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## The Measure of a Gentleman

by [i\\_ship\\_an\\_armada](#)

### Summary

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a partner.*

*Less universally acknowledged is that a single man in possession of very little in the way of fortune may be in want of a partner as well, but John Watson had little time or energy to devote to his own wants or needs...*

*Enter one Mr Holmes...*

Please note that I gleefully take great liberties with the laws governing same sex relationships and how they are seen in the Regency Era. As in, it is not an issue at all in this story. At all.

A HUGE thank you to shanzu, who translated this into [Chinese](#)!! My very first translation, and I am very honored.

And now in [Russian](#) !!! Thank you OneChancetoLive!

## Notes

This is a fusion of BBC's Sherlock and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. All mistakes and misrepresentations of her lovely work are all mine.

## Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a partner.

Less universally acknowledged is that a single man in possession of very little in the way of fortune may be in want of a partner as well, but John Watson had little time or energy to devote to his own wants or needs. While his widowed mother and unwed sisters ranged round him in the sitting room, he turned back to the notices on his desk and sighed.

The fire crackled pleasantly in the hearth, warmth exuding into the small formal room. They all sat quietly, tending to their own tasks. The two youngest concentrated on their needlepoint, while he looked over correspondence at a small wooden desk near the window, which revealed the day to be dreary and grey. He rubbed a hand down his face, grateful after this month's expenditures, they were still solvent. He'd have to have a talk with his mother about keeping an account of her purchases. *Again.*

His mother cleared her throat. Once. Twice.

John looked up, inquiring.

"Have you heard, John, Netherfield Park has been let at last?"

John raised an eyebrow. "You want to tell me, so please carry on."

She continued. "And a Mr Lestrade, a well-to-do man from London, came in a richly appointed carriage, and was so delighted with property, he agreed immediately to take possession of it by the end of the season. He arrived Monday and some servants are to be moved into the house by the end of the week." Mrs Frances Watson pursed her lips, her rather shrill voice echoing in the room.

"Mr Lestrade? Netherfield?" Harriet Watson clapped her hands together. Molly looked between them placidly, a small smile on her lips. "What fantastic news!" The young woman's blond curls bobbed messily around her young face.

"A very good fortune indeed for this family," Mrs Watson nodded.

John thought perhaps this was true, and though he was saddened by the thought of Molly moving away from him, he knew it would be a relief financially. He detested the fact that he needed to think of the girls in this fashion, but his military pension only stretched so far. They were neither falling behind, nor gaining ground, and the tenuousness of their circumstance made John lose sleep at night. Once their position was secure in the world, his mother would become a part of one of their households, and then perhaps John could start living a life of his own.

"John! John! You *are* going to call on him?" Harriet fairly bounced on her perch on the embroidered settee.

John cleared his throat, suppressing a smile at her youthful exuberance. "No need. It seems there will be a ball Friday next. We will all have the opportunity to meet him there."

The three women in the room froze and turned their wide eyes on him.

"Truly?" Mrs Watson breathed.

"Truly, mother," John smirked, knowing very well this information was sure to send at least two

of the three women present into a frenzy.

“What do you know of him? Is he handsome?” The words fell out of Mrs Watson’s mouth like water over a waterfall.

“That, mother, I do not know. I’ve not seen the man. And even if I had, I would not be qualified to say one way or the other.”

Molly raised an eyebrow at him, and a dull flush crept up his neck.

Oblivious, Harriet sighed. “He’s sure to be handsome.”

John turned the page of correspondence, attempting to focus his attention once again, making notes of money owed on a piece of parchment. “With as much money as he apparently has, and the fact he can well afford Netherfield, I would suppose it wouldn’t matter if he looked like a Michaelmas ham.”

Mrs Watson and Harriet gasped and Molly simply hid her grin behind her fingers.

“Aside from that, I will heartily give consent to marrying whichever of you two girls he so chooses.”

Mrs Watson beamed, and then leaned forward expectantly. “And does Mr Lestrade have a sister for you, perhaps?”

“I do not know that either, mother.” John’s eyes slid away and out the window to the field outside.

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“I can’t breathe. It’s too tight. And my feet hurt.” Harriet Watson fussed with her attire, adjusting and readjusting the bow at the bosom of her empire-waisted dress.

Enthusiastic participants twirled across the small area cleared for dancing. Country farmers, minor squires and pink-cheeked young ladies dressed in their best chatted good naturedly. The atmosphere was warm and close, but happy as someone played the spinet in the background.

John and Molly stood to the side, observing the small crowd. The pale peach gown drew attention to the fact Molly Watson was a very beautiful young lady; the colour highlighted the creaminess of her skin and paid tribute to the rich auburn tones of her hair. Her face was serene, though her eyes glittered.

“You look lovely, Molly. If every man in this room doesn’t walk away besotted, they are all blind as bats.”

She looked at him from head to toe, and smiled, wide and generous. “And you cut a fine figure, too, John. You are so very handsome, all dressed up in your new finery.” John’s clothes were indeed new, and fit him perfectly. His breeches were a neutral camel colour, and his waistcoat and jacket complemented them in similar tones.

