounding than he could have anticipated.

“Sherlock. My most sincere apologies. I told John that I would not have come had I known the two of you were spending your honeymoon here.” James’ voice was low and his face was sincere. Sherlock took in the way he stood, still so obviously influenced by his military training. He was tall and fit and good looking despite the scars on his face, and Sherlock felt a twist of jealousy in his stomach. He had to push away an image of this man and his husband together, doing things that he and John still hadn’t done.

He gripped James’ hand in his and gave it a perfunctory shake. “James. While your timing is quite inopportune I understand that your circumstances were most urgent.”

James nodded and let his arms fall to his sides but he maintained his ramrod posture and held his head high. “My instinct was to find a secure place to regroup and consider what action to take. I won’t inconvenience you, though. I’ll be on my way as soon as I’ve thanked John for his hospitality.”

“Long way to come for an overnight,” Annette quipped behind them.

Both men turned to look at her. She was still scrubbing away at a saucepan. Behind her, the kettle started to whistle and the toaster popped.

“Sit yourself up there, then, and I’ll pour your tea,” she continued. “How do you like your toast? I brought over a jar of Alice’s strawberry preserves. Major Sholto liked it well enough.”

Sherlock fought back the urge to laugh out loud. Here he was, trying to stand his ground in front of the man who had unknowingly cockblocked him the night before, while facing down a death threat, and a few feet away this diminutive girl with bright red hair was ordering him to sit down and have toast and strawberry preserves.

“More tea for you, Major Sholto?”

James looked at Annette, at Sherlock, and back to Annette. “Yes, please. Thank you.”

They sat across from her and let her prepare their tea, continuing to sit in silence while she stacked the toast and pushed it across the table with a plate of butter and the jar of preserves. She picked up where she’d left off with the saucepan, eyeing Sherlock as if to dare him to insult her sister by not trying the strawberries.

James sipped his tea and rubbed his thumb along the grain of the wood table. “John tells me you’re quite good with this type of thing.”
Sherlock intuited his meaning and shrugged. “I tend to observe things that others don’t. It’s easy enough to follow them to their logical conclusion.”

“Are you going to tell the Major who wants to kill him, then?” Annette said, now elbow deep in a stock pan.

James set his cup down and, if possible, sat up even straighter. “How on earth did you know about that?”

It was Annette’s turn to shrug. “You left the note right there on the counter. I saw it when I came in this morning, is all.”

“That was rather careless of me.”

“It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone. I mean, who would I tell? So, are you then?” she said to Sherlock. “Going to take the case?”

“I’ll do what I can to help.”

She nodded, hung the pans she’d finished cleaning back on the overhead rack, and picked up the next one.

When John came down a few minutes later, Sherlock was done with his tea and toast and was holding the note between his index finger and thumb. John stood at Sherlock’s side and leaned down to kiss him on the mouth. James sat still as stone next to them.

“What do you make of it?” John asked. “Does the message mean anything to you?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It’s pretty straightforward, don’t you think?” He waved the note in front of him and read aloud. “‘You have a date with death.’ It’s short and sweet and the person who left it clearly intends for James to die. Tell me everything about this, James. Tell me where you found it, what time it was, where you’d been beforehand, everything.”

James looked over to where Annette was loading their plates and mugs into the dishwasher, then back to Sherlock and John. John stepped back and gestured toward the hallway with his arm. “Why don’t we go sit in the library. We’ll be more comfortable there.”

Sherlock knew that if Annette really wanted to hear them she’d easily be able to eavesdrop, but she seemed completely nonchalant about the guest in their house or the death threat directed at him. They pushed back from the table and made their way to the library. He and James took their seats while John closed the door behind them.

James recounted what he must have told John the night before. He’d been out to get his haircut at 10:00 a.m., driven by his driver who had stayed with him the entire time. They hadn’t been gone more than an hour and nothing looked disturbed when they got back to the house. He had read the newspaper for half an hour and eaten the lunch that his cook had prepared for him earlier in the day. The cook had left the house to do the grocery shopping when he and his driver had left for the barber. After eating he had watched the news, then had gone upstairs to his bedroom to fetch a book. It was then that he found the note on his nightstand, folded in half and propped up on its two ends. It had been written on a piece of paper from his own notepad and with his own pen. Nothing had been taken and there were no signs of a forced entry.

Sherlock sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. He walked himself through the information he’d been given.
“And you’ve received other death threats?” he asked.

“Yes, fourteen so far, but always in the mail, untraceable. I hadn’t received any in the last eight months, and this is the first one I’ve found in my house.”

“I assume you have security cameras installed around your property?”

“I do. I alerted my offsite security detail after I found the note and they reported back that there were approximately thirty minutes of missing footage from the server that manages all of the cameras.”

“Tell me about your staff.”

“I have one driver at my disposal and he’s been in my service since I came home from the war. The scar tissue on my leg makes it difficult for me to drive. I give him my schedule at the beginning of the week and he comes at the necessary times. He drives to my house but we use my car. I have a cook who comes three days a week to make and leave meals for me. She has been with me for six months. I have a cleaning lady who comes once a week. She’s a young Polish woman, speaks little English, and has been with me for about six weeks. The last one got married and moved away. And that’s it. I had around the clock security for the first six months after the accident, but when the death threats stopped it was deemed that I was no longer in danger and they were removed.”

Next to him John crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. “What do you make of it, Sherlock?”

“All I can tell you at this point is that the person who left this note knows you well. He or she knows your habits, knows your staff’s habits, and knows technology, otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to disable the security cameras at the server.”

“Could the note have been placed there by one of his staff?” John asked.

“It’s unlikely. If any of them wished him dead they’d have done it by now. But that doesn’t mean that one of them wasn’t an unknowing accomplice. James, tell me about your social life.”

James stared at him for a moment, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. “What social life? I’m hardly in high demand. I scare young children and repel their parents. Even in the small village I live in, I’m either looked upon with pity or scorn.”

“What about your friends? Past partners? Family? Surely you’re in touch with them.” Sherlock leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

“My parents are dead and I’m an only child. I have few friends and they stay in touch by email or the occasional visit to my home. I haven’t seen any of them in weeks now, but I trust them implicitly. As far as previous partners go,” James continued, eyes flicking toward John, “I lost touch with them long before this happened. Except for John, that is.”

Sherlock felt something sour curdle in his belly. Jealousy and curiosity were nasty bedfellows, a bitter combination that pushed Sherlock forward despite his own common sense. He was tempted to ask James questions about his relationship with John under the pretence of investigating who was trying to murder him, but one glance at the look John was shooting his way took the words out of his mouth and put them to rest.

“I take it you haven’t dated since the incident with the recruits, then?”

“No, no one. I’ve been solicited by my district AMP agency again in the last several months. They keep sending me folders to look at, but I haven’t gone on any dates.”
“You’re not going to be able to avoid that for much longer, you know. Now that the legislation has passed, you’ll be required to marry,” Sherlock reminded him.

James closed his eyes and sighed. “That seems like cruel and unusual punishment, doesn’t it?”

John scoffed. “You might find someone well-suited for you, James, you never know. Being with someone you care about needn’t be seen as a punishment.”

“I wasn’t talking about my own punishment, John. Who would have me?”

Sherlock didn’t want to wait to hear John espouse all of James’ finer qualities. “Let me look into this a little more, if you don’t mind. I’d like to talk with your staff and your security detail, and look at the video footage that’s available from just before and after the missing segment. It might take a day or two.”

James stood up and gave Sherlock a curt nod. “I do appreciate it, and again, I am very sorry for what is clearly the worst possible timing. Had I known you were here, I wouldn’t have come.”

Across the room, John cleared his throat and looked at the floor.

“Nonsense. John has explained that he had previously given you a key and told you to use his house as a safe place if necessary. You were only doing what you thought best.”

“Still, I’m sure there are lodgings in the village. I’ll gather my things and be gone as soon as I can.”

The room fell silent as James made his way to the library door and pulled it open. He was almost through and into the hallway when Sherlock finished warring with himself and called after him. “James, wait. John and I would much rather that you stay here. Our home is open to you.”

James turned and looked back at him. Sherlock could see the push back in the line of the ex-major’s shoulders and the tilt of his head.

“Please. Neither of us will rest well knowing that you were on your own in some dingy room. And this way, I can ask you any other questions that I might think of.” Sherlock glanced over at John, who was staring at Sherlock with such a look of utter appreciation and adoration on his face, Sherlock immediately looked down at his own feet and swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Very well then. I’ll try to not be a nuisance.” He gave Sherlock a brief smile, then turned and walked out of sight. A moment later Sherlock heard him make his way up the stairs and down the hallway toward his guestroom.

“Sherlock.”

“It’s okay, John.”

“Sherlock,” John said again, crossing the room to stand in front of him. “Thank you. I know that wasn’t easy for you. I wouldn’t have asked it of you, but that you did it on your own means the world to me.” He reached out and squeezed Sherlock’s shoulders, then pulled him forward into a hug.

Sherlock let himself be held. He relaxed into John’s embrace as John rubbed his back and pressed a kiss to his jaw.

“John, I should remind you that it will be very difficult for me to resume the path we were on last night as long as we have a guest in the house.”
John nodded and pulled back enough to meet his eye. “I understand. I’ll give you as little or as much space as you need. Whatever makes you comfortable.”

“Thank you. I want you to know, that is, you should know that I do very much want to pick up where we left off.”

John smiled. He wove one hand into the curls at the nape of Sherlock’s neck and cupped his cheek with his other hand. “I’m glad to hear that. Very glad.”

Sherlock pressed a quick kiss to John’s lips, then excused himself to get to work. He had a life to save.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving, Americans!

All the thank yous to happierstill for betaing early and catching so much stuff in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock spent the day locked in the study with his phone and laptop, poring over every story he could find about the Afghan ambush that had taken so many lives and had ruined James’ career. He read the family interviews and Googled as much as he could about any identifiable family member. It was a start, but there were many families that hadn’t made themselves available for interviews and who had remained out of the public eye.

He contacted the head of James’ security detail and tried to make arrangements to have the video footage sent to him, but the person in charge had never heard of Sherlock Holmes and was uncooperative. His efforts there were less than fruitful, so Sherlock made a note to ask James to approve Sherlock’s clearance and moved on to the next item on his list.

He contacted all of James’ staff members and talked with them at length, but those conversations were dead ends. More than any outright proof they could offer, Sherlock could tell from the tone of their voices, word choice, and emotional response that they weren’t involved. He reassured them all that James was safe and would be home soon.
He called Mycroft and asked for any useful files on James, the ambush, and the families of those lost. He’d known when he made the call that he’d have to offer something in return, and when they hung up he felt relieved that he’d only had to promise to take Mummy and Daddy to two musicals. He’d been prepared to agree to three.

Satisfied with the work he’d done by the end of the day, Sherlock stood back from the desk and stretched. For the first time in hours he became aware of what was happening in the rest of the house. A delicious smell of something cooking filled his nose, and he heard soft music playing from somewhere below. He shut down his laptop and made a cursory attempt at tidying up the mess of notes on the desk, then made his way downstairs.

John’s voice inside the kitchen stopped him in his tracks, and he stood just outside the door and listened.

“... bloody brilliant, is what he is. If anyone can figure out what’s going on, it’ll be Sherlock.”

“I appreciate his help, and yours. I still feel horrible about interrupting your honeymoon, though. I’m serious about staying in town, John.”

“I know you are. I’ll let you know if things change but for now, I do think it’s best that you stay here, where we can keep an eye on you.”

“I’m not sure I’d be as generous if the tables were turned.”

“Nonsense. Of course you’d be.”

There was the sound of a cabinet door opening, then James started talking again.

“You seem happy, John, happier than I’ve seen you in a long time.”

“Yeah? Yeah, I am happy. Really happy. I can’t say I thought things would work out so well for me, you know? After being shot and sent home things were pretty bad for a while.”

“And I didn’t make things any better. I am sorry, John.”

Sherlock took a step closer to the door.

“Hey, we’ve been over all of that. Like you said, what you and I had wasn’t meant to carry over into this world. You were right. It was a time and a place thing. No regrets.”

There was a slight pause before James cleared his throat and said, "No regrets." The two of them fell into silence again.

Sherlock waited another thirty seconds before pushing through the swinging doors and walking into the kitchen. John stood at the stove, stirring something in a large pot, and James sat at the kitchen table, dipping a teabag in and out of a mug that Sherlock suspected had long gone cold.

“Hey, there you are,” John said, coming over for a kiss. “Annette made Cullen skink and I’m heating up some bread. Want to open a bottle of wine?”

“What on earth is Cullen skink?” Sherlock said as he moved toward the wine rack and rooted around in a drawer for a corkscrew.

“Haddock, potato, and onion soup. You’ll love it.”

James was quiet during their exchange and Sherlock was grateful that he’d given him and John a
moment to reconnect after a day spent mostly apart. Sherlock uncorked the bottle of wine and started pouring into the three glasses John had set in front of him.

“None for me, thank you,” James said, holding up a hand.

Sherlock didn’t question him. He poured two glasses, passed one to John, and held his up to toast. “To finding James’ would-be-assassin.”

He filled them in on what he’d done that day, the three of them sitting around the table with their bowls of soup and warm bread slathered with butter. James and John asked questions and Sherlock gave him what information he had. James told Sherlock he’d contact his security detail first thing the following morning, but the conversation eventually turned to topics regarding the house and property. Whether it was James’ reticent nature or his discomfort at imposing that kept him from participating more fully in the conversation, Sherlock wasn’t sure, but he was appreciative that James didn’t act overly familiar with John.

When they were done eating, John dismissed James to the library with a modest glass of Port, and he and Sherlock stayed behind to clean up.

“I think I can see what you saw in him,” Sherlock ventured.

“Really? What’s that?”

“He seems like a very stable sort, quiet but strong, steady. An anchor in the chaos of war.”

John dried the bowl in his hand and nodded. “I suppose so, yeah.”

“But here, in the relative calm of your real life, I think you’d be bored with him.”

John placed the bowl in a stack of other cleaned and dried dishes and turned to face Sherlock. He smiled. “Are you saying that I replaced the chaos of war with the chaos of you?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Am I chaotic?”

John took a moment to consider, then said, “It’s not that you’re chaotic, no. But you remind me of a barely contained whirlwind sometimes. There’s so much under the surface and you’re drawn to dangerous things. I don’t know many people who would involve themselves in a death threat on someone else’s life.”

“Perhaps not.” Sherlock took the damp tea towel from John’s hands and draped it over the back of a chair. He wrapped his arms around John’s waist and looked him in the eye. “I’m not making a lot of progress, to be honest.”

“It’s only been one day.”

“It’s been enough time for me to follow all the leads we have and those have all turned up dead ends.”

John pulled him closer and rested his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders. “Maybe the security footage will show something.”

“Yes. Hopefully, I’ll have it tomorrow.”

“Okay. So let’s enjoy tonight and you can start again tomorrow.” John bumped Sherlock up against the counter and tilted up for a kiss. Sherlock felt tension he didn’t know he’d been holding slip away
as John’s lips touched his own. They stood in the silence and kissed until kissing seemed like not
nearly enough, until John’s hands were kneading Sherlock’s shoulders and Sherlock’s leg was firmly
wedged between John’s thighs. When John’s hands slipped lower to rub over Sherlock’s chest,
Sherlock broke the kiss and took a deep breath.

“John, despite telling you that I won’t be comfortable being intimate while James is here, I find
myself wanting you very much.”

John smiled. “I don’t think our physical attraction to each other will be diminished by who’s around
us, but I do understand why you wouldn’t be comfortable acting on it right now.”

“And you don’t mind?”

John shook his head and rubbed Sherlock’s back. “Not at all. These little stolen moments are
enough. I love sharing a bed with you and being close to you. I like having you in my arms. It
doesn’t have to be more than that.”

Sherlock thought carefully about what he was about to say. He kissed John again, then said, “I have
an idea for tonight, though. My wedding garments need to be washed. Especially the short pants. I
suggest a compromise of sorts. I’ll wear something else to bed tonight. I want us to be able to touch
each other in a nonsexual way and not worry about what’s touching what. Does that makes sense?”

“That makes perfect sense. But still, you need to let me know if you’ve had enough of me plastered
up against you or whatever, because I can be pretty tactile, even in a nonsexual way.”

“I will. And you, too. We talk all the time about what I’m comfortable with, but you should tell me
the same things about yourself. You’re more experienced than I am but that doesn’t mean you don’t
have preferences.”

John fiddled with one of the buttons on Sherlock’s shirt. “Well, a lot of what we do together is going
to be new to you, so I’m more concerned about me leading you down a path you aren’t comfortable
with than I am about myself.”

Sherlock ran through a list of sexual activities in his mind and wondered which of them might be in
his immediate future. He had to admit, his mental files on such things were relatively sparse.

“You look confused,” John said. “You have that wrinkle at the top of your nose.”

“I was just realising that I might not have a complete picture of all the various ways we could be
together, sexually. I don’t know what I don’t know. I don’t like not knowing.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Now?”

“Whenever you’d like. It doesn’t have to be now. How about if right now we join James in the
library for a little while and then head to bed?”

Sherlock poured two more glasses of Port and handed one to John. He leaned down for one more
kiss and followed John out of the kitchen, turning out the lights behind them. “I think I might head
up now if you don’t mind. I want to go over my notes from today and make a list of things to follow
up on tomorrow.”

“Absolutely. I’ll be up soon.”
Sherlock left John at the door to the library and continued up the stairs. A quick survey of his emotions proved that he had no lingering jealousy over James and John’s previous relationship and he was fine with leaving the two friends to chat on their own. He had a moment of lingering embarrassment over the way he’d responded when James showed up unannounced at their door but wasn’t sure that most people would’ve handled it any differently. He supposed it didn’t really matter how others would’ve handled it. Next time, if God forbid there ever was a next time for such a confounding set of circumstances, he would endeavour to respond with more emotional maturity and understanding.

In the bedroom, he undressed and gathered together a small pile of clothes that needed to be laundered, placed those in the hamper in the bathroom, and considered what to wear to bed. He had packed a pair of pyjama pants and some faded cotton t-shirts, but thought about John sleeping shirtless and decided to do the same.

He climbed into bed and realised he’d forgotten his case notes in the office. He was comfortable and didn’t relish the idea of getting out of bed and wandering down the chilly hallway half-naked. Instead, he let his mind drift back to the conversation he and John had been having in the kitchen. He reached for his phone on the nightstand and typed in a few keywords, then scrolled through the results. Settling on a website that seemed more educational than pornographic, he fluffed up the pillow behind him, sipped on his Port, and began to read.

Half an hour later he was too distracted by his own arousal to continue reading. There was a whole world of sexual pleasure out there he’d never stopped to consider. He put the phone back on the nightstand, turned out the light, and tried to think about assassins and death threats instead of some of the sexual activities he’d just read about. It was futile. He was mentally cataloguing a list of acts he wanted to try in order of priority when he finally drifted off to sleep.

It couldn’t have been much later when he was roused from a light sleep and felt the bed dip next to him. John scooted close, wrapped his arm over Sherlock’s side, and pressed his palm to his chest.

“Are you awake?” he whispered.

“Mmm. A little bit.”

“Is this okay?” John molded himself to Sherlock’s body, pressing his bare chest to Sherlock’s back and tucking his legs and hips in tight.

“Yes.” Sherlock put his hand over John’s and intertwined their fingers.

“Go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you.”

John kissed the back of Sherlock’s neck, and the warm spot he left tingled and spread over Sherlock’s skin. John sighed and his breath ruffled Sherlock’s hair, and then he pressed his toes to Sherlock’s Achilles heels and Sherlock opened his eyes and smiled into the darkness. Leaving the day behind and succumbing to the darkness could be such a lonely affair. He’d never realised before what a solitary venture it was, not until he had someone next to him. Falling asleep with John felt like a journey to look forward to, not a necessity that his body and brain needed to function.

“John?”

“Mm?”

“Remember what we were talking about in the kitchen? About you wanting to be sure I’ll be comfortable with certain things we might do together? In bed?”
“Yeah?” John squeezed his fingers a little tighter.

“Would it help in advance if I told you some of the things I know I’d like to try?”

John kissed the back of his neck again. “Sure. Do you want to talk about it now or some other time?”

“Now. I’m very interested in oral sex.”

John was silent for a beat. “Yeah, me too.”

“I mean, I know I’d like to receive it, but I’d very much like to try doing it to you, too. It seems to me that two men have a distinct advantage when it comes to oral sex because they can do to each other the things they know they like. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense.”

“Also, sixty-nine seems like a very good option, if not a bit awkward depending on positioning.”

John pulled Sherlock a little closer and let out another sigh against the top of his spine. “We could always play around with positioning until we found something that feels comfortable for both of us.”

“Which do you like better, side by side or one over the other?”

“I … well, I guess I’ve enjoyed both positions, to be honest.”

“I’m open to trying both. All three, actually, because if we’re not side by side then there’s an opportunity for us to take turns being on the top and the bottom.”

“True.”

“I was reading about some other oral activities, too.”

“Oh, my God.” John buried his face in Sherlock’s shoulder and took a deep breath.

“John?”

“Mmhmm?”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, not at all. It’s just a bit arousing, is all, listening to you talk about the things you’d like to try.”

“Oh. Would you rather not talk about it?” Sherlock turned over and mirrored John’s position so they were facing each other. It was hard to see John’s face in the dark but he could just make out the curve of his ear and cheek.

“We can talk about it. We can talk about whatever you want.”

“Would you like that?”

“What? Talking about sex or doing other oral things?”

Sherlock wrapped his arm around John’s waist and moved closer. His knees knocked into John’s.

“Other oral things.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. I mean, I’m pretty sure we’re talking about the same thing, but to be clear, there’s nowhere on your body that I wouldn’t want to put my mouth. Nowhere.”
Sherlock slipped one of his feet between John’s. “In theory,” he said, lowering his voice to a low rumble, “a lot of what people do in bed should seem taboo. At least, it always seemed that way to me. But now that I’ve got some idea of what it feels like to actually be intimate with someone I care about, nothing seems very off-putting.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” John reached out and wound his fingers into Sherlock’s hair. “I think a lot of guys would do just about anything with anyone to get off. The other person isn’t even part of the equation, really. As long as the package looks good to them, they’re in. But if you spend a few minutes with someone you get a good idea of whether or not you have chemistry with them and that changes everything.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s one thing to just see someone and think ‘yeah, they look nice,’ but it’s another thing to get to know them and feel an attraction based on who they are, too. Or, to get to know them and realise that you don’t feel that initial attraction anymore. And it’s another thing altogether to fall in love with someone and know that you want to experience everything together.”

Sherlock nudged his head into John’s hand to get him to keep tugging on his curls. “Go on.”

“Think back to when we first met. You tried to get me to leave your house. You wanted nothing to do with me. And now you’re talking about all the things you’d like to do with me. Sexually. Some of which you’d probably never considered doing with anyone else. Familiarity, trust, love, wanting to make someone feel good, all that stuff factors in.”

“John. I don’t even want to kiss anyone else let alone some of the things we’re talking about.”

“Exactly. The thing is, there are all types of sexuality. We all know about heterosexual and homosexual and bisexual, but there’s also asexual, demisexual, pansexual, and so on. And you can be heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, etc. Maybe you’re demisexual. You only feel attraction to someone you feel emotionally connected to.”

Sherlock filtered what John had said through his own research on sexuality, which was admittedly very little. “How many labels are there?”

John laughed and stroked his thumb over Sherlock’s ear. “I don’t know. I suppose the labels don’t really matter unless they help someone figure out why they feel a certain way. I haven’t ever really thought about my own orientations, but if I had to pick something I’d say I’m a bisexual homoromantic, meaning I’m sexually attracted to men and women but generally only feel romantic connections with men.”

“Interesting.”

“What else do you want to talk about?” John finished the sentence with a yawn and stretched his arms over his head before turning back to Sherlock.

“You’re tired. We don’t have to talk about anything else. Would it bother you, though, if I stayed up a bit more and did some reading?”

“It won’t bother me in the slightest,” John answered. “You were almost asleep when I came in, though.”

“I know. I just want to look up a couple of things.”

Within a few minutes, John was breathing deeply against Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock’s phone
screen illuminated a small circle of space around them, including John’s arm resting low over Sherlock’s hips and the blond of his hair just under Sherlock’s chin.

Sherlock scrolled through the pages he’d found on sexuality and within an hour he had a much better understanding of his own place on the vast spectrum, his previous thoughts about intimacy, and the way he had been responding to John as they’d gotten to know each other better.

He turned off his phone and set it on the nightstand, snuggled back into John’s arms, and fell asleep sure in the knowledge that he wasn’t a freak for eschewing all things intimate until this point in his life. After all, he hadn’t met John until this point, and with John came the trust and emotional connection that allowed for attraction and the desire to act on that attraction. It wasn’t a very complicated equation, but he took pleasure in the knowledge that came with unwrapping the puzzle.

Chapter End Notes

Cullen skink!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Thank you, happierstill!

Annette and James were sitting on the kitchen terrace when Sherlock surfaced the next morning, she with a cigarette in her hand, he with the morning paper in his. Sherlock poured himself a cup of coffee and grabbed a scone off the counter before joining them.

“Good morning,” Annette said as Sherlock stepped outside. “I’m to tell you that John went to town to get groceries and house cleaning supplies and he’ll be back by lunchtime. He said to text him if there’s anything in particular you want him to get.”

“Thank you.”

He and James greeted each other and James made room at the table, folding up the newspaper sections he’d already read and brushing some crumbs into his palm before dumping them onto his empty plate. Sherlock sat his coffee and scone down and pulled out a chair on Annette’s side of the table. He looked out over the overgrown grass and tilted his face up to the partially sunny sky. It didn’t look like it would stay sunny for much longer.

“Forecast calls for rain,” Annette said, as if reading his mind. She stubbed her cigarette out in a chipped, glass ashtray and stacked the empty dishes and cups in front of her.

Sherlock nibbled on his breakfast and scanned the headlines of the front page. There wasn’t much there to hold his interest, so he turned his attention back to Annette.

“Are you finding everything you need here at the house? Other than some cleaning supplies?”

“I am. I’m still working on the deep clean and probably will be for the next few days. After that, I can arrange to have some workers come in and take care of the bigger issues. Windows, plaster, paint, things like that.”

“Sounds good. Do let me or John know if you need anything.”

“I will. I’m going to finish the first floor today, then move upstairs. John said not to worry about making any lunch, that he’ll bring something back, but I was thinking I could make a roast chicken and potatoes for your dinner, if you’d like.”

Sherlock licked a bit of fruit jam off his thumb. “If you have time that would be lovely. But I don’t think either John or I expected you to cook for us when we hired you.”

Annette stood up and gathered the stack of dishes in her hands. “Nonsense. You’re on your honeymoon, there’s no need to cook for yourselves.”

Sherlock could’ve sworn he’d seen her shoot a look in James’ direction when she said the word honeymoon, but when he glanced over at James the man was still doggedly focused on the newspaper.
“Well, the soup you made last night was delicious. I’d never had it before.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. It’s a speciality in these parts.” She started to go but turned back at the door and looked at James. “I’ll let you know if I find those folders, Major.”

James smiled at her and inclined his head with a small nod. “No bother if you don’t come across them, but thank you for looking.”

Sherlock popped the rest of the scone into his mouth and wiped his hands on his trousers. He felt less comfortable sitting there with only James as company but he was determined not to let his own insecurities chase him off of his own kitchen terrace.

“What was Annette talking about? Folders?”

James neatened the newspaper pages in his hands and put them on top of the other sections on the table. He leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. “Nothing important. I was sure I’d left some agency folders here the last time I visited but I can’t find them now.”

“Agency?”

“The marriage agency. Candidate dating folders. I thought I left them in the guest room bedside table but I can’t find them. It’s not important.”

Sherlock knew exactly which folders James was talking about. He’d assumed they were John’s when he’d come across them, and not wanting to get caught snooping he’d shoved them under the mattress when he’d heard John approaching. It made more sense that they belonged to James, especially since they’d been in a guest room. Sherlock had the fleeting thought that although he hadn’t considered the possibility before, he was glad James hadn’t slept in the master bedroom when he’d come to the house on his own.

“When were you last here?” Sherlock asked.

“Two months ago. My therapist suggested I take a trip to break the monotony of my daily and weekly routine, so I came here. She also recommended that ‘getting back in the game,’ so to speak, might help alleviate some of the ennui I’ve experienced since coming home, so I registered with the agency and brought the folders with me.”

Sherlock thought ennui was probably an understatement. “And did the dating help?”

“I never got that far. I registered with the agency and received my first batch of folders but never contacted any of the candidates. Since I forgot them here and couldn’t send them back I haven’t been sent any others.”

James didn’t look at Sherlock as he spoke. He’d set his sights somewhere in the field stretching out to the forest behind the house. He cleared his throat and recrossed his legs.

“What happens if you don’t send them back?” Sherlock could remember not being able to send his back fast enough.

James shrugged. “I assume the agency can send me duplicates if I can’t find them. Or we can start again.”

