Windsor Manor

by Tigresse

Summary

Two strangers meet under harrowing circumstances and fall in love. But a shocking secret prevents a happily ever after. Will John Watson be able to exorcise the ghost of his husband’s former partner and get rid of the dark shadow of the man he is supposed to have replaced!

THIS STORY IS NOW COMPLETE

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
A Whirlwind Romance

‘Your life is over, finished, done. Sooner or later you’d do this, then why not now?’

John Watson closed his eyes and counted till twenty, hoping the feeling would pass. Usually all those negative energies passed with a few moments of meditation, deep and calming breaths, a little pep talk in his head that would lift his drooping spirits and set him back afoot again.

But today that didn’t happen. The negative energies started to storm down on him like a tropical thundershower and he got soaked through their jittering vibes until a part of him grew so desperate that it compelled him to get up, walk out of his room and then trot out of the remote resort he was staying in. It was a quiet place where people came for peace and restoration, to rebuild their broken spirits and bleeding hearts. But for John the solitude of the place had only served to make him even more depressed and hopeless. He wanted to end it all, just end it and get rid of the constant pain and haunting memories that kept engulfing him.

He began to walk, aimlessly at first, then his feet took him right to ‘Hunter’s Peak’, the tourist spot the resort guide had showed them a day or two before. During the mornings and early afternoons that place was used as a starting point for some adventure sports, like paragliding, hiking, dirt biking and rappelling. But at this point, past 4 in the evening, it would be as deserted as the rest of the landscape.

He kept climbing, not even sure how close he was or how far, until the familiar broad ledge showed up before him. Yes, the small hutment used to register participants was still there, but it had been locked up by then. The day’s activities were over.

John walked till he was standing at the edge, so close that his toes were hanging off the side. A strong gust of wind would propel him down on the rocks a hundred feet below….or maybe his willpower could do the trick. He could just jump……

That was when he saw him.

A handsome, pale skinned, tall, slender young man with a mop of curly hairs and a strangely insecure, sad expression on his face. He stood on another side of the ledge, just a few feet below John, much in the same position John was standing. He was even more precariously perched, in that half his feet were hanging off the edge and he was swaying back and forth, arms spread out like a bird’s wings.
“Something clicked inside John.”

“Hey, HEY,” he cried out.

The man almost fell over before he staggered back and looked at him.

Their eyes met, John’s warm brown ones and those sea-green orbs, a chance meeting that made them look right through each other’s souls and form an unspoken, unseen connection that was immediate and deep-seated. Almost instinctively they stepped back from the edge of the cliff, embarrassed looks on their faces like children caught trying to steal candy from the kitchen jar. For the longest moment they stared at each other, standing about twenty feet apart, wondering how to start a conversation. At the same time a burning question began to form in both their heads. ‘Does he know what I was about to do? Did he guess that already? How am I even going to explain this?’

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*Next day*

“Are you usually a churchgoing guy?”

John looked at his newfound friend and smiled, shaking his head. “Not always. But on Sunday masses you’d usually find me there, especially over the last six months. Today I am here for a very different reason though. I am here to confess.” He paused and looked into the other man’s face, a longish diamond shaped face with sculpted cheekbones and aquiline features, bow shaped lips and those beautiful eyes. Every time he looked at him, he nearly took John’s breath away. “Yesterday……” he began and stopped.

“Then even I need to confess.”

“You do?”

“I came here for the same reason.”

“Ah…..I see, I guess we have been…..a bit stupid……but then every man is a bit stupid at times, a
little bit desperate, a little not-good.”

“I think I have been a bit not-good several times.”

“Haven’t we all been there sometime or the other? My name is John Hamish Watson, Dr. John Watson. You can call me John.”

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes. You can call me Sherlock…..or freak.”

“Freak?”

Sherlock’s green eyes grew sad all over again. “Translates to ‘brilliant at work and an idiot otherwise’, I guess. I have made some real blunders in life and people never stop taunting and teasing me about them. Sometimes it gets to a point where I feel like just throttling those…..”

He stopped and stared at his feet, ashamed of his outburst.

It was at that precise moment that John Watson realized why he had been unable to throw himself off the cliff and end his life. His life had a new meaning, a new purpose now. He was always the man who saved others, saving lives was what gave him the greatest of highs and this young man, Sherlock, needed saving. John knew instantly that he had to rescue Sherlock from his demons, from whatever it was that pushed him to take such a self-defeating step…..well, almost take that step. Thank God he had been there. Thank God Sherlock had been there. In a way they had saved each other! Fate had brought them together at the nick of time, the timing in fact was uncanny.

“I am sorry,” Sherlock murmured, “My verbal diarrhea. I end up saying whatever’s on my mind and that eventually puts me in trouble.”

“What do you mean?” John stepped closer, happy that he had met Sherlock again a day later, that too at the local church, “What did you say Sherlock that’s so bad, so mean? I didn’t hear anything that could cause trouble.”

“I….I didn’t….I mean….I said I could throttle…..”
“Not everyone who says I’ll kill you actually kills you, do they?”

Sherlock looked astounded. He gaped at John for the longest of moments and then mumbled, “You really are very different from the rest, you know. Anyone else would just go slam bang boom at me and call me a spoilt, murdering brat, a real dick who couldn’t even save his……” He stopped as if he had spoken too much and suddenly turned on his heel and began to walk away. John could have just let him do that but something made him follow Sherlock and grab his arm.

Sherlock stopped, shocked. But he didn’t shrug off that hold over his arm so John took some encouragement from it. Maybe Sherlock was crying out for help, but couldn’t exactly voice it out aloud.

“Come on,” he said, tugging at his arm gently.

“Where?” Sherlock swallowed hard.

“Inside. We have that confession to make.”

“Yeah.”

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1 week later

“Oh God you’re beautiful, so beautiful!”

John’s breathy words made the other man moan and his hips jerked upwards. Sherlock was trembling and writhing under his ministrations, his nude body splayed out on the soft clean sheets of the hotel bed, his arousal proud and prominent and resting against his belly button, thick and tempting. His fair, almost translucent skin was smooth and mostly hairless, save from the light patch of dark brown hairs in his armpits, trimmed and clean, and the thatch of downy pubic mane which also had been trimmed adequately. He was a natural beauty, albeit an unconventional one, and sensuous charm poured off him in buckets. John felt he could climax from just pleasuring this man and watch him respond with eager enthusiasm and shyness at the same time.
“Please,” Sherlock hissed as the pads of John’s fingers traced every nook and cranny of his body carefully avoiding the erect phallus and the sizeable balls. His legs parted automatically and his long fingers clutched at the sheets he was lying on, his head turning sharply to one side, then the other. A drop of clear slick trickled down the head of his uncut manhood and he let out a sharp whining cry when John gathered enough courage to lick it up with the lightest of flicks of his tongue. “Oh-Oh-Oh,” he went, trying to push John’s head down.

“Patience,” John said softly, making short work of his own clothes. He hadn’t taken them off since Sherlock had been so skittish, so scared, that he was more or less sure the young man would run away before they actually got going. But he was wrong. Sherlock actually wanted this. He seemed to need this. John was happy to give it to him, happy to do anything for him, anything to make him smile.

Sherlock had a lovely, lovely smile.

Lube slick fingers skimmed the younger man’s entrance and John kept him in his mouth as Sherlock’s cries rose in pitch and volume and became more frequent and desperate. He was about to cum, almost.

When John’s index finger slid in, Sherlock let out a chokes gasp and filled the doctor’s mouth with his semen. At first Sherlock shuddered hard, like a fish out of water, before he realized what he had just done. He hadn’t even given John a proper warning.

“O fuck sorry,” he gasped, body undulating with pleasure.

John communicated with his eyes, telling him silently that he had no need to worry. He hadn’t done anything John didn’t want him to do.

Happiness and relief showed in equal measures on Sherlock’s face and he lay on his back, panting, legs still spread out, his manhood still engorged. After the initial cheer, those green eyes grew a bit darker, lust and need and something else smoldering within them. John had never seen or been with anyone else who could move him with just a little look, as Sherlock Holmes could.

Then Sherlock lifted his legs and exposed himself, willingly surrendering for John’s pleasure. He was not just a taker, he was a giver too. No pun intended.

John plunged into him the next moment, thanking himself for having kept a condom close by and
rolling it on while his lover lay recuperating from his first orgasm. If he waited any longer he would have spent himself right there, all over Sherlock’s crotch and thighs, and embarrassed himself to the core. He held Sherlock’s ankles and kept thrusting, eyes on the younger man who seemed to be going into ecstasy once again. God, he was so responsive, so utterly sexy and open to whatever John wanted to do with him. It was this sweet and absolute surrender that made John want to own this man, be next to him, protect him from every harm, every rude verdict, shield him from all cruel words and taunts, destroy those who even dared to raise a finger at this magnificent prince of a guy!

“Jawn…..” Sherlock drew out the vowel sound in a demanding, cute, sexy manner, “Jawn I am getting close….so close, again!” He tugged at himself, his mouth open, eyes tightly scrunched shut. He was shaking with the need to cum.

“Then let go,” John encouraged, having trouble slowing down because he was far too close himself, “Cum for me Sherl. I got you, I got you, just let go and cum.” He drove in a few times, maintaining the same angle which seemed to give Sherlock maximum pleasure.

They ejaculated simultaneously, crying out their ecstasy into the cool evening air wafting through the breezy room, their bodies shaking spasmodically and rocking together till the last of the aftershocks departed. Sherlock’s legs slowly fell down on the bed and he closed his eyes.

John stayed buried inside him, putting his weight on his arms so he didn’t crush the younger man under his weight. A strange ache developed in his chest as he watched his lover’s face from close quarters. Just-fucked Sherlock looked dozy, beautiful, vulnerable; But more than all of that, what moved John was the way he saw explicit trust invested into him by this young lad. He was not going to break that trust, ever.

By the end of that evening, John Watson knew he was in love. This time it was for real, for keeps, for a lifetime.

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1 month later

“What’s this?” Sherlock was pleasantly surprised when he woke up and found himself clutching a small velvet box in purple color. John was sitting on the bed beside him. He had put on his boxers and a T shirt.
John pushed back the curly locks from Sherlock’s forehead and eyes and pressed a kiss to his forehead, then dragged his nose over the younger man’s scalp and inhaling the scent of his shampoo. Sherlock always smelled good and fresh, no matter what condition he was in. “I went to town this morning,” he explained, “Got hold of something for you. My first gift to you, to mark our first ‘month-versary’. Just a month ago, on this very date, we had met at Hunter’s peak, remember?”

Sherlock seemed both excited and apprehensive at the same time. He cradled the box in his palm for a little while before an impatient cough from John made him pop the lid open. Inside was a beautiful platinum chain, short length and rope design, with a beautifully crafted crucifix pendant, also in platinum, hooked to it. Both the items were simple, slim, minimalistic designs that were elegant, fashionable and yet retained an old-world charm that would never really go out of style. Expensive and yet not showy, it suited Sherlock’s personality and quirky dress sense as well. Sherlock held the gift in his palm for several seconds, smiling slightly and nodding in approval. Yet, he didn’t look delighted.

“You want me to change these?” John asked, studying his lover’s expression carefully and with a hint of amusement.

“No, no, why should you? This is very nice. Thank you.”

“Were you expecting something else?”

“Yes….no, not really. This is very nice, thanks.”

“Sherlock look at me, please.”

Green eyes turned towards him, every emotion written so large in them that John saw right through the young lad’s soul. “I have something else as well,” he said, a wicked grin now spreading over his lips, “But that comes with a commitment. So I thought, let me give it later.”

Another box was put on his palm and this time it contained a ring. A plain dull gold band.

With a squeal of happiness Sherlock moved to the other side of the bed and pulled out a similar box, but in light green color, from the pocket of his jeans. “This is for you,” he placed it in John’s hand and when the doctor opened it, he saw an identical gold band inside it.
“Sherl…..this is….you really mean it?”

“Yes, yes, yes, I want to marry you.”

“I want to marry you too. Just tell me whose permission I should take.”

“Not needed. I have a brother, Mycroft, but he and I don’t really do the family thing too well. I take my own decisions and he takes his. The only condition that he might have….which even I have, is that we settle down here, in St Peterstown, at the Holmes estate.”

John didn’t even hesitate for a moment. A small voice in his head kept telling him to slow down, to take it all in and process the information in his head, to give his heart enough time to stew over the new juices of love flowing through it, but he had always been a man who took quick and irreversible decisions and this was, by now, his second nature. Sherlock had consumed his entire life completely with his presence and marrying him and growing old with him seemed to be the safest, sanest decision to take. He saw no need to deliberate over it. “I am fine with that,” he said eagerly, stroking Sherlock’s bare flanks, “I’ve fallen in love with this place much the same way I fell for you, at the very first glance. I feel this town needs a good doctor, eh?”

John had slipped in a tiny lie there. He was a Londoner, a cosmopolitan man, and this quiet life was not meant for him. But having Sherlock in his life was definitely worth such a tiny sacrifice. He had no idea what he was signing up for and that it was not such a tiny sacrifice after all.

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15 days later

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

As John kissed Sherlock, both of them wearing identical cream tuxedos with black bow ties and black slacks, the expression on the face of Sherlock’s best man, his brother Thomas Mycroft Chad Holmes turned to one of mild disgust and slight reservation. John blinked and that look passed but it had been there and he couldn’t ‘un-see’ it even if he wanted. So he resolutely pushed it away to the back of his mind, deciding to rake it up later and give it more thought then. Right now he was going through a beautiful moment and he didn’t want to ruin it because of the snooty, snarky, haughty, snobbish elder brother.
Thankfully for John, Sherlock’s only other relative, his aged aunt Fiona seemed quite thrilled to see her nephew married. She hugged them both and kissed them on their cheeks, congratulating them joyfully. John’s friends, fellow doctors Mike Stamford and Molly Hooper also seemed delighted, as was the local police chief Gregory Lestrade and Sherlock’s nanny and their estate housekeeper Mrs. Martha Louise Hudson. Their warm wishes, warmer handshakes and happy hugs made John completely forget what he had seen in Mycroft’s expression.

That was all the audience they had, as Sherlock was not interested in a big, white wedding. John had agreed. Even he didn’t want a highly publicized and huge wedding. After all, neither of them were marrying for the first time.
Their First Night

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock's wedding night and their first trip to Windsor Manor, as a couple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ah John!”

“Sherl!”

A shallow but hard thrust slightly to the right side and Sherlock’s body went into near rapture underneath him. John smiled against the soft skin of his husband’s long neck, bingo, he had struck gold. “Your sweet spot, right there, yeah?” He asked and felt Sherlock nod against him. Bolder, encouraged, he kept angling his thrusts in such a manner that he nicked that prostate one out of three or four thrusts, keeping Sherlock on the edge but never really allowed him to fall over. Every time he felt the tension build in Sherlock’s body, he slowed down or ploughed him at a different angle, giving him pleasure but not letting him climax with more stimuli to his prostate. Not just yet, he wanted to prolong this a little bit more, just a while longer!!!

But eventually it did become too much for the green-eyed beauty and he began to push back on his husband’s erection, arching his back so he could rub himself against Joh’s taut abs. The delicious friction did him in and Sherlock began to beg in that needy manner that went straight to John’s libido. He found himself speeding up and soon even he started to approach a point of no return.

“O God,” Sherlock gasped, “Right there Jawn!”

“Sweet Jesus,” John moaned when Sherlock began to tighten around him.

“Oh fuck, fuck, ohhh!”

“Oh yes, you’re cumming now!”
“JAWN……”

“I got you, I got you love, cum……”

It was as if Sherlock had just been waiting for those words because he came like a torrent, his semen gushing out almost, as his arms and legs tightened around John much the same way his soft, snug channel tightened around the man’s throbbing manhood. “Oh my……” John let himself cum, felt himself lose control like never before and flood Sherlock with his seed, turning his inner channel slick with his fluids.

Sherlock let out a final soft moan and then stilled.

John slipped out after a full minute and very carefully lifted himself off of his husband. He had expected him to be asleep or half in the land of nod at least, but Sherlock’s eyes were open, and there was a small smile around his lips. He looked bathed in afterglow and very gorgeous.

“Have I told you how gorgeous you are?” John asked as he tumbled down on the mattress next to Sherlock, stroking his naked, sweaty thigh.

“An hour ago, when we made love for the first time on our wedding night,” Sherlock giggled.

During sex Sherlock became more shrill, his voice sounded more like a boy’s than a man’s. While John got turned on by those squeaky, sometimes whiny tones but he secretly felt awed by his husband’s original voice. The aftereffects of orgasm being over and the physical need now abated, Sherlock’s sexy and deep baritone was back and John adored that voice and the honeyed undertones of it; it was one of the best things about Sherlock. “Oh how really awful of me,” John said in his dramatic tone, eyes twinkling as he stretched out an arm and allowed Sherlock to wrap himself around him, “Remind me next time when half an hour passes, so I can fortify my compliments and maybe add a fresh one every single time.”

Sherlock suddenly looked a bit sad. “To fortify my confidence, is that right?”

John looked at him in surprise, “What?”

“Nothing.”
“It was something. You said something.”

“No. Forget what I said.”

“Okay, fair enough. But then….Sherlock, we need to know a bit more about each other.”

It was Sherlock who now stared at him in surprise. “We are married now, we love each other and that’s all that matters, isn’t that correct? Why do we have to rake up the past and ask for details and get to ‘know’ each other? Whatever we know about each other already is all we really need to know. I am Sherlock Holmes Watson and you’re John Watson. And this is our wedding night.”

“So it is,” John kissed the top of his head, “But sometimes people form stronger, better bonds when they share a bit of each other, especially with their partners. I don’t mean to say we should spill out all the beans. Whatever happened in our lives before we met are our own personal business, but sometimes some vital little points are key to a happy future. For example, are you a late-riser or an early to bed person? What kind of relationship do you and Mycroft share? And why are we in this luxury hotel in Peterstown instead of Windsor Manor, the Holmes family estate?”

Sherlock tensed up.

“Sherl? Did I ask something wrong?”

“I didn’t really want to spend my life….my wedding night there.”

“In Windsor Manor?”

Sherlock simply nodded without giving any further details around it. John kept waiting and perhaps even Sherlock realized he was being a bit too secretive, because he finally started to talk about his family background, possessions, wealth, his elder brother and his late parents. “My great granddad believed in buying property, land and collecting precious and rare artifacts, paintings, precious stones, pottery, antique silver. Thanks to the old man’s quirky and cunning purchases, my grandfather inherited more than an Earl or a Count would. In the early twentieth century, he was worth ten million pounds. My father and Mycroft went into business, we own a mid-size, prosperous publishing house in England and we have stocks in some of the biggest companies across the world. Investment and financial advisory services is what Mycroft specializes in, just like our father used to. We’re worth over a 100 million pounds, besides the estate here.”
John gulped. Fuck, that was some serious money. He knew Sherlock was wealthy but this was a jaw-dropping net worth. He himself was not poorly, he had a net worth of nearly three million pounds, but suddenly he felt a bit inadequate and seriously on the backfoot. Anyone who heard of their whirlwind romance and abruptly organized marriage would suppose he had married the young man simply for his inheritance.

“So over and above the wealth generated through our properties in London, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool and Belfast, Windsor Manor is the biggest asset we have and worth nearly forty million pounds,” Sherlock added, staring at the ceiling, “Fully insured, thanks to wily fox Mycroft who always plays it safe, always ensures we stay two steps ahead of any possible disaster.”

“Sherl…..don’t get me wrong…..but why did you choose to marry me? I am not someone who….somebody like you would easily fall for.”

“I knew this was coming. Wealth isn’t the only thing that makes people….nice, or desirable, or dependable or even loveable. Never forget that Jawn. You were in the army, you served the nation and won a bravery medal from the Queen. You are a doctor from one of London’s top medical schools. You are a good-looking, intelligent, kind and caring man who genuinely likes me. What is there not to fall for?”

Feeling suitably reproached, John decided to leave the questioning aside for now. Sherlock was right. They had a lifetime ahead to know each other. But he did have a last little query. “Do you work with Mycroft, in the family business?”

“No. It’s his business now. For the past two years it’s been so. Shortly after mummy and daddy got killed in that road mishap, I signed over everything to him. What I own is a flat in London, a house in Surrey, a few prized artifacts and a couple of million in my bank, plus Windsor Manor.”

John cleared his throat, thinking over his words very carefully, “So then, what work do you do?”

Sherlock didn’t seem offended by that question and answered with complete ease, even mixing a bit of pride in his words. “I am a scientist. I graduated with organic chemistry as my major subject, followed by post grad in forensic sciences, then my doctorate in biochemistry. Results and a degree is awaited but if I get it, which I hope I would very soon, I would be one of the youngest to have received it. My thesis was highly appreciated. My subject was cell regeneration and if all goes well, one day we will have a cure to Alzheimer, or at least a way to detect it at a very early stage and slow it down by at least a decade. I am also working on a tissue sampling experiment which could give the law a better grip on criminal identification, by connecting fingerprints to tissue and blood samples.”
Being a doctor, a lot of those things Sherlock mentioned resonated well with John and even he felt a sense of pride that his young husband, hardly twenty eight years of age, had achieved so much and had so much potential to offer. Even though Sherlock and he were married, Sherlock was a bit of a mystery to him and unveiling parts of him, little by little, was at once satisfying, intriguing and thrilling. “And?” He asked, hoping Sherlock would continue.

“I have my lab, my assistants, my grants, my projects, my patrons.”

“Good, so then…..?”

“I will never really work for someone else.”

“Yes, you are too kindred a spirit to do that and too talented.”

“You mean I have an oversized ego?”

“So what if you have an ego? All performers do.”

“But Jimmy did not think so and……” Sherlock began, then his face paled and his eyes widened in some kind of shock-horror, as if he had only just realized what he’d ended up spilling, “So, then, what about you John? You are a general surgeon, you had been in the army, what else?”

John decided to use the art and trick of self-revelation to help Sherlock open up as well. He had heard from a fellow doctor, someone he knew from his medical school days and who was now a psychiatrist in a Dartmoor hospital, that when two people talked, one person often mirrored the behavior of the other. If one lied, the other one would move towards falsehood, if one was upset, that mood would extend to the other person, if one started to share, so would the other.

“I was brought up in South London,” he began, “Dad was a paramedic and mum was a nurse. I wanted to be a doctor because that’s what I was expected to be. But what I really wanted to be was a soldier. And I nurtured that dream till I realized I didn’t have the stamina or the reflexes to be so. Didn’t make it to the field services in the army so went to medical school, got my degree, became a trainee, then joined the armed forces as a military doctor. When the war was over and I was injured, I came back and lived on my pension for a while, whilst studying to get the surgeon’s license.”
“Do you like being a doctor? Does it make you happy?”

“Having witnessed war and destruction and almost seen death at close quarters, I prefer to be the one to save lives rather than take them,” John said and immediately felt Sherlock tense up as if something had struck home with the younger man. “Earlier, exalted heroics appealed to me until I realized that real heroes work quietly behind closed doors and without making any brouhaha about their work. Firemen, cops, people who work for the Red Cross, researchers who toil away to discover new vaccines and cures, doctors, they are as vital to society as soldiers are. Glory doesn’t matter to me anymore, a feeling of contentment does. I am thirty-four, I am now at an age when I believe I know myself much better. If I had been wiser, maybe I wouldn’t have made some mistakes that I did in the past.”

“You wouldn’t have joined the army?”

“No, no, I would have. That was the right decision to take at that point of time. I meant my first marriage, to Mary Morstan.”

A hint of jealousy came over those green eyes. “I don’t want to know.”

“I shall spare you the details but you should know that I married her just to prove to my parents I am straight, which I never was……”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I had slept with her just once and she got pregnant. It was a pity move. I should have never done that. But what’s not meant to last won’t last. She and my unborn child were killed by a drunk driver a year ago and I could never stop blaming myself for it…..because I wasn’t particularly nice to her and then…..well, the self-pity and self-loathing continued till I met you and realized…..”

“I SAID I DON’T WANT TO KNOW.”

John sat up in alarm.

“Which part of I don’t want to know didn’t you get, huh?” Sherlock was shaking with rage, pointing a finger at him, “How many times would I have to repeat something to you until you take me somewhat seriously? Why is it so hard for you to respect me, to think about anyone other than
“O God,” John forgot the rant the moment he saw tears in those almond shaped eyes, “Baby, baby, no, it’s okay, you just had a meltdown. We all do. We all have a temper, calm down, please, shush, quiet now please. It’s our wedding night, we shouldn’t end it in tears……”

“You don’t understand Jawwwn,” Sherlock sobbed in his arms, “I am a monster, I am a vicious, cruel and ruthless monster, you should hate me by now……” He didn’t say a word beyond that and, after seeing his condition, John didn’t have the heart to say anything to him either. Clearly there was baggage in Sherlock’s life, buried deep in his past, but digging them out would only compromise their present. It was perhaps best to let sleeping dogs lie and wait patiently for the right time. Sherlock would talk to him when he felt like it, not when John wanted him to. “It’s okay hon,” he kept stroking the other man’s back as the sobs reduced to sniffled, “It’s fine. I love you. Go to sleep now, I got you, I got you baby.”

To his immense relief, Sherlock fell asleep soon.

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The next day they drove down to Sherlock’s estate, after breakfast. It was a fifteen minute drive up the hills after crossing the town’s edges.

As the property drew closer and closer, John found it growing bigger and bigger, as if it had hidden walls and grounds and turrets that were only now coming to the forefront.

John had seen Windsor Manor from a distance, almost daily since he had come to this place. It was an easy-to-spot milestone and in some ways he associated the Peterstown area with that property as its primary ‘identifier’. The town was situated in a valley area, surrounded by hills on all sides and woods at the foot of them, with the wellness resort on the southern side of the hills surrounding the town and Windsor Manor on the northern hills, bang opposite to where John had lived for the past month and half. But he had no idea just how vast the place was.

They entered through what Sherlock called ‘the outer gate’. “Fifteen feet electrical fencing to ensure no onetrespasses,” Sherlock said, “Twenty-four hours security team stationed at this gate and the one that opens out over the gorge on the other side.”
John tried to take it all in but he started to get overwhelmed.

The property was at least two square miles of grounds, with a winding road leading to the central point where Windsor Manor stood. It was a sprawling mansion, built part Edwardian, part, Victorian and part Gothic style.

Landscaped gardens, hedges shapes like animals, a manmade lake with a walkway bridge over it, tennis courts, mini-golf course, two swimming pools, outhouses, huge garages, staff quarters, the place had them all. It felt like they were entering the palace of some Tudor king.

“No wonder this place is worth forty mill,” John murmured as their car drew up outside the elaborate portico. There was a huge marble fountain on one side and cobbled courtyards on the other, followed by fifteen steps to the large porch and the humungous heavy ornate main door which was surely too heavy for even two able bodied men to move.

John was so busy just taking in the size and grandiose sights of the property that he didn’t notice the army of retainers standing around the porch. Sherlock noticed that look and said, “Oh, those are our staff. Such a huge place needs people to look after it, clean it, keep it airy and fresh and lived-in and make sure everything is in their places. We have two cooks, six maids, three gardeners and groundskeepers, two chauffeurs, a plumber, an electrician, two personal shoppers, an estate manager and a secretary, an accountant, four additional men for….um…..additional work and of course, a butler and a housekeeper. I suppose they are here to….welcome you to the property and your new life, your home…..yeah, I suppose.”

“I could have done better with a quieter welcome,” John shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“They need to know I have a new husband now, a current partner and stop talking about who was here in the past……” Sherlock stopped. Again that self-directed horror, that paleness. “I’ll do just fine,” John assured him, deciding to get this over with before Sherlock got more upset.

The butler opened the car door. “I am Paul Andersen,” he said, “Pleased to meet you Mr. Watson.”

“Doctor Watson,” Sherlock said sharply.

“Apologies, doctor Watson.”
“Thanks Paul. You’re the butler then.”

“Yes sir. This is Mrs. Hudson……”

“Oh I have met the dear boy on the day of the marriage,” Mrs. Hudson seemed to enjoy an elevated status amongst the retainers and, having been Sherlock’s nanny, she was also especially close to him. She hugged John and made an expansive gesture towards the house, “Welcome to your new home doc. All of us here are committed to make your acclimatization to Windsor Manor as quick, smooth and happy as possible.”

For once, John felt a sense of comfort and assurance. The place was so huge, so foreboding that so far all he had been feeling was a little fear. But Mrs. Hudson’s words and warm greetings changed his mind. Maybe this house was not so scary after all.

Chapter End Notes

A note of warning - Sherlock is a bit OOC here and may not be so likeable initially
The creepily devoted butler

Chapter Summary

John’s first night at the Manor

“I am aware how you feel doc,” Mrs. Hudson spoke with both empathy and sympathy, “Had I not lived here for almost forty years, I would have probably run at the very sight of this place, beautiful and super-expensive as it might be, no matter how grand and how palatial. But it’s a beautiful home and home becomes home due to family, right? I am sure you will make this a beautiful home for Sherlock, and a lively, cheerful, wonderful place like it used to be before.”

“You make me sound like the woman of the house,” John laughed.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t dare imply that, so sorry if that’s how it came across,” she was truly contrite even if John was joking, “You see, some of us are a bit hungry, desperate for laughter and celebrations, joy and festivities in this house and estate. Doc, it was not always like this, quiet and taciturn, it’s only over the past two years this place has become a bit of a mess. First Sherlock’s first husband disappeared, then he was presumed dead, then proved to be deceased……” she stopped, sighing deeply and clearly holding back words, “Then Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, Sherlock and Mycroft’s parents, they died in that road mishap. Gloom descended over this place much like depression took hold of Sherlock. Mycroft’s way of dealing with this was to become even more cold and detached than before.”

John looked around the huge bedroom suite that had been assigned to him. He thought of the word ‘assigned’ since it was so luxurious and the he was so promptly attended to by retainers, that it felt more like stepping into a heritage hotel.

The suite started with an anteroom which served as a sitting area, which in turn opened out into the bedroom area through an arched way and beautiful handmade, open-shelved cabinets on its two sides. The area of the bedroom visible through the anteroom was a dining area, raised on an elevated platform by three steps and surrounded on three sides by huge bay windows. There was a round table with colored glass, four chairs around it.

There was also a traditional fireplace and an armchair in front of it.

“Now we shall put two,” Mrs. Hudson said excitedly.
A curiosity lingered in John’s mind about Sherlock’s first husband and he couldn’t help but ask, “Didn’t the….I mean his first spouse…..like sitting by the fire as well?”

“Oh…” Mrs. Hudson paused, “No. He used to live in another bedroom suite. That was on the eastern side of the property, this is the southern wing. This used to be…..”

“This was and will always be Master Sherlock Holmes’ bedroom, his bachelor pad,” Paul Andersen had entered the place stealthily and was staring sternly at Mrs. Hudson, “Should I run a bath for you Mr…..sorry, Dr. Watson?”

“He maintained a bachelor pad even after getting married?” John felt the words slip out and regretted that immediately. This was not a question meant for the retainers, this was a question for his husband. But words, once spoken, couldn’t be taken back and he bristled with unease and self-directed reproach. He made up his mind to be more careful about his choice of words and other reactions in this place.

“Mr. Holmes’ former spouse maintained his own quarters and that’s how the couple preferred to live,” Andersen said in a stone cold voice that seemed to form icicles on John’s skin, “He was a man from a very wealthy background and a successful professional in his own right. His choices were not very…..middle-class. Anyways, shall I run your bath now?”

Mrs. Hudson now gave a stern look to Andersen. She had earlier taken a step back and left John wondering why she would do so when she was clearly treated like a family member by the two brothers. But now she won back his respect, seeing the way she stood up for him and stopped Andersen from shooting his mouth off. Andersen glared back at her though, not backing off an inch and that resulted in a rather awkward standoff. After seeing the situation go from unpleasant to downright hostile, John decided to be the wise one and conclude things with mutual respect. He didn’t want his first day here to be sullied with the unexplained scorn of the butler and a fight between him and sweet Mrs. Hudson.

“Oh Andersen, how kind of you to have offered to run my bath,” he said with as much authority as he could muster, “Usually these things are done by….what did they call it back in those days, a century ago, parlor maid, personal maid, something like that? Yes, please do run my bath for me and ensure you put in some bath salts as well. There must be an impressive collection of bath oils and salts here, right?”

Andersen blinked, as if he had only just realized who was addressing him. “Yes,” he took a moment to understand and digest the order, “Sure sir.”
The moment he had slipped into the bathroom Mrs. Hudson snickered, “Well said.”

“It wasn’t how I wanted to talk though.”

“Oh come on doc, you know very well that some people have it coming. You’re a man of the world, a real man of the world and you’ve seen and known people of all kinds. I knew on the day of the wedding that Sherlock had made a great choice.”

“You think?”

“Oh, I know.”

“What did you think about the earlier….about…..?”

“James? James Isaac Moriarty. That was his name.”

“John, John, are you here…..oh there you are,” Sherlock came in, looking bright and cheerful and with a spring in his step, “Now Hudders, have you forgotten that big brother is due back from his business trip this evening and will have dinner at home? Do ask him if he wishes to dine with us or after us…..before us, whatever pleases his workaholic self.”

“Sure thing,” Mrs. Hudson said gleefully, patted John on the arm and left.

Sherlock jumped into John’s arms the next moment and nearly knocked him over on the huge bed in the middle of the sleeping area, nonetheless, John managed to stay on his feet and even grab Sherlock properly so he stayed astride him, like a delighted child would cling to a grown-up. John was about five feet seven inches to Sherlock’s six feet one inch but somehow he was the stronger, manlier and the sturdier of the two men. Sherlock was like an elf, or a pixie that had grown too tall, sprightly and slender, like a majestic and tall but narrow tree that needed the support of a more robust, grounded companion. Just like John. In the few days they had known each other, John had noticed how Sherlock loved to test his strength, his stamina, in every possible way.

“You gotta do better to knock me off,” John reminded him.
“Strong, brave, faithful and fierce John,” Sherlock murmured, “I have found you.”

“And I, you,” John returned.

“Do you like Windsor Manor?”

“Hmmm, finding out more about it. What’s there not to like? How old is it?”

“Hundred years.”

“Very nicely refurbished and maintained, I must say. The interiors have contemporary facilities and yet an old world charm that’s so missing in modern homes today. But this place is way too big Sherl, I am wondering if I’d get lost in it someday, like some never-ending maze that stretches on and on. How many rooms are here in this property? I mean, how many bedrooms are there?”

“Your bath is ready sir, oh… I beg your pardon.”

Sherlock abruptly let go of John and got to his feet. Andersen stood at the doorway to the en-suite bathroom, staring at both of them in the strangest of manners. John realized he had completely forgotten about him while Sherlock seemed less than pleased to see him there.

“You can leave now,” he said curtly.

Anderson gave a small, polite nod and left. He walked very erect, back ramrod straight and shut the door very softly. John couldn’t even hear the faint click of the tongue of the lock as it slotted into its place.

As soon as he was gone, John felt like going back to the moment before. Maybe it would lead to sex. Sherlock was so handsome and dishy in his single-breasted dark suit and milk-white shirt and he wanted to take Sherlock then and there! But the confounded butler had clearly spoiled Sherlock’s good mood because when John tried to coax him back into an embrace and kiss him properly, Sherlock wriggled away and said he had to make a few phone calls. Eventually John was left standing alone in the bedroom and went to take that bath, finding it amusing that the size of the bathroom was bigger than most of the flats he had seen in London.
Sherlock disappeared for most of the day, leaving John with not much to do except unpack and ponder about his future. As he took a walk along the cycle track that circled the estate, he met a familiar face. It was one of the faces that had greeted him with a stiff smile that morning, upon his arrival at the Windsor Manor. A man not much older than Sherlock, with wavy brown hair that he pulled back and wore in a ponytail, about five feet ten inches, medium build and boy-next-door debonair looks. Not a head-turner but he looked intelligent and bright and John couldn’t help but stop and greet him.

“Hi, if I am not mistaken you are Victor….Victor….Sherlock did mention about you, before the wedding.”

“Trevor,” the young man replied pleasantly, surprised that John remember his first name at least, “Trevor is my last name. Victor Earl Trevor. I am the estate manager. I also happen to be Mycroft Holmes’ secretary and Sherlock’s childhood friend. We went to the same school together.” He stopped as Paul Andersen passed by on a cycle. The butler looked at both of them but didn’t utter a single word. “About the wedding,” Victor continued, though his eyes remained on Andersen’s back as the man pedaled away, “I really wanted to attend it but I had some urgent work and had to go to Manchester.”

“That’s no problem, I am glad I met one of Sherl’s friends,” John said.

“Glad to meet you too.”

“Do you live in the town?”

“No. Everyone you saw this morning, all sixteen of us, we live on this estate. I occupy one of the outhouses, that one right over there, it’s next to the one Sherlock has converted into his laboratory.”

“You’re on your way home then?” John knew he was trying to prolong the conversation but couldn’t help himself. He wanted to know more about his young husband, about the husband he had before, about this place, about Mycroft, even about the odd Andersen, everything.

“No, to the town,” he said, “I have to send out some samples to the customers.”
Then he realized John looked clueless for a reason and chuckled. “I am sorry John, I should not have assumed that you know all of this by default. Someone has to give you the information, right? You see, all the land on the western side of this property belongs to the Holmes family and they own the vineyards, tea gardens, apple orchards and walnut plantations there. There are workshops and small factories there too, where the initial processing of the produce is done. Then they are sold to several customers, who use them as one of the ingredients to products they manufacture. Around five hundred people work on those plantations and workshops. I manage the whole thing, including sending samples of fresh and current produce to our buyers.”

“Ah, I get it now,” John realized he had much to learn, “Sounds very big.”

“Not as big as what you are,” Victor stated unexpectedly, “You’re a surgeon, are you not?”

“I am.”

“Hats off to you. You save lives. I am sure someday you will save…..”

“Save what?”

Victor looked a bit appalled at his own words and John realized that everyone there was walking around eggshells whenever they spoke to him. What big secret lay behind the walls of this estate and why was he not supposed to be a party to it? “I mean to say, you will surely save many lives in this town,” Victor quickly pulled a rabbit out of his hat but John was clever enough to read between the lines and understand this was not what he had in mind when he had said those words ‘you will save’.

“I am taking up employment at the Newport Hospital. I shall start next week.”

“Great. I wish you the best. Um….excuse me, I have to go.”

John watched him leave and once again he noticed Andersen coming his way, this time with a basket strapped to the back of his cycle. It had fresh fruits and vegetables stacked up in it. John walked on, hoping he wouldn’t have to talk to that man now but alas, that was not to happen.

Andersen stopped. John stopped, more out of a sense of obligation than a real desire to do so. “How do you like it so far here sir?” The butler queried.
“So far so good.” John didn’t want to prolong the conversation and took a step towards the opposite side, leading away from the house.

“You seem to be lost. Do you want me to send the golf cart to you. We have a couple of them, just to go around the estate.”

John had a good mind to ask him to ‘fuck off’ or simply say ‘I’d let you know if I need help, no need to sarcasm at every little opportunity you get’, or better still just put him into his place with a cold ‘Why don’t you head home, these fresh veggies and fruits won’t transport themselves to the kitchen on their own’. But he didn’t choose any of those mouthy options. No doubt he would have the satisfaction of scolding this man but it would also bring him down to the man’s level. ‘Never argue with an idiot, they drag you down to their level and beat you with experience’, he remembered those golden words, which his alcoholic and now-estranged sister Harriet often said to him when they were younger.

It would only make him sound affected, troubled, disturbed or offended. It would somehow give this man power over him. He didn’t want Andersen to have the satisfaction of knowing he could impact John in any way with his sneers and sarcasm and general snarkiness. “I am not lost,” he said with admirable restraint, “The estate is big but not so big that I’d need a GPS to navigate through it.”

“Mr. Moriarty was a quick learner,” Andersen remarked out of the blue, “The very day he arrived, he had taken over everything. Everyone, including the elder Mr. Holmes, Mrs. Holmes and even Mr. Mycroft Holmes ate out of his hands. Within two hours of his visit, he had pointed out that we lacked a greenhouse. That greenhouse and nursery you see over there, he commissioned it and supervised it as it was built. Most of our herbs, spices, seasonal fruits, flowers for the rooms are grown there.”

John felt a pang of insecurity.

“I am sure he was a wonderful person.”

“Very gorgeous too. There were women working in the plantations behind, women from the town, who would wait for him to show up at the estate gates, driving one of his many customized automobiles, usually the sports cars and convertibles. They’d click selfies with him.”

Again John felt stung. He was aware he was no great beauty. The earlier husband seemed to have
been both handsome and accomplished. Double damnation for him. He felt inadequate.

He was tempted to ask more about the ex but that would have been too much of a triumph for Andersen and a defeat for John, a fate John was less inclined to suffer. He felt a bit defiant and walked off, not dignifying Andersen with a response. So what if James Isaac Moriarty was more beautiful or richer or more suited to this life?! It was his life now, he was Sherlock’s husband and this estate was now his home. Moreover, he was alive. Moriarty was not.

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John had slept late that night. The room seemed too big, the surroundings too quiet, it was nothing like his three bedroom flat near Tate Modern in London, where he had reasonable privacy but at the same time could always hear the lively sounds of neighbors, traffic and even the occasional airplane or chopper flying past.

But once he slept, he’d slept heavily. But like clockwork, his eyes opened at 7 am. He was so used to that schedule of waking at 7 and being at work at 9 that he didn’t even need an alarm.

The first thing he noticed was Sherlock’s face right next to him. The younger man was sleeping soundly, dead to the world and clutching at the sleeve of John’s sleep shirt. “Morning sweetheart,” John whispered and kissed the tip of his husband’s long nose and got up, stretching his arms and legs. He wished he could stay in bed a little longer but he had an appointment to keep at the Newport Hospital, with the head of neurosurgery and trauma, Dr. Elizabeth Smallwood. She was a stickler for timing and he didn’t want to be late for his 8-45 am meeting with her. He kissed Sherlock’s hand, the one holding on to his shirt, and gently tucked it back under the blanket.

He went for a jog, again by habit, and then showered, shaved and dressed, appearing at the dining room downstairs for some breakfast at 8 am sharp. He startled two maids who were doing the dusting and polishing of silverware there. “Good morning Dr. Watson,” one of them said softly, “Breakfast is usually served in the conservatory or the breakfast room. Where would you like it? We’ll inform the cook and server.”

“Which way is the kitchen?”

“Pardon me sir?”

“The kitchen. I can make some scrambled eggs and toast for myself.”
The two ladies looked at each other as if they had just encountered a huge riddle that was to be solved in a time-bound manner. They looked both perplexed and tense. Realizing how he might have sounded in this world where Victorian-era style retainer-dependency still existed, John decided to put the two ladies out of their misery. “I was only joking,” he smiled and saw them exhale, “I shall have it in the conservatory, I think. Um…..which way is the conservatory?”

They gave directions and John somehow followed them till he was in the sunlit room. It was a semi-greenhouse, semi-kitchen and semi-sunroom besides being a breakfast room. Beautifully constructed, it had a rustic look and feel to it and was an extension of one of the kitchens in the manor, the country-style kitchen. Along with a sitting area with cane furniture and a corner to grow medicinal plants and some lovely flowery creepers, there was a breakfast table that could comfortably sit ten. And sitting at the head of the table was Mycroft Holmes.
The Haunting

Chapter Summary

Andersen shares a scary secret of the Manor with John

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, hello doctor,” Mycroft looked up and greeted him. His voice always reminded John of a swish of silk over velvet. Smooth, cultured, polished, fine, balanced, he wondered how many years it had taken the man to create this perfect pitch, tone and intonation.

“So, Lockie still asleep?”

“Yes, he came to bed rather late last night.”

“He’s at it again.”
“Pardon me, Mycroft?”

Mycroft made an impatient wave of his hand, “When you’re married you do need to be in bed at a certain hour, at least. Even midnight should do. This boy just doesn’t learn his lessons, not even after the last……anyways, how do you like Windsor Manor so far?”

John noted the sudden discontinuity of that sentence and the abrupt change of topic. While he would have loved to hear more from Mycroft, he didn’t want to pester the man too much. “This sunroom is beautiful. We can see the pool from one side, the rose garden from the other and the open lawns from the third side and this roof, the sloping glass roof with wooden beams, it’s truly magnificent. Do you usually have your breakfast here?”

“Sunny days, yes,” Mycroft said, “Otherwise in the breakfast room, on the eastern wing. This is a relatively new addition to the house. James had designed it.”

“James?”

“Yes, James. Lockie’s first husband, James, mostly known as Jim.”

John’s food arrived and he started to eat in silence, not sure of how to continue the conversation without sounding stupidly curious about Sherlock’s first husband. He could feel Mycroft’s eyes on him several times but kept his own eyes down, concentrating on his food and frequently watching the time to ensure he didn’t get late for his appointment. As he was about to finish, Mycroft asked him a question. “Are you planning on taking up employment here? There are two hospitals that can gainfully engage you, as consulting physician and visiting surgeon. Newport and Elizabeth. I know Dr. Smallwood, she is the head of surgery and trauma at Newport and can easily give you a contract to sign right away.”

“Thanks,” John said, “It seems our thoughts match. I did try the same route but I don’t want to hassle you for it. I have already set up a meeting with her. In fact, it begins in exactly thirty minutes, so I gotta leave now.”

Mycroft looked impressed, “I see what Sherlock sees in you.”