John fidgeted in his spot and tugged on his waistcoat, generally unused to compliments.

“Someone is sure to take note,” Molly commented further.

John huffed, unconvinced.

“One of these days, John, someone will catch your eye and you’ll be reeled in like a fish on a line.” Molly squeezed his elbow and leaned into him briefly.

“My ocean is considerably less plentiful than yours, I’m afraid.”

“Less plentiful does not mean empty, brother.”

John was about to retort, but caught his breath and looked toward the door as a small group filed in. They were all dressed expensively, and John fought the urge to look down to inspect his own attire with a critical eye. A friendly looking sort headed the group, silver threaded through his hair and an engaging smile sat naturally on his face. He was pleasant looking and gentleman-like; his body posture was easy and unaffected. A petite brunette, elegant and with a look of such an obvious feeling of superiority that John gritted his teeth on instinct followed, eyes roving the crowd with disdain. Bringing up the rear of the party, a tall, dark brooding man walked with his hands tucked behind his back. The only thing not restrained about him was his hair that was dark and curled every which way. One lone lock dipped over his forehead appealingly.

The man’s cool, pale gaze detachedly roamed this way and that, until he eventually caught John’s eye. John stared, inexplicably surprised, but unable to glance elsewhere. He could feel Molly notice and glance at the man, then back at John before the stranger turned away.

“Looks like your ocean just became exceedingly smaller.” There was gentle laughter in Molly’s voice.

The crowd quieted as the small group made their way though as people leaned toward each other to whisper as they passed.

They were from an entirely different world, and the local gentry paid close attention.

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“We’re a long way from London, are we not, Mr Holmes?” Irene purred next to his elbow. Sherlock didn’t respond, instead watching a young couple dancing while trying to eye the three of them surreptitiously. They stumbled into each other and immediately burst into peals of laughter.

He cringed.

Greg Lestrade smiled at the couple’s gaiety, turning to comment, only to spot something very lovely indeed across the room, her long auburn hair swept up on top of her head in impossible ringlets around her face. She looked like an angel.

“I think I’m going to enjoy my time here.”

Sherlock looked at him coolly.

Laughing derisively, Irene commented, “Mmm...My brother is easily swayed, isn’t he?” and then looked expectantly up at Sherlock, who ignored her yet again.

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Mrs Watson lightly swatted at her son's arm to get his attention. "Look sprightly, both of you. Here they come."

John winced at his mother's stentorian voice, and turned to see who she meant, though that was unnecessary, considering she'd been bemoaning the fact they hadn't been formally introduced to the party's unofficial honoured guests.

Sir William Donovan ambled toward them, his face grizzled, yet pleasant, his bright orange waistcoat barely covering the paunch of his stomach.

"Mr Lestrade, I'd like you to meet the Watson family." He gestured at each of them in turn. "Mrs Watson, Captain John Watson, and Miss Molly Watson."

Mrs Watson gushed, "It is such a pleasure. I have another, but she is dancing at the moment."

Lestrade inclined his head, grinning broadly. "Delighted to make your acquaintance."

Sir William stepped back a bit and indicated the tall stranger. Dressed in dark grey breeches, a black topcoat and a deep watered silk aubergine waistcoat, he was dashing and elegant. John figured he'd look so, no matter what he wore, however.

"And may I introduce Mr Holmes, of Pemberley, in Derbyshire." He cut a significant look to Mrs Watson, who looked nearly giddy.

John bowed politely, his face relaxed and smiling as Molly murmured her greeting, but the smile slowly melted off his face when he received a stiff bow rather than something similar in kind.

John cleared his throat, doing his best to keep things polite. "Are you liking it here in the country, Mr Lestrade?"

Lestrade, openly staring at Molly, blinked and pulled his attention back to the present long enough to answer.

He beamed. "Yes, very much so." A blush coloured his cheeks.

Grasping for subjects to talk about, John continued. "I understand the library at Netherfield is impressive."

Lestrade's eyebrows furrowed and John saw Mr Holmes roll his eyes.

"Oh yes, I suppose. Not much of a reader, really. I like the outdoors." He shrugged guiltily and shifted nervously on his feet.

Irene took the opportunity to slide in between Lestrade and Mr Holmes, her eyes sly. "Mr Holmes, your library at Pemberley is extensive." Her tone was sycophantic.

He flicked a glance at her and then continued his visual perusal of the room. John wanted to wave a hand in front of his face, but restrained himself. Barely.

"Yes. A work of several generations, but I mainly use the space for my experiments." His tone was bored; aloof in the way only the wealthy could attain with much practice. Even so, the rich baritone resonated deep within John's belly, making him swallow hard and be grateful the eyes of the small group were not on him at the moment.

“You’ve added to it yourself. Made it your own.” She looked at the rest of them as though they were beneath her contempt. “I’ve seen it several times, myself.”

John watched her and wondered at her brazenness. Mr Holmes looked vaguely irritated when he replied, “Yes, and it’s such a shame you’ve never bothered to pull a book from the shelves.”