“Forgive me if this is too personal,” Sherlock said, taking great interest in the crease of his trousers, “but do you think you’re ready now? To date?”
James was quiet for a moment but when he spoke he looked Sherlock in the eye. “John and I talked about it last night. You were right when you said that I’ll be required to marry in the near future. John thinks there are several reasons to take matters into my own hands, now, while I still have some say. Despite having staff in my home throughout the week I am isolated much of the time. From both a safety point of view and for what John referred to as my ‘state of mental health,’ it might behove my situation to not be alone so much of the time.”

Sherlock nodded. “And, of course, being able to select your own partner now has countless advantages over being pressured to do so in the future. Or, having one assigned to you should legislation move that far.”

“Indeed. The political climate being what it is, I would not be surprised if the government reaches that point within the next year or two.”

Sherlock sat with his own thoughts for a moment. He wondered if James regretted ending his relationship with John. Surely, he’d have been better off entering into a marriage with someone he knew and already cared for in some way than with an absolute stranger.

“I think I know where your folders might be.” Sherlock pushed back from the table and fiddled with his cuffs. James raised an eyebrow but Sherlock didn’t elaborate. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment.”

Sherlock left James sitting at the table with his newspaper. He wanted to retrieve the folders from under the mattress before John came home or Annette headed upstairs. He wouldn’t keep this from John if the subject arose, but he hoped it wouldn’t. If pressed, he’d admit the truth. He’d say he mistakenly thought the folders were John’s and feeling guilty for snooping he’d shoved them out of sight without thinking it through.

He made it upstairs and into James’ room without seeing Annette. The folders were exactly where he’d left them. He tucked them under his arm and moved back to the door, stepping lightly, as if his footprints would mark the floor and give him away as an intruder. He paused on the threshold and looked back before he left. The room appeared as it always did, except for James’ duffel bag which sat on an armchair near one of the windows. The bed was perfectly made. There wasn’t a book or comb or pair of shoes to be seen. The curtains were open and the bathroom door was closed.

It was as if James didn’t exist at all. Sherlock knew the man tried to keep a low profile and didn’t want to be a bother to anyone, and he assumed his background in the military had created strict habits of tidiness, but the lack of any sign of occupancy left Sherlock unsettled.

His and John’s bedroom looked as if they’d lived there for years. The bed was usually haphazardly made and there were pyjamas and shoes and clothes scattered about. There were magazines and teacups and phone chargers on the nightstands and John left the closet door open more often than not. Anyone would be able to tell the room was inhabited. Co-inhabited.

Sherlock experienced a brief sense of connectedness with the Major. He wasn’t unlike Sherlock had been before he met John. He had led a life mostly unto himself, cut off from other people, shunning social interaction and sticking to his own rigid routines. He hadn’t become a social butterfly after meeting John, but John had opened doors he never would’ve considered looking for on his own. Even when they stayed in and pottered about, Sherlock found he’d grown accustomed to having company, someone to talk to, or eat with, or sit near while they each pursued their own interests. Being with another person created a circular dynamic of interpersonal energy and awareness. Sherlock was glad for it.

Outside, a boom of thunder rolled overhead and rain began to splatter the windowpanes. He closed
the door behind him and retraced his steps. James was where Sherlock had left him, although he seemed close to finishing the last pages of the newspaper. He looked up when Sherlock stepped outside and when he saw the green folders in Sherlock’s hand he put the paper down and gave Sherlock a small smile. Sherlock handed them over without a word and reclaimed his chair. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and steepled his fingers under his chin. James set the folders in his lap and waited for Sherlock to speak.

The rain was coming down harder now and the sound of it on the terrace roof was a background rumble to Sherlock’s thoughts. Nearby a gutter spluttered, filled, and started to drain into the grass.

“James. I think you and I are somewhat alike. Had outside circumstances not interfered, I would be unmarried today. Left to my own devices, I’d never have met John. It was my mother, actually, who pushed me to marry. I cannot tell you how many of those damned folders she had delivered to the house. I ignored all of them, stacks and stacks of them. She devised various plans for me to meet potential suitors but I would just as quickly devise plans to ensure those suitors would never want to see me again. Then one day, she arranged to have John Watson show up. He was unannounced and unexpected. He walked right into our sitting room and into my life and he never left. I tried to get rid of him, but not very hard, not really. He simply asked for a cup of tea and we’ve been together ever since.

“My point is, I was the least likely candidate for marriage you’d ever care to meet. I don’t know if my mother knew something I didn’t, or if the agency algorithms really are that good, or if it was simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time, but I can honestly say that I have no regrets.

“I agree with John. I think having a partner would be good for you. Forgive me if I’m being overly familiar, but if someone like me can find what I have with John, then someone like you can find it, too. I don’t know if you’ll find it there,” he said, pointing at the folders in James’ lap, “or in another pile of folders, or not in a folder at all, but hiding away at home in the middle of nowhere will neither guarantee your safety nor your happiness.”

James nodded at Sherlock and held his gaze for a long moment before he looked away. A flash of lightning startled them; Sherlock counted the seconds until the thunder sounded. It was closer than he thought. A slight wind picked up and ruffled the newspaper where it sat on the table. Sherlock set his empty mug on top of it and watched the rain come down.

“You must wonder what happened,” James said.

Sherlock wondered a lot of things about John and James, but there seemed no appropriate response to James’ statement. James continued, saving Sherlock from having to come up with something to say.

“John is an amazing man. Anyone would be fortunate to be his partner. So, you must wonder why I decided to break it off. I would. If I were you I would wonder why anyone would choose to not be with John.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“He was going to be transferred. I knew but I wasn’t at liberty to tell him. I thought I would do both of us a favour and end it sooner than later. I thought it would give us each time to adjust before the transfer came through. I’ve seen it all before, the intensity of a wartime relationship and then the impossibility of maintaining it once you’re split apart. Your world shrinks down to the few square miles you’re in at any given time. It’s all or nothing. I believed what I told him, that it couldn’t last. I thought we would talk about it again once he was re-stationed and he would see the logic in my
decision, but then he was shot and sent home.”

“And then you were, too.”

“Yes.”

Sherlock let this new information settle. A small bird took refuge from the storm in the rafters above them and shook out its feathers, then began to groom itself with its blunt, yellow beak.

“It must have been very hard for you. You were a career military man before the accident. Decorated. Strong, capable, a natural leader. Afterward, you’d have had months of recovery followed by months of physical therapy. You considered yourself broken. Unworthy.”

A small, brown and grey feather drifted down and landed near Sherlock’s foot. He snapped his mouth closed, sure he’d said too much.

“You can understand why I didn’t reconnect with him.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No. I can’t, actually. You know him. You know he wouldn’t have cared about your injuries or the end of your career. He would’ve wanted to help.”

The bird hopped onto another rafter and hunkered down, tucking its wings close to its body.

“I didn’t want his pity.”

“He wouldn’t have given you his pity.” Sherlock brushed a hand over his face. He left it pressed flat over his mouth, his thumb pressing into his cheekbone.

Behind them the door opened, and above them the bird spooked and flew back into the rain. John stepped out to join them, dripping wet, leaving puddles under his shoes.

“God, this rain! I should’ve expected it, given the way it looked when I left this morning.” He looked back and forth between Sherlock and James, water dripping from his hair and running under his collar. “I’m going to get changed, then we can have lunch, yeah? I picked up some sandwich stuff and some salads. Sherlock, put on a pot of tea?”

Sherlock stood up and nodded. “Excellent idea. I’ll be right in.” He waited for John to step inside and close the door before he spoke again.

“You never told John about the transfer, did you?”

“No.”

“I won’t say anything. That’s between the two of you. Between you and I, however, I can only say that I’m very glad you weren’t a braver man.”

James shifted in his chair. He set his mouth in a hard line and looked away from Sherlock.

“Don’t misunderstand. I have no doubt you were a brilliant army major and served Queen and country well. But, when it came to John Watson you made a significant strategic error. He would have gone to you.”

Sherlock left James to stare out at the rumbling grey sky and the sheets of rain. He went inside, walked past the kettle, past the bags of groceries waiting to be unpacked, and went straight up the stairs and into the bedroom he shared with his husband. John looked up in surprise from where he sat on the edge of the bed with a pair of socks in his hands, naked but for a pair of dry pants. A damp
towel sat near his hip and his hair was sticking up from where he’d rubbed at it.

Sherlock crossed the room and knelt between John’s legs. He wrapped his arms around his waist and buried his face in his stomach. He breathed him in.

“What’s this all about?”

Sherlock nodded into John’s warm skin.

“Hey, you okay?”

Sherlock shook his head. He had no words for what he felt at that moment. Panic, relief, gratitude. All the sensations that come after a close call, when you catch that beaker before it shatters to the ground, when you look up just in time to steer the car back into your own lane, when that moon-sized asteroid veers off course and does not, in fact, destroy the earth.

To think that he’d been so dismissive of John when they’d first met. What if John had listened to him and left the house that day? He couldn’t help but remember how smug he’d been when John first courted him, as if he was doing John a favour by letting him get close, as if there had ever been any real substance to his deliberations about marrying the man.

How easily this could never have happened. How easily one broken man could have reached out to another. He hugged John tighter. It was okay now. John Watson was his. Another man had made a mistake and John Watson was his, and he was so, so grateful.
“All I’m saying is I have a second room he could stay in. He’d be out from under your feet and he’d be safer with me than he is here.” Annette scraped the roast potatoes off the baking sheet with a spatula and scooped them into a serving dish.

“How on earth would he be safer with you?” Sherlock sniffed at the wine he’d just poured and took a small sip. “I mean, no offence, but you can’t weigh more than eight stone.”

Annette glared at him. “You aren’t exactly a heavyweight yourself, are you? What I mean is that if someone is looking for the Major they might be smart enough to come looking at his friend’s house, right? But they wouldn’t look at my flat because I have no connection to the man. Plus, you’re out here in the back of beyond and I’m in the city centre, close to the police should there be a need to call them.”

Sherlock peeled the foil off the neck of the wine bottle and rolled it into a ball. Annette had a point, he had to admit.

“And don’t tell me you’re happy having him here with you. It’s your bloody honeymoon, for Christ’s sake.” She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed a wayward lock of red hair out of her eyes. “Where are they now, anyway?”

“John is showing James the old tennis hut. He’s been talking about turning it into a guest house.”

“Oh, right, so you can have even more ex-boyfriend interlopers showing up when you least want them.”

Annette looked so offended on his behalf, Sherlock couldn’t help but laugh. He laughed long and hard and after a moment of stunned silence Annette’s indignant expression softened and she joined him. They laughed until they each had tears running down their faces and Sherlock was gasping for breath.

“It’s true and you know it!” She sniffed and wiped at her eyes and chuckled again.

“That’s why I’m laughing. It’s funny because it’s true. Okay, you might have a point but I can’t really say anything without coming across as jealous and suspicious, and I don’t want to be either of those things. What am I going to say? ‘Oh, by the way James, Annette has a second bedroom no one is using. Isn’t that fascinating?’”

Annette grabbed a pair of potholders, opened the oven door, and pulled out the roast chicken. She turned back to Sherlock as she set the pan on the counter but she didn’t speak again until she had tucked the potholders into a drawer and washed her hands. “That’ll need to rest for five minutes,” she said, as if poultry resting times were relevant to what they’d been discussing.

Sherlock liked tracking her movements around the kitchen. She was sharp and efficient. She’d been tidying as she cooked and now she took an appraising look around, untied the strings of an old apron she’d taken to wearing, and tossed it onto the back of a chair. Seemingly satisfied with the state of things, she came around to the other side of the table and sat down next to Sherlock.

He poured a second glass of wine and slid it over to her. She took a sip and wrinkled her nose, then
took a second sip and shrugged. “It’s not a pint, but it’ll do. Cheers.

“Okay, I get what you’re saying about not wanting to come across a certain way. You asked him to stay when he said he was going to leave, so you can’t really ask him to leave now. Leave it to me, then, and I’ll take care of it.”

“What are you going to do?” Sherlock knew he should tell her not to do anything at all, but he was curious.

“Just leave it with me.”

They sat in companionable silence for another minute and then Annette hopped down and rounded the table again. Sherlock watched her carve the chicken and arrange slices of it on an antique-looking ceramic platter.

“What about you, then?” he asked.

“What about me?” She didn’t look up from her work, and when the chicken was as bare as she could get it she dropped the carcass into a pot and covered it with cheesecloth. “I’ll make chicken stock with this tomorrow, so don’t bin it.”

“When we met your sister at Victoria’s she said you were recently divorced.”

“Leave it to Alice to give you my life story.”

“It’s hardly your life story.”

“What else did she say?”

“That you had no children and your ex is a lying, cheating scum.”

“And there you have it, my life story.”

Sherlock smiled at her. He could tell she wasn’t really put out by what Alice had told them. She smiled back and reached for her wine glass. “What can I say? I was really young and he was really stupid. Story old as time.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“I’m not. It’s fine, really.” She stacked the roasting pans and last of the dirty utensils in the sink and turned on the hot tap.

“Are you seeing anyone now?”

She laughed. “Lord, no. Everyone says I’ll change my mind but I really can’t imagine dating right now, and I doubt I’ll ever marry again, as long as the government doesn’t force me to do so, and I don’t think I’m who they’re interested in.”

Sherlock snagged a piece of chicken off the platter and took a bite. “Mm. This is good.”

“It’s going to be cold if they don’t get back soon. What about you, then?”

“What about me?”

Annette handed Sherlock a stack of plates and gestured for him to set them out on the table. “Arranged marriage and all that. What’s it like?”
“I suppose I don’t really think of my situation as an arranged marriage as much as the result of a dating service. I did meet John through the Program but I wasn’t required to marry him. I chose to.”

“How long did you date before you got engaged?”

“Four months.”

“Sounds pretty arranged to me.”

Sherlock shrugged. “You’re lucky you likely won’t need to worry about it. I was fortunate to meet someone I wanted to be with. Had I not met John the government eventually would’ve found someone for me to marry and I wouldn’t have had a choice.”

“I guess I never thought about not being wealthy or upper class as lucky, but yeah, I see your point. Honestly, if I were forced to marry someone I didn’t know I’d probably end up killing them. Or them me.” She shuddered as she added dishwashing soap to the sink and turned off the hot water. “Ah, here they are now. I can finish the washing up in the morning so you can eat in peace.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sherlock said. “We’ll take care of it. And I thought you weren’t supposed to come in until noon?”

“There’s enough to do here to keep me busy and I don’t mind.”

John and James came in then, rubbing the chill out of their hands and sniffing appreciatively at the dinner waiting for them. Annette said her goodbyes and let herself out, and the three of them settled into their usual places at the kitchen table and helped themselves to dinner.

“Well then,” Sherlock asked James as he poured John a glass of wine, “what did you think of the tennis hut? Has John convinced you it should be turned into a guest house?”

“I suppose it depends on how many guests you think you’ll have and how long they’ll plan to stay. It’s a big job and not one you need to do right away.”

“True. There’s plenty to do in the main house as it is,” John agreed. “It’s just an idea for down the road. So, how did you get on this afternoon, then? Did the surveillance footage ever arrive?”

“It did, actually.”

“And? Was it helpful?” John put his fork down and looked at Sherlock.

James laid his napkin on his lap and leaned forward.

Sherlock hated to disappoint them. “Yes and no. The footage helped me narrow down the window of time the suspect was on the property, which is useful. James, the outdoor surveillance shows your driver’s car arrived when you said it did. We see the driver get out of the car and walk to the side door, knock, then enter the house when the door is opened. Shortly after, the footage stops and is off for twenty-seven minutes. When it comes on again we have approximately twenty-five minutes of nothing until you and your driver come arrive back at the house. Nothing looks out of the ordinary. You go inside and your driver gets back in his car and leaves.”

John crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “And that’s it? What about the footage from inside the house?”

“There are three cameras inside, each focused on separate doorways. Those were off for the same duration of time and show nothing out of the ordinary.”
“You said ‘yes and no,’ about the footage being useful, though. It doesn’t sound useful at all,” John said. "And twenty-seven minutes seems like a long time for someone to be in the house. Why did it take them so long to leave a note?"

"I assume he was either gathering more information or looking for something specific. You're sure nothing was missing?"

"Nothing that stood out, no."

“James,” Sherlock continued, “what was the weather like that day? I’ve looked up the temperatures but am wondering if you can remember if it was particularly windy?”

“Windy?” James looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. “Not that I recall, but I’m not sure I would remember, to be honest. Why do you ask?”

“There’s something about the footage that might be significant or it might be nothing at all.”

“What’s that?” John tore a chunk of bread off the loaf and slathered it with butter.

“A slight shift in the car after it’s parked and the driver gets out.”

James reached across the table and grabbed the bottle of wine. John pushed an empty wine glass toward him and watched as James poured himself an inch of wine and downed it in one gulp.

“So you’re saying it might have been windy enough to shift the car? That makes no sense,” John continued.

“Perhaps not so much a shift as a slight … bounce?” James offered.

“Exactly.”

“But what would that mean?” John looked back and forth between them.

“I would’ve noticed if it’d been windy enough to shake a car,” James answered. “What he’s saying is there was somebody else in the car, somebody moving about.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“It’s a possibility,” Sherlock said, holding up a hand. “It’s very hard to detect if it’s there at all. I could be mistaken.”

John raised an eyebrow and shot Sherlock a look. “Do you think you are? Mistaken?”

“Probably not.”

“James, are you sure you can trust your driver? Surely he’d have known if someone else was in his car?”

Sherlock helped himself to more chicken and held the plate out to James. “Not if that person were in the boot.”

James took some more chicken and then poured himself more wine. “I do trust him. Perhaps it’s misplaced but I cannot imagine he’d be a part of something like this.”

They sat in silence for a moment, each of them looking off in a different direction.
“So, what then? The suspect found a way to get into the car, hid there until James, his driver, and the cook left the house, exited the boot, somehow turned off the surveillance system, entered the house, wrote the note, left the house, and turned on the surveillance system again?”

Sherlock shrugged. “It’s not impossible. What I don’t know is if the suspect then got back in the boot or left some other way. I’ve looked at Google maps and it appears that after the first quarter-mile from your house there are two different routes one could take to get to the village centre. If the person was on foot you wouldn’t necessarily have passed them on your way home.”

“That’s true,” James agreed. “It would take about half an hour to walk that distance, so if they walked they’d probably have made it back to the village before we were done at the barber.”

“What about any surveillance cameras in the village itself?” John asked. “Maybe there’s footage of someone walking into town and being picked up?”

Sherlock reached for John’s hand and wrapped his fingers around it. “There could be footage of a lot of people walking about and getting into cars, but that doesn’t mean they’re murderers.”

“Yeah, I see your point. But why would anyone go through all that trouble to leave a note? Why not wait until James was home, sneak in, and finish the job?”

James winced.

“To see if he could do it, I imagine. He wanted to see if it would work while no one was home. If he’d tried and failed when James was home he’d have been arrested for breaking in.”

“So what now?” John asked.

“I’ve called the detective on your case, James, and asked her to do a forensics sweep of the trunk of your driver’s car, but unless any prints or DNA they find there are already in the system, it won’t do us much good. It’s worth a shot, though.”

“Thank you.” James stood up from the table and started ferrying their dishes to the sink. “Would it help for you to see the car yourself?”

Sherlock didn’t want to say he’d already considered this and gotten stuck on the idea of leaving Scotland and his honeymoon behind, even for a day or two. He knew it was selfish of him, but he also knew there was little to be gained by looking into an empty trunk.

“Probably not at this point. The forensics team will know what to look for. I’ve also asked them to check any CCTV around your driver’s home.”

“He lives in a fairly suburban area. I doubt they’ll find much.” James cleared the rest of the table and began scraping the dishes into the bin. “Why don’t you two clear out and I’ll clean up in here.”

“Thanks, James. I’m going to get a fire going in the library if anyone cares to join me.” John tugged on Sherlock’s hand and shot him a smile. “You coming with me?”

Sherlock followed John into the other room and stretched out on the couch, watching as John packed kindling, newspaper, and logs into the fireplace. When the fire began to take, John joined Sherlock on the couch. He sat near Sherlock’s hip, facing where he was resting his head against the armrest.

John leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “I have to admit, I’m glad you don’t think you need to look at the car in person.”
Sherlock reached out and fiddled with the hem of John’s jumper. “I wasn’t keen to leave, myself.”

John sighed. “Thank you for everything you’re doing. I know it’s not what we expected and I fully understand what we’ve had to put on hold while he’s here.”

“Thank you, John.”

“For what?”

“For understanding that I need it to be just the two of us in this house when we finally take the next step.”

“I get it. I do.”

Sherlock let his hand come to rest on John’s thigh. “You know what we can still do, though?”

“What’s that?”

“Kiss.”

“Oh, we can, can we?”

“If you’d like to.”

“If I’d like to? Are you insane?” John moved closer and stared at Sherlock’s lips. “I’d love to kiss you.”

Sherlock held his breath and waited as John slid forward and leaned down. He held his breath as John cupped the side of Sherlock’s face with one hand and moved closer. He held his breath as John brushed his lips across Sherlock’s, then he took a deep breath and tilted his head. John’s lips slotted perfectly between his own. They stayed there for a moment, bumping noses and playing with the angle, tasting each other with the tiniest of movements. When John opened his mouth a little more and licked Sherlock’s lower lip with the tip of his tongue, Sherlock wrapped his arms around John’s neck and pulled him flush against himself.

Sherlock felt the slide of John’s palm down the side of his neck, felt his fingers gripping his shoulder. He heard the crackle and pop of the fire and welcomed the heat of it spreading through the room. A similar heat was making its way through Sherlock’s body. He wriggled his hips in an attempt to make room for what was happening in his pants. John braced himself against the arm of the couch with one hand, sliding the other up and down Sherlock’s side. Sherlock had the sensation of melting in the cushions, sandwiched between its leather surfaces and John’s chest. He licked into John’s mouth and John kissed back, harder. When Sherlock tentatively slipped one hand behind John and squeezed his arse, John broke the kiss and hummed, forehead to forehead, eyes closed.

“That’s the problem with kissing you,” he said. “It’s never enough.”

“John.”

“Mm?”

“Kissing you has given me an erection.”

John sat up and giggled as Sherlock adjusted himself inside his trousers. “Stop. James is going to come in any second now.”

Sherlock gave himself a final nudge and pushed himself up to sitting. He pulled his knees to his chest
and wrapped his arms around his shins. “I need to solve this case.”

“You will.” John smiled and stood up. He walked to the fireplace and rearranged the logs with the poker, set the tool back with the others, and returned to the couch. He sat at a respectable distance and squeezed Sherlock’s ankle.

“What if I can’t? What if James never leaves?” Sherlock whispered.

“Hey, this isn’t on you alone, okay? I wouldn’t be surprised if you solved it first but there’s a whole team of detectives and police working on it, too. And he won’t stay forever. Even I have my limits.”

“It’s getting harder to wait.”

“He’s only been here two days.”

“Testament, then, to how badly I want you.” Sherlock’s voice had gone low and quiet. He stared at John until John licked his lips and looked away.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock continued. “I’m not being fair. I kiss you and touch you and tell you how badly I want you, then complain we can’t do more when it’s me who’s decided we can’t do more in the first place. It’s not fair to you. I’m not trying to be a tease.”

“No, of course not. I don’t think that, Sherlock. I’m frustrated, too, but I understand and respect why the line is drawn where it is. Don’t worry, we’ll get there.”

James’ footsteps sounded in the hallway. Sherlock tucked his legs closer to his chest and John gave Sherlock’s ankle a last squeeze. When James entered the room they were each reaching for a book, and when James sat down and opened his own book, the threesome fell into a comfortable silence. As the minutes ticked by Sherlock allowed himself to relax. He slipped his toes under John’s thighs and wriggled them and in return, John rested his hand on Sherlock’s ankle again. They smiled at each other over their books, but Sherlock continued to stare at John long after John went back to his reading. He was tempted to drag John upstairs right then and keep him in bed for the foreseeable future. To hell with waiting, to hell with the case, to hell with James Sholto.

He looked at James and considered what he might think about the situation. He didn’t know whether or not Sherlock and John had consummated their relationship, but he probably assumed they had. It probably never occurred to him that his presence was keeping them from moving forward and experiencing what most other couples did during their honeymoon. At the very least, though, he had to know he had inserted himself into a newly married couple’s intimate space.

No, Sherlock didn’t know what James thought of the situation, but he did know that when he looked back on the first time John Watson made love to him, it would be on his own terms, uncompromised. He would wait.

Chapter End Notes

If you are waiting for the weekly chapter update and wondering what’s going on, please read what I posted on Tumblr and twitter:

“I will probably delete this later but I’m rock bottom enough right now to put it out there. I’m depressed as fuck. I’m barely functioning right now. Every minute of every
day feels like I’m on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown, and the only thing keeping me from that is the responsibility I have to manage a difficult situation in my family and the scrap of determination I have to get through the holidays.

I’m having a hard time writing. When I started posting TWG I had 17 chapters written and since then I’ve written eight more chapters. I’m out of chapters. I’m half way through this week’s chapter and I have no faith in it. I said I would post weekly and I’ve done that for 25 weeks, but I honestly don’t know if I’ll be able to maintain that schedule. I’m sorry.

I’m overwhelmed. I am getting help but it’s not enough right now.

I just wanted you guys to know that I might take a few weeks off from posting TWG. I hate having to do that, but I don’t seem to be able to force myself through it right now. My queue is running and I’ll try to check @’s and messages.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Friends,

Thank you for being so patient with me while I've not been able to post. I won't have a schedule from this point forward because I really don't know how the writing will go. I apologize for that, but hope the not knowing will make the eventual email notifications feel like little surprises. :)

I wish you all the very best in 2018. God knows 2017 was a complete shitshow for so many of us. I thank each and every one of you who read and interact. Fic has been one of the standout highlights of the year for me, and fic is nothing without community.

Thank you, happierstill, for being ready to beta when I was ready to write and for telling me it was good and ready when I couldn't figure out how to feel about any of it.

Big hugs,
Me

Sherlock woke up with his hand trapped between his cock and the mattress. His hips ground out short and shallow thrusts into sheets; he stilled them. His heart was racing and he was breathing fast, but the subject of his arousal slept peacefully next to him, unaware of what he’d just been doing to Sherlock in his dreams. Sherlock rolled over and withdrew his hand from his pyjama bottoms. He cupped his balls with one hand and let those subconscious images replay in his mind.

John. John, kissing Sherlock, licking his nipples, lowering the white g-string to Sherlock’s thighs. John caressing Sherlock’s arse and nibbling on his neck and slipping his thumb into Sherlock’s mouth. John sliding down Sherlock’s chest, down his body, John nestling between Sherlock’s spread legs, grinning up at Sherlock, teasing him. John telling Sherlock that he had a beautiful penis, that he couldn’t wait to take it in his mouth. John shushing him when Sherlock groaned, when he bucked up and begged. John licking his lips before leaning down, before making contact with the tip of his tongue, just the softest flicker over Sherlock’s straining shaft.

Sherlock rolled to his side and peered at John, still asleep in the dark. He shuffled closer and pressed his face between John’s shoulder blades, breathed him in. Sherlock’s cock throbbed. He pressed down on it with the flat of his hand. His body felt flushed, sweaty, like he’d run a race to be here at John’s side. He rested one hand on John’s hip and gave him a gentle squeeze. He could feel the dip of John’s groin under his fingers. God, how he wanted to reach down just that little bit more and take John in his hand. To learn him, to know him the way John had known Sherlock in the dream.

He closed his eyes and revisited the sensations again. John’s tongue swirling, John humming, John looking up at Sherlock and winking as his head bobbed and bobbed and bobbed. John’s fingers smoothing, stroking, exploring. The tip of John’s finger tracing that delicate seam, John sliding his hand under Sherlock’s arse, palm up, his thumb sliding between Sherlock’s cheeks, seeking.

Sherlock shuddered. The chances of him falling back to sleep while in this state were slim, especially with John lying right there, solid and warm and delicious. If John woke up right now, if he turned
around and wrapped Sherlock in his arms and pressed them together, tight, Sherlock wouldn’t be able to stop himself. He squeezed John’s hip a little harder and kissed a small kiss onto John’s shoulder.

John made a contented sound but didn’t wake up, so Sherlock got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. He didn’t turn on the light. He braced himself against the sink with one hand and pushed his pyjama bottoms down with the other. He almost never did this, never needed to, but he needed to now, desperately. He trailed his fingers upward, teasing himself, feeling the way his fingertips smeared the leaking fluid across his tight skin. He slid his fingers back down until his palm bumped the plump, pink head, and he stroked up again.

He wrapped his hand around himself and spread his feet a little more, his pyjamas bound around his flexing thighs. He thrust into his hand, arse clenching, hips rolling. He did it again and again, adjusting his grip, quickening his pace, until he was hunched over himself, legs shaking, abdominals squeezing, until his hand was flying and his eyes were slamming shut. He saw John’s mouth stretched wide around him, felt his tongue swiping and rolling.

Sherlock locked his knees and came, the first burst of it timed with the gaping of his mouth, the furrowing of his brow, the arch of his neck. The second pulse came as his toes gripped the tiled floor, as he swallowed a grunt. The third wave shot through him as the air filled with the heavy, cloying scent of sex.

Sherlock gripped the edge of the counter and dropped to his knees. He shivered. He waited until he had his breathing under control, then cleaned himself up, pulled up his pyjamas, and wiped down the mirror and taps and floor.