John blinked, “What’s that?”
“You guys have that in common. He also doesn’t want any help. For him, everything must be done on your own merit. That’s a bit of a stubborn idea to follow always, because we survive on interdependence. I personally see no harm in a little nepotism. If you are born or married into an influential and wealthy family, then why should you struggle like a working class man? I feel we must never have to apologize for our privileges. We didn’t steal them, did we?”

“It’s a different kind of satisfaction you get when you do something completely on your own merit and abilities. It makes people stronger.”

“You’re getting late doctor.”

John heard the change of tone in his brother-in-law’s voice and realized he was actually being goaded to leave. Sighing softly he wiped his mouth with the napkin, finished his tea and got up from his chair. “Oh yes, Mycroft. How kind of you to keep an eye on the clock for me.”

“Mention not. Andersen…?!”

Andersen stepped in, “Yes sir, Mr. Holmes?”

“The doctor will be going to town. Please ensure he has a car and….do you prefer to drive or be driven by a chauffeur?”

“I’ll drive,” John replied, making up his mind to bring down his Ford Fiesta from London.

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After struggling to choose between half a dozen models of Mercs, three BMWs, two Aston Martins, two stretch limousines, several sports cars and convertibles and even a Maybach and a Rolls Royce, John had decided on the least expensive, least showy car that would be easy to drive and easier to park. He had picked up a white Alfa Romeo.

The meeting with Elizabeth Smallwood had gone better than he had anticipated. She was most impressed by his records, his experience and even his personality, which she termed as ‘a ray of sunshine’. “We doctors need to be positive and optimistic, cheerful and patient. If we’re not any of those things and all we can do is a procedure or write a prescription, then we’d end up doing disservice to our patients who look up to us not only for cures but also encouragement and
John got to sign his two year contract with an option of becoming a permanent staff after completing a year. He had to take up four surgeries a week, plus emergencies, and visit the clinic on three days for two and half hours each, leveraging that time for meetings, looking after patients in post-operative care and seeing patients from the out-patient-department or OPD. The pay was good, the bonus decent and the facilities of the hospital quite modern and adequate. It was a good break, especially in a town that boasted of a population of only five thousand people and had a sizeable moving population that mostly comprised of tourists. He called up and informed Harriet, Molly and Mike, then called Sherlock. Sherlock didn’t answer, so he texted him.

Two hours passed, no answers. He had no further work that day so around 4 PM, John wrapped up his work and decided to call it a day. He was in the parking lot when he heard a female voice call out to him.

“Leaving for the day, Dr. Watson?”

John turned, clutching his keys and mobile, “Hello Dr. Smallwood.”

“Elizabeth please.”

“Sure.”

“I must say, on a personal note between us, that you are quite different from what the younger Holmes boy prefers in a husband/companion. Or at least, you happen to be very dissimilar to the first husband he had chosen. But maybe he has changed over the years. You know, a tragedy changes people irrevocably. But don’t take my words to heart, that’s just other people’s opinions; what truly matters is whether the younger one is happy with his current choice. If he’s happy then we’re all happy.”

John felt a slight catch at the back of his neck, as if someone was trying to twist his spine. *I am not sure Sherlock is really happy. Maybe he married on impulse. Maybe he still can’t forget his first husband. Maybe that was the reason why he had tried to hurl himself off the precipice.*

His lack of response made Elizabeth speak a few words out of turn, possibly to fill in the silent spaces. “Poor Sherlock was devastated by the loss. Even Mycroft, who I happen to know better than his kid brother since he happens to be a fellow member of Peterstown Civil Governance
Council, was totally at a loss. For two years Windsor Manor has had neither a big party nor a big celebration, two things they were very well known for.”

As John drove back to the estate, his head was filled with thoughts about the previous husband and how almost everyone thought Windsor Manor had lost its charm and sheen since the unfortunate death of that very ex. The more he struggled to free himself from the shadow of that man, James, the longer the shadow stretched. He was just past the main gate of the estate when he saw a text land on his phone. Thinking it was Sherlock congratulating him, he stopped the car half way through to the mansion, right next to the manmade lake and the perimeter wall, and checked. Nope, it wasn’t Sherlock but Nurse Viola, who was assigned to him at the hospital, informing him about the surgery schedule for the week.

John felt glad to be back to his old habits and a busy schedule, though it was nowhere close to the fourteen hour days he was used to at Barts Hospital at London. He had five surgeries lined up already over the next three days and a queue of patients to check at the outpatient facilities. John texted her back telling her that he needed the reports and case history for each patient at least twenty-four hours prior to the surgery date. He was very meticulous about such things.

As soon as Viola confirmed her understanding of his message, John started the car. He couldn’t wait to see Sherlock again and was about to drive towards the garage when his eyes fell on Windsor Manor. He caught a movement at the windows of the eastern wing…..THE Eastern Wing and, if his calculations were correct, it was part of the bedroom suite where Jim used to live before.

Nobody went there. Not at this time of the evening. Andersen personally aired the suite every morning and the maids changed sheets and flowers even though nobody used the bed or the room or even that wing anymore. But come lunchtime, the doors and windows were shut.

*Then who was it, standing there at the bedroom window?* John peered, narrowed his eyes and even got out of the car to double check. Yes, there was someone standing there at the window and…..if John was not mistaken, staring back at him. Yet the distance was too much between them for John to identify this person. Taking deep breaths and willing himself to not think about this too much, John drove to the garage and parked.

When he walked into the bedroom suite, he had the most pleasant surprise of his life. Sherlock was standing there, alone, awkward small smile on his face, with a chocolate cake in front of him, candles lit on it, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket next to it. He was still in his night clothes and clutching a gift box in his hands.

“Sherl?” John asked, surprise but also happily so, “What’s all this?”
“Congratulations on your new assignment here,” Sherlock handed the gift box to John, then stepped aside and said, “This is a cake….I mean, a welcome-home cake….and some champers. I thought you might like. We should have done this yesterday but then I am……” He stopped, like he often did when he was trying to talk about something on his mind, something less factual and more emotionally charged, where he began well but trailed off at the middle of the sentence, leaving it bereft of an ending. “John, I am a working hermit at times and I usually work late nights,” he said, putting a new spin on the conversation and switching gears abruptly, “I will tend to live a different lifestyle than you can expect from a newlywed….I am hoping that is all right with you.”

John hated to see Sherlock uncomfortable. Without realizing what he was signing up for, he replied, “Yes, I suppose I am. As a doctor even I will have odd timings at times.”

“Good,” Sherlock looked at the floor and pointed at the gift, “Open?”

“Sure.”

The gift turned out to be a beautiful silver photo frame with a crystal base and zirconia and amethysts studded at strategic angles to give it a quaint, vintage charm. There were slots for three photos. “One for me, one for you and one for us,” Sherlock explained, “It even has the Holmes family monogram at the back, it’s made by hand and I hope you…..I hope you like it.”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” John smiled broadly, “Let’s have some champagne?”

“Let’s.”

John popped open the bottle of bubbly and filled two flutes. “To us,” he said, raising the glass as a toast. “To us,” Sherlock repeated, they clinked glasses and took a sip each. “Sherl?” John looked at his husband from the corner of his eye, gauging his mood so he could ask the question.

“How many rooms does a wing have? What’s the design of a wing like?”

“I can share a blueprint of the interiors of Windsor Manor with you. Main area comprises of fifty percent space which houses a visitor’s room, three home offices, a meeting room, a formal sitting
room, a ballroom, a formal dining room, an informal parlor, a games room which has the pool table and all that, a room for displaying our precious art collections, a music room and a library. The wings branch out from the central stairway and lift chute, one on each side. Usually all wings except the western wing have a master bedroom suite, two guest rooms, a tea-room and a large covered terrace balcony. The western wing has the gym, the jacuzzi, the chapel, the private theater, the media briefing room, the studio etc."

Realizing Sherlock was totally invested into the question and ready to answer further, he posed the next one. “Does anyone live in the Eastern wing anymore?”

Sherlock gave him a rather blank look at first but soon that look grew heavy with impatience and disappointment and when the answer came it was almost in a scoffing tone. “Why don’t you take a grand tour of the house tomorrow with either Mrs. Hudson or Andersen. Even Victor can help you with that. I have arranged for a little interlude here, hoping we could connect and talk, thinking maybe you’d appreciate some time alone….yet all you seem to be concerned about is Windsor Manor and the wing that my…..my previous partner used to live in? John, if you must find out, explore on your own and don’t come to me with these basic questions. Do you really feel I take care of such details?”

“But Sherlock…..”

“I have to be on a conference call.”

“Sherl…..”

“Later.”

John chased after Sherlock and was in the hallway when he came face to face with the sour-faced Andersen. “Pardon me sir,” the man said in his usual cold manner, evidently enjoying the look of mild distress on the doctor’s face, “I was coming over to tell you that Mr. Mycroft Holmes wanted both of you to join him for dinner at the formal dining room tonight. At seven-thirty pm sharp please.”

“Did you see Sherlock walk past just now?”

“Yes, he passed me in a hurry but I managed to ask him the question and he said he will be there.”
“Then I shall be there too.”

“Oh and yes…..sir?”

John gave him a glare. If this man tried to be a smart-mouth again, he would get an earful this time. “What is it Andersen? Go on.”

“The eastern wing is rumored to be haunted. Even if curiosity pushes you, try and avoid visiting it after dark.”

The expression and tone, coupled with the imagined solitariness and solemnness of the eastern wing, lifted the hairs at the back of John’s neck and head and he sucked in a shaky breath before letting it out slowly. “And why, if you’d be so kind to inform me, would you want to tell me fairy tales out of the blue Andersen?” He asked, but inside he was scared of what he might hear in the man’s answer. Something about Andersen unnerved him and he had to admit that.

“Mr. Moriarty, they say he hasn’t left the house sir. People have seen him. The problem is, whoever has, they are never seen again.”

John frowned, trying to berate himself for even taking this seriously. You are a doctor, you were a soldier, you have seen a pitched battle and people dying, you walked through corpses to check for survivors, how can you get so swayed by a little story of the countryside prat? Still, he found himself gaping at Andersen for more information, which the man was only too happy to supply. “We had a boy who tended to the garden,” Andersen said in a tone of faint amusement, clearly enjoying John’s discomfiture, “About twenty three years of age. His name was Allen….or Alan, no-no, Allen it was. He saw Mr. Moriarty once and lost his head. He was sent away somewhere, to one of those places….what do they call that process of sending people away…..?”

“Committed?” John finished for him.

“Oh yes, you are the doctor after all.”

“Is that all?”

“Jenkins, the old butler. I was second in command to him. He saw him too and then….he just left the estate overnight and no one has heard from him for nearly two years. Then there was a nosy
worker from the plantation, her name was Rosa. She had come in to deliver some papers to Mr. Trevor and ended up doing a little exploration without taking permission from him. She saw him and fainted. Later that week, she committed suicide by throwing herself off the cliff. The Hunter’s Peak.”

John almost jumped out of his skin at that. Wasn’t Hunter’s Peak the very same spot where Sherlock had attempted…..

*Did that mean Sherlock had seen him too?*

“Andersen!!”

It was now Paul Andersen’s turn to jump out of his skin when they saw and heard Mycroft Holmes at the other end of the hallway. “Y-Yes, sir?”

“Don’t you have work to do?” Mycroft asked sternly, “I do not remember we pay you for spreading gossip or entertaining it in any way.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the support, kudos and comments on this story so far
Dinner was delicious, though John would have gladly called it deliciously awkward.

Mycroft and Sherlock clearly didn’t get along. Their conversations were filled with snarky comments, digs at each other, casual insults, nitpicking, blame-mongering and several sly anecdotes that pulled the other one down. To any onlooker it was like a comedy show which also made fun of posh people and their uptight accent and table manners but to be part of it, as a family member, was painful for John.

As they worked through their asparagus, fig, tomato and cucumber salad, then the hearty corn chowder, followed by baked quails with grilled beans and jacket potatoes on the side, a fruit custard and finally the best Indonesian coffee and Armenian brandy to cap it off, the conversation went from stilted speech to free-flow arguments and finally a deathly silence at the table. John almost felt like leaving the table but he was a bit awed by Mycroft’s presence and personality and didn’t want to defy him. also, he loved Sherlock too much to do this disservice to him. He didn’t want to give the formidable Mycroft a chance to add one more insult towards Sherlock by calling his new husband an intolerant, ill-mannered fool.

As Sherlock got up to leave, Mycroft taunted, “I have tickets to the ‘The Best Ways to Correct Your Mistakes’, at Westend, London. You can go and watch it with your friends.” He paused and added, “If you have friends.”

John cringed.

Sherlock snorted, “No thanks, I must decline. I know you’d rather go there yourself, with a partner. If you had a partner.”

John closed his eyes and waited for the next barbed comment but surprisingly none came. When he reopened his eyes he found Sherlock had gone and Mycroft was sitting on his chair with and
smoking a cigarette. He was also staring rather keenly at John, as if scrutinizing him thoroughly. “You must be thinking we are all mad here, don’t you?” Mycroft asked, “Squabbling, strange, sulking frequently. Well, fate hasn’t been kind to us of late. While my business and Sherlock’s work have only seen an upsurge in recognition and profits, our personal lives have taken quite the beating.”

Now or never. John asked the question that was raging inside him from the time he had set foot here at Windsor Manor, “How did James Moriarty die?”

To his surprise, Mycroft’s poker face changed and looked…..sad? Did he look sad?

“Fell to his death in that gorge….behind the property. He used to go there frequently. He was very fond of photography and playing the piano. He’d play every evening and every morning he’d go to that gorge, the valley, the slopes, the waterfall, and shoot pictures. Until one day….”

John held his breath.

“Until one day he ever came back.”

A loss was a loss, and it never failed to evoke a bit of melancholy in John, or a sense of sympathy for those who were most impacted by it. He looked at the strangely shaken and ashen-faced Mycroft with adequate empathy, noticing that the normally unflappable man was reliving that particular fateful day when Jim had died and drowning in those sad memories. Even though this loss had eventually been John’s gain and that was the very reason why he was here in Windsor Manor, as Sherlock’s husband, he couldn’t help but console Mycroft with the obvious statement. “I wish things had happened differently and he was still here. But he’s not, so I hope he finds peace, wherever he has gone, and I do hope you and Sherlock find peace as well, because we have to reconcile ourselves with reality and move on.”

“Well, Lockie certainly has.”

With that, Mycroft got up, a bit disgusted with himself because of the way he had let his guard down. John got up too. He was actually eager to be out of the dining room and retreat to the privacy and solitude of his bedroom. The elder Holmes sibling walked towards the door, stopping just before he walked out through it. “John, I have to say one thing to you. You are a member of the Holmes family now. You don’t need to be afraid of Andersen.”
A week passed. John had neither gained any further understanding of Sherlock as a person nor had he been able to deal with the unfathomable depths of mystery surrounding the Manor.

He did well at the hospital and won the respect and approval of Elizabeth, his peers, the nurses and of course the patients and their families. But the moment he was back home, he struggled.

For starters, he watched helplessly as Sherlock appeared to be deeply disturbed by something from his past….or recent past, and he failed to comfort the man because the moment he made an attempt to talk to him, Sherlock bottled up. They had sex almost every night (or early morning, since Sherlock came to bed only around 4 am every day and didn’t wake up till noon) but the emotional intimacy was missing. John diligently avoided the eastern wing but even then he thought he heard piano strains at night, footfalls in the hallway at midnight, saw a window open on the eastern wing, a shadowy figure standing behind the drapes.

Feeling strangely and helplessly desolate, he decided to call Molly and Mike and ask them for some help. By help, he meant company. So he texted them asking if they would like to stay a weekend at Windsor Manor. Before they had even replied, John decided to check with Sherlock if he was okay with it. After all, this was Sherlock’s house and since he hadn’t seen Sherlock or Mycroft invite any house-guests yet, he was not so sure if he should either.

Sherlock’s response was less than enthusiastic.

He had just woken up around midday and was pleased to find John sitting in bed next to him and reading a book. “Hey,” he said in a sleep-scratched voice that was sexy and inviting, “You smell nice. You took a bath?”

“Yes, I did, had breakfast too, then took a walk around the estate before coming back to bed and waiting for you to wake up,” John smiled tenderly and kissed the sleepy man’s forehead, then the corners of his mouth, “It’s my day off and I want to spend a lot of time with you today, Sherl.” He giggled softly when Sherlock launched himself at him and lay down on top of him, grinding his morning wood against John’s taut stomach and kissing around his collarbone. John grabbed the mounds of Sherlock’s buttocks and kissed him lingeringly on the lips before whispering, “Someone has woken up real horny. I suppose he needs me to put it out right away. Am I correct?”

“Mmmmyeaaah, do me, please!”
“Yes, just one thing I wanted to ask….before we start.”

“I can’t concentrate on anything but this.”

“Oh my needy, whiny baby. This will take only a minute.”

“Oh all right, fine, what is it?”

John kissed at the pout on Sherlock’s face and cuddled him closer. During moments like this he didn’t mind any hardship at all. Even if this marriage entailed a number of things that he was not really accustomed to and had brought him away from the city and the work he loved and the people he was friends with, he didn’t mind it one bit. One look into those blue-green eyes and he was ready to melt from the inside. Sherlock had literally cast a spell on him somehow.

“I wanted to invite a couple of my friends over. To stay a weekend.”

Sherlock looked at him as if he didn’t understand, “Your friends. Invite them here.”

“Yes,” John said, “The same ones who attended the wedding. Mike and Molly, remember?”

“Yes, they were here, I remember.”

“So can I……”

“Yes, it is your house and you can invite guests.”

“Thanks…..”

“I just didn’t expect you’d need other people so soon.”

John was gob-smacked. He just murmured ‘What’ and his brows knotted together in utter
confusion, his brain trying to process the words Sherlock had just said. He was giving his consent but with a grievance hanging round it like a bat from hell. For the first time he got a little upset as well and couldn’t help but speak in a tone a bit sterner than he normally used. “Sherlock, we hardly talk or spend time together. You are either on a conference call or locked up in your library. When you come to bed, it’s an ungodly hour and I am sleeping. When I wake up you’re fast asleep. Don’t get me wrong, I am not complaining. But all of this is new to me and I thought having a couple of friends over will be nice. That’s all. It’s not about needing others, it’s about……”

“I am not enough for you,” Sherlock was getting emotional, he pushed John’s arms off himself and rolled off his embrace and on to the mattress, “I am never enough…..”

“Sherl, you’re saying things I have not said or meant at all, Sherl, please…..”

“Stay away from me, don’t talk to me, don’t touch me……”

“Now how can I do that? You are my world. Please.”

“No, I am not.”

“Sherlock look at me,” John climbed over him this time and stared down at him affectionately, “Just open your eyes and look at me, listen to what I am about to say.” When Sherlock complied, John began to speak. “You know why I was contemplating jumping off the cliff that day we met? I was thinking the same thing you just said. I thought I wasn’t enough for anyone and it steeped me in a kind of guilt that was overpowering. I had detested the way things had gone with my wife Mary. When she and my unborn child died I felt somehow I had wished it upon them. It devastated me and I just wanted to end it all. But then I saw you.”

Sherlock took a deep breath and murmured, “And?”

“I knew just then that there was a good reason why we had been put in each other’s paths. We are both a bit broken by our pasts but together, we can be whole again. This can be beautiful. But for this to be beautiful we need to shed off the past and focus on the positives. My friends are not a threat to you, they are just people I sometimes talk to and have a good laugh with. My life is with you, only you, I have given it all up to move here with you, haven’t I?”

“Y-Yes.”
“Oh God, now I have upset you too much.”

Without a further word John nudged Sherlock’s legs apart and gently probed at his entrance. He was still loose and a bit moist there, from their earlier time. He lined his cock with the entrance and gently but firmly pushed into the younger man.

“Jawwnnnn,” Sherlock’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and he let out a sexy, long gasp after crying out John’s name. His legs curled around John’s back and his arms came up around the older man in a tight grip.

“Just feel me baby, just feel,” John whispered and started to move and immediately felt shudders in Sherlock’s body as the curly haired beauty began to moan softly. Every time John hit his sweet spot, a warm wetness trickled out of Sherlock’s engorged dick, spilling those droplets of clear slick on John’s fingers as he gave him light strokes, matching the pace and rhythm of his thrusts. They moved together, Sherlock aiding the movements by pushing back on John’s invading erection while letting his husband control the pace completely. His cheeks soon acquired a rosy color and his mouth opened like a flower, soft pants and sudden hisses coming out of it as he was ravished.

“Yes,” John groaned as he upped the pace and deepened his thrusts after a few minutes, “I can feel you get so tight baby, you feel so good Sherl.”

“Oh….oh…..fuck,” Sherlock began to tense up. He was clearly approaching a climax.

John started stroking him harder and tightened his hold over the cock.

“FUCK JAWN,” Sherlock’s eyes opened wide and he screamed with pleasure, gripping John’s forearms in ecstasy, “I am going to cum….I’ll cum now!”

“Yes,” John smiled, “Let it flow!”

Sherlock let out a stream of moans and curses before he came, splattering semen all over himself as his orgasm almost knocked him out. He gasped and groaned and hyperventilated, arms and legs twitching and jerking, his arse constricting near painfully around John. John was so enchanted by just watching Sherlock cum that he lost his own controls before he knew it, and only when the first shot of semen left his cock did he realize he had begun to ejaculate. He buried his face in Sherlock’s neck and sucked hard on the soft skin there, continuing to fuck his husband through his orgasm, till it all calmed down and faded into a lovely afterglow.
“Fine,” Sherlock said after a prolonged silence. He seemed easy and relaxed now.

“Hmmm?” John looked up from his neck.

“You can invite Bike and Lolly.”

“Bike and Lolly?!? Seriously Sherl, did you just say that?? Oh God, you’re truly hilarious, you know! They are Mike and Molly, not bike and lolly. Mike Stamford, who was my best man and Molly Hooper. They are both nice people, doctors, like me! You will like them and they won’t be any trouble at all. I am sure of that!!”

“Oh yeah, same thing. Mike and…whatever else you said, I mean whoever else you said. But don’t expect me to play perfect host all the time.”

***

John had just performed a tricky surgery on a young teen who had an infected wound on his left leg. Due to negligence and delay in treatment, an abscess had grown and the wound had putrefied. If the treatment had been delayed a few more days, the poor boy would have lost his leg beneath the knee. John had extended his hours and operated on the boy, not only saving his leg but also doing a beautiful job removing the infected parts and stitching it up so well that it would heal pretty soon. “That was truly beautiful and very well-handled doctor,” Nurse Viola said as John washed his hands, “He will recover sooner than expected. Usually I have seen that most doctors just remove the growth, you cleaned it up so well…..”

“Just doing my job Viola,” John said modestly, as usual.

“Dr. Smallwood and I were talking that day as she gave me a ride home after my shift,” Viola handed John some coffee, “It’s just been three weeks since you started here and she already depends a lot on you for suggestions and support. In fact a resident, Dr. Charlene May, she was even interested in your phone number but I told her you were married, that too to the super-wealthy heir and the prodigy, Sherlock Holmes. You should have seen her face when she learned that. Maybe I had teased her too far because she snapped at me, saying you would have been better off living in town and dating a commoner than trapped in that cursed manor.”

She clasped her mouth in shock as soon as she had said that. It was a slip of tongue but the cat was
out of the bag now, whiskers and tail included. “What do you mean, cursed manor?” John asked angrily, “That is my home. How can anyone talk about my husband and home like that?”

“I-I am sorry, I didn’t mean to jest….”

“Viola, please explain rather than offer excuses.”

“Doc, Sherlock Holmes was married to James Moriarty, a devilishly handsome, sexy, clever and charming genius with whom he paired up rather well. Whenever they were seen together people would just sigh and wish they had a similar partner and relationship as well. But some evil eye just destroyed their happiness. James died in an accident, following which several other people died or disappeared from that Manor. Sherlock himself was brought here one night, raging and raving like a madman and had to be sedated. But….I am sure you have been good for him, and we wish you the best….sorry I made you listen to that jealous diatribe from Charlene.”

***

John had just got out of his Alfa Romeo when someone called out from behind. “I think it’s about time you went for a different color, make, model and brand!!!”

“Sherl, what……” John turned, all smiles at the sight of his husband.

His eyes then fell on the car parked right next to Sherlock’s favorite drive, a purple Lamborghini. It was a bottle green Jaguar XJ, shiny and sparkling and looking like a new bride resplendent under the focus lights trained on it. “That my dear husband is my wedding gift to you,” Sherlock said with a broad smile and an outstretched hand pointing at the automobile, “I hadn’t given you anything for the wedding and you never asked, not even once. So I thought, why not a surprise gift, something you’d use every day while going to work and back. I…..em….I hope….you like it. If you want a different color we can change it, Victor has already spoken to the showroom manager and told him…….”

“Sherl, I love it.”

“Oh. Thanks. I thought maybe you won’t.”

“Give me a hug.”
“Jawn?”

“Yes, just c’mere into my arms,” John smiled kindly, stretching out his arms and tilting his head slightly to the right, “Please give me a hug. While I appreciate the gift a lot and I would love to drive it to work, what I really want right now is a nice cozy and warm clingy hug from you. One of those you used to give me while we had our brief courtship. Ever since we came here, those hugs have hardly been offered. I miss them, you know.”

Sherlock swallowed audibly, “Yes, I miss them too.”

In a flash they were holding each other in a clinging embrace. Even though Sherlock was taller, his right leg again looped around John’s hip, as if he were trying to climb the shorter man for some assurance and support. John rocked them back and forth a bit, recognizing an unspoken need in his young husband. Maybe he was stressed out due to some reason John was not aware of. He was so clueless about Sherlock’s life that he felt like a fool. How would he comfort him or support him if he didn’t know? “Feel better?” John asked as they finally parted.

“Um-hmmm,” Sherlock was smiling slightly.

“Let’s go for a drive in this car?”

“Yeah, I would love to. Let’s do that.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, only Sherlock can say 'Bike and Lolly' huh!
The Phantom on the Turret

Chapter Summary

John’s sex life with Sherlock gets hotter but the cold fear around him gets to freezing point.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sherlock was riding John, his face flushed with arousal, his eyes clouded over with desire, his lean beautiful body gyrating as he moved up and down John’s thick erection with soft moans and sharp wails tumbling out at regular intervals. Beautiful, John thought, someone beyond the realm of my dreams, and he is all mine. Just mine. How did I even get so lucky?

Sherlock’s own erection bobbed up and down, slapping against John’s abs and the jerking upwards every single time Sherlock’s prostate was brushed. It leaked at the head. John caught a shiny drop at the tip and skimmed it off with his finger, tasting it. Sherlock always tasted good.

He realized as his husband’s perfect rhythm faltered that Sherlock was approaching his completion. If he were to ride the way he was, he needed both hands for leverage as he planted them on John’s thighs and moved his torso. He couldn’t free one of them to touch himself. “Need a hand?” He asked with a glimmer of wickedness in his brown eyes, hands skimming all over Sherlock’s trembling body. The younger man nodded hard and pleaded with his eyes, Oh God could he communicate with just his eyes, his amazing green-blue eyes. Or were they blue-green? Aquamarine? John didn’t know and he didn’t want to. Why figure out the details when the whole picture was such a joy, such a pleasure to the eyes and all senses.

“M-Make me cum,” Sherlock whispered in a raspy voice, eyes scrunched shut as a visible shudder ran through his body.

“Yes, love.”

“Oh yeah!”

John stroked him harder and let him ride to completion, surrendering his own needs to ensure Sherlock got the most pleasure. In all these years, John had never felt so deeply for someone. His heart had felt tugs and pulls at some men, he had adored a couple of women, he had lost controls
with one of them, but at the end of the day none of them could compare with the unbridled lust and
love he felt for this lad.

“Oh Sherl…!!”

“Jawn, oh God, it’s coming!!”

John said the words he knew would always assure Sherlock and let him be himself, enjoy himself
as he pleased. He mouthed the words this time, not willing to shatter the quietness of the room as
they made love.

‘I got you’

Sherlock came, wailing and howling, so hard that he fell bonelessly on top of John and clung to
him while he came and came and came. John wrapped his arms around him and kept thrusting until
he was about to cum too, then…..

He saw a shadow move. They were making love on the couch in the anteroom so he could see the
glimmer of the hallway lights under the bedroom door. Yes, there was someone there, listening,
and he saw the shadow move away.

Sherlock was in aftershocks, safely ensconced in John’s arms, when he was somewhat rudely
moved off the thick cock and moved aside. John was not rough with him exactly, because he
immediately guided Sherlock to lie on the couch and even pushed a cushion under his head so he
was comfy, but the young scientist noticed that John had neither cum, nor was he in the mood to
continue. Instead he watched, puzzled, as John got up and threw on a robe to cover himself, before
he rushed towards the door to open it. “What’s going on,” he asked, a bit annoyed and surprised, “I
am still naked, what are you doing? Why are you opening the door? Why? Jawn!”

“Be with you in a minute,” John said breathlessly and rushed out.

He had seen the same shadow run down the hallway and, instead of taking the stairs up or down,
open the door at the upper landing. It was the door to the winding staircase that led to the turret.
“You bloody voyeur,” John gnashed his teeth together in anger and chased after the person.
Whoever it was, he was going to have to deal with John and give an explanation. If not, John
would have a few punches to trade with him. The cheek of this person, listening to them as the
newlyweds enjoyed some intimacy.
Yes, the turret door was open.

John got to the staircase and heard footsteps going upwards. He shouted, “You, whoever you are, you’ve trapped yourself now.”

John rushed up the stairs, determined to catch the culprit. He was sure it was Andersen, that stuck up stick in the mud who saw John as nothing more than a common mongrel who had been adopted and given a place of honor he didn’t deserve. This time John would show that confounded butler his place and make sure Andersen respected him from now on. He kept climbing stairs, checking the two other doors that could lead one back into the mansion’s living-space, and was glad to find both of them locked.

Now he only had to reach the top of the turret, the terrace with the old fashioned watchtower. Andersen would be waiting right there.

Yes, the door to the turret-top was open. But what was that?

The fog! Thick fog that one could almost cut with a knife. Where did that come from?

John stumbled out on the terrace, charged up with adrenalin, ready to face and fight whoever his enemy was. It was rather chilly, he was shivering in just a robe and bare feet, and it seemed even colder up here somehow, still he hunted down the intruder by scanning every inch of the terrace top for the elusive figure. Finally, finally, he spotted him through the fog. He was standing next to the watch tower, facing away from John.

As John approached, he realized something was wrong.

This man was not as tall as Andersen and didn’t have sandy brown hairs like him. His hairs were darker, shorter, worn in a different style. He was shorter, slimmer, he was someone else. John stopped in his tracks and held his breath, wondering if he had got Andersen wrong somehow. Maybe it was one of the other retainers…..but then….this man was different…..he matched none of the descriptions of the other men who worked around the estate. A strange fear began to cripple his limbs and he moved closer, trying to touch the figure so it would turn and he could see who it was. He smelled a delightfully fresh citrus, vanilla and wood based cologne, he heard the other man murmuring something. Then the man turned.
THOSE EYES!!

John staggered backwards and closed his eyes, shocked beyond shocked. He heard footsteps and suddenly felt the urge to hide. But in the fog, the fear and the confusion, he wasn’t sure where he was headed until he found himself with one foot off the edge of the turret-roof, staring in horror at the lawns which were at least sixty feet below. He was so shaken that he nearly lost his balance, until someone caught his arm and pulled him back.

“For Christ’s sake John,” Sherlock looked at him startled beyond startled, “What were you trying to do?”

“I….him….there he was….Sherl….I was chasing after…..someone was listening to us and……”

“All well sir?”

Andersen stood at the doorway, looking at them curiously. “Don’t just stand there and gawp,” Sherlock snapped at him, “Help him. Come on, help me take him downstairs and get us both some tea.”

“Sure sir.”

John shrugged off Andersen’s arm when the butler offered to help. “No,” he objected, “You get the tea. I will be fine. Sherlock is here.”

Andersen looked at Sherlock for more instructions but when the latter nodded, he quietly went off to bring tea. John somehow got to his feet and managed to make it back to the bedroom.

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“John, sorry to tell you this right now, but I have to go to London and be there for the next few days. Even the weekend.”

John sighed, “Okay, sure.”
They were back in the bedroom and sitting on their bed, both of them in their pajamas, sipping the tea Andersen had sent up with one of the maids. Sherlock looked apologetic and a bit distracted. “I know I have not spent enough time with you since we got married,” he said after taking a few deep breaths, John noticed, “But I am working on something important and it’s taking up a lot of my time. I am hoping this will change soon, and when I have more time we will spend all of it together. I know you’re expecting more conversations, more fun, more answers, like any husband would. Just be a bit more patient with me and things will take a turn for the better.”

“It’s fine Sherlock,” John put a hand on Sherlock’s knee, “I am not a young woman of twenty-one. I am an adult male. I have been to the war. I have handled plenty of stress. I am a doctor. It’s not so easy to derail me. I have more resilience than you can imagine.”

“That’s what made me marry you. I know your strengths.”

“You do?!?”

“I do. I just don’t say it enough.”

“Sherlock, I saw someone up there who…..”

“The stupid fog did the trick I suppose. It makes people see things that don’t exist.”

“But Sherlock…..”

“I am tired, I have an early start tomorrow. Will you help me sleep?”

Once again his husband was clamming up and withdrawing into his own shell. John knew the symptoms too well to stir the pot at this point. So he did what he usually did whenever Sherlock leaned on to him emotionally, even though John needed the same emotional support from him at the same time. He lay down, pulled the covers over them and spooned Sherlock. But the moment he tried to switch off the light, Sherlock suddenly and inexplicably trilled, “No, leave that one on.” Then he paused and said in a much lower, controlled voice, “Please.”

John’s hand had stalled on the button of the remote. “Sure,” he said and put it away.
Two days later, it was Friday and John got a rare opportunity to spend some time with Victor Trevor. He went into one of the home office where Victor worked and found the man finishing up. “Hey,” Victor said, “You’re back early.”

“Yes, one of the surgeries got postponed as the patient’s blood sugar levels are too high and need some more medication,” John explained, “Hence, as you see, I am back at four pm. But Sherlock isn’t home and my friends would be arriving only by tomorrow morning. So, I was wondering, if we could have a drink together?”

“Bad weather tonight,” Victor didn’t answer John directly or immediately, instead he walked to the window and peered out at the skies, “Grey skies, clouds over the horizon, it seems like 9 PM already, I know these signs all too well. We are going to see a stormy and rainy night but it will be good for the crops.” He turned back to the room and realized he owed John an answer, “Listen, I was thinking I could better your offer. We can have some whiskey in my cottage, I mean the outhouse I occupy, and team it up with some bangers and mash and gravy. It might not be the gourmet fare of chef Stacy and chef Charlie but I make a mean bangers and mash and gravy. I am also extremely good at cooking a few Chinese dishes, egg noodles, shrimp fried rice, vegetable spring rolls etc.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” John said, happy that Victor was opening up and willing to spend time with him. He could use a friend and this man appeared to be genuine and honest and clearly very loyal to the Holmes brothers, especially Sherlock.

“Oh we’ll manage that somehow,” John was willing to risk a bit of bad weather, “At the most my feet and clothes would get dirty and I might jump a bit of the lightning strikes a tree right next to me. Otherwise we are good. I have braved more than just bad weather in my life.”

“John.”

“Yes?”
“I am glad Sherlock has you now.”

“Really? I don’t suppose I am making much of a difference to him really.”

“Hey, you didn’t really have a lot of time to make that happen. It’s not a lack of effort. See, it’s been barely a month since you married him and only two and half months since you have known him. Things take some time, especially in relationships. I’d say be patient and stick to doing the right thing John. It will all fall into place and slot together in the most wonderful manner possible. You will make Sherlock very happy in the long run.”

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“This is most amazing,” John realized how much he missed a simple home-cooked meal, “The mash is so creamy and tasty and the sausages are grilled just right. The gravy is so smooth and seasoned just perfectly. Thanks so much for this.”

Victor smiled between bites and poured more whiskey for them as they continued to eat. It was an early dinner, at six-thirty. Usually John had dinner around eight, sometimes alone, sometimes with Sherlock. Mycroft had not shared a meal with them since that one time when they had dinner together. In fact, Mycroft had hardly been home in a while. He did catch him now and then while he was on his way out to work or Mycroft was playing golf while John jogged around the property but aside from a quick greeting, they had not even had a chance to talk. “Mycroft,” he began, “He is a very busy man, is he not? He hardly seems to be at home.”

“Mycroft is a workaholic,” Victor said immediately, “He is also very competent and intelligent. Unlike Sherlock, he handles people well and reads them carefully before opening up with them and thanks to these attributes, he has not only seamlessly taken over as Chairman and CEO of the companies he built up with Reginald Holmes, their father, he has the loyalty of his employees and the backing of the Board as well. He isn’t much of a talker though, he speaks only when it’s necessary, but he’s a good man. A really good man and really does love his younger brother dearly.”

“Oh…..”

“I understand the surprise.”
“How do you mean?”

“They keep sniping at each other, don’t they?”

“They increased my repertoire of insults and sarcasm over a meal. Sherlock compared Mycroft to a steam-roller and Mycroft called him a cactus.”

“They have called each other worse,” Victor laughed as he took small, economical bites of his mashed potatoes, mopping up the gravy with each forkful, “But they do care deeply about each other. Mycroft has made a huge sacrifice for Sherlock, something he will never talk about.”

John looked directly into Victor’s eyes, “I suppose I can’t ask what it is.”

“Best if you didn’t.”

“May I ask you about someone else then.”

When Victor nodded, John said, “How about Jim Moriarty? I hear so many grand impressions about him, not just from Andersen but also from other retainers, even the townsfolk and my colleagues at the Newport Hospital. Everyone tells me he is just……unassailable. Makes me wonder why Sherlock would want to be with a simple, common, ordinary man next door like me? I’d be boring in comparison.”

Victor gave him a strange look. “You got it all wrong John. Yes, I agree Jim was enchanting. He was the sort of man who was hard to resist and even he resisted very little…anyways, Jim came from an extremely wealthy and sophisticated Irish family. They are the Brooke family from Clontarf, Dublin, his parents were Daphne and Jeremy Brooke, both accomplished people in the fields of art and music. But Jim took on the name of his stepfather, Malcolm Patrick Moriarty. Old man Moriarty was very rich, thanks to his trade profits with the Far East. He had no offspring but he adopted Jim as his son and was very proud of him. He left all his wealth to Jim, all hundred million of it. I think he even got Jim a very expensive life insurance policy…..the details escape me right now. Jim got a double degree from Trinity at a young age, in mathematics and astrophysics. Brilliant man, very intelligent, almost at stratospheric level.”

“See,” John said, “Unassailable.”
“No, not in terms of a husband and a mate. That is different from being academically brilliant or socially popular. You are a kind, generous, considerate, reasonable man and on top of that you really seem to put Sherlock first in the relationship. I have noticed some changes in him.”

“Positive changes, I hope.”

“Oh yes. He seems far more relaxed and at ease.”

“What did you think about Jim?”

Victor’s eyes focused on his glass and he chugged down the rest of the contents quickly, as if he needed liquid courage to speak the next words. “Well, all I can say is that he was a mesmerizing man. His personality was a killer, lady killer and gentlemen killer and people fell for him easily.”

John felt something sink in his chest. Whilst Victor said he was good for Sherlock and had many qualities that one looked for in a husband, he was also singing praises for the unmatched brilliance and charm of Jim. Was that supposed to make him feel better?

“But,” Victor added, a little distractedly, “As I said before, you are the sort of man who would make Sherlock very happy. I am sure you guys will grow old together, right here in Windsor Manor, a happy couple forever. Mycroft will then perhaps decide to finally make an honest man of Gregory Lestrade and move with him to his gorgeous townhouse in London, Mayfair. Once he sees his kid brother happy, he’ll take a decision to move on too…..from someone.”

Chapter End Notes

Who could possibly be worse? Ghost Jim or Jim who stayed alive!
Haunting

Chapter Summary

John realizes that everyone in the Manor is hiding something from him

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Seriously?” John snickered, “The police chief? He is a handsome, very amiable man. Now that you tell me, I think I did notice those looks he gave my brother-in-law at our wedding.”

“Terribly fond of Mycroft. He’s been trying for years. But Mycroft sort of….avoids any kind of commitment.”

Victor didn’t elaborate any further and John, rather wisely, didn’t ask him any more questions. He didn’t want to be the interrogating pest who had come to dinner. But there were a few comments of Victor’s which stood out in John’s memory and made him wonder where they came from. That he had sacrificed something major for Sherlock, that he would move on from someone….those indicated a love affair or a big move in the personal sphere which hadn’t gone per plan. Both Holmes brothers had secrets buried in their closet, possibly skeletons, and John was torn between letting the sleeping dogs lie and digging up the closet so he could get the answers to some burning questions in his mind. He found Mycroft’s elusive manners a bit unsettling and wished he had more information on the man.

“The estate belongs to Sherlock.”

“Huh?” John blinked, “Oh yes, he told me.”

“Mycroft doesn’t have to be here. Not that Sherlock minds.”

“Yes, I can see that too.”

“He is a bit hard to read and sometimes harder to get along with, but deep down he wants the best for his brother and his new husband. Mycroft is a good man who suffers from the terrible Holmes family ailment. He cannot express his feelings, emotions etc. in words. And, like the rest of his
family, he thinks attachment is a disadvantage, so is caring. But he does care, deeply so, and he refuses to acknowledge that.”

John nodded, not sure how to respond.

“John, just be yourself, love Sherlock, protect him from his own demons and be patient and alert. I know it’s a lot to ask for but these are simple things really. A man like you should have no problems following these tenets.”

“I think I best be going back to the mansion,” John said, “It’s blowing a real gale and the rain’s coming down in buckets.”

“You’ll be okay?” Victor asked, “You got a raincoat?”

“Yes and a torch. I will be fine, don’t worry. Thanks a lot for dinner and your company.”

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John entered the mansion through a side door that was closest to the southern wing where he resided. Mycroft occupied the northern wing, the same wing where the Holmes parents used to stay until their untimely demise. As he took the stairs and climbed to the first floor, it occurred to him that he had never tried to visit the floor above. There was a second floor in the mansion, which also had that door that led to the central turret, but somehow he had never explored it.

A bit curious, he went up the additional flight of stairs and saw a big heavy door. When he pushed it open, to his amazement, he saw an entire open-plan floor with pillars at regular intervals but no rooms or balconies designed like the floor below. It was a continuous huge hall filled with boxes, crates, barrels etc. “What the fuck,” John exclaimed, getting back out of the door and closing it, “What do they do on that floor? It’s a sheer waste of space…..”

He couldn’t finish his sentence because he had reached the bottom of the stairwell by then, and realized that he was standing bang in the middle of the mansion, the central point of the house, from where the wings branched out. In his distracted state he had taken the wrong stairs, the ones leading to the central unit of the house rather than the one directly leading to the wing he occupied. “God this place is a maze,” he held his head and sneered at himself, “And I am too much of a dumbass to even memorize it properly. I think I am in the wrong wing now and…….” He stopped, froze, and looked around him. He was at the foyer of…..was this the eastern wing?
A sense of dread and foreboding filled him immediately as he looked at the hallway and the doors on either side, the right one no doubt leading to the bedroom suite earlier occupied by James Isaac Moriarty. Jim. Sherlock’s ex husband Jim. The adored and brilliant Jim. The Jim who was unassailable and incomparable, indomitable and peerless. The Jim Sherlock still loved and missed so much that he could hardly bear to talk about him.

John’s feet automatically took him towards the bedroom suite and, despite the warning bells in his head, he couldn’t suppress the urge to see the rooms occupied by his predecessor.

He tried the handle of the door. It gave away. The door was unlocked.

John walked inside, then groped about blindly for the lights. Finally he found a couple of them and flicked them on. Immediately his breath caught in his throat and he looked around with wide, gaping, wondrous eyes.

What an awesomely beautiful room!!!

If the room he shared with Sherlock was tastefully done and elegant, this one was three notches above it in terms of luxury, décor and aesthetics. The rug, the bed, the furniture, the drapes, the expensive artifacts, the paintings on the wall, the fittings and fixtures, the items of personal use on the bedside table, the exorbitant electronic goods, everything dripped wealth, class and elegance. It was the room of a prince and nothing less.

John found himself walking to the writing desk and touching the stationery.

Everything was monogrammed with ‘JM’. From the notepads, pens, the laptop, the mouse pad, the pillow case, the suitcase, the briefcase with golden clips, even the watch lying casually inside the top drawer, everything had the initials of Jim Moriarty on it. ‘JM’ everywhere. With shaky fingers John pushed open the bathroom and gasped. Again it was steeped in luxury and the huge sunken bathtub had a jacuzzi function built on one side and a normal tub on the other. It could comfortably hold four people. Images and visions of a naked Sherlock ravishing his young and gorgeous husband in that tub flashed before his eyes and John ran back out into the bedroom area, panting with the stress he felt inside.

I will never be like him, Sherlock will never be happy with me, I married him for love but Sherlock married me out of impulse and also pity, maybe.
Gulping down the anxiety he felt, John tried to escape the beautiful but nightmarish room when his eyes fell on the huge oil painting in the sitting area. His jaw dropped and his knees shook. So, this was James Moriarty, aka JM, aka Jim.