John ducked his head and coughed into his fist, both uncomfortable and amused, all at once.

He was curious though, so when he raised his head, he asked, “Experiments? What sort?”

Mr Holmes’ pale eyes turned to him, zeroing in and making him squirm a bit. He didn’t answer immediately, as if he were sizing John up.

“Science, Captain Watson. I’m sure it’s nothing that would interest you.”

*How would you know, you pretentious git?*

John narrowed his eyes, but didn’t comment for fear he would say something that would embarrass his family.

An awkward silence followed, and John could see Irene smirk before she schooled her face into bland disdain.

Lestrade, lost in his adoration of Molly, grinned sheepishly and held out his hand. “Miss Watson, would you care to dance?”

She bit her lip and smiled, reaching for the offered palm. “With pleasure, Mr Lestrade.”

They stepped away to the centre of the room, elegantly moving amidst the less graceful participants already dancing. Lestrade’s ears were tinged pink with his obvious pleasure.

Mrs Watson rocked back on her heels. “They look lovely together, do they not? And that dress. It becomes her in the most pleasing of ways. Though of course my Molly needs little help from couturiers for that to be apparent.”

Harriet chose that moment to bound up to them, excited and flushed. “Mama! The regiment is to arrive next week!” She clapped her hands together, as was her wont, and bounced on her toes, earlier discomfort forgotten. “They’re going to be stationed here, and are going to be here through the winter. Isn’t that exciting?”

Mrs Watson smiled indulgently. “Ah, Harriet. It is. I remember when I was a girl how I loved the red coats of the regiment. And if a handsome young officer with six thousand a year should be interested in you, then I shall be approving.”

Mr Holmes looked mortified and Irene’s visage turned sour in clear disapproval. Harriet glanced at the newcomers, noticing them for the first time and bit her lip, embarrassed before slinking away to once again join her group of noisy friends.

John cleared his throat, automatically deflecting. “Mr Holmes. Do you not dance? There are many young ladies here who would oblige you, should you ask.”

“I do not dance if I can help it,” he answered stiffly.

John snorted. “No, of course not,” before he moved away to refresh his punch.

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*Good God, when would this insufferable torture be over with?*

Sherlock Holmes stood rigidly with his hands behind his back, observing the crowd with a critical eye. There were only so many things he could deduce about these country folks before he became bored. They had few secrets to tell, and were too easy to read.

*That one over there? Tired and not feeling very well. Thrown from his horse recently.*

*That one? She doesn't like her shoes, but she likes the portly man looking down her décolletage as she bends over to adjust them.*

*And that one? Verging on spinsterhood but not too broken up about it.*

*Boring. The bloody lot of them.*

Lestrade strode up, cheeks aglow and his grin expansive. "Come, Sherlock. You must dance. I hate to see you over here by yourself in such a way."

Sherlock shook his head sharply. "You know I detest it."

Looking around, Lestrade chuckled. "I have never seen such a room full of pretty girls."

"You are dancing with the only lovely one in the room, Lestrade." That being the honest truth, as far as Sherlock was concerned.

Lestrade cut a knowing glance toward him. "Yes, she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, and her brother is handsome as well."

Sherlock lifted his chin a fraction. "He is perfectly acceptable, but not enough to tempt *me*, nor hold my interest for long. You'd better return to Molly and enjoy her smiles, because you are wasting your time with me."

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John sat down heavily, having taken a few turns on the dance floor; his heart knocking in his chest as he laughed.

"You see, John? Aren't you glad you danced with me?" Sally Donovan grinned as she fanned herself with her hand. Her dark, curly hair framed her face, and her coffee coloured eyes sparkled with a natural, easy humour. John and Sally Donovan had been friends since childhood, and John appreciated her intelligent, forthright manner. For a long time, people had speculated on a match between the two, but it had never come to fruition; both sides had not been amenable to the idea and were much more comfortable being friends.

"So which of the newcomers is the famous Mr Lestrade?"

John motioned with his hand. "He's that one, dancing with Molly." He smiled, happy to see his sister having a good time.

"And the one with the disagreeable expression?" Sally lowered her voice, as the character in



question stood much nearer in proximity, his back to them.

John eyed Mr Holmes' back, thinking if he were made of marble, no one would be the wiser. "That is Mr Lestrade's friend, Mr Holmes."

"How unfortunate he looks as if he's bitten into a lemon unexpectedly." Sally giggled.

John snorted. "Yes, but I think many could ignore that, considering he is worth ten thousand a year and owns half of Derbyshire, or so Phillipa Stuart saw fit to tell me."

They watched as Mr Lestrade bounded up to Mr Holmes like a young puppy, full of exuberance and excitement. Their voices drifted to them.

*"I have never seen such a room full of pretty girls."*

*"You are dancing with the only lovely one in the room, Lestrade."*

John smiled, even though the compliment was offered off-handedly and without much sentiment behind it, it was still pleasant to hear his sister had been noticed and appreciated.