When he left the bathroom John was still sound asleep. Sherlock pulled the blanket higher over John’s shoulder, then took a shower, got dressed, and went to his office. Over the next few hours he heard the house wake up around him. He heard John run the shower, heard James open and close his closet door, heard Annette arrive and begin to move about. He heard the creak of old wood floors, the murmur of voices, the clinking and clanking of glasses and plates.

At some point, John came in and set a cup of coffee and a plate of buttered toast down on the desk. He ruffled Sherlock’s hair, kissed the top of his head, and left again.

At lunchtime, Sherlock stretched back in his chair and went through a mental checklist of what he’d accomplished so far. There was nothing identifiable in the boot of the car, no CCTV footage from around James’ driver’s house, and nothing in the military families’ files. He closed out of the useless reports Mycroft had emailed him, shut his laptop with a quiet click, and pushed it to the back of the desk. He set his notebook on top of the laptop, precisely aligning the corners in a way that did nothing to ease his sense of uselessness. He clicked his pen open and shut until the noise of it annoyed him, then he tossed it down on the desk, watching it skitter until it came to rest against the laptop.

Sherlock set his elbows on the edge of the desk and ran his fingers through his hair, letting his head hang low between his arms.

Nothing. He had nothing to go on. On the other hand, no one else looking into the threat on James’ life seemed to have anything to go on, either.

None of them were waiting to consummate a marriage, though, were they?

Sherlock stood up and looked out the window. The previous day’s storm had cleared out but left its detritus of leaves and small branches scattered around the driveway and lawn. Sherlock thought
about the little bird that had taken shelter in the rafters and wondered where it was now. He wondered how everyone else had spent the morning while he’d been holed up in the office, spinning half-clues into empty answers. He missed John. He wanted to see his husband.

He left the office and walked right into Annette, who was dragging an ancient-looking vacuum cleaner and its tangled spirals of plastic hose behind her.

“Sorry, here, let me help you with that.”

“It’s no bother, I’m almost there.”

“Where are you headed?”

“The guest room.”

“James’ room?”

“Not anymore, it’s not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Told you I’d take care of it, didn’t I?” She winked at him before continuing her trek down the hallway, the vacuum bumping along in her path.

Sherlock raced downstairs. There, at the foot of the stairs, was James’ duffel bag. He pushed into the kitchen, found it empty, and continued to the library. John and James were seated on either side of the fireplace sharing a pot of tea and a tray of sandwiches.

John looked up and beamed at Sherlock. “Hey, you! Come eat with us, I’ll pour you a cup.”

Sherlock took a step forward and looked back and forth between them. “Where’s James going?”

John raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward James. “Apparently, he’s moving in with Annette. The two of them discussed it this morning.”

James gave them a short nod and small smile. “As I said this morning, it makes perfect sense.”

“How so?” Sherlock asked, wondering if Annette had presented the same arguments to James that she’d given Sherlock.

“We don’t know what the person after me knows or what information he learned about me when he was at my house, but if he knows that John and I are friends, the two of you might not be safe. As I only just met Annette a few days ago, there’s no way anyone could know to look for me at her flat. She’s closer to the police than you are. Finally, staying with her would allow me to get out from under your feet.” James held Sherlock’s gaze as he finished speaking, his head held high.

Sherlock sat down on the couch, crossed his hands in his lap, and addressed James. “I assume John tried to talk you into staying here?”

“No, actually. John agrees that this makes the most sense.”

“Oh.”

“And, I have promised to keep a low profile, to contact you immediately if anything happens, and to remain available for any questions you might have.”
Sherlock wanted to ask how quickly James could get himself to Annette’s flat.

“He’s going to follow Annette home when she’s done for the day,” John added.

“Oh.”

John smiled at him, a knowing look plastered all over his face. “Tea?” he asked again.

Sherlock nodded.

“Have a sandwich, too.” John sounded far too chipper for tea and sandwiches.

Bereft of anything else to say and no idea on how to fill the hours until he and John would be alone, Sherlock accepted the tea and pulled a chicken sandwich onto a napkin. He figured he could drink tea and nibble on his sandwich for the next ten minutes, which would leave at least another four hours and fifty minutes before Annette and James vacated the premises. He was going to need more than tea.

“Well, I’ve reached a bit of a dead end with what I was working on. Is there anything the two of you would like to do with the afternoon?”

John gave Sherlock his best benign smile. James looked into his teacup.

“We could do a bit of sightseeing,” Sherlock continued. “Take James to Scone Palace? Go for a hike?”

“Well, it’s not a bad thing to set up a couple dates with candidates based on their picture, no red flags notwithstanding,” John said. “No matter how someone appears on paper, you won’t know if there’s a connection until you meet in person.”

“What kind of red flags would you look for?” James asked.

“Well, it’s not a bad thing to set up a couple dates with candidates based on their picture, no red flags notwithstanding,” John said. “No matter how someone appears on paper, you won’t know if there’s a connection until you meet in person.”

“What kind of red flags would you look for?” James asked.

“That’s up to you. Maybe you know you wouldn’t want to date someone from the military, or someone who has children, or someone with a career that wouldn’t mesh with your lifestyle.”

“Right. So far I don’t see anything completely off-putting, so I suppose I should just get on with it.”
James looked as excited about the prospect as he would’ve been about inviting his would-be assassin over for dinner.

“What about you, Sherlock,” John asked. “You were up so early this morning, maybe you want to throw yourself down for a bit? Get some rest?”

Was John seriously suggesting that Sherlock get in their shared bed and try to rest in anticipation of what they would be doing later that night? Did he not realise that he was more likely to self-combust in that bed than sleep?

Sherlock took a tiny bite of his sandwich and raised his eyebrows at John. “I’m okay. Unless you’re going to take a nap?”

“No, I’m okay, too.” John raised his eyebrows back. “Slept like a baby.”

The afternoon dragged by. Sherlock made a few phone calls, reviewed his case notes, and tried to read a random selection of books from John’s library. He shadowed Annette for a while, asking if there was anything he could do to help her, until she finally shooed him away with a mop and told him to stay out from under her feet. Eventually, he went for a walk. He stayed out for hours, following grown-over trails that led to and from the river, climbing up and down hills but mostly ignoring their views, and collecting small stones that he then used for target practice against a patch of moss on an old English oak tree. By the time he wandered back to the house he was ready to physically drag Annette and James to their cars and send them on their way.

As it was, Annette was putting away her supplies when Sherlock found her. She had just finished a deep clean of the master bedroom and bath and had decided not to start another room at that point in the day.

“There’s no need to rush back tomorrow morning,” Sherlock said to a small scuff on the floor.

“Is there not?”

“Nope. In fact, you should take the morning off. Maybe take the whole day off.”

“I should, should I?”

“You should. Paid. We’ll pay you not to work tomorrow.”

Annette side-eyed him as she propped up a broom in the utility closet and closed the door behind her.

“Have big plans, do you?”

“What?”

“You’re blushing!”

“I was just out for a long walk. I’m probably flushed from the activity.”

“I see.” Annette grinned and tugged her jacket on.

Sherlock fidgeted with his cuffs. “So, we’ll see you day after tomorrow, then?”

“Sounds good. Unless, of course, you and John decide you need me to stay away for longer.” She winked at him.
Sherlock grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her toward the front door, but it didn’t put an end to her sass.

“Are you sure you want me to take James with me? Maybe he should stay here, after all.”

“That’s enough out of you. Where is he, anyway?”

Footsteps echoed from down the hall and James appeared with his cardigan draped over one arm. He gave Sherlock a curt nod and reached out to shake his hand.

“Sherlock, thank you again, for everything. You know where to find me.”

“Indeed. I’ll be in touch as soon as I know something. Likewise, call if anything arises on your end.” Sherlock tried to suppress the urge to shepherd them both out the front door.

James reached for his duffel bag as John appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

“Off, then?”

“Just leaving now,” Annette chirped as she walked through the door and looked up at the sky. “James, it’s impossible to get lost, but you’ve got my number, just in case.”

James thanked John, shook his hand, and followed Annette into the driveway. Sherlock and John stood in the doorway, a foot between them, and watched as their guests got into their respective cars and drove away, then John closed the door, locked it, and stood with his back pressed up against it.

“Cup of tea?” he asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I am, actually. Get upstairs.”
I do believe this is the one you've all been waiting for. ;)

Sherlock didn’t have to be asked twice. He took the stairs two at a time, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. By the time he crossed the threshold of the bedroom he was tugging it off his shoulders and down his arms while kicking off his shoes.

John was right behind him. “Whoa, hold up there.” He grabbed Sherlock’s arm and turned him around. “Slow down. Let’s do this right.”

“John. Let’s just do this.”

“Take a moment to think about how you want this to go. Do you want to strip down in front of me? Do you want me to undress you? Or do you want to do what we were about to do the night we were interrupted?”

Sherlock dropped his hands from his belt. “The g-string.”

“The g-string. Sherlock, I would love to see that on you. I would love to take it off you, too, when you’re ready.”

Sherlock nodded. “Okay. Yes. Give me a couple of minutes.” Sherlock rummaged around in the armoire until he found the scrap of silk and his robe, and disappeared into the bathroom with them. He undressed efficiently, folding and stacking his clothing in a neat pile on the counter. He didn’t dally. He pulled the g-string on, tugged it into place, and gave himself a quick look-over. This wasn’t the time to linger over his physical aesthetic. He brushed his teeth, finger-combed his hair, put on his robe, and turned back to the door.

He opened it a crack and called out. “John? I’m coming out.” He didn’t wait for an answer. He tied a loose knot in the belt of the robe and stepped into the bedroom.

John was already in bed, propped up on one elbow with the sheet tucked low around his waist. He had taken off his shirt but Sherlock couldn’t tell what he was wearing below the sheet. John grinned at Sherlock and patted the bed next to him.

Sherlock crossed the room and stood near the bed, toying with the belt of his robe. Now that he was here, in the empty house, in the moment, he felt unsure of how to proceed.

“You okay?”

Sherlock nodded.

“Want to get in bed?”

Sherlock nodded.

“Come here, love.”
Sherlock moved closer until his knees bumped into the bed and he couldn’t go any further. John reached up and hooked a finger into the loose knot of the robe’s belt.

“Is this okay?”

Sherlock looked down at John’s hand undoing the knot. “Yes.”

John undid the belt and the robe fell open at Sherlock’s sides. It brushed against his calves and shins and hung in folds against his chest and hips.

“Are you comfortable taking it off?”

John, so understanding, so concerned. Sherlock wriggled his shoulders and the robe fell to the ground and pooled around his feet with a gentle shushing sound. The cool air of the bedroom made the hair on the back of his neck tingle. His nipples peaked.

“God, you are stunning.” John stared at Sherlock, his gaze lingering forever on the taut fabric of the g-string, his tongue peeking out over his bottom lip. He pulled the sheet back and made room for Sherlock to join him, and Sherlock thought he got a glimpse of a naked hip before he climbed into bed next to John and pulled the sheet back over them.

They faced each other, less than a pillow’s width between them. John stroked his hand over the side of Sherlock’s face, trailed his fingers down his neck and let it rest there. John’s hand was a warm welcome on Sherlock’s skin, a slow hello, and Sherlock leaned into that warmth, stretching his neck, tilting his head back. John smiled and petted him, running his hand up and down into Sherlock’s hair and along his shoulder. Sherlock shimmied a little closer. John gripped Sherlock’s upper arm and squeezed and Sherlock settled his hand on John’s waist.

He was already breathing hard.

When John leaned in to kiss him, Sherlock closed his eyes and angled his head. John was gentle and sweet, giving and taking kisses that, under any other circumstances, would have seemed tentative or chaste. It was the duration of each press that told Sherlock otherwise. Each time John kissed him he kept the pressure light, but each touch dragged out, became longer until Sherlock found himself parting his lips to ask for more. That signal given, John began to kiss Sherlock longer, harder, until he was propped up over Sherlock, his free hand cupping and squeezing Sherlock’s pec, his thumb swiping over his nipple.

Sherlock rolled onto his back as John closed the space between them. He let his hand slide down the flexing muscles of John’s back, lower, lower, until his fingertips ascertained what he thought he’d seen a few moments earlier. John was naked. He stopped with his hand pressed to John’s hip, his fingertips gently prodding the firm upper swell of John’s arse. John paused, then slipped his leg between Sherlock’s, and Sherlock, for the first time, discovered the bliss of John’s naked erection pressed against his own naked thigh.

He stopped kissing. His mouth fell open and John bumped their noses together. “You okay?” he asked.

“God, yes. You’re so … naked.”

John laughed. “Yeah, I am.”

“John. I need to see you. All of you.”

“You can see me. Whatever you want.”
Sherlock turned onto his side again and pushed John down onto his back. He tugged the sheet down low on John’s hips but no further than that. Coming up on one elbow, he took a good, long look at John. He’d seen all of this before, his naked shoulders and the scar, his strong arms and pink-beige nipples. He had run his hand through the hair on John’s chest and tracked that darker line of hair just south of John’s belly button. He’d looked at all of that, but not like this, not when he knew what was about to happen, not when he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that John was about to use his body to make love to Sherlock. He took his time exploring John with his eyes and his fingers and his mouth. He licked at John’s nipples and registered the sigh of contentment John made. He sucked on them and felt the way John’s breath deepened.

Sheet still in place, though just barely, Sherlock sat up and reached underneath, brushing his hand down John’s thigh while he watched John’s reactions. John closed his eyes and sucked in a quick breath. Sherlock followed the lines of John’s quads and felt them flex under his touch. John shifted, bending his knee and letting that leg fall open to the side, and Sherlock felt the way John’s skin became so much warmer the higher he explored. John threw one arm over his head and Sherlock watched as he clenched his hand into a fist, released it, clenched it again.

Sherlock dared to stroke higher, his thumb angled toward John’s hip, his fingers curling toward the inside of John’s leg. When his knuckles grazed the soft skin of John’s bollocks, John gasped and Sherlock jerked his hand back.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to stop.”

Sherlock hesitated for just a moment, then gripped the edge of the sheet and looked up at John. John, eyes set on Sherlock, gave him the slightest of nods. Sherlock looked back down and slowly lowered the sheet to the top of John’s thighs. Whereas he’d previously been fascinated by the expressions unfolding on John’s face, he could not make himself look away from what lay before him.

Sherlock tried to pace himself. He wanted to take everything in slowly, surely. He wanted to gather this new information and incorporate it into what he knew of John and the greater whole of his physicality. It was so, so hard to focus, though. He registered that John’s hips, lower abdomen, and upper thighs were paler than the rest of him. His inner thighs had almost no hair on them, and that hair was very light blond. John’s skin was unmarked here, smooth, unblemished.

But John’s cock.

John’s cock was long and thick and gorgeous and it was bobbing an inch from his belly. It was flushed a rosy pink, slightly darker along his foreskin, and it had prominent blue-tinged veins running the length of it. John was hard enough that his foreskin had partially retracted, and Sherlock could see the tulip-petal curve of his cockhead and the small slit at the tip. As he watched, a small bead of fluid ran out and dripped onto John’s stomach.

Sherlock licked his lips. John groaned.

Sherlock needed to touch it. His hand hovered in the space above John for several seconds, his fingers trembling, before it drifted down, down, down. On first contact, with just the lightest touch of his index finger, John’s cock jerked and slapped against his belly.

“Oh,” Sherlock whispered.

He used his thumb and two fingers to nudge John’s foreskin down, and the sensation of that slow tugging slide sent a pulse through him, an exponentially large reaction considering that only his fingertips were involved. He forced himself to swallow, to breathe.
John’s hips bucked as Sherlock rolled the extra skin down, revealing the deeply flared ridge around John’s cockhead, exposing the smooth skin of his frenulum. Sherlock slid the skin up and down, uncovering more and more of John with each pass.

Sherlock glanced back and forth between what he held in his hand and the whole of what he held in his heart. John’s eyes were heavily lidded but he was making an effort to keep them open, to watch what Sherlock was doing. His lips were wet, open, his tongue darting out repeatedly. There was a small furrow between his eyebrows, and if Sherlock didn’t know better he’d have interpreted it as pain. But he did know better. John’s efforts to catch his breath, the light sweat covering his chest, the straining tendons in his neck; this was pleasure. John loved Sherlock’s touch.

Sherlock touched some more.

He closed his hand over John’s shaft and felt the way the silky skin glided up and down over the rod-like structure underneath. He pushed the tip of his thumb into the fleshy ridge at the head and imagined leaving his fingerprints there, marking John as his own. He ran the tip of his index finger across the weeping slit and smeared the fluid in a small circle. John’s reactions created a loop of feedback and adjustment that Sherlock honed in on, and soon enough John was melting underneath him, spreading his legs, whimpering.

Sherlock stopped. He let go and slipped his hand between John’s legs. He cradled his testicles and let them roll in his palm, gently tugging them.

“Fuck, Sherlock. God.”

Sherlock lay down at John’s side again but kept his hand where it was. As soon as his head hit the pillow John pressed their chests together, wrapped his leg around Sherlock’s hips, and kissed him. Every few seconds he stopped long enough to say something, little outbursts like *feels so good, want you so bad, losing my mind*. The words rained down over Sherlock, and he struggled to keep up with the sensations they stirred in him: need, pride, willingness. Those words paired seamlessly with John’s hands and mouth, which were finding new places to kiss and lick and fondle. One of those hands reached around Sherlock’s side and splayed over Sherlock’s exposed buttock.

Sherlock froze, his tongue stilling inside John’s mouth.

“Is this okay?” John didn’t move his hand, but neither did he take it away.

Sherlock nodded. “Yes. It’s … it’s very good.”

“You sure?” John spread his fingers over Sherlock’s plush curves and squeezed.

Sherlock nodded again, then pushed the sheet down to his ankles and grabbed John’s hand. He pulled it up to his mouth and sucked on John’s fingertips, one at a time, then gave John a soft kiss and said, “Take the g-string off.”

John stared at him.

“I want you to take it off now, John.”

John scrambled.

He kneeled at Sherlock’s side and visually devoured him, his gaze lowering from flushed neck to chest to belly to groin. Sherlock looked down too, and bit his lower lip when he realised his erection was protruding from the top of this last wedding garment. John licked his lips again. Slowly, lightly, like a feather drifting in a warm current, John placed his hands on Sherlock’s hips and hooked his
fingers into the ribbons of fabric holding the g-string in place. John glanced up at Sherlock once, then back down at his hands, and began to roll the white silk away from Sherlock’s cock, down over his hips and upper thighs. He stopped there, staring. He shook his head as if to dislodge an impossible thought, and said, “You’re so beautiful.”

Sherlock’s instinct was to deflect the compliment, to self-deprecate in some way, but he held back.

“Thank you.”

John finished removing the g-string, sliding it down Sherlock’s legs and over his feet before crumpling it into a ball and pressing it to his face. His expression spoke of doing something much more significant than removing a piece of clothing. He looked reverent, beholden. He looked like he was diffusing a bomb.

“Touch me, John.”

“Oh, God.” John did the unexpected then. Still clutching the g-string, he leaned down over Sherlock and pressed a soft kiss to the centre of Sherlock’s erection. He kissed up and down the length of it, using only his lips, and then he buried his nose in the joint of Sherlock’s inner thigh and groin and took a deep breath. Sherlock ran his hand down the back of John’s head, floating in the intimacy of the moment. John laid his cheek against Sherlock’s hip and nudged his cock with his nose. He sighed. When he looked up at Sherlock his eyes were shining and his lashes were wet. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Come here.” Sherlock spread his legs.

John set the g-string down on the bed near Sherlock’s feet and lowered himself until they were hip-to-hip, belly-to-belly. Sherlock wrapped his arms around John and stared up into his face.

“You’re trembling,” John said.

“It’s just … you feel so right. It feels right.”

“Yeah, it does.”

They started again, slowly. Slow kisses, slow stroking, slow explorations. Soft sighs and gasps and smiles.

John rolled his hips and Sherlock pressed his thighs to John’s legs, cupped his arse, squeezed.

John kissed Sherlock’s neck and jaw and eyebrow, and when he licked into his ear, Sherlock arched and stretched and shuddered.

John lifted his hips and reached between them, and at the same moment he took Sherlock’s mouth in another kiss and took his cock in his hand and stroked it from root to tip. Sherlock couldn’t help but thrust, couldn’t help but moan as he broke the kiss, panting and smearing wet lips against John’s jaw.

John altered the pressure and speed of his hand, learning what Sherlock liked, gauging what would bring him right to the edge. Sherlock buried his face in John’s neck and clung to him, his lower back curling off the bed as his hips found their own rhythm.

“Sherlock,” John whispered into his ear. “I’m going to take you in my mouth now.”

Everything, every single bit of Sherlock’s body, tensed and quivered. As John repositioned himself, Sherlock stopped breathing, pressed his palms flat to the mattress on either side of his thighs, and stared at the bursts of light on the inside of his closed eyelids.
He felt John’s shoulders nudging the insides of his spread legs, felt a warm breath gust over his belly, felt time come to a standstill as he waited for the rest of his life to become defined as *post-John’s-mouth-on-my-cock*. Wet heat enveloped him, just the very tip, and then there was suckling and licking and John’s pointed tongue pushing down and under his foreskin.

“Relax,” John said, pulling Sherlock’s fingers free from the mangled clumps of sheets in his hands. “Keep breathing.”

A wave of dizziness flowed through him, surging from his belly to his chest to his throat. He breathed in and out and smoothed the sheets with flat palms. He nodded against the pillow and it came again, the perfect pressure of John’s lips sealed around him, that tight wet slip and slide.

As Sherlock’s arousal surged, unwanted thoughts floated to the top of his consciousness. Little bits of conversations with Annette and James, scraps of notes from the case, untied ends. He pushed them down, again and again, trying to focus on the almost unbearable pleasure John was giving him. Distraction battled with awareness and threatened to derail him completely; he placed one hand on the top of John’s head and gently pushed him away.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“I’m so close,” Sherlock said, settling on a half-truth instead of taking the time to fully explain. “I want us to come together.”

Relief washed over John’s face as he gave Sherlock’s cock one last kiss and climbed up to lay beside him. “Like this, then, okay?” he said as he turned on his side, reached down, and enclosed Sherlock in his hand. He set a slow pace to start, and Sherlock rolled to face him, tangling their legs, seeking John’s mouth with his own.

The sight of John’s shoulder and bicep jerking up and down centred his thoughts, and he slid his hand between them and took John in hand. The heavy solidity of John combined with the pleasure they were giving each other was enough to silence the distracting thoughts and voices in his head. Touching John grounded him.

John pressed his face against the side of Sherlock’s neck and sucked in a deep breath. “That feels fantastic. I’m not going to last very long.”

Sherlock was in the same fragile place, rapidly falling apart. “So, this is okay? The way I’m touching you?” Sherlock continued to play with John’s cock, alternating between light, teasing touches and steady strokes.

“You can’t tell?” John panted.

“I want it to be perfect for you.”

“It is. It’s better than perfect.”

“That’s not possible.”

Sherlock felt John’s cock bump and slide against his own. He tilted his hips forward, the glide of soft-hard over hard-soft raising gooseflesh on his skin, making the hairs on his legs stand up.

“You like that?”

Sherlock nodded.
“Is this, is it what you were expecting?” John’s fingers had slowed to toy with the head of Sherlock’s cock again, little swipes and circles.

“I have nothing to compare it to but if far exceeds any expectations I had. Touching you like this is as arousing, if not more, than being touched. I’m quite taken with your body, John.”

“Yeah, me too, with yours. Every single, blessed bit of it.” Based on where John’s hand was, Sherlock had a pretty good idea of the particular blessed bit John was taken with at the moment. As if to emphasise his point, John flattened his palm against Sherlock’s erection and brushed his fingertips over Sherlock’s balls.

Sherlock bent his knee and rolled that leg away from them, and John’s fingers slipped lower until he was cradling Sherlock in his palm. “You’re gorgeous,” John whispered against Sherlock’s temple. “Absolutely stunning.”

Sherlock’s balls drew up tight and a tremor ran up his inner thighs, ending with small contractions in his lower belly. He cupped John’s arse in one hand—he was learning that not touching John’s arse was going to be problematic for him—and brought their mouths together. He pulled away just once more to whisper in John’s ear. “I’m ready.”

Pressed together, arms stretched down between them, Sherlock gave himself over completely. Forearms brushing, fists bumping, they found a rhythm that drove them forward, together. Slick noises filled the air, harsh, rasping breaths that evolved into drawn-out groans and muttered profanities. Rising tension stripped away basic functioning; kisses broke apart, eyelids shuttered and breathing faltered, fists twitched and tightened.

“John,” Sherlock managed, his toes curling, his heel digging into the bed as he fought for traction toward release. “I’m—”

“God, yes, yes.”

“Please, I—”

“Yeah, come on,” John panted against Sherlock’s neck.

Sherlock felt John’s arse clench in his hand and his thighs flex hard against his legs. His cock was hot and stiff in Sherlock’s hand and his own was throbbing with his heartbeat, with each stroke John gave him, his groin tight with need.

“I’m—” Sherlock tried again.

“With me, with me.”

“—coming, coming!” Sherlock froze, lost in that short eternity before the first pulse surged through him and the orgasm swept him away. He spasmed through wave after wave of bliss, unable to breathe, unable to move until it had had its way with him.

He heard John shout something about Jesus, felt John’s hand fall away as he jerked and went shushed-still against him. They clung to each other, bodies taut through the aftershocks, and then slowly, as if climbing down from something precarious, they relaxed into each other.

Sherlock luxuriated through long, deep breaths and took stock of his body. He straightened his neck from its arched position against the pillow, softened the curve of his lower back, lowered his leg from its flung-wide position. He wiped his hand on the sheet and brought it up to John’s chest, his fingers curved like cathedral domes over John’s heart. He licked his lips. Swallowed.
John’s eyes were closed. He had a huge grin on his face, one that matched the giggle that was just beginning to spill over between them.

“God, that was … that was magnificent.”

“Was it?”

John opened his eyes and put his hand over Sherlock’s. “Wasn’t it for you? Oh God, Sherlock, tell me it was good for you.”

“Me? Obviously.” Sherlock grinned back and began to laugh. “Couldn’t you tell? The inability to form a sentence, the full body paralysis, the uncontrollable shaking? The copious amounts of semen?” He trailed a finger through the mess splattered across their bellies and chests.

John kissed him on the nose and grabbed a handful of tissues off the nightstand. “I was a bit distracted by your hand on my cock, to be honest. Bit not good.”

“My hand on your cock?” Sherlock lifted a lazy eyebrow and reached for the sheet.

“Your hand on my cock is better than good, it’s unparallelled perfection. No, what’s a bit not good is that I was too distracted to watch you come, and that’s something I very much want to see.”

Sherlock finished arranging the sheet over them and threw himself down, sprawling, love unbound, over John’s chest. “Plenty of time for that later I should think.”

“Excellent.”

Sherlock yawned as John worked his fingers into the knots in Sherlock’s hair, no doubt the result of him thrashing about under the influence of orgasm. “How much time do you need, do you think?”

“For what? Another round?” John’s fingers slipped out of Sherlock’s hair and tickled down his back, not stopping their sensuous caresses until they were pressed to the curved underside of Sherlock’s arse. “Ready when you are.”

Sherlock reached down and fondled John’s softened penis.

“Oh my God, are you serious? Right now?”

Sherlock laughed. “Just trying to help things along. I’ll give you a few minutes, though. I know you’re not as young as me.”

“Shut up. I’m only four years older, you prat.”

“You love that I’m a prat.”

“I love you, period.”

They lay in silence, spent, drifting.

“Sherlock?”

“Mm?”

“How do you feel now that it’s over?”

“Over? Oh, John. I don’t think of it like that at all. We haven’t been moving toward one last thing,
toward this one act. Permission is what we’ve been moving toward, readiness, and now that we’ve got it there’s no holding back.” Sherlock ran his hand up and down John’s body, down his outer thigh, up his inner thigh. He cupped John’s balls and stroked the base of his penis with his thumb. He kissed the place over John’s heart and hummed. “Sleep for a bit. You’re going to need your rest.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thank you, happierstill, for your enthusiasm, support, and commitment to me and this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock watched as John closed his eyes, a satisfied smile still plastered on his face. He shifted onto his side under the covers, shrugging the blanket up and over his shoulder, and continued to stare at John. Post-coital John, his husband. His husband, after sex. Fascinating.

“Are you staring at me?”

“Mmm.”

“What’s so interesting?”

“Your face. The patterns of flush over your skin, the complete lack of tension around your eyes, the relaxed shape of your mouth.”

John didn’t open his eyes, but he smiled even more broadly. “And what conclusions are you drawing in that magnificent brain of yours?”

“Based on the degree of vasocongestion alone, I’d say that sex agrees with you.”

John did open his eyes then, and he laughed out loud. “Sex agrees with everyone, I think. And for the record, you look much the same. Completely blissed out, if not a bit contemplative.”

It was Sherlock’s turn to smile. “Blissed out,” he said, trying the phrase on for size. "I concur."

They fell silent then, slipping into a light doze, then a deep sleep, with their hands clasped together and pressed between their chests.