He stood leaning against a desk, wearing a neat and sharp tailored suit in Oxford blue with a matching blue and yellow tie, a white shirt and shiny loafers. There was a Rolex on his wrist and a shining wedding ring on his finger, both no doubt pretty and precious items, but none of them could beat the pretty smile sported by the young man. The smile, those eyes, no wonder Sherlock had fallen so hard for him and so many people praised him to the sky. That man was really quite dazzling.

He had an aura of cool casual charm about him, was slender and had a good posture, smooth unlined skin and glossy dark hairs, but his biggest assets happened to be his eyes, his smile and the almost regal aura of self-assurance that hung about him. Maybe the painter had painted a flattering photograph, perhaps it was the old fashioned way of photoshopping away the blemishes and freckles, the spots and imperfections.

No. That was not the case.

John realized he hadn’t noticed several other photographs of Jim which were placed strategically around the room. There was one in the dressing room, right there on the dresser. There were a couple of them on the nightstands. There was one hanging right next to the door leading to the balcony. There were three more in the anteroom, placed in a manner to form a triangular space. Finally, he saw there were several more on a wall next to the master closet. But they didn’t belong only to Jim. There were many others in it, including Sherlock.

John realized that arrangement was probably the ‘family pic corner’.

Jim looked perfect in all of them. Not a hair out of place, not a slouch, immaculately dressed, sexy and photogenic; enchanting creature that he was it was difficult for John, as a gay man, to not stop and admire him. Even though he knew this man was a rival, that he had been there before John got a chance, that his shadow hovered over this manor and its occupants, including Sherlock, he still felt a strange attraction towards him.

Those expressive, dreamy and yet demonic onyx eyes. They seemed to be bottomless. One could drown in their depths. And from the depths of those dark wells this man called out to him, enticing him, tempting him, daring him to taste the forbidden fruit and go to hell.
The sound of someone suddenly striking a key on the piano broke the trance John had slipped into
and he shuddered with fright when he saw the baby grand piano in one corner of the huge suite.
How come he hadn’t spotted that before. The notes from the keys struck a moment ago
reverberated across the room and echoed inside John’s head. He shakily crept closer but couldn’t
see anyone there, not on the piano seat, hiding behind it, behind the drapes or in the shadowy
corner. The faint hope he had that someone was pranking him to scare the living daylights out of
him evaporated and a dreadful eerie feeling came over him. What if Andersen was right for once?
What if this wing was truly haunted and he had made a terrible mistake coming here?

He backed off towards the door. As he passed by a crescent moon shaped decorative mirror on the
wall, its frame studded with colorful shells, he caught the sight of a young brunette man standing
there, diagonally opposite from him across the room.

“Fuck,” he shrieked and shot back as far as possible before he realized it was only the reflection of
Jim’s portrait in the mirror. By then John had lost his balance and fallen against a wooden
handmade table. An expensive vintage clock kept on it got knocked off by his elbow and broke.

“O God no,” John groaned. Now he had caused damage. He had broken something that was not
only very expensive but also held sentimental value. Worse still, now there would be evidence than
he had been there, or someone had been there. This was avoidable, this really shouldn’t have
happened at all. *Jesus Christ, why do I take such risks, why am I so clumsy, why the fuck am I
scaring myself constantly?*

Suddenly the windows on one side of the room flew open, letting the rain and storm in. John felt as
if his heart had leapt on to his mouth and he gasped with terror, hands and knees shaking as he
crouched in one corner of the room, trying to hide from whatever entity was in there. There was
someone there for sure, he could feel that presence and then he could smell it, that familiar whiff
of citrus fruits, vanilla and warm woody undernotes.

Oh yes, the same whiff he had experienced on the turret top. He remembered now!

*Oh God no,* wasn’t it the same pair of eyes he had encountered there as well? Jim’s eyes!

He suddenly heard voices, and laughter, and footsteps and then the sound of a door opening.
Crazed by those sounds and paralyzed by fear, he literally crawled and dragged himself on threes
and fours towards the door which was now…..open…..and what was that…..a pair of legs right
there, standing before him!!!

“Please, no……” John shielded his eyes and crouched, sure that he would either be dust soon or
rotting behind the walls of an asylum. There was no escaping the specter if you saw it with your own eyes, Andersen had said that.

“John,” a smooth voice called out. John didn’t react. He just stayed where he was. Maybe if I just stay like this, close my eyes for a long time and then open them again, I’d be back in my bedroom. What you can’t see can’t hurt you, right? But the voice called out to him again, “John, John, John.” No, I am not answering, I am not going to even look at him. I don’t know what to expect, what I shall see, maybe my heart would just stop the moment I lay my eyes on those dark orbs. “John, please, take my hand and get up, John, this is me, Mycroft, Sherlock’s elder brother, get up, please,” the voice called out and this time more tenderly, with compassion, tinged with a hint of worry.

John opened his eyes.

“My-cro-ftt.”

“Yes, who else did you expect?”

Mycroft stood there, tall and proud, clad in his silken pajamas and satiny robe, like the lord of the manor. The only thing missing was the pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth, had it been there he would have looked straight out of the nineteenth century, a snooty Lord who ruled over the moors and the villages surrounding it, residing in a huge imposing manor just like…..Windsor Manor.

“I-I don’….know.”

“Get up, let’s go back to my quarters first. We can talk there. It seems you can use a brandy.”

“Y-Yes.”

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“Better?”
John nodded.

Mycroft’s bedroom suite was the same huge size as Sherlock’s (Jim’s was even bigger), but the décor was different. More books, more art, a touch of the orient and the African, everything that suggested his globetrotting past and his profession as a shark of the financial waters. He had also inherited a taste of the vintage charm that his forefather was so passionate about, John noticed that with a sweeping glance around the place. Even the glass in which he had been offered brandy was vintage. A beautifully hand-carved exterior, in a combination of silver and crystal, with a quirky shape.

“If you wanted to see that wing, you should have asked Mrs. Hudson or Andersen or even me,” Mycroft settled into the other armchair, “Or at least chosen a better time.”

Now that he was not so brain-dead anymore, the doctor felt rather embarrassed by his actions. As the seconds passed, John felt the stiffness in his joints and muscles slowly lessen and disappear. The fear and cold, which had more or less cramped him up, were slowly leaving his body now that he was in a safer place and sipping brandy next to a nice roaring fire. It was a stone fireplace and the warmth was emanating from proper firewood. Mycroft noticed what he was looking at and said, “There are two more fireplaces in the room, both electric ones, but sometimes I prefer this. What can I say? At times my tastes and preferences are pretty much the same as my great granddad’s.”

“I-I saw someone there,” John pointed in a random direction. He was still struggling with controls. He felt he had no control over his body movements or his brain functions. He was doing everything randomly. There was a strange lingering numbness inside him.

Mycroft stared in the direction John was pointing before he said ‘Oh’ and turned back to John. “You mean the eastern wing? No, nobody is there. No one has been there for the past two years. I can vouch for that.”

“Then….why is everything left the way they are?”

“He will never be gone from our lives.”

“Or you don’t want him to.”

“What? Well, if you put it that way.”
He isn’t helping matters with these ambiguous answers. It doesn’t confirm or deny anything at all. What am I supposed to make of these things he’s saying?

John cleared his throat, “How did you know someone was there in the eastern wing?”

“I didn’t. I was on my way up from the parlor downstairs when I saw your flashlight lying on the landing, right where the sets of stairwells branch out towards the various wings. Something told me you might need a bit of help, it’s a huge mansion after all and easy for someone to get lost. I went to the southern wing first, then to the eastern one, where I found you. Again, if you need to go there and look around by all means do that. This is your house. But choose a better time. Dark, stormy nights often give abstract shapes to our innermost thoughts and fears and that’s what got to you, I think.”

“So this place is not haunted?” John blurted out, regretting his choice of words immediately. But he was looking for some assurance, some guarantee that Jim was not going to invade his life, thoughts and his……marriage with Sherlock.

Mycroft kept sipping his brandy and staring at the orange-yellow flames of the burning logs. The thunderstorm had faded into a drizzle outside and the quietness surrounding them was unnerving, interrupted momentarily by the crackle of the logs getting licked up by the roaring fire. He heard Mycroft take a deep breath and sigh it out. “Haunting is a broad term, isn’t it doc?” The elder Holmes said, a peculiar undertone of sadness lacing his words, “Who isn’t haunted? Which place isn’t haunted? Memories are what haunt us the most. That sparkling laughter when someone finally gets a joke you cracked. The sounds of someone breathing next to you as you watch a crime thriller together, waiting anxiously for the next scene. Those eyes which keep haunting you every time you……yes, we are all haunted. What kind of haunting are you talking about?”

John realized what the other man was hinting at. It’s all in the mind. Blink and its gone. Close your eyes and you see it again. The mind was the greatest magician, conjuring tricks that seem near improbable otherwise. “Mycroft I……”

“I think you should go to bed.”

“Sorry I was a bother.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I realized a while ago that you didn’t exactly get a warm and appropriate welcome in this house. But you will settle in. Sherlock has chosen well even if it was a
rushed choice and a hasty wedding. I hope you prove him to be right.”

“Right, how?”

“That Windsor Manor can be a lively, happy, prosperous place again.”

John wanted to ask some more things but there was an ice wall between him and Mycroft, which seemed to be getting taller and thicker with every minute that passed. He saw Mycroft get up and walk towards the door, which prompted him to do the same. His brandy was over. The hour was late. There were no further excuses to stay back here and talk. “I was just thinking that we……” John began to speak, intending to invite Mycroft for dinner the next day, with Mike and Molly in attendance. It would be the polite and dutiful thing to do, as his brother in law.

Mycroft did not allow him to finish. He held the door open and said, “Goodnight Dr. Watson.”

Chapter End Notes

Connection between Jimcroft will be revealed later, not immediately. But I guess some of you will guess it right!
Suicide

Chapter Summary

“An accident,” he muttered.

(Warning - This chapter contains a minor character death)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can’t believe this,” Molly was filled with awe and wonder, “Oh my God, this place is straight out of the movies! I saw it only from a distance on the wedding day, but being in here now, it gives me goosebumps. It’s like a heritage five star hotel, with the grounds one can only expect around a royal castle. The décor, the facilities, a retinue of staff, personal chefs, two swimming pools, that shower stall in my bathroom…..”

“Slow down Molly,” Mike Stamford snickered, “You sound like Eliza Doolittle.”

Molly mock pouted but went on gushing about the whole place nonetheless. Mike Stamford didn’t say so much but one look at him and anyone would say he was overwhelmed too. John could totally understand their wide-eyed bewilderment and amazement since he had felt that too, on his first few days here! His friends had been settled into the two additional bedrooms in John’s southern wing, right next to his (and Sherlock’s) bedroom suite. Even though those bedrooms were smaller, as were the balconies and bathrooms attached to them, they were still as big as a badminton court and beyond the wildest dreams of an average middle-class Londoner who was used to living in flats that were slightly bigger than shoeboxes.

“A chapel, a private chapel, a private lake where you can do some angling, a treehouse that’s so cute, a fully equipped gym, sauna, and that garage, I am sure there were over twenty cars there,” Molly went on, a cheek splitting smile on her face, “John, John, John you found your prince, you really found your prince. And he is soooo cute. He is really the whole package, with looks, charm, wit, money!”

“Our John is a good catch too,” Mike interjected.

“Of course he is,” Molly agreed, “You were long overdue some good luck.”
“Thanks guys,” John said quietly.

Mike frowned, “How are you doing, by the way? Sorry we had to postpone your invite by two weeks. We were filling in for others who were on vacation or out sick.”

“I understand, that’s fine. I am just glad you guys are here now and would be staying here for two more days and nights.”

“This place is awesome John. But it’s not so easy to adapt to this life. From a noisy, people-filled, busy, almost cantankerous life in London to this slow-paced, idyllic life in the lap of nature and solitude, it is quite the switch. While almost all of us dream of a holiday like this, many of us can’t really get used to living here forever. Even your career as a medical professional will be impacted if you stay here long-term. But I am sure Sherlock’s company and love must be worth it?”

“It is Mike, it sure is.”

“Good then.”

John actually felt a lot better now that his friends were here and he had people to talk to, right there at the manor. Otherwise it was a lonely life there and with Sherlock not around, it could get quite claustrophobic. After a nice laughter packed lunch, the three of them pedaled around the estate and stopped at the manmade lake to take a boat ride. There were three row-boats and a jet ski moored at the boathouse, right next to a speedboat as well, and they chose to use the good old fashioned oars than the engine. It proved to be a pleasant afternoon and by the time evening arrived, John had got over the terrible ordeal of the night before. He felt much better until Molly suddenly told him something that chilled his spine over, again.

Mike had just gone into the greenhouse with the gardener, eager to see the little tubs and pots blooming with produce, when Molly suddenly clutched at John’s arm and whispered, “Who is the cutie? The hottie?”

John gave her a mock angry glance, “You do know Sherlock.”

“Oh he is absolutely a dish. But I meant the other one.”

“Mycroft is a witty, debonair and sophisticated man but I doubt he can be called hot/cute.”
“Oh no, not the stuck-up elder brother with his stiff upper lip. I meant that one over there.”

John’s heart nearly stopped when he saw Molly pointing at the windows of the eastern wing. “No one lives there anymore Molly,” he said firmly, “Nobody at all. You must have seen a retainer or someone else who might be cleaning the rooms there. And none of them are really hotties or cuties. Now come on, let’s go back indoors. Chef Charlie just called me to say tea, pastries and sandwiches are waiting for us in the tea-room.”

“Oh, tea room, chef, oh lalalala, I feel spoiled already.”

She pranced on ahead but John stopped and looked over his shoulder at the ominous eastern wing. Did Molly really see someone there? Was it really a retainer, as he had just suggested? He had to check with…..no, not Andersen, maybe with Mrs. Hudson.

Fortunately he found her in the visitor’s room as he passed by it. “Oh Mrs. Hudson?”

She looked up from the list she was making, “Ah, doc. How are you? I have seen so little of you of late.”

“Yes, I could say the same about you too.”

“What can I say? Sometimes I am ‘asked’ to stay away.”

“Why would anyone ask someone as amazing as you to stay away?” John actually felt a bit guilty that he had not made an effort to talk to her more often, “You gave me the warmest of welcomes when I came here about a month ago.”

“Oh my, has it been one month already?” She said as he motioned with her hand for him to take a chair next to her, “How time flies. I have been here for forty years you know, I came here when Mrs. Holmes was pregnant. But the child didn’t survive more than four months in the womb. I was to be the little one’s nanny but I ended up being Mrs. Holmes’ nurse and confidante when she went through that difficult time of recovering from the miscarriage and hoping she is able to conceive again. Two years later, she did and Mycroft was born after nine months. The Sherlock followed, seven and half years later. Both were healthy, bonny, beautiful babies. And look at them now, all grown up and fine men…..”
“Tell me about James. Jim.”

Her eyes grew guarded, “He is gone. What’s there to know?”

“How did Sherlock meet him?”

“In Dublin. Sherlock had gone there for a science convention. I still remember him calling us, me and his parents, exclaiming he had finally found love. He was an aloof boy, often shunned by people his age because he was so brilliant as compared to them. Suddenly he had found someone who was a counterpoint to his genius, someone very much like him and who also loved him with equal passion and fervor. Only Mycroft was a bit miffed, but all of us were just overjoyed.”

John’s face fell, as did his spirits. How could anyone love someone else after having experienced true love of this sort? Jim was Sherlock’s dream man, even after his death his shadow extended and fell over their marriage, darkening the mood considerably. John wanted to hate the man but he also knew one shouldn’t hate the dead. That was a rather horrible thing to do. “Mycroft and Jim didn’t get along then?” He asked in a morose tone.

“No, but they did. That was the most surprising thing. They did. In Mycroft’s eyes Jim could do no wrong at all. Even if Sherlock had a problem or a fight with Jim, Mycroft would step in and call Sherlock out for it. He never reproached Jim, never.”

“It’s confusing….”

“It’s saddening too. Leave it doc. Let’s focus on what’s left behind. You’ve made Sherlock seem normal again. That’s a huge achievement. We thought he was going to go mad and get committed. He had even become suicidal.”

“I know.” John sighed, remembering Sherlock standing on the precipice, almost about to fall off. He shuddered, “Well, what I wanted to ask was…..do you believe in ghosts?”

Mrs. Hudson seemed a bit taken aback but not so much that she wasn’t prepared with an answer. “Yes, I do believe there are presences that linger long after the earthly form is gone. What are you trying to ask me? Have I seen Jim?”
John was almost afraid to confirm that, lest she actually said she had. But there was no point in holding back on her when she was ready to reveal and he desperately needed that information. So he nodded and almost immediately the old woman started talking. “Yes, yes I have seen him. I cannot deny or lie when the truth stares me in the face several times a month, that he is gone but not really absent. I see him climbing the stairs, I see him entering the east wing, I see him on the balcony and at the windows, I sometimes even hear him playing the piano. On dark long nights, I hear footsteps because I live right beneath the bedroom he once occupied. But these are not the real thing. Jim is gone. It’s you who’s taken his place now. If all goes well and I am sure they should, you will be the one to wipe off all this……re-create the Windsor Manor we knew once.”

“Mrs. Hudson?”

She looked up, a bit startled, slightly nervous. Andersen was standing there.

John wondered how long he’d been there and how much he’d heard.

Thoroughly ignoring John, the butler said, “Is the list ready or not? I am sending Mandy and Decker to the town for the supplies. They can’t wait any longer if they have to make it to the stores on time. Or would you like us to send them tomorrow instead?”

“No, no,” Mrs. Hudson said, “No, it’s fine, it’s fine, I’m almost done with this.”

She walked out of the room in a hurry, leaving the two men in a standoff situation. Andersen seemed defiant and challenged John to speak first, his body language one of open arrogance. John was not to be cowed down and he glared back at the insolent butler, deciding he had to start acting like a master of the house and not some scared little guest at the mercy of the retainers. “Do you not knock when you enter a room?” John asked sternly.

“Not if the door is open and……”

“You will knock, from now on.”

“Very well Dr. Watson.”

John was just walking past him, still quite mad at the butler, when the man unexpectedly called out to him. “Sir, If you really wish to know more about Mr. James Isaac Moriarty, why didn’t you ask
me? I could tell you more about that wonderful, foxy, attractive man than anyone else ever could, including the junior Mr. Holmes.”

John spun around so fast that Andersen smiled in a rather mocking manner. “When your guests are gone, when you have more time, all you have to do is ask.”

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“What do you mean the place is haunted?” Mike Stamford asked in a rather puzzled tone, “John, you are living in the countryside but that doesn’t mean you should start thinking like the country bumpkins do. Superstitious nonsense, old wives’ tales, gossip, myth, if they had a way they would conjure up the spirits of all those who died in the Holy War and make a new funeral pyre for those long-departed souls. I could still accept this if you were an artist, a writer, with a creative and imaginative frame of mind. But you’re a surgeon for crying out loud, you should be the one to dispel the myths and rumors. Possibly that’s why Sherlock fell in love with you. He is a man of science, he wouldn’t like it if.....”

“If I tell him about this,” John murmured. “Well, yeah,” Mike answered, “Sorry if my response disappoints you.”

The two men were sitting in the tea room of the southern wing, chatting over a nightcap and warming their hands next to the fire. Due to the thundershower the night before, the temperature had dropped several degrees and there was quite a nip in the air. Molly had gone to the ‘spa’, as she called it, to soak into a hot bath of rose petals and essentials oils, in one of the massive jacuzzi tubs right next to the gym. She had taken quite a liking towards Mrs. Hudson, who in turn had also grown quite fond of her as well, and the old housekeeper/nanny was keeping her company. It gave John a rare chance to chat with Mike, who was his medical school pal and whose advice he took far more seriously than Molly’s.

“I don’t know what kind of response I was expecting, to be honest,” John said with a big sigh, “A part of me feels relieved that you find this to be total bollocks. But there is this other part that’s desperately looking for answers and wishes you’d dig a bit between the lines.”

“If that’s what you want,” Mike said seriously, “I’ll do some research and email you.”

“Will you?”
“Of course. But tell me, are you happy here?”

“I want to be.”

“Oh God. Don’t tell me you rushed into this Johnny!”

“No, no, I didn’t……or maybe I did….but I don’t regret it one bit. I don’t feel I should have decided otherwise. I love Sherlock. I can’t bear to see him hurt, not even a hair on his head. He is precious, it’s something I can’t explain, we men can’t find the words, but if I was Molly I would probably call him the prince who came riding a white horse and we rode off together into the sunset, happily ever after.”

Mike Stamford gave John’s wrist a squeeze and said, “Don’t bother explaining. I can see it on your face. I can even picture that scene as you described it…..except…..” he gave a dramatic pause and added, “Poor horse. Two of you on his back!!!”

John didn’t quite get the joke for the first few seconds but when he did, the corners of his eyes crinkled, and he guffawed out loud. Mike was already beginning to roll off to the floor, shaking with the humor he had just dished out. After exchanging a high five, the two men laughed and laughed till tears came out of their eyes. John wiped them off with the heels of his hands while Mike clutched at his cramped up stomach, both still gasping with laughter. “Ohhhhh,” John trembled and chuckled and shook his head, “I haven’t had a laugh like that in a long time. Thanks a lot Mikey, that was really hilarious. Poor horse indeed…..” and he doubled over with laughter again.

That was when they heard the bloodcurdling shriek.

“Okay,” Mike stood up from the chair, “What was that?”

“A woman,” John murmured.

They looked at each other and gasped with sudden realization, “MOLLY!”

As they rushed out of the wing and came to the landing, one of the senior retainers, Raymond, who worked mostly with Mycroft, almost collided with them. “Dr. Watson sir,” he said breathlessly, “You better come with me right away. I…..um…..you need to see something.”
“Where is my guest?” John asked, rushing down the stairs, “Molly…..”

“Mr. Holmes is also there, waiting for……”

“Where is Molly?”

“I am afraid she is….she is dead sir. She fell from the eastern wing to the lawns below. But you can maybe just confirm…..sorry to put you through this…..”

John stopped in shock, as did Mike Stamford. “God no,” John closed his eyes and wailed, “Oh God no, please no. Tell me this isn’t true.” He sat down on the steps, his legs giving away underneath him. Mike handled it better, saying he would rather go and check the body instead of John. “Maybe there is a mistake, maybe she is alive, you hang in there okay?” He consoled John and rushed down the staircase.

In just ten minutes John got the confirmation he dreaded. Mike came back and informed him that there had been no mistakes or any exaggerations. Poor Molly Hooper was gone, dead on impact. She had fallen from the window of the eastern wing bedroom suite, rather inexplicably so, but there was nothing to prove any foul play.

***

Greg Lestrade was a kind-natured, reasonable and suave man, someone who didn’t seem to have lost the touch of humanity despite being in the company of criminals and investigators and law-keepers all the time. He was also efficient, if not the most observant, and commanded total respect of his team. They worked quickly and cleanly, assessing the body before wrapping it up in a body bag and putting it in the ambulance. Paramedics and forensic experts worked quietly and quickly while two cops took rounds of the property with sniffer dogs. The retainers and even the security team were interrogated thoroughly, followed by Mycroft, Mrs. Hudson, John, Andersen and Mike Stamford.

“John, I am very sorry about this, a loss of a friend is hard,” Greg said when he got a few moments alone with John, “I guess this place has started to attract a lot of negativity. Only two years ago I was here, talking to everyone about Jim’s death.”

Once again John felt a deep-seated fear shudder through him and his throat went dry. He picked up
a glass of water and drank deeply, before he managed to whisper, “I can’t believe she is gone. Only an hour before this happened, we had finished dinner and were talking about what we’d do the next day. And then suddenly…..” He couldn’t finish as he felt a lump in his throat. So many memories of Molly, so many of them, Molly laughing in the lab, Molly showing him a photo of her latest purchase, a Lada car, Molly winking at him and mouthing ‘good catch’ as he married Sherlock a month before this fatal accident. “An accident,” he muttered.

“You think so?” Greg asked.

“What else is it?”

“Could even be suicide.”

“She was a happy go lucky girl with a great future as a doctor. She was well employed, well liked, her parents are still together and she gets along well with them and her younger brother, she had friends, she had a good life…..she just bought a car and….no, no, she……not possible.”

“Could you tell me what was she doing in that deserted wing at nine-thirty in the evening?”

“Maybe I could help with that,” Mycroft Holmes entered the room and sat down next to John.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry about Molly :(
John saw an immediate shift in Lestrade’s behavior. The man became painfully self-conscious and even a bit shy, looking at his hands, a slight flush on his cheeks, running his fingers through his hairs. He remembered Victor’s words. ‘Mycroft might finally make an honest man of Greg Lestrade’ and had the situation not been such a sad, somber one, he might have even found the police chief’s school-girlish behavior a bit funny. Clearly he had a crush on Mycroft.

“Yes, to answer your question inspector,” Mycroft began, totally behaving his usual cool and composed self, “She was a guest and any part of the house was hers to explore, use or visit. Being an urban girl, she might have been curious about the rooms and the décor, that’s all.”

John was about to open his mouth and talk about what Molly had told him earlier, that she had spotted someone there in the eastern wing. But he held himself back at the last moment. This could land anyone into trouble, including Victor, Mycroft and even Mrs. Hudson, people John genuinely liked. They would immediately become possible suspects and in all likelihood the whole scenario would be considered a ‘murder’. But then….was it really a murder? Molly was not a suicidal person, John could vouch for that, and even if she has been there for curiosity’s sake, why would she open a window, climb on the sill and put herself in such a position where an accident was just waiting to happen!

“Do you suspect anyone?” Lestrade asked.

“No,” Mycroft answered.

“Mike….I mean, Mycroft, I was saying….” Lestrade quickly corrected himself after having accidentally used Mycroft’s nickname, “Have you and Sherlock thought about moving to London? You have fantastic properties there, at Mayfair, Hyde Park, Chelsea. Haven’t there been enough mishaps here already?”

“Sherlock won’t. I can’t leave him here with his demons.”
“Now he has John. He is a married man. Maybe John should talk to him about it.”

“Sherlock won’t leave and you know why.”

“Oh yes, I do. The same reason even you won’t….at least partially so.”

John sat there listening and wondering if he was just invisible to both men. They kept talking as if he didn’t even exist. Half of the things that were being said didn’t make sense to him but he knew better than to stick his nose in at this point. He made up his mind to ask Sherlock a few questions upon his return. Then he sat up, alerted by his thoughts. Sherlock! He deserved to know what happened here. He needed someone to inform him.

“If I am not needed,” John said after a few minutes, “I’d like to go outside and take a walk please, clear my head a bit. Mycroft, may I take a smoke from you?”

“Thought you might need one tonight,” Mycroft handed him the cigarette and a lighter. Lestrade let him go but reminded him that he was not to leave town for at least a week. The inquest would continue, even if this seemed an open and shut case.

***

“Damn it, just when I needed to have a word with him…..” John kept puffing at his cigarette while trying to catch Sherlock on the phone but after three unsuccessful attempts, he was in a good mind to give up. The line refused to connect. Maybe Sherlock was in some place with low or no signals but then….why would he be in such a place at this time of the night. It was bloody 1 am. John sucked the cigarette till the butt before tossing it away and stamping hard on it, needing an outlet to his frustrations right now. He typed out a text, hoping that eventually got through to his husband.

“You married a freak, doctor.”

John turned and exclaimed ‘You’ to which she responded with a cocky smile and a slight shrug. It was the same curly haired woman, brown skinned with mixed race features and a rather sour expression on her face whom he had met a couple of weeks ago at the hospital. Her name was Sally Donovan and she was second in command to Lestrade. She had come in to John’s chambers with her mother, whom John had treated and healed quite quickly and efficiently. Back then she was not in uniform and scrupulously polite and grateful. Now, in her own turf and with the battle
gear on, she seemed unpleasant and overconfident. John had a good mind to ignore her and walked away, but she kept following him.

“I shall pretend I hadn’t heard that comment about my man,” John warned her.

“I cannot pretend that your man is normal doctor,” she answered him.

“I don’t need this conversation, sergeant.”

“I am sorry to be persuasive. But I am only looking out for you. You’re a very good doctor and you cured my mum of her horrible skin ailment which she had been suffering for months. The least I can do is give you a fair warning that you should leave while you still can.”

“Leave? What the hell do you mean?”

“Accidents, suicides, shocks, disappearances, they are just waiting to happen around here. Not safe for anyone other than that fre…..sorry, other than those who are used to this place, or possibly perpetrators of the crimes.”

“Now let me tell you something sergeant,” John was cross by then, “This is my husband and my family you’re talking about and unless you have proof, this is all pure speculation and rumor mongering. And I shall not stand for it.”

“You don’t really believe some ghost does this, do ya?” She asked, snorting with laughter, “I am sure they would have tried to feed you that bullshit. This cannot happen unless someone living behind those walls is responsible for it, is masterminding it.”

John kept walking back towards the mansion, confused and angry. But she followed, relentless in her persuasiveness and talking incessantly. “He does this, you know, the freak that he is, he gets close to them as soon as he meets them, says he’s head over heels in love, then one day he’s tired of them and they are abandoned. But with that man, Jim, it was the real deal and oh man, see what happened, see how it panned out when karma caught up with him and took away the only love of his life. He’s damaged goods now, totally damaged, in the head, heart and spirit. It won’t be long before you’re abandoned too and if you’re lucky, you’ll still be alive. It is this man, Sherlock Holmes, who brought this curse upon this manor and the family, it is him, it is him…..”
John got in through a side entrance and slammed the door on her face.

But already he was thinking about a few words she had used and how they resonated with what others had said. Jim being the real deal, Sherlock falling in love quickly and then falling out of love just as quick, the mansion being cursed, Sherlock heartbroken after Jim’s death.

*What have I got myself into!* 

But even amidst so much grief, confusion and total chaos, there was just one tide of thought that brought him ashore. He really loved Sherlock Holmes.

***

Mike Stamford left two days later. Molly’s body was sent back to London to her family. The police concluded it was an accident and no foul play was involved, as circumstantial or forensic evidence didn’t point towards any.

But even as the initial unrest at Windsor Manor died down, the uneasy atmosphere still continued. John found refuge in his work and went back to it on Tuesday. Elizabeth assured him that she was absolutely fine if he needed a week or ten days off, but he declined her offer.

“I shall take it when I need it, but right now I need to be here, I need to work,” was what he told her as he continued seeing patients and performing surgeries. Nurse Viola was especially kind towards him, back home Mrs. Hudson was very accommodating and kept an eye out for him all the time, even Mycroft said he’d stay back until Sherlock came home. What hurt John was how Sherlock responded to him via a text saying he was sorry about John’s loss, and that he would be two days late in returning to Windsor Manor. The delay, as claimed by Sherlock in the text, was purely due to work-related unavoidable circumstances.

Still, John was happier than happy when on Thursday Sherlock called him to say he was coming back that evening. “I’ll be a bit late, say around nine-thirty or ten pm, but can we still have dinner together tonight?”

John immediately responded with a ‘Yes’ and was grinning as he walked into the mansion that early evening, relieved that he wouldn’t have to sleep on a lonely bed that night. His man would be back and he would have Sherlock’s firm, lush, sexy form in his arms, his to hold and love and cherish and ravish. Half of the angst and worries bottled up inside him drained out at that very
thought. But his good mood subsided when he found Andersen at the hallway leading to the southern wing. He was scolding one of the retainer, the one who worked there as a plumber and fixed other hardware like the heating system and air-conditioning ducts. John was irritated and about to shoo them away from there when Andersen unexpectedly addressed him.

“Dr. Watson, since junior Mr. Holmes isn’t around and Mr. Mycroft Holmes has gone to town for a commitment, I am requesting your intervention please.”

A bit taken aback, John asked, “Mine??”

“Yes sir, you’re the only one who…”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Chris was in the eastern wing today, just before he came into your wing to check the heating systems and any leaky faucets. It is part of routine maintenance work he does. It seems that while he was in the eastern wing, he broke a valuable artifact. It cost Mr. Sherlock Holmes nearly five thousand euros and it was a Valentine’s day present to Mr. Moriarty. I saw it hidden behind a statue in the corner, broken into three pieces. He is denying he broke it.”

“I didn’t sir, I didn’t, I didn’t,” Chris pleaded.

John was in a fix. It was the same artifact he had accidentally broken. Maybe in a state of panic he had put the broken item behind the statue and forgotten about it. Oh yeah, this was his handiwork, his clumsy mistake and now poor Chris was getting berated for it.

“It’s all right,” he said as calmly as possible, “I think there has been a mistake. It wasn’t broken by Chris, I believe him.” Andersen seemed flabbergasted and opened his mouth to object but John stopped him, “If you wish to discuss this, let it be between you and me. Chris, you can go.”

Chris thanked him and scuttled away. John looked at the butler, “I broke it. That night when I went there, I accidentally broke it.”

“Accidentally sir?”
“Yes. People die there accidentally and I don’t see you cringe much.”

For once, Andersen seemed to have nothing to say. He stayed quiet and John, in a last attempt at giving the man an olive branch, softened his tone towards him. “I know you were very fond of Mr. Jim Moriarty and his memories are very much a treasure for you, something I shall never ask you to let go of. Whatever rocks your boat Andersen, it’s fine by me. But I am married to Sherlock now and regardless of whether you like it or approve of it, I am here to stay. So we have two choices, we continue the hostilities until I get you thrown out of here or you make my life so miserable that I am forced to leave, or we get along and bring Windsor Manor back to her glory days of happiness, celebrations and joy.”

The butler seemed dumbfounded.

“You are, after all, employed by the Holmes family. Your loyalty should be towards them, right?”

“Yes, very much so. They lie there, I assure you.”

“Then let’s make life better here, for both the brothers.”

Perhaps John’s sincerity and honesty transformed him because Andersen seemed meeker somehow after that and far politer than he usually was. John observed the change as the caustic butler also put a peace offer on the table.

“If you’re okay with it sir, I’d like to show you around the eastern wing personally.”

An offer too good to refuse. John nodded, “Very well. It’s still three hours before Sherlock is back so I have time.”

***

“These were all his favorite toiletries,” Andersen seemed as enthusiastic and eager as a child, “YSL, Hugo Boss, Armani, Tom Ford, Davidoff, he ever used any lesser brands. The brand you wont recognize are the ones he got from his trips abroad. Sometimes Mr. Mycroft Holmes or junior Mr. Holmes would get them for him too. He was the doll, the darling of the family. Even Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were terribly fond of him.”
John was half listening to the ramble as he looked at an album he had discovered under the coffee table, next to the magazines.

Many, many photographs of Jim and Sherlock. Posing in Arabian robe and headgear in front of the pyramids at Egypt, in hiker’s attire and boots with backpacks at the Machu Picchu, kissing in front of the Taj Mahal, making faces on the Great Wall with snow capped mountains in the background, at a candlelight dinner in Paris with the Eiffel Tower all illuminated and standing proud in the background, cuddled together in a tent with their tongues sticking out, asleep inside a private jet, leaning against each other. Those photographs had ignited a burning jealousy and a numbing insecurity inside John, until he found a couple of photographs slipped inside the jacket of the album cover.

He wouldn’t have found those pics, had he not accidentally dropped the album when Andersen had suddenly turned on the shower in the bathroom, boasting about the sixteen point spray which Jim had especially ordered for is bathroom. He was started, dropped the album and the surprise just popped out.

John’s brows knotted together and his jaw dropped. One of the photographs was of Jim and Mycroft, Sherlock’s elder brother Mycroft, reclining one a sunbed together. It didn’t seem like two brother’s in law on a vacation with Sherlock behind the camera, it was an intimate pose that no husband would tolerate. Mycroft was in a thin vest and board shorts, a wide rimmed sunhat and sunglasses, Jim was in speedos and sunglasses, their legs tangled together and their arms around each other in a possessive, almost clingy pose. The other photograph was of Jim with an astonishingly handsome and big built man, with blond hair. The pose struck by the two men for the camera was even more intimate and telling than the other one. Jim was sitting on the blond man’s lap in a pub, both holding beer bottles.

On an impulse, John hid the two photos inside his jacket just as Andersen, still going on and on about Jim, walked back into the bedroom.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes would come in every night and they’d sit on the bed, watch telly. I often brought them their drinks and a few snacks, sometimes even at 3 am, sometimes finding them under the sheets and you know…..”

“No,” John objected, “I don’t want to know.”

Andersen raised an eyebrow, as if only now realizing how long he had been talking without even a pause. “I appreciate you telling me about the room Andersen,” John said, “But Jim’s private life with Sherlock was their own, personal business. I don’t need to know.”
The butler nodded, “I suppose that is a fair point.” Then he looked at John with glowing eyes, “Would you, however, like to know what was Mr. Sherlock Holmes’ favorite look on his husband? Or the kind of outfits and accessories and hairstyle he adored? See, you were kind to me so I suppose I should return the favor somewhat, sir? Would you want to know how Mr. Holmes preferred to be greeted by his Jim, especially when he returned home after a trip that lasted quite a few days?”

John felt rather thrilled at that prospect. Making Sherlock happy was always on the top of his mind but he had nothing much to fall back on, either by means of experience or suggestions. He could use any help he could find, especially since Sherlock had said very little about his asks and preferences in their few days of marital life so far. Even if some insights came from someone like Andersen, he didn’t mind. Andersen had after all worked with Jim, Sherlock’s one big and true love, so he was surely aware of a few things here and there. And the man seemed to be offering this help entirely on his own accord, so he didn’t feel any hesitation in accepting it.

“Yes,” he said, “Yes I would very much like to know a few tips and tricks.”

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Sherlock hopped out of the midnight blue, Maserati Quattroporte, his travel bags in his hands and a smaller package tucked under his right arm. The retainers skipped down the stairs to relieve him of the luggage but Sherlock refused to part with the package. “This one I shall take by myself, thanks a lot Raymond,” he said as he thanked the chauffeur, Daniel, and asked him to take the next day off. Then he ran up the stairs to the porch, eager to see his husband after almost six days, and a tad bit guilty that he had arrived at nearly eleven in the night and John was probably dizzy from hunger by then.

“Jawn,” he called out as soon as he entered the bedroom suite, “Jawn where are you?”

He took out the gift he had brought with himself, a guilt offering really because he had arrived three days later than committed, especially around the time when John needed him the most. He was aware he had left his man, relatively a stranger to these parts and people, alone at this messy, dismal hour when he had lost his young friend to an unexplained, horrible tragedy. This was the best way he knew about making up to Jan, a nice little gift, then dinner together and maybe a shower, post which would surely follow a long, hot night of sex and holding each other close, sharing some thoughts. “Jawn,” he called out impatiently.

“Sir….”
Sherlock saw the butler at the doorway, eyes lowered. “Andersen. Where is Dr. Watson? Isn’t he home?”

“He is….um….in the Eastern wing sir.”

“WHY?”

“He wants to give you a surprise.”

“A surprise in the wing where we had a death recently? Some surprise that. Please ask him to come here and…..no, wait, I shall do that. What is he doing there, really?”

Andersen spoke in a low, whispered tone of voice, “He is getting ready, changing, getting into something special, for you.”
“What…..what the….what….” Sherlock stammered at him, eyes wide, horror evident in them, “Who…who are you?”

John looked at himself in the mirror and smiled nervously. He had literally undergone a makeover in the past two hours, helped by Andersen and also one of the other retainers, a young man named Joey. Together they had added a temporary color to his hair, giving it a darker look, then spiked it up. It was not John’s usual style, his hairs were dark blond and worn in a more conservative style with a side parting. But he didn’t mind this one since it made him look cool, young and different. And if Sherlock liked a younger look on him, then this effort was well worth it.

This was temporary after all. One wash and the color and spikes would both be gone and he would be his usual self again the next morning.

After the hair, Joey had been asked to go and Andersen had given him a rather nice outfit to wear. A pair of dark slacks that were form-fitted and which Andersen claimed he had one of the maids ‘alter’ slightly to help him fit into it. A broad belt with a prominent brushed silver buckle, a black shirt with a slight sheen to it and slightly sheer, clinging to every inch of his upper torso. The look was finished with a nice charcoal grey coat and a steel grey tie, a silver tie pin shaped like a fox attached to it. Similar fox shaped cufflinks had gone on to the shirt ends and completing the cool dude look were a pair of suede finish camel leather golfer’s shoes. Even John had to admit that he looked 10 years younger and 15 times sexier like this, even though this didn’t really make him look like ‘himself’.

What the hell, he thought, everyone can change their style somewhat. Never too late to do that. This wasn’t something he usually did but for tonight the exception seemed justified. He was highly hopeful Sherlock’s approval would make all doubts in his mind disappear with a poof!

He heard footsteps and quickly picked up the ‘gifts’ for Sherlock. Again, it was something Andersen had suggested, based on whatever Sherlock liked in the past. Having nothing else to fall back on, John had eagerly grabbed the opportunity and accepted that choice.

It was a beautiful purple shirt. A Prada shirt with ‘S’ monogrammed on the front pocket. Pairing it was a classy and elegant watch from IWC Schaffhausen with a purple dial.
“Several of these items had been bought for him a long time ago but never gifted to him,” Andersen had said with a tinge of sadness, “The one who was to gift him these things,” a deep sigh had left his throat, “He was suddenly no more. But I think now that we have a new partner for Mr. Holmes, it’s only fair that he gets those gifts from you, I suppose.”

“You sure?”

“Yes doctor, totally sure.”

“I mean, I didn’t buy them….”

“Never mind, you can always buy him more gifts of your choice. For now, this is the best option you have. It’s not London we live in, there are no two hour gift deliveries nor are stores open at this hour for you to choose gifts from.”

“Very well. Makes sense.”

The footsteps came right up to the door and John braced himself for the moment, feeling like a college boy in love. He could imagine a scenario when Sherlock jumped into his arms and complimented him. He could imagine another scenario at the same time where Sherlock would start tearing these clothes off him so they could make love then and there. Or maybe Sherlock would just marvel at the gifts and thank John for choosing something he was always partial to. John planned to reveal everything, that the clothes and even the gifts had been purchased by Jim, and that he had only borrowed them for that evening. Hopefully that would wipe off doubts in Sherlock’s mind that he was jealous of or insecure about Jim’s memories and the legacy the young Irishman had left in this Manor.

The door was opened hesitantly.

“Jawn?”

Oh the sound of that heavenly baritone and how smoothly it went down his ears, like honey on a toast! John could feel himself melting inside and also heating up with desire. Just one word, just one call of his name, and he was ready to offer the world to Sherlock Holmes.

“Come in, come right in Sherl.”
“Why are you here?”

John heard Sherlock step inside but not close the door behind himself. Okay, so he wanted them to go back to the southern wing then. He was game with that. Whatever Sherlock wanted was his command for that night. “For convenience’s sake,” he called out, smoothing down his tie and adjusting the lapels of his fashionable jacket, “Come here, bedroom area please, and you’ll see what I mean.”

More footsteps and Sherlock appeared around the corner.

The first reaction he got from his handsome husband was shock. Sherlock yelped and staggered backwards as if the vision in front of him had slapped him hard on the face. He seemed stung, bitten, slammed.

“What…what the…what….” Sherlock stammered at him, eyes wide, horror evident in them, “Who…who are you?”

The lights of the room had been switched off and candles lit in their place, making for a perfect romantic setting. There were fresh flowers from the garden kept at strategic spots in the room so the entire room was fragrant with their sweet, fresh scent. There was also a bottle of fine wine and some really delicious cold cuts and cheese platter to go with it. In the midst of all of this stood a totally confounded John, startled at Sherlock’s reaction.

He stepped out of the shadows, right on to an illuminated spot next to a candelabra holding six differently colored candles with balmy, exotic aromas wafting out of them. “Hey,” he said cheerfully, “It’s me Sherl.”

At first the young scientist didn’t say a word. He simply gaped at his husband through saucer like eyes, his jaw slack as a mentally challenged man’s, a blank expression on his face and fingers twitching with some untold tension. Slowly that changed and his body language became tense, angsty, his nostrils flared, his jaw hardened. John noticed the horror in those green orbs instead of the appreciation there and his hands shook with the gifts in them. He looked down at them nervously and dubiously, wondering if he had got those wrong as well. Sherlock didn’t seem to like anything at all, neither him and his ‘trendy avatar’, nor the setting nor the choice of the room and wing. Had he made a terrible mistake? Had he got everything completely and utterly wrong?

Sherlock’s eyes went straight to the gifts, taking a cue from his husband’s lowered glance.
“These….these, why did you get me these….why? WHY? And why are you dressed like that? Did the devil make you wear these….why would you wear these? WHY?”

“Sherlock I was just…..”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP.”

“Huh?!”

“D-Don’t….don’t you dare do that again….just get out of these, they’re not-not meant for you, you weren’t supposed to do this….these candles, fuck, the scent of cinnamon…..oh….no, no, this isn’t happening…..WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE TO YOUR HAIR?”

John wanted to say something but the words just rolled to the back of his tongue and got stuck there. He felt foolish, betrayed, let down so badly he wanted to just roll over and end his life. He had wanted nothing more than to please Sherlock and make him happy but his efforts had done just the opposite of that. He had never seen his husband this shocked or unhappy, or this disappointed. Oh Gosh, Sherlock looked so very disappointed.

“I-I am sorry…..” John began but his apology was not about to redeem him right away. Sherlock looked at him in sheer disgust and shook his head, backing off the moment John advanced on him and tried to hold his hand and pull him closer.

Then with total rage he picked up the bottle of wine and hurled it against the wall, shattering it totally. The contents, ironically also purplish in color, stained the wall in a deluge and then in several patters of spots and squiggles.