*"Yes, she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, and her brother is handsome as well."*

Sally elbowed John in the ribs. He attempted not to react, though who doesn't preen a bit when given a compliment? "Sally, please. His immediate adoration of my sister has coloured his vision. He'd even think old Mr Forbes attractive, should he have met him." Sally snickered.

*"He is perfectly acceptable, but not enough to tempt me, nor hold my interest for long. You'd better return to Molly and enjoy her smiles, because you are wasting your time with me."*

His smile disappeared and he heard Sally suck in air, and turned to look at her.

"Pay no attention to him, John. Who would want to be with someone so rude?" Dear Sally. Always willing to come his aid, even when it wasn't warranted.

"Don't worry, Sally," he replied with a laugh, "I wouldn't give him the honour of my company for half of Derbyshire."

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Although one could be assured John didn't particularly care for Mr Holmes, the same could not be said for his companion, Mr Lestrade. He'd discovered he and Mr Lestrade could communicate easily with each other, as Mr Lestrade was older and therefore a bit closer to John's own age. He was kind and considerate and completely transparent. John found himself very happy indeed with the idea of Lestrade and Molly together, and he watched their interaction as the small group hovered near the refreshment table. Mrs Watson also watched the couple conversing quietly with anticipation in her eyes, her designs for an advantageous match written all over her lined face. Mr Holmes and Miss Lestrade looked distinctly uncomfortable at having to be there at all, which was quite amusing, although he would never admit to anyone he was enjoying another's misery.

Mr Lestrade took a moment to turn his attention to the group, probably realizing he had been ignoring them all in favour of the lovely Molly Watson.

"Your friend, Miss Donovan is an amusing woman, Captain Watson. I enjoyed dancing with her,"

Mr Lestrade commented to John. He sipped his refreshment.

Chuckling, John responded, "Please, call me John, and I know. She is the best of friends."

Mrs Watson made a disparaging sound. "Yes, she is amusing. It is a pity she is not more attractive. Molly, though, now everyone knows *she* is the beauty of the county."

"Mother!" Molly's voice was soft, but full of censure.

She went on as if she did not hear the admonishment, and it was quite possible she did not as she was entirely enthralled with her own conversation.

"When she was fifteen, a suitor we were sure was going to make her an offer wrote her heartfelt verses." She eyed Mr Lestrade as if he were a piece of meat at the local butcher.

John rolled his eyes. "And so ended the courtship. Who knew love poetry could actually drive one away?"

"I thought poetry was supposed to fan the flames of love?" Mr Holmes asked drolly, his profile proud and aloof.

John felt the urge to needle overwhelming. "Well, I imagine if it is firmly grounded, it may. But if it is any way wavering, the right words will snuff it out entirely."

Mr Holmes finally turned to look at John, lips quirking up on one side of his generous mouth, and his grey-blue eyes showing a glimmer of surprise, as well as thinly veiled interest. "And what *do* you recommend to secure the affections of another?"

John gave him a dazzling smile, fully aware of what that could do to someone, woman or man of such an inclination. "Oh, I would make sure to hold their interest, for as long as I could."

Mr Holmes' looked startled as he blinked, and then had the decency to look embarrassed as John turned on his heel to walk away to say good evening to his dearest friend.

Mr Holmes watched as John retreated, cursing his heart for kicking just a bit faster in his chest.

## Chapter 2

Longbourne was quiet, the only sound the rhythmic sliding of Molly's hair as she pulled through it with the bristles of the ivory handled brush, over and over. She and John were in the sitting room, winding down after the excitement of the evening. Molly stared into the dying embers of the fire, the only light in the room; the warm light flickering on her features. A small smile graced her lips.

"Mr Lestrade is what a gentleman ought to be. Well-spoken, polite, sensible--"

"Handsome, conveniently rich..." John took a sip of his tea, grinning behind the rim. He enjoyed this time with Molly, after their mother and sister had already retired, when they could finally talk without interruption. She was the most sensible girl in the house, and without her it is quite likely he would have been driven entirely mad. Their father had died while John had been away on his last regimental tour before returning home to run this household of women, leaving them all in unsteady financial straits and John to clean up the mess.

She paused her brushing to look at John, her eyes wide. "You know my thoughts on that. My happiness does not depend on the amount of money someone has. It would matter not if he were a farmer or a lord, as long as he caught my eye and was kind."

He leaned over and patted her knee. "I'm glad you think that way, Molly. I would have you marry someone you love. As for myself, only the deepest of adoration will motivate me to marry, which is why I will end up an old bachelor, telling stories of my time in the regimental army to my cat."

They giggled, and Molly shook her head. "Do you truly believe he likes me, John?"

John rolled his eyes. "Molly. He danced nearly every dance with you tonight, save for two. If it were any more apparent and he would have asked for your hand already."

She tilted her head and her gaze went a little unfocused, as if she were examining a memory inside her head. "He *was* rather sweet, and I was flattered at the attention, if you must know. I didn't expect that." She picked at her dressing gown and smiled.

"That is what is endearing about you, Molly. Compliments always take you by surprise. And I agree Mr Lestrade is a good man, so I give you leave to like him. He is better than some you've been fond of."