The room was grey and filling with shadows when Sherlock woke up. He turned his head toward the window and gauged the time to be somewhere between twilight and nightfall. He considered trying to more finely hone his estimation, but gave up in favour of scooching closer to John and wrapping his arm around him. The warmth of John’s body was a delicious contrast to the cool air of the room on his cheek. Sherlock ran his fingers up and down John’s strong back and into the short hair at the nape of his neck. He ran his hand down again, lightly scratching John’s back with his short nails, and John hummed and let out a sigh.

“Feels good.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Waking me sounds like a great idea.” John arched into a full-body stretch and wriggled one foot between Sherlock’s ankles. “All sorts of things we can do when we’re both awake.”
Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Yeah, actually, I did.” John rolled onto his back and stretched again, then turned back toward Sherlock and propped himself up on one elbow. He combed Sherlock’s hair back from his forehead with his fingers and chuckled. “You have the best bedhead, you know that?”

Sherlock reached up and tried to flatten some of his unruly curls, but John pushed his hand away and messed them up again. “No, leave it. I like you like this, all mussed up and dishevelled.” He traced the side of Sherlock’s face with one fingertip and let it come to rest on his full lower lip. “You’re gorgeous when you’re like this, and I fully intend to add to the effect.”

Sherlock watched as John came closer, as he gently pushed Sherlock onto his back, as he hovered over him. John’s first kiss was a tease, just a brush and a nudge of breath and lips. It was what John’s hand was doing under the sheet that had caught Sherlock’s full attention. John’s hand had drifted down Sherlock’s chest, over his ribs, over his hip, and was now pressed high up on Sherlock’s inner thigh. Sherlock tried to turn into it, to trap John’s hand between his legs, but John held him in place and kissed him again. This kiss was firmer. This kiss said that Sherlock was to listen, to follow John’s lead. John had said that he had an idea and Sherlock generally liked John’s ideas, so he stilled his body and kissed back.

Their bodies realigned as their kisses deepened, each of them working to get closer to the other, until John solved the problem by climbing right on top of Sherlock, spreading Sherlock’s thighs as he went, settling down into the space between them. He wove his fingers deep into Sherlock’s hair and ran his thumbs over his cheekbones and temples, angling his head to properly plunder Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock could feel John’s bare chest and belly expand into Sherlock’s with each breath he took, covering him with that grounding, solid warmth. He rolled his lower back away from the bed and squeezed his thighs around John’s hips, trying to increase the pressure between them.

Somehow, they still weren’t close enough.

He reached down, grasped John’s arse in both hands, and flexed upward. That movement may have been purposeful, but the next one, a full body shudder, was the result of Sherlock involuntarily responding to John’s obscene groan.

“God, your hands, Sherlock.”

Sherlock put those hands to good use, groping and squeezing John’s buttocks, cupping them, caressing them as he continued to snog John within an inch of his life. The tension was rising between them, arousal sparking like kindling in a well-built fire as the shadows grew longer on the walls and the grey light dipped the room deeper into darkness. John tried to buck back into Sherlock’s grip, but Sherlock held him close, spanning his arse with long fingers and flat palms. John gave as good as he got, thrusting his hips forward, and Sherlock felt the hot slide of John’s erection against the soft, taut bowl of his stomach. Distracted, Sherlock loosened his grip on John’s delicious backside and sighed into his open mouth.

“Hey, I had an idea, remember? I want to finish what I started earlier.” John left a kiss on Sherlock’s lower lip, rolled his hips again, and began a slow journey down Sherlock’s body. Sherlock watched him go, intent on memorising the way John looked as he kissed each separate bit of his sprawled body. He captured little snapshots of John hovering over him, his eyelashes framing his cheekbones, the top of his head contrasted against the expanse of Sherlock’s chest, his lips pressing down on his nipples and into the hollow below his ribs.

When John was settled between Sherlock’s legs he kissed each hip bone and smiled up at Sherlock. Settling his hands on Sherlock’s waist and rubbing his thumbs into the smooth skin of his lower
belly, John held Sherlock’s eye as he lowered his head and licked a long, slow stripe up Sherlock’s erection.

Sherlock’s breathing kicked up a notch, short raspy gasps interspersed with a wheezy, desperate whine. He couldn’t look away from the image in front of him, John’s clever, wet tongue lapping at him, John’s eyelids hooded with focus and intention, his lips spread wide and glistening, all of it fantastically obscene. Sherlock took a deep breath and registered the scent of sex blooming around them, their bed a garden of pleasure. He exhaled and let himself fall into the richness of it, a honeybee diving to the centre of a heady, intoxicating blossom.

John sucked at the side of Sherlock’s cock, then kissed the flare of its sloping head, ran the tip of his tongue along the ridge of it, and opened his mouth wide.

“Oh my God,” Sherlock whispered into the dimming, violet-grey light of the room.

John winked, then lowered his head and sucked Sherlock down.

The back of Sherlock’s head met the pillow with a slam, curls bouncing across his forehead and against the white cotton pillowcase. His thighs trembled and his toes curled, his mouth gaped, his stomach fluttered. He had been too distracted by intruding thoughts when John first did this, too distracted to stop and truly register the sensation of a hot, wet mouth on his dick, or the slip and slide of a curling tongue around his shaft, or the suction of hollowed cheeks against his cockhead, but even had he stopped to catalogue the sensations, he wouldn’t have been able to conjure up anything close to what he was experiencing now. Sherlock was so hard it almost hurt. He throbbed in quick, tight pulses, from low behind his perineum, into his balls, and up and down the length of him.

And with the throbbing came the thoughts.

*He found a note inside his house, a death threat*

John gripped the base of Sherlock’s cock and alternated full-mouth sucking with tongue-tip stroking, and the thoughts came.

*The person who left the note knows James well*

John pulled off and nuzzled between Sherlock’s spread thighs, and cool air rushed in to assault the exposed skin of Sherlock’s slick cock. John suckled at Sherlock’s balls and Sherlock shouted at the ceiling, past trying to control himself, past caring, desperately wanting more, and still the thoughts came.

*You have a date with death*

Physical sensations battled with those thoughts, thick vines of stimulation entwining with them, trying to pull them down, but still the thoughts came, sprouting like unwanted weeds in Sherlock’s mind.

*What kind of red flags would you look for?*

Sherlock reached down and grabbed John’s shoulders, hoping that touching John would in some way help ground him the way it had earlier in the evening. He didn’t want to stop John again. He wanted this, he wanted to experience an orgasm by John’s mouth. And so the thoughts flooded in and pulsed in time with his arousal.

*What social life?*
Sherlock slid a hand into John’s hair and tried not to pull. Strands of it brushed across his knuckles and tickled his palm. *John,* he thought, *John licking my cock, John sucking me off, John making me scream, sucking me…*  

*I thought I’d take your advice and set up some dates*  

“John,” he tried, admiration and praise dripping like honey from that one syllable. “John, yes.”  

It was coalescing now, all of it, the thrum of climax building in his tight, trembling flesh, the thoughts that were crashing in, all of the bliss and the brilliance of it combined.  

*There, sticking out of the drawer, the edge of a folder*  

John hummed low and deep in his throat and bobbed his head faster. His fingers tightened around Sherlock’s shaft, the side of his hand brushing rhythmically through Sherlock’s pubic hair, sending tiny shock waves through the follicles.  

*Honestly, if I were forced to marry someone I didn’t know I’d probably end up killing them*  

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and tossed his head to the side. It was there, it was right there, it was so very, very close.  

“John, it’s coming, it’s—”  

Everything peaked. The throbbing, the flooding, the flashes and surges of thought, *sucking me, sucking my cock—*  

*one brother (deceased)*  

—all of it weaving together, a circular wreath of completion, and Sherlock came long and hard in John’s eager mouth.  

The aftershocks shook the bed, shook Sherlock to his core, and when he was able to breathe again he opened his eyes and saw John braced above him, licking his lips, his deep blue eyes fond and amused and curious.  

“Okay?”  

“John. I solved it.”

Chapter End Notes  

Those of you following me on Twitter/Tumblr may know that I’ve been super-struggling with my depression and anxiety these last several months. For the last four weeks I’ve been in a Partial Hospitalization Program (9:30-2:00 every weekday) that focuses on Cognitive and Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and I do think it’s helping. I’m learning actual SKILLS to catch and stop some of depression’s most insidious habits: rumination, negative self-talk, cognitive distortions, catastrophizing, avoidance, isolation, etc.  

Thought-challenging is a cornerstone of DBT, intended to balance the emotional and rational parts of our mind, and I used it this morning while getting this chapter ready to
post. I want to share it with you because I think we can all benefit from it whether we're depressed or not.

It goes like this:

We all make "Yeah, but" statements.

"Yeah, __________. but __________."

"Yeah, I'm getting better, but I'm afraid I'll get worse."
"Yeah, I'll do it, but I really don't want to."
"Yeah, I'm looking, but I can't find a job."

All of these follow this structure:

"Yeah, rational statement, but emotional statement."

The "but" always negates what came before it.

This morning, mine were:

"Yeah, happierstill likes it, but I'm not sure it's my best work."
"Yeah, I worked hard on it, but I feel like it's too short and my readers will be disappointed."

The trick to thought-challenging is to turn these statements around into something more balanced. We do this by flipping our two statements, erasing the "but" and adding an "and".

"Yeah, emotional statement, and rational statement."

Mine become:

"Yeah, I'm not sure it's my best work and happierstill likes it."
"Yeah, I feel like it's too short and my readers will be disappointed, and I worked hard on it."

Now my negative emotional statement is followed by a positive (or at least a neutral). It's a more balanced way of thinking.

"Yeah, I'm posting a chapter now, but it's been over a month."
"Yeah, it's been over a month, and I'm posting a chapter now."

"Yeah, it's probably good enough, but there might be mistakes."
"Yeah, there might be mistakes, and it's probably good enough."

Thank you for coming to my Ted talk. ;)
John blinked down at him. “Solved what?”

“The case.”

John blinked again. “Just now? While I was …”

“Yes. I couldn’t help it. You know how I’ve said that I can’t always control what comes to mind, or out of my mouth, when I’m stimulated?”

John nodded.

“This was similar, but I was able to manage both at the same time. I could thoroughly enjoy everything you were doing, and even though I couldn’t stop the thoughts from coming, I was able to manage them a bit better.”

“Thoughts about the case?”

“Yes. Things I hadn’t considered before.”

John settled himself down at Sherlock’s side and propped himself up on one elbow. He laid his hand on Sherlock’s chest, fingers splayed, and said, “I can feel your heart beating. Racing. It was okay, then? You weren’t, you know, too distracted by what you were thinking?”

“Don’t misunderstand, John. The fellatio was amazing. It was perfect. I wasn’t purposefully thinking of other things while you were doing that.”

John nodded.

“The thoughts just sort of came … and then I did, too.” He chuckled at his own joke and John smiled at him and leaned in for a quick kiss.

“Fair enough. So, tell me. Who’s after James and what do we do now?”

Sherlock studied John’s face and body language, the pace of his breathing, the tension of his hand on Sherlock’s chest. In his excitement about the case he had lost sight of John’s arousal. He slid his hand under the sheet and took John’s somewhat deflated erection in hand. “We should talk about that later. Let’s focus on you right now.” He stroked up, his fingertips catching on the crown of John’s cock.

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Sherlock,” he said, eyes still closed, “if you know who’s doing this, that should probably be our priority right now.”
Sherlock scooted closer and nuzzled under John’s chin. John’s stubble scratched against the side of his face and along his temple, bringing an electric focus after the softening effects of his orgasm. Pressed up against John and wriggled until there was no space between them. He pressed his thumb against John’s frenulum and rubbed. “It can wait,” he said into the flushed curve of John’s neck. “Let me make you feel good.”

John kissed his forehead but pulled away. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to focus, to be honest with you. I don’t really want to think about James and death threats when we’re having sex.”

Oh.

“Does it bother you that that’s what I was doing, just a moment ago?”

“No, not really. Like you said, you can’t help what comes to mind when you’re stimulated. Plus, I could tell that you were really into it.”

Sherlock slid his hand off John and curled it against his own chest. “I loved it. I apologise, though. I was excited and I opened my mouth before I stopped to think. Now you’ll be left unsatisfied.”

“No, don’t apologise. I’m glad you told me. I want to understand what goes on in your head, the way your thoughts work.” John moved close again and wrapped one arm around Sherlock’s back. He rubbed between Sherlock’s shoulder blades and down to the subtle hollow of his lower back. “We’ll have plenty of time to get back to me. Right now, though, can you tell me what you’ve figured out and what we need to do?”

Sherlock nodded, scanning John’s face for any telltale signs of insincerity. There were none. His John was patient and had a strong moral compass. Of course he would put another’s safety before his own pleasure. With that realisation, Sherlock fell in love a smidgen more; a rather large smidgen.

“Do you remember what the note said? That James has a date with death? A date. And you remember that James had left some Agency folders here, potential candidates that he’d never processed? It was something Annette said, actually, about how she’d probably end up killing anyone she was forced to marry. When you were, I mean, when I was, when I was … extremely aroused, I remembered that one of James’ candidates has a deceased brother.

“I now believe that James’ would-be killer infiltrated the AMP in order to get close to him. Think of all the information he’d have right at his fingertips; personal history, identifying details, maybe even the town he lives in and information about his household. And what if he created a profile that he thought would attract James and draw him out from under the heavy security he’s been under? He’d be able to get his own profile right into James’ hands.

“But then James didn’t take the bait, he didn’t arrange the date. It makes sense that this person would be frustrated, right? That he’d become angry, impulsive. I believe that’s why he broke into James’ house. He wanted to scare him, to let him know that the noose is tightening.”

John nodded. “Okay, but why go through all that trouble? He could have just posted a death threat if he wanted to scare him.”

“His brother’s death is very personal to him, and he blames James. He wants this to be just as personal to James. He wants James to know what’s happening, and to be afraid. Breaking into his house is far more personal than using the post.”

John nodded and thought for a moment.

“So, what if James had taken the bait and gone out with this guy? Wouldn’t the police immediately
look at anyone James was dating as a possible suspect?”

Sherlock steepled his fingers and tapped his index fingers against his chin. “Possibly, but remember that thorough background checks are done on each candidate and the police know that. Plus, the other death threats were received before any dates were arranged, as was this note. It will seem as if the other threats and this note aren’t tied to the person he’s dating because they predate him. He’s clever.”

John was silent for a moment, thoughtful. “Right. That might’ve been the case had he taken the bait, but he didn’t.”

“Not yet.”

John locked eyes with Sherlock. “You’re not suggesting James actually date this guy? If you know who he is, why not just go after him now?”

“And have him arrested based on what evidence?”

“The note? Evidence from the car?”

“There’s nothing to tie that note to anyone, not without fingerprints or footage of someone breaking into the house, and forensics found nothing in the car, no fingerprints or DNA.”

John scratched the stubble along his jaw and sighed.

“Besides, John, James has already told us he was going to set up some dates. Remember? He may have already been in touch with the Agency.”

“So what do we need to do? Besides let him know, I mean.”

It was Sherlock’s turn to be quiet. He looked up at the ceiling and studied what remained of a spider web hanging in one near-dark corner.

“We have to let him know, Sherlock. You know that, right?”

Sherlock looked back at John. “I suppose you’re right. He’d be very suspicious if we told him we needed to know about any dates he set up and then caught us trailing after him, wouldn’t he?”

John laughed. “You tosser. Yeah, he would be. Is that your plan then? To set up a trap and catch the guy in the act?”

“Not necessarily, no. After all, he won’t be stupid enough to go after James while they’re together. But I do want to be able to observe the man from a distance and see if I can figure out what his next steps will be.”

“And where do the police come into all this?”

“The police?”

“Yeah, you know, the people who can actually arrest someone for attempted murder?”

Sherlock frowned and worried the edge of the crumpled sheet between his fingers. “I was hoping we could put off alerting them until I had more information.”

“Hmm. So tell me exactly what happens next. What’s your plan?”
Sherlock rolled over and wrapped his arm around John’s waist. “We tell James to set up a date with the suspect. We shadow them. I gather as much information as I can regarding his behaviour and try to anticipate his next steps. Then we catch him in the act of attempted murder.”

John pursed his lips and frowned. “But what if we don’t catch him in the act? What if you can’t figure out how he’s going to do it and he actually gets away with it?”

Sherlock slipped down a bit and pressed his face to the warm skin of John’s chest, just between his pectorals. John’s chest hair tickled his nose and lips. He pressed a soft kiss over John’s heart and said, “One step at a time. I won’t know what I know until I know it.”

“That sounds like something you would say.” John tousled Sherlock’s hair and wrapped his leg around Sherlock’s hip. “Should we call him, then? Let him know about all this?”

“Now?”

“Well, yeah. What if he’s already set up the date? And how do you know which of the candidates it is?”

Sherlock touched one of John’s nipples with the tip of his tongue, felt it harden, and licked at it again. “Like I said earlier, it’s most likely the one who’s lost a brother.”

“Wait,” John said, pushing back a bit so he could look down at Sherlock. “Wait just a second. You read those files?”

“Not good?”

“Bit not good, yeah.”

“I see. And probably even a bit more not good that when I read them I thought they were yours.”

“Mine?”

“I wanted to see who my competition had been.”

“Oh love, you never had any competition, not really.”

Sherlock pressed his forehead to John’s shoulder and rubbed his nose against John’s bicep. “You were dating someone else just before you proposed to me. Remember?”

“Was I?” John’s tone was light and teasing.

“You were and you know it.”

“Hey, come here, look at me.”

Sherlock wriggled up until they were eye-to-eye again and laid his head on John’s pillow.

“The second I knew you were serious about me I ended that,” John explained. “By text. I didn’t even call. Bit rude of me, to be honest, but that’s how insignificant they were to me, okay?”

Sherlock tried not to grin. “By text?”

“By text. She didn’t even respond, so it couldn’t have been very serious on her end, either.”

“She?”
“Yeah, well, see? I was confused. Or something.”

“I’d say. What was her name?”

“Why would you possibly want to know that?” John said, wrapping one hand around the back of Sherlock’s neck and pulling at the curls there.

“Just curious, I suppose. I like detail.”

“I’ve noticed. Her name was Mary.”

Sherlock filed the information away, the name leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“So what now? Should we call James?”

“How about,” Sherlock said, trailing his fingers down John’s chest and abdomen before dipping them into his belly button, “we call him later tonight, and take care of some other very urgent business right now.” Sherlock’s fingers brushed through the hair trailing down John’s lower belly. “I promise we’ll call him tonight. It’s not like he’s meeting up with anyone now, right?”

“But you said the suspect had ramped things up when he didn’t get a date. James could be—”

“No, he really couldn’t be. He’s at Annette’s, and he’s only been there for a few hours, and nothing is going to happen to him tonight.”

“So, when you say ‘very urgent business,’ you’re referring to what, exactly?” John asked, his voice low and soft. He stared at Sherlock’s mouth as he waited for his answer. It was a rather unabashed stare, Sherlock thought.

Sherlock slid his fingers into John’s pubic hair and swirled them in slow circles. “I’d like to take care of my husband now. I’d like to make him feel good. Very good. Exceptionally, outstandingly good.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” Sherlock inched his hand down until his fingertips brushed against the thick base of John’s penis, felt how it jerked and twitched as it hardened.

“Mmm. Yeah.” John licked his lips and pressed them to Sherlock’s mouth, breathed into him, waiting.

Sherlock suckled on John’s lower lip and teased it with his tongue. “I’d like to try what you did to me. I’d like to practice that, to get good at it. In short, I’d like to perform fellatio on you, John.”

John’s body tensed against Sherlock’s and he took in a sharp breath through his nose. He managed a weak nod before kissing Sherlock again. Sherlock took pride in how his words so strongly affected John’s arousal. John’s body felt urgent against his, strong and keen with desire for what Sherlock had offered.

“Shh,” Sherlock whispered. “Easy. Tell me if this will work.” He lifted John’s hand from where it rested on Sherlock’s hip, brought it to his mouth, and slipped John’s first two fingers inside to the knuckle. Mouth still open, he rolled his tongue over the pads of John’s fingers, flicked at them, licked them.

“Yeah, that’s gonna work just fine.” John watched his fingers disappear into Sherlock’s mouth as if it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen.
“And this?” Sherlock closed his mouth and sucked short, sweet pulses around those fingers.

“Mmhm.”

“And how about this?” Sherlock sucked John’s fingers down deep and tight and bobbed his head up and down.

“Jesus Christ, yes.”

Sherlock released John’s fingers with a soft pop and licked his lips. He could feel John’s erection bump against his stomach and ribs as he slid down, an anchor for Sherlock’s intentions. He bent his knees so his legs wouldn’t hang off the bed, placed one hand on John’s hip, and nuzzled the warm skin of John’s belly. “Are you okay to stay on your side like this?”

“Yeah, this is … good.” John seemed to be having a hard time retrieving anything but the most basic of words. Sherlock hoped he’d soon be entirely speechless.

“Can you pull that leg back a bit?”

“Yeah,” John whispered, bending his upper leg at the knee and planting that foot on the mattress.

Sherlock tilted his head back to look up at John, who was now looking back at him as if Sherlock had just performed an exceedingly difficult magic trick. Alright, Sherlock thought to himself, let’s see what we can do.

He brought his lips to the head of John’s cock and pressed them around the flared ridge of it. He let the tip rest there, barely in his mouth, as he got used to the feeling of plump flesh on plump flesh, soft-warm on warm-soft, delicate curve on curved delicacy. He deduced that when he reached out with the tip of his tongue, he would find that the slit of John’s cock was wet, and he was correct. He licked away the bead of fluid and sampled it, rubbed it into the roof of his mouth with his tongue and across the back of his teeth. It was salty and bitter, smooth and slick.

John hummed, an appreciative, content sound. Sherlock glanced up at him again, a movement that repositioned his lips so that only the lower one was in contact with John. Staring up at him, Sherlock held John’s cock in his hand and rubbed the head of it over that swollen lower lip, back and forth, again and again, as if adorning and preparing his mouth for making love to John. John sighed and settled his head into the crook of his arm.

Sherlock kept his mouth and tongue loose and easy on John, working only the head as he lowered his hand to fondle John’s balls. John gave the slightest roll of his hips and Sherlock squeezed in acknowledgement, brought his hand back up to the base of John’s cock, and angled it toward his mouth. He tightened the circle of his lips around John’s shaft and then slowly lowered his head, sliding John’s erection over the flat bed of his tongue. He stopped halfway, gauging the heft and weight of John’s erect penis, then slowly bobbed up and down to get a sense of the space it took up in his mouth. His lips were stretched wider than he’d anticipated, and his mouth felt much fuller than he’d imagined. The action of taking in John’s cock rendered his mouth incapable of doing anything else at the moment, and the thought sent a shudder through him. No talking, no explaining, no thoughtless, unprepared words.

John hummed again, and this time it sounded like the heady recognition of his own growing need.

Sherlock released John from his mouth, then licked a broad stripe from base to frenulum. He kissed the rosy slit at the top and swirled his tongue around in light circles. He suspected that what John wanted was tight, deep, and fast, but he also knew that teasing John this way would make those
sensations that much more intense when he finally delivered.

He bobbed down again, taking his sweet time, playing with pressure and the placement of his tongue to see how much of John he could take. He stopped just short of triggering his gag reflex, and then did it again. On the third pass he felt John’s fingers on the top of his head, just barely bumping as Sherlock bobbed up and down, then scratching lightly across his scalp.

“Jesus, Sherlock. God.”

Sherlock worked methodically, keeping a steady pace and light pressure, not wanting to tire himself out too soon. He had other data, after all, to gather before this was over. He slid his hand far back between John’s legs and reached up to cup his arse, first one side, then the other, before slipping his fingers into the space between.

John groaned then, a proper wordless groan, and thrust a bit more urgently.

Sherlock trailed his fingers in a full arc from the top of John’s cleft to his perineum, brushing over puckered skin on his way. He didn’t stop there, didn’t pay that spot any more attention than anywhere else, but still John shivered and moaned.

He caressed the smooth skin of John’s inner thigh, brushed back over his scrotum with the back of his hand, and then, with increasing pressure, carefully rubbed the taut skin of his perineum.

“Fuck, yeah,” John whispered.

Sherlock ran his fingers up and down John’s shaft, coating them with saliva, then moved them back between John’s spread legs. He found that furled spot again and circled, pressed, circled and pressed.

John arched back, seeking more, but that brought him almost entirely out of Sherlock’s mouth, so he rolled his hips forward again and lost the connection of Sherlock’s fingers.

“Yes, oh God, please.”

Sherlock had propped up his head on his lower arm, but now he repositioned it so he could wrap the fingers of that hand around John’s prick and keep him from rutting too far into his mouth. He pressed his index finger harder against John’s arsehole. He didn’t want to enter John, not this time, but he knew he wouldn’t have to in order to push John over the edge. The teasing was driving him mad, and each pulse of Sherlock’s slippery finger made him more reckless in his movements. He rutted faster, pulled Sherlock’s hair harder, groaned louder. He gripped his leg behind his knee and pulled it up and back to make more space for Sherlock’s hand. John had crossed the line from keen observer to desperate, needy participant.

Sherlock bobbed faster, sucked harder, ignoring the growing pain in his jaw and the ache in the back of his neck. He drove his mouth down around John’s cock and up again, over and over, just barely hanging on to the rhythm he’d established. Saliva was running down his chin and over his hand, making the pumping motion slicker, faster.

“Oh God, oh God,” John chanted, racing toward the end. “You’re gonna make me come.”

He gave one final push toward Sherlock’s mouth and froze, his body taut and vibrating like a violin string under Sherlock’s constant, expert tuning to John’s responses. Sherlock slid the tip of that one finger into John’s body, just enough to breach him, and John, with one last stunned-sounding “Oh!” spurted his orgasm into the heat of Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock held it on his tongue for a moment, decided he didn’t like the taste of it at all, and spit it
onto the bed sheets. He wiped his mouth and chin on his forearm, wrapped his arm around John’s thighs, and buried his face in John’s stomach.

Above him John sucked in long, deep breaths, twitched with aftershocks, and said, “Oh my God,” one last time.

“How,” John asked once he’d regained control of his breathing, “how are you so good at that?”

Sherlock pushed himself up the bed and into the circle of John’s waiting arms. He shrugged. “I have an amazing teacher, and I learn quickly by observing feedback and applying the data in a seamless loop.”

“Bloody hell, yeah you do.” John kissed him on the top of his head. “Didn’t want to swallow?”

“I found the taste of semen to be less than pleasant. I hope you don’t mind.”

John chuckled and rubbed Sherlock’s back. “I don’t mind at all. I’ll warn you next time so you can stop before I come.”

“Do you like to swallow?”

It was John’s turn to shrug. His fingers were making sloppy circles over Sherlock’s lower back. “For me, it’s more about the act than the taste. I don’t have to, though, if it bothers you.”

“It doesn’t bother me either way.”

“Okay. And just in case I didn’t tell you, because right now I have no idea what I may or may not have said while you were making me lose my mind, that was fantastic. That was simply bloody brilliant.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Sherlock relaxed into John’s arms, hoping he wouldn’t say that they should get up and call James. Lazing about in bed with John was a pastime he was growing increasingly fond of, and lazing about in bed with John post-coitus was a sensory delight, a veritable plethora of input for him to analyse, label, and catalogue. John’s scent during and after arousal was intoxicating, and the sheen of sweat on his chest and face paired beautifully with the pink flush across his abdomen and inner thighs. John’s hair was a mess and the thought of John thrashing back and forth on the pillow as Sherlock brought him to climax put a quiet smile on Sherlock’s face.

Dusk gave way to evening. Shadows darkened and grew and then disappeared altogether with the absence of light. Next to him, John glowed. Sherlock could see everything he needed to see.

Everything else could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for your support and patience while I continue to get my act together.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

... and ... we’re back!

Kudos to Happierstill for being such an enthusiastic beta, and to all of you for being supportive and lovely between and after each chapter posting. MWAH.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock lifted the stack of folders in front of him and moved them to the side of the table as Alice set down tea service and scones for three. Victoria’s was busy this time of day, late morning appearing to be the best time for moms with young kids and retirees to gather en masse and clutter up the tables with their cappuccinos and chat. He had suggested that John invite James back to the house to talk through their plan, but John had been antsy to get out now that the weather was cooperating, and Sherlock, still buzzing from a delicious round of mutual morning handjobs, didn’t want to say no to John, anyway.

“How’s it going with Annette, then?” Alice asked as she poured their tea.

“Yeah, she’s great,” John answered. “The house is really coming together now, and she’s a terrific cook, too.”

“She is. I’m glad it’s working out. She seems to be enjoying the work, and she likes the two of you well enough. She was quite happy that you gave her a couple of days off, too.”

Sherlock could’ve sworn Alice was blushing. She caught his appraising look, cleared her throat, and resumed pouring the tea.

“Your sister’s a cheeky one,” Sherlock said, winking at Alice, who turned bright red, tucked her hair behind her ear, and wove through the tables toward the kitchen.

Tea and chit chat dispensed with, Sherlock flipped through the folders again, held one out towards James, and said, “Here. This one. Call this one.”