“I HATE YOU,” Sherlock shouted and ran out of the room, destroying the last remaining hope John had of salvaging something out of the situation and earning his husband’s forgiveness.

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John sat down heavily on the bed, holding his head between his hands and his eyes fixed on a spot on the floor. He was not sure how long he had been sitting there when something fell on the nightstand, making him look up. He feebly reached out for the photograph that had toppled forward and straightened it, his hands withdrawing as soon as he realized it was a photo of Jim,
looking straight back at him with a toothy grin. Sounds of derisive mocking laughter resonated around the room and wherever he looked, he saw Jim standing there and laughing at him. ‘You idiot, you will never be a part of Windsor Manor or his life, not like the way I had once been. I will always be there, my presence will hover above you and linger around him, and you’ll find out soon that you shall always share him with me.’

John was wallowing in his misery so much that he didn’t realize Andersen had come into the room and was standing a few feet from him. “How did it go sir?” He asked.

John had been a hot-tempered man once and, even though over the years he had learned to curb his temper and be more and more mature and responsible, even while angry, that simmering temper still very much remained a part of him. Today’s setback had unleashed that anger and in a flash he was at the butler’s throat, pinning him against the wall and growling at him viciously. “You arse-hole, you did this on purpose, didn’t ya?” He hissed, tightening his hold over Andersen’s windpipe, “From day one you had made up your mind to misguide me and make my life here miserable. But keep one thing in mind, I am here to say, I AM HERE TO STAY.”

He picked up a notebook monogrammed with ‘JM’ and tore it into shreds before tossing it away on a couch. “He is gone, his memories would go too. They would all have to go. And someday, so would you.”

Andersen seemed strangely calm through all of this and made no efforts to free himself or flee from there. When John’s anger drained out and he realized he was choking the man, he abruptly withdrew.

Andersen coughed and cleared his throat and took a few deep breaths. Then he spoke in a slightly breathless manner, “I was only trying to help you. I hadn’t foreseen everything going wrong like this.”

“Oh no, you hadn’t, eh?” John sneered, “You had planned this all along. He doesn’t seem to like black, or this wine, or the color purple, or even dark hairs.”

“Come with me,” Andersen beckoned, “I didn’t do this deliberately, but I do admit my calculations were all wrong. But you need to see this.”

“Why should I even trust you again?” John snorted but found himself following the other man till they walked into the master closet of the late James Moriarty. It was twice as large as the one Sherlock and John shared and the wall to wall shelves, wardrobes and cabinets were centered around a sitting area in oval shape with avant-garde features and a footstool with a seat on top of it.
A bit fascinated by the finery he saw around him (he hadn’t looked into the closet properly on his last visit to this room), John quieted down and listened as Andersen showed him some rather revealing evidence of his innocence. “See, look at these,” he pushed open a sliding glass door, “These shirts, all of them black and most of them sheer. Those slacks and jeans, black and dark grey or inky blue. Here, look at the jackets, which color do you see the most? Black and charcoal grey and silver grey right? The shoes, please glance at the shoes, the design and material I made you wear today, they dominate the collection Mr. Moriarty had. Now take a look at these handwritten notes. See what Mr. Holmes used to write to his beloved whenever he or Mr. Moriarty went away for a business trip.”

John looked at the notes, aghast.

“Love, this is a lovely black shirt I found at Gucci’s, on Rodeo Drive, LA. Matches your hair and eyes, so exquisite.”

“Hey Jimmy, I love the purple shirt of sex you got me. How did you manage to find one that’s so delicate, made me look like a belly dancer when I wore it. I was practically naked.”

“Welcome home babe, a new pair of shoes for you. Camel leather, suede finish, the best smart casual design in the market today.”

“I want you to create a fairytale setting for us when I return, the candles, the wine.”

“Your eyes, your hair, like volcanic glass, so beautiful, so rare.”

John knew at that moment that had he been too emotional, or a vulnerable woman, less resilient than his ex-army-hard-hearted-surgeon self, he would have howled out his misery in the night air and cried his eyes out in sheer misery. Maybe it would have been better that way. At least this acute pain in his chest and those stabbing sensations in his gut would have gone away slowly. It would have been catharsis.

“I didn’t mean to let you down,” Andersen spoke in his haughty, cold voice again, “But how would I have known that he…..I mean Mr. Holmes…..wouldn’t approve of the same things on you which he used to love on Mr. Moriarty. It was an error of judgment but not deliberate.”

***
Sherlock woke up with a top grade headache, a dry, parched throat and an overall sense of unease and listlessness. Memories from the night before came crashing down on him, regret storming down on him as he recollected the insensitive, inhuman treatment he had meted out towards his husband. John had tried to welcome him with style and panache, tried to make it perfect, had even rustled up a good dish, just that he had got the dish wrong in the first place.

It was not John’s fault. John wasn’t to be blamed for it.

Sherlock closed his eyes again as he heard the drapes of the room being drawn aside and daylight came streaming in. The day was cloudy but even the dull, grey rays of the sun hurt his eyes, pain throbbing behind his eyeballs, and his hangover felt a bit worse from it. He curled into himself, hungry and thirsty, wasted and woozy. He hadn’t eaten anything, he had just finished almost an entire bottle of whiskey all by himself and then…..oh Lord, hadn’t he thrown up over himself and passed out, wasn’t that how it had happened? Shame and regret washed over him again as he thought about being discovered like that in his study, like a teenager heartbroken over a breakup, out of control and out of sync.

“Sherl?”

John’s voice. *I am dreaming. Why would he want to have anything to do with me? Didn’t I just push him away viciously last night? Nutcase that I am…..*

“Sherlock, wake up. It’s 1 PM.”

No, it was his husband’s voice. John was calling out to him.

Sherlock cracked open his eyes with some effort and realized that he was not lying on the couch of his study, as he had expected. He had no dried vomit on him, he wasn’t reeking of alcohol and sweat and waste, and he wasn’t really cold and cramped up. Instead he was warm, dry, smelled clean and fresh, was in his night clothes, he was relaxed and comfortable. He was on soft sheets, nice warm thick comforter over him, soft pillows under his head, *he was in his own bed.*

“Sherl, wake up, you need to hydrate.”

Sherlock managed to open his eyes fully. Again his head throbbed and he shielded his eyes from the light. Immediately John sat in front of him, acting as a shield, and smoothed back the hairs from
his forehead. It was such a lulling motion that he began to drift back to sleep.

“No, wake up, please, eat and drink something, then sleep again if you must.”

“J-Jawn…” He whined, aware of how he sounded. He felt warm lips kiss his forehead as he was gently helped up into a sitting position. He groaned, his head throbbing, but complied when a tall glass of water and two aspirins were offered to him. He managed to consume both before he fell back into a horizontal position, eyes closing automatically. “Just keep doing that,” he pleaded, holding John’s wrist.

Those soothing motions on his forehead were back and John hummed something in a low voice, sending Sherlock right back to sleep.

The next time Sherlock woke up, the bedside clock said it was 4 PM and he felt much better. The headache was gone, he wanted more water but wasn’t so horribly thirsty as before. The ache in his eyes had disappeared too and he could open his eyes without any discomfiture. His stomach was growling and he felt terribly hungry, a sign that his hangover had left him for good. He was about to stretch his arm out of the covers to reach the kitchen on the intercom when he felt two arms gently hold him and cuddle him close. “Toast, fried eggs, some bacon and coffee, everything is on a trolley right next to the bed love,” John’s affectionate voice reached him and he smiled.

“How did I?” He asked, not really elaborating. It was so embarrassing to say some words.

“I found you there, brought you upstairs.”

“You carried me?” He felt John’s nod against the back of his head and whispered, “I didn’t realize you were so strong.”

“What can I say? A man’s height could be very deceptive. I am an ex-soldier after all.”

“You were a doctor in the army, an army surgeon.”

“Who had to wield a machine gun and kill people when matters went on a downward spiral, who had to exercise heavily to stay fit and toned so he could do eighteen hour shifts and save lives, etc. etc. etc.”
“You cleaned me up, I was so dirty....”

“Yes, you were. And you sure didn’t like it that way because you loathed yourself so much that you were scratching and cursing at yourself, even in your state of semi-wakefulness. I had to strip you and put you in the tub. Thankfully you cooperated somewhat but mostly you stayed passed out, in you alcohol-haze. I did some heavy lifting but it was nothing I wouldn’t do for the love of my life.”

Sherlock buried his face in John’s chest, unable to hold back on the apology anymore. Anger be damned, ego be damned, he was not going to hurt this man anymore. He was going to say how much of an imbecile he had been. “Jawn, I’m sorry, I’m so very sorry,” he rasped, “Forgive me.”
Trust but Verify

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock go on a well-deserved and delayed honeymoon but Windsor Manor awaits their return with its usual dark shadows and mysterious past.

John had been waiting for Sherlock to wake up, feeling better, and then have a heart to heart talk. He had expected his man to still be in a foul mood but Sherlock seemed strangely calm and so reproachful towards himself that John had no more grievances left in him. “I already have,” he said to Sherlock when the younger man begged his forgiveness, “But I feel I should be sorry too. I did something totally stupid last night, didn’t I?”

“Forget about it,” Sherlock sat up, reaching for a toast.

John saw his husband eat ravenously and poured some coffee for him, strong and black, just what he needed at this point of time. “I must have done something terrible last night, no?” John hoped that probing Sherlock gently like this would at least make him open up, “It affected you badly enough to make you behave totally out of character. I have never seen you drink anything beyond a glass or two of wine or an occasional beer or a martini. Last night you downed three-fourths of a bottle that had just been emptied of one large peg before. I don’t want to see you in that state again. If I can be of some help, if talking to me will work, then I am all ears. I won’t judge Sherl, I promise.”

Sherlock swallowed his mouthful of eggs and reached for the coffee John was holding, “No, no, we won’t talk about this, no, yes, so we are going to move on. Let’s just throw it out of our minds. The next time you wanna do something different, try sticking to what we used to do before we married. Just pubs, drinks, book stores, cafes, coffee, tea, simple food, watching documentary films or sports together, going on drives, discussing current affairs, we shall do those things, okay?”

Sherlock was clamming up again. John didn’t push him, instead he nodded and said, “Okay.”

“You washed out the color. Good.”

“Yeah, even I didn’t like that on myself.”
The younger man started eating bacon before helping himself to a glass of water. He didn’t say anything further. John took another one of his several deep breaths and said, “Can I still visit the eastern wing? Will you tell me about the floor above and why is it kept in that state of disarray? Is it okay to make some changes in the house? No major ones, but a few little shuffles here and there?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, “This is your house John. You do whatever you like. Just don’t expect me to move out of this room or this wing.”

Feeling rather comforted and assured by Sherlock’s vote of confidence and approval, John relaxed. He would have preferred some more information about the second floor, but this was good enough for now. Some changes were needed at Windsor Manor. He murmured, “We aren’t moving anywhere Sherl, not now and not in the future. Even I like it better here, in Windsor Manor, and the southern wing is the best.”

Sherlock suddenly stopped eating and seemed to be borderline hyperventilating. “You’re saying this just to make me happy,” he spoke in a tight voice.

“You know what,” John pulled him closer, putting the nearly empty plate and cup out of the way, “I think I have just realized why we’re getting so easily needles and what we need to rise above it. The reason we are snippy and sarcastic and not so self-assured right now is because we’re stressed out, both of us. This life and place and people are new to me and so is my workplace, therefore I am burning out just a little. Then look at you, this marriage and a new man in your life, your work, all these are getting to you. We both need a break and I got the most brilliant idea. As a wedding present, a belated one, I’d like us to go for a vacation of a week or ten days. Call it a delayed but much awaited honeymoon perhaps?”

“You’re perfect John,” Sherlock seemed wistful, “It’s me who needs to pull his socks up. I am the problem in our marriage, I am aware of that.”

“No one is perfect, not even me Sherlock. Sooner or later I might not be as patient and as understanding as I am now. We married for love, we married because both of us happened to be at a point where we were about to snap, about to crumble. While I shall never ask you questions around that, I know from my own experience how terrible it can be to reach a point of such utter dismay and disillusionment, that living seems harder than just….ending it all one fine day.”

“I know, I understand. Thanks for not…. prodding.”

“If we want this to work we must invest in the marriage, invest time for each other. Is it possible
for you to take two weeks off and travel?”

“Yes, I do have something but….I can move that, another deadline is coming up but….yes, I think I can do this. Two weeks sounds doable.”

“For me too. Elizabeth told me she’s okay with it. I guess even others want us to go on the honeymoon, huh?”

“Yeah,” Sherlock sounded enthusiastic for the first time, “Where shall we go?”

“Pick one,” John said, “Algarve in Portugal, Paphos in Cyprus or Marmaris in Turkey.”

“Portugal.”

“Then Portugal it shall be.”

***

As soon as they were on a plane to Portugal, Sherlock seemed a more relaxed and happier man. He was horny too, inexplicably so, and began pawing at John from the moment they sat in the car they had rented. John stopped him half way through to their beachfront rented villa because he was a bit afraid he might lose control over the car. “Why a rented villa, why not a resort?” Sherlock asked.

“Because you’re loud sweetheart,” John explained as he opened the door with the keys he’d been given, “In a resort there would be other people. Here we shall have a cook and cleaner for just two hours a day, around noon to 2 PM. You can be as loud as you want.”

They barely made it to the bedroom which had panoramic views of the ocean and beach before they shed off all their clothes and landed noisily on the soft, huge bed. John immediately dove downwards to suck Sherlock’s cock. The younger man was so beside himself with pleasure that his arms flailed and smacked against a variety of things, headboard, nightstand, ash tray, lamp shade, pillows, John’s head, everything. John grinned around his mouthful and slapped Sherlock’s arse playfully, repeatedly, as he kept sucking him real hard. As he had mostly anticipated, within three minutes Sherlock came hard, howling at the top of his voice and clawing at John’s hairs and skin.
John let go of the still throbbing member, smacked his lips and squirted lube on to his erection, then a bit on his fingers. “No,” Sherlock demanded, still panting from his orgasm but still hard and horny, “Do it to me, now, just this way.”

“Two fingers, then I promise I am going in.”

“You have thirty seconds.”

“All right, all right, you horny bitch.”

“Oh fuck,” Sherlock got so turned on by those words from John that he began to tug at his erection again, “If you don’t fuck me now Jawn, I will do a full hand-job and cum. Then you’ll be sorry. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

John quickly prepared Sherlock and plunged in, reveling in the groan that escaped Sherlock and the corresponding loud grunt he let out in response. They both began to move, together as one unit, always in perfect harmony, always perfectly synchronized. As John rose over Sherlock and watched him hungrily while making love to him, a voice in his head told him Sherlock did love him. No way could a man look at you so lovingly, so adorably, with so much reverence, unless they really had feelings for you!!!

“Going to make you cum now,” John batted Sherlock’s hand away and grabbed the leaking member, “You’ll shoot it right up to your chest and neck, I promise you that.”

Sherlock let out a sound that was a cross between a whine and a snarl. John laughed, enjoying these rare moments of watching his man surrender after a brief struggle, these rarest of rare moments when Sherlock actually gave him power, attention, trust. He started to stroke Sherlock in the same frenzied rhythm he was moving inside him until he made good on his earlier word and his husband climaxed with a loud, lingering moan.

He indeed shot all the way up to his chest, getting one shot on his right shoulder.

Those aquiline features contorted with pleasure and Sherlock kept trembling and hissing long after the last pulse of semen had left his cock and landed on his abs, traversing over John’s fingers first and leaving the good doctor’s hand a sticky mess. John was so fascinated by the sight of his lover cumming that he forgot to move. It was only when Sherlock started writhing impatiently underneath him and raised his hips, trying to get John deeper inside, that realization of his sudden
inactivity dawned on him. “J-awn….please,” Sherlocks clawed at him and kept writhing, “Make it even better…..lemme….let me feel you cum inside…..please….”

“Oh….yeah….” John began moving and in a minute he was done, emptying himself into Sherlock who seemed to enjoy being filled as much as he had enjoyed shooting it all out a while ago.

It took them some time to come down from the high and by the time that happened, neither of them were in a position to stay awake. The lassitude and laziness induced by their orgasms, coupled with the tiredness of travel and an early morning wakeup, it didn’t take John too long to fall asleep. Sleep had come without warning and the last thing he remembered was Sherlock curled around him, those soft curls nestled on his shoulders, the sounds of his still panting, ragged breath filling his ears.

When he woke up, he realized only about an hour had passed but an hour was all he needed to get back into the world of the living. John had long practiced the art of sleeping only for five or six hours a day. Even four hours would do sometimes. He was a doctor after all so he wasn’t the least bit surprised that he once again felt splendidly awake and very active. He couldn’t wait to splash some sunscreen on and go down to the beach with his man.

But something else surprised him, bothered him even.

Sherlock was awake and that was a very weird thing. He knew Sherlock’s sexual habits rather well by now, even if the man’s overall mysteriousness was yet to conquered by him. During sex Sherlock had less ‘staying’ power than John but made up for this with a fantastic refractory period of only five to ten minutes. At the same time the young Englishman had less resistance to post-coital sleepiness than John had. 95% of the time Sherlock slept soon after he’d cum.

Then why not today?

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

John ran his fingers through Sherlock’s hairs. “Need I ask?”

Sherlock shook his head against John’s chest and held him tighter. John stroked his naked
shoulders, back and neck, waiting for his man to open up now that they were away from that debilitating mansion, away from those haunting memories and those toxic people. But, somewhat disappointingly, Sherlock remained as silent as a stone. John had offered his own silence and presence as comfort and the young scientist happily claimed those offerings, relaxing finally and settling down in John’s arms, even letting himself drift off into a light doze. It left John bereft of any measures to comfort Sherlock, even though he knew the man was disturbed, shaken, upset with something. How was he going to help his lover if Sherlock sealed up his mouth and never spoke a word!

***

Thankfully for John, the rest of the vacation went fairly well and without major hitches. They drank rum punch and beer, ate their dinners at the magnificent seafood joints within walking distance of their villa, enjoyed home-cooked breakfasts and lunches by their cook-on-call Esperanza and lazed about on the beach all morning and noon.

Every night they made love and every night John held Sherlock in the aftermath, sensing a shift in his man’s mood just after they had finished. Sherlock seemed to grow quiet, sad, lonely all of a sudden. It made John feel lonely too.

But the next morning his young husband would be all energetic and happy and bouncing around their infinity pool, drinking tea and spewing out information after information on the sea, the country, the flora and fauna, the local customs, showing himself to be the information storehouse that John knew him to be. Sherlock was a genius, his IQ levels were astronomically high and John took pride in just watching and listening to him reveal flashes of his brilliance, sometimes wondering what it would be like inside that man’s head. Did it feel noisy in there, did ennui set in too easily, did he feel hubris crowd every corner, did he treat it like a gift or a burden?

John ensured Sherlock didn’t have a moment of time to slip into the dark spaces in his head. He kept a packed schedule mostly and where the schedule didn’t help, he filled in the spaces by lavishing attention on Sherlock, both sexual and romantic.

They went to see local shows and programs, watched late-night movies on their huge sixty inch screen television, went deep-sea fishing and parasailing and even did some canoeing in the river nearby. They made love in the pool, on a boat and in their bed or the couch every night.

A day before they were scheduled to return, Sherlock casually mentioned over their morning tea that he didn’t mind owning a property here and coming back every summer to spend some time in the sun, surf and sand. John took him to a local real estate agent and between their limited Portuguese and the man’s broken English, they managed to find out some options of owning homes on the beach.
They even took a look at one such property. It was a three bedroom villa with a small garden at the back and a plunge pool in the front, a few palm trees offering shade around it and a patio on which the sun shone all through the year. It would cost them about a million.

As they strolled back from that visit, hand in hand, a strange thing happened. In the distance, there was a little lagoon formed by the sea streaming into a little alcove created by a natural rock formation. Rocks jutting out of the waters on three sides, a small sandy strip of a beach and a shallow lagoon completed an almost ‘private’ setting which John and Sherlock had frequented during their first week there. Today they spotted two men climbing the slopes till they stood on a precipice about forty feet above the ground. “Seems like others have found out, eh Sherl?” John asked with a smile.

A sudden pull on his hand and John almost slipped.

“Hey,” he looked at Sherlock who had stopped abruptly and was staring in horror at the two men up ahead, “What happened? Why did you stop?” He followed Sherlock’s gaze and stared at the two men too, “Sherl, what’s the matter?”

“No, no, no, it’s a mistake, no,” Sherlock was turning manic, shaky, his eyes were clouded over with the sort of terror that came from a very deeply seeded fear or paranoia, “One of them will die. They should not, they will fall, they will die……”

“What are you talking about? They are two fully grown men having fun. Why would they die?”

“No, you don’t understand. That’s how it starts and suddenly someone dies and the other person….they live like they’re dead too, dead inside.”

“Stop it. You’re digressing. Look at me please, love, please look at me.”

“Ask them to come down from there, tell them it’s not done, it’s not safe. It will be a lifelong burden, just tell them.”

“They are fine…..”
John got a start and so did Sherlock, perhaps the sound of his own voice startling him more than anything else. Suddenly he began to walk with long strides, forcing John to run after him.

“I want to go home,” the younger man wailed as he walked.

John kept up with him, wondering if Sherlock meant home here or home back at the Manor.

***

As John had half expected, Sherlock immersed himself in work the moment they came back to Windsor Manor. Thankfully for John, he had long hours or work too and he’d found something else to fill the hours by joining the local ‘Ashford’ club, a place which hosted various community activities, charitable events and creative programs. Life was good outside but John always had a sense of unease whenever he came back home and a weird feeling that someone was keeping an eye on him round the clock. Sherlock’s aloofness and withdrawn nature also bugged him a great deal, until he learned to make peace with it and accept him the way he was.

A month later Mycroft informed John, during their breakfast together (Sherlock always woke up late and ate later), that he was going to be traveling over the continent for a month or so.

“Business beckons,” the elder Holmes sibling stated plainly as he sipped his Oolong tea, “Three weeks of travel and then a week in London. I figured out our properties there also need some care and I shall do the rounds to check on them. Repairs, fixtures to be replaced, a quick call on the housekeepers, someone has to do those things. When mummy was around she used to be in charge of all these activities but now….anyways, I just want you to remember three things whilst I am away and, if possible, even when I am around. It will do you a world of good John.”

John was eager to hear what Mycroft had to say. He found that he had acquired a great deal of respect for this man, with his quiet demeanor, ability to stay unruffled under all circumstances and his obvious expertise and shrewdness as a businessman. From time to time that picture of Mycroft’s with Jim stoked his curiosity and made him wonder what was the deal between them. Was it a casual single moment of fun or an affair of the unholy kinds, nonetheless, John still approved of Mycroft. “Sure,” he said, “Tell me.”

“Old mansions have an imprint of their inhabitants long after they have gone. Windsor is no
exception there. But it’s your chance to put your imprint on it now. Let the legacy be there, but
don’t forget to build a new one. You are Sherlock’s husband now, you are family, take charge.”

John nodded. He knew he should.

“Trust but verify. Don’t believe all you see or hear. Remember, the truth is only a version of an
event or person. And everyone has their own versions of truth and authenticity.”

After a few seconds of pause, Mycroft added the third and most startling point. “Don’t go by what
Sally Donovan says. She had an obsession with James and was insanely jealous of Sherlock. If I
were you, I’d just tell her to shut up and never bother me again. That’s that.”
A handsome mysterious visitor

Chapter Summary

Jim had several admirers, John discovers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t until a week and a half later that something again came up which shattered the uneasy peace that kept up its fragile hold over Windsor Manor. John was taking a stroll around the property when one of the gardeners passed by him, greeting him politely. More out of a need to talk and know more about the estate than to actually strike a conversation with this man, John asked him a simple question.

“That orchard, what’s beyond that?”

The man coiled up tight, his body language and voice immediately hinted at a tension that John’s seemingly innocuous question had brought up. Clearing his throat he took a few steps away from the beginnings of the orchard, automatically making John do the same to keep up with him. “Um…..nothing really,” he said in that local accent of these parts, “Nothing that would keep up anyone’s interest sir. In the middle of the orchard is a gazebo, made entirely of glass and surrounded by a Japanese style zen garden, with a lotus pond and a waterfall. But then again, not as interesting as the other parts of the estate. We have the new slice of garden Mr. Mycroft Holmes commissioned last summer, it’s in full bloom now…..”

“I didn’t ask what’s in the middle of it. I asked what lies beyond it.”

“It’s….it’s the wall.”

“Wall? Boundary wall?”

“Yes sir. If you want I can show you that new garden, it’s got cherry blossom trees…..”

“Is it the wall that merges into the side of the cliff and looks down on the gorge below.”
“Y-Yes…” The answer was a squeak. The man was ready to bolt, almost, “But no one goes there, no family members, I mean. Not since….” He paused and caught the look of realization in John’s eyes. Immediately the man grabbed John’s hands and pleaded in a hoarse voice, “I-I need this job sir, I have a woman and three kids to feed, I can’t afford to be turned away….if anyone knows I have spoken of this with you…..”

“Nobody will,” John said firmly and calmly, “There is no benefit I foresee of snitching on you. But I promise you my silence only if you tell me the whole thing.” He knew this was blackmail but as long as he wasn’t really going to hurt the man’s employment or the goodwill he had here, he saw his slight manipulation as justified. If everyone was conspiring to keep facts from him he would have to dig, coax and even force them out. Living in a situation only half-known to him wasn’t acceptable in his book.

The man looked scared to death.

“Come on,” John said, “Take me there, answer all my questions. Otherwise I might have to put in a word to either my husband or my brother in law.”

The man quickly turned around and walked towards the orchard, making the faintest of smirks appear at the corner of John’s mouth. He was making some headway.

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The wall on that part of the property wasn’t like the other parts. This wall was thicker, with a walkway on top of it that almost resembled a battlement or rampart, with two watch tower like structures on either ends (right where this fortified structure ended and merged into the normal perimeter wall). Though there were no crenels and merlons and the watch tower structures were merely canopied sit out areas with stone fireplaces in the middle and stone benches and seats built around it, this place still reminded John of the sole visit he had made to the Great Wall of China almost fifteen years ago during his gap year. He stood at a particular spot and looked down over the edge.

He saw the gardener fleeing through the orchard that occupied about seven hundred meters of space inside the wall before the lawns and regular driveway/walking track of the manor’s gardens began. He was scared out of his wits, the poor guy, but even his trembling voice and half-eaten words had helped John understand a vital part of this property’s tragic events from the recent past.

This was the very spot where Jim had fallen from. His body had been discovered deep in the gorge below, almost two days later. It was smashed up and laying against the pebbled, rocky banks of a
gushing brook that cut through the thick woods. The gardener had also said that Sherlock had never set foot on these parts of the property since then and had spent a whole week with a strange delirious fever, taking his husband’s name over and over again. His condition had become so bad that they had to shift him to the hospital for the last couple of days. He also told John that the little cottage next to the gazebo and the Zen garden was Jim’s studio and the man spent a lot of time there.

“I want to know what you were, Mr. Moriarty,” John mumbled and stepped back down the winding stairs that took him back to the orchard.

He walked past the Granny Smith, Pacific Rose and Ginger Gold apples that had fallen off the trees, feet scrunching down dry leaves and twigs. They certainly didn’t look after this part of the property as much as they did the others. Jim’s death had almost turned this ground sour for the family and even the retainers avoided it. But John knew, especially since he was a doctor, not to ignore anything long enough to make it fester and putrefy. If this was a part of the house, then it had to be treated as a part of it and not like some unholy ground to be avoided.

He came to the cottage.

Well, it was big. Quite big. Surrounded by massive trees, it had a cocoon of its own and was hardly visible unless one came within ten feet distance of it. From the outside it looked fairly okay, quite decently kept, but John wasn’t about to judge it until he had seen it from the inside. Soon the same gardener came back with a key and handed it to John. “Go to your quarters or wherever you are supposed to be at now,” John said to him encouragingly, “I will hand this back to you at a time when we have no prying eyes around us.”

The man nodded and ran off for the second time. John concentrated on opening the door which took some coaxing, since it had not been operated in a while and needed some grease. Still, John managed to open the door after almost five minutes and set foot inside, hoping it was not too dark to look around properly.

It was fairly well-lit and despite the dust that had accumulated here and there, including the window panes, the afternoon sunlight did come through quite in abundance. Then John noticed the roof, part of which was a skylight with stained glass covering it. Sunbeams streamed down from there too and he had no problems looking into every nook and corner. The place didn’t appear dilapidated, broken or too badly kept. It was a big room, an attached bathroom where the shower and tap and flush still worked, a small dark room, a kitchenette which boasted of an oven, an electric induction oven, a small fridge, a sink, an island, several cabinets and drawers and finally, a table for two people to sit and eat.

The big central room had a single cot on one side with a nightstand, a shallow closet next to it, a
couch with a coffee table and two chairs on the other side and a small dresser with a mirror at the foot of the bed. Of course the major part of the room was occupied by photographic equipment, including tripod stands, screens, lights, settings and various kinds of cameras. There was even a raised dais served as a platform to ‘strike a pose’.

“One can even live here,” John murmured.

“NO, people usually die here.”

The keys dropped from John’s hands as he turned sharply. His worst nightmare had come true. Sherlock was standing there, glowering at him and barely able to hold back his rage. His fists were balled to his sides and his face was so red that all his blood appeared to have rushed to it.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” Sherlock demanded.

“You told me this is my house, I could see and work on every part of it, alter it if needed,” John decided to put up the logic first. Yes, if Sherlock had granted him that permission then it surely overrode whatever he might have said earlier to the retainers.

“Our welcome isn’t extended to these parts,” Sherlock loomed over him like an angry ghoul, his face reflecting a strange emotion that John couldn’t pinpoint, “I don’t want anyone coming to this place and everyone knows that, I am sure Alex told you so, and yet you deliberately flouted my rules and barged in here. What the fuck kind of attraction does this cottage hold for you, huh? What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know what I want to know Sherlock,” John decided to stand up to his husband for once, “Depends entirely on what you’ve been trying to hide from me.”

At first Sherlock looked comical in his anger, pulling at his hair, stamping is foot and sulking like a child. But the anger within him was such a full and deep well that the next phase of the outburst was not so benign or childish. He let out a scream and started kicking and toppling things, repeating ‘why won’t you take my word for it’ over and over and over again. At first John was quite taken aback and, had he not had military experience where he had to calm down several soldiers who woke up hysterical upon finding they had lost a limb, he would have run out of there as fast as his legs could carry him. But he didn’t run nor did he flinch. Instead he approached Sherlock carefully, grabbed him from behind and slammed him against the wall, pinning him there bodily.
At first Sherlock let out the choicest of expletives but John had him in a stranglehold and when he couldn’t free himself, he calmed down bit by bit until all the anger had dripped out of him through his sweat and tears. Yes, tears. He wasn’t crying but his eyes were watering and he was clearly distressed. “I have done nothing to be ashamed of,” John whispered into his ear, “I am your equal Sherlock, I won’t have you dictate what I can do or not do, what I can ask or not ask and where I can be and not be.”

“Jawn….”

“I’ll let you go now.”

“Come back home with me.”

“This is also a part of our home…..”

“NO. There is nothing in this place. Come out of here, NOW.”

John realized that angering Sherlock over something like this was not going to help him much. He would be back again, but more discreetly. And this time he wouldn’t enlist the help of any of the retainers. He quietly slipped the key into his pocket, put his arms around Sherlock and maneuvered him around for the door. “Come on then, we will leave. You win. We’re leaving right away. Happy now?”

Sherlock nodded but his body still thrummed with an invisible energy, like he was on the verge of imploding because he was holding back too much. He even seemed scared, which was rare for the strong, superstition-free, scientific-minded and free-spirited man John knew.

“Let’s go back to the mansion,” he said, making up his mind to explore this cottage later.

***

Sherlock became normal the very next day and John and he even went out for dinner that night. The tension between them dissipated and even though John kept waiting for his husband to say something/anything about the cottage or the history attached to that or the wall behind, one which was so fateful and saddening that he didn’t even wish to tread that way, that revelation never came. He assumed it was all about Jim.
It was *always*, all about Jim, even *years* after his demise.

On the fourth day since that incident, John came home early as he had a rare light day at work. He had attended to all the patients in post-operative care and finished his hours with the visiting patients who needed his consultation and found it was 2 PM still. Not much more to do, hence he had taken his leave and come back home, thinking about taking a nap. He had slept badly for two nights straight because Sherlock had nightmares and had kept him up with his sleepy mumbling and occasional cries. *Maybe he needs to see a psychiatrist.* John made up his mind to suggest a trip to London and then consult with a therapist he knew, a lady by the name Louise Mortimer. She lived in Dartmoor but on John’s request she could come down to London for a day or two.

As he entered the house he saw a rather uncomfortable look on Mrs. Hudson’s face.

“Mrs. Hudson,” he said cheerfully, “You seem like the cat who lost the canary after she had slathered ketchup over it.”

In any other situation or maybe a different day she would have laughed at his joke and said ‘Oh doc, you really know how to make an old girl laugh’ but that day she answered in a rather subdued manner. “I am ok doc. Do you want me to send some food up, tea and sandwiches, scones or maybe a nice fruit shake?”

“I am not hungry, had lunch only an hour ago,” John said, “Where is Sherlock?”

“He’s gone to Surrey. Some work he said. He’ll be back by dinner time. Told me he had texted you about that.”

“Oh,” John checked his phone, “Damn it, my fault, the thing’s run out of battery.”

“You go upstairs and change into something comfy,” Mrs. Hudson spoke in the same peculiar manner, as if she was trying to hide something, “I’ll at least send up some tea?”

“I’ll go for a swim, I think. The heated pool.”

“Good idea doc.”
She seemed relieved.

John didn’t give it much of a thought and walked towards the stairs while Mrs. Hudson went towards the kitchen, presumably to ask for the tea, when he remembered he had left his charger in the breakfast room that morning. That was the primary reason why he couldn’t charge his phone. He had no charger.

John walked down the long hallway towards the conservatory, passing the ballroom, the home offices and then the formal reception room when…..he heard voices. He stopped. Yes, he heard voices there. Both men, both talking as if they knew each other for a long time. John listened for a moment or two before slowly approaching the doorway to see who it was. One belonged to Andersen the butler and his voice was very familiar. But it was the other voice that intrigued John to no end. A heavy, sexy, almost predatory baritone, one that was straight off some Broadway stage, a voice that had the power to be heard for rows and rows right across the theater, a voice that had both panache and pride. But….where had he heard that voice? He couldn’t remember.

“What do you mean I cannot even visit? He isn’t home, neither is the lovesick older boy.”

“Try to understand. He’s married now. The new husband stays here.”

“So I am supposed to be afraid of that newcomer now? Who the hell is he? Osama Bin Laden. I have killed some of Bin Laden’s men you know.”

“Killing this one won’t help. You know, I think he likes this one.”

“I don’t care about him or who he likes. This place has many memories for me and I would…..”

“Shhh, quiet, please!”

“I don’t think that’s necessary now, you, whoever is behind the door, can you please step in?” The other man said, making John almost trip over his own feet. Then he cursed his own stupidity. The way he stood behind the door, the sunlight behind him, his shadow fell right into the room and alerted this visitor of his presence. “You’re casting a rather long shadow mate. Come right in, please, it’s your house after all.”

John straightened his back and stepped in. The first face he encountered was Andersen’s, who looked pale as a sheet. The next one he looked at was the gentleman who was visiting…..and a glance at that tall, rugged, handsome man made him suck in a long breath. Blond hair, blue eyes,
Adonis good looks, dressed in smart casuals and with the ripped build of a porn superstar, it was the same man whom John had seen in the photograph he’d flicked from Jim’s personal photo album. But there was somewhere else he’d seen the same man and it was that unique voice of his that helped John identify him from the common past they had once shared.

“Hello,” he said simply. Just a greeting. For now that was enough.

Andersen bristled with discomfort. In fact, this was the first time John had seen the man with any traces of discomfiture on his visage. Usually he acted holier than thou, acted like he knew exactly what he was doing, acted like the puppet master pulling at John’s strings now and the, eliciting reactions from the man.

“Andersen, my good man, are you not going to introduce us at least?” Sebastian asked, raising his brows right up to his hairline, his words and expressions exaggerated as if he was turning this scene into a dramatic climax of a play, “I am shocked at your reticence really. The good doctor deserves to know who I am, doesn’t he? Come on, it’s not fair to keep a man in the dark, especially since he is supposed to be the husband now.” He looked straight at John and said, “I was Jim’s business partner, friend and confidante. We were very close, something his husband….ooops I am sorry, your husband Sherlock didn’t like much. Therefore, once Jim was gone, I was not welcome here. I still am not.”

It was a lot to process. A few things clicked into place in his head. But John just kept looking at the other man, not saying a word despite the provocation. They won’t know my thoughts.

“My name is Sebastian,” the tall, handsome stranger said, a tad bit taken aback at John’s stoic silence, “James Isaac Moriarty was a gorgeous, awesome man, too good to be true. Too good for Sherlock, perhaps, and naturally your husband couldn’t hold on to him. Things ended, like they always do when you don’t deserve something you’ve claimed. Being a genius in a field of science and having an Einstein like IQ doesn’t make someone a successful, caring, devoted and loving partner.”

“It doesn’t,” John replied, “But did you come here to tell me that?”

Sebastian’s eyes went just a bit wide before he cleared his throat and said, “I have better things to do. This place has memories of Jim, so sometimes I like to visit. I hope you’re not going to do a tattle tale to Sherlock about this.”

“No, I won’t. But on one condition, please don’t visit again.”
“Oh….well, that is a hard bargain. But a fair one.”

“Then we have a deal.”

“Doctor Watson,” Sebastian walked past him, “It’s good to see the ninny has found someone to be daddy to him. God knows he needed that.” He walked out of the room, his footsteps clicking on the hallway till the front door opened and closed.

John had the satisfaction of seeing Andersen scuttle away in fear.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the slow updates. I am up against a deadline at work and right now the deadline is winning!
Like a spirit from a grave

Chapter Summary

Victor Trevor reveals a few dark secrets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock came to bed around the 2-30 am and, to his surprise, found John still awake and waiting for him in bed. “Hey,” he said, beginning to undress, “You haven’t slept yet?”

“No, wanted to wait for you, for a change,” John smiled seductively, “Come to daddy!”

Sherlock froze. Instantly John spotted the kinky side of his partner. The whole concept of an older, mature, daddy-like controlling man in bed, showing him the way and treating him like a colt that needed to be bred, yes that sure turned Sherlock Holmes on. “C’mon,” he said, throwing the covers off himself and revealing his nude, aroused form. Sherlock’s eyes went straight to John’s cock and he held the phallus in his gaze for a long moment, admiring it and desiring it deeply. John was well hung and big, with a thick girth and he kept the bush, only trimming it slightly. “Like what you see?” He asked in a husky voice, giving himself a few light tugs and pulls.

“Ye-ah,” Sherlock’s voice was a squeak. He licked his lips.

“Wanna sit on it?”

Sherlock nodded, undressing super-fast.

“Feel it deep?”

“Y-Yes.”

Sherlock was naked now and fully erect. John beckoned out to him with both arms outstretched and the younger man rushed over to him, eager and hard and horny. They fell on the bed and John immediately took a position of control. He tossed Sherlock over to his stomach and kneaded the
pert mounds of flesh, separating them to reveal the tiny pink twitching hole. “Maybe I will eat you out first,” he said, “If you suck daddy and make him happy, I’ll even let you cum by just rimming you.”

Sherlock’s body jerked so hard that John thought he had cum already. But the younger man’s self-control had improved somewhat over the past two and half months and he managed to stop himself before he could spill it.

“Jesus,” Sherlock groaned, “Please Jawn.”

“Please what?”

“I-I…do….something.”

“Did you just call me by my name?”

“S-Sorry, d-daddy….!!”

“That’s like a good boy, seems like you’re ready for the first reward for obedience,” John said thickly, raising both hands and letting them smack down hard on the bare bum of his husband. The loud sound of the twin slaps echoed across the room, followed by Sherlock’s yelp of pain and pleasure. He raised his butt again, as if seeking more such treatment from his husband.

“Yeah, I like how bouncy your tushy is,” John said breathily, “Love the way they feel under daddy’s hands, smooth and nice, mine to smack and kiss it better.” He first kissed the twin globes and spanked Sherlock till the man’s butt cheeks were flaming pink and he was moaning so loud it could easily wake the dead. The skin under his palms felt raw, hot, it had come to the point where John knew a bit more would simply break the soft skin and hurt Sherlock for real. That was not what he wanted so he moved to the next step, separating the twin cheeks and attacking the soft furled opening with his hard tongue. The instant reaction he got from the already writhing, eager and aroused man was just as he had expected.

“J-Jawn….make me cummm!”

“What?”
“Daddy please, daddy…..!”

“Oh yes.”

“I’m so hard, please make me…!!!”

John had been either sitting on or lying over the back of Sherlock’s thighs, keeping him motionless in one place while he doted on him. He lifted his weight off them now and lay down next to his man so Sherlock could move, rub and grind against the sheets, at the same time continuing to eat him out like a hungry and ravenous cannibal. Sherlock clawed at the sheets, crying out and rubbing himself insistently on the sheets below, coming so hard he passed out from the intensity of it.

John drank in the sight. The way his husband’s back bowed, his neck got exposed, his eyes scrunched shut and his mouth opened wide in ecstasy, everything got imprinted in his memory forever. Sherlock was so sexy, so utterly captivating in this position of surrender, in this role-play, that John was grateful he had not cum yet. A couple of times he was almost on the brink but managed to pull back from there.

He slathered lube on his erection and slid in, waking Sherlock up with the first thrust.

“Huh…wha….oh….d-daddy….”

“No,” John said in a tight voice as he fucked him hard, “I am your John now.”

“Mmmmm,” Sherlock smiled like an angel and spread his legs wider.

His eagerness was a huge turn-on for the doctor who began to push deeper and deeper inside him, turning them both on their sides so he could access Sherlock’s cock and keep fondling it. John worked him over thoroughly, fucking him for almost an hour, making him cum at least three more times. He himself had cum twice, managed to stay hard between, and kept ravishing Sherlock as the man grew more and more pliant, sated and drowsy with every orgasm that wracked through him. By the time John finally slipped out, now too soft to go on any longer, Sherlock was not even in a state to communicate, move or even think. He was half into the land of the nod, finger and toes still twitching from aftershocks and remembered ecstasy.
“Sleep hon.”

“Hnhnn….”

John applied a cooling, soothing salve on Sherlock’s butt while Sherlock drifted, making small sounds of satiated contentment. He lovingly caressed the long, lean, smooth body in his arms and waited, wide awake, till he was sure his husband was totally dead to the world. It was only then, around 3-45 am, that he gently, carefully, noiselessly moved out of bed and got into a set of clothes he had kept nearby.

In five minutes he was ready, complete with flash light, a knife, a key he had managed to have made over the past couple of days, a loaded hand gun and his phone. He glanced at Sherlock, feeling terrible for a moment for doing this, but he knew this was the only way out of this constant miserable mystery that hung around the manor like an impenetrable fog, blurring out all the sunshine of happiness.

Tonight’s performance was not just to satisfy his husband to a point of saturation but to also make him sleep so heavily that he wouldn’t miss John’s presence in bed.

“I love you,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to Sherlock’s curls.

Sherlock didn’t even respond.

***

The night, the darkness, the isolation of the place, the remoteness and history of it, everything was like a blanket that draped over it with its ubiquitous presence. But there had been a shift inside John and he was no longer as scared and apprehensive of it as before.

He approached the cottage in the middle of the orchard with sure, firm footsteps. He had paid the gardener handsomely to clean up the place and take out all the leaves and twigs, and also to make a duplicate key. Thanks to the cleanup he didn’t step on twigs, branches or dried leaved that would scrunch and snap and alert anyone to his presence. Thanks to the duplicate key, he would get into the cottage without anyone noticing the key missing.

He approached the cottage cautiously, ensuring he stayed low to avoid being spotted. As he was on
the patio, a beam of light suddenly flashed close by and he heard the bark of a dog. Oh shit, the
security was on his rounds of the property, with the sniffer dog. Bad timing. He crouched there as
he heard the barking grow louder and two men speak in the distance. John couldn’t hear exactly
what they were saying but he was sure of one thing, they were both coming over to check this place
out, dog in tow.

Seeing no other option, John unlocked the door of the cottage and got inside, then opened a
window and got out on the patio again, locking the door from outside so it gave people an
impression that the place was closed and no one was in there. Then he swiftly got back in through
the window and closed it, locking it from inside like it was earlier. He crept across the room and
hid under the bed, the safest place he could find where he wouldn’t be spotted. Did the security
team have a key to this cottage? He was not sure but he hoped they didn’t. No matter where he hid,
The dog would sniff him out and he would be exposed. Those highly trained canines were not going
to miss a man’s scent, never.

Voices, footsteps and barks came closer and closer and then, all of a sudden, flashlights were
trained on various angles and corners of the room. John held his breath and waited.

“Gaston barks whenever we come this way,” one security guard was saying.

“Yeah. Might be bones buried somewhere,” the other one replied.

“Whatever it is, we won’t find anything here. For two and half years we’ve been doing this, when
have we found anything suspicious?”

“Thank God we haven’t. Do you really want to come face to face with Windsor’s ghost?”