"John!" She wasn't truly hurt, at least if the laugh in her voice was any indication.

"Truth, Molly. You are a good deal likely to find something to like about everyone. The world is lovely and agreeable to you at all times in your eyes." John looked at her fondly, wishing maybe a little bit that he could be a bit more like her in that way. As it was, he was fully aware his experiences had left him somewhat jaded.

"But not his friend. What a deplorable person. I can't abide by what he said about you, that you could never interest him." Molly had been particularly defensive when John had relayed the story of what he and Sally had overheard.

"Oh, Molly, I've a thicker skin than that, as you well know. Of course, if he ever says such a thing to my face..." Though his threat remained unspoken, Molly certainly knew he could hold his own against anyone who confronted him.

He leaned down to kiss Molly on the top of her head. "Go to bed, so you can dream about Mr Lestrade."

She threw her hairbrush at him, nearly missing his head as he exited, amused, through the door.

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“And then he danced once with Miss Drury of little standing, and once with Miss Donovan, and then the rest were only for our Molly.” Mrs Watson sat at the head of the table, presiding over breakfast while recounting every detail of the evening before. “It is a pity Miss Donovan is not prettier, for she is getting older and her prospects are narrowing. But our Molly,” she grinned wide and adoringly at her, “she is sure to hold the attentions of Mr Lestrade.”

John sighed, only out of bed for a short amount of time and already needing to escape. Perhaps he would go for a ride into town as soon as he was able to slip away.

“You aren’t listening to me, John.” Mrs Watson pursed her lips, displeased. “It’s not as if you can keep supporting us forever on your pension and what your father left us. We need to think proactively about the girls’ future.”

Molly and Harriet both groaned audibly. John replied, “Of course I’m listening, Mother, but I daresay this does not need your interference.” He glanced at Molly, winking at her.

Mrs Watson began to puff up like a peacock, obviously about to retort, when the maidservant stepped in holding a letter. “I’ve got a letter addressed to Miss Watson, ma’am. From Netherfield Hall, it is.” She handed the letter to Molly.

Mrs Watson threw her hands into the air. “Praise the Lord, we are saved. Now open it, Molly, and be quick about it.”

John bit into his toast, chewing and watching his sister’s face as she read through. Harriet whinged next to him. “This is so unfair. I cannot wait until the regiment arrives, then perhaps someone will be writing *me* letters.”

John poked her, and when she looked at him crossly, said, “Mind yourself, Harriet. And remember just because someone wears red, does not make him a good match. Take it from one who knows.” She stuck out her tongue at him.

“It is from *Miss* Lestrade.” Molly’s voice was quiet and everyone seemed to freeze in place. “She’s invited me to lunch while Mr Lestrade is dining elsewhere.”

John could see the emotions flitting over her face: confusion, disappointment, then finally pleased.

“Well, that is most unfortunate.” John watched his mother as her eyes shifted away to look out of the window for a moment. “But you intend to go, do you not?”

Molly looked at John, smiling a little. “Of course. May I take the carriage?”

Before John could answer, Mrs Watson did so for him. “No. You’ll be going on horseback.”

John narrowed his gaze on his mother, but she wouldn’t look him in the eye, a sure sign of her scheming. “Mother. What are you-”

She stood up suddenly, ignoring John’s inquiry. “Come, Molly. Let’s find you something fetching to wear.”

Mrs Watson smiled a secretive little smile as she walked out and up the stairs.

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John sat at his desk, watching the blackened clouds with trepidation. Heavy sheets of rain ran down the windowpanes, warping his view. Molly was caught out there in this torrential downpour, he knew, because it had been raining for the past four hours, starting almost immediately after she had left for Netherfield. He felt an uncomfortable knot in his stomach, because he knew for certain this is what his mother intended to happen. He looked over at her, placidly doing needlepoint, but her smirk gave her away as if she'd had a sign draped around her neck.

“You planned this.” John was equally appalled and amused.

She raised her eyebrow, but didn't look up from her needlepoint. “I am quite sure I have no power over the weather. But it is good fortune, for now Molly will surely have to stay the night at Netherfield.”

“You are diabolical, and I hope she hasn't caught her death out there in this rain.”

She finally met his gaze. “No, I only have my daughter's future at heart. Is that so wrong?”

Not answering, he glanced at the maidservant who appeared at the door. She looked a little nervously at Mrs Watson before starting forward and handing a letter to John, her eyes wide. “A note, sir.” He nodded and took it from her, immediately recognizing Molly's neat script.

Scanning the letter, he pressed his lips together. “*“And Miss Lestrade will not hear of me returning to Longbourne until I am feeling better. Please do not worry, for it is only a sore throat and a slight fever which keeps me in bed, and nothing more serious.”*” John waved the note at his mother. “Are you happy now? Is it a comfort to know your daughter is ill all in the name of the pursuit of Mr Lestrade?”

Mrs Watson huffed dismissively. “People do not die of colds. She will be fine, and this is an excellent opportunity.”