James took the folder from Sherlock but didn’t open it. He blew over the surface of his tea and took a cautious sip, grimaced, and set his cup back down in its saucer. “Maybe we could back up a bit. On the phone, John said you’d figured out who was after me and that it had to do with one of the AMP candidates, but he didn’t say much more than that.”

John nodded around a mouthful of cranberry scone and brushed some crumbs off his lap. “Yeah, and that we need you to arrange to meet him so we can gather more information.”

“Like a sting?”


James glanced at John, then back at Sherlock.

“What I mean to say,” Sherlock continued, “is that if you meet him and he tries to take you out right
then and there, then yes, it’s like a sting because we’ll have caught him red-handed. But I don’t think that’s what’s going to happen because he wouldn’t give himself away that easily. He wants to meet and get to know the person he holds responsible for his brother’s death. That’s why he hasn’t killed you yet.”

John gave Sherlock a swift kick under the table.

“Sorry. He’s not going to kill you at all. Once he’s satisfied his curiosity about you, he’ll plan your murder. Someone like this, someone who would go through the trouble of breaking into your house, who would try to date you before killing you, is caught up in the emotional warfare of his schemes. He wants this to be personal like it was personal to him.”

“Yeah, well, murder is pretty personal,” John muttered.

James nodded and broke off another piece of his scone. “So what, then? He tries to wear me down by sending those death threats and breaking into my house, then he fakes a loving relationship with me before letting me know it was all a farce? A payback?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Emotional motivations are irrational, complex, and not always easy to dissect. But yes, that could be what’s driving him. His brother trusted you to keep him safe, and then he died. He’ll want you to trust him, too, and then you’ll die.”

Another kick under the table.

“Sorry. You’re not going to die.”

Sherlock finished getting James up to speed while John listened and drank his tea. James had questions about Sherlock’s deduction process and how he’d figured out which applicant was the suspect. When Sherlock was done explaining they agreed that James would go back to Annette’s flat, arrange the date with Nathan Foster, the candidate Sherlock had deduced was a virgin with anger management and commitment issues, and report back to them with the arranged time and place. Satisfied with the plan, Sherlock sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

John nudged Sherlock’s foot and pushed his plate toward him. “Eat up, you. I’ll order another pot of tea because yours has gone cold.”

Sherlock sank down in his chair and scowled. “Boring. I’m too focussed on this case to waste time eating.”

“And we both appreciate your focus, but nothing is going to happen for at least another day or two, if not longer, and you can’t not eat or drink until then. Plus, after this we’ll go on that hike we talked about, so you’ll need some energy.”

John waved Alice over and ordered more tea and some sandwiches to go, and the conversation settled into a discussion of John and James’ mutual military acquaintances, the weather, and the many hiking trails in the area. Sherlock nibbled on his scone and arranged the crumbs on his plate into the shape of a Sig Sauer P226R, half-listening and half-considering how James’ assassin might try to kill him. Poison? Accident? Meat dagger?

When they parted ways James headed back in the direction of Annette’s flat, leaving John and Sherlock standing in front of Victoria’s. John stepped forward and straightened the collar of Sherlock’s jacket, then went up on his toes for a quick kiss.

“Thank you for everything you’re doing. I appreciate it.”
Sherlock shrugged and stepped closer to John. He wrapped one arm around John’s waist and tugged him up against his hips. “I don’t mind. It’s quite exciting, actually. I’m definitely not bored.”

John licked his lips and lowered his voice. “Good. And if this case isn’t enough to keep you going, I’ve got some other ideas to keep you engaged. We can pick up where we left off this morning.”

Sherlock’s hips gave an involuntary roll. “I’m perfectly capable of multi-tasking, John. This case and your other ideas need not be exclusive of each other.” He lowered his chin and tilted his head for another kiss, and when they broke apart he was sure he saw Alice duck away from the front windows with a smile on her face.

John squeezed Sherlock’s shoulder and unlocked their car. “How about that hike, then we can see what else we can get up to?” John retrieved his backpack from the boot, packed their sandwiches into it along with the bottles of water Alice had given them, and slung it over his shoulder. It was a short walk to the start of the trail they’d chosen, as many of Pitlochry’s trails were accessible from a car park near the train station.

Sherlock had studied the Pitlochry Paths brochure that morning and quizzed John on what they were likely to see on each of the various hikes. Ultimately, they’d decided on the Clunie trail, which would take them over the Port-na-Craig suspension bridge, and up a steep forest path to Fonab Hill. The twelve-kilometre hike would take about four hours if they did the complete circuit, and when John had suggested that being out of the house for most of the day might make the wait for James’ update pass a bit quicker, Sherlock had agreed.

They chatted as they walked, discussing the possible outcomes of James’ upcoming date. How long would it take him to reach the candidate? How long until they actually met? Where would they meet? Would Sherlock be able to get close enough to observe without being obvious? How long would the candidate drag out the process before attempting to harm James? At what point should they notify the police? As the questions grew less answerable, Sherlock became more frustrated. He kicked at rocks in their path and plucked at the low-hanging oak leaves brushing their shoulders.

“Hey, come here,” John said at one point, stopping Sherlock’s rapid stride with a touch of his hand on his lower back. They stepped off the path and under the canopy of a nearby tree, startling a red squirrel that wasted no time skittering away into the underbrush. John rubbed at Sherlock’s shoulders until he let out a long sigh and met John’s eye.

“Sorry. It’s hard to turn off sometimes.”

“The thoughts?”

“My brain.”

“Yeah, I can see that. And I bet sometimes you get answers from that kind of constant rumination, but sometimes you’re just driving yourself mad, you know?”

“I can’t come to a solution if I don’t think about the problem.”

John nodded and stroked his thumbs up the sides of Sherlock’s neck. “Yeah, I know, but you also can’t come up with the answers if you don’t have all the information, and right now you don’t have all the information. I was hoping being out this afternoon would distract you a bit, you know?”

“Unfortunately, my brain comes with me no matter where I go.”

John gave Sherlock’s shoulders a last squeeze, took one of his hands between his, and rubbed his thumb over his wedding band. “Okay. Let’s give your brain something else to think about, then.
Let’s talk about what we’re going to do when we leave here.”

“Leave where? This hike? Or our honeymoon?”

“Honeymoon.”

“Right. I had sort of forgotten that we’ll have to leave here at some point.”

John laughed and stepped back onto the trail. “Well, I suppose we don’t have to leave, but I think you’d get pretty bored here, and I have a new medical practise to start up, don’t I?”

Sherlock nodded, thoughtful, and reached out to take John’s hand again. “Maybe I should have got you something else as a wedding gift, like a silver frame or a crockpot.”

“It was rather extravagant, but crockpots aren’t really my thing.”

“Was it too much?” Sherlock glanced at John before he could answer, hoping to read any giveaways in his expression, but John just grinned at him before answering.

“I think that’s your nature, you know? Large gestures, passionate displays. You’re a ‘go big or go home’ kind of guy.”

Sherlock toyed with the saying until he felt he had a good understanding of what John meant. “That’s probably accurate. Why bother if you’re not going to make an impact? The gift may have been a bit unfair of me, though, because I’d never want you to think that I expect anything similar in return. I’m quite happy with small gestures, John.”

“I know you are, love.”

“Coming here, to your ancestral home, was one of the most thoughtful gifts anyone has ever given me. I’ve enjoyed every single moment of being here with you.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, because I don’t have a detective agency to give you, instead.”

Sherlock brushed the idea away with one hand. “Besides, my family owns property all over the London area, so your new medical practise was simply a matter of finding a practitioner ready to retire. We own that entire building, should you ever want to expand.”

“You still had to buy out the other doctor, which couldn’t have been inexpensive.”

“He owed me a favour, so it was a good deal, I assure you. But John, if it’s too much, if you’d rather not own your own practise, it wouldn’t be a problem to pass it on to someone else.”

John squeezed Sherlock’s hand and shook his head. “Let’s play it by ear. When we leave here we’ll move into Baker Street, you’ll establish yourself as the foremost consulting detective of our time and take on more cases, I’ll set up my practise, and we’ll see how things go. How’s that sound?”

Sherlock stopped to press a kiss to John’s cheek. “It sounds like a good plan. I’m going to have Mrs Hudson spruce the place up a bit before our arrival. I’ve already started a list.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, opened the Notes app, and began to read out loud. “Hire cleaners. New sheets, at least 900 count Egyptian cotton. Firewood, preferably American beech. Stock the fridge with food John likes, including that thing with the peas. Have our mail forwarded. Remove 2013 mould experiment.”

“Whoa, hold up there. First of all, we can do a lot of this ourselves. Second of all, 2013 mould
experiment?"

"The experiment is contained to a temperature-stabilised cooler which I have suspended outside the kitchen window."

"Of course you have. Still, though, I’m sure Mrs Hudson will be glad to help, but let’s not overdo it."

Sherlock deleted ‘remove 2013 mould experiment’ from the list as a concession to John and continued to read. John fell into fits of giggles when Sherlock read in his typical, deadpan tone, “Continue sexual experimentation, not limited to the bedroom, as frequently as possible. Kitchen table is ideal height for activities involving bending at the hips. My hips.”

Ignoring John, he listed off more mundane details regarding window treatments, shower curtains, and a new sterilising system for his test tubes. He wanted the flat to be perfect for John when they moved in, not a chore for him to have to deal with. By the time they’d reached the pinnacle of Fonab Hill, both out of breath but still able to comment on the stunning landscape laid out before them, they’d mapped out a thorough idea of what needed to be done to make 221b more comfortably habitable.

They spread out their lunch on broad, sun-warmed boulders and ate the smoked Scottish salmon sandwiches Alice had packed for them. Sherlock pulled out the thin slices of tomatoes in his and passed them to John, who wedged them into his own sandwich before passing Sherlock some of the rocket leaves from his own. Between bites he pointed out some of the visible sites to Sherlock, explaining the history as he went.

“See over there?” he pointed. “Where that clearing is? That’s where the standing stones of Clachan an Diridh are. They're 4,000 years old and it’s thought that the people who erected them visited the stones on the first day of May each year.”

“Probably some sort of religious or mid-equinox ceremonial tradition, I would think,” Sherlock said, holding his hand over his eyes and peering towards the clearing. “Seems odd that they’d have created a stone circle in the middle of the woods, though, doesn’t it?”

“It would’ve been,” John explained, “but this area wasn’t forested then. They’d have had views to Ben Vrackie and the Grampians from there.”

“Interesting,” Sherlock mused. “It would’ve been a magnificent view.” He loved John’s knowledge of the area and the obvious pride he took in his ancestral lands. He made a mental note to pull out some of the books he’d seen on John’s shelves about Scotland’s ancient peoples and customs. John was his people now, and by extension, so were John’s ancestors. He needed to know more.

“Tha thu nas brèagha na an sealladh seo,” John said, and Sherlock stopped thinking about books and ancient customs and started thinking about John’s tongue and mouth making those rugged, sexy sounds, and then the meaning of the words themselves. Granted, his self-instructed speed course in Scots Gaelic had been fast and furious, but he was pretty sure he got the gist of it.

“Thank you, John.” His cheeks felt hot.

“I mean it.”

“You’re quite easy on the eyes, yourself.”

They shared a few minutes of reciprocal adoration, including a thorough snog and grope with the sun shining down on John’s back and Sherlock’s spread thighs, and then cleaned up the remains of their lunch and got ready to hike back toward Pitlochry.
By the time they reached the Land Rover two hours later, Sherlock could feel the lazy thrum of physical exhaustion in his bones. He binned their trash while John popped into the grocer to pick up a few things for dinner. Sherlock had visions of finger foods by the fire, a stack of books and John by his side, but maybe he’d have a bath first. Or, maybe they should share a bath? Would they both fit in the tub? Perhaps not comfortably. They’d be half on top of each other, he figured. Ah yes, he decided with dawning realisation, a shared bath was definitely in order.

“How do you feel about bathing together?” he asked when John came back to the car with a grocery bag and a wine carrier.

“I feel great about bathing together,” John beamed. They climbed into their seats and John turned the key in the ignition. “Do you want to take a bath together?”

“Yes.” Sherlock gave a sharp nod and placed his hand on John’s thigh. John gave his hand a pat, put the car in gear, and pulled out of the parking lot.

Back at home, John put the groceries away and uncorked the wine while Sherlock rummaged around in the master bathroom for something that would add bubbles to the bathwater. He found a half-full bottle of a minty smelling body wash, turned on the taps, and poured in a generous stream. He stacked clean towels on the bathmat, lit a couple of candles that were tucked away under the sink, and adjusted the water temperature a few times before calling down to John.

John came in a few minutes later with two generous glasses of white wine and a smile. “This looks lovely. Very romantic.”

Sherlock took one of the glasses of wine, clinked it against John’s, and took a sip. “Oh, clever. A sparkling wine for a bubble bath? Genius.”

“I’m glad you think so. Put it down for a minute and let’s get you undressed.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll get undressed after you. I’m still quite taken with the notion that I get to remove your clothes pretty much any time I want to.”

Sherlock had dressed casually for the hike, in a long-sleeved flannel shirt and a pair of dark denim jeans, and now he put his wine glass down on the vanity counter and watched as John undid his buttons. John took his time about it, then lifted Sherlock’s hands and undid the cuffs. He pushed the shirt off Sherlock’s shoulders, dragged it down and off his arms, and pulled the plain white vest Sherlock had worn underneath out of his waistband. John’s fingers brushed low along Sherlock’s waist and hips but didn’t linger.

“Boots and socks next,” John said, bending down to untie Sherlock’s laces. Sherlock balanced with one hand on John’s shoulder as he stepped out of the hiking boots and let John peel off his socks.

“Surely, taking off my filthy socks is a bit off-putting?”

“Sherlock, there’s really nothing off-putting about any part of you.” John stood again and popped open the button-fly of Sherlock’s jeans, then pushed them down around his ankles so Sherlock could step out of them. Standing there in his vest and pants, with the bath-warmed air swirling around his bare arms and legs, Sherlock felt a strong urge to wrap himself around this man that didn’t mind his stinky feet, sweaty armpits, and God-knows-what-hair. Acceptance was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Instead, he peeled off his vest, dropped it on the growing pile of dirty clothes, and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxer briefs. John had taken a step back and was staring unabashedly now.
Sherlock ignored the heat he could feel spreading over his chest and up his neck and slid the pants down his legs and over his feet.

John licked his lips and shook his head. “I will never get tired of seeing you naked. Never.”

He was appreciative of John’s admiration but didn’t know what he’d done to deserve it, other than inheriting a certain set of genetic traits from a long line of relatives he’d never known. Certainly something so random, something he couldn’t own or take credit for, was a tenuous quality for which to be grateful? It felt precarious to him, as if John’s admiration was based on something outside himself.

“I have nothing to do with how I look, though.” Sherlock shifted from foot to foot and resisted the urge to cover his genitals with his hands.

“You have everything to do with how you carry yourself, how you take care of yourself. The way you inhabit your body is a beautiful thing to me. Get in if you’re cold,” John said, mistaking Sherlock’s fidgeting for physical discomfort. “I’m in right behind you.”

Sherlock stepped into the bath and arranged himself along the sloped end of the clawfoot tub. Bubbles swirled over his belly and chest as he sank down into the hot water. He peered over the suds as John made short work of his own clothing. Once disrobed, he turned toward the vanity and went up on his toes to pull a face cloth off a shelf. Sherlock studied John’s calves and hamstrings as he did so, his arse, his lower back, his shoulders and biceps. John was taking a long time getting that face cloth, Sherlock thought to himself. Ah, yes, John was posing just a little bit, wasn’t he?

And suddenly, Sherlock understood what John was trying to say, that the way John held himself, the way he moved through time and space was indicative of who John was, that although his physical body wasn’t something he’d had a say in creating, the way he lived through that body was very much a conscious choice. Sherlock loved John’s body because of who John was inside that body. He looked down at what he could see of himself in the tub, at his nipples and his knees, and he decided that self-acceptance was also a powerful aphrodisiac.

“Get in the bath, John. I’ll be able to admire you much better from a closer distance.”

John smirked and tossed the flannel toward Sherlock’s head. Sherlock grabbed it out of the air, soaked it, and ran it over his neck and shoulders. John came to stand by the tub, hands on his hips. Did John realise that his index fingers were pointing directly at his beautiful penis? Sherlock was allowed to stare at said beautiful penis, wasn’t he? He stared.

“Like what you see?”

“Get in the bath, John.”

John handed Sherlock his glass of wine, stepped into the tub, and lowered himself into the water. Holding his own glass above the bubbles, he leaned back between Sherlock’s spread legs and against his chest. He wriggled until he was settled, then let out a long sigh.

“Comfortable?”

“Very.”

Sherlock gulped down his wine and set the glass on the floor next to the tub. There was bath sex to be had, very important bath sex. He splayed his fingers and slid his hands over John’s chest, taking a long moment to play with his nipples, then pushed his hands lower, deeper, under the surface. His fingers were a hairsbreadth from John’s groin when John’s phone started ringing.
“Don’t answer it.”

“Could be James, though.”

Sherlock considered. “Fine, answer it, but then we’re picking up again right here.”

“Of course we are.” John reached over the edge of the tub and fumbled about in his discarded jeans until he found his phone.

Sherlock listened to John’s end of the conversation, but John’s ‘Really? Seriously? But that makes no sense,’ was not what he’d expected to hear.

“What’s she saying in the background? Okay, I’ll tell him and see what he says. Bye.” John dropped the phone on the bathmat and sat up, turning as much as he could to face Sherlock. “James called Nathan Foster, like you said, but Nathan Foster is engaged to be married and not interested in a date with James.”


“James sounded pretty frustrated, to be honest.”

"And who was talking in the background? Annette?"

"Yeah. She said she thought the whole concept of it being someone in his AMP folders sounded too good to be true."

Sherlock watched a trail of bubbles slide in a slow line down the curve of John’s bicep. “What did you just say?”

“I said that James sounds frustrated.”

“No, after that.”

“That Annette said it sounded too good to be true?”

“Oh! John, that’s it! Yes, of course!” Sherlock braced his hands on the sides of the tub and pushed himself up to standing. A small tide of water sloshed over the side of the tub as he stepped out and slid across the tiled floor.

“Wait! Where are you going? What about the bath?”

“Stay right there, John, I need to check my notes!”

Chapter End Notes

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The Pitlochry Path brochure.

If Google translate is correct, John’s bit of Scots Gaelic means, “You’re more beautiful than this view.”

Two chapters ago I posted a DBT technique on "thought challenging," and many of you responded that you found it helpful. I'm glad.
I'm out of treatment now and doing so much better. I'm working hard to hang on to the skills I learned over those 45 days. The one that I use the most is one of the easiest, so I'd like to share it in hopes that you find it useful, too.

Many of us, whether we suffer from mental illness or not, struggle with negative, ruminative thoughts. We get stuck thinking about situations in the past that didn't go well. We think about past relationships, fights we had, decisions we made, people we've hurt, people who've hurt us. We get stuck thinking about things that may or may not happen in the future. We play out the worst possibilities and create tragic circumstances for ourselves. We think we're problem solving, but we're not. We're ruminating, and it serves no purpose but to push us deeper and deeper into negativity, insecurity, and self-loathing (yes, some anxiety is healthy, but this is more than that). Our brains form habits based on the way we think, so the more we ruminate, the more we ruminate.

To stop the cycle, we have to stop the thoughts. To stop the thoughts, we have to recognize that we have them in the first place. Once we recognize them, we can "stop and switch."

For example, I think a lot about something that happened to my family last summer. I replay it in my head, I cry about it, I think about what I wish had happened instead. But that event is over. Thinking about it now, letting it hurt me again and again, only brings me pain.

Now when I find myself going there, I become aware of it and I tell myself to stop. Then I replace those hurtful thoughts with happier thoughts about something else. I have a whole library of happy places to go, and as you can imagine, a lot of them are completely imaginary.

I think about:

- Sherlock and John retiring to Sussex, Sherlock tending bees, John tending Sherlock
- Me retiring to some tiny village in Italy, probably in Umbria
- How I'll decorate my little stone house in my little village in Italy
- Walking through the surf on a sunny day, margarita in hand, floppy hat on head
- The first Johnlock kiss, how tentative and soft and blinky it'll be
- Teenlock
- Napping in a hammock in the sun
- Kitty toe beans

Literally, you just need to create a stable of happy thoughts and images and make yourself go there when you find yourself ruminating. Ruminative thoughts can be pesky assholes, though, so don't be surprised if they intrude into your happy place. Keep kicking them out. The more you do it, the easier it gets. The more you stop ruminating, the less you'll ruminate.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Hello! Please have some bathtub sex with a teeny bit of case advancement!

Thank you, happierstill for the cheerleading, beta-ing, and support!

Sherlock’s champagne glass clattered to the floor as he skidded back into the bathroom and aimed himself toward the tub. John reached over the edge to set it right again, then held out his hands to steady Sherlock as he climbed in and settled on his knees, facing John.

“Easy there, I think you just emptied half the tub.”

“Irrelevant.” Sherlock placed his hands on John’s spread knees and leaned in for a kiss. John was pink and warm and covered with suds, and the slick of his tongue felt slightly cooler than the water surrounding them.

“Tell me what you just figured out,” John said against his lips. He ran a hand up Sherlock’s arm and to the back of his neck, holding him there, kissing him through and over his words. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Mmm. It wasn’t Nathan Foster after all,” Sherlock said against the curve of John’s jaw. “It was too obvious, that one. No one intent on killing someone else would be so transparent in their bio. Army reserve, studying law, a deceased brother?” Sherlock slid one hand up John’s thigh, over his hip, and up his torso to his chest. “It stood out among the folder candidates but as a percentage of the general population he’s really not that unusual.” John’s nipple pearled under Sherlock’s thumb, and John took a deep breath, expanding his chest against the pressure.

“Okay. So what does that mean? It’s not one of the candidates, after all?”

“Oh no, it’s still a candidate,” Sherlock answered. “It means, however, that in this case, the person who seemed wrong enough to be right really was wrong, and the person who seemed too good to be true really is just that. Not true. A lie.” He gave John’s earlobe a sharp suck and sat up tall again.

“Trade places with me.”

Water and bubbles sloshed around them as they wriggled and rearranged in the tub. When they were done, Sherlock was reclining against the back and John was sitting in his lap, belly to belly, knees to the sides of Sherlock’s waist.

“So, if Nathan Foster was telling the truth and isn’t our man, who’s lying?”

Sherlock rested his hands on John’s hips and spread his fingers over what he could reach of his arse. He tugged him closer and stretched up to plant a string of kisses along his neck. “His name is Daniel Cotter,” he said to the underside of John’s upturned chin. “His bio was crafted to reflect a very definite image. For example, he volunteers for the blind, has a dog, loves kids, is financially responsible, etcetera. He was truthful about his employment, however, because that’s too easy to check, and that’s helpful to us, as he works in information technology. That could give him access to the tools he’d need to hack into James’ security system.” Sherlock slipped a little lower and licked
John’s nipples as he finished explaining. Certainly that was enough to go on. It was time for bathtub sex.

“So he, oh, that’s nice, he made up a fake bio to attract James?”

“Exactly. No one is that perfect.” Sherlock splayed his fingers over John’s arse and guided his hips into place so they were better aligned underwater. John was nicely erect and Sherlock was mostly there. The slippery brush of the head of John’s cock along Sherlock’s shaft went a long ways towards finishing the job.

“What do we do now?”

“I was thinking about stroking your penis until you climaxed.”

John smiled as he leaned down to kiss Sherlock. “Yeah, I’m on board with that, but don’t we need to let James know?”

“That I’m about to manually bring you to orgasm?”

John pressed his face to the side of Sherlock’s neck and laughed. “No, you berk. About … what was his name? Daniel?”

Sherlock reached between their bellies and took them both in hand, then thunked his head against the wall as the bliss of John in his hand, pressed tight against his own erection, spread through his body. “Daniel Cotter. I already did.”

“How did you, oh, oh God.”

“I texted James the name. He’ll know what it means.” Sherlock’s fist sent a ripple through the water as he tugged their foreskins up and down.

“Are you sure—”

“Very sure.”

John lowered himself enough that they could kiss and moaned into Sherlock’s mouth as Sherlock worked them under the surface of the water. John had one hand on the back of the tub, near Sherlock’s shoulder, and reached the other down to where Sherlock held their erections together. He teased the head of Sherlock’s cock with his fingertips and whispered, “Let me help. Let me do you.”

Sherlock licked deeper into John’s mouth in response and freed them just long enough to let John take him in hand. He gripped John’s erection again, wrapping him in a tighter fist than he was able to when he was stroking both of them together. He wanted to wrap his legs around John’s waist but the tub wasn’t wide enough, so he bent them at the knee and pressed his thighs to John’s arse. The water made everything slick and easy, and the sensation of John’s arse slipping and sliding against him as he flexed into Sherlock’s fist made his balls contract and his belly clench.

John’s hand was tight and fast on Sherlock, and Sherlock began to pant into John’s mouth as John shortened the length of his strokes, twisting up and over the head and pressing his fingertips into his sensitive frenulum. Sherlock was too close. He’d wanted to take care of John, to get John off. He’d wanted to give John the gift of bathtub sex, but John was too damn good at this, and Sherlock was already so close.

“Stop. Stop, wait.”
John let go of Sherlock’s cock and pulled back enough to look him in the face. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing’s wrong. I want to make you come, though.”

“I want to make you come, too.”

“I want to make you come first.”

John smiled. “Why?”

Sherlock ran a finger through the damp and curling hair around John’s ear. “I like watching you fall apart. I can’t watch you if I’m coming, too.”

John pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. “You like to watch, eh?”

“So far, I like everything. But for now, this time, I want to make you come first.”

John kissed him, soft and slow. “Yeah, of course. As long as I get to return the favour.” John sat up and rested against Sherlock’s thighs. His cock peeked out of the water, thick and hard, flushed a deep pink at the plump tip.

Sherlock licked his lips. “You’re gorgeous. Look at you.” He ran his hands up John’s body, circling his nipples with his thumbs before trailing them through his wet chest hair and back down to his waist. John’s cock twitched as Sherlock gripped his hips and dug his fingers into the sides of John’s arse. “Gorgeous.”

Sherlock cupped John’s balls with one hand, fondling them as he made a circle around John’s cock with his other. John watched him, his eyelids heavy, his mouth open, and then he bit his lip, closed his eyes, and let his head hang down. Sherlock kept the hand on John’s cock slow and steady, even as John rolled his hips and tried to rut faster into his fist.

“Ssh. I’ll get you there. I promise.”

John settled down a bit, but the tension in his body was constant, his muscles hard and straining. A drop of fluid beaded out of his slit and Sherlock swirled it around the head with his thumb while he tugged on John’s balls. He watched a pink flush spread upward over John’s abdomen and chest. Sherlock slid the fingers of his other hand behind John’s sac and pressed against his perineum, and John hissed and arched his back.

“John, I want to, that is, can I—”

“God, yes.”

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“I think I do. Ask me, though, if you want.”

“I want to finger you.”

“Good, because I’d really, really like it if you did that.” John lifted up a bit more, putting a few inches of space between them, and as Sherlock slid his fingers underneath him, John reached back with both hands and spread his cheeks apart. Sherlock’s body shuddered with arousal, because that might’ve been one of the sexiest things he’d seen John do to date. He tried to remember to keep stroking John as he led with his middle finger, sliding until he felt the tight pucker under his fingertip.
“Yeah, that’s it,” John whispered, eyes closed, head thrown back.

Sherlock circled and pressed and stroked, and John began to fall apart. He was beautiful, Sherlock thought, beautiful as he thrust his chest out, as he arched his back and rolled his hips and rutted into Sherlock’s hand. Stunning as he began to lower himself onto Sherlock’s finger, too impatient to wait for Sherlock to breach him. Absolutely mesmerising as he groaned and whimpered and unabashedly, unashamedly took his pleasure from Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock started to pump John’s cock in earnest as he pushed deeper inside John. Water splashed up and around them as his fist repeatedly broke the surface of the water, sloshing over the side of the tub as John thrust up and down, over and over again. Sherlock searched for and found what he was seeking, knowing it as much for John’s sudden cry as for the smooth swelling under his fingertip. Sherlock slid another finger inside.

“Oh, God,” they said at the same time.

John looked beautifully frantic now, fantastically desperate as he let his weight rest on Sherlock’s thighs and hand, as his head rolled back and forth on his shoulders, as he squirmed and fucked himself on Sherlock’s fingers.

“Oh,” he hissed, “yeah, make me come, Sherlock. Make me come.”

“Oh, God.” Sherlock said again. John was taut as a tightrope in his lap, hovering in the space between them, straining toward release. He held onto John’s cock underwater and jerked him as fast as he could, his bicep flexing, his forearm twitching with the movement of his wrist.

John keened.

Sherlock crooked his fingers and pulsed them hard and fast inside John.

John let out a string of soft grunts.

“God, look at you,” Sherlock said, enthralled. “Look at you, so close, so close now, John. I’m gonna make you come. I’m gonna make you, oh God, look at you.”

John rose up a few inches and slammed himself back down on Sherlock’s fingers, gasping, “Christ, Christ, Christ,” before going shock still. Frozen, he began to spurt long and hard through the circle of Sherlock’s fist.