“Nah, I could live without that experience…..Gaston, stop growling, come on, good boy, there’s
nothing in there. We need to go back and complete our rounds Ned. This is the only side of the
property which is totally safe and impenetrable. No one can climb that wall or the slope beyond it.
Besides, we were told this place is off bounds for everyone, including us, and that mad reclusive
scientist will behave like a raging madman, again, if he finds out.”

“Now that’s an experience I sure could live without. Say, we don’t have keys to this cottage, do we
Fred?”

“Nope. Never had. It’s locked, see.”
“No, I do see it. Just asking.”

John exhaled with relief as the ‘key’ was mentioned. So Sherlock had unwittingly helped him with his adventure, by keeping the security team at bay. *No key supplied to them, orders to stay away from this place,* well that would work in his favor tonight. He was glad when the footsteps retreated and the dog was also pulled away. He still waited for some more time, just in case they came back, and moved only after ten full minutes had passed.

Somewhere in the distance a clock struck four. He heard the dog barking again but it was much farther than the previous time. He was free to do this exploration now.

***

Two days later, it was around 8 am and Victor Trevor was sitting in the office space allocated to him on the ground floor of the mansion, laptop open in front of him, several papers scattered over the desk as he texted away on one of his two cell phones. When John knocked on the door, he was temporarily a bit blank, still neck deep into his work, before a small smile spread over his face. “Hey there John, please do come inside,” he greeted the man with warmth but also a bit of trepidation, “Good morning. Please take a seat and tell me what can I do for you. It’s been a long time since we last spoke, isn’t it?”

“Yes, been a while,” John said as he walked in and took the chair across the desk.

Victor simply put his elbows on the desk, leaning forward a little, and waited. John took some time to gather his thoughts together before he spoke, “I don’t know what you think about me and Sherlock but I sure want you to know that I love him and want the best for him. Even though I still think I am not quite worthy of the position he’s given me, as a part owner of this property and his husband, I am trying my level best to rise to the occasion and be a good master of the manor and a supportive spouse. But I do need a bit of help, from someone like you who’s also fond of Sherlock.”

“John….” Victor averted his eyes, “……It’s not what you think.”

“Look at me Victor. Do I seem like a fool to you?”

“No….never said you are, never thought you are.”
“Then I want the truth. I know you’ve never lied to me but concealing the truth and deflecting away from it is sometimes as bad as a lie.”

“I don’t know….what you mean, John.”

“You two had an affair, didn’t you?”

Victor closed his eyes, as if pained, and hung his head. He didn’t say anything initially but John waited patiently, giving him enough time to summarize his thoughts. He was not leaving without an answer that day. The silence was thick between them and dripping with several unspoken words, until Victor finally mustered up enough courage to speak up. “Okay,” he said quietly, “I shall tell you.”

“I won’t judge you,” John said kindly, “I promise you that.”

“Sherlock was a very precocious and sensitive child and while growing up I automatically felt protective about him,” Victor spoke in a quiet voice, his eyes meeting John’s in a sign of honesty, “He was mentally brilliant and sharp, physically fit and agile and strong, but somehow he was very easily affected by people’s words and attitude towards him. He feared being ignored, neglected or abandoned. If he was ever attacked, Mycroft always insisted he should learn to defend himself properly instead of either attacking the other party in mad rage or running away from there and sulking. But I stepped between him and those that taunted him for his brilliance, I attacked back those who attacked him, and we formed a very deep bond.”

He fell silent. His eyes lowered, he was coming to the difficult part now. “Go on,” John said insistently but gently, “As I said, no judging you or the past. I merely want to know the past, that’s about all.”

“Soon I realized he was attracted towards me and he was gay. I was young, experimental, he was very attractive and one day, when he was eighteen and I was nineteen, we got drunk ad mucked around. It wasn’t full-fledged lovemaking but we did get each other off, some groping, touching, kissing and cuddling followed. The next morning I felt deeply ashamed for taking advantage of him because I was not…..still am not…..ready to live a gay man’s life. I like women, I want to have kids, I can’t be….I could never be the man Sherlock wanted me to be.”

John nodded, “I understand.”
“We didn’t speak for a year but over time our friendship mended, we understood each other better and I stayed on in his father’s employment and later under his employment. I could go and find a job in London or anywhere else, but I knew he needed me, especially after…..”

“Jim’s death?”

“Yes.”

“What do you really think about Jim’s death?”

“I found it rather strange. But some people have it coming.”

“What do you mean?” John frowned.

“He was careless, he was pushing things too far. I mean….he liked to shock people, he loved the attention, he sometimes went a bit too far with some things, I mean…..” Victor sighed, leaning back against his chair, “…..That’s why I was so happy to see you with Sherlock. He needs someone like you, stable, calm, devoted and sincere, someone who speaks the truth and seeks the truth, understands Sherlock’s needs and offers him the companionship he needs.”

“If he accepts me as his confidante and trusts me enough to open up with me,” John rued, “But it seems his head and heart is too full of Jim. Now about Jim…..tell me the truth about Jim.”

“Well, all I can say is that he was the most enchanting ad magnificent creature I have seen in my life,” Victor answered, fiddling with the eyeglasses he wore, which he had taken off while talking, “He and Sherlock met at a science convention and I think the sparks flew immediately because for the first time Sherlock had found an intellectual equal. He had found someone who was not going to treat him like glass, nor like a freak, nor with dog-eyed devotion. He was an equal and perhaps even a superior in many ways, in the sense that he always knew how to handle people better and make sure they respected him. He made people fear him, maintain their distance from him if needed, there was something about him that was rather powerfully potent and at the same time sharply scary. He was so comfortable in his skin it was incredible.”

“Okay, is that all?”

“That is all I can share.”
“Victor, I know it’s your private life but did you at one point see a woman named Catherine?”

Victor got a start but he recovered remarkably well, “Yes, yes, I was. She was from Liverpool. But she’s married now, even has a child. We broke up four years ago. But how did you……?”

“I just know,” John said with a smile, “But that’s all I can share.”

This made a newfound respect come over Victor’s eyes and he swallowed hard, struggling clearly with the conflicting emotions inside him now. “John, I think you’ve been very good for Sherlock. But why don’t we just let things remain that way? I mean, why dig up the past? We have skeletons in our closet, all of us, and if you dig deep enough they will all come tumbling out. As an eastern proverb says, in the bathhouse all are eventually naked.”

“True,” John said, “But sometimes piling the dirt on a rock doesn’t make it crumble into dirt or make it disappear. Sooner or later you’d stumble over the same rock and hurt yourself badly. Some corpses have been buried but not put to rest. Guess what haunts this mansion?”

“That’s just bullshit rumors…..”

“It’s our own collective fear of what we’ve done and the subsequent guilt that arises out of it, like a spirit from the grave.”

Chapter End Notes

This mystery will not solve itself. Eventually John will, with Sherlock's help. But not before he encounters several fearsome, inexplicable and shocking incidents.
John and Mike Stamford hugged lightly before taking their seats at the pub chosen by the latter, some distance from the Barts where Mike worked currently and John had previously worked. They had scrupulously avoided meeting at the hospital or the cafes or pubs close to it, neither of them wanted to be reminded of the ill-fated Molly who used to be their frequent companion whenever they congregated at one of those places. Still, the look of wistfulness in Mike’s eyes and the saddened expression of John bore witness to the grief they still nursed, with John being the one to carry the bigger burden. Like most men, they had chosen to avoid all topics Molly rather than talk it out.

That day Mike made an exception.

“Don’t blame yourself John,” he said as they ordered beer and some chicken nuggets, “Whatever happened, you couldn’t have done anything to change it or stop it. Accidents have no law or rule and sometimes they happen inexplicably. In this case we do have an explanation at least. I feel very strongly that Molly shouldn’t have gone to that wing and climbed on the window, that’s it. It was a very dangerous and foolish move and she paid the price for it.”

“Her mistake was not so big she deserved to pay its price with her life Mike,” John said as he fiddled with the coaster on which the bartender had placed his beer mug.

“You suspect any foul play?”

“I don’t know yet. But I am trying to find out.”

“Man, the place is scary, I gotta admit it.”
“I’m scared too, sometimes. But I have to face my fears, otherwise I am afraid I might lose Sherlock. I can’t live without Sherlock.”

“Why would you have to?” Mike lowered his brows, “You guys are young, you’re in love, you’re happily married, you’re talented and wealthy and doing pretty well in life. You shall grow old together, I am sure of that.”

“But I am not sure Mike,” John held his gaze to suggest he was serious, “In any case, it always pays to be careful. Have you been able to find out more about Jim Moriarty?”

“Oh yes, as a matter of fact I have,” Mike made a gesture that suggested he had only just remembered the task he had been entrusted with, “Here is the file. I knew someone who was in the Yard first and then broke away to start his private security and private eye firm. One of his best and most experienced investigators, an erstwhile newspaper worker, compiled this for me. He took a hefty fee and some time but you had given me a handsome amount and weeks to get this done, so I didn’t mind giving him the same leeway. Anyways, here it is, take a look, it’s very, very comprehensive and totally authentic.”

John thanked him heartily and opened the file.

“James Isaac Moriarty, born Richard Isaac Brook, oh so he changed his first name as well,” John murmured as he went through the pages, “Let’s see, he was surely an academic genius, much like Sherlock. Good Heavens, he got his grad degree at sixteen, post grad at eighteen and completed his thesis and research work at twenty-one, at twenty-two he was a professor of mathematics at the Trinity and a winner of the famous Franklin Institute award, astrophysics. It seems he started his own company, business analytics and software development, and it was funded initially by his stepdad, the senior Mr. Moriarty. In a year they broke even and by the third they started making profits.”

“By the fifth year Jim Moriarty was dead,” Mike Stamford sighed, “Tragic end.”

“Nah.”

“What? No, but he died…..”

“I mean, the company. It’s run by someone by the name Augustus Seamaster.”
“Yeah, so? Companies continue to grow and expand and succeed long after their founders are gone. But that doesn’t mean Jim Moriarty is not dead.”

“Jim is,” John said, “But see a few interesting aspects of this man. After he was gone, the headquarters of the company were shifted from London ad Dublin to New York City and Frankfurt. They do maintain offices here but with skeletal staff. It seems they were in a big hurry to wrap up and leave these shores and go across the pond or somewhere else in the continent. Also, this man Augustus Seamaster is present on papers but there are no photos, no known records of him anywhere.”

Mike looked a bit blank, “You lost me there. What are you really trying to imply?”

“The company has several branches and several affiliates. One of them made a big announcement recently. They are on the verge of creating a groundbreaking drug that will vaccinate people at birth, childhood, teenhood and adulthood, making them immune to the effects of any narcotics. Once vaccinated, people would never touch crack, never snort coke, never become a meth head.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” John replied, “But I wonder how a company with no known product releases in the past and no achievement that even matches one ninth of the potency of this drug can make a claim as huge as this one. Unless they are collaborating, unless they are working with someone who wishes to remain anonymous and stay out of the limelight. Or is it that they are planning to steal something from a genius”

Mike gave him a rather startled look.

“I know, I know, I am confusing the hell out of you,” John raised both hands in self-professed confession before he stared at the covering page of the file again, “I am not making much sense here and I am painfully aware of that. You see buddy, the thing is this; I am only beginning to form a theory in my head. At this point I have nothing to prove or disprove anything but this file and the information in it is a pretty good start. Based on this I am 100% sure I shall make a breakthrough and I am hoping that happens soon. Now, let’s see what this file has to say about Jim Moriarty as a person, as a man, his pre-marriage days especially. Did your investigator talk to people he grew up with, people who knew him as a kid and as a teen?”

“Oh he sure did,” Mike replied, “Man was quite the player. Played and batted on both sides, but
was more into men than women. Was bullied as a kid and spent long lonely hours in front of his telescope, or in the library, but at age ten he beat up three bullies so badly he was almost sent to a prison for juveniles. His father’s friend, the man who later married his mother and became his stepdad, he used his influence to keep him out of trouble. But it seems he broke out after this and suddenly became popular, a kid both feared and hated, but also coveted and respected. Strange sort of combination.”

“Yes,” John agreed, staring at some of the pics of Jim, “Strange indeed.”

***

When John came back to Windsor he found Sherlock in a lonely, depressed mood. The moment he walked into the bedroom, he smelled the alcohol. “You’re drinking again,” he said quietly.

“You were gone again,” Sherlock grumbled.

“Gone again?” John was astounded, “What do you mean? I am always around. I just go to the hospital for a few hours and over weekends I go to the club, swim, play cards, help with the community events. Otherwise I am always here am I not? I don’t have friends, I don’t have family anywhere close by whom I visit, I don’t even have any hobbies. What do you want me to do? Just sit here and wait for you to make a guest appearance? It’s you who’s hardly been around since we got married Sherrl.”

Sherlock sighed, “You’re having regrets.”

John startled, “No, when did I say that? No.”

“You don’t understand John……”

At this point John couldn’t hold back anymore. Weeks, months of being in the dark, of being afraid of a man who was not even alive, of fighting a legacy that he couldn’t understand, losing a close and dear friend, battling to save his own sanity and manage his elusive, mysterious husband had taken a toll on his nerves and temper and for once he didn’t want to just allow Sherlock to say anything unfair and get away with it. “I don’t understand?” He snapped, “No, it’s you who refuses to understand what a proper domestic partnership means, what it means to be someone’s husband and soulmate. I married a man I found funny, witty, friendly, sexy, companionable and adorable. Now I have an empty shell of a man who refuses to let go of the past and wants me to just stay
quiet and keep waiting for a day when he will finally talk.”

“I cannot talk,” Sherlock snapped back, “I can’t do that. If I talk you will hate me.”

“Nothing can make me hate you. Just try me Sherl.”

“No, you’re just curious. Once you know, you will just leave me.”

“Try me Sherlock, please, talk to me, tell me what’s bothering you. Is it my presence? Do you want me to leave? Is my presence here getting you down, making you a snappy, irritable creature? I’ll gladly leave you alone if that’s the case.”

“NO, Jawn, don’t go, no, please……”

“Me staying here is of no help to you. It’s rather….causing you grief, discomfort.”

“Who told you that? You’re the one keeping me together.”

John shook his head, “I am afraid your words and actions don’t match. If I was really such a savior I would have healed your wounds and helped you come to a point where you could move on from the past. Have I done anything of that sort? No. I have only succeeded in being a bother, being a burden, and sooner or later we will have to make a choice. Just…..just do that quickly, painlessly, with no more pretenses.”

“You’re abandoning me,” Sherlock’s eyes were filled with tears, he looked petrified.

His body language suggested defeat and humiliation and John instantly remembered what Victor had said. He fears being left behind, of being abandoned. What the hell did I just say? I managed to alienate him completely, what the fuck! “No, I am not abandoning you,” he tried to pacify the rather stricken man but the damage was by far done already and an emotionally fragile Sherlock batted his hands away.

“Everyone just leaves, everyone only blames me,” Sherlock said, voice cracking up, “Mummy and daddy did, even Mycroft did before he had to come back out of a sense of duty, even Victor did the same to some extent, now you will do this to me too. I knew it, I knew it, I have rotten luck when it comes to marriage and relationships. First Jimmy, then you….they were all right, I am a freak, a stupid, silly……”
“Sherlock wait,” John tried to grab him but the man ran out of the bedroom suite, went to the tea room and locked himself in there. John tried to talk to him from the other side but it was of no use at all. Sherlock refused to respond.

***

Later that night John realized a harsh truth. Whatever had damaged Sherlock, *Jim's loss perhaps*, it had left a deep psychological impact on the young man and scarred him rather badly. It had been a severe blow to him emotionally and someone like Sherlock, who was used to masking his feelings with an icy cover of arrogance, had crumbled inside bit by bit while keeping the outer mask intact. Therefore the first signs of his breakdown came only after the ball had rolled ahead quite a bit and Sherlock was already reeling under the impact of the damages.

John found him shivering in the tea room after forcing the door open around midnight with a spare key.

“Oh God,” he groaned when he felt the man’s burning forehead, “He’s gotten sick as a dog.” With some effort he picked up the man and carried him to the bedroom, getting a catch on his back while lifting up his dead-weight. Sherlock was lean and slender but also six feet tall, and picking him up, all seventy-eight kilos of him, was quite difficult. Ignoring the slight pull of muscle in his lower back John quickly checked his husband’s temperature while calling Mrs. Hudson on the intercom and asking her to come upstairs immediately. Sherlock was absolutely unresponsive.

“Lockie, my darling boy, what happened, how are you feeling?” Mrs. Hudson fussed over him, clearly nervous but trying her best not to show it.

“Temperature is a bit dangerously high,” John said, “Situation is a bit not good.”

“Shall we call a doctor?”

“I am a doctor Mrs. Hudson.”

“Oh sorry, I was just so worried.”
“It’s okay. Get a tumbler of water, a couple of wash-clothes, some ice, the medicine kit and some water with this solution added to it.” He handed her a sachet, “Add it to about two liters of water. It helps hydrate and cool the body fast, from inside, and also adds some electrolytes that he needs desperately right now. He’s sweating and burning up at the same time, which isn’t a very good sign.”

Mrs. Hudson did whatever she was asked to, quickly and efficiently, while John made Sherlock swallow a couple of pills, one to help him sleep for a long time since his body needed the rest and the other to bring down the temperature.

An hour and half later, around 2 am, Sherlock was finally peacefully asleep and his temperature had gone down drastically. He had semi woken in between, mumbling something and thrashing about violently, which had necessitated a slap from John when he absolutely insisted on getting out of bed to look for ‘Jim’. Mrs. Hudson had tried to protest but backed off when one of Sherlock’s hands had caught her ear and given it a hard blow. Rubbing the sore and aching spot, he continued to apply the wet wash-cloth on Sherlock’s forehead, doing her bit while John kept vigil on the other side of the bed, frequently checking Sherlock’s temperature, pulse, heartbeat, blood pressure etc.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mrs. Hudson asked, “I am almost afraid of the answer though.”

“Psychosomatic.”

“He is psychotic?”

“No, no, psycho….I mean it’s because of his state of emotional turmoil, stress and exhaustion. There are past wounds that might have opened up and pulled his head under the water. Happens sometimes and I am expecting that he should be fine by day after tomorrow. If that doesn’t happen and his temperature remains high like this, I shall do further investigations, a blood test perhaps. But I am quite certain he will be okay before.”

“But it is true,” Mrs. Hudson kissed Sherlock’s hand and tucked it under the covers.

“What is?” John looked up at her.

“He does have some psychological issues, Mrs. Holmes was always worried about him,” the old woman continued, oblivious to the change of expression on John’s face, “From the outside both
brothers, Mike and Lockie, seem to be made of steel and stone but deep down Sherlock is entirely different. He was a very sensitive, easily hurt child. He suffered from bouts of fever and breakdown like this, whenever he was deeply injured inside. Mrs. Holmes often favored him over Mike even if Lockie was wrong, just because she feared….for him.”

John tinkered with Sherlock’s little finger, gently caressing it between his thumb and forefinger, “He is not made of glass. I shall ensure he finds the strength he has inside, buried deep within him, which all of us need to dig out at some point or the other. It’s only when we are faced with really challenging circumstances that we truly realize our potential. Sherlock will realize it too, I promise you that.”

After a long period of silence John asked, “Should I call Mycroft and ask him to come over? Is that an expectation?”

“No it isn’t necessary, not if you think there is nothing to worry about. I think it’s best if we don’t tell him anything, let the poor man live his life,” Mrs. Hudson showed uncharacteristic sympathy for the elder sibling, which surprised John somewhat. Though she had brought them both up, she had always been protective and more concerned about Sherlock. She had always hovered around him, praised him and always gushed about his abilities, his charm and his innate goodness. But on the topic of Mycroft Holmes, she had always maintained a stoic silence. This was the first time she took his side and John couldn’t help but give her an open, questioning look.

“Mike is a good man too. He made a major sacrifice for Sherlock.”

“He did?!”

“Yes. It was he who was……”

As if she had spoken too much, she nervously bowed her head, her voice trailing off into an inaudible sentence. John tried his best to read her lips, but he missed the point. “What are you trying to tell me Mrs. Hudson?” He asked her firmly. If he was the one to share Sherlock’s life and joys and setbacks then he deserved to know, simple as that.

“Mycroft and Jim were in a relationship. Sherlock had gone to the science convention as a last minute replacement for Mike because he suddenly got a client over and needed to be at work. The one week stay for Sherlock at Dublin extended to two and half weeks, then we get a call saying he and Jim were in London and in love. He wanted to marry Jim by that weekend.”
John’s hands shook, “You’re not joking, are you?”

“No, I am not joking with you,” she said with a sigh, “Who would crack such a terrible, ill-timed joke doc?”

“Not you,” John looked at Sherlock and remembered all those times he had silently blamed Mycroft for not understanding his younger brother better, for being so aloof and emotionally detached. He made up his mind never to judge people so quickly.

“Mycroft was devastated but when his parents told him Sherlock wouldn’t take the setback too well if he were to be given the bigger picture, like any first-born in the family he just agreed. Maybe he regretted it later but he never infringed on his word, always maintained his distance from his former boyfriend and lover.”
John had slept only towards early morning, around 7 am. All night he had maintained a nonstop vigil by Sherlock’s bedside, taking no more than two toilet breaks. When Mrs. Hudson came back to the room in the morning, John slid under the covers and passed out. He was so tired he couldn’t even remember what he was thinking before sleep had claimed him.

He woke up to find Sherlock’s face right next to him, those almond shaped eyes watching him soulfully. “Hey, how long have you been awake Sherl?” he asked, trying to blink hard to fob off the sleep, “How are you feeling? What time is it now?”

“It’s noon, half past twelve to be precise,” Sherlock said softly, but he sounded a lot better than the previous night, “I just woke up a few minutes ago. I am okay I guess; don’t think I will be able to work today though. Asked Hudders for some breakfast, sausages and eggs, but she said you want me to be on slops for a couple of days so a light porridge is all I am getting in a few minutes.” He yawned wide, showing tongue and teeth before he snuggled closer to John who guided him to rest his head on his chest, “I did it again last night, didn’t I? I am hopeless that way, sometimes I have so little control over myself it’s embarrassing, mortifying even. I am sorry, truly I am.”

John took a deep breath, “I’d rather you showed how sorry you are than just said those words to me.”

Sherlock tensed up, then slowly relaxed again. “I guess I deserve that judgement.”

“Your fever has broken, which is good. Stay in bed today.”

“I will. Doctor’s orders after all.”

“I am not just your doctor, I am also your husband.”

In a small voice Sherlock replied, “Yes.”
“So next time you have something to say, please tell me and don’t bottle up. You can avoid getting sick, you know right?”

“It’s not happened in a long time. I don’t know why…..”

“Yes you do,” John said sternly, “You sure do. But there’s something you’re reluctant to admit. It’s fine, if you don’t feel you’re ready to talk then don’t talk. I can wait. But you have to handle that well of fear, inhibitions and anger that you’re carrying inside. Sherlock, I have been there too, trust me. I lost my wife and unborn child. I saw people dying around me when I was in the army. I have struggled with my sexuality and my injury. Adjusting to civilian life almost ruined me completely. All of us have to bear our crosses and hide our scars but you’re taking thing to a different level. It’s killing you inside and it’s killing our marriage.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and tightened his hold over John.

Regretting those words immediately and cursing himself for having spoken like this with a man who was still unwell, John quickly tried to make amends by stroking Sherlock’s back and holding him in a reassuring manner. He felt the slender body in his arms thrum with untold tension, felt those little and infrequent tremors which suggested Sherlock was wrestling with his demons, quite hard. Almost five minutes later, Sherlock replied in a firm, clear voice. “Give me a few more days John. Since you have waited so long, just wait out two more weeks. I need to finish this assignment I am working on. It’s a very critical one and I can’t afford to have any distraction while at it.”

“What assignment? Can you at least share that?”

“Yes. I could. I have found a cure for AIDS.”

“Sh-Sherlock….what?”

“Yes. I have found one. Jim and I had been working on it together but after he was….gone, I abandoned it for a year and half. Then picked it up again. After I married you I thought let me finish this and get it out of the way, make it a perfect homage to Jim, bury his ghost like that. That’s why I have been on such a punishing schedule. The testing phase is on right now. In two weeks, this will be over and we will sit and have a proper chat, I promise.”

John reversed their positions and kissed Sherlock on the mouth. Sherlock kissed back but John
withdrew quickly. “Your lips and tongue are dry. You need to drink water.”

“I want to kiss.”

“Get better and we will kiss as many times as you wish.”

“And fuck?”

“That too.”

Looking playful and cheerful, years younger than his age, Sherlock asked with glittering eyes, “You promise? As many times as I want?”

John rubbed their noses together and chuckled, “Since when has sex been a problem or our refractory systems? We have been at it for hours, sometimes all night whilst we were on our honeymoon. So to answer you, yes I promise and as many times as you’d like.”

Sherlock grabbed John’s hand and put it between his legs, making him feel the hardening rod there and the warmth emanating from his crotch. The musky sweet salty whiff from his groin assaulted John’s senses and for a few moments the doctor almost got sucked into the mood. “I feel better already Jawn,” Sherlock started to rub himself against John’s palm, “Can we not have one quickie right now?”

“Mrs. Hudson,” John’s eyebrows danced, “I doubt she will approve.”

When Sherlock looked at him in dismay John pointed at the door with his twinkling eyes. They could hear it opening and closing and soft footsteps and some metallic sounds. The doctor said loudly, “Thanks Mrs. Hudson, this is just what we needed. We are both starving.” It made Sherlock scuttle away rather comically and put some distance between them, lying on his back with a sulky expression on his face by the time Mrs. Hudson appeared at the sleeping area, wheeling a trolley. “Porridge for Sherlock and some toast, eggs and sausages for the doc,” she announced, looking happy to see Sherlock awake and well, “Tea for both of you and some juice, I got fresh apple juice made today.”

“Yeah, porridge,” Sherlock huffed.
John’s hand pinched his bottom under the sheets and he let out an unmanly yelp before saying, “Porridge is fine.”

***

“Hey John, this is Greg Lestrade.”

“Hi Greg, how are you?”

“Um….I don’t know how to say this and I did call Mycroft first….but he’s on a flight so his mobile phone is switched off,” Greg sounded hesitant, almost apologetic and it didn’t give John a comfortable feeling. In fact, his heckles rose and he was on high alert in an instant. What else had gone wrong now? Couldn’t there be any peace in their world? “How is Sherlock now?” Greg asked, more of a filler phrase than anything else, “I heard he was indisposed due to fever. Common cold and flu?”

“He’s better now, gone back to work since day before yesterday.”

“That’s good, he has a doctor at home to look after him.”

“Greg, get to the point. What did you call for? Is it Molly?”

“No, this is about James….James Moriarty, Sherlock’s…..late husband.”

John gripped the phone with both hands and tightened his jaw. Disappointment washed over him again. This man, James Isaac Moriarty, never left them alone. He was dead but not gone. His ghost, his shadow, his footprint kept doing the rounds all the time, lurking in his and Sherlock’s life like an ominous thundercloud. “What about him?” He asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“A fresh inquest into his death has started.”
“What did you say? WHAT?” John said so loudly that Nurse Viola rushed into his room to see what was going on. He realized his mistake, smiled very politely at her and waved her away before going over and shutting the door firmly. “What are you saying Greg?” He asked the inspector, trying to deal with this rather shocking and astounding revelation in the calmest possible manner, “A fresh inquest? But why? What triggered it? From my limited knowledge of the country’s law, I know this much: you cannot randomly start an inquest into someone’s death unless you have found some irrefutable proof that there was some foul play involved. What did the earlier report state?”

“There was no report.”

“No report? No coroner’s report? No forensic pathologist’s report?”

“Coroner’s report was there. But that was the problem. The coroner died a week ago and left a note saying he was coerced into hiding one important fact. Jim’s death was caused by impact but there were some marks on his neck which suggests someone tried to kill him right before that and this same person or attacker might have pushed him to his death in that gorge. Basis that revelation, sergeant Sally Donovan got a permit from the county court to exhume the body and start a fresh inquest. She told me after she had the permit. I can’t even stop it now and legally I shouldn’t.”

John felt as if the phone would fall from his now-nerveless fingers. “You’re suggesting a foul play in Jim’s death?”

“Very possibly so.”

“Oh God…..”

“You know what this means, right? Sherlock would have to identify the body again, give his statement, he will be asked questions and if things don’t go well a case will be filed. Several people present in that estate that day, including your husband and Mikey….I mean Mycroft, will also become prime suspects.”

John gripped at his hairs with his free hand, pulling at them. He was so bewildered he didn’t know how to react.

“John?” Lestrade called out, “John you still there man?”
“Yes, yeah, yes, I am still here.”

“As we speak, the whole investigation is on at full throttle and since Jim Moriarty was a fairly known man in the business circles and had powerful contacts, we are under pressure to get quick results,” Lestrade sounded like a man trying to do his job and protect his friends at the same time, “Frankly speaking, on my own authority I can give you about two hours, at the most. By then you need to talk to Sherlock and prepare him for what’s coming up. Then I will have to call him and let him know and, quite possibly, he might even receive a summon to the town’s court for the initial probing. I hope he has a good lawyer or Mycroft does….okay, we need to inform Mike as well. Any idea where he might be at this moment?”

“He should land at Gatwick any moment now,” John said, “He’s on his way back from Warsaw, where he had gone for business. You will get through to him in fifteen minutes at the most.”

“Thanks John and…..”

“Yes Greg?”

“Take care of Sherlock. The last time this happened, he had barely pulled through.”

A pang of fear and sadness gripped John and he was already on his feet by then, shrugging off his lab coat and reaching for his suit jacket, “Yes-Yes-Yes, I am on my way back home. I have no further surgeries today so I am going, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I shall call in two hours.”

“Roger that.”

***

John had heard about Murphy’s law before, that when something has to go wrong it will, but that was the day when he saw it coming true. He had driven madly, desperately to reach the Manor in thirteen minutes instead of the normal twenty or twenty-five but the moment he parked the car haphazardly outside the portico and got out, he was greeted by the sight of someone he had begun to detest.
Sally Donovan.

The woman looked smug, she smirked with the bitterness and vendetta of someone scorned, and right on her tail was the slithery Andersen who seemed to have bloodshot eyes. John had never seen Andersen this shaken. Without even knowing what had transpired there, he had a fair idea of what to expect. “Andersen,” John ignored Donovan completely and concentrated on the butler, “Where is Junior Mr. Holmes?” Andersen gave him a blank look which annoyed the hell out of him and repeated loudly, his expression almost a snarl, “I asked you something. Where is Sherlock right now? Where?”

Before Andersen could say anything, Sally Donovan piped in, “Moping and shaking in his shoes in the bedroom suite of his beloved, the same one he….uhm, I think it’s best if the official report states what I already seem to know.”

John felt his blood pressure rise, along with his fury at this woman’s insolent and insensitive behavior. Andersen was in tears by then and he quietly turned and climbed back up the stairs, disappearing inside quickly, wiping at his face with the sleeve of his shirt. John glared at Sally who pretended to be afraid of his wrath, putting on an expression of fake fear while maintaining a mocking smile on her face at the same time. She dramatically backed off a few steps and said, “Oh no Captain John Watson, military man and surgeon per excellence, are you going to just snap my neck with your bare hands? I have damaged that freak even more than usual, have I not? But tell me, doesn’t he deserve to know he is finally caught? I thought a bit of prep was necessary.”

“You listen to me now,” John waved a finger under her nose and it was the seriousness of his voice that wiped off the smile off hers, “Get this in your thick skull Ms. Donovan, I am very aware of the kind of ‘freak’ you are. You had the hots for someone and he turned out to be gay and married another man, does this give you enough reason to launch a witch-hunt against them? When I first saw you I hated your obnoxious behavior but I respected you as a protector of law. But today all I see is a scorned, bitter, vengeful and cruel woman who has absolutely lost her marbles and her humanity. You disgust me. Never come here unless you have an official warrant or I’ll have you thrown out, woman or not.”

Her mouth was still open as a frog’s as he turned and went inside the house, slamming the door shut. “Oh Christ,” he closed his eyes and leaned against the polished wood, “What a mess!”

Mrs. Hudson came running out of nowhere. “Oh doc, thank God you’re here. I can’t find Sherlock anywhere. That horrid cop came, they had a word in the formal reception room and then he just disappeared.”
“No, he didn’t,” John said, experiencing a light bulb moment, “He is on the property and I know exactly where he has gone. Do me a favor, can you please get all the retainers together and tell them I shall meet them in precisely one and half hours and give them an important briefing? Also, inform Victor, tell him to meet us at…..the Eastern wall, the fortified one with the rampart. Just….hand me a bottle of water and a hand-towel, quickly.”

“Sure,” she hurried down the hallway and got him what he had asked for, then handed him a thermos too, “Some tea which I had made for myself. Seems like both of you might need it more than I do. It’s cold and on that wall there it’s even colder. The wind blows like a real gale.”

***

When John reached the steps leading to the rampart on the thirty-foot wall, he was fairly loaded with stuff. Thermos, bottle, glasses, towel, a blanket and even a small medicine kit just in case he needed to give Sherlock something to soothe his frayed nerves. The steps were steep, narrow, without a handrail and John was struggling to climb them with all those things in his hands when Sherlock appeared at the top of the steps.

John knew he would never forget that sight.

The young man looked pasty white, as if the last it of color had drained from his face due to a deep shock to his soul. His eyes were hollow, blank, it had a certain deadness in it which scared John, a lot. His lips seemed contrastingly red, a stark reminder of the faint strains of life still inhabiting that near-empty shell. With his curly locks flying wild in the breeze and his favorite trademark frock-coat billowing in the strong breeze, he seemed just as untamed, wild and destructive as the strong gale that swept through these rugged landscapes. Even before his husband had spoken a word, John knew Sherlock had changed irrevocably. He just hoped the change was not so lethal it would interfere with his sanity.

“I will help you,” he came down the steps swiftly, swaying so much that John rushed up to meet him half-way, afraid he would topple over.

“I got this,” the doctor said, grabbing Sherlock’s arm, “Come on, let’s go sit in one of the watch towers up there.”

“There is a deep gorge beyond them, beyond this wall,” Sherlock spoke in a rather dull voice.
“Yes, so?” John gulped down his fear as they reached the top.

“Have you ever wondered, whether falling is like flying?” Sherlock leaned too much over the edge, prompting John to drag him away.

“Yes, might be, but it sure has a more permanent destination,” John muttered, “Sherlock, you need to take some meds.”

Sherlock kept walking, so John stopped him by standing right in his path as he was about to lean over the edge again, at the exact spot where Jim had fallen from. John remembered.

Sherlock shrugged his arm off and gave him a quizzical look. “Oh no, you think I am nervous, stressed, anxious and about to lose my sanity, don’t you?” He asked the question with slow, measured, deliberated words and then suddenly burst out into barking laughter, nearly falling on one of the stone seats under the canopy of the ‘watch-tower’. “Ohhhh,” he held his sides, “John you are such an optimist. Lose my sanity? Hahahahaha, that’s rich! Especially since I think I am about to lose my life.”
“NO,” John grabbed Sherlock and pulled him into his arms, rubbing down his back, “No Sherlock, no, please.”

“Jawn…..” Sherlock seemed to be in two different moods, hopeless and scared one moment and angry and self-loathing the next.

“You mustn’t say such things Sherl. Please, you’re scaring me now.” Sherlock melted into John’s arms for a while, then pulled back all of a sudden. The look on his face and in his eyes fleeted between needy and seeking help to defiant and resistant and John recognized the first signs of a man who had become so desperately depressed he could easily inflict self-harm. “Sherl, please Sherl, just listen to me, just give me and yourself a chance. We married for a reason, right? We were supposed to share our lives, bodies, thoughts, souls, dreams, ambition and also failures, sadness, insecurities, fears and everything else that bothers us. As your partner I want to be there for you at this hour of need, grief, anxiety. I know what’s happened and I…….”

“You don’t know John, you know nothing.” Sherlock sat up straighter, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“Then enlighten me.”

“Are you sure? Once you know, you cannot un-know.”

“Why would I wish to un-know? Anything to do with you is worth a place in my memories.”

“You might just end up hating me.”
“Nothing can ever make me hate you. I love you so much it will take more than just a revelation or some backstory to make me dislike you, forget hate on you.”

Something close to relief and happiness swam in Sherlock’s light blue-green eyes and he seemed to relax and relent. John waited ever so patiently, but he kept a hold of his husband’s hand throughout as the young scientist struggled to start his side of the story. He was afraid that if he let go, Sherlock would do something hasty, impulsive and stupid and end up jumping off the wall on a whim.

“It’s about James…..Jim…..my Jimmy.”

“Yes.”

“What are your thoughts about him so far? Please tell me that first. I am asking for a reason, I want to know what’s already on your mind. You must have formed an impression.”

“Good looking, brilliant, witty, interesting, enterprising, elegant, good taste, good education, well-liked and respected, someone you married for love and was the love of your life, someone you lost and then nothing was ever the same again for you.”

Sherlock was wistfully sad as the corners of his mouth curved up in a self-deprecating smile.

“I must be a wonderful pretend-artist if that was what you thought about my feelings for Jimmy,” the green-eyed man took a few deep breaths, “Yes, most of your deductions are correct. He was indeed attractive in a devilish sort of way, with eyes that I have never seen on anyone else before. Dark, deep, bottomless, soul-stirring, he was the epitome of the gorgeous nocturnal creature who could seduce even saints and make them sin right at the pulpit. When I met him I was swept away by his charm and sensuality, he made me want to tear off his clothes right then and there and ravish him. Yet, after we made love on the very night of the day we met, I found that he had touched a part of me that I didn’t even knew existed. My heart and soul, my spirit, the very inner core of me.”

John lowered his eyes. Yes, he had expected this.

Sherlock continued, “But no, it wasn’t Heavenly bliss that I assumed was beckoning out to me, but evil magic and trickery, entrapment and sorcery of a beautiful, bewitching creature that only wanted to ‘use’ me for his own convenience. The magic ended soon and right after our six week honeymoon across Latin America, US and Canada, Jim showed me his true face and revealed to
me his real intentions.”

John’s hands shook this time. “You….you two weren’t happily married???”

Sherlock chuckled mirthlessly, “As I said, we both acted, a lot. I can be a great pretend-artist whilst for Jim, enacting the role of someone else, that was his forte. To the outer world, even my parents and staff, we were the perfect modern-day same-sex couple. A pair of geniuses, we were evenly matched in terms of competence, brilliance, family background, age etc. It was a match made in Paradise and people eulogized our image of a perfect couple. But no, I was happy with him for a grand total of three and half months, a month and half of courtship, two weeks of engagement and then six weeks of honeymoon.”

“Oh…..” John was left bereft of words. He felt goose bumps rise on his flesh.

“As I was saying, on the last day of our honeymoon, he spent a long time talking to someone over the phone…….”

***

Five years earlier

“Fuck, what are you doing here?” Jim cursed when he almost ran into his husband.

“Hey, I was missing you babe,” Sherlock greeted Jim with a broad smile as the latter stepped back indoors after an hour-long chat with someone. The petite Irishman had been glued to his cell phone, walking up and down on the balcony of their luxury suite at a New York City hotel, chatting away and smiling nonstop. He looked so pleased that Sherlock had assumed it was either his father or some dear friend who’d called after ages.

Jim made a strange face at him and stepped past him, avoiding Sherlock’s outstretched arms. “Jimmy, are you upset about something?” Sherlock asked in a good-natured way, “Have I done something wrong?”

Jim turned and gave him a sharp look, then bared his teeth in a snarling gesture before mimicking Sherlock’s tone and parroting his words. “Jimmy have I done something wrong? Just look at you being such a perfect good little spouse, so eager to please and so easily nervous. You are ridiculous at so many levels that sometimes I struggle to keep up, even me, someone like me who’s brilliant at other things. But well, what can I say, even us geniuses have our Achilles heels and when it
comes to that soft spot, we tend to do things that are totally out of character. While your Achilles heel is me, mine happens to be……” he paused and watched Sherlock’s confusion with mirth, then added, “Not you, but someone else…… or actually, it happens to be something else.”

Sherlock knew Jim was capable of making roguish jokes. He had seen others at the receiving end of them and since Sherlock himself was equally acerbic and direct, he had enjoyed watching Jim at close quarters as he made others so uncomfortable in their skins they nearly plastered themselves to the tiles beneath his feet. But as he stood in the not-so-nice spot himself, he found that he was less appreciative and far more shaky about the words that Jim had just spoken.

“You’re kidding, right?” He asked, hoping Jim would just jump into his arms and give him a tight hug, saying he was only teasing him.

That didn’t happen. Jim stood his ground, his eyes narrowed into cruel, heartless crescents. “Awww look at poor you, struggling to grapple with reality. At least your brother was wiser, perceptive, more level-headed, worldly-wise. He even told me once his kid brother is a dreamer and hates living in reality. His world is an Ivory Tower, a mind palace that exists only in his head, and he can’t handle the ugliness and deception that’s part of this….real world.”

“Mycroft?! But how……”

“He and I had been seeing each other for a year. He delayed marrying me, so I got to you.”

“Jim, all this is not true. I don’t believe you.”

“Tell me the truth Sherrrrly,” Jim sing-songed, “You don’t believe me or you want to believe something else entirely? Still trying to evade reality, are you not?”

Sherlock was so taken aback that for the longest time he couldn’t speak. The same lovable, cute, sweet, sexy, genius whose IQ was just as stratospheric as his own, the one who had given him the feel of a ‘soulmate’, the ‘one soul in two bodies’ kind of fairy tale, was now looking at him as if he was an insect under the lab microscope, up for scrutiny, experiment and even dispensable at will. His old fear of abandonment, being ridiculed, being called out for making a mistake and bringing his family shame, came back to him with a resounding smack and he flinched visibly. “Oh no,” Jim tutted, “No-Nooo-Noooo! I won’t hurt you physically. Why should I when I have so much to gain from you? But if you don’t agree with my terms and conditions……”
“What-What kind of terms and conditions?” Sherlock asked, voice wavering. He could hardly feel his legs and arms, even his brain felt fuzzy.

“See, eventually you found your voice and in case your practical side has taken a walk down the park, I suggest you grab that one too,” Jim spoke in that shrill, derogatory tone that almost pierced through Sherlock’s skull and hurt his brains, “Because you’re sooooo going to need it.” He paused and went to the bed, swaying his hips in an exaggerated manner, then looked over his shoulder at his newlywed husband, “We are both twenty-four, we have a long life together ahead of us, so get used to this. This is me, I am not some sweet thing that believes in eternal love and fairy tale endings. There is nothing sweet about me, I am all sharp claws and fangs. All things on earth end with deception or death. Love is not eternal but mostly carnal. There, I busted all the myths for you. The sooner our wavelengths match, the better it will be for our ‘marriage’, sweetie.”

“Why are you doing this?” Sherlock asked, pain obvious in his voice.

“I needed a ruse to move to England, to live beyond the scrutiny of family and friends, to be part of a family and be married to a man who can further my ambitions. You are a perfect match and I was so glad when I spotted you at the science convention. Thank God Mycroft wasn’t there because it’s a bit more difficult to fool him. You, my sweet sacrificial lamb, happen to be the best ‘husband’ for this job. For me, this is a business deal and nothing more.”

His spirit shattering, his heart breaking, his demons raising their horned heads, Sherlock felt as if the words were stuck at the back of his throat. He tried to speak but it needed a lot of effort and eventually he almost choked out the words, “What if I refuse to comply?”

“Oh no honey, don’t do that, don’t even dare or dream about that,” Jim lay down on the bed and parted his legs, his privates showing prominently through the thin cotton of his boxers, “I am not a man to be trifled with. But I am a fair man, often. So, in exchange for your compliance, silence, patience and pertinence, I shall play the most adoring, dutiful trophy husband for a young wealthy aristocrat like you. But you won’t ask me any questions in private, nor would you get possessive, nor will you even breathe a word about this to anyone, Reginald, Mycroft and Eugenia included.”

Sherlock took some time to process this. His mind worked faster than a computer when it came to analyzing facts, deducing people and situations or working on chemical formulae and new compounds, but in terms of relationships and matters of the heart he was not only inexperienced but also very vulnerable. His lips quivered and he hung his head, wondering if he should pinch himself to check if this was really happening or some horrid nightmare.

“Oh the poor innocent mite,” Jim laughed in a manic way that froze the blood in Sherlock’s veins, “Still thinks he will wake up and find this a bad dream.”
Sherlock got a start, nearly jumping out of his skin. Oh God, Jim was not only a monster, he was a very clever monster. If he could read Sherlock’s mind so expertly and promptly then it was very possible that he was absolutely indomitable. Their eyes met and in a flash Jim’s playfulness vanished and was replaced by a vicious look in those eyes. The same eyes which were pools of molten chocolate, so desirable, so pretty, so filled with adoration, now looked like the depths of fiery hell. Suddenly the Irishman grabbed Sherlock and pinned him down on the bed with surprising strength. “Now you listen to me,” he hissed, “You’re a great lay and a great prick. I love my moments in bed with you. You’re also intelligent and handsome and the perfect man to be seen in social gatherings with. Then you have money, reputation, which gives me the cushion I need. I want this ‘arrangement’ to continue, or else there’s gonna be trouble.”

Something worked up inside Sherlock and he snapped at Jim, “No, I will not be blackmailed into doing something so horribly deceitful and fake. If you don’t want to be my husband, I’d rather set you free.”

“Oh that’s the problem darling,” Jim said, “I do want to be your husband. Just don’t expect me to rely only on one cock.”