“No, she'll not die of a cold, but she well might perish of shame for having such a devious mother,” he said in exasperation.

Mrs Watson laughed, obviously entertained.

“I am going to her at once.” John stood and made for the door.

“Don't be ridiculous. Molly has the horse and Harriet has taken the carriage with her friends to town.”

He stopped and turned around, pinning his mother with a stare. “Then I will walk. It is not acceptable for Molly to be alone at Netherfield. She needs a chaperone.”

“You'll be a fright by the time you get there,” she tsked, returning to her needlepoint.

John grinned.

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Though the paint in Netherfield's formal dining room was a warm shade which invited images of newly turning fall leaves, the atmosphere was otherwise cold and aloof. Perhaps that had something to do with the inhabitants within, who sat stiffly at the long burnished cherry wood table at one end, a spread of food in front of them enough to feed ten people. As it was, neither Miss Lestrade, nor Mr Holmes were taking advantage of the bounty; she merely picked at her portion and he sat in front of an empty plate.

Irene's blue eyes tracked over the letter she had next to her on the table. "Lady Engleman is to be married again. I don't think her last husband has even cooled in the grave yet. Tsk, tsk. How very scandalous." She sounded much more amused than outraged by this information. As for Sherlock Holmes, he did not care one whit about Lady Engleman. The woman was repellent, and tended to telegraph her ardent interest in Sherlock and any man within easy reach in the most obvious of ways. Obvious to him, anyhow. He didn't deign to comment.

Sherlock turned the page of the newspaper he held, scanning for articles that were *interesting*.

*For let, one charming cottage on Easton Lake. No.*

*A Mister Barton to Auction The Owl and Thistle. No.*

*Lost. One chestnut mare, blind in one eye. Scar on the right flank...No.*

*One man, a Mister Boswell, lost overboard whilst fishing with his son-in-law, a Mister Shankland, and feared dead.*

*Oh, yes.* Sherlock smiled. It was a little game he played with himself, to ease the boredom of gentry life. Scanning through the papers, he would pick out stories that rang of half-truths and twists of plot, and would try to deduce the real story. Occasionally when in London, he would even call on a connection or two in the Metropolitan Police to wheedle for tidbits of information. Anything to keep his mind from atrophying.

A sound at the entryway broke his concentration, and irritated, he looked up to find the footman standing ramrod straight, staring back at him, his expression pinched and disapproving.

"A Captain John Watson, sir, ma'am."

Before the footman could scoot out of the way, Captain Watson circled around him to enter the dining room. His face was flushed, the colour high in his cheeks, his blonde and silver locks tousled carelessly by the wind. Mud caked his breeches up to his knees and his ivory cravat had come partially undone, exposing his tanned throat. A cloth sack was slung carelessly over his shoulder.

Sherlock stared, unblinking, then quickly stood up from the table, more out of habit than etiquette, his mind narrowing down to one single fact.

*Captain John Watson looked better like this, dishevelled and in disarray, than any put together man he'd ever seen.*

Irene stayed in her seat and made a disapproving noise, looking him up and down, her pert nose wrinkled in distaste. "Good God, Captain Watson. Did you *walk* here?"

Captain Watson looked at her, and Sherlock could see the wheels turning in his head, trying to suss out how he should answer her. After a beat, he ignored her question and asked, "I'm sorry,

but I'm here for my sister. How is she?" Sherlock watched as worry lines creased his forehead.

He knew how it was to worry about a sibling, so he answered, "She's upstairs, resting." He looked at the footman. "Show him the way, Edward."

John nodded with a slight distracted smile and followed Edward out of the room. Sherlock stayed standing, staring at the spot Captain Watson had just vacated.

"My goodness. Did you see his breeches? Mud up to his knees."

Looking toward her, he didn't comment.

"So generally untidy. Disgraceful!" Irene sounded truly scandalised.

Sherlock narrowed his gaze. "I think his concern for his sister does him credit."

Irene sat for a beat before an insincere smile twisted her lips. "Oh yes. I think it's simply *marvellous*." She laid her fork down on the plate, eyeing him narrowly. "Be careful, Mr Holmes. One might be led to believe you are beginning to like our lowly Captain Watson." Her smile widened perceptibly as Sherlock turned on his heel to walk out of the room.

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Edward pointed the way once they reached the top of the stairs, and John stepped into the hallway. A worried looking Mr Lestrade stood outside a closed door, obviously straining to hear the conversation happening inside. As John walked up, he cleared his throat subtly, and Lestrade jerked back from the door as if shocked.

"Oh. John! It's good to see you." A smile flitted across his face before it became serious again.

"How is she?" John asked, just as the door opened and a portly man wearing rectangular spectacles exited the room. Lestrade looked to the doctor hopefully, his frame tense.

"She'll be fine. A violent cold, yes, but she'll get the better of it. She only needs to rest." The doctor nodded and began to move between them. The anxiety bled out of Lestrade, relaxing his shoulders as he leaned against the wall. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Both of the men left in the hallway watched him leave. John turned. "Mr Lestrade--"

"Greg. Please call me Greg, John." His smile was true now, and John appreciated how much younger it made the other man look. He glanced at the sack slung across John's shoulder. "Oh. Yes. You'll be staying here, of course. I'll have one of the servants set up a room for you straightaway."