They sat still for a moment, John breathing hard and shaking, Sherlock cataloguing every nuanced change in John’s precious body, the flush over his chest and neck, his pink, peaked nipples, the occasional deep shudder of breath. John blinked at him slowly, his expression relaxed, his lips parted in a subtle smile.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

“That was amazing.”

“Hell, yeah it was. For me, anyway.”

“No, it was amazing for me, too. Watching you, I can’t begin to tell you how incredible that was.”

“Mm. Whatever it looked like, I guarantee it felt even better. Can we move this to the bed though? The water’s getting cold and I have things I need to do to you.”
“Do you, now?”

“Desperately.”

Sherlock gave them each a cursory wash with a face cloth and bar of soap, then climbed out of the tub after John. They stepped gingerly onto the sopping bath mat and looking around for dry towels.

“Bathtub sex is very ... wet,” Sherlock observed.

“It really is,” John giggled. He reached for and grabbed two folded towels off the counter and passed one to Sherlock. “Let’s just get in bed.”

Sherlock scrubbed the towel through his hair and checked his phone as John pulled the bedclothes back, then smirked as he put the phone back down on the nightstand.

“Any news?” John asked.

“It can’t have been more than twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes since I texted James the name of his next date, yet Daniel Cotter has already responded to his email and agreed to meet.”

“Really? Wow. What did James say?”

“He said that Daniel has offered to drive to Pitlochry as early as tomorrow and he’ll let me know as soon as the details are set.”

“I think we have our man.”

“I think we do.”

“And I think I have mine,” John said. “Come on, get in bed.”

“How do you want me?”

“Elbows and knees will do quite nicely, thank you.”
Sherlock stood at the side of the bed and blinked at John. “On my elbows and knees?”

“Oh God, I’m sorry, is that too much? Have I put you off?” John sat up and reached his hand out toward Sherlock, then let it fall back to the bed when Sherlock didn’t take it.

“No, not at all. I was just thinking about what you might want to do to me while I’m in that position.”

“Nothing you don’t want me to do, I promise. At least, I don’t think so?”

Sherlock imagined himself on the bed, arse in the air, and considered the various scenarios that sprang to mind. Although they hadn’t yet discussed the act of anal penetration, Sherlock knew that wasn’t what John had in mind, as John had just orgasmed and wouldn’t be able to achieve an erection for at least another half an hour. Sherlock supposed John could fellate him from below if he were to stretch out underneath Sherlock’s hips, but John probably would have asked Sherlock to straddle his shoulders if that were the case. Fingering, too, was possible, but the position seemed overkill for that option.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock thought back to the discussion they’d had in bed a few nights ago after he’d researched various sexual acts on his phone and told John some of the things he was interested in trying. “Other oral things” was how he’d put it, and John had affirmed that he was also interested in doing that. In fact, his exact words had been, “There’s nowhere on your body that I wouldn’t want to put my mouth. Nowhere.”

Rimming.

“Sherlock, are you okay?”

“Yes, I do believe I am.” Sherlock climbed onto the bed next to John, gave him a lingering kiss, and settled down onto his elbows and knees. He rested his forehead on intertwined fingers and wiggled his bottom. “How’s this?”

John was quiet for a moment, then he let out a sigh and said, “Perfect. You’re perfect. You sure you’re okay? You seemed a bit out of it there for a minute.”

“I was evaluating the options provided by this position.” He turned his head to the side and looked up at John. “I believe you intend to rim me, and I’m eager to begin.”

John let out a short huff of laughter and shook his head. “Yeah, okay, that was the end goal, but I
was thinking I’d lead up to it, not just, you know, do that right away.”

“Whatever you think is best, John. I trust your judgment.” Sherlock wiggled his hips again and felt his thickening cock sway back and forth between his spread thighs.

John moved behind him, planting his knees between Sherlock’s calves, and ran his hands up and down Sherlock’s back. “You didn’t dry off very well, did you? I don’t want you to get chilled.”

“I’m fine.”

Still, John grabbed the towel Sherlock had tossed over the end of the bed and ran it over the drops of water along his neck, shoulders and lower back. He patted down Sherlock’s hips, thighs, and calves, too, stroking slowly, softly. “There. That’s better.”

Towel discarded once again, John shuffled closer and pressed down gently on Sherlock’s upper back, digging the heels of his hands into the muscles between his shoulder blades and pressing his thumbs along either side of his spine.

“Mm. That feels good.” Sherlock had thought he was rather relaxed after soaking in the bath, but the hike earlier in the day must’ve left his muscles a bit tighter than he realised. John rubbed and kneaded there for several blissful minutes, then wove his fingers into Sherlock’s damp hair and massaged the nape of his neck and scalp.

His hands danced through Sherlock’s hair and skulled over his skull and neck, light, brushing touches that relieved tension more through stimulation than pressure. John’s hips, however, were a solid weight against Sherlock’s arse, and the snug nestle of John’s genitals between his cheeks was a heady counterbalance to the relaxing effects of his massage. Sherlock’s cock continued to harden and flex between his legs.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” John murmured. “I love your body.” He kissed his way down Sherlock’s spine, top to bottom, whispering as he went. “I love your neck, and your shoulders, and your hips. I love the small of your back. So graceful, so strong.” John stroked down Sherlock’s back until his hands were resting on Sherlock’s hips. “And I love,” he said, his voice barely audible, “your arse.” John inched back so he wasn’t pressed directly against Sherlock, then palmed Sherlock’s arse in his hands, fingers splayed, thumbs stroking.

Sherlock exhaled into the pillow and curled his lower back, pushing himself into John’s hands. This was the most John had seen his arse, he realised, much less played with it. He had a strong hunch they were both going to find the experience extremely enjoyable. He surged back one more time, writhed just enough to send an unmistakable hint. Do it.

“Oh my, yes, that’s gorgeous.”

John pried Sherlock’s cheeks apart, nudging them open before repositioning his hands to get a firmer grip. Sherlock lowered his chest to the bed, rubbed his nipples over the sheets. He was fully erect now and throbbing, beading at the slit. John’s hands were warm and firm on him, a doctor’s steady touch, then they were ghosting over his skin, his fingers drawing circular designs over Sherlock’s gooseflesh. When John removed his hands to reposition himself on his hands and knees, Sherlock looked back over his shoulder. He needed John close, wanted him close.

John met his eye and smiled. “I hope you like this, love, because I love doing it.”

Sherlock nodded, mute, and put his head back down.

John paid homage to the back of Sherlock’s thighs with a series of kisses, first one, then the other.
He ran his fingertips up from the back of his knees, against the grain of fair hair growing there, then licked a stripe up the left side of Sherlock’s arse with the tip of his tongue.

Sherlock’s soft “oh” was lost in the folds of the sheet spread beneath him.

John licked again, and again, following up with several kisses before slowly planting one hand in the small of Sherlock’s back and sliding the other carefully, steadily, between his legs. As soon as he’d cupped Sherlock’s bollocks in his hand, Sherlock gasped and bucked backward.

“Hold still now,” John said.

Sherlock did his best.

When John took possession of Sherlock’s arse, he did so fully, the way one might wrap their mouth around a ripe summer peach, the way one kisses a lover when they intend to never, ever let go. With an open mouth and broad tongue, John kissed and sucked his way from the lush curve of one buttock to the crease in between. Hands on Sherlock’s hips, he buried his face in that lavish bounty, found the very centre of Sherlock, and licked.

Sherlock felt the act through his entire body, a wave of warm, wet intimacy that wreaked havoc on his nerve endings and jerked at his muscles, his abdomen going tense and tight. He saw it in his mind’s eye as well, saw the precise movement as clearly as an arrow finds its bullseye, a bullet claims its target, a laser marks its claim. Immediately his brain began to battle with his body, feeding him thoughts and tangents that tied John’s actions to the broader reality of the last several days.

John circled and teased, swiped and wriggled, and Sherlock sucked on the pad of his thumb and let out one long, loud whine. John gentled him with a soft shush and pierced him with the tip of his tongue. This is filthy, Sherlock thought. This is divinely filthy and perfect and how can this otherwise forgotten, diminutive part of him be so powerful, so overwhelming, so all-encompassing? Words bubbled up from some primal place as Sherlock started to pant. “Oh, sweet Jesus. God. John. Fuck.”

John hummed and set up a pattern of swirl-flick-probe, and Sherlock’s ability to speak was effectively cut off. Body and mind worked independently now, lower back bowing, inner thighs straining, toes curling, cock throbbing, dripping. Sherlock tried to focus on his body, on each individual part of him. He needed to ground himself, to separate the intense pleasure from the intruding visions in his head. He imagined that John could touch him just about anywhere right now, the crook of his knee, the crest of his hip, the centre of his palm, and the pleasure would present in his cock. Funny how the body could do that. Pleasure or pain, the source often sent the signals elsewhere, one direct action leading to an entirely different reality.

His thoughts continued to mimic the intense, singular focus John was paying him. In the blackness behind closed eyelids he saw concentric circles closing in on each other, red-orange dots and spirals that continuously recented in his head no matter how hard he tried to move beyond them. He gripped the sheets in his fists and stretched the fabric on either side of his head, grunting into the pillow. He imagined the scene from John’s point-of-view, the stretch of his fingers on pale, spread flesh, the moist, pink pucker under his tongue, the tremor and shiver in Sherlock’s skin, but his attention was like a deduction now, honing down, honing in, an unrelenting brainstorm of singular intent.

circle pinpoint dot spot red red red hole hole hole ...

John stopped long enough to take a deep breath and whisper, “Fuck yeah,” before diving in again, redoubling his efforts with lips and tongue, his face pressed in tight.
Oh God, he wanted to come, and the closer he got the more narrowly defined became the constructs in his head. As if reading his mind, John reached around his hip and took him in hand.

“Oh yes, oh please, please, John.”

“I’ve got you.”

John continued with his tongue while he made short, fast work over Sherlock’s aching erection with the tunnel of his fist. Sherlock’s hips twitched back and forth, thrusting in an endless loop of pleasure. He was coiling upward now, every breath fuelling the climb toward release, a closed system ratcheting tighter and tighter, the tension drawn and held, drawn and held. He inhaled and held it, propelling himself into the final rush, cock first into the last throbbing uptake and release.

His last exaltation was John’s name drawn out, choked off, and with the first pulse of his climax, his psyche fed him one more thought, a convoluted mix of visual and conceptual.

_Searing shooting red red red pinpoint target mark hole hole hole._

He understood.

John guided him down onto his side, away from the mess on the bed, and curled his body around Sherlock. He pulled up the sheets and wrapped his arm around Sherlock’s arm and chest, tucking them in, holding them together.

“John,” Sherlock drawled through his endorphin fog.

“Mm?”

“That was brilliant. Amazing. Unprecedented.”

“Yeah, you seemed to like it.”

“Like it? I ascended.” Sherlock wriggled his bottom into the vee of John’s hips and sighed. “I want to do it to you.”

“I’d be amenable to that.” John sounded smug, sleepy.

“So, Cotter isn’t working alone. He’s behind it but he’s not the one who’s going to kill James. He’s going to keep his hands clean.”

John chuckled. “Again with solving cases during sex, eh?”

Sherlock rolled over so he could see John’s face. He tucked John’s hands into his own, pressed them against his chest, and yawned. “ Couldn’t help it, although it didn’t really make sense ‘til the end.”

“What didn’t make sense?”

“The imagery. Much different than the usual thoughts and deductions.”

“Go on, then.”

“Sniper, John. Sniper.”

Chapter End Notes
This gif may have exchanged hands during the beta-ing of this chapter.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay! If these chapters had titles, this one would be called "In Which Writing is Like Passing a Stone."

Please note that I’ve added a chapter count and anticipate two more chapters.

Many thanks to happierstill for always being there, ready to jump in, when the writing happens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Armed with this new sex-induced deduction, Sherlock and John set out to catch their suspect.

Once Daniel Cotter contacted James, which he did in record time and with great enthusiasm, James established a day for their first date and recommended a hotel for his stay, then relayed that information back to Sherlock. Sherlock and John spent an afternoon surveying the hotel, taking note of all entrances and exits, lines of sight, and staffing schedules, but John drew the line when Sherlock announced his plan over breakfast to break into Daniel’s hotel room to gather as much information as possible.

Annette intervened, suggesting that she pose as a housekeeper at the hotel and do the reconnaissance herself. John raised hell over the suggestion, refusing to put Annette in any danger, but she asserted that she was an adult and would do what she pleased, and if she just happened to borrow a cousin’s hotel housekeeping uniform and find herself in Daniel’s room, who was he to stop her?

Sherlock was duly chuffed.

Annette’s mission went smoothly and provided them with a wealth of data, the most important of which was that Daniel was not staying on his own. Based on what Annette observed and the dozens of photos she’d taken with her phone, his companion was most likely a woman with a size five shoe, medium-length brunette hair, and a penchant for lesbian romance novels. Neither had packed more than three days worth of clothing. Annette had found no weapons in the hotel room, but this did not surprise Sherlock. He suspected the sniper had hidden the tools of her trade in a locker at the train station and worked surveillance of that spot into his multi-layered plans.

He couldn’t pinpoint the exact time the sniper would strike, though he had several theories to help guide him. He surmised that Daniel and his companion would carry out their plan while James and Daniel were together and in public, as this provided Daniel with an alibi and eliminated him from police inquiry. It also made sense that they would not make an attempt on James’ life during their first date, as Daniel would want to get to know James over the span of a few encounters. Finally, the attempt on James’ life would have to take place in a location that allowed the sniper to avoid notice and discreetly slip away. Though he could not predict the exact place and time, he was almost certain that the attack would happen on the third date and during dinner. Any longer than that increased the odds that the sniper would become identifiable to witnesses in Pitlochry, and any less time decreased the amount of time Daniel would have to get what he wanted from James before eliminating him.

The first date took place at a small bistro in the heart of town and went off without a hitch.
Afterward, when he was sure that Daniel had returned to his hotel, James drove to John’s house and reported back everything he could remember while John made tea and set them up in the library. Sherlock paced in front of the fireplace, brandishing the poker until John took it from him to reposition the logs and stir the flames.

“Let’s not kill anyone with this before we save James’ life, eh?”

Sherlock scoffed and threw up his hands before making his way to the sofa and flouncing down on it, then bouncing back up to accept a cup of tea from John. “Right,” he said. “Let me see if I’ve got everything so far. You got to the restaurant on time and Daniel was already there. He shook your hand and did not attempt to hug you or show any other signs of affection. You were seated toward the back at a two-top and made small talk about his trip for approximately ten minutes before placing your order. What did you eat?”

“Sherlock, do we really need to know what they ate?” John sat down next to him and ran a hand up and down Sherlock’s thigh. Sherlock recognised the gesture for what it was, an attempt to calm and settle him, but they were so close to the end now, and he had no idea what missing information might be useful.

James shrugged and gave John an apologetic smile. “I ordered beef medallions. He ordered the same thing.”

“Interesting.” Sherlock steepled his fingers under his lower lip and squinted into the fireplace.

John looked back and forth between Sherlock and James. “Why is that interesting?”

“He ordered the same thing. He’s probably attempting to create a bond through shared interests and preferences. What did you drink?”

“We shared a bottle of red wine, a Merlot, one that I picked. I only had one glass, he had most of the rest of it.”

Sherlock nodded as if he had suspected as much.

“And the conversation? How did that go?”

“Well, it started as typical first date banter, I guess. He told me he was glad I’d been in touch and that he was grateful to get out of London for a few days. I thanked him for coming so far and assured him that we could’ve met in London upon my return, and he said that he was due for a break from work and had always wanted to see this part of Scotland. He promised he wouldn’t monopolise my time but said he hoped there would be a second date.”

“He said he hoped there’d be a second date that early in your conversation?” John asked.

“Yes, I thought it seemed a bit eager, to be honest, but I said I hoped so, too.”

“Hmm. Go on. What else did you talk about?” Sherlock asked.

“He asked a lot of questions about my military experience, which I’m sure doesn’t surprise you. Some of it was pretty general, like what the food was like and what we did for fun. Some of it was more political.”

“Such as?” Sherlock asked.

“Let me think. He asked what I thought about the lift on the ban restricting women from combat, and
if I’d had female recruits. He wanted to know if it was hard to be gay in the military.”

“What did you tell him?” Sherlock tried not to look at John as he asked, knowing that his request for more information had little to do with the case.

James met his eye and raised one eyebrow. “That it’s hard to have a personal life, period, in the military.”

“What else?”

James took a sip of his tea before continuing. “He wanted to know where I’d been stationed, when I was discharged, how I was injured, all that sort of thing. I knew he already knew most of what he was asking, and I didn’t tell him anything I wouldn’t have told anyone else. As John can tell you, most of that information is classified.”

“I assume you asked him questions, as well?”

“I did, all the usual types of things. Where in London he lived, if he liked his job, what he did in his free time. He was fairly forthcoming, to be honest, and didn’t falter even when I asked him about his family. His profile said he has one brother and one sister, and he talked openly and easily about both of them. He even showed me pictures.”

“Pictures? And you didn’t recognize either of them?”

“I did not. Also, he didn’t say a word about a deceased brother, not that I thought he would. But then I wondered if he hasn’t falsified his Agency profile, because as far as I remember, I’ve never had a recruit named Cotter.”

“Interesting.”

“Sherlock, are you sure this is the right man?” John asked.

Sherlock didn’t respond right away but instead disappeared into his mind palace to quickly review his files. When he came back James was pouring them all another cup of tea and John was adding a log to the fire.

“It’s him. He’s definitely hiding something about his or his brother’s identity but I’m more concerned about his intent to kill James at this point. When is your next date?”

“We didn’t set one. He said he would text me tomorrow.”

They talked for another hour, James providing information about Daniel’s body language and tone of voice, little details about his demeanour and attitude that Sherlock used to create a composite of a man who was trying hard to cover his anger and appear charming and genuine. When they parted, James said, Daniel had put one hand on James’ bicep and kissed his cheek, but did not suggest a nightcap or make any other advances.

Convinced they had gone over the date thoroughly enough, Sherlock thanked James and made him promise that he’d be in touch the minute he heard from Daniel again.

Though he found it increasingly hard to sit and wait, Sherlock knew he had to allow Daniel to set up the second date, and then the third, as it was the only way for Daniel to set the scene to his exact requirements. He spent the following morning trailing Annette around the house and generally getting underfoot until she eventually sent him outside with a paint scraper and ordered him to work on the wood around the windows in advance of having two cousins, both handymen, come to do
repair work.

He spent the early afternoon camped out in the train station, hoping to catch a glimpse of a brunette woman with size five feet checking into a locker, but that proved fruitless, as did his time spent later that day in the hotel lobby. He returned home as Annette was leaving, and for a brief moment he considered asking her to return to the hotel room to see what else she could find, but even in his desperation for more information, he didn’t want to put her in harm’s way.

“How’s the case going, then?” she asked as she opened the car door.

“We’re in limbo right now, waiting for tonight’s date.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it, that things are moving quickly? Where are they going tonight?”

“The restaurant at the Knockendarroch hotel. James is meeting him there for drinks at seven, with dinner to follow.”

“The Knockendarroch is nice. I have a cousin who works there.”

“How many cousins do you have, exactly?”

“A couple dozen. Stephen is a bartender there. Want me to see if he’s working tonight and have him keep an eye on things?”

Sherlock weighed the pros and cons of getting anyone else involved, ultimately deciding against it. “No, but thank you. It would be too hard to explain why you want him to keep on eye on them.”

“All right. I’ll be back tomorrow morning at ten. I made a shepherd's pie for your dinner, it’s in the fridge.”

“Does it have peas in it?”

“John told me you like peas, so yes, it does,” she answered, smiling as she got into her car. “Have a good night.”

Sherlock watched until her car was down the drive and out of sight, thinking about loose ends and dead ends, then went into the house and closed the door behind him. The house smelled of cooked mince and spices, and the last rays of sunshine streamed strong and bright through clean windows. The ongoing ordering of the house provided some semblance of control, while everything outside seemed to hang in the balance of the unknown. He sought out John and held him tight, grounding himself in his home and husband.

James reported that the second date was much like the first, but after several cocktails and a bottle of wine, Daniel had loosened up considerably and told him, without making eye contact and while fiddling with his wine glass, that he’d Googled James and read about the military disaster that resulted in the death of his recruits and his ultimate dismissal from service. Again, James offered little information but stressed to Daniel that he had been cleared of any wrongdoing and would carry the burden of those losses until the day he died. Daniel hadn’t continued down that line of conversation but instead opined that while he knew peace was elusive, he was sure James would find it.

“So you think he’s trying to tease out more information from James about what happened that day?” John asked as they got ready for bed. “Maybe information specific to his brother?”

Sherlock wet his toothbrush and reached for the toothpaste. “It’s hard to know without observing
him firsthand, but yes, I suspect he’s digging for whatever he can find about the incident. A person like this will have become obsessed with his brother’s last moments and will fuel his need for revenge with those details.”

John nodded and took the toothpaste from Sherlock. “And what about the third date? Have they arranged anything?”

“Indeed they have, and the way Daniel has set it up is very interesting.”

“How’s that?”

“Before they left dinner tonight Daniel told James he hoped he wasn’t being presumptuous, but that he’d made a reservation for tomorrow night at Caffe Scozia. It’s right in the centre of town, surrounded by other buildings, and only a three minute walk to the train station. Plus, I bet if we checked we’d find out that he’s booked a table by the front windows.”

“Huh. So you think it’s going to be tomorrow night?”

“Based on all the evidence available, yes, I do.”

John followed Sherlock into the bedroom and watched as Sherlock pulled off his robe and stepped out of his briefs. “What do we do now, then?”

Sherlock tugged at the hem of John’s t-shirt and helped him lift it over his head. Stepping closer, he put his hands on John’s hips and pressed his lips to his temple. “Right now, we’re going to go to bed and partake in various, long-drawn-out sexual pleasures.”

“Such as?”

“You haven’t noticed me staring at your mouth all day?”

John turned a delightful shade of pink and ran the tip of his index finger over his bottom lip. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Sherlock took that index finger between his own fingers and sucked it into his mouth. “I’m feeling particularly oral today, and whereas I’ve never spent much time on the aesthetics of my own penis, I have to say I’ve become a bit obsessed with the way it looks sliding into your mouth.”

“God, Sherlock. What else? What else have you been thinking about?”

“That tomorrow we’re going to check out the rooftops with a sightline to Caffe Scozia’s front windows.”

John shook his head and laughed. “I don’t know if I should be jealous of your multi-track brain or not. Should we call the police, too? What if we can’t figure out where the sniper will be? And actually,” John said, pausing as Sherlock reached behind him and cupped his arse, “what are we going to do if we do figure it out? I’m not really keen on a stand-off with a sniper. We really need to call the police.”

Sherlock stopped nibbling on John’s earlobe long enough to say, “We will figure it out. However, Annette has a cousin on the local police force. I’d be most comfortable going to her if we must.”

“Yeah, we must. First thing tomorrow, yeah?”

“Mmm. Get in bed.”

The next day brought sunshine, a delicious round of sleepy frotting, a lazy breakfast of coffee and
toast, and Annette. Sherlock pulled his robe tighter around him when he heard the front door open, then looked over at John, perched on a chair at the kitchen table, hair in complete disarray, buttery crumbs on his fingertips. Debauched but presentable.

“We’re in here,” Sherlock called, finishing a text to James.

Annette popped through the doorway with a grin on her face and a shopping bag in her hand. “Late start to the morning, boys?”

“Hello, Annette,” John answered. “Looks like a lovely day.”

“Indeed it is. What are your plans? Anything new with the case?”

“We’re going to do some recognisance in town, actually.” Sherlock carried his empty plate and mug to the sink and turned on the tap.

“Ooh, like spies?” Annette asked, eyebrows raised as she pulled an apron over her head and tied the strings behind her back. She shooed Sherlock out of the way and squirted some dishwashing liquid into the sink.

“Don’t go getting any big ideas, you,” John countered, shoving the last of the toast into his mouth and swirling the dregs of the coffee in his mug. Sherlock moved to pour him more but John shook his head and carried his empties to the sink. “You already know too much about what’s going on.”

“But haven’t I been helpful? I know Pitlochry like the back of my hand and I know everyone here. What are you looking for?”

“You have been helpful, but there’s nothing for you to do at this point. Thank you, though.” Sherlock put on his best ‘I’m serious’ face until she shrugged her shoulders and turned back to the dishes. “Actually, there is one thing. I recall you said one of your cousins is a police officer. It’s probably time we brought her in on this. Can you text me her name and number?”

Annette wiped her hands on the apron and pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “Aye, of course. Her name is Olivia.”

Half an hour later John and Sherlock were showered, dressed, and ready to go. They spent the afternoon checking out the back alleys and tiny laneways between the restaurant and the train station, taking note of service entrances, back stairwells, balconies, and anything else Sherlock deemed of possible significance. Fire escapes provided access to the rooftops directly across from Caffe Scozia, and they carefully surveyed the various vantage points from all angles until Sherlock was satisfied he could predict where the sniper would make her nest.

John kept careful notes in a small notebook he kept in his front pocket, despite Sherlock’s claims that he was filing everything away in his mind palace.

“What else do you have in that palace of yours,” John asked as they made their way to the police station.

Sherlock shrugged. “All sorts of things. The important things.”

“Am I in there?”

Sherlock scoffed. “John, please. I added an entire room for you shortly after we met.”

“Wow, a whole room?”
“Yes, although I need to update and expand it. Since we’ve married and become sexually active I find I have far more information than I can adequately store in one room. I anticipate you’ll have a wing before the end of the year.”

John smiled, his face lighting up with pleasure. “That’s, um, good. Yeah. And this case? Does that have its own room?”

Sherlock slowed to a stop and peered down the narrow gap between two buildings. “Not its own room, no. I only need a small box for what we’ve discovered so far.”

“And I get a whole wing?” John went up on his toes and leaned in to kiss him.

“Indeed.” Sherlock kissed back, enjoying the way John basked in the knowledge of his vast holdings in Sherlock’s mind palace. “I’ve stored memories of all our dates, some in snapshot form, our conversations, our intimacies, and so on. I’ve got boxes filled with files on your past, your family history, your health, your military files, etcetera.”

“Amazing. That’s fantastic.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Be that as it may,” Sherlock said, interrupting himself for another kiss, “none of that is going to help us save James. Needs must,” he finished, nodding toward the front door of the police station.

Olivia was attentive as Sherlock got her up to speed but insisted she could take no action until she’d reviewed the NSY and military reports that had already been filed. Acquiring those files, Sherlock knew, was both a stalling tactic to ascertain whether or not Sherlock was off his rocker, and a bureaucratic process that could take days, if not weeks. He was hardly bothered, though. He had gone to the police to appease John and had expected the exact response they’d received. At least they were on record now, should anything go horribly wrong.

He didn’t think anything would go horribly wrong, but there was always something, wasn’t there? he thought as they left the police station.

They were on their way to their hiding spot on a rooftop across the street from the restaurant, well in advance of the time of James’ date, when a text alert sounded. Sherlock swiped his phone’s screen as they walked, stopped dead still, and frowned.

“Who is it?”

“Annette.”

“What’s going on? What did she say?”

“She’s sent an address.”

“That’s all? Nothing else?”

The phone pinged again. “It just says ‘now,’ all caps, exclamation point.”

Sherlock read the address out to John while typing a response. “Map that for me, can you?”

“Got it.” John typed the address into his phone and waited for it to spit out map coordinates. “Huh. Are you sure that’s the address?”
“I’m sure. Where is it?”

“Directly across the road from Annette’s flat.”

Sherlock was already pulling up a mental map of the town as he grabbed John’s arm, spun on his heel, and said, “Let’s go.”

It was a matter of ten minutes before they were at the address Annette had sent, and then another thirty seconds before they’d climbed three flights of steep stairs and were standing on a quiet, dark landing outside the door to a flat.

“This is it,” John confirmed. “Now what?”

There was a quiet thump from inside and then Annette’s voice called out, exasperated.

“Oh, for the love of God, come in already!”

Sherlock turned the doorknob and pushed the door open a few inches, curiosity trumping caution. John, nearly flush against his back, whispered, “Careful.” Sherlock could feel him go up on his toes in an effort to see more.

The sight that greeted them left Sherlock speechless. Ascertaining they were in no immediate danger, he swung the door wide and stepped into the large, mostly empty room. His mind raced to categorise pertinent details while discarding others. *Bare white walls, no furniture, hardwood floors, large windows, somewhat sheer window coverings, AW50 rifle and a box of .50 BMG cartridges on the floor next to a black carryall, two women, Annette sitting on the back of the other, brunette, hands tied behind her back with what looked to be a scarf...*

“Mary? What the fuck?”

John’s voice startled him out of his detail-gathering. He spun from the scene in front of him and back to John.

“Fuck is right,” the woman on the ground groaned.

“You know her?” Sherlock asked, looking back and forth between John and the woman he’d just identified as Mary.

“Little help here?” Annette said, grunting as she pressed the struggling woman’s squirming shoulders against the floor.

“I dated her. She was blonde then,” he said distractedly.

“I’m surprised you recognise me at all, you were already so gone on his nibs here. Broke up with me in a fucking text.”

A door inside Sherlock’s head started to rattle, facts and memories butting up against it. What were the odds that someone John had met and dated through the Agency would now be working as a sniper with the intent of murdering one of John’s closest friends?