“No, Jim, don’t say that…..”

“Oh my angel, such an innocent, a virgin in mind and body you were and now….I have popped both cherries. This is the real world, accept it. I like variety and no matter how good your dick is, how big or how satisfying, I will still need more, many more.”

Sherlock made a strangled noise as a hot hand dipped into his shorts and grabbed his manhood. The traitor reacted instantly to Jim’s familiar touches and scent and before he knew it, Jim was sitting on it, taking it deep and hard as he rode him like a race jockey. But unlike all their earlier times, when the sight of Jim above him gave him visions of being ravished by a beautiful demi-God, this time felt like a violation. He felt as if he was being ravaged by a sandstorm in a dry, burning desert.

“Please,” he cried out, body needing this, mind shuddering with the implications of it.

“Please what Sherlylocks?” Jim hissed, guiding Sherlock’s hand to his cock, “Yes, your job is to please and pleasure. If you hold my interest and keep me entertained, if you do as I say, if you’re a good little boy, I promise you no harm will ever come to you. If you renege on your words and promises, then I will gladly show you the gateway to hell and all your wealth, talent or power won’t be able to pull you back from it.”
They continued, Sherlock’s mind and body warring, Jim laughing and moaning alternately, till the Irishman came with a triumphant cackle of laughter and a few grunts, spilling all over Sherlock. Seconds later Sherlock came, which elicited another long-drawn exaggerated moan from his ‘husband’, a man who had clearly occupied the seat of power in their marriage and who was thoroughly enjoying this ‘game’.

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John held Sherlock in his arms as the latter recounted the days of horror. Unknown to himself, Sherlock had started shaking all over as if a part of him was still living out that ordeal. “I realized, as months passed, that this was not a game really. This was a very well-thought out and planned move on Jimmy’s part. He needed someone to back up his still-unknown name and brand in England and that was provided by my father and brother, he needed to harness my talent in co-creating certain things, inventions that were pathbreaking but dangerous in the wrong hands, and this sham marriage provided him the perfect opportunity to do that. He broke my heart over and over again Jawn, he was so cruel and heartless that sometimes I prayed that I should die, just to escape him.”

John closed his eyes and prayed for Sherlock. Those moments when he’d detested or suspected Sherlock’s behavior revealed themselves in a truly three-dimensional manner now, making him ashamed of the way he had judged the man without truly knowing what he’d suffered.

“I thought he was incapable of loving someone, that he was stone-hearted, but at the end of the day not a menace or a threat to society,” Sherlock went on, now in a daze, “But I was so wrong. Shortly after our marriage a man entered our lives, someone Jim had picked up during one of his many business meetings, a man who was rumored to be a sniper. Tall, blond, rugged handsome, with blue eyes and the build and looks of a Greek God, he began to work with Jimmy and started to share his bed. So far Jim would share my room and bed but suddenly he shooed me away and we never slept together again. This was barely six months into the marriage. I was once again, devastated. I thought maybe I could salvage something from this hollow sham of a relationship but that was the day my hopes truly died.”

John spoke after a long time, “Didn’t you tell anyone?”

“No, I just told you. Not even Mike, not even Victor, not even my parents or old Hudders. What would I have told them? That I am a stupid fucking failure, a jilted, scorned husband, a fucking amoeba? No, I’d rather die too than let them know…..”

He paused for a few moments, “I think Victor guessed something. He is too sincere and loyal to
ask me directly but I knew Jimmy had tried to seduce him…..I always knew Jimmy met this 'partner' of his at London ad Dublin, where they maintained their love-nests. Guess what, by the end they got so bold he used to bring that bugger here and they would openly flaunt their relationship on my face. Sebastian always loved to show off the hickeys Jim had given him…..”

“He was here a few days ago,” John said quietly, “He insisted that I don’t inform you. I didn’t. Guess I didn’t wish to stir the pot because at that time….I was under the misconception that you were still grieving for Jim.”

Sherlock’s eyes were filled with anguish as he leaned back in John’s arms, shaking his head with regret. “How I wish I had not been so hasty in marrying him! How I wish Mycroft had not made such a great sacrifice and hidden his relationship with Jim from me. It would have made alarm bells go off in my head immediately. You see, Jim used to read people very well and he knew my brother and I don’t share a lot and I always maintained some distance from him, so he took advantage of that. I tried to save my marriage John, God help me I did try! I even told Jim I would hand over the formula for the two major inventions we were working on together, let him take the sole credit for them, but he didn’t relent. I can’t stop seeing Seb and I won’t answer your questions, was what he said. He didn’t want to give me any rights. But he did an exceptional job at maintaining the façade of an ideal spouse.”

“Sherl,” John tried to calm him, “He’s gone now. But….the worry remains, and I saw it even before the police inquest was reopened. Why? Do you really miss this man so much even today, the very same man who made your life a living hell?”

“Call me a loser but I will always love him in a way,” Sherlock confessed, “But my life is with you Jawn. You’re my husband, a man a 100% times more suited to me and my life, my dreams and my future than Jim could ever be. If he was the sparkling diamond that blinded me…..”

Sherlock coughed and took deep breaths. “Hey, you’ve been speaking for a long time, shhhh, relax, give your voice some rest.”

“Let me finish,” Sherlock said through a coarse, grating voice, “If he was the diamond then you’re gold, you’re the steady presence in my life that has finally grounded me again. Your love has helped me through a very difficult period.”

“And here I thought you could barely tolerate me,” John gasped.

“I could barely tolerate myself,” Sherlock said sadly.
“Hey, why would you hate yourself so much. What happened was not your fault, an error of judgement for sure but not your fault.”

“You don’t understand Jawn. It was my fault. I….I….I’m the one who….O God, Jawn I killed Jim.”

Chapter End Notes

Off on a vacation to the Emerald Isle.....Ireland (In my vocab AndrewScott Land). Updates won't happen till the end of next week, perhaps 8th or 9th at the earliest. Stay safe, stay happy everyone!
Several times in his life of thirty five years, John had come across situations which had taken his breath away and left him speechless and numb, and not in a good way. There was that moment in his childhood when he had been pushed into a lake by a jealous cousin, someone who had offered truce only a day ago so he could lure him into that spot and get rid of him. John had struggled to stay afloat while dealing with the hurt and betrayal he had felt while struggling with the hypothermic conditions in the ice cold water at the same time. Then there had been those moments at war which he still relived in occasional nightmares. There was also the moment when he had received the phone call about Mary’s demise.

But none had impacted him the way Sherlock’s words rattled him to the very bones.

‘I killed Jim’. Those three words echoed in his head over and over again till he could almost enact the whole scene in his mind, Sherlock and Jim right here on this spot, a windy day, a day that had to end in tragedy for both men. An early and untimely demise for the Irishman and a lifetime of an overbearing burden of guilt for the Englishman, it was a sublime tragedy for both! He could hear their voices, arguing, he could see them pushing and shoving each other, he could see that moment when a browbeaten Sherlock had pushed Jim a bit too hard and that deafening scream as the small, sassy, swaggering little manipulating bastard had lost his balance and fallen. One moment he was there, the next moment he was gone. He could hear the cries of anguish from Sherlock and the way he curled up on the ground and berated himself.

“No,” he murmured.

It was Sherlock who was holding him now, showing the first signs of protectiveness. “It is true, I am afraid. Your husband is a killer, a murderer, rotting away in his own private hell. Oh John, I should have never married you, never dragged you into the mess that’s become my life.”

“It was an accident,” John said sternly.
“What?” Sherlock blinked.

“An accident,” John repeated, showing steely nerves.

“But I told you what really happened….he told me he wanted the formula and I refused. I knew he was going to misuse it. I was okay to tolerate his abuse John but I wasn’t about to let him harm thousands of people by first giving them AIDS and then curing them for a high price. He would have been the richest man on earth several times over in merely five years and he wanted me to share that life with him. He tempted me saying he would sleep with me again, that he would give up on all lovers but Sebastian. But I…..But I couldn’t do this….I couldn’t let him get away with this either.”

“The formula had a flaw,” John said firmly, his voice all ice, “It also gave away a way to implant the virus in one’s body just as it gave a formula to create drugs that could cure it completely. You did what you had to do. You took the life of one to save many. In my eyes it’s a good deed, not even close to murder. And that too….unintentional, unpremeditated murder, third degree, it was a culpable homicide, manslaughter.”

Sherlock let out a chuckle.

“No, no, Jawn, you’re blinded by your love for me and it’s the sort of love I don’t even deserve,” the younger man shook his head and kept huffing out joyless chuckles, “No one will ever believe this story. Everyone knew Jim as an honorable, law-abiding, socially conscious, enormously popular and charming young man who won hearts as easily as he won deals in business. He was the likeable genius whilst I was the freak, the grumpy reclusive bastard who was cocky and arrogant. No judge or jury would believe me. If this doesn’t convince you then how about this, I got hold of a body with Mycroft’s help and identified that as Jim’s. Mycroft used his powers to stop an autopsy and we buried the body as fast as we would. But the dead do tell the tales sooner or later, as Sally Donovan just told me an hour ago.”

Someone clearing their throat made them both jump a bit. But they relaxed when they saw it was Victor.

“You heard?” Sherlock asked bluntly. He was always direct with his friend.

“Yes,” Victor answered, “I agree with John. It was not cold blooded murder. It was truly an accident. What will this corpse prove? That it was not Jim? How will that implicate you or indict Mycroft? The man who wrote the letter is gone. Mycroft is a clever man, he will manage the situation well. You just keep your mouth shut….actually just stick to your version. That you were
shocked and not in a fit state to think clearly and you made a mistake in identifying the broken, bloodied and almost unidentifiable body.”

“Yes, hear,” John called out.

“You are both crazy,” Sherlock slid down against the wall, sitting down heavily on the ground.

“We won’t let Jim win, not from the grave,” Victor said in a firm, clear voice, “I knew more about your marriage than you thought I did. I was not stupid, you know. The only reason I stayed silent was because of your honor and that of your family’s. I can’t say Jim deserved to die but I shall surely say this; he was definitely going to meet a violent end because he was doing some very wrong things. People who get derailed often get decapitated too. He brought this on himself and I think you paid for it by moping and grieving for more than two years. Over with it, now!”

“It won’t be over so soon,” Sherlock sighed and buried his face in his hands, “I am doomed, finished. Jim has won. One thing will lead to the other and…..”

As if on cue, Victor’s phone went off noisily in his pocket. John got another jump scare and grabbed Sherlock’s hand instinctively, his mind trying its best to calm down and think it was all going to be fine while every fiber in his body kept screaming ‘doomsday’.

His fears were near-confirmed when Victor answered the call briefly, disconnected and looked at the rather downbeat Sherlock. “It’s Lestrade.”

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“The body we exhumed and performed an autopsy and DNA tests on, was not Jim Moriarty’s,” Lestrade announced as Sherlock, John and Victor stood in a semi-circle formation around him, “In fact, the body belonged to a man named Aaron Maxim Comish. Used to live in the town, alone, worked in the sawmill, was a chronic drunk and it was indeed an accident that he fell from a height and died. But it wasn’t the sort of height that forms the wall on the eastern boundaries of your property. He might have fallen from a tree or a building and the injuries on him prove that.”

Lestrade was accompanied by a middle-aged man named Henry Blackwood, who was a public prosecutor by profession and one of the members in charge of the inquest into Jim Moriarty’s death, alongside Greg Lestrade and forensic expert Diana Jones. Diana couldn’t make it that day but Blackwood was there and he seemed to be fairly charged up with the energy of ‘Digging out a
few criminals from their hideouts by digging up their crimes first’.

“The strangest part of this whole mystery is this,” Blackwood spoke in a rather snobbish tone, giving Sherlock a completely unsympathetic glance, “Where is James Isaac Moriarty? Where is his body and is he even dead? In my opinion he is dead indeed but his body was cleverly hidden/concealed somewhere because it would have pointed straight to the criminal. There was some kind of foul-play there, otherwise no one hides dead bodies. Had Mr. Holmes not made that ridiculous mistake of identifying a stranger’s body as his husband’s, we might have searched for Mr. Moriarty a long time ago. Now we have lost a lot of time and ground.”

“What do you need from me, counselor?” Sherlock asked in a razor sharp tone.

“There will be a formal inquest. You need to be present there.”

“Yes, I shall be there.”

“Try to tell the truth this time.”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

Sherlock got agitated, John felt annoyed, even Lestrade was quite startled by the choice of words from the lawyer. “Last time you were perhaps unwell, grief stricken and therefore you abetted some sort of falsehood by testifying in its favor. Perhaps it was unintentional but it did throw the cops off the scent. Had you been more careful last time, your husband’s killer would have been behind the bars by now.”

“What makes you think my husband was killed?” Sherlock put his hands on his hips and gave Blackwood a rather hard glance.

“Circumstantial evidence and a bit of psychological theorizing my young friend,” Blackwood said as he stepped up to Sherlock and stood toe to toe with him, “I have known you for a long time, I have watched you grow from a youngster into an adult man. Your idyllic, blissful, happier than happy marital life always struck me as a bit fake and portrayed. But when your man died and you became a recluse, I was more or less convinced that you did really love him and were inconsolable after his loss. But now, with this fresh evidence, I am not sure what to think anymore. What was he doing there alone, in such bad weather, on top of the wall, so early in the morning? How did he just fall? Did you never feel the need to figure out if someone had murdered your husband or if it was a
“People have different ways of dealing with grief,” John interjected.

“Oh yes sure, Dr. Watson, see you at the inquest Sherlock,” Blackwood said, gave the whole room a rather sharp and suspicious glance and turned to leave, “Lestrade are you coming?”

“Be with you in a bit,” Lestrade replied.

As soon as Blackwood had left, the inspector turned towards Sherlock, “If there is something I must know, that I should know, you need to tell me that, now.”

“He has nothing to say.”

Mycroft’s smooth, polished voice came from the interconnecting door to the other room and moments later the man himself made an appearance. He was cool, unruffled, immaculately dressed in a suit and didn’t seem the least bit shaken by the sudden turn of events. “What do you want to know Greg?” He asked, “If Sherlock was responsible for Jim’s death? No, that’s not possible. He was madly in love with Jim…..as was I.”

John startled, as did Sherlock and Victor, when the big reveal came. Lestrade noisily dropped the gun from his hands and picked it up quickly again, mumbling his apologies. “I had always wanted to tell you the truth Greg,” Mycroft continued, “Sorry it had to happen under these circumstances. Yes, James was and is the only man who managed to make me reconsider my bachelorhood. But no, my brother could have never harmed him, not intentionally.”

Greg Lestrade was quiet for a long time. It was evident he was struggling to process the new piece of information, both at a professional and personal level, but eventually the cop in him won. His voice was perfectly in control when he spoke next.

“I guess then we shall see you at the inquest.”

Mycroft nodded.
As soon as Lestrade had left, Mycroft turned away and lit a cigarette while Victor and Sherlock tried to make a quick exit from the room. All while a still dumbfounded John stood there, perplexed, wishing someone would shed a bit more light on what was about to come up next. Yes, he was aware that none of them had considered one key thing, where the hell was Jim’s body? But didn’t that merit more discussions and debates? Were they going to just drop the topic, like many other things before? No, not this time, this time he was part of the mess too and part of the Holmes family as well, so they better stick their noses out and face facts rather than walk off, like they’d been doing so far.

“Wait, stop, everyone.”

Three heads turned towards him.

“Please, have a seat, all of you.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to protest but John shot him a sharp look that made him quickly withdraw that sentence. Mutely he sat down on a chair and, seeing that, Victor and Mycroft did the same thing. John noticed in Mycroft’s eyes a newfound respect, as if the elder sibling had only just realized the positive influence he seemed to have had on Sherlock’s life. “Okay Dr. Watson,” Mycroft stubbed out the cigarette in a nearby ash-tray, “Now that we are all settled down and ready to listen, what’s it that you have to say?”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t? Then why…?”

“Because you do, Sherlock does, maybe even Victor does.”

“What….how do you mean?”

John looked at Sherlock who seemed to be pleading with him silently, using just his eyes to communicate. Even though John’s heart melted a little, he remained firm on his resolve. “The family that talks things out openly, settles disputes instead of carrying grudges, stays together for a lifetime,” he announced, “At this rather difficult moment, my only wish is that all of you come clean to each other about Jim Moriarty.”
“Jawn….” Sherlock gasped.

“We all know what had happened,” John said encouragingly, “There is nothing to hide.”

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“I can’t believe you would really do that, I still can’t.” Mycroft was smoking like a chimney, “You couldn’t keep him happy, you two didn’t get along, I understand all that but divorce was an option too. Why do something this drastic? You let things go to a point where someone had to die. Damn it, I helped you and now because of that even I am in trouble. Which incidentally isn’t my biggest fear. My biggest and worst fear is that karma comes back to bite everyone in the butt. If there is a proper search on, his body will be found and all the worms would spill out from the bag.”

“What can they prove anyways?” Victor asked, “Mike, they found this fellow’s body in Jim’s grave and what did it eventually prove? There were finger marks on his neck but that was due to a pub fight earlier. Eventually he had died from the impact of injuries due to a fall.”

“I know because it’s I who organized a body that would have similar symptoms and causes of death.” Mycroft said a tad irritably, “It was sheer good luck we had a body at the right time, otherwise the only other way was to actually kill someone and let them take Jim’s place. But the question that’s been raised now was always present in my head. Where is Jim’s body? Where is he? What really became of him? I hadn’t handed him over to you on a platter so you could pull him apart one day and just toss him off some wall. I felt let down Sherlock, I still do, and I will never stop feeling like a fool for having trusted you to have a stable, happy relationship with someone.”

“What the fuck are you trying to insinuate?” Sherlock screamed, the veins on his neck standing out.

“You made him do it, isn’t that so?”

“You mean I-I-I abetted his suicide?”

Mycroft simply looked away and said nothing. Sherlock’s eyes were glowing with anger. He too said nothing and turned his back on Mycroft.

“Years ago,” John began, trying to be the sane and rational one, “Jim Moriarty drove a wedge
between two brothers. Don’t let him do that to you again, please don’t. He’s not even in this world and yet he happens to be standing right here in this room, his presence hovering over us, his legacy and memories haunting us in a manner that’s driving us insane, insidious, infantile even. Did you two just hear yourselves speak? Instead of standing together at this hour of need, you’re slowly becoming a house divided by suppressed feelings, anxieties and grievances.”

Sherlock was transformed by the short but rather pointedly accurate summation of their problem. But Mycroft still looked disgruntled. “Tell me John,” he began, “If you had just one big love in your life and you gave it up for your baby brother, how would you feel when……”

“I’d trust the same brother I made the sacrifice for,” Victor pitched in, unexpectedly, “I’d look at the situation from a different angle. The Jim you knew and were in a long-distance relationship with for a year, was just putting his best foot forward. He always kept the darker side of himself hidden from your view because he knew only too well that you wouldn’t approve of it and distance yourself from this relationship if you as much as got a hint of his non-legit business plans or his sexually cavalier lifestyle and bohemian, non-monogamous tendencies. But Sherlock lived with him, was married to him, so he saw that side which Jim no longer had to hide. Had you been in Sherlock’s place, you might have given up on James a lot more easily and a whole lot sooner.”

“Exactly what experiences are you basing your observations on?” Mycroft asked in a snippy tone, “You didn’t live with them and Sherlock clearly stated he hadn’t told you much. These are simply your assumptions?”

“No, I didn’t live with him but I watched Sherlock’s life in close quarters all the while he was married to Jim and Jim was still around,” Victor spoke with some deliberation, weighing every word he was speaking out. “Besides that, there were some other reasons as well, reasons that were frankly too embarrassing to be spoken aloud.” He stopped to collect his thoughts together while Sherlock pleaded him with mumbles and tugs at his friend’s sleeve. But John stopped Sherlock and gave his husband a reassuring look. Let the truth be known, he seemed to say and Sherlock understood the unspoken words. He let out a huge sigh, bowed his head and gathered his hands on his lap, his body language one of defeat and resignation.

“What do you mean Victor?” Mycroft asked sternly, “The dead can’t defend themselves so whatever you’re saying, I hope you have some proof.”

“He was a serial cheater. He had a lover on the sly….well, not on the sly towards the end because he became more and more enamored with that man and the two of them grew bolder and bolder with their intimacy. Sebastian.”

“He was a business partner….wait, you mean….?”
“I might have had my doubts too Mike. But he tried a move on me several times and once I was even tempted.”

There was pin-drop silence in the room. No one spoke. Sherlock’s nose was inches from his lap, he was curling into himself, as if he wanted to disappear.

“I held him off at the final moment and kept myself in check,” Victor added, “Had Sherlock not suspected what was happening and cornered me, I might have never told him either. Jim was all kinds of wrong, all kinds. He made Sherlock’s life a living hell. He reduced him to a puppet whose strings he could pull at will and the normally strong, intelligent and confident Sherlock played along, simply to protect the family’s image, his parents, you…..from this mortification.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being patient with me. I am back from my holiday in Ireland (amazing country, every single person should put it on their bucket list) and the updates will be more regular from now on. Cheers!
Chapter Summary

“You will burn in hell, Sherlock,” Jim snarled.

“I had helped Sherlock because he was my brother,” Mycroft murmured after a long moment of silence that seemed to permeate the room, “I bent a few rules but didn’t break them. At this point, I am not the one who’s in trouble but Sherlock can well become so, if these facts became known to people, to the ones holding the inquest.”

“How can you say that?” Sherlock spat out, “I didn’t.....I am not.....he was taking things to a point where even mummy and daddy would have got involved. I begged him, I rubbed my nose before him, but he just wouldn’t relent. He was very cruel.”

“Not just that,” John added, eager to support his husband and expose the ‘monster’ that was James Moriarty, “He was about to misuse one of the inventions Sherlock and he had worked on together. The remedy for the AIDS virus, a breakthrough in medical science that’s no less than the discovery of penicillin. Anyone, even those in the near last stages of the disease, could be easily cured with this treatment. One month and people would be back on their feet. In three or four months they could resume their regular lives, start working again. Sherlock wanted this to be a service to humanity and a landmark to medical science whereas Jim saw this as a money-making scheme. He wanted to control the drugs market, he wanted to implant the virus first, make it totally spiral out of control, then release the drug.”

Sherlock nodded in agreement, but he didn’t say a word. It seemed to John that he was more hurt by the open disbelief of his brother than by the danger lurking in his near future. But there was a visibly shift in Mycroft’s mood and perceptions and that manifested through his next reaction. Mycroft shot a look at Sherlock, exasperated and shocked at first, then shook his head slightly. “Sounds like the sort of crazy thing Sherlock would do. He would try and handle everything without any help.” He put a hand on Sherlock’s head, a gesture of a blessing as well as support, “But you should have asked for help.”

Sherlock swallowed, “You believe me?”

“Yes.”

“I did try to tell you then….when I did ask for help….but you called me a murderer.”
“It was my mistake and I apologize.”

John cleared his throat irritably. Mycroft quickly raised his brows, then understood the implications and added, “I should have asked more questions, understood your reticence on some matters and just….just removed my rose-tinted sunglasses about Jim. It’s just that…..”

“You loved him, isn’t that so?” Sherlock asked with a sad smile.

“Yeah,” Mycroft raised both hands in a gesture of helplessness.

“I know the feeling Mikey. Been there too.”

“He played us, both of us.”

The two brothers exchanged a grateful glance, then nodded at each other in silence. Misunderstandings had been ironed out, finally, and Victor and John looked at each other and smiled. This was the best the Holmes brothers could do. Having been emotionally aloof and slightly distant all their lives, they were not going to hug, shake hands and vocally pledge more support in the future. But at least the penny had dropped and they were no more in their own zones, blaming and nursing grievances against each other. At least that was a start. Mycroft spoke of hiring the best lawyer in town while Sherlock promised not to lose his temper during the inquest and answer questions objectively.

“But first,” John said, “Tell us exactly what happened that day.”

“Like a trial? A rehearsal?”

“Whatever you call it, just do it. Sometimes we need to hear what we’re speaking and that’s where we correct our mistakes. Better correct them here than at the hearing.”

“I had just left my lab that night, around 3 am, when I met Jim half way through to the house. He seemed different somehow that night, almost like the person I had dated and courted back in Dublin, and for a moment I was fooled into thinking he had changed. He jumped into my arms and asked me if I would carry him to the house, saying he hadn’t been keeping too well and felt very
tired and exhausted nowadays. My fears worked up and I asked him if he had been to the doctor.”

Sherlock looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then added softly, “He said he had. I lifted him in my arms and we were almost at the house when he pointed at the golf cart and said he’d like to go to the eastern wall and watch the sunrise from there. He made a strange comment that he didn’t have many sunrises left to watch. I was slowly getting shaky with unfounded fears but I complied. We went there, we….we made love under that canopy…..he had spread out pillows and a blanket there…..in advance. We had hot chocolate once we were done and had worn our clothes again…..he was very cuddly and affectionate.”

John felt an intense jealousy course through him and with superhuman effort he kept up his composure.

“Then?” Mycroft asked, looking thoughtful.

“Then he told me he was suffering from HIV and that was why he had kept me at arm’s length for a while. Now he was getting worse, more ill by the day, and he suspected he had full-blown AIDS. He told me his only hope was if our common invention could be tested and developed.”

The three other men in the room listened with rapt attention. John could see the moment in his imagination, Jim being a manipulative little shit and Sherlock, for all his intelligence and deductive reasoning, getting sucked into the moment and offering Jim the world, until something struck him as ‘falsehood’.

“I was on the verge of tears,” Sherlock confirmed his theory, “I was ready to do anything to save him. He was alive, present, wrapped up in my arms and I would have given my life if I could to keep things like that when…..something told me ‘trust but verify’.”

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“I don’t want to die Sherlock,” Jim was sobbing, his small fists bunched into Sherlock’s shirt and his face pressed into his neck, Sherlock’s vulnerable, sensitive spot, “I want to live, with you, I hadn’t valued our marriage and our relationship till I found out I was ill and it was all due to my-my trespasses, my own stupid fuckery, I want to change all that. I have kept myself away for over a year, just so I wouldn’t infect you but now…..when it seems I don’t have many days left, I had to tell you this. I held out as long as I could but I can’t…..not any more. I tried to make you hate me. But you seem incapable of hating me…….”
“I could never hate you baby,” Sherlock held him tighter and was gratified to notice Jim curl up in that embrace instead of pushing him away or insulting him, “I have always loved you. I wanted you to be the same person I had met in Dublin, I wanted the same life……”

“Please Sherlylocks, please do this for me,” Jim begged so pretty that Sherlock felt alternate tugs to his heart and his cock, a side of him wanting to protect and save the man in his arms and another side just wishing to be inside him and pound away till he had brought them both to another sweaty, messy climax. “I want us to be back to those days too,” Jim sniffled, awkwardly wiping his face on Sherlock’s shirt, “No one knows about this but you, nobody does. Only my doctor knows and he’s given me the reports, just see……” He handed Sherlock a file, then curled up in his arms again.

Sherlock opened the file with shaking hands and looked. At the outset it all seemed normal.

Then he noticed.

A different font on the letter-head, a different one on the texts next to the diagnosis, another one in the statement signed by the doctor. Then there were the signatures, of the pathologist, the doctor and the specialist consulting on the case. They were signed using the same ink.

But their addresses were completely different. One was at a clinic in south London, one was at a lab in the western side of the city and the third one was operating from Glasgow. None of those were electronic signatures.

How could all three people be at the same time, same place, same day and use the same pen. Why not electronic signatures, which were the order of the day to avoid manual interventions and unnecessary work for the medical personnel. Everything about this report was state of art and perfectly contemporary, then why were the signatures all taken in the old-fashioned way and that too, together? Unless this was a set-up.

Sherlock gently extricated himself from Jim’s clinging embrace and walked away a few feet. “Sherly?” Jim asked, “What’s the matter?”

The tone had changed again. Though not as mean or vicious as always, it was certainly lacking the tears and distress of a few moments ago. It was a plea earlier, now it seemed to be a demand, and Jim also sounded impatient. Jim was on the clock but was that the only reason why he was impatient? Or was there a bigger reason lurking around that Sherlock was not looking at? Oh yes, of course there was. He was being hoodwinked, yet again! Cheat me once, shame on you, cheat me twice, shame on me, those golden words came back to him in a rush and suddenly he found his
voice of reason and authority. No, he was not going to get manipulated by this unearthly gorgeous creature, no matter how much it hurt him to address Jim with sternness and doubt.

“I will do anything to help you recover,” he said, keeping his back turned to his husband, “But I think we should get a second opinion.”

He ‘heard’ silence. Then Jim said with exaggerated helplessness, “Don’t do this to me.”

“I am merely asking for a verification. Sometimes those idiots make mistakes.”

“Three people have checked…..”

“There is no harm in getting a fourth person to check too.”

“Noooo, I don’t want to go through this again. Do you have any idea what it takes to go through such diagnosis, the wait as they confirm, the fears and tribunals your mind goes through as you struggle to believe this is happening to you, you’re in the thick of it, and you won’t come out of this alive? You really want to put me through this again, once again, all over again?”

“I will be with you this time,” Sherlock offered, “At every step. So will be a family doctor, and the AIDS specialist he recommends. We will fly down experts from US if we have to. It’s about you, my husband, and we will blow up our entire fortune if that’s what it takes to.....”

“Don’t be dumb,” Jim snapped at him finally, “It’s a waste of time.”

“So my fears were not unfounded. He was manipulating me again.’ Sherlock felt his heart break again but this time it didn’t take his mind down on its knees. He kept up his logic and rationale and looked Jim square in the eye. “You should be ashamed of yourself Jimmy.”

Immediately Jim reverted to the monstrous, evil, almost cataclysmic creature that he was. At the blink of an eyelid he was right on to Sherlock, grabbing his collar and shaking him hard, his breath hot on his husband’s face.

“You WILL give me the formula,” he growled, “If you don’t, you will be really sorry Sherlock.
Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

This time Sherlock was not interested in nursing his grief and shock over Jim’s behavior. He had witnessed it far too often and didn’t feel that numbing pain anymore, only a fierce determination to not let this manipulation go on any longer. Jim had him by the balls thus far but he was going to take his family jewels, his spine and his heart right back from the merciless and evil creature. “I am sorry already,” he said calmly, “That I trusted you once and married you without even thinking….without noticing some signs early on that you…..never loved me. You hadn’t even been in love with Mycroft…..I was just a better, easier option for you, wasn’t I? Well, nothing teaches a man more than tragedy and heartbreak and I am not the same man you so easily walked over for the past few years.”

He saw, much to his satisfaction, that Jim was just as shocked by the change in him as he was himself shocked at this ‘much-needed’ firmness and his eventual refusal to take any more bullshit. “Not only will I NOT give you the formula,” he said clearly, “I will report this to the cops and let them know your deviousness. If they dig a bit, I am sure they will find enough to implicate you and that toy-boy of yours, Sebastian, isn’t that his name? The one who keeps you company while you use my name and my family’s position to forward your business interests?”

“You will do NO such thing,” Jim said through gritted teeth.

“Watch me,” Sherlock threw back.

“If you don’t give me the formula right now, I will jump off the wall.”

“Jim, James, no, don’t be a fool……”

Jim climbed up on the edge of the wall, balancing himself precariously on top of it. Then he took some measured steps backwards, as if he was enticing Sherlock to give in. for a moment Sherlock wanted to, but he knew the consequences would impact hundreds of thousands. He had no right to do this to other, he had no right to unleash Jim and his evil schemes on many, many innocents.

“You will burn in hell, Sherlock,” Jim snarled.

Sherlock waited, just a bit, then he lunged at Jim and grabbed him. Jim nearly toppled backwards before he caught himself and tried to push Sherlock back. The struggle continued till Jim unexpectedly caught Sherlock’s jaw with his foot and sent him sprawling on the rampart.
“I was temporarily distracted by my fall. When I looked up again, the spot he occupied was empty. I can still hear myself scream. I looked over the ledge, I half hung over that for a long time, trying to see something/anything below, but there was nothing to be seen. Not a scrap of shirt torn off and sticking to the branch of a tree, no tell-tale blood on a precipice below, no cell phone smashed and lying on the ground, nothing. One moment he was there, alive and berating me, the next moment he was gone. There was nothing I could do to bring him back.”

“Hush,” Mycroft whispered, his hands hanging loose by his sides, “You don’t have to say anything further Lockie. I can almost see it as like an action replay from the mere words you used to describe the scene so lucidly.”

Sherlock kept sitting quietly, not saying a word. Mycroft walked to the window and stared out, a faraway stare that clearly stated that a lot was going on in his head. John went and stood behind Sherlock, placing a hand on his shoulder to show and pledge his support. Victor did the same, taking the cue from John, and placed his hand on Sherlock’s other shoulder. Mycroft turned towards them and smiled, “I am glad you have these two to support you no matter the situation. Clearly you have done something right Lockie. Probably I was wrong, falling in love with a madman and seeing nothing wrong with him and everything wrong with my own brother. Not just me, he fascinated so many people and could easily turn them against someone, just for sport or for his own benefit.”

“Andersen, Donovan,” Sherlock murmured.

“Yeah. None of them are his aides, they just….adored him.”

“Andersen will probably kill himself. Donovan is a tough bird and will try to kill me instead. I know, I can see it happen.”

“It won’t happen,” John snorted, “I won’t let her.”

“Good to know,” Mycroft said, “Keep your ears and eyes open. I will hire a good lawyer, more for Sherlock than for myself, because aside from trying to protect my brother and therefore bending a rule slightly, they have nothing against me. But Lockie can get into trouble…..”

“……If he speaks the truth,” Victor murmured, completing the sentence.
“Right.”

“Then his best option is to stay silent and maintain the earlier version.”

“Correct.”

John looked at Sherlock, “Whatever happens, don’t get upset or testy. They might try to do that, just to needle you into saying something you shouldn’t, but tomorrow your composure is going to be your best friend and savior. Answer exactly as you would have done two years ago.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, “I promise I would.”

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John lavished Sherlock’s body with attention of all kinds, a chicken feather, his tongue, his lips, his hot breath, the dog tags around his neck dragging over the sensitive flesh as he nosed and kissed him all over. He wanted this night to be amazing for his young husband, so amazing between the sheets that he would forget the dangers and complexities surrounding him and get a good night’s sleep. From the responses he drew from Sherlock, he realized it was working and for once Sherlock’s mind was not rattling him nor were his memories gnawing at his insides. He truly enjoyed the pleasures of John’s ministrations and encouraged him with moans and pleas.

When John’s hot mouth engulfed him, he erupted with a cry within seconds, emptying everything down his husband’s throat. He panted wildly and yelped with surprise when John immediately climbed over his and lifted his long legs over his own muscular shoulders.

“Now let’s take you flying,” John hissed as he lubed up well and slid into Sherlock, having opened him up just a bit with two fingers. Sherlock’s body was so aching and eager for him that he didn’t feel any pain at the first thrust of John’s entrance, only a quivering pleasure that shot right up to his brain and made him fall gently, softly, around its throbbing warmth. A voluptuous sigh, followed by a throaty moan came out of him as John began to make love to him, getting deeper and deeper inside him and making his bones turn to jelly, reducing his brain to a puddle of mush and claiming his mouth in such searing kisses that Sherlock forgot to breathe.

Fifteen minutes later Sherlock Holmes came so hard he nearly blacked out. Semen splattered everywhere, on him, John, the sheets. He clutched at John desperately, trying to stay afloat while
John thrust into him, trying to reach his completion.

He did feel the warmth flow into him but by the time John had run out of it and pulled out, he was fast asleep.

“Mission accomplished,” John grinned, cleaning them up with a wet wash cloth, “Sleep well my brilliant angel.”

But as he lay down to sleep, closing his eyes and letting himself curl around Sherlock, his mind was wracked with unspoken and unknown fears. Something told him the inquest would open up Pandora’s box and all hell would break loose. How was he going to protect Sherlock then?
An Unexpected Witness

Chapter Summary

Sherlock gets into further trouble as a helpless John watches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John was glad he was in Sherlock’s corner at the court, where the formal inquest was taking place. He, Mycroft, Victor, Mrs. Hudson and their lawyer, a bright woman by the name Kitty Riley sat on one side while a bunch of people, including Andersen, Donovan and even one of the residents of the Newport hospital sat on the other side, all of them throwing dirty glances at Sherlock. The hostility was quite evident and tension was rife in the air.

Based on that and any other evidence presented, they would either take matters to court or shut the case once and for all.

The first witness to be called was Donovan and she presented a plethora of biased, prejudiced, rather vengeful statements, beginning with her observations of how eccentric and selfish Sherlock was and how he and his brother had suppressed the information the last time and stopped a proper coroner’s inquest from happening. Blackwood was balanced in the way he handled the information though, telling her more than once that her personal opinions on this matter were of no consequences and she should refrain from using them liberally. She was angry at being reproached and when her eyes met John’s, she threw him a glance of loathing ad disgust as if he was no better in her eyes than Sherlock himself, simply because he was supporting the man.

Finally, Sherlock was called. The first set of questions were to be asked by Blackwood.

John sent up a small prayer. He was not a religious man but at this moment he needed the prayer, just to hold on to his faith. Please dear God, don’t let him get upset and angry and bark out a confession that will take him behind bars, please!

“First of all, Mr. Holmes, why was your husband at that dangerous and rather unusual spot at 5 am. Dawn hadn’t even cracked on to the eastern skies and he was there, alone. Where were you at that point?”

“I am a late riser,” Sherlock answered, “I hardly ever wake up before 10. I was in bed, asleep.”
“Was your husband a late riser too?”

“Mostly.”

“That means, he did wake up early when needed?”

“Yes, sometimes. As I did. Early flights, early conference calls, sometimes those happened.”

“Mr. Moriarty had no such commitment that day, did he?”

“Even though you are his husband?”

“That happens to be the very point I wish to mention counselor, I am….I mean I was his husband. Not his secretary.”

Everyone laughed, except Andersen who kept up a stoic look while Sally Donovan rolled her eyes. John smiled. Sherlock was holding up well on his own, even infusing a bit of bone-dry humor in his words. If he kept this up, he would come out smelling of roses.

But as fate would have it, things were subverted just as John was beginning to relax a little. The attacker turned out to be Diana Jones, who was simply doing her job and didn’t seem to have any personal animosity with Sherlock, but it was her competence that threw the case up on its heels, turning it turtle. “Mr. Holmes, you’re saying you identified the body as your husband’s but per the records shown, you hadn’t even gone down to the gorge to look for him or registered a missing person’s case. When he disappeared and was feared dead or injured, why did you not report this to the cops? Inspector Lestrade here confirmed there were no reports and the only reason he discovered the body was when an anonymous tip-off came to him. By then your husband had been gone for thirty-six hours.”

John’s felt the blood run to his feet. Good point. Well spotted. But alas, it would only work against them, against Sherlock.

Mycroft also showed a bit of tension and his eyes set firmly on Sherlock, who was staring at the panel. “Look at me Lockie, look at me, please,” Mycroft muttered, which John clearly heard. He
took stared at Sherlock, willing him to look their way. *Please-Please-Please Sherl, look here!*

Sherlock turned. It was almost telepathy.

Mycroft made a gesture which John didn’t quite get but Sherlock understood. The silent understanding between the two brothers showed a rapport that had not been so evident before, which meant *their relationship wasn’t so bad after all*, the good doctor thought.

“What can I say,” Sherlock said as casually as possible, “My husband was an independent man and often went off somewhere or the other for work or other hobbies and passions he had, like hiking, photography and the piano. He didn’t always inform me, especially shorter trips, and I never asked. I didn’t like being intrusive and he wasn’t intrusive with me either. I merely supposed he was somewhere close by, taking some pics of a rare bird species, or a hurricane trip to London for some business meeting.’

“That’s a lie.”

Every heard turned in the room. There stood the tall, handsome, blond and blue-eyed Adonis whom John had met earlier at the manor and whose appearance and voice kept giving him goose bumps. Earlier he couldn’t remember who the man was but now he did, and he was angry and upset at the way he had stuck his nose into the case. This was definitely not needed.

“Sebastian!!” Sally Donovan seemed happy and a bit jealous at the same time, as if she was delighted by his sudden appearance and also slightly annoyed with him.

“Mr. Stark, sir,” Andersen was quite relieved to see him and appeared to welcome his involvement in the case.

Kitty Reilly, as the Holmes family lawyer, immediately protested the rather melodramatic entrance. “I am sorry but I am not sure the panel would *like* to involve a walk-in visitor,” she said sharply. “Or if they *can* involve a walk-in visitor. This was meant to be a *private hearing* and as such only people who have been issued prior notices for this are meant to be present in this room. How has this turned into a *free for all*? Is this some kind of a joke? Mr. Stark, you seem to forget that you’re not a part of the Holmes family, this town, the staff that work at Windsor Manor or this inquest. You need to write to the panel and I have to be involved and informed too. It’s not a place for opinion based judgment but a thorough dissection of solid legal, forensic and logical facts.”
“Actually Kitty, the joke is on you,” Sebastian snickered.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear the slight,” Kitty said indifferently and turned to the panel, “Is this going to be allowed? And if yes, on what grounds?”

“He has been invited by Sergeant Donovan,” Greg Lestrade said.

Mycroft frowned. But when John looked at him he sighed and shook his head, indicating that Greg was not supposed to let them know. John understood that too, he knew Greg had too much integrity to break the law for them, or anyone for that matter.

“On what grounds?” Kitty was not giving up.

“Should I tell them Sherlock?” Sebastian taunted the other man.

This was the moment John had feared and he knew it wouldn’t take his husband too long to react. Sherlock still hated the fact that his marriage to Jim hadn’t worked, he still grieved for the man despite all the cruelty shown towards him during their marriage and taking advantage of his pride and grief, those conspirators had hatched a plot and set a trap for Sherlock to neatly walk into it. John look at his husband fearfully but already Sherlock was purple with suppressed rage and his hands were balled into fists.

“You have permission to be here but that doesn’t mean you spin riddles and tales and waste our time,” Greg said firmly, “You have to address us and not Mr. Holmes.”

“Very well,” Sebastian’s grin grew broader and John had a queasy feeling in his stomach. He knew Sebastian was doing this on purpose. Oh Sherlock, please don’t get upset and mouthy.

“I was trying not to embarrass Mr. William Sherlock Scott Holmes,” Sebastian said snidely, taking his place right opposite to Sherlock, in front of the common panel he was facing, “But I guess he prefers revelation rather than confession.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared. John was so on the edge of his seat the chair almost toppled forward and he stopped himself from falling on his nose by gripping Kitty’s hand. The lawyer leaned closer and whispered, “Breathe. Your body language can misconstrue the case and not in your husband’s favor. Act normal, attentive but not tense.”
John took a few deep breaths but the bubbling anxiety inside him kept growing by the second. Sherlock looked positively murderous, his rage growing to a level when he could launch himself on this man any moment now. Again, John wished Sherlock would look at Mycroft or him, so they could at least request him to stay calm, but this time the young scientist’s focus was solely on his one-time adversary. Blackwood spoke in a rather terse manner, “May I suggest that you already embarrassed him Sebastian. I think it’s time you stopped embarrassing yourself with all this elaborate pretenses and wordplay. Just get to the point already because none of us have all day to just listen to this inconsequential sentences.”

“Okay then,” Sebastian was unaffected by the reproach, showing steely nerves and a thick skin, “I shall speak of two important things then. First, my connection with Jim and this….fellow, Sherlock.” John cringed when he heard the tone and choice of words. Jim and this fellow? He was needling Sherlock again. “Second,” Sebastian continued, “Why I am more or less convinced there is something fishy about Jim’s disappearance. I am not saying ‘death’ because unless the body is found, none of us can confirm this. All right then, here goes.”

He looked at Mycroft and said, “Jim loved Mycroft but Sherlock stole him by throwing one of his tantrums. Mycroft Holmes, a respected business and responsible citizen, turned out to be completely opposite in relationships. He just gave his boyfriend away, like some hand-me-down toy, to his brat of a younger brother. But Jim was the one who got victimized because of this whole ‘brotherly’ affair. Sherlock always suspected Jim of still being in love with Mycroft and Mycroft always kept coming back to the Manor, as if he wanted to make Jim’s life miserable.”

“Shut up you moron,” Sherlock growled.

“No, Sherlock….,” John stood up, raising a hand to stop him.

“Dr. Watson, you cannot influence or interfere, we made that very clear to you,” Blackwood warned him.

“He cannot, yet this lout can?” Sherlock snapped.

“Sit down John,” Mycroft gnashed his teeth together and spoke under his breath, “You’ll only make this more worse.”

John sat down quickly but by then the damage was done. Sherlock’s temper had flared up and the look of satisfaction on Sebastian’s face was indication enough that half his mission was
accomplished already. Sally Donovan was gleeful while Andersen watched silently, *too silently*, his face totally pale and almost deathly ashen, his beady eyes blank and dull, his body language suggesting a mix of raging but silent grief.

“Go on Sebastian,” Blackwood seemed to be leaning towards the other side now, clearly taken aback by the new entrant’s ‘revelations’.

“I was Jim’s business partner and also his lover and support,” Sebastian declared boldly, much to Sherlock’s chagrin, Mycroft’s mortification and John’s utter dismay. Even Kitty Reilly seemed shattered by those words as she shook her head and muttered ‘*Oh damn, why did I not know this, no one told me this*’. John glared at Sebastian, then stole a quick look at Sherlock who appeared to be shaking with frenzied wrath. The meltdown was just waiting to happen. Sebastian continued in his pretentious and fake tone of sympathy and kindness, “That explains why I am here and how I am connected to this inquest. I was the closest that Jim had in the absence of a family or a sympathetic and loving husband. The poor man was always so lonely and disturbed.”