"Greg, then. Thank you, I'd appreciate that." John raised his eyebrows, not ashamed in the least he'd forced the issue, albeit indirectly. "I'd like to check on my sister now."

Blinking, Lestrade seemed to remember himself and step away from the door. "Of course, of course. I'll just..." He motioned vaguely toward the stairway and started toward them.

John waited for a moment and then stepped through the doorway, entering a well-appointed but simple bedroom. Molly lay in the centre of a large four-poster canopy bed, draped in crisp white linens, her hair fanned out around her. Her eyes were closed and her face was pale, save for two

high spots of colour, giving proof to her fevered state. A thin sheen of sweat filmed her face.

“Molly.” John grasped her wrist and sat at the edge of the bed.

She opened her eyes and gasped weakly in surprise. Her brown eyes were tired but she grinned, her face lighting up.

“John! Your fingers are so cold.”

“Sorry,” he said, but he didn’t remove his hand. “Molly, I’m glad you are going to be better sooner rather than later, and so is Mr Lestrade. I don’t know who is happier you are here, him or Mother.”

“I feel like such an imposition. I didn’t mean to get ill.” She looked tired from speaking already and John kissed her knuckles.

“I’d have to rank you along with Mother if you had.” He laughed, standing up. “Now, get your rest, and we’ll get you home as soon as we can.”

She sighed and turned to her side, her breaths evening out almost immediately, even as John watched, wondering how he was going to get through the evening on a pleasant note.



## Chapter 3

John Watson was a man who would say, had he been asked, that found himself comfortable in most situations. He was not nervous by nature, nor did he think overmuch on what others thought of him. They could care for his company or not, and it would not matter one way or another. He was not completely unaware, however, of moments when tension threaded itself within a room and around its occupants like a spider weaving a web around a poor unsuspecting fly.

After being settled in a room down the hall from Molly, John had changed into the extra clothes he had brought in the sack that had been slung across his shoulder when he'd traipsed through the mud and fields to Netherfield Hall. He'd then made his way the drawing room with a book from home within his hand, where a warm fire burned brightly in the grate, and the room was blessedly empty. Settling himself on a seat near the warmth, he went about reading in peace for a good amount of time before Mr Lestrade, Miss Lestrade and Mr Holmes trickled in, one right after another. Polite greetings were given, and John had hoped the evening would pass so, though he honestly berated himself later for not having foreseen the outcome.

Mr Holmes sat at a small desk against the far wall, writing on expensive looking cream parchment, concentrating on his task with the utmost focus. He was dressed in dark colours again, which were rather flattering with his pale skin and dark hair, but wore a brilliant blue waistcoat that made John smile at the incongruity of such a bold item on such a stern man. He wondered briefly if it were some indication of the underlying personality of Mr Holmes, or if he just enjoyed throwing fashion conventions to the wind. Miss Lestrade played with cards at a side table, sliding calculating looks occasionally at the others in the room, her ebony hair swept high off of her face, making her cheekbones stand out prominently. Mr Lestrade roamed aimlessly, as if bored, flitting from one spot to the next, never staying for long.

"Mr Holmes, you are very hard at work over there, and you are writing exceedingly fast," Miss Lestrade commented, breaking the silence.

Without even a pause, Mr Holmes replied, "Your definition and mine of the meaning of hard work differs greatly then, for I just write correspondence. And not so quickly as that."

"How many letters must you write? Letters of business then? An awful task, if that is what you are doing." Her tone was wheedling, and John saw Mr Holmes press those full lips together in irritation.

"Then I imagine you should be grateful the task falls to me, and not to you." His tone was flat, but his message was clear: He wanted Miss Lestrade to cease her talking.

Either unaware or uncaring of his mood, she carried on. "Please tell your sister I cannot wait to see her again. It's been too long."

Sister? Now that was interesting. It was difficult to think of Mr Holmes as related by birth to anyone, much less a sister. John wondered if she were as cold as Mr Holmes, and if there were any other siblings.

Mr Holmes put his quill down and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I've already done so, at your request. I am fairly certain she is bright enough to understand the message the first time."

It was John's turn to press his lips together, not from irritation, but from an attempt to hide his amusement. It was obvious Mr Holmes only tolerated Miss Lestrade because of her connection to Mr Lestrade.

Miss Lestrade smiled, looking at John directly. "I do adore her so. She is so very talented and refined, as she should be, given her station."

In other words, *a station you are nowhere near attaining, John Watson.*

John let the sting roll off, and turned his eyes back to his book. Good lord, he hoped Molly was better by tomorrow.

Mr Holmes grunted, and resumed penning his letter. "I trust you'll give me leave to include your...adorations in a subsequent letter, as I seem to not have room on this to do them justice."

Mr Lestrade now paced anxiously around the room, John did his best to ignore him.