“No really, your previous dating lives are fascinating, and it may look like I asked you over for tea, but could I get some help? Maybe call my cousin and have her come over? Today?” Annette was still sitting on the other woman’s back.

Sherlock snapped to attention and crossed the room in four great strides. “John, can you please
“You’re hurt,” he said, dialling the police. This close to the window he could see directly into Annette’s flat across the road, including most of the front room, part of the front door, and James, straightening his tie in a mirror.

“I’ll be fine. Just a few bumps and scrapes.”


“Jesus, you really are slow, aren’t you?” Mary muttered.

“That’s enough out of you. Save it for the police. What I want to know,” Sherlock said, arms crossed and peering at Annette, “is how you figure into all of this?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know that, too,” Mary said, blowing some fringe out of her eyes before resting her cheek on the floor.

Annette shrugged. “I know you said that I couldn’t help but I was so curious, is all. I’ve heard enough over the last few days to piece together what was happening, and after leaving your place each day I’ve been coming back to the hotel to see what I could figure out. I’d seen this one,” she said, glancing down at Mary, “in the hotel bar with James’ date, so I figured she was the one staying in his room with him. I had no idea what she was up to ‘til today, though.”

Sherlock weighed her words against her tone and found nothing lacking; she was telling the truth. “And what happened today?”

“Same as yesterday. I came to the hotel after I left your place, had a drink at the bar, nothing unusual, you know? Then I saw her in the lobby and something seemed different. Her outfit, the black bag, her posture. I can’t really say what it was, but I decided to follow her.”

On the ground, Mary sighed. “Had it been you or him,” she said, nudging her chin toward John, “I’d have copped on. This one, though? She wasn’t worth noticing.”

“I’d say she’s worth noticing now,” John responded.

“Go on,” Sherlock said to Annette. “What happened next?”

Annette wiped a drop of blood from the corner of her mouth with the cuff of her sleeve and sniffed. “I followed her here. I figured it out pretty quickly then, it being right across the road from my flat, and with James there, getting ready for his date. I waited a few minutes before I came inside and, well, here we are.”

“Annette,” John said, a look of complete befuddlement on his face, “she could’ve killed you.”

Another shrug from Annette. “I’m pretty non-threatening. I told her I was looking for my friend’s flat and must’ve had the wrong address. She told me to get lost and turned her back on me, so I jumped her. Had I not had the advantage things might’ve ended differently, but once she was knocked out it was pretty easy to tie her up. Then I texted Sherlock.”

John’s mouth fell open.

Sherlock had a hard time keeping the grin off his face, but thoughts of the mistakes he’d made kept
him in the moment. “I have to say, this isn’t at all what I was expecting. I thought you’d do it tonight, during dinner, so that Daniel couldn’t be blamed.”

“Yeah, I figured that much out,” Mary said. “I saw the two of you snooping around today so we had a little change of plans. He still won’t be blamed, though. He’s on a train back to London as we speak. And I won’t be blamed, either, as I haven’t actually done anything wrong.”

“Rude, standing James up like that,” John said.

“No ruder than you breaking up with me by text.”

“Oh, and also? I’m recording this,” John waved his phone in front of him and winked at Sherlock. “So is that why you’re doing this? Why you’re working with him? Because I broke up with you?”

John looked at Mary while handing Annette a tissue for her lip.

“Oh please,” Mary spit out, “don’t flatter yourself.”

“No, I’d say she knew Daniel before she ever met you, John. I assume she dated you to try to get information about James’ whereabouts. Is that right, Mary?”

Everyone looked at Mary, who had now gone silent as she glared at the wall in front of her.

“I’ll take that as a yes. What I don’t know,” Sherlock continued, “is if you’re helping Daniel out of the goodness of your heart or if you have a connection to one of James’ cadets. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough, won’t we?”

They stood silent then, watching the woman on the floor, listening to the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and down the hall. Annette’s cousin and another uniformed officer walked through the open door and into the flat. “Well, I’ll be,” Olivia said. “Annette, what the hell are you doing here?”

“She’s with us,” Sherlock said.

“Quite right,” added John, and this time Sherlock couldn’t hold back the smile.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve been reading the endnotes pertaining to mental health and cognitive behavioral therapy, you may be interested in an article I wrote for Carnation Books about Imposter Syndrome. You can find Part I here.
Mycroft tapped his index finger on the file folder and pushed it across the coffee table. He picked up the tumbler of whiskey John had poured him, leaned back against the cushions of the armchair, and let out a long sigh. “This was incredibly foolhardy of you, Sherlock. Of both of you.”

Sherlock recrossed his legs and huffed. “Please. We caught a would-be assassin and saved a life. You should be thanking us, not criticising our methods.”

“Be that as it may, you involved a young woman in your shenanigans, had her break into a hotel room, then failed to notice that she was trailing your suspect and placing herself in an extremely dangerous situation. What would you have done had she —”

“But she didn’t,” Sherlock interrupted. “She’s fine. She’s more than fine. You should be thanking her. She accomplished far more than any of your own incompetent team.”

Next to him on the couch, John was radiating vibes of indignation. They had both spent the two days after Mary Morstan’s capture being questioned by Mycroft’s minions and had looked forward to a quiet night in. Mycroft’s arrival and subsequent dressing down were not even close to what they’d had planned for the evening. Sherlock placed his hand over John’s clenched fist and squeezed.

Mycroft interlaced his fingers on his lap and glared. “My point Sherlock is that you and Doctor Watson have —”

This time, it was John who interrupted. “Do tell us, Mycroft, what exactly is it that we’ve done? As soon as James came to us we contacted you and the Yard, and to be honest, the lot of you were completely useless. We did not, in point of fact, ask Annette to trail anyone. And while, yes, she did pose as a housekeeper to gather information from Daniel Cotter’s hotel room, the information she gathered allowed Sherlock to construct a theory as to exactly how and when an attempt on James’ life would be made. We went to the local police with our suspicions. Thanks to the three of us, you now have two suspects in hand, more evidence than could possibly be needed to convict them of attempted murder, and perhaps most importantly, resounding proof that the Arranged Marriage Program is corrupt and has been a conduit for criminals to identify, target, and make attempts on the lives of innocent people. Shall I go on?”

Mycroft sniffed and averted his gaze. “While that might be accurate,” he began before Sherlock cut him off again.

“Is there anything in that file John and I don’t already know, Mycroft? I doubt you’d have come all this way if there weren’t something important you wished to tell us. Unless, perhaps, the Highlands were calling to you? Have you decided to take a bit of a holiday?”

Mycroft rolled his eyes and arranged his mouth into a moue of disgust. “Hardly. The information in this file should fill in some details of what you’ve no doubt already observed and deduced. We’ve ascertained that Mary Morstan was Cadet Kristine Galbraith’s long-term partner, up to and including
the period of time that Cadet Galbraith served under Major Sholto’s command. Daniel Cotter was Cadet Galbraith’s cousin. So, while you were correct that Mr Cotter had close ties to one of Major Sholto’s recruits, he was not, in fact, the recruit’s brother.

“Ms Morstan and Mr Cotter knew each other through Cadet Galbraith and, following her death, conspired to murder Major Sholto, whom they blamed for her tragic end. Unable to find him in the months following his discharge and subsequent placement in our protection program, they infiltrated the Arranged Marriage Program, but as Major Sholto had not yet registered, there was nothing to find. Ms Morstan then accessed the files of his close friends, including Doctor Watson, in hopes that she could track down Major Sholto through them. She bypassed the Program’s algorithm-based system for matching candidates and had her folder sent to Doctor Watson, who then responded to her request for a date.”

“Jesus Christ,” John muttered. “But how did she know who his friends were? How did she know to look for me?”

“That would’ve been easy, John,” Sherlock said. “Social media is an easy way to identify who someone is close to. Before his discharge, James may have had a Facebook page or something similar.”

Mycroft nodded toward the file. “It’s all in there. John, you can rest assured that you gave nothing away.”

“And by the time you had indicated to Mary that you were no longer interested in pursuing a relationship with her,” Sherlock said, aware and fairly gloating that he was the reason John had dumped the other candidate, “James’ security detail had been minimised and he’d decided to enter the Program himself. Ever vigilant, Cotter had his candidate folder sent to James in hopes that James would ask to meet, but months went by and James didn’t respond. At that point, one of them broke into his house and left the note after disabling the security system.”

They were silent for a moment, reflecting on everything that had transpired from that point on. Sherlock watched his older brother, scanning him for further clues to explain his presence. He couldn’t imagine there was anything in the file that would require him to hand-deliver it. Mycroft was, as usual, impeccably dressed and coiffed but his posture revealed he was relatively relaxed. Sherlock had seen Mycroft when he was truly angry, annoyed, or frustrated with him, and Mycroft was none of those things in this moment. No, Mycroft had only pretended to berate them for their actions out of some sense of brotherly obligation. He wasn’t here to deliver official penance for their actions.

“So let me ask you again,” Sherlock said. “Why are you here?”

Mycroft fidgeted with his cufflinks and inspected his perfectly manicured nails before answering. “Perhaps I came to see how my younger brother is faring. It seems married life suits you, Sherlock.”

“John suits me,” Sherlock replied, “and that’s not why you’re here.”

“Yes, all right, fine. Is Miss Ross here, by any chance?”

“Annette?” John answered. “No, she left shortly before you arrived. Hasn’t she already been interviewed?”

“She has,” Mycroft said with a tilt of his head. “We couldn’t have compiled this report without thorough interviews with all three of you.”
“Besides,” Sherlock said, “interviewing is very much below Mycroft’s pay grade. He detests field work. Why do you want to talk with Annette?”

Mycroft shrugged, but the forced casualness of the gesture wasn’t lost on Sherlock. “As you said, she proved herself quite invaluable to this case. I’m curious to meet her in person.”

“Let me guess,” Sherlock said with a growing smile. “You think she’s wasted here cleaning house and doing odd jobs. Well, you’re right. She is. She’ll be back at ten tomorrow morning and you can come back and offer her a job then.”

“I’m hardly going to offer her a job, Sherlock, for heaven’s sake.”

Sherlock chuckled. “Oh, you will. I’ve no doubt. Now, you and your driver should head into town and book rooms at the Fonab Castle Hotel. It’s not The Four Seasons but you’ll survive.”

“Sherlock, he can stay here with us. We’ve got the room.”

Sherlock shuddered. “Lord no, he can’t stay here.”

“Sherlock.”

“John, thank you, but it’s fine. I wouldn’t wish to impose. It is your honeymoon after all.” Mycroft stood, buttoned his suit coat, and brushed down his lapels. “I believe my assistant has already booked accommodations and a dinner reservation. If it’s all right with you, I’ll come back tomorrow morning to meet with Miss Ross.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s fine,” John said, standing to shake Mycroft’s hand. “Thanks for bringing the file. I’m sure it’ll make for some interesting reading.”

“No doubt. Until tomorrow, then.” Mycroft gave them both a tight smile and made his way across the room.

John saw Mycroft out; Sherlock heard him close and lock the front door before making his way back to the library. When he returned, John leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed over his chest, one eyebrow raised, and said, “Is it me, or does it feel like you and I haven’t been alone for a very long time?”

“Eons,” Sherlock said, holding out a hand.

John joined him on the couch again and let out a contented sigh as Sherlock kissed his temple.

“We are alone now, though, aren’t we?” Sherlock murmured. “The case is over and we have nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to even think about.”

John wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s waist and smirked. “Well, I can think of some things we can do. And I swear to God, if anyone knocks on that door, I’m not answering it.”

“John, I promise that if someone knocks on that door between now and tomorrow morning, I will physically restrain you from answering it. Now tell me more about what you think we should do.”

John sat up from where he’d been reclined against Sherlock’s side and took one of his hands in both of his. He glanced up at Sherlock, then down at their hands again.


“I’m not nervous, I’m just a little unsure of how to say what I want to say.”
“In other words, you’re nervous. Just say it.”

John nodded, resolve evident in the set of his shoulders. He licked his lips and started speaking. “You and I, we’ve been having a good time, haven’t we?”

Sherlock had no idea where John was going with that sentence. “In what context?”

“Well, in every context, really, but more specifically I was thinking about sex. We’ve been having a good time in bed, right?”

“We’ve been having a phenomenal time in bed, John. I hope you know I have no complaints. Oh. I see. You have a complaint.”

“No, not at all. Not a single complaint. It’s fantastic, it really is. Everything we’ve done together has been amazing. It’s just that, well, there’s more, there’s something else I’d like to do, and I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it.”

Sherlock blinked his way through his inventory of sexual acts, which took about four seconds, as it was obvious what John was talking about. “Anal penetration.”

John swallowed and nodded. He was having a hard time meeting Sherlock’s eye. “Um, yeah.”

“John, why are you being so bashful about this? You know me well enough to know that if I weren’t on board with something I’d not waste any time telling you. I’m quite willing to try it. I trust that you’d do everything in your power to make it comfortable for me and that you’d stop if I didn’t want to continue.”

John nodded again, swallowed again. “Well, that’s the thing. I was, well, I was actually thinking that maybe we could do it the other way.”

Sherlock’s mouth may have fallen open for a split second. “You want me to penetrate you?”

“Yeah. Um, yes. I, well, that is, I love being, um, penetrated. Always have. And I’ve been thinking about it for a while now, what it would be like, you know, to do that with you, and it’s something I’d really like to do but I completely understand if it’s not something you want to try, I get it, I do, that it’s not everyone’s cup of tea, but—”

Sherlock pressed one finger to John’s blabbering mouth. “John, stop. As you are the more sexually experienced between us and therefore have been the de facto leader when it comes to our sex life, I had assumed you would also take the lead when it came to this particular act. I shouldn’t have assumed anything. I apologise for that. Perhaps I’ve come to rely too heavily on the perception of my own virginity in our dynamic. You are expressing a clear preference to … what is the terminology … to bottom?”

“Um, yeah, that’s the terminology.”

Sherlock had an image flash before his eyes, crisp as a high res photo. He saw John lying underneath him, legs spread and wrapped around his waist, pale inner thighs exposed, chest flushed, his face contorted in pleasure, his shoulders sliding against the mattress as Sherlock made love to him.

_God, yes._

He wasted no time tilting himself into John’s space, taking John’s worried face in his hands, and kissing him soundly. John breathed out a small puff of relief and kissed Sherlock back, stroking a thumb over his cheekbone and under his ear.
“I am so lucky to have you,” he whispered against Sherlock’s lips.

“Luck doesn’t come into it, John. Now, take off your clothes.”

John barked out a laugh and pulled away to look at Sherlock. “What, now?”

“Right now. Why wait?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to do this at all, so I wasn’t mentally prepared to just, I don’t know, go for it. But I mean, if you’re ready, then I guess—”

Sherlock grabbed John’s hand and pressed it to his flies. “I think I’m ready.”

John gave Sherlock’s erection a gentle squeeze and raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I’d say you are. There are some things we could talk about first, though, and some things I should do to prepare.”

“Boring.”

“But necessary.”

“I have read about this, you know.”

“Of course you have. But reading about something isn’t the same as doing it.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and reached for the top button of John’s shirt. “How about if we warm up a bit down here? Take things as they come, so to speak.”

John leaned back against the arm of the sofa with his arms folded behind his head. “By all means. I’ll never turn down a bit of snogging.”

Sherlock made short work of John’s buttons and pushed the sides of his shirt apart, revealing the plain white vest John wore underneath. Again, he rolled his eyes.

“Hey,” John joked, “at least I wasn’t wearing a jumper, too.”

“The horror,” Sherlock said, pulling the offending vest out of John’s jeans and reaching for his belt buckle. Belt undone and tossed to the floor, he positioned himself between John’s legs, hips to hips, belly to belly, and wrapped John in his arms. “I’m going to take very good care of you, you know. I’m going to, well, I don’t know exactly what I’m going to do as I’ve never done it before, but I’m going to take care of you and it’s going to be wonderful.”

“I believe you.” John wriggled under Sherlock, pushing one knee against the back of the couch to give Sherlock more room. He ran his hands down Sherlock’s back, pulled his shirt out of his trousers, and touched bare skin.

“Snogging is good,” Sherlock purred into the space under John’s jaw. “Snogging on the couch was an excellent idea.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it’s so small, there’s nowhere for you to go.”

John spun one of Sherlock’s curls around his finger and watched it bounce. “Why would I go anywhere?”

“You wouldn’t. Not far, anyway. But I quite like having you pinned underneath me. There’s so
much contact when we’re like this.”

John ran the arch of his foot up Sherlock’s calf and cupped his arse in both hands. “There is, but there’d be even more contact if we had less clothing on.”

Sherlock popped up off the couch and divested himself of his clothes in record time, then, naked and aroused, helped John with his. John’s socks, majestically airborne for a few seconds, joined the pile of clothes on the floor, immediately followed by his shirt, vest, jeans, and pants.

“There,” Sherlock said, hands on his hips, “Problem solved.”


Sherlock smiled down at him as he climbed back between John’s legs. He felt the brocade fabric of the sofa press into his knees, the wool fringe of a pillow brushing against his toes, John’s sturdy forearms coming to rest on his shoulders. The warmth of John’s body was stronger now and carried the scents of his arousal, his masculinity. All of Sherlock’s senses burned brighter with this much skin-on-skin contact.

John’s thighs were smooth and strong where they bracketed Sherlock’s hips, his chest a safe place for Sherlock to land as he lowered himself down. The snogging commenced in earnest then, a drawn-out session of slow, deep kisses and wandering hands, deep breaths and low moans. Sherlock trailed his fingers through the hair on John’s chest, feeling the strands under his fingertips, tickling, teasing. He brushed the pad of his thumb over John’s nipple and imagined the erect tissue bumping against the lines of his fingerprints.

He moved to John’s other nipple and wriggled contentedly when John pushed his splayed fingers down and over Sherlock’s buttocks, cupped and kneaded them, spread and lifted them, stroked them, massaged them. “I love your arse,” he said. “It’s a magnificent arse.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

John tipped his head back and hummed as Sherlock traced the contours of John’s erection with his thumb and index finger, careful to stay on the side of foreplay. He reached lower and held John’s testicles in one palm, rolled and stroked them, then reached lower and rubbed two fingers against John’s perineum.

John moaned into Sherlock’s mouth, his kiss stuttering as he took a shaky breath. Sherlock nudged the tip of his nose over John’s cheek and reached lower.

“Let’s take this to bed,” John whispered, and Sherlock nodded and said, “In a minute.”

Sliding down just enough to rest his head on John’s chest, Sherlock listened to John’s heartbeat. He drew invisible designs on John’s bicep and in the crook of his elbow, the skin there impossibly delicate. “You’ll tell me if I’m doing it wrong?” he said.

John held Sherlock close, kissed the top of his head. “We’ll be doing it together, but yes, I’ll tell you if something isn’t right.”

“I want it to be good for you.”

“It will be.”

Sherlock stayed still for another minute, peaceful and snug in John’s arms. He felt the hammering of his heart mirrored in the throb of his erection where it was pressed against the sofa. When he was
ready to move he sat back and looked his fill at John, aroused, flushed, tousled. Sherlock held out his hand. “Come on, then.”

John disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door when they reached the bedroom, so Sherlock crawled to the middle of the bed and lay on his back with his hands folded on his belly. He listened to the sounds of running water, the rustle of his hair against the pillow, his own breathing. He watched the rise and fall of his abdomen under his penis, still hard, curved just ever so subtly away from his body. He thought about touching himself, maybe just a stroke or two, then reprimanded himself. Wait. Wait for John. Give him everything, give him the start, the middle, the end.

He was still mostly erect when John came out of the bathroom, turned off the lights, and came to bed. “You’ve been patient,” he said as he climbed onto the mattress and straddled Sherlock’s thighs. John smelled like soap and toothpaste and his hands were slightly damp against Sherlock’s waist, as if he hadn’t wanted to waste too much time drying them.

“You weren’t that long,” Sherlock countered. He reached up and pressed one palm to John’s chest, just over his heart. “I love you.”

John covered Sherlock’s hand with his own and smiled. “I love you, too. Very much.”

Sherlock tugged until John curled lower, close enough to kiss. John didn’t linger on Sherlock’s mouth for long, though, and soon began to inch his way down Sherlock’s body, licking and kissing as he went. Sherlock closed his eyes and listened to the soft, wet sounds John’s tongue and lips made on the different parts of his body, feeling each spot cool into gooseflesh as John moved lower, neck to nipple to sternum to belly.

John kept one elbow planted near Sherlock’s hip and lifted Sherlock’s cock away from his stomach, drawing it up toward his mouth. Sherlock opened his eyes in time to see John press a sweet kiss to the flare of his glans, then lick the same spot with the very tip of his tongue. Sherlock shivered.

“Love your cock,” John said, reverent. He turned his head to the side and pressed his cheek to the underside of Sherlock’s erection, rubbed his nose against it, his jaw, the corner of his mouth. A fresh bead of fluid blossomed out of Sherlock and John licked it away. “Love it,” he said again, then opened his mouth wide and took it in.

John moved slowly. He licked slowly, slid his lips up and down slowly, stroked slowly. Sherlock’s breath seemed to pick up exponentially and in direct contrast to the pace of John’s mouth, but when John released Sherlock and hovered, the tip of his tongue a hair’s breadth from Sherlock’s frenulum, Sherlock stopped breathing altogether.

Then John flicked his tongue and made contact, and Sherlock’s belly quivered and went tight, concave.

“Love,” John flicked again, “it.”

“If you keep loving it like this I won’t be able to perform for you.”

“Hmm. I think you’ll be just fine.”

Sherlock watched as John’s head bobbed up and down, faster, his lips stretched and red and shiny and slick, his pale eyelashes resting over flushed pink cheeks. Then John opened his eyes and stared right up at Sherlock, and Sherlock had to close his eyes again.

He’d been a fool to deny these pleasures for so long, he thought, although it seemed impossible that
he’d have enjoyed them with anyone but John.

When Sherlock had to reach down and squeeze the base of his cock to keep from coming, John stopped and gave him one final, decadent lick, then stretched over to the side, reached into his bedside table, and pulled out a bottle of lube.

“Would you be okay with us starting like this?” he asked as he snapped open the lid. “With me on top?”

“Is this topping from the bottom?” Sherlock asked.

John smiled. “Yeah, it is. It’ll help me set the pace for our first time.”

“Of course. Yes. Whatever you think is best.”

John leaned over and kissed him, and Sherlock stayed there, in that moment, only somewhat aware of what John’s hands were doing with the slick until he felt John take him in one hand, guide him up and back, and press him exactly where he wanted him.

Sherlock’s eyes flew open. “Oh!”

“Ready?”

“Should I … should I do something?”

“Not just yet.” John sat up straight, adjusted his hips, and sank down just the tiniest bit.

“Oh, God.”

“I love this part,” John sighed, “this first moment, the breach.”

“Oh, God.”

“Breathe, Sherlock.”

Sherlock dug his fingers into John’s thighs as John sank down a little more. John took his time, took great care with little rolls of his hips, his thighs flexing as he raised himself up incrementally and lowered himself back down. Sherlock found it hard to look away from John’s face, reading waves of tension and relief in the set of his brow, the flutter of his eyelids. He was beautiful.

And then John was moving, really moving, and Sherlock felt a heat and a friction he couldn’t have compared to anything else that had ever come before. In time, John settled on Sherlock’s thighs, stopped, and let out a long sigh. He looked down at Sherlock with half-closed eyes and a smug smile. He had taken Sherlock completely.

“John.”

“Mm?”

“I’m in you.”

“Yeah. Doing okay?”

“It’s so much tighter than your hand or mouth. I mean, of course it is, I just, it’s just so, it’s so …”

“So?”
“Everywhere. Surrounded.” Sherlock frowned at his inability to articulate his thoughts. “I mean, what your body is doing, I feel it everywhere. I think I feel it in my toes.”

“Give me your hands.”

Sherlock held up his hands and John wove their fingers together, then braced his weight over Sherlock and began to slide up and down again. “I feel you everywhere, too.”

Sherlock watched in wonder as John picked up the pace. The harder John rode him the harder John’s cock got, until it was rigid and smacking against his body with each thrust.

“Sherlock. God. Oh, yes.”

Sherlock was stunned that John could take so much pleasure from Sherlock when all he was doing was lying there, flat on his back, and then he wondered if John could take even greater pleasure if he moved, too, so he spread his legs, bent his knees, and thrust up.

It turned out that John definitely could take more pleasure from Sherlock if Sherlock did that.

“Oh, fuck, oh yeah, that’s it.”

“Like that?”

“Yeah, just like … oh God, yeah.”

Sherlock let go of John’s hands and took hold of his hips, helping him move as Sherlock thrust in, over and over again. He turned his thoughts toward finding the best angle, pace, and depth for John, never realising that he had no other thoughts at all, nothing intrusive, nothing out of the moment, nothing strange or odd or weird threatening to burst out of his mouth.

Outside of conscious thought, Sherlock’s cock was having the time of its life and his balls were singing in praise of their imminent release. His arse ached with the repetitive contractions and his thighs were straining, but Sherlock’s physicality was in a secondary dimension to the emotional and mental bliss of taking John so thoroughly apart.

Sherlock wasn’t sure what dimension John was currently in, but everything about him seemed heightened, bigger and greater than merely alive and aroused. John was a cresting wave, a musical crescendo, a rebirth taking place before Sherlock’s very eyes. Slick with sweat, shaking and straining, John stared down at Sherlock, swirled his fingers around his own nipples, and said, “God, Sherlock. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.”

Later, Sherlock wouldn’t remember making the decision, but he must’ve had some sort of thought process that involved flipping John onto his back, spreading his legs up and back, and attempting to pound him through the mattress. Hips and back and arse driving him forward, Sherlock fucked.

Anchored by John’s arms and thighs, Sherlock buried his face in John’s neck and licked and sucked on the salty skin there. He felt one of John’s hands slide up the nape of his neck, felt his fingers tangle in his hair, felt them pull. He heard John’s frantic, “Yes, yes, yes,” heard his own whispered response, “John, John, John.”

Sherlock was close, and then he felt John reach down and grab his arse, felt John’s fingers dig into his cheeks and pry them apart before teasing inward, and Sherlock stuttered to a stop, his hips grinding in tight to John’s body, his orgasm hovering, a bird deciding whether to take flight. Pulled between the sensations of his cock buried inside John and John’s fingers playing with his arse, Sherlock twitched his hips from side to side, pushing against John’s palms. When one of John’s
fingers brushed over his arsehole, Sherlock groaned and held still, and then John’s fingers were there, rubbing and caressing and nudging, and Sherlock dug his toes into the sheets and bucked so hard they both slid up the bed. John curled his back and rounded his shoulders, grappling for purchase as Sherlock’s movements became more and more erratic. One of John’s fingertips slipped inside and Sherlock growled, “I’m going to come,” and began humping into John, hard and fast as he held his breath and waited for the first wave to pull him under.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” John panted, his thighs gripping Sherlock’s waist, and with one last press of John’s finger Sherlock spilled, vaguely aware of John pulsing hot between them.

With the return of Sherlock’s breath came the sensation of John’s fingertips dancing up Sherlock’s back, his foot resting on Sherlock’s leg, a pat to his backside.

A caress.

A kiss.

“I have no words for how magnificent that was,” John said, one arm flung up over his head.

“I have one.”

“Yeah?”

“Repeatable.” Sherlock propped himself up above John and smiled down at him. A damp curl partially blocked his view. “It really was rather good, wasn’t it?”

“It really, really was. You surprised me with that flip, but I’m absolutely not complaining. It was bloody fantastic. You were amazing, Sherlock. Jesus.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock beamed. “Oh, and there are so many other positions to try!”

“Liked topping, did you?”

“What’s not to like?” Sherlock said, then grimaced as his softening penis slid unceremoniously out of John with an unspeakably rude sound. The cool air was most unwelcome after such delicious heat.

“Yeah,” John laughed, “I should’ve warned you about that part.”

Sherlock rolled to the side, yawned, and pulled up the blanket. They were quiet for a bit, and then John said, “Hey, Sherlock? It didn’t seem like you had any deductions or anything that time. Did you?”

Sherlock opened his eyes and blinked up at the ceiling. “Oh. No, I didn’t. That’s interesting, isn’t it?”

John got up and headed to the bathroom. “Like I’ve said before, it doesn’t bother me when you do, it just seemed different this time.”

Sherlock stretched, fingers and toes splayed, back arching, thinking about what made this time different. Maybe it was the novelty of what they’d just done, although everything they’d done before was novel to him at one point. Maybe it was his complete, unwavering focus on John as he took a more active role, although he’d certainly been focused on John before. Or, maybe it was just them growing together, so trusting, so safe in their vulnerability, that Sherlock’s brain had given up the fight and let him be for once.

He found he didn’t really care.
John came back to bed with a wet flannel for Sherlock and after Sherlock had cleaned himself up and flung the flannel over the side of the bed, he curled himself around John’s body and sank toward sleep. Maybe his brain had stopped fighting him, and maybe he needed to stop fighting his brain. Maybe, with John, he was finally finding peace with himself.
This is it, the final chapter of The Wedding Garments. Thank you, everyone, for coming along for the ride. Thank you, happierstill, for all your diligent beta work, your friendship, and your support. Thank you, ME, for persevering and getting it done despite the depression, and life, and surgery, and all that stuff. I did it!