“So you guys had an extra marital affair,” Greg questioned, “I am still not able to understand how this is going to impact this case and inquest. Jim might have had affairs, but the man is no more and we are not talking about adultery here but……”

“Possible murder,” Sebastian said in a mocking tone.

“Murder???” Andersen shot up from his chair, “No……”

“Yes Paulie,” Sebastian said, “Sherlock was possessive and beastly in his jealousy fueled fits of rage. He sent me several texts back in those days he was still around and I was seeing him almost every second day. I can show them to you. You can even conduct tests on this phone, the texts, the application we used, and approve them for authenticity. Here, he left me only two or three such texts but they were…..telling.”

Diana took the phone and read aloud.

“I fear for myself Sebby. I have insisted on separate sleeping arrangements.”

“Don’t come here. Just get me out of here somehow. No, wait, what will happen to Reginald and Eugenia? They adore me.”

“He grabbed me by the throat, nearly choked me and left finger marks on me. Attaching a picture.
But please, don’t talk to the cops or him. It will only make the whole situation worse. He is already quite upset. Reginald told me the other day he wants to put this manor in my name. Sherly wasn’t pleased with that, to say the least.”

That was the moment Sherlock reacted.

“Why you son of a bitch, you…….” Sherlock launched a foul-mouthed tirade at the blond man, much to John’s horror, before a loud shout of distress ripped out of him. His war cry ricocheted off every wall of the room and there was the sound of a loud crash as the man literally flew at Sebastian, overturning a chair and upsetting a variety of things kept on the table. Bottles of water, pens, pencils, paper and paperweights went flying and hit the ground with a great clatter and a collective gasp rose in the room. Sebastian, amidst all this, stood calm and defiant and didn’t even move an inch, neither did he blink as Sherlock grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and raised his hand to punch him in the face.

“STOP SHERLOCK,” Greg cried out.

“What’s going on?” Diana stood up.

“Mr. Holmes I advise you to not do that, by no means would this be acceptable,” Blackwood also left his chair and proceeded towards the two men.

A scuffle ensued and while Mycroft, John and Greg easily separated the two men, Sherlock had by then started to yell and rail at Sebastian.

“You dare to make those holier than thou statements,” he shouted at the top of his voice, “When all you wanted from him was his body and money. What else did you to for him aside from warming his bed and putting rubbish thoughts in his head? And if you had those texts, where were they all these years when Jim had been declared dead? What do you want you maggot, you want money? How much money do you want, you scum? Wasn’t it bad enough that I was being cheated on, now you want to rub it in my face…..you bastard…..”

Kitty shook her head and put her hand on her forehead. This was not needed. This had weakened their case indelibly.

“Fuck,” John slumped against the wall.
Mycroft stood silent, eyes wide. He too knew the damage had been done.

“What?” Sherlock looked at the people around him, “Why are you all staring at me like that? I didn’t kill my husband. I DIDN’T KILL MY JIM.”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Blackwood said in a dead-serious voice, “You will be held in preventive custody till the case is presented in court and the verdict declared after thorough investigations and subsequent hearings. During this time you cannot be permitted to visit your house. You may meet your husband, brother, lawyer and a few other people for an hour every day but that list, or any additions to it, will have to be approved by us. When you meet them, one police officer or a representative of the law will be present in the room.”

“No, you can’t do this,” Sherlock was shocked, “You can’t do this.”

“Sherlock, please…..I mean, you have the right to remain silent, please,” Greg Lestrade said, before making a subtle gesture towards a few of his deputies who approached Sherlock with caution. The green-eyed man stared at them with obvious bewilderment and then turned towards Greg, “You mean to say I am being arrested? Me? Just because of a few texts which have been shown at an opportune time by someone who might be manipulating this situation to his benefit? You can’t arrest me, I haven’t killed my husband. It was an accident. I tried to save him, I haven’t killed him, I never intended to, yes we had major differences but I didn’t do anything, Lestrade…..”

Right after that Sherlock grew violent once more and John sat down heavily on a chair and with a sigh, buried his face in his hands.

“No, Jawn, you don’t believe this too,” Sherlock bemoaned.

“I don’t,” John said, shaking his head slowly.

“No, you do, Mike, Mike, don’t let them do this…..”

“Mycroft, if you try to assist him you’d be considered an accomplice…..”

“But why? What have I done to deserve such a judgment?”
“You had an affair with Jim or not?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean……”

All other words blurred and receded from John’s senses as his worst fears came true. Sherlock was now a prime suspect. He had been played, they had all been played, and suddenly Jim had risen from his grave and extracted his revenge for Sherlock’s non-cooperation. He thought for a moment if he should mention that but his common sense told him not to. Without proof, all that would happen would be mayhem, argument, scoffing, rebuttals, and eventually the accusation would not even stand a chance.

When Sherlock was taken away, kicking and screaming, the look of triumph on Sally and Sebastian’s faces made John want to smash them into smithereens. Automatically his eyes searched for the other person who was just as attached to Jim, if not more, Paul Andersen.

But Andersen was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter End Notes

I am trying to ensure JohnLock wins at the end. Believe me, that's the plan!
Chapter Summary

As the night darkens  
So do the secrets  
Until a glimmer of light emerges  
What if it's the eye of the beast

Two days passed and the investigations went on full swing in the background while Sherlock languished in a ‘confinement’ status in a comfortable semi-detached house owned by the state for ‘suspects’ such as him. He got regular and decent facilities there, aside from the use of internet or cell phone of course, but it was a huge scale-down from the standards of living he was used to. His food was plain, as was his living quarters, but that was not what hurt him the most. There were other things.

When John went to visit him there, his heart broke when he saw a downbeat and exhausted Sherlock. He was clearly not eating or sleeping well.

“They took away my freedom and my lab,” the young man said ruefully, holding John’s hands tightly in his own, “They took you away from me, they took away my only friend Victor, I have lost my brother too. I don’t have you around anymore Jawn, I hate sleeping alone. He comes back to haunt me all the time. I can see him laughing at me, telling me repeatedly that he had ‘told me so’. He would always have the last laugh, I knew that, I always knew that, that’s why I never wanted to talk about it. I thought as long as the sleeping dogs lie, I can at least try and live a normal life. But it seems my luck has run out. No, I never had any luck, did I? Even Mike got caught in all this. Why has he not come to see me? Have I lost both of you then? Have I?”

“Rubbish,” John said in a shaky voice, “You have lost none of us. We are with you, till the end.”

“Thanks for confirming that this is nearing the end.”

“No Sherl, I never meant that. Please don’t be so pessimistic.”

“They are going to hang me or imprison me for a lifetime. What’s the use of such an existence? I’d rather just end it on my own terms. At least this way I have some control left over my life.”
“Sherlock no, please. We will fight this case. The truth will come out.”

They hugged. John wanted to kiss him but that confounded cop was standing close by. His name was Hal and though he kept a neutral face, John was sure he was just ‘eating up their conversation like a hungry lion devours a fawn’. He might even be a Sally Donovan sympathizer. She had her own coterie in the police station and while she was faithful to her job and Lestrade, she was the kind of person who would stoop real low to get Sherlock to a miserable and wretched end of either his life or his liberties.

“Just let’s give it to them,” Sherlock whispered.

John pulled back, “What?”

“The two formulae. One for the AIDS treatment, the other for the creation of liquid bombs.”

“No,” John was stunned, “You can’t be serious. These should not fall in the wrong hands. If so, it will cause a manic havoc in the world and you have endured a lot to keep these away from being misused. What makes you change your mind? Babe, this will not be a good move.”

“Do I care, in my present condition?” Sherlock snorted and rubbed his dry eyes with the heels of his hands, “My eyes are burning.”

***

John lay in bed, alone, staring at the strange shadows on the ceiling as the moonbeams played hide and seek with the darkness of the night. It had been four days now that Sherlock was in confinement and he was alone, with his depressing thoughts, regrets, misery and sadness as the only company. People who knew what had happened felt either sorry for him or curious. He wanted neither pity nor their questions, so he avoided talking about it. He worked like a machine all day, serving his patients to the best of his abilities, then came home, took a bite of the dinner served to him and retired to his bedroom with a bottle of whisky.

Except tonight. He had purposefully kept himself away from alcohol. Don’t get addicted John.

A sudden sound somewhere in the house alerted him to some kind of undesirable activity going on in the manor. It was too late for the retainers to be awake, Mycroft had gone to London to meet
some legal counsel on behalf of Sherlock and Sherlock was not living there for the past few days. There were no reasons for those sounds except that someone, or *something*, was walking around the house in the dead of the night. John’s gut tightened instantly and palpitations started in his chest. *Something is going to happen tonight in the manor and it is going get real ugly soon.*

He got out of bed, changed into jeans, T shirt, running shoes, a pullover and a light jacket over it. He grabbed his phone and a flash light, his gun and a knife. Better be prepared.

*Can you really prepare against the supernatural, the paranormal?*

*Hush John, you are a doctor, a man of medicine and science.*

*Yes, but I saw and felt something a few months ago. I sensed that presence again and again over the next few weeks. Sherlock was right. Jim is still present in this house and his spirit wouldn’t really leave them alone unless it was put to rest properly. A proper burial, maybe.*

Taking a few deep breaths, John crept out of the room and followed the sounds to…..exactly where he had expected, the eastern wing of the house. The wing where Jim Moriarty lived and which is still haunted by his ghost.

“All right ghosty,” John pushed the door of the bedroom suite open, “Let’s see what you got.”

The moment he stepped into the bedroom area he almost felt like turning and bolting. The entire room had been trashed. Things broken, things strewn about, things scattered here and there, paintings that had crashed to the ground, lampshades that had overturned, the closet had been almost entirely emptied and all the clothes and accessories were lying on the ground.

Someone was there, for sure. Or maybe more than one person.

John saw one anomaly in the bedroom though. While other things were simply broken or out of place or thrown around, no structural damage had been done to any part of the bedroom or the furniture. None, except for one of the solid wooden frames of the enormous closet, which had been ripped open. Strips of wood lay everywhere, as did hinges and nails. John gingerly stepped past the wooden and iron bits and cautiously peered into that part of the closet. He flashed his torchlight in there and his jaw just dropped. The back of the closet was actually a door to another…..dimension? John tinkered with the door, which had been left open just a crack, and saw a passage beyond. Not another dimension but a corridor, low and narrow, which definitely led to some other part of the
“Here goes nothing,” John murmured and crouched, then half crawled, half dragged himself through the narrow space. It seemed to go on forever and John was thankful he didn’t have claustrophobia, or else he would have probably suffocated and had a fit half-way through. It was uncomfortable, cramped, but John knew the destination would prove to be a crucial missing link to this whole mystery and kept up his efforts.

Soon he came to a broader, bigger spot, where he could stand up.

There were two ways leading to two completely opposite sides.

Thankful that he had a phone which had a compass, John quickly tried to see which directions those tunnels might lead him to.

“Damn it,” he hissed with disappointment and frustration, “No signal. Too deep in the ground.” Then it occurred to him that he was not making a phone call or using social media but using the compass, which was not necessarily dependent on the strength of the signals received from cell phone towers or a Wi-fi source. He opened the app, let the arrow spin and finally come to a half, indicating one leading eastwards and the other westwards.

John made a mental calculation of where those tunnels might lead to. One leads to the orchard area and the fortified wall. The other leads to the outhouses.

“Tic-Tac-Toe,” John mumbled and randomly chose the westward tunnel.

Some difficult crawling and scraping and panting later, he found a ladder going upwards and then a hatch. It was heavy and it took all of John’s strength to push it open.

“Oh my God,” the good doctor gasped as he lifted himself using his elbows and emerged into the room, “This is Sherlock’s laboratory.”

The laboratory was intact but the records room and the office Sherlock maintained next to it had been ransacked. Every paper, every bottle, every tube, every single thing had been handled, verified, some tossed aside, some torn, some simply dropped on the spot. Someone had done a thorough check there.
John looked around extensively but found nothing in the lab to really give him a lead. If there was something missing he wouldn’t know. If nothing was missing then he had no clues to follow on. But the effort he had put in was not an entirely wasted one, because he was now completely sure that someone or some folks were in the manor and looking for something desperately. To find them and to unravel the mystery of this manor, he had to take a risk again and try the other tunnel. Straightening his back, John got back down there, crawled through the tunnel until he reached the landing space where the two tunnels branched out. “All right,” he said, giving himself some pep-talk, “You did this once, and you can do it again John Watson. Let’s check out the other tunnel and see where it leads to. That will help me put the bigger puzzle into its proper shape.”

He shook his head and let out a small, nervous chuckle. “I am talking to myself. First step of going mad or……”

He entered the other tunnel, crouching to fit into it, “……or the last step of solving a mystery. Windsor Manor, let’s see what you got!”

The journey through that tunnel was shorter, perhaps because he was on the eastern side of the property already, and within a few minutes he saw a similar ladder up ahead. But, there was one major difference on this side. Behind the ladder was another door. When John tried the handle he couldn’t open it. It was locked. Someone kept something important there, important and secretive enough to be kept behind a locked door.

It was also a door that had been opened recently. No dust or rust on the handle. In fact, the doorknob and lock were new, hardly a year or two old.

It had started making sense to him now. But there was this one vital piece of information missing, which he had to figure out somehow. For that, he had to go up the ladder, open the hatch and enter whatever was up there, whichever place it opened out to.

John carefully climbed the ladder. One step creaked and he winced. In the silence of this place that creak sounded so bloody loud it could alert someone half a mile away. John tried the hatch, it opened rather easily as compared to the other one. Oh, so this one was used far more often. He could smell an oily substance. The hinges had been oiled recently to ensure the hatch moved smoothly.

He climbed out and his heart skipped a beat. Yes, it made sense now. The perfect circle. Starting from the east wing, Jim’s bedroom suite, to Sherlock’s laboratory and now this place.
This was Jim’s studio. The cottage in the middle of the orchard that he had once entered and looked through.

But there was one vital difference between the look and feel of the cottage that day and now. The place was not so dirty and it seemed someone had been there that evening. The remains of a meal, a bottle of water half drunk, even a small flagon of whiskey sat on one of the tables. There were a couple of bags and some crates and boxes kept stacked neatly by the door. For a moment John looked past them but a sense of déjà vu brought him back to those boxes. He had seen them somewhere, similar ones! Oh yes, of course he had! These were the same kinds of boxes he had seen on the third floor of the property, a continuous open plan floor with pillars and arches but no rooms or hallways, just a giant open space filled with boxes, trunks, crates and sacks.

John took out his knife and forced open a crate.

He realized he might as well leave his jaw on the floor because of all the shocks he was getting that night. The crate was filled with innocuous looking cans but one of them was open, probably because someone was showing or testing a sample, and it didn’t take John rocket science to realize they were narcotics. He swiftly went to the next crate, it was filled with ampules. He sniffed at one, it was some kind of cocktail drug.

Good Heavens! This was far more serious than he thought! Someone was using the manor for smuggling and storage of illegal goods.

But who could this someone be?

Jim got his answer moments later as the door opened and in walked a tall, imposing figure.

John immediately took action. There was no time to flee or even hide, only to go on the attack. So aggression was what he showed, by flashing his torchlight on the man’s face and temporarily blinding him. As the man got a start and blinked and tried to open his eyes properly, John raised his gun and said in a voice as confident as he could manage in the given circumstances. “Hello Colonel Sebastian Augustus Moran. So we meet again.”

Colonel Sebastian Moran also had nerves as steely as John’s and in a split second he was perfectly normal again. “Captain John Hamish Watson. I knew you weren’t so thick-headed or forgetful. I was sure you would eventually remember me. I’m no Stark, I am Moran.”
“The last time we met, it was a party thrown in your honor,” John said as he gestured for Sebastian to take a seat, which the blond man did, albeit with an amusement that suggested he wasn’t intimidated by the smaller man at all. He appeared to be humoring him. But John didn’t want to get balked by this casual confidence in Sebastian. He stood tall and glared at the former colonel, “You had won the Gallantry Cross, then the Victoria Cross, for valor in armed combat. Iraq and Afghanistan respectively. That party was for the Victoria Cross and I remember the Prince of Wales presented it to you.”

Sebastian huffed out a dry laugh. “Those days are long behind me my friend. They have become a footnote to a phase of my life that I have shut the doors on.”

John exhaled, shaking his head as he set the flash light on the narrow cot and sat down next to it. “The army treated you fair where required and gave you the benefit of doubt,” he continued, “You can’t deny that. You disobeyed orders and took a SWAT team on a dangerous mission, which cost four lives and maimed one for life. But it won us victory so your court martial was personally called off by the General. But then you did something that shook the very base of our regiment. You killed your Brigadier and six of your men, in a fit of rage. You refused to even give any explanations for your rather cruel, shocking actions. They discharged you dishonorably. From where I stand I think it was once again an act in moderation. In your place there are other officers who would have been……”

“I was not ‘other officers’,” Sebastian said sharply, “Neither did I NOT give explanations. That information was kept classified or else people would have stopped trusting the military. The Brigadier was a pedophile and one of the majors was also a similar warped bastard. They kidnapped two locals, a brother and a sister, one was fifteen and the other was thirteen, and raped them. Then they gagged them and threw them in a well, blaming the guerilla warriors for that heinous crime. The others I killed were involved in smuggling part of our ammunitions and guns to a private trader in Kabul.”

John’s confidence faltered. Yes, he had heard rumors. He just didn’t know where they came from and who had been a witness. The army had kept a tight lid on those accusations.

“What?” Sebastian snorted, “Nothing to say? Captain! That dangerous mission I went to, with my band of nine best and most competent men, it was necessary because our commanders were sitting idle and letting the enemy hoodwink them into thinking all was well. I spotted the dangers and took action, saving the regiment and the civilians of the villages close by. May I also remind you that a soldier does die in the line of duty and it’s a matter of honor. The survivors got promoted and awarded and they never said a word against me, because they saw the intentions behind that mission and each man agreed to do this.”

Sebastian stopped for a few seconds and then added, “I took three bullets too. I led the charge. So I walk my talk.”
“So then, what is a man of honor, valor and bravery and integrity doing here?”

“You were waiting for me, is it?”

“Yes, you got that right.”

“You made a terrible mistake. I like you. I didn’t want any harm to come to you, or Sherlock.”

John began to laugh at that statement, “That’s a tall story colonel, a real whale of a tale and pardon me for not believing it at face value. You clearly wanted Sherlock out of the way. You went to the inquest, hell-bent on getting him behind bars and starting an investigation against him. When you were out of the army, I heard you had rebuilt your life rather well. You are the son of a Lord, you inherited his entire estate when he died shortly after. You became a published author under the pseudo-name of ‘shikari’ and you also became an advisor to large companies that produce weapons for personal and civil-law-and-enforcement use. Why would you need to do this……all of this, this illegal business?” He stretched his arms wide to show the crates and the boxes surrounding them.

“You might be sharp John but you’re just not sharp enough,” Sebastian said dismissively, “Do you think I can handle something of this scale and type? Nope. Not me. I am merely an order taker. I work at someone else’s bidding.”

“You still participate in illegal work, smuggling, narcotics, banned drugs, dangerous cocktails……”

“Oh hush. You talk too fucking much and think too fucking little. I am no different from you. You’re risking your life for someone you love, just as I am doing this for someone I love. I would do anything for him, anything he asks from me, I am stating this for the records.”

John felt a pinprick on his arm. Immediately that side of his body became numb. He felt his arm and found a small needle stuck to his bicep. As he pulled it out, he began to feel giddy and woozy. All his limbs started to lose their sense of touch. He felt as if he was floating, not sitting. “You—You…..” He feebly raised his other arm towards Sebastian who was still sitting there, watching him with a hint of regret and hesitance, “You…..are not…..a soldier anymore….you’ve become a….a villain…..”

Sebastian shook his head, “Don’t fight that feeling John. Too late. You will pass out. As for me being a criminal, well, I did tell you I would do anything for him.”
John took a long time to turn his head and what he saw knocked the five senses out of him. Stepping out from the dark corner of the cottage was a man he had so far only seen in dreams, nightmares, visions, paintings and photographs. He turned back towards Sebastian.

Sebastian had disappeared.

Dark eyes gleamed in the night like burning coals. Jim’s ghost floated closer, as if he had no ground beneath his feet. John struggled to keep his eyes open. “Hellooooo successor,” a lilting Irish accent, the words spoken in a sing-song manner, “You’ll never bury my ghost, nevrrrr!”
The Faceoff

Chapter Summary

“No, this time I played my cards right,” Sherlock shook his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing John felt as he began to regain consciousness was a numbness in the right side of his body, pinpricks to his legs, a feeling of being confined to some small space and a dry mouth and throat. His head also throbbed mildly. Every event from the hours preceding his unconsciousness came back to him, indicating his brain was working just fine and he was not too badly impacted by the knock-out shot.

John opened his eyes carefully, thanking his stars when he realized he was in some place dark. Light would have literally fried his eyes right now. It's fine, I had expected worse. It was a powerful med that knocked me out. Not some regular stuff. I wonder how long have I been out.

He found himself being lifted right after that, by several hands, and then carried out of what appeared to be a small room. He pretended to be unconscious still and kept his eyes open in slits, trying to gather more data about his captors, circumstances and possible escape routes. Oh, so this was the room under the stairs and now he was being carried up the same wooden ladder. Ouch, that was the loud creak of that squeaky step! Then he was in the cottage again but John noticed on the way out that all the crates and boxes had been removed from there. He hung loosely in the arms of his captors till he realized he was being taken to the top of the wall, the rampart area, right next to the sheer drop that was the gorge. Oh shit, this cannot be good, I just hope.....

“Put him down. His time will come but only when I have what I want.”

“I thought you had what you wanted.”

“A couple of pieces missing, the bastard. He thinks he can pull one over me, the simpering, righteous bastard.”

John tried to fit the pieces of puzzle together. Three conclusions came to him right away. Jim was not a ghost. Poor Sherlock was being held for ‘possibly’ killing someone who was not even dead. Somehow the man had faked it and used his ‘death’ to his advantage. He used the manor as a
hideout, a hub for his illegal activities and a store house for his narcotics and other smuggling products. Sebastian worked for him and also loved him just as much as John loved Sherlock. In a twisted way John understood the devotion. The third conclusion he had was that Jim was desperate to pick up the formula from Sherlock’s lab, the pathbreaking drug which could cure the acute immunodeficiency virus and the sample of the liquid bomb, a small vial of which could blow up entire Westminster Abbey.

“But he is languishing in that place…..”

“He will escape. He’s a clever guy, absolutely brilliant and ingenuous. I have to give him that. As soon as he sees what we have done to his pet. Shall we cut off that ring finger…..”

“The finger????!!”

“Of course. Otherwise there are several such rings, same make and model. His finger will prove the authenticity of our threat, that his Jawn is in danger and he needs to give me the missing pieces right away or else…..you get it right, Tiger?”

John couldn’t hold still any longer. *No, no, this can’t happen, this wasn’t supposed to happen, what if I have gone a bit too far and some part of the whole machinery didn’t work and I end up without fingers, perhaps even a head.* His worst fears were confirmed when he heard Sebastian asking if Sherlock decided to do nothing and refused to give in and Jim answered with a giggle. “Then we throw him off from this very wall, let him fly like a bird and then find a permanent destination on the rocks and the dried bed of the brook below. This time there won’t be a rescue team and a brave Sebastian present on the other side of the wall to harness me and let me swing down rather than fall down and stop a few feet before my head was smashed on the stones and boulders below.”

“That would be ironic. The first husband ‘allegedly’ had an accident and fell off the wall. Years later the second husband commits suicide from the same spot on the wall. Poor Sherlylocks will lose his mind this time, I swear.”

“Do I even care? I never much liked him, by the way.”

“But he did love you.”

“Oh he still does, but that’s not my problem.”
“Your problem is something else Jim.”

Jim and Sebastian got a little bit of a start this time, much to John’s satisfaction. “Your problem is that you can’t think of anyone but yourself and you are incapable of loving somebody. So far you have conned and hurt and betrayed many men who were genuinely smitten with you, and you might have managed to escape a cruel fate. But may I remind you there is something called karma which you cannot escape. Eventually it will get to you and take away what you hold most dear. Mark my words.”

Jim burst out laughing and John felt hit by that laughter. It was cruel, ruthless, cunning, derisive and bordering on the manic. This man was truly mad in some ways and Sherlock was right, he could never reciprocate even an iota of the love and devotion that had been bestowed upon him by the entire Holmes clan. Sherlock’s love had been one of the most selfless kinds and yet Jim had betrayed him. He had let the man live in a hell of his own making, no, Jim’s making, cursing himself for causing the death of Jim, a death that never really happened.

John felt his anger rise. He was not going to let this Irishman walk away this time. This time Jim was going to pay for his sins.

“How cute,” Jim came and kicked John on the side, hard, “I thoroughly detest cuteness of any kind, by the way!”

When Sebastian tried to stop him (John noticed a certain apprehension in Sebastian, as if the man’s love for Jim made him do his every bidding but something deep inside him was telling them they were crossing some lines now), Jim simply snarled at him, “Now make yourself useful and get the message to Sherlock. If he doesn’t come here soon, we don’t get out of here soon, understand?”

Sebastian seemed to react favorably to that implied threat to both himself and Jim and proceeded towards John, taking out a sharp but small knife from his pocket. John looked straight into the blonde’s face and found the latter avoiding eye-contact. Even though he was ready to piss his pants, John found his brain still working and still making some desperate plans to escape a cruel, painful fate. Maybe something could be salvaged, someone would come to save him, if only he managed to buy some time. “Wait,” he said, struggling in his restraints, “At least try and send the first message to Sherlock to see if he reacts. Then cut off my fingers or chop off my balls, I don’t care. Let me remind you, there’s nothing remarkable about my finger that will convince Sherlock it’s mine and I might bleed too much, causing you unnecessary hassles.”

Sebastian looked at Jim.
“Okay, tell the fool he has thirty minutes….okay give him an hour.”

“But how…..”

“He has a TV in his cell. I am aware. That idiot Lestrade has given him some special privileges. We can get him a message through the cable connection.”

“Oh yes, you’re brilliant.”

John felt like slapping Sebastian. What a waste of an otherwise good man! But then love made people a bit crazy and drove them to do weird things. Sebastian was strong in body and mind but vulnerable when it came to matters of the heart. He could easily get manipulated by Jim, whose greatest power was being unaffected by anything in this world. He had a sort of selfishness that helped him bury anyone, even his nearest and dearest, as long as it benefitted him in some way.

A picture of his ring finger was taken and Sebastian hooked his phone to some contraption while Jim instructed him how to go about it. That gave John not just the time but also the opportunity to do a little trick of his own, an ace he (literally) had up his sleeve. The Fit-Bit fitness band he wore on his wrist had a small device and chip embedded. It was one of Sherlock’s minor inventions, relegated down in the order of importance next to his heavier, bigger products. But today the device was a boo for John and he was glad he had the prudence and foresight to bring it along.

He started to knock his wrist against the rampart wall, producing the friction and impact needed to set off some signals. He just hoped it got to the right people, starting with Sherlock.

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“You have no idea what you’re doing Jim,” John said as he sat with his hands and ankles still bound, backed up against the wall while Jim prowled about like an impatient predator, typing away on two phones. He was ambidextrous, as John realized, and had levels of intelligence that was comparable to an Einstein. It was clear from his actions, words, most of which John observed and overheard. It was such a pity that a genius of gigantic proportions was so misguided, so out of line. Had he leveraged his brilliance for good, like Sherlock, he would have helped the world in so many ways!

“Contrary to what you’re thinking,” Jim said, fingers continuing their incessant typing even though his dark eyes turned to John, “I know exactly what I am doing. Thank you pet dog.”
“Devotion, loyalty, unconditional love, genius brains, money, you have it all,” the good doctor insisted despite his captor’s obvious disdain, “You don’t have to throw it all away on the altar of misdeeds and illegal transactions. There is still time Jim, why don’t you just leave with your loot and continue your life elsewhere with Sebastian. He is a keeper. He will do anything for you. Don’t you fear losing him because of all this? Someday one of your plans is bound to go wrong and what if that kills him, or separates the two of you?”

“Sherlock would have done anything for me too, most people are like that, losers.”

“Really? People who can do anything for you are losers?!?”

“Yeah. If you haven’t noticed it yet, I am bad without a reason and I don’t mind being alone.”

John sighed. What was he thinking? He couldn’t counsel this madman into changing his ways. Probably a dozen or more men and women had tried and failed. He was romanticizing the situation, that some form of loneliness or a harsh childhood had turned Jim on to this path. What he said just now made sense, he was just an evil cunning man who was bad without a reason. There was no turning him back.

“Two more minutes and chop-chop-chop,” Jim spoke with evident relish and glee and pointed at John’s finger. In the distance, Sebastian was harking at all possible routes that led to this side of the property and up to the wall and ramparts. He couldn’t see anyone and that registered in the disappointed tone he used whilst informing Jim about the lack of company. “No one Jimmy,” he said, “I guess we need to adopt Plan B.”

“Chop it off,” Jim ordered.

“DON’T!”

At first John thought he had just heard a loud voice in his head but in reality it had come from a few feet away, from an impossible spot to their right. His head turned sharply in that direction, as did Jim’s and Sebastian’s, scanning an empty spot right over the edge of the wall. But how could someone be talking from there? It was a sheer drop! As soon as the question formed in John’s head, the answer arrived rapidly. Someone climbed over the edge and jumped on to the walkway of the wall-top. The tall, curly haired, familiar green eyed man who made John smile even in his compromised, precarious state. William Sherlock Scott Holmes, his dear husband. His Sherl was here!
“Don’t you even dare,” Sherlock said, taking off his harness and ropes.

“Oh,” Jim rocked on his heels, in control again after the initial start, “Using my methods, eh?”

“Cut him loose Jim,” Sherlock said sternly.

“Why?” Jim asked, innocence of the most contrived kind dripping from his voice, “Have you kept my side of the bargain? I don’t do anything for free, you know that very well husband.”

“I am John’s husband, not yours,” Sherlock spat out, disgust lacing his tone. At that moment John had the immense satisfaction of knowing that Sherlock had finally shed off his guilt, understood exactly how vile his ex was, and stopped caring about him altogether.

“Whatever, not that it matters, where are my formulae?” Jim continued while Sebastian protectively positioned himself between the Irishman and Sherlock. Or was it a spark of jealousy that John saw in those bright blue eyes? Oh Sebastian, you fool! Could he not see that Jim belonged to no one but himself, that nothing was more important to the madman than his nefarious schemes?

“Here,” Sherlock was carrying a small backpack and he took out two bottles, a diary and a small contraption that looked like a cross between a catapult and a microscope.

But the moment Jim tried to grab it, Sherlock stepped backwards and held them right over the edge of the wall. Immediately Jim’s face changed colors. “No, what the hell are you doing you fool?” He shouted.

“I created them, I can destroy them,” Sherlock said coolly, “Cut John loose and let him go. Then you get these things. Otherwise off they go into the gorge. There won’t be harnesses, ropes and rescuers waiting to grab them.”

The irony was not lost on Jim who snarled at the slight. “Fine,” he looked at Sebastian, “Do it.”

Sebastian quickly cut John loose and after a bit of a wobble, due to his stiff arms and legs and back, John managed to get back on his feet and walk with steady steps. He suddenly spotted something and his heart leapt with joy. They were going to win this time. Jim was not getting away with this, nor was his Sherlock going to lose the hard work he had put in at the lab.
Just as John walked away to a safe distance, Sherlock suddenly pounced on an unsuspecting Sebastian and latched something on to the man’s belt. In a flash the whole scenario changed and the advantage was firmly with the good guys. Sherlock’s eyes shone with victory.

Sebastian raised his fist to punch Sherlock, and he could have easily knocked the scientist out flat with his strength, but a small pinging sound came, followed by a gasp from the tall hunky man. The sounds alerted Jim and he turned his head from following John’s path to Sebastian and Sherlock. His hand immediately went into his pocket and he grabbed what was most definitely a gun there. John almost shrieked when Jim pulled it out, only to notice that Sebastian was not reacting the way he should. In fact, he had not reacted at all as Sherlock stepped back from him, looking fairly smug. “What the hell,” Jim thundered, his voice dripping with anger and hatred, “What are you trying to do with him you filthy bastard?”

“Remember something we built together,” Sherlock said triumphantly, “The liquid grenade. Silent killer. The small little weapon to destabilize any adversary in a blink of an eyelid.”

John had immense satisfaction noting the look of horror in Jim’s eyes. “No,” he snapped, “No, you didn’t really keep a sample…..”

“I did. And I just used it, on your Sebby baby.”

“FUCK…..”

“Jim-Jim, what is it? What did he strap on to me? It seems like a bomb…..”

“Take it off him Sherlock. TAKE IT OFF HIM NOW!”

Sherlock let out a freakish laughter that even John found a bit spine-chilling. Showing a rare side of himself, a dangerous and somewhat cruel one, he said, “I am going to use your words on you Jimmy. People in a position of disadvantage cannot issue orders or make demands. They need to compromise, negotiate and seek a truce. And right now it seems you and your man Friday are totally in a position of disadvantage.”

Sebastian looked at Jim, “Jimmy…..?”
“It is a remote controlled explosive device,” Jim explained in a tight voice, “It can blow someone and everyone in his surroundings, within a fifty feet radius, to smithereens. If you try to take it off it will explode immediately. Don’t touch it Basher, don’t try to take it off. I’ll do something.”

“Of course you would,” Sebastian suddenly stood tall, looking more like the military officer, the skilled sniper and colonel he had once been rather than a megalomaniac genius’ henchman, “You will run from here. We have a safe route out, take that and leave. You have amassed enough wealth to last a lifetime, forget the fucking formulas and just go. Once you go, let him blow me off. I’ll make sure I take him with me.” With that, Sebastian blocked Sherlock’s path.

“N-No, I-I won’t go anywhere without you,” Jim’s voice wavered oh-so-slightly, his eyes suddenly losing their usual ruthless streak and looking a trifle….. insecure??!

Yes, they did, something John noticed much to his amusement; Jim did look insecure. Sherlock had hit the spot where it would hurt the madman the most.

That was just the moment Sherlock had been waiting for because he put his hands on his hips and pushed past Sebastian, a newfound courage and the flush of victory lacing his visage. For years he had been dominated, tortured, duped, controlled and haunted by Jim or his memories and manipulations. This was sweet revenge and he was thoroughly enjoying it, as his expression and tone of voice suggested. “So Jim the heartless, merciless, relentless criminal mastermind eventually tasted the sweet but forbidden fruit of love, eh? This is the man you’re scared to lose. The day you fell in love with him was the day your fortress, your walls were breached, because with a weakness at hand you’ll never be as powerful again, nor as dominant.”

“Shutup, swine,” Sebastian pointed his gun at his temple, “I’ll take care of that weakness……”

“Sebby…..Sebastian no, NO!” Jim yelled, panic now rising in his voice, “I need you…..for work, for a host of other things, to get out of the country….you’re forbidden to die until I kill you or give you the orders to end your life. Your life belongs to me, remember? Put that gun down.”

Sherlock snickered, “Finally,” he said with evident satisfaction, “The indomitable Jim Moriarty painted himself to a corner. I knew something was not right. Hints and clues were always there. I turned a blind eye to them because the mere thought of you made me feel lonely, sad and guilty. I chose to ignore some telling signs. But I did follow some of my husband’s investigations, so I was able to put pieces of the puzzle together the moment I got John’s location indicator.”

“Location…what?” Jim looked ferociously at John, realizing the apparently innocuous, ordinary man was quite extraordinary in his own way and slipped one past his defenses and vigilance.
John shrugged and grinned, infuriating him *further*. “My men will make mincemeat of you,” Jim growled.

“No, this time I played my cards right,” Sherlock shook his head, “The advantage of having a good image, clean reputation and friends in high places is that they will bend the laws a bit to help you. You don’t suppose I came here alone, to be a sitting duck before you? I got company and it’s your men who’re already turned into all forms of chopped, diced and minced meat. Look around you Jim.”

Chapter End Notes

Jim had played dead but Sherlock truly believed he was dead. His emotions and guilt had overtaken his intelligence and his logic and stopped him from picking up certain clues and possibilities.
John never believed in magic, until now.

At least twenty odd cops appeared from the edge of the wall and another ten emerged from the garden side, where they had been quietly doing their work hidden in the orchard. Jim’s dozen odd men were already incapacitated and tied up, a couple of them were even shot, though not really lethally. Greg Lestrade had amassed a team that knew exactly how to go about a mission as critical as this, do their jobs silently without raising an alarm.

Along with the SWAT team on the orchard side emerged Mycroft, Victor and Lestrade, not to mention Sally Donovan and Phil Andersen trailing right behind them with more reluctant steps. John saw the look of exasperation on Donovan’s face and understood the angst but Andersen’s expression was harder to decode. He looked stoned, as if someone had separated his soul from his body. His eyes were dead, blank, dull. He walked along like a zombie. “James,” Mycroft looked at Jim with as much disappointment as hurt, “If only you had asked, I would have given you the world. You destroyed my brother, you almost destroyed our entire family. Why? Why did you target us? And why spare me then, you could have spared my brother instead.”

“I would have gladly used you Iceman,” Jim hadn’t lost his cockiness even a bit, showing a far more resilient and potent side than his slender build and medium height indicated, “It was your decision to hand me over to your brother on a platter. It worked better for me because he’s more emotional and less calculating than you are. As to why I chose your family…..everyone needs to collaborate in order to create the perfect, most advanced stuff that’s way ahead of its time. Even geniuses need that. I needed it either from you…..or Sherlock.”

“Well, where you’re going you won’t collaborate with anyone other than your lawyer,” Greg Lestrade said, “That too only for a brief while because this time we have a water-tight case against you.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Jim’s voice was so sneaky and devious that everyone present there looked around in a bit of alarm, sure of some hidden trap or trick present in the surroundings, “Oh you
definitely would not have that. Besides, you need to catch me first!”

John’s hands had been untied by then by Sherlock. As the doctor was helped on to his feet, he couldn’t help but notice that Jim was now right there next to Sebastian, his hand on the belt to which Sherlock’s super-effective liquid bomb was strapped.

“Sher…..” John began.

At the same precise moment Sherlock realized what was about to happen. His body tensed up and he grabbed John around the waist, then yelled.

“EVERYONE, DUCK, TAKE COVER, BOOOOOOMMBBBB!”

Mayhem ensued for a few brief seconds during which John felt himself lifted off the walkway, on top of the wall and then a sharp plunge downwards. Thanks to his steady nerves he didn’t squeal like a child but his mouth opened in a silent scream as he plummeted several feet down.

Then he realized Sherlock was holding him tight and had put his harness back on, attaching himself to the climbing ropes that were anchored to several spots on the wall. The plunge stopped and John realized they were no longer falling but swinging from side to side due to the momentum created by the flight. “Sher…..I…..” he began when Sherlock, eyes still clouded over with fear, pointed upwards and said, “It’s not over yet Jawn.”

The next moment a massive explosion happened about thirty feet above them and John’s eyes and nostrils were suddenly filled with the smell of chemicals and ashes and burning wood and weird fumes that made him want to cough his lungs out. A lot of smoke billowed out from the (Now half-broken) rampart and John clumsily covered both his face and head with his arms as chunks of rock came flying downwards. He saw one of the cops get hit by one and fall. At once his attention turned back towards Sherlock and he reached behind himself to grab the man protectively, when his hand hit the bare and still thrumming wall which was reeling from the after-effects of the explosion.

Sherlock was not there. He was no longer strapped to John. He had somehow anchored John to a rope and detached himself from him, all the while as John was recovering from the explosion and the temporary blindness and coughing caused by it.

John shrieked, “Sherl? SHERL?” Oh God no, had the man fallen or got brushed or hit by one of
the rocks? No, this couldn’t happen, his Sherlock had to be safe. The man had done nothing wrong, nothing wrong at all.

“Doc,” one of the cops, hanging midair like him, pointed upwards, “There!”

John looked up and saw Sherlock climbing. What the fuck, was he trying to get back up there to see what was on, or worse, to lock horns again with his ex Jim? “Oh thank God you’re okay baby,” he said, then his face twisted into a snarl, “But I am going to come up and kill you if you go back there. Wait. Stop. What are you trying to do Sherlock? Please, no, please stop! That man’s dangerous, stop.”

“I have to end this,” Sherlock shouted back, “Sorry Jawn.”

John began to climb as well, and he did so more dexterously and swiftly than Sherlock. His head was filled with only one target, one thought. If only I can get a bit closer, then I shall grab his ankle and yank him down, then grab him before he falls off the wall. Yes, I can do that.

He missed grabbing Sherlock by a whisker and managed to slip down a bit in the bargain. “Damn!” He cursed and hauled himself back up, only to be greeted by a charred body lying slumped over the edge of the broken wall. One unfortunate soul had not jumped on time.

Right under his nose he saw Sherlock chase after Jim who was not running from him, but making him follow. John cried out in anguish. Damn this manor, damn this situation, damn his helplessness. He was not going to allow Jim to take the love of his life away from him, not more than he already had done.

Sherlock had never truly belonged to him, thanks to Jim’s forever present memories or his foreboding, haunting presence around them. For months he had suffered from the alienation subjected towards him because of Sherlock’s past, his guilt as well as his misconceptions about Jim. John was not going to suffer those follies again, especially about the space Jim still held in Sherlock’s heart. Not when he knew that Sherlock no longer cared about Jim, and it was he, John Watson, who was Sherlock’s husband and his only love. No more! He’d go down in flames but not let that demon take his man away. He reached into the dead cop’s holster, pulled out a gun and aimed and fired at the figure of the fleeing man with Sherlock in hot pursuit.

The bullet was fired but nothing happened to Jim or any spot around him. For a second John thought he had hit a wall.
Except that it turned out to be a human wall that had planted itself in the way. It was none other than the obsessed, creepy, devoted, almost doggish and self-sacrificing deluded idiot Andersen. He had blocked the path of the bullet and taken it straight to his ribs.

“Fuck,” John was splattered with the butler’s blood, “Noooo…..you asshole, why did you…..?”

He couldn’t finish his words as Andersen’s strong hand grasped at his throat. John struggled hard but the grip would not weaken. Even with his dying breath the bastard was defending Jim.

Seeing no other way, John shot Andersen at point blank range, right between his eyes. This time it worked and the man slumped to the ground but not before he had given John a death-scare. Coughing and holding his throat, John chased after Sherlock and Jim on unsteady legs. A total mayhem had broken out, things were all out of place, there was fire, bodies on the ground, amidst which John was happy to find a slightly bruised but very much alive Mycroft. Lestrade had managed to save him.

They sped across the property until Jim entered Sherlock’s laboratory.

John made a beeline for that place too, till he was picked off of the ground and tossed aside. Groaning with the pain he felt on his right side, on which he had landed, John squinted at his assailant. A long shadow fell over him.

“Colonel Sebastian Moran……”

“Don’t interfere or I will have to remove you permanently, and I can easily do that,” Sebastian’s voice was like rumbling thunder, “You cannot stop this. There is unfinished business between them which must be concluded. I am going in there, to do the right thing this time. Follow me henceforth and you’re dead meat. Let me do my job and your Sherlock might just come out unscathed and safe. Your choice.”

The handgun was taken away from him and the mini-giant turned and went into the lab right after Sherlock had entered it. “No, Sherloooock, nooooo,” John cried out in fear and extreme worry, “Watch ouuuuuttt, look behind you, please!!!”

On threes and fours he made it to the laboratory/outhouse, his sore right side limiting his mobility severely and slowing him down. He almost fell against the door and, to his dismay, found it was locked, it just wouldn’t open. Abjectly disappointed and almost beside himself with fear for
Sherlock’s safety, John looked through the very next window he could find. He saw Jim standing in one corner, making dire threats that couldn’t be heard through the closed panes of the glass, but his body language suggested something extreme. Sherlock stood adamantly, gun raised at Jim, while Sebastian crept up on Sherlock from behind, stealthily and quietly because John saw his husband was clearly deceived into thinking he and Jim were alone in the lab.

His light brown eyes grew big when he saw Jim yelling at Sherlock and still asking for the formulae. Sherlock side stepped a bit and grabbed the dozens of test tubes, beakers, jars and decanters filled with liquids, then jars filled with substances and solids, most of them unknown to John. But when he saw Sherlock flick the flame on from his lighter, the whole matter became crystal clear to him instantly.

Oh God!

Sherlock wanted to end it all, including himself. This was so not good. This was a disaster.

John had barely opened his mouth to scream and raised his fist to strike at the glass, when Sebastian did something that took him completely by surprise. The tall hulking man grabbed Sherlock and tossed him against the window, the same one outside which John was parked.

At the same time Jim shot at the spilled substance and chemicals on the floor, definitely on purpose, an evil grin flashing on his face, before breaking out into shrill, manic laughter. Even through the thick glass panes John could hear some of that.

The loud sound of something exploding in the lab gave John a big start and in that split second that followed, the entire scenario changed.

Sherlock’s eyes met John’s through the glass pane. In the meantime flames erupted in the background, slowly and steadily enveloping the laboratory. Gunshots could be heard in the distance and then some commotion. Then Sherlock slammed his fists on the pane, shook his head and tried to go back to where Jim was. The small figure was getting obscured by the smoke that had collected inside the lab.