Miss Lestrade changed tactics. "Captain Watson, I am to understand you were in the army and travelled extensively. Please do tell." Her tone was falsely solicitous.

He looked up. "Yes, thus the title I bear." John didn't particularly enjoy talking about his time in the regimentals. Not that he was in any way ashamed or not proud of his service, but it brought up memories of companions lost and time away from those he cared about.

"Captain. Yes. Is there a reason why your star did not fly higher?" John had to remind himself Miss Lestrade was a lady, despite her behaviour.

"I had to retire from service." Perhaps if he kept his answers brief, she'd redirect her attentions elsewhere and he could go back to his book.

"Had to?" She laughed teasingly. "Oh dear, Captain Watson. Did you do something unbecoming?"

John noticed Mr Holmes had stopped writing altogether and was studying him intently, as if trying to figure something out. He fought a flush which threatened to colour his face, though he didn't want to examine too closely if it stemmed from his irritation with Miss Lestrade, or Mr Holmes' scrutiny.

"No. There were very respectable reasons for my doing so." He didn't feel the need to expand on that.

"You were shot." Mr Holmes's voice rang with certainty and John's gaze snapped to him reflexively.

"How...?" How could he possibly know that? No one knew that, save for his family and Sally. John was never one to share war stories with his acquaintances.

Miss Lestrade laughed again, as Mr Lestrade sat on the seat opposite him, still for the first time in several minutes. "Oh, he does that occasionally. He fancies himself very observant."

Mr Holmes cut an unpleasant glance toward Miss Lestrade. "I don't fancy myself anything. I merely *am* observant." He tilted his head and turned that icy gaze at John again. "You were shot in your left shoulder, at close range, I'd say by a military issue flintlock, obviously, since the injury happened during your service and you do not seem the type for seedy alleyway brawls ending in gunfire. The lead ball passed through, and you have some scar tissue that alters the way you use your left arm. It is not difficult, if you pay attention." He raised his eyebrow.

John's mouth was dry. He swallowed, but it didn't particularly help. "That was..." He cleared his throat. "Yes. I was shot, and you were right about the rest, too. But I came home for my family." He lifted his chin, nonverbally daring Mr Holmes to comment.

“But to see the world and be so accomplished, Captain Watson! *Surely* you can tell us more about that,” Mr Lestrade implored.

“Oh, yes, please do,” Miss Lestrade agreed.

“The word is applied too liberally, as far as I am concerned. There are many more men who fancy themselves accomplished than there actually are in this world. I know few of true accomplishment,” Mr Holmes said as he kept his gaze on John.

“I am surprised you know any. I know plenty of accomplished men, but then it all depends on what you consider worthy of praise, I imagine. If one looks for actions or talents to commend, then one will assuredly find them, but in contrast, if one has expectations so high they are unattainable, one will be sorely disappointed in the accomplishments of men.” John smiled pointedly, enjoying the look of mild surprise on Mr Holmes countenance before he deliberately turned his body to face Miss Lestrade.

“I was under Colonel Jeffries Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers on the continent and in India for a time. I was injured in a skirmish against the natives in the Nepal mountains over a border dispute,” he supplied grudgingly. “I count myself fortunate I got out alive, because several of my regiment did not.” Shifting in his seat, John watched Miss Lestrade’s deceptively lovely face fall when she realised they had wandered into the territory of talking about a topic as serious as death, and was not surprised in the least when in her next breath, she altered the direction of the conversation with a fresh smile.

“Captain Watson. Don’t you find our Mr Holmes’ hobby of deduction amusing? He can do that with anyone, you know, pick them apart until he knows everything about them without them saying a word.” Miss Lestrade laughed. It was not a pleasant sound, and even Mr Lestrade looked at her askance.

John glanced over his shoulder to see Mr Holmes bent over his letter once again. “I don’t find it amusing at all. I find it worthy of praise. I would not laugh at that.”

Mr Holmes looked up through his very long, very dark lashes to meet John’s smiling gaze before looking away.

Miss Lestrade was amused, her eyes glittering. “Oh no. Mr Holmes is not to be laughed at.”

John turned to eye Mr Holmes critically. “No, I don’t doubt it. But it is unfortunate, because I love to laugh. Is that a flaw, Mr Holmes?” Part of him was teasing, the other part just wanted to see what would transpire.

Disappointingly, Mr Holmes kept his nose to his letter, the quill scratching methodically across the page. “I could not say,” he replied.

John couldn’t resist pushing just a little harder. “And you, Mr Holmes? Have you a fault?”

Sighing, Mr Holmes set down his quill and ran a hand through his hair. Not that it had been notably neat before, but now it stood in all sorts of interesting directions, including that one errant curl that fell on the middle of his forehead. Unconsciously, John licked his lower lip in response.

“It would not be possible to not have one, but it has been my study to avoid certain weaknesses.”

That made John pause. What would this man consider a weakness? “Such as vanity, or perhaps pride?” he suggested.

“Vanity is a weakness, but pride, where there is a superiority of mind, pride will always be justifiable. I would imagine it would be that I find it difficult to forgive the follies and offenses