Note from happierstill:

One and a half years ago cwb and I sat down at a taco restaurant in Santa Fe (girls’ trip!) to brainstorm about the idea she’d been mulling over quite some time: having an arranged marriage story with Sherlock being uncomfortable about sex and John providing him with silk wedding garments. Since that day, cwb has gone through a lot including a major bout of depression, a partial hospitalization program and has been working on recovery. Through all of this she kept writing, kept true to her original plan (even with the difficult casework chapters!) and succeeded in finishing a fabulous novel-length story with twists and turns, character development and laugh-out-loud funny moments, not to mention a handful of fabulous sex scenes. Cwb, it was an honor to be your beta and your best friend through this transformative year and a half.

(Almost one year later)

Sherlock zipped up his suitcase and set it on the floor, making more room on their bed for John’s roller bag and piles of folded clothes. “Do you want me to finish packing for you?” he called out.

“Yeah, sure, thanks,” John answered from the kitchen. “I’m going to clean out the fridge and take the rubbish down to the bins. No need to let these leftovers fester while we’re gone. Did you tell Mrs Hudson we’re leaving this afternoon? I don’t want her to worry.”

“I did, but knock on her door and remind her, would you?” Sherlock stacked John’s jeans together on one side of the suitcase and his jumpers on the other. He inventoried as he packed: shirts, pants, socks, toiletry bag, arranging and rearranging until everything was neatly nested inside the bag’s compartments. He straightened the collar of one of John’s button-downs, tucked in an errant pair of socks, then closed the case and set it on the floor next to his own.

John called out that he’d be back in a moment but Sherlock waited until he heard the click of the front door before he made his way to the armoire, knelt down, and opened the lowest drawer. He reached around a stack of bed linens until his fingers found what he was looking for, then carefully pulled the pillowcase-wrapped parcel out and slid the drawer shut. Smiling, he smoothed down the fabric and reached for his suitcase.

Thirty minutes later they were kissing Mrs Hudson goodbye and promising to text when they got there.

“Drive safely, boys, and have a wonderful time! Your first anniversary, oh, it’s so romantic! Don’t
you worry about a thing here, I’ll keep my eye on the flat and collect your mail.”

“We appreciate it, Mrs Hudson. Can we bring you back anything from Pitlochry?” John asked.

“Not a thing, dear. Off you go now. Enjoy your week, just the two of you!”

Sherlock gave her a last peck on the cheek before climbing behind the steering wheel and turning the key in the ignition. John clicked his seatbelt into place and rested his hand on Sherlock’s thigh, giving it a soft squeeze as they pulled away from the kerb.

“You ready?”

Sherlock nodded as he manoeuvred the car into traffic. “Very much so. I’m looking forward to seeing Annette again, and the changes she’s made to the place.”

“The photos looked great, didn’t they? I didn’t think the tennis hut could possibly be turned into something like that, not without a complete tear-down and rebuild.”

Although they hadn’t been back to John’s ancestral home since their honeymoon, Annette had kept them apprised of the ongoing updates and repairs to the house and property. The plans had expanded to include a complete overhaul of the tennis hut, which she would use as a home base and office. So far, her work with Mycroft had been mostly training, surveillance work, and report writing, but she was quickly learning the ropes and was eager for more and more responsibility. That she had stayed on to help John and Sherlock manage the house and property was a decision borne of her desire to stay close to her family, her love for the house, and her insistence that she not become another one of Mycroft’s workaholic drones. Indeed, Annette had proved to be her best self when she balanced several projects at one time. Now that the house and tennis hut were done, Sherlock and John wondered what she’d take on next.

Carefully renovated, the main house had been patched, painted, scrubbed and decluttered, and the tennis hut brought up to the standard of a comfortable lodge and secure safe house. Sherlock was eager to play with some of the more advanced technological gizmos and gadgets, despite Mycroft’s warnings to ‘keep his hands to himself.’

The drive was long but uneventful, spent mostly watching the cities give way to towns and the towns to villages and farms. They passed Mrs Hudson’s thermos of tea back and forth and ate the sandwiches and biscuits she’d packed for them, laughing about how offended she’d been when they told her they would just stop for a bite to eat at a roadside motorist stop.

Annette greeted them when they arrived at the house, ushering them in with warm hugs and huge grins. “Come on then, come and see what we’ve done to the place,” she urged, reaching to help with their bags. “Here, put those near the stairs and I’ll put the kettle on.”

Sherlock and John wandered through the rooms of the ground floor as Annette prepared tea in the kitchen. Gone was much of the heavy, outdated furniture, the collections of yesteryear’s knickknacks and decorative chaos. The rugs that remained had been cleaned, the furniture repaired, polished, and rearranged to highlight each room’s size and openness. Brighter hues of green and ivory offset the traditionally heavy hunter green, red, and browns. Heavy draperies had been replaced with simple linen panels and the artwork had been rehung with a focus on themes; the traditional paintings of hunting dogs and Scottish cattle were now all clustered in the more formal living room, and John’s family portraits had been moved to the library where they were joined by newly framed photographs from John and Sherlock’s wedding.

“Where did she get those?” John mused, running his finger over a candid shot of the two of them
sipping champagne and grinning at each other.

“If she has access to Mycroft she has access to Mummy,” Sherlock sighed. He was thrilled to see the wedding photos added to John’s ancestral home, but not so thrilled that his mother had had her fingers in anything to do with it.

“We should probably invite your parents up here sometime, love.”

“Bite your tongue, John.”

“We really should. They’d love it here, especially now that it’s a reflection of both of us.”

“Maybe next year,” Sherlock conceded, hoping that John would forget about it by then. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see his parents; he and John saw them every few weeks for dinner at his family’s home in the country. He found, however, that he had far less patience, if he’d ever had any at all, for his mother’s meddling now that he was living independently with his husband in London. He was no longer her pet project, and he didn’t want her to think she could create one in their home in Pitlochry. This house was where they’d started their life together, where they’d been tested under the stress of James’ unexpected appearance, where they’d laid the foundation for their sexual relationship. He was fiercely protective of it.

Sherlock watched John as they moved from room to room, observing as he picked up various objects and inspected them as if seeing them for the first time.

“This is amazing,” John said, holding up an antique ceramic dish with his family crest painted in the centre. “She’s completely kept the essence of the house but made it more livable, less stuffy. It’s like it’s the same place, just … lighter, more us.”

Sherlock ran his fingers over the brass studs on a leather armchair and looked down at the patch of sunlight he was standing in. “Did she refinish the floors, too?”

“I don’t think so, but without so many of the rugs covering them, you can actually see more of the wood now. Come on, let’s go look at the rest.”

They walked through the rest of the downstairs, noting all the small changes that made such a large impact. The previously unused game room had been turned into an office and some of the books from the sitting room and library had been moved to bookshelves repurposed from somewhere else. Sherlock made a note to come back and explore the titles later. The kitchen was mostly the same, save for an updated backsplash and dishwasher. Despite having a perfectly functioning formal dining room, Sherlock knew the kitchen would remain the heart of the house and where they took their meals. He and John pulled out their usual chairs and sat down when Annette pushed mugs of tea across the table toward them.

“Well?” she asked, taking a sip from her own steaming cup.

“You’ve done an incredible job,” John answered. “Even though you’d sent pictures of the bigger jobs, seeing it in person is fantastic. You’ve really dragged it into the twenty-first century, haven’t you?”

“I bet the tennis hut is in the twenty-second century,” Sherlock quipped.

“You’ll see it soon enough. Relax for a bit, you’ve been in the car for hours. Unpack, then we’ll go see the hut.”

Sherlock’s mouth tilted into a smirk. “I bet Mycroft just loves knowing that his newest operative calls
her workspace a hut.”

“Shush, you.” Annette laughed.

“Are you going to have to kill us after we see it?” John asked.

“Of course.”

“Excellent.”

John stayed downstairs with Annette to go over some of the receipts Annette had amassed while Sherlock dragged their bags upstairs and into their bedroom. There, too, small changes made the room look lighter, fresher. There were new bed linens and pillows on the bed, and a set of armchairs from downstairs had been re-upholstered and set up in one corner with a reading lamp and small side table. New curtains made the room look both more modern and homey. Cracks in the plaster walls and ceiling had been repaired, and the walls painted a light ivory colour.

The large cherrywood armoire Sherlock had used the year before still stood across from the bed and when he opened the doors he saw that Annette had added a few baskets at the bottom to aid in organising their clothing. He quickly unzipped his bag, pulled out the pillowcase-wrapped secret he’d packed back in London, and laid it in the bottom of one of the baskets. He added a stack of vests and pants over it, leaving the rest of the unpacking to finish later.

In the bathroom, he found that with the exception of new towels, little had changed. He was happy for it, thinking that the refurbishment that had been done in the 1920s, with the black and white tile and claw foot tub, added so much character to the space. Plus, he had very fond memories of what he and John had got up to in that tub.

He was unpacking his toiletries when he heard John come into the room.

“I’m in here, John.”

“Hey, you. Unpacking?”

“Just a bit. We can do the rest later.”

“Ready to go see the tennis hut?” John stepped into the bathroom and wrapped his arms around Sherlock from behind, pressing his cheek to Sherlock’s shoulder.

“I am.” Sherlock turned in John’s arms and ducked down to kiss him. “Did you see the new sheets?”

“I did. They’re lovely, although I imagine they’ll be utterly defiled soon enough.”

Sherlock chuckled and kissed John again. “Later.”

“You promise?”

“Of course.”

The tennis hut, despite Sherlock’s futuristic expectations, looked more like a guest house than a secret agent’s lair. The space had been neatly divided into two rooms; an office-slash-lounge, and an en-suite bedroom. There was a small kitchenette along one of the walls of the office and a new, working fireplace in the bedroom, but other than that the structure was unchanged. The desk in the office was small and sparse. There was an ultra-thin laptop sitting in the middle of it, a leatherbound journal, a fountain pen, and a file folder.
“Are you kidding?” Sherlock asked, spinning around and gesturing at the desk. “This is it? Where’s all the surveillance equipment, the monitors, the top-secret gadgets? Isn’t there even a gun safe?”

Annette put her hands on her hips and shook her head at him. “I have no idea what you think I do, but I guarantee you I can do almost all of it from that laptop and my mobile phone.”

Sherlock sighed. “This is so disappointing. Tell me at least that the fountain pen shoots poison darts.”

“The fountain pen shoots poison darts.”

“Really?”

“Of course not.”

John patted Sherlock’s shoulder and smiled. “So much for double-oh-Annette, eh?”

“All joking aside,” Sherlock responded, “you’ve done a wonderful job here and it all looks very serviceable. It’s small, though. Are you sure this is enough room for you?”

“Absolutely. Don’t forget, I spend time at the main house, too. At least, I do when the two of you aren’t visiting.”

“And don’t let us keep you from using it while we’re here,” John said.

“Don’t be silly, you deserve your privacy. Speaking of which, I’ve hired a weekly cleaning service for you while you’re here. They’ll come both Fridays and then do another clean once you’ve left. If you want, I can arrange for someone to come in and cook for you, too. All the information is in here,” she said, tapping the file folder on the desk.

“No need,” John answered. “We’ll run into town and hit the shops for the basics, and we’ll probably eat out quite a bit, too. Will you be able to join us for a couple of dinners?”

Annette nodded, picked up the file folder, and passed it to John. “I’d love to. And, if you’re interested, James might be able to join us one night, too.”

“James? He didn’t tell me he was in town.” John looked back and forth between Sherlock and Annette but Sherlock just shrugged and ducked down to inspect the bottom of the desk for secret compartments.

“Well, to be fair,” she started, “I think he’s afraid to come around again after what happened last year.”

“It’s not as if John and I were responsible for him almost being killed,” Sherlock said, popping up from under the desk.

“Oh no, not that. The way he showed up here unannounced during your honeymoon. He’s a bit afraid to infringe upon your hospitality again. It’s partly my fault, I suppose. I give him a good ribbing about it all the time.” Annette smiled, obviously pleased with her ability to slag off James, and not feeling at all guilty for it.

“You keep in touch with him, then?” John asked.

“Well, yes. He hasn’t told you?”

“No. I mean, he and I check in once in a while, but I guess we haven’t really talked in much depth since the investigation and hearings around the Arranged Marriage Program.”
They had all been key witnesses, working with prosecutors in the months following the attempt on James’ life to expose the security breaches inherent in the program and show how it could be used toward nefarious means. There had been public outcry and demonstrations calling for the end of the program and the closure of all the agencies. The government had had enough on its plate dealing with the ramifications from Brexit and had quickly acquiesced and shut down the program.

“Right,” Annette said. “He and I spent quite a bit of time together during all that. The hearings did quite a bit toward turning public opinion in his favour. Things have been much better for him since then.”

Sherlock watched the exchange. Annette didn’t seem at all surprised by John’s admission that he and James were barely in touch since the hearings. Annette, it seemed, was far more aware of what was going on in James’ life than either of them had realised.

“So, you still see him?”

“Oh sure, I see him quite frequently.” Annette tilted her head and gave John an expectant look.

John seemed to process this for a long moment before his mouth dropped open. “Oh, my God. Are you two, are you seeing each other? I mean it’s fine if you are, yeah, I just didn’t see it coming.”

Annette threw her head back and laughed. “Seeing James? Romantically? Lord, no. He has been dating a little bit, though. Only men, as far as I know.”

Sherlock stepped close to John and rested his hand on the small of his back. “John,” he said, sliding his arm around John’s waist. “I believe Annette and James may be working together.”

Annette grinned as John looked back and forth between them.

“Seriously? So Mycroft got to James, too?”

“No, not at first. It’s just that after spending those days with James last year and learning his story and how hard it was for him to have a public life after the accident, and then working with him in the hearings, I started thinking maybe he could put all those undercover skills to good use.”

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” John said.

“So, about three months into my own training I brought it up with Mycroft, and things fell into place pretty quickly from there. Because James and I already knew each other and had effectively worked a case together, Mycroft agreed to team us up. We don’t work every assignment together, but we have shared some interesting work so far. A lot of it is computer-based, but we do get together every few weeks.”

“You tell us where he’s based?” John asked.

“I can tell you that he spends a lot of time in Edinburgh.”

“Fair enough. I’ll give him a call and see if it would be convenient for him to meet up with us for dinner at some point.”

Sherlock and John left Annette to whatever it was she was working on that day, and headed up the path leading back to the house.

“Are you okay?” Sherlock asked as they stepped into the kitchen.
“Hmm? Me? Oh sure, I’m fine. I guess I just didn’t see that coming.”

“Nor I, though it makes perfect sense.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t tell me, to be honest.”

Sherlock thought about the conversation he and James had had over breakfast a year ago, about his strong hunch that James had regretted ending things with John before John had been invalided out. “He has probably erred on the side of caution and given you plenty of time and space, as your ex, because of your marriage to me. Keep in mind he still harbors guilt for showing up here when he did.”

“I suppose. And truth be told, I’ve kept my distance, too, knowing how you felt about him showing up here announced.”

“Water under the bridge, John. Are you hungry? Annette said she got some salads and luncheon meats in, or we could head into town and do a bit of shopping ourselves.”

“Let’s stay here. I want to look around some more and walk the grounds, maybe take a short hike. Will you come with me?”

“Of course.” Sherlock loved the house and the grounds, and he loved the outlying fields with their gentle streams and colourful outbursts, all that heather and gorse, thistle and bluebell. He thought back to their first outing in Perthshire, to their picnic on the River Tay, where John had told him in Gaelic, *I think you’re beautiful.* “We could even pack a lunch and head out now if you want.”

“Excellent idea. Let’s do that.”

The late-afternoon picnic led to early-evening errands in town, feel-good errands like tea at Victoria’s and groceries at a new gourmet deli that hadn’t been there the year before. Pitlochry’s High Street was bustling with business, and Sherlock smiled to himself as they passed a shopkeeper energetically sweeping her front stoop. He looked forward to reacquainting himself with the locality without the pressure of a case to solve.

When they got home John disappeared into the new office to call the clinic and see if there was anything that required his attention. He’d been slow to find a way to ease into Sherlock’s wedding present of a doctor’s practice and the building it was housed in, but after discussing some ideas with Sherlock and friends from both the military and his medical training, he’d decided to shift the more traditional practice of treating head colds and injecting vaccines into one focused primarily on the healthcare needs of wartime veterans and victims of violence.

Over the past several months he had developed a strong team of former military doctors, medics, and nurses, and was in the process of creating a comprehensive range of services that would include therapy, re-entry workshops, and physical and occupational therapy. As the practice grew he’d had to take on more and more administrative staff and was now in the final stages of hiring two more directors to oversee the new services.

The progress had been slow in part because John had wanted to spend as much time as possible chasing criminals around London’s dark alleys with Sherlock as the world’s only consulting detective’s reputation grew stronger, and Sherlock, suspecting it was selfish of him, had encouraged John to do so. Eventually, they had reached a compromise that involved Sherlock working cases on his own during regular workday hours, and John joining him afterward whenever possible. John wasn’t entirely happy with the situation and took Sherlock’s reassurances that he’d remain safe with a scoff and a roll of the eyes. Truth be told, Sherlock had found himself in quite a few close calls and
had come home more than once with sprains and stitches.

It was a balancing act they were still working on, John driven both by the need to keep Sherlock safe and his own need to not lose his identity to the pull of Sherlock’s adrenaline-driven detective work. Sherlock knew they’d get there. It would take patience and compromise and clear intention, and Sherlock, through association with John, was getting better at all of those things.

Sherlock went to the kitchen and began pulling food for their dinner out of the fridge. He reflected on how he’d changed since knowing John. Mostly, he saw how isolated he’d been before John, keeping to himself and his converted greenhouse lab, eschewing company and flat-out refusing to socialise or entertain thoughts of relationships. He’d been afraid, but with good reason. He’d fed his intellect the way one might a giant hound, keeping it on a constant diet of information, observation, and data, but he’d not established ways for that ever-hungry beast to take what it’d been given and play nicely with it. Insecurity, inexperience, and perhaps emotional immaturity had given that intellect too long a leash, had allowed it to run quite wild with its own power.

He set the kitchen table and opened a bottle of wine, then sat down with a glass and waited for their dinner to heat up in the AGA. He was still feeding his intellect, of course. That would never stop. But now, with the additional experience of loving and being loved, of being responsible to someone else and allowing that person to be responsible for him, Sherlock better understood the power of his emotions. Now, he let them tamp and balance his intellect. It was one thing to know that the shopkeeper was having an affair with his accountant, it was an altogether different thing to destroy the shopkeeper’s wife’s life by telling her. Sherlock no longer let his intellect run roughshod over emotional engagement. By fully experiencing his feelings for another person, for John, his intellect was more likely to stay put when necessary.

His mind palace was still crucial to his work, but he’d become much more selective about what he stored there. Dirt alkaline levels and ash density, brick composition and underground maps, those were all relevant to his work. But the petty manipulations of humans, the lies and misdirections, the jealousies and betrayals, he was much more careful of those now. He observed them for cases and then cast them aside, not wanting to add any negative weight to the same foundation that housed what he experienced with John.

And Sherlock’s feelings for John had continued to grow past whatever limit he’d previously thought possible. He’d stopped expecting his love to stop growing. He was consumed with it. Sherlock’s love for John had been stitched together while they’d dated, with flirty smiles and gentle kisses, shared interests and keen anticipation. It had been fortified by John’s respect for Sherlock’s body, regard for his inexperience, appreciation of his tenuous steps forward into their sexual life. His love for John had been impermeably set in their mutual trust and in the sharing of joy and fear, anger and exultation. Being adored by John Watson was so much more satisfying than unravelling the mysteries of a chemical solution or the motivation for crime. Those had their place, of course, but at the end of each day, it was John’s foot tapping his under the dinner table that shored him up. It was John’s arms around him as they watched a movie, it was John’s text in the middle of the day to see how he was, it was John’s silly giggle and his gentle ribbing and exasperated sighs that connected Sherlock to himself and his place in the rest of the world.

If Sherlock was quiet as they ate dinner that first night back in Pitlochry it wasn’t because there was anything wrong. It was because everything was right. So when John asked, “Everything okay? You seem quiet,” it was enough to answer, “I’m with you, John. I’m quite well.”

They scrubbed the dishes after dinner, setting everything to dry overnight, then took a stroll around the grounds. Sherlock tracked the movements of the swallows over the back fields as they walked, and John listened as Sherlock talked rapid-fire about the birds’ migratory habits, flying speeds, and
diet.

“They travel two hundred miles a day, John, to return to Britain after wintering in South Africa.”

“That’s quite a trek.” He took Sherlock’s hand and placed it in the crook of his elbow. “I suppose most creatures on this earth are driven toward home, though, aren’t they?”

They stopped then and watched the sky darken, watched the birds take their final dives before nesting for the night, and then they returned home, too, and took another walk through the house. They looked at the way disparate pieces came together to tell a new story, at the way some things simply seemed to live better in a new place, at how new paths led to better outcomes, and they went upstairs.

While John used the bathroom Sherlock went to the armoire and pulled out the package he’d squirrelled away, got undressed, and got ready. By the time John came out of the bathroom in his flannel pyjama bottoms and threadbare T-shirt, Sherlock was perched on the side of the bed, legs crossed, palms flat on the bed behind him.

John stopped and stared, licked his lips, swallowed.

“You, you brought your wedding garments. I haven’t seen those in quite a while.”

“A year, to be exact.”

“Right. And you’re wearing all of them? At the same time?”

“I am.”

“And why is that?”

“I’m changing the rules tonight, John. These have served their purpose. They were a very considerate gift when you knew I was unsure about being touched, when I didn’t know what I was doing or how I’d respond. You were patient with me. But we’ve moved past that now. If I don’t want something, if I’m not in the mood, I can tell you and know that it’ll be okay. And you do the same with me.

“So tonight I’m changing the rules. Tonight, whatever the white silk touches is where I want you to touch me.”

“There’s very little not covered, you gorgeous man.” John stepped forward and stood in front of Sherlock, put his hands on his shoulders. “But what about your mouth? That’s not covered.”

“John. You’re being pedantic. I’m giving you the wedding night we didn’t have.”

John laughed and ran his thumb over Sherlock’s lower lip. “I don’t need a do-over, you know. I’m quite happy with how everything has turned out.” He pulled Sherlock up to standing and kissed him, wrapped his arms around his waist, kissed him again. “I am also quite happy,” he said as he leaned back and undid the belt of Sherlock’s white silk robe, “to unwrap you.”

John took his time undoing Sherlock’s layers, kissing under his ear and down his neck as the robe slid to the floor, then his chest and shoulders and belly as the long-sleeve top and tank top came off. He stroked the cords of muscle running down Sherlock’s back and kissed his pecs and nipples and sternum. He only stopped when Sherlock moved to strip off John’s T-shirt and tug him back onto the bed, and then Sherlock laid John out against the pillows and returned all those kisses, all those caresses. Chest to chest, legs intertwined, they explored, unhurried and content. When Sherlock’s
lips felt tender and pink and his fingertips were hot from John’s skin under them, he let John roll him
to his back and reach for and remove the white silk pyjama bottoms and boxers. He let John sit
back between his spread thighs, his canted knees, and touch the arches of his feet, his calves, his
inner thighs.

When John leaned down and licked along the outline of the white silk g-string, Sherlock’s legs
jerked up and back, and when John slipped a fingertip under the fabric stretched taut over his
erection, Sherlock shook and shivered.

“Take them off, John.”

“Oh, you want me to touch you here, then?” John stroked over the silk covering Sherlock’s shaft.
The material was tight and thin and Sherlock could see the vein John was tracing right through them.

“Yes,” Sherlock whispered.

“What if I don’t want to touch you here?”

“Why wouldn’t you … what are you doing?”

John moved to Sherlock’s side and prompted him to roll over onto his stomach. “Maybe I want to
touch you here, instead.”

Sherlock felt John’s hands on him, on either side of the g-string, his fingers pressing into the plump
curves of his arse, his thumbs slipping and sliding over the thinnest strap of fabric between his
cheeks. Sherlock rested his forehead on his crossed forearms and sighed. “Anywhere you want. You
know that.”

John slid his hand under Sherlock from behind, fondling him, squeezing the hard flesh trapped
against the mattress, until Sherlock was rocking his hips and arching his back, his breath coming
faster, harder.

He was so focused on where John’s hand was, stroking harder now, he hadn’t anticipated the first
lick through the silk. He was up on his knees immediately, spread and keening.

“Ssh. I’ve got you.” He felt John’s hands on his hips, steadying him, felt John’s mouth on his lower
back, down the strap of the g-string, down, down, until it was where Sherlock wanted it, teasing him
through the wet material, his tongue close but never actually reaching. Sherlock wriggled and
squirmed as if that would make the g-string loosen or shift, but it stayed where it was, wedged in
tight.

Sherlock was ready to rip the infuriating scrap off himself when he heard John say, “Do something
for me, love?”

“Anything.”

“Suck me.”

Sherlock whirled around and pushed John flat on his back, undid the tie of his blasted pyjama
bottoms, and flung them to the floor. John grinned up at him, his mouth and chin still shiny with
saliva, and gave himself a slow stroke. Sherlock slapped his hand away with a scowl and settled into
the task, revelling in the way John’s sounds matched Sherlock’s movements. Sighs for licks, hums
for kisses, groans for a swipe and full-out moaning for a tight, slick suck. Sherlock felt the way
John’s thighs tensed and trembled under his palms, the way his skin grew flush as he grew louder,
uninhibited.
With one final roll of his tongue, Sherlock popped off, crawled back up John’s body, and said, “I want to be in you.”

“Oh God, yes.”

Sherlock pointed to the still intact g-string and John growled as he sat up and reached for it. “This fucking thing. I never want to see this g-string again in my life.” He rolled it over Sherlock’s hips, down his thighs and past his knees until Sherlock finally squirmed out of it and tossed it aside.

“Seriously, love. It’s sexy as hell on you but you naked and hard for me is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

They laid on their sides, Sherlock behind John, and fit themselves together. Sherlock kissed the back of John’s neck as he readied him, licked over his shoulder blade as he teased slick fingers between John’s cheeks, as he prodded and swirled and dipped. He came up on one elbow to lean down and lick into John’s mouth and pinch at John’s nipples. He lined the wet tip of himself up, collapsed down again, huffed out a hot breath, and slid inside.

John took a deep breath, held it, slowly let it out.

“Let me know when you want me to start,” Sherlock said against the smooth skin behind John’s ear.

“Oh God, Sherlock. Your voice.” He grasped the edge of the bed for leverage, curved his back away from Sherlock, and pushed back. “Now. Move.”

Sherlock wrapped his arms around John’s chest and held him tight as he began to roll his hips, thrusting up and in, skin slapping on skin. John’s cries got louder, shorter, higher, then dissolved into rhythmic grunts when Sherlock took John’s cock in hand and began pumping in time with his hips. He pressed wet curls to the back of John’s head, snapped his hips, closed his eyes, snapped his hips, dug his feet into the bed, snapped his hips. Sherlock rode the physical sensations, rode the trust and intimacy between them, uttered broken words of gratitude for John, for them.

Soon he began to tense, to strain, to lose his breath, his words.

“Oh God, you’re close, I can tell, you’re so close,” John breathed out in a rush. “Do it, give it to me, please Sherlock, give it to me.”

Sherlock took a deep breath, held it, bucked his hips, rolled and thrust, and with one, long, decadent moan, went rigid and came. John, still thrusting into Sherlock’s fist, cried out, “Oh fuck, oh yes,” and followed. They stayed there for a long while, stayed until their hearts had slowed and their breathing was easy, until Sherlock couldn’t stay inside John any longer and John had gooseflesh from the chill of the purple-grey night settling around them.

“Happy anniversary, John.”

“Happy anniversary, love.”

John fell asleep first, leaving Sherlock with armfuls of love and contentment.

Sherlock could see the stars if he looked out the topmost part of the bedroom windows, thousands of them, astronomical balls of hydrogen and helium, unfathomable distant, naked, brilliant.

Sherlock lay there, in the dark silence of their bedroom, and held John tighter to his chest. John mumbled something unintelligible in his sleep and exhaled deeply. Solid. John was so solid, and that really was a conundrum, because humans, like stars, were mostly gas. Sixty-five percent oxygen, ten
percent hydrogen, a little nitrogen. And didn’t John shine, too?

But humans didn’t change the way stars did. No red giants and white dwarfs, not here. John was a constant, steadfast in his ability to stabilise Sherlock, the more nebulous element in their relationship. Through everything, the tenuous beginning of their courtship, Sherlock’s hesitancy to be touched, the progression through the wedding garments, John had been patient, respectful, kind.

And now here they were, and Sherlock was as bare as he could be, exposed in every way possible, and happier than he’d ever dreamed possible. All those layers, all his defences, dismantled. Layer after layer of sarcasm, dismissiveness, cruelty, layer after layer of white silk, all of it stripped away, and just like those distant stars, at the very heart of him, he was burning bright.

Sherlock fell asleep in his nest of sheets and pillows and John and thought about how far he’d come, and how far he’d go if it meant being home, home with John.

Works inspired by this one: [Over] The Wedding Garments by allisovacant

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