That was when John spotted the axe, probably left behind by the gardener by mistake, under the tree about ten feet away. He lunged forward, grabbed it and smashed through the glass. If Sherlock was not coming out on his own then he would be dragged out, that’s that!
Pieces of glass flew around, maybe he did cut a finger or two, but John was not aware of anything other than his man’s safety right now. He grabbed Sherlock who resisted, looking over his shoulder and crying out something incoherent, but John was having none of it. “You’re coming out of there now,” he yelled back with the full force of his lungs and pulled with all his might. Half of his body hanging out of the window, Sherlock screamed something that sounded like, ‘This whole place will blow’ before John managed to get him out of there. He hit the grassy ground on his back, Sherlock on top of him, his breath nearly knocked out of him under their combined weight.

“Jawnnn,” Sherlock rolled away and sat up, “There…..” He pointed a finger towards the laboratory with his eyes wide.

“What? Let’s get out of here,” John pulled him to his feet.

“He is doing something stupid. The formula isn’t here. He’s not hurting me, he’s just going to end up truly killing himself.”

“You can’t help him Sherl. I heard him, saw him, experienced his madness tinged ambitions, he can’t be helped.”

“But then…..”

“I can’t see you hurt yourself over someone who doesn’t care. His Sebastian is with him. The rest is up to them.”

“Jawn…..”

“Shut up and get away from there now. That smoke, is it dangerous?”

Their eyes were already burning and it was getting difficult to breathe. Sherlock was reluctant but he finally allowed John to pull him away from there. From the way the smoke and fire billowed out of the laboratory outhouse, it was pretty clear that place was going to blow sky-high. But there was smoke everywhere and the place seemed toasty warm, way too warm for the cooler, pleasant Fall climate.

“Good grief Sherlock, look!” John’s gaze fell on the huge inferno before them.
“Windsor Manor is in flames,” Sherlock murmured in disbelief as he stopped in his tracks, looking shocked and deathly pale, “It is burning. It’s turned the morning skies red…..but how did it happen? When did our house catch fire?”

“We’ll find out,” John said, “Come on now, I can see a crowd gathered there. Let’s go join them, we need to put some distance between us and the lab. If she’s gonna blow then I don’t want either of us to be anywhere close to her.”

As if someone was just waiting for him to say that, they heard an explosion behind them and soon the laboratory blew up spectacularly. The nearby trees, grass and shrubs too caught fire and a bright red haze appeared in the skies above it, even darker and denser than the smoke spiraling out of a burning Windsor Manor. Sherlock and John looked on in dismay as everything burned, exploded and smoked out around them, their once beautiful home and its expansive, gorgeous grounds being slowly consumed by flames and fumes, leaving nothing but ashy dust behind. The two men, distracted and distressed and holding on to each other for support, tottered towards the small groups that had gathered in the still untouched open grounds, watching the huge inferno before them.

It was the groundskeepers, household staff and the cops, Lestrade, Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson. A few others from the nearby town had collected there too, no doubt alerted by the explosions and flames. They soon heard the sirens of police cars and ambulances and saw paramedics enter the scene, shortly after three trucks full of firefighters descended on the property.

“Too late,” Sherlock said, his light green eyes reflecting the orange flames he was looking at.

Mrs. Hudson came running towards them. “Thank God you’re okay, you’re both okay,” she said, hugging them both, “Just see what he did…….”

“Who?” John asked.

“It must be Andersen,” Sherlock murmured.

“Yeah,” Mrs. Hudson said, “He torched the place. Put inflammables in every room and once the fire started, in the kitchen, it just spread so fast that none of us could do anything but run out to save our lives. We couldn’t even get anything out. But what was that sound…..the lab?”
“Yes, blown up completely,” Sherlock murmured, strangely calm and serene.

“John,” Mycroft approached them cautiously, “Lockie, you guys okay?”

“We’re fine,” John replied, adrenalin making him restless, “We’re fine but those two are not.”

“Jim’s dead for sure this time, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Unfortunately he didn’t want to be saved. Sebastian didn’t make any attempt to save him either. There was nothing we could do about it Mike.”

“Yeah, I do understand. Well, I am glad you guys are okay…..I am fine too, a bit shaken and bruised but fine. Thanks to Greg…..Sergeant Donovan is critically injured. She tried to stop Jim but only managed to get impacted by the blast from the device strapped to the belt.”

John couldn’t help but notice a wee bit of wistful sadness on Mycroft’s face and the defeated body language. Was he really mourning Jim, after all that had happened, after all the reveal? John was not sure. But if he was, John still understood his sentiments. That evil little thing had this uncanny ability to enslave men and women with his charms and then killing them with his ambition. The good doctor knew he wouldn’t be surprised if Sherlock was a bit upset with himself too. He had seen that hollow look in his eyes when they’d landed outside on the grass. While eager to be safe and with John, Sherlock had still looked a bit drawn towards Jim and unhappy to have allowed the crazy bastard to kill himself.

After about an hour the chief of the firefighting squad announced the inevitable. The fire was too strong and had spread too wide. Even after drawing water from the manmade lake on the property, it was not possible to save the house. “Sorry, but it seems futile,” he announced to Mycroft and Sherlock, “I hope you have insurance on the property and everything that was inside. If we leave the objects aside and just talk about people, I’d say you’re lucky to have escaped this. You sure no one is left inside? My men can still do a sweep.”

“No, please don’t risk any necks,” Sherlock answered, “Everyone is outside. I did a quick count.”

John was relieved to see Sherlock was keeping his head. It was a welcome change to see him in charge while Mycroft, the man who was always impeccable in his behavior and cool as a cucumber, looked a bit out of whack and unsteady on his feet. A sliver of a smile came over John’s lips when he saw Greg Lestrade help Mycroft into his car, then signal for John and Sherlock to get in too.
“Come on,” he said, “Let’s go to the station. Some formalities left to complete and then….you guys can stay at my place for tonight….or as long as you want. I have…..um…..four bedrooms. So even Mrs. Hudson can accompany us, and Victor. I will…..I can sleep on the couch.”

“We’ll check into a hotel after the formalities are completed at the station,” John said, pulling Sherlock by the hand and heading for his car, “Don’t bother about us, we’ll be fine. The rest can stay with you for a while. Please call Elizabeth Smallwood. Send another doctor and couple of our nurses from the hospital to your station. Most of us need first aid. I can help but I don’t have a kit with me.”

“Sure, will do. Sherlock anyone in the outhouses, your lab, do you think they should check?”

“No,” Sherlock replied with more surety than ever, “There’s no one left to save.”
"Jim was a vile human being, if he’s alive…well, I am sure he is not. The facts still don’t change. Please cut him out completely, from your heart, conscience, life, mind, memories, everything."

“What if I can’t?” Sherlock asked, sounding helpless.

(READ NOTES ABOUT THE EPILOGUE)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John felt a sense of surrealism as he checked into a deluxe room of the eco-friendly boutique resort where he’d stayed many months ago, maybe half a lifetime ago, when he’d first come to these parts. At that time he was a broken man, a battered soul with very little will left to live. Now he felt more alive than ever, having narrowly evaded disaster and death both for himself and his beloved spouse.

Sherlock was eerily quiet throughout the drive and looked dead tired. He was literally stumbling and blinking as they made their way towards the elevators, eyes half closed.

John slung one of his arms around his own shoulder and led him into the elevators, kissing his neck, which was the closest part of him to his mouth. “Hey, stay awake and stay with me babe, okay?” He encouraged his partner as they stepped out on their floor, “You’re smelling of prison and chemicals and you’re as dirty as a pig that has just played a wrestling match in the dirt. I know you wouldn’t like to fall asleep in this state. So let’s get you cleaned up and then you can hit the bed….wait, when was the last time you even ate something? I know you hate the prison food and the last several hours must have gone off in planning my rescue and Jim’s capture.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Okay, some hot soup and bread?”

“Ice cream.”
“Oh….all right, I will order some ice cream.”

“Jawn?”

“Yes love?” John held Sherlock against himself, supporting him with one of his arms and opened the door with his free hand, “What is it?”

“Don’t leave me, please.”

His voice was so small, the tone so close to begging, his expression so crumpled and lost that John’s heart literally broke into two. That little bastard had destroyed Sherlock’s spirit and the only fault that lay with Sherlock was that he had given his heart wholly and completely to Jim. “You know I am here for the long haul,” he assured, but kept words minimal since Sherlock was in no state to understand long speeches, “If I had to leave, I would have made my way out before the inquest began.”

“I-I know…but I still fear that….he just wanted to use me to get more money, more power, he didn’t even want to spare me after he’d taken away so much, he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill me and yet….yet I couldn’t kill him when I had the chance.”

“That’s because you’re a good man,” John said, trying to keep his own emotions in check, “You don’t have to react to situations like he does. That would mean you’ve become like him, which would be the worst possible tragedy ever. There’s nothing more deplorable than a good soul that turns towards the darkness because of hardships, betrayals or frustration.”

“But he is capable of loving,” Sherlock burst out as John helped him into the bathroom, “He didn’t want that fellow Sebastian killed. He was willing to sacrifice for him, if he could really love then why not me, h-how is that asshole better….better?”

The jealous and disappointment filled diatribe of a broken-hearted, jilted lover blinded by a need to be loved and adored. John would have misunderstood Sherlock had he not been in Sherlock’s shoes mere weeks ago. He had wallowed in self-doubt and pity for long enough to understand that Sherlock merely needed to be loved, to feel worthy, to feel someone out there was made only for him. The emotional investment he had made in Jim had paid him with brickbats and betrayals and he was struggling to cope. “C’mon now,” he said as he started to help the taller man out of his clothes, “You need to take a nice hot shower. As for Jim and his love for Sebastian, don’t you realize they deserve each other?”

The shy, almost hesitant manner in which Sherlock stripped naked was so adorable that John
wanted to cuddle and ravish him at the same time. But sex was too much of a thing to ask at this point. He had to first give the man a chance to heal. After the traumatic experience back at the manor, he needed some time too. “What do you mean?” Sherlock asked him as John stepped into the shower with him.

“Think about two great food items, say tea and chutney. Both great in their own ways, both are needed and favored by most, but they cannot be mixed together. You do that and you ruin them both. But mix honey with tea or fries with chutney and you have two great combinations. Sherlock, you and Jim were not meant to be. When he met Sebastian, he met someone he liked and thereafter the man began to work for him. But when he met you, he was only looking for profits and usability. Clinging to his ghost will damage you more than you already are. Don’t give him that power Sherl, please, for my sake.”

“You’re right,” Sherlock sighed, slumping in John’s arms.

It took John quite some time to get him cleaned up and dried up enough to take him to bed. Fortunately the ice cream arrived almost immediately and he fed his man some, then gave him some water and tucked him under the blankets.

Sherlock was out like the light, asleep before his head had even hit the pillow.

John took some time to close his eyes. Despite being tired physically, he was too high-strung to calm down, stop his thoughts from racing and fall asleep. So he watched TV with the sound off but after sometime they started showing the manor and the deaths and the smoke clouding out on the horizon of the town and decided to switch it off. He had watched all the horrors with his eyes, he didn’t need to watch and listen to someone else’s account of them. It was late afternoon by the time he lay down next to Sherlock, falling asleep after a good ten minutes.

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An elbow to his chest ended his slumber after a while. John woke up with an ‘ouch’ and a sharp turn of his head, finding his mate thrashing about and muttering something. No prizes for guessing what happened, it’s Sherlock, as I had expected. The poor darling is riddled with nightmares and he will be in this condition for a few nights going forward. There’s no escaping from it. I have to deal with him patiently.

“Sherlock,” he woke him up gently but insistently, nudging his shoulder and calling out to him repeatedly. Sherlock kept muttering and hitting out at him but despite a strong urge to just slap him and wake him up from this mess, John held back his impatience. He knew fairly well how the
suffering person got a nasty start if shaken awake roughly or violently, then got into an almost seizure-like state of horror where they experienced blended lines between dreams and reality. “Wake up,” he kept saying, “It’s only a dream. You’re safe, you’re with me, I’m here, your John is here.”

It worked and those almond shaped eyes opened, pools of green moving from side to side, staring at him in sheer dismay and fear at first before they focused on him properly and stabilized. The random jerks of his limbs stopped too and John let go of him, giving him his space and some time to come down from that nasty space. Sherlock blinked rapidly, took a few deep breaths and stared around the room before turning his attention back to John. “You—You didn’t leave me, you’re still—still here,” he said meekly, a dollop of disbelief lacing his soft, wavering voice.

“Oh Sherl, why would I? I am your husband.”

“Jawn, I—I am….”

“Yes, tell me…..”

“No, forget it. What’s the time?”

John wanted to insist again but decided not to. Sherlock would talk when he was ready. He even considered taking him to a proper shrink, a good one, and getting him into therapy for at least six months. But first, they had to move away from this town for a few days.

“It’s nearly 8 PM. You’ve been asleep for six hours, me for four.”

“I’m still tired.”

“Go back to sleep then…..”

“I don’t want to. I am a little peckish. I want to talk. Where is Mike?”

There was nothing more John wanted to do than holding his husband in his arms and going back to sleep for another six or eight hours. But Sherlock’s shaking hands, unusually listless manners and
somewhat anxious voice told him the man needed help. Realizing that Sherlock was restless and needed to be occupied, John sat up and handed him the room service menu. “You might be only peckish but I am very hungry, so order something for both of us please,” he spoke with a twinkle in his eye and a wry grin on his lips, “Let’s see if you even know what kind of drinks and dishes I like. If you can’t remember, the deduce. If you cannot deduce then simply make a wild guess.”

Sherlock’s eyes were wide for a second. Then he seemingly took up the challenge. “Okay, here goes nothing,” he said, scanning the menu. John took the opportunity to call Mycroft and check on him. Not entirely to his surprise, he realized Mycroft had been sleeping too.

“Ah John, all well? What time is it….Gosh, it’s only 8 PM.”

“Sherlock was asking about you.”

“Don’t tell him yet, they haven’t found the bodies.”

“Whose?”

“You know. Jim’s and Sebastian’s.”

John walked away from there under the pretext of giving Sherlock more space to order the food, which he was in the process of doing over the intercom. “Mike, I have a request for you, since you’re his brother and I want you to be on-board with this. Last time this happened, he didn’t get a proper chance to either grieve or reconcile to the event. It made him suffer terribly for years. I think it’s best if we let Sherlock face his demons this time and help him recover in the correct way.”

“Which is?”

“Tell him Jim is gone. But we have no evidence. That even if he’s alive this time there will be no further reconnections. He needs to move on, from him, from that trauma, from the loss, from the deep sense of hurt and betrayal and most of all….from this place. I want to take him somewhere else, far away, into a busier, more fulfilled life. I have a feeling he’s not cut out for the country life anyways.”

Mycroft was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, “Whatever you think is best John. I trust you
to take the right decision. Windsor Manor is gone now, it’s charred, bent out of shape, reduced mostly to bare iron grids and rubble and concrete. We can rebuild it, but what’s the use of that? It will only remind us of what happened there. There is a hefty insurance I had secured on the property when Sherlock inherited it and I paid three instalments from the overall funds of the estate. Sherlock will get a whopping ten million for that, within a month. I think that will be enough for both of you to start a new life somewhere. As for this mess, it is handled, it is solved…..I will take care of everything this side, along with Greg. Don’t worry.”

“That money is more than enough for a new start and…..thanks for handling this…for us.”

When John returned to the bedroom (he had walked out to the balcony), he found Sherlock sitting on the bed in his underwear, knees drawn to his chest, pensive and distracted look on his face. “So my darling hubby,” John said as cheerfully as he could manage, climbing on to the bed and sitting next to his man, “What did you order for us then?” Green-blue orbs stared at him, the head tilted slightly to one side, then Sherlock answered, “Pizza. Thin crust. Sixteen inches. Extra cheese, three types of cheese, with pepperoni, jalapenos and paprika, a dash of olives and pineapple thrown in to balance the flavors. Good old robust beer to go with that, two pints each for the two of us.”

“Couldn’t have been a better choice,” John grinned, stroking Sherlock’s stubbled cheek, “Pizza is the ultimate comfort food for me and I love that combination. Pepperoni, jalapenos, three kinds of cheese, yeah, perfect order baby boy!”

“I am not stupid or dense, you know.”

“What? When did I ever give you that impression.”

“Just now.”

“Pardon me?”

“You spoke to Mike, didn’t you? Yet you didn’t hand over the phone to me. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to know if he blames me for Jim’s death.”

John decided to take the bull by its horns. If Sherlock needed a confrontation, if he needed to hear some words, then this was the time for it. “That is precisely why I didn’t let you talk to him,” he said calmly but firmly, “You have to STOP blaming yourself for anything related to Jim, whether it’s a faked death or a real one, his descent into the darkness or vindictive madness. He was a vile
human being, if he’s alive….well, I am sure he is not. The facts still don’t change. Please cut him out completely, from your heart, conscience, life, mind, memories, everything.”

“What if I can’t?” Sherlock asked, sounding helpless.

“Then there are ways to help you with that,” John assured him.

“There are?”

“Precisely. But every intervention needs a 50% support from your side. You have to cooperate, keep up your efforts, keep the chin up and believe that things are going to get better. I am there for you Sherl, do I not matter to you? Can’t you do this one thing for me?”

He had an armful of Sherlock the next moment and all he felt and heard was Sherlock’s sobs for the next half hour. John stayed there, patient and understanding, silent and caring, rocking the distraught man back and forth as he let his husband scream, cry and weep it out. It was going to take time but this was a good beginning, a sort of catharsis which was long pending. Sherlock clung to him like a drowning man to a piece of wood, the tumultuous grief within him flowing and ebbing, until it tapered down to soft whimpers and deep sighs. When the final drops of tears had dried out on the taller man’s bony cheeks, John gently pulled Sherlock back and looked into his face.

“Feel better?”

“Actually….it was hurting here, before.”

He pointed to his chest and neck. John nodded, “Is it better now? Has it gone or is it still there?”

“Gone. I feel I can breathe now. But what if it comes back, this pain? What if he comes back, to haunt me again?”

“You cannot allow his ghost to control your life babe. You have to tell it to leave and one day it will. He cannot traumatize you unless you consent to it. Don’t let him win this time, because this is precisely what he would have enjoyed. Don’t give him or his spirit that satisfaction. Stand up to him like you did at the manor earlier today. With time, I am sure you can put all of this in the past, behind you, leave them here for good.”
Sherlock narrowed his eyes slightly, “You mean we are moving?”

John nodded, “Yes, don’t you think it’s time?”

“I’d love to Jawn, but is it even possible? I mean, financially? I don’t have a steady income and I am not too sure I can get back to work right away. I don’t like a conventional job either. The manor was all I had. I had signed over everything else to Mike. I don’t want to ask him for anything, not anymore, not when I am aware that it truly belongs to him. It is he who has done all the slogging, he worked his arse off to build the company with my dad and take it to greater heights, so…..”

“Shhhh, no need for that. Even if he offers, refuse.”

“How do we manage then?”

“I have a conventional job,” John assured him, “I can earn while you figure things out. I can run the expenses and also pay rent. But I don’t think we need to be that frugal.”

At Sherlock’s questioning glance he added, “Mike insured the place for a neat sum. That will come down to you and we can use that to start afresh. What plans do you have, which city would you like to live in, what kind of life do you foresee for us?”

“No one has asked me these questions before,” Sherlock murmured as if he was in a state of wondrous disbelief, but he perked up considerably a moment later, as if injected with a fresh purpose and infused with a burst of energy. “I’d very much like to be a scientist, but an independent one. That doesn’t mean I won’t earn. I will keep patenting my products and work as a consultant with corporates, pharmaceutical firms, oil companies etc. Not doing that earlier was a stupid thing to do, there is no harm in making money off your talent. But I won’t be greedy John, I cannot work under deadlines or with a bunch of guys in suits chasing number and profits at my expense.”

“You don’t have to,” John affirmed, “We are not penny pinching. But you gotta start anew. Everything you had done before is lost now, lost to that fire.”

Sherlock’s jaw instantly hardened, “It was necessary. To end some things there, that fire was needed as a cleanser.”
John was happy to see that change from misery and longing to anger and determination. Baby steps, but Sherlock was taking them already. It was a start, at least. “So then,” he added, “What’s your city and lifestyle choice? Where should we live?”

“Somewhere urban enough, with skyscrapers and big fancy shopping malls, streets lined with pubs and big parks where one can stroll or just sit and watch people go by. A nice flat, on a higher floor, with panoramic views of the city around us.”

“Done. I’ll take up a job at a hospital and slowly move towards a consultant status, where I don’t have to do hours but attend to a certain number of surgeries a month and assist with pre-operative analysis and post-operative care. We will also need space to build your lab.”

Their food arrived moments later and they sat down to eat. John was heartened to see Sherlock enjoying his food and actually following the movie being shown on the channel they were watching. “Fool,” he cried out as he crunched down on a slice, “That’s not the murderer.” He also gave John a shy but promise-filled smile when the doctor caressed up his bare thigh, a blush appearing on his cheeks and jawline.

John knew this would take time but he didn’t care about that. What really excited him was that today was the first day of the rest of their lives, a life finally devoid of the manor and its silent curse, free of the hauntings and ghosts and the charred remains of Sherlock’s past.

Chapter End Notes

If you like JohnLock Utopia and happily ever after, stop here. If you want a twist, or a taste of reality, there will be a two part epilogue after this. I shall post soon.

Thanks for dropping by, reading this series and for the kudos and comments.
Epilogue 1 - All seems well

Epilogue - 1

JohnLock's lives continue far, far away from the now-scorched Windsor Manor.

I year later

“Sherlock? Sherl!” John called out with some anxiety, a bit of irritation. The answer came with a sharp and elongated, “Yeaaaaahwhaaaat?”

“This is your captain speaking, this is the fourth and final call to have brunch. The dishes on the table are turkey and mayo sandwiches, quail eggs with paprika and rock salt toppings, a quinoa and bell pepper and cherry tomato salad on the side with orange ad vinaigrette dressing and finally ice cream sandwiches, macaroons with strawberry ice cream chunks in between. That, is the only item we ordered from outside. Everything else is homemade and comes with two complementary glasses of mimosa, also homemade. You need to come out like now, NOW, or all these are going off the table.”

John’s humorous statement, a breathless spiel lasting almost half a minute, gave Sherlock the courage he needed to emerge from his home office and head towards the formal reception room. John was sitting there, next to a well-heeled and elegantly dressed gentleman of about fifty. Next to them were Mycroft and Greg Lestrade, also just as sharply dressed, who were visiting them that weekend and staying at their place as house guests. Too many people, too many eyes on me. Sherlock squirmed and shuffled his feet, not looking the least bit happy or hungry for food.

“Hello Sherlock!” The guest said, “Good to see you! You look handsome.”

“Hello Dr. Reid, I think I am underdressed,” the young man said, “Everyone here is in suits.”

“Not your husband,” John raised his arm. They were both similarly dressed, comfortable baggy Adidas track pants, round neck soft cotton T shirts, flip-flops on their feet. John was better groomed though, shaved and hairs all styled with product and freshly washed. Sherlock was scruffy and had a two day stubble, his curls were massively overgrown and made him look more like a hippie than a talented scientist.
“I am here to celebrate,” the other man said cheerfully, “Guess why?”

“I give up, why?”

“You won’t need me anymore.”

Sherlock looked at John first, then at Mycroft. John was beaming from ear to ear while the normally staid Mycroft seemed immensely pleased as well. “Well done, both,” he said in his brief, concise manner, “It’s been thirteen months and what a difference a year makes.”

“You’re no longer in need of therapy, no more meds needed, you have been living a full, robust and busy life for the past four and half months now and I suggest you continue that.” Dr. Reid went on, handing Sherlock a manila folder with some carefully filed papers inside, “Soft copies will be sent to your email ID as well. You’ve responded very well to treatment and been a very cooperative and optimistic patient. I wish you all the very best.”

“Seems like more good news on the way,” Gregory Lestrade said, taking Mycroft’s hand, “In fact, two of them.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to the man who seemed rather content and at peace, next to Mycroft who had already tensed up and was wishing he was elsewhere. The typical Holmes family tendency to keep everything bottled inside, including the news of a happy upcoming event! John smirked and winked at Lestrade who continued with a small nod. “Sherlock has signed a contract each with Al Habib Petrochemicals, an Abu Dhabi based company, and Ziegler pharma, an Austrian firm that produces medicines for humans and chemicals for soil testing, cultivating etc. He is back to work full time from next month, which is a remarkable thing because in two weeks Mike and I are getting married.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened slightly, “That’s quick.”

“We had been planning for a while but kept putting off setting the date, until we realized we aren’t getting any younger. Better now than later. So it’s going to be a small, private ceremony, a handful of relatives and even fewer friends, about thirty people in total. Will happen at our backyard, in the city we live in and not back there…..” he trailed off, not wanting to name the town or the manor. It had become an unspoken rule between them. Do not mention, do not discuss, do not even think about it anymore.
There was an awkward silence for a while. Then Sherlock murmured, “Congratulations!”

“Congrats both,” John said much more enthusiastically, “Come on, brunch awaits all of us. Doc, please join us for brunch today and do stay in touch.”

“Come on,” the shrink laughed, “It’s a good sign to lose connections with your shrink. No one is really happy to see us, believe me.”

As they proceeded towards the sunlit dining room, separated from the kitchen by a breakfast counter and a wet bar, John grabbed Sherlock’s butt discreetly and squeezed. Sherlock opened his mouth to yelp and closed it with an audible ‘clack’, glaring over his shoulder at his husband.

“Success makes me horny,” John whispered, nuzzling his neck.

“Well, you’re getting nothing till bedtime,” Sherlock said in an impish manner, “Serves you right for calling my brother and his partner and now the doctor. Had we been alone you could have fucked me right here on the table.”

***

Sherlock squawked the moment John entered him. This hadn’t changed at all and remained the same as if used to be during their first days together. Every time John’s impressively sized and full blown dick entered his anal cavity, Sherlock was already on the verge of orgasm and noisy as hell. But while John loved the responsiveness his partner showed, tonight he had to be a bit careful. They both had to be.

He cupped Sherlock’s mouth with his hand as he took the younger man on all fours. “Shhhh sweet.,” he whispered, kissing behind one of his Sherlock’s ears, “I hate to remind you of this but your brother and the sheriff are asleep just two doors down.”

“Nnnhhhh,” Sherlock pushed back, eager to have him deeper, “Shaddup and fuck me!” He pushed back again and tried to touch himself but the moment John began to saw in and out of him again, he almost lost his balance and had to place his palms flat on the bed to keep himself upright. His arse was up in the air, his face smothered into the pillow, John’s hands grabbing and kneading his buttocks and spreading them apart to watch the spot where they were joined together. Sherlock wailed and moaned, despite John’s hand covering his mouth he could still be heard loud and clear
in the hallway outside.

John let out a few deep grunts and groans of his own, the overwhelming pleasure he always felt when he was buried inside his lover mostly leaving him bereft of speech. Sherlock’s milky white back, the gentle swell of his buttocks, the tiny pink hole where he was buried, now red from all the friction and rubbing. It was exquisite, sexier the fuck and if he kept looking any longer, he knew it would all be a lost cause. He’d ejaculate prematurely.

“I know you wanna cum…..” Sherlock moaned, “Fill me up….”

John wanted to tell him to stop, to hush up, that any more dirty talk would end this abruptly but the truth was that he enjoyed hearing his normally shy and reticent man eventually let go and ‘speak’, open his heart’s innermost desires.

He tried to hold back his orgasm by stopping his thrusts but his lower torso seemed to have developed a mind of its own. His hips moved like a piston, slamming into Sherlock and nudging his sweet spot again and again till it was Sherlock who was left without words.

Sensing his husband was awfully close, John bent double, draped himself over Sherlock’s butt and back, placing his cheek on the man’s shoulder blade. Then he reached downwards, to the erect rod bobbing and leaking between Sherlock’s legs.

“FUCK Jawwwn!”

“Nope, you’re being fucked by Jawn….ohhhh!”

John could feel it build in his balls, sense his toes curling automatically, his hips thrusting out of sync and faster now and his breath coming in short spurts. He clutched at Sherlock and sucked a bruise on his collarbone as he continued to fuck him into the mattress, now smothering him against it almost, until he felt his orgasm rip through his defenses and rocket through his body like some huge blast.

He came and came, hips slowing down as he deposited his load inside his spouse, who squirmed and moaned and cooed with pleasure. Sherlock could be slutty and eager in bed, completely belying the shy, coy image he presented at times.
“Uhnnnn, Jawn,” the younger man begged shamelessly, pushed his arse back as John stopped thrusting completely and panted close to his ear. He didn’t need to say it one more time as his caring husband, eager to make him cum just as hard, started the pistoning motions again. He pulled Sherlock up on all fours and fucked him into a spectacular state of arousal where all Sherlock needed was just a touch, a little nudge and he would fall deep into that gorge of happy ecstasy. When John realized his man was tensing up, he angled his thrusts and began to hit the sweet spot three out of five times, keeping him on the edge for a little while, before his hand dipped between the long, open legs.

“JAWNNNN!”

The scream of his name was followed by warmth splashing on to his fingers and splattering on the sheets below as Sherlock came hard, even harder than John just had, shaking all over with such intensity that John had to hold him steady.

Finally, when the shudders stopped, they both fell on the bed with resounding thuds and loud pants. Immediately they began to laugh. “I think I am lying on my own….you know what,” Sherlock said while John raised himself on one of his elbows and stared at him fondly, caressing his face with his free hand. “What?” Sherlock asked, seemingly surprised but knowing fully well what it might be.

“I am just happy to see you happy, carefree, devoid of all ghosts from the past,” John smiled.

“Yeah,” Sherlock hugged John, placing his chin on the older man’s shoulder, kissing a spot there. He didn’t want to be scrutinized by anyone, not even John. But he knew his man meant well and John meant the world to him, so he would humor him if needed.

Truth was that, he was not sure if he was ‘completely free’ yet. He had just managed not to show it to anyone, the shrinks, John and Mycroft included.

“No to sleep,” John said, laying him down, “I’ll do the cleanup.”

As John wetted a wash rag and cleaned himself, he heard…..or he thought he heard Sherlock talking to someone. Thinking it was a phone call, he entered the bedroom only to find the phone charging on the nightstand and Sherlock staring at him with a slight unease. “All well babe?” He asked, “You look a bit startled.”
“Yeah, all well except….I think Mycroft and Gerard heard,” Sherlock answered, “Now I can hear them outside.”

John dragged the washcloth over Sherlock’s skin, wiping off traces of cum and sweat as the latter stretched out luxuriantly on the soft cotton sheets beneath. “Well, if they heard us they’d either be very jealous or very annoyed, but, in neither case would they really tell us anything as such. They’d just find earplugs or something else to block out the sounds. Oh and yes, it’s Greg, Sherlock, it’s Gregory Lestrade and not Gavin or Gary or Gerard or George. He’s going to be your brother in law soon, you gotta start remembering his name don’t you think?” He smacked Sherlock’s butt and then kissed it as the curly haired man yelped and snorted. “Fair enough, call him Lestrade then! Who were you talking to?”

“Me? Talking to whom?”

“That’s what I am asking you.”

“ Asking me what?”

“I heard you talking to someone. Who were you talking to? Did Mycroft knock?”

“No, he did not. I can hear him outside but I have no desire to talk to him right now. I wasn’t talking to anyone really, no!”

“Oh,” John felt a bit bad for being so intrusive and pulled the sheets over Sherlock, tucking him in for the night, “I thought I had heard….never mind, I might be mistaken. Maybe I heard Greg or Mike talking and thought it might be….. It’s okay babe, you go to sleep now. You have an early start tomorrow morning. The demo for the new apparatus you built, with the Siemens team and your lawyer?”

“Oh yeah, nearly forgot,” Sherlock curled up on one side, closing his eyes, “G’night Jawn!”

***

John knew he was dreaming, like several times earlier during the past few months, but that didn’t stop him from feeling that unpleasant, foreboding sensation traveling up his spine.
He was roaming the ruins of Windsor Manor, stepping past rubble and chunks of concrete, jumping over bent and out of shape iron bars and half crumbled bricks, dodging past an overhanging canopy that was half destroyed and hanging really low.

All through his journey across the now-deserted palatial estate, he felt he was not alone, that someone was following him at times or sometime leading him on. It was a feeling he couldn’t shake off but at the same time he felt compelled to chase after it at times, whilst running from it the very next moment. The place felt like a maze, a labyrinth of something that was once beautiful but now in utter shambles. He felt sorry for the manor while also dreading some of the events that happened there.

Suddenly he stumbled and hit the ground on his knees.

Then he saw him. Yes, it was him, standing right ahead, about twenty feet from himself. James Isaac Moriarty, Jim Moriarty, the same crazy megalomaniac and cruel criminal who had nearly destroyed Sherlock and almost killed John. The same man who had shown no affection towards Sherlock but seemed to have feelings for Sebastian. Ah, Sebastian! The same tall and handsome colonel who was in his full military gear and finery, standing right behind Jim’s petite figure like the protective mini-giant who wouldn’t allow anyone to even touch Jim’s shadow. John knew those men were dead and gone, even if no body had been found this time there were plenty of chances that could have been due to the unfortunate circumstances in which they died. Fires sometimes left nothing behind, the piles of rubble could have buried them, the manmade lake close by could have swallowed the remains.

Yet they seemed so real, right down to the rosy hue on Jim’s clear skin and the blue orbs in Sebastian’s eyes. They didn’t notice him though. They were talking to each other, animatedly, and at one point Sebastian even reached out and grabbed Jim, pulling him close for a kiss.

John tried to get up but fell down again. This time Jim turned and smiled like a cat that had got the cream. “He will always be mine,” the mad genius hissed, approaching John like a stealthy predator who had caught a scent of blood.

I must wake up, I need to get away from here, I cannot allow him to intimidate me again. No, never again, never ever!

He pushed himself towards reality, moving his limbs as quickly as possible and blinked his eyes rapidly. The more he blinked and looked around the more the surroundings started to fade until the scenery melted completely, leaving him in a dark room and on a soft bed, many hundreds of miles away, in a completely different life and place. John sighed with relief while sitting up, taking deep
breathe. “Jawn, you okay?” Sherlock’s voice came from the other side of the bed.

“Oh, sorry, did I wake you?”

“No, I was awake….I mean, I had gone to the bathroom.”

John turned on the bedside light, squinting slightly, then accepted the water from his lover. When he tried to apologize again, Sherlock cuddled him and said it was about time he began to take care of John just the way John had been doing for him so far. And that was true! For weeks it was John who held Sherlock in his arms as the latter kept crying, screaming or waking up through the night, remembering Jim, remembering the fire, remembering all those moments.

“It’s okay John, go to sleep,” Sherlock lay down next to his man and held him in his arms, but didn’t turn out the light immediately. After a few minutes, as John’s breathing evened out, he turned to the corner of the room and said, “Sorry, I will talk to you tomorrow again.”
Epilogue 2 - Spectres Everywhere

Chapter Summary

"Deep in the dark, I don't need any lights"

"The ghost resides inside me"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream - Edgar Allen Poe

“I really think I ought to have worn just a formal shirt with a pair of slacks and brogues,” Sherlock said, driving and checking his cell phone at the same time, expertly navigating through the streets which didn’t have the usual rush hour traffic yet, “But you insisted I wear a suit and I did. Now I think the color of the tie could have been different, no? This one, blue with faint yellow stripes, reminds me of the tie I used to wear as part of my school uniform. Ohhhohoho, don’t tell me I should have worn the grey blazer instead of the navy blue one? Oh yeah, now you tell me that!”

He had stopped at a traffic light. The meeting was at eight, a breakfast meeting, hence he had started at 7-15 am from home. Sherlock hated early morning wake ups and breakfast meetings but if this meant getting relatively empty roads for long stretches, then it was all worth it.

He turned his head casually to the right and saw a yellow Mazda hatchback parked right next to his bottle-green Audi A5. In the car were two school kids aged about seven or eight and a young mother. While the mother was cursing the traffic light and checking her watch, the kids stared in a strange manner at Sherlock. Never very child-friendly, Sherlock made a face at them and said, “That’s what I don’t like those little ruffians. What? It’s their mum’s fault? Oh yes, I agree. She should have taught them manners, asked them not to stare at strangers or press their noses to the window pane.”

The kids kept staring at him until the lights turned green and Sherlock sped forward as fast as he could.

“Finally,” he said as he took a turn and the Eagleton property came into view, “There’s the hotel. I
hope their breakfast spread is good. Oh yes, we are both similar that way. If the tea is good and there’s a nice crisp toast, I don’t mind how the eggs and rashers are, eh?”

Before handing over the keys to the valet, Sherlock whispered, “How do I look? Why don’t you accompany me too? I could use the advice. What? Oh yes, I agree, that’s not a good idea.”

“Sir?” The valet asked, as he held open the door.

Sherlock gave him a questioning look. The man looked into the car, then back at Sherlock, “I thought you were saying something to me sir. I saw you talking but couldn’t hear you properly.”

“No,” Sherlock said emphatically, “I said nothing.”

He tipped the man generously and walked up the steps towards the revolving doors, a striking, tall, man with gorgeous aquiline features and blue-green eyes that sparkled with intelligence. He got quite a few second glances and in one or two odd cases, even a third glance.

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The table was set with fine china and silverware, candles lit at strategic angles and a big bunch of fresh blooms in an exquisite crystal vase in the middle. A bottle of expensive red wine stood next to the plates of seafood and Italian fare. Three long stemmed wine glasses also occupied the pride of position, two of them half filled. Soft music played in the living room area and wafted through the apartment while soothing summer breeze blew in from the French windows. “Well, cheers,” Sherlock said, raising his glass and taking a sip, “I hope you find the setting suitably romantic and something John will like.”

“He should,” Jim replied, taking a sip too, “Though I doubt the doctor is used to sophistication or romance. He is a hardcore middle class man who’d be just as happy with takeaway Chinese from ‘Taipei’ and perhaps a beer. But this shows you put in an effort.”

“You’re right,” Sherlock said, nodding, “He should see the effort and intent behind it, not the results alone. It’s a happy day Jimmy, a real special one. This is my first earnings in over a year, this cheque…” He placed the piece of paper on the table, “I could have asked for a bank transfer but insisted on the cheque, just because I wanted to hand it over to John. I know the insurance money got us this nice flat and the two late model brand new cars, but it’s John who has been running the household expenses for the past year. He wouldn’t let me draw a penny from my
“Practical guy, yeah,” Jim said, “You should hand it to him, yeah. But now you’ll earn more and more. Do you plan to bottle the AIDS vaccine?”

“I don’t even remember the formula anymore.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

“The nuke thing, it’s really lethal you know.”

“Yes, of course I know. I helped conceive that idea, I know it all.”

“I know you have it. I know you can use it any time you want, for any price you ask, from any rich nation who can afford it.”

Jim shrugged, “But that is my insurance. I never intended to sell it. If you sell it, you get a one-time payment and you use it all. Nothing left of it for you to use later. But if you keep this in a tight fist, only temporarily revealing a sliver of it, then many in this world will be willing to do anything for you. If not out of a hope of possessing it, then out of a fear of becoming its victim.”

“Sherlock? Sherl?”

Sherlock flashed a bright smile, eyes lighting up at the sound of the familiar voice, “He’s here, he’s home early, that means we do get to enjoy dinner before Mike and Gary return from watching that play.” Jim showed him a thumbs up sign and sipped his wine coolly, relaxing in his chair. Sherlock got up and was about to step towards the hallway that led to the living room, when John walked in on him. The two men kissed and John said a jolly ‘congratulations’ before observing the second glass on the table. There was no one else in the room. The glass was untouched. Yet he was sure he had heard Sherlock talking to somebody just a moment ago. “Babe,” he said in a soft and gentle voice, holding Sherlock’s hand in a gesture of reassurance, “If there is something I need to know, you will tell me, right?”

“Yeah,” Sherlock said, “But what are you referring to?”
“I am sure you were talking to someone. Business or some friend…..?”

“My only friends are you, my lawyer, my brother and Victor. No one else.”

“So was it Victor?”

“No, not him. It was….uhm….a wrong number. Hey, stop all that now and look at this! A cheque for two hundred and fifty thousand! And it’s only the beginning. Signing amount from Siemens, they want me to work on their apparatus and machinery, ones that’ll increase their efficiency.”

John stared in wonder and happiness at the cheque. He was so happy his man was finally getting his due as a talented scientist and inventor. Forgetting everything else, he hugged Sherlock hard.

Sherlock hugged back, his eyes on Jim who was still seated at the table and grinning, but his eyebrows lowered in a mock frown. When their eyes met, Jim mouthed ‘Seriously? Wrong number?!’ Sherlock made an apologetic gesture and winked at his ex. Jim pointed at the wine glass.

Sherlock whispered, “C’mom John, let’s have dinner. See, I even poured out your wine when I heard you come in.”

John smiled but kept looking at the third glass. Sometimes Sherlock put a third plate when he set the table. On their bed he occasionally put a third pillow. He wondered if they would ever be alone? Or maybe he was thinking too much.

"C'mon," he wrapped an arm around his man, "Let's celebrate."

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Vancouver, Canada.

“How was your day?” Sebastian said as Jim ducked into the Jeep Grand Cherokee.
Eyes the color of molten caramel looked at him with a gleam in them, “We’re in business baby.”

Sebastian grinned at the response and watched as the suit-clad debonair little man closed the door of the vehicle and looked at him in his usual manner, half cute, half dangerous. The faithful and loving deputy/partner leaned over to kiss his cheek and strapped Jim’s belt on, casually brushing his knuckles on the smaller man’s thighs as he did so. Jim muttered expletives but made no attempt to push him off as he relaxed in his seat, reclining it slightly. “We have been in business for a few months already,” Sebastian said as he started the car, “The new identities, new contacts, new life suited us fairly well. The only thing we carry from our old life is the money, old money is always a good idea, huh!”

“Not just the money, also the formula,” Jim winked.

Sebastian got a jolt. He turned his head towards Jim, “Which one?”

“Nukey-nuke weapon, handheld, easy to carry, lethal and can take a city out in a flash!”

“But-But you said we couldn’t…..”

“I am telling you something else now.” Jim turned and looked at a motorcyclist pass by. Long legs, endless legs, those blue-green eyes visible through the gap in the helmet visor.

“Jim-Jim, if we have that and we try to sell or share this, they will trace us out in a jiffy. Our truth was out before the law and everyone else this time, it was not just Sherlock. All this we have created, in New York City, Vancouver, Paris, Dubai, Tokyo, it will be all in vain.”

Jim made a sob face, “Eyes on the road Sebby, eyes on the road. I do not wish to die in an…..accident.” He burst out laughing, a mad laughter Sebastian found both endearing and frightening. He gave his man a half-smile in return, confusion written large on his face. “Oh hon,” Jim went on, still chuckling, “You take me to be just a money-making machine or some kind of an impatient fool? Of course the formula and the device, which I have already built based on Sherlock’s notes and diagrams, won’t be sold anywhere. They will be our shield, our greatest strength in negotiations with large establishments, nations and armies.”

“Oh,” Sebastian relaxed and drove on, “Like that!”
“Yes, precisely. My money making power isn’t in those two formulae Sherlock built, based on the foundations of what we both started. I wanted them for other benefits. The idiot destroyed one of them but the other I saved, and that’s enough protection for both of us.”

“You’re a genius. I know you know that too, but thought I should repeat.”

“Yes, please repeat,” Jim said, kneading Sebastian’s thigh and moving his hand up it, “Because as long as we are together you don’t need to worry about money. That instrument lies up here,” he tapped his temple and winked, “By the way, your instrument is responding rather well to my touches.”

Sebastian squirmed, “I thought you didn’t want to die in an accident.”

“Fair enough,” Jim relented, “We can wait until we are home. I see there’s too much traffic and pedestrians on the road.” He looked over his shoulder, somewhere on the backseat. The Belstaff coat....the edge of it....the familiar scarf lying on the seat....

“Jimbo?”

“Yes? Yeah? What?”

“Sherlock won’t come after us, will he?”

“No, the answer to your question is no. Yes, our bodies were not found, but I created a very plausible reason for it to be swept away into the lake and thereby sucked into undercurrents and tunnels that feed out to the river. The explosion was spectacular and the huge fire after that, destroying the boring fucking manor, it took care of the rest. Finally that eel-face Andersen was of some use after all.”

“So you think Sherlock has moved on?”
Jim snickered, the look on his face hardening, those dark eyes of bottomless depths swimming with an arrogant streak. “Free of me? Sherlock? No, never. Even if he thinks I am alive, he’ll still hold on to my ghost. I will always be the face he sees in the rear view mirrors and in a crowd.”

He lowered his voice as he looked out of the window and saw a tall, dark headed and lanky man in an overcoat walking through the crowds, head down, thoughtful, quick and brisk steps. The moment their eyes met, a long wiry arm was raised and waved at him. Jim half raised his hand to wave before bringing it down. Then he whispered, just enough to hear the words in his own head. “Just as I see him too…..”

Chapter End Notes

Finally this is the end! Thanks for being with me on the journey! Leaving things a bit open, for all of you to assume conclusions that seem believable to you :)

End Notes

Majorly a JohnLock story. John Watson is the protagonist here, not Sherlock.

Based on the incredible Daphne Du Maurier's timeless classic ‘Rebecca'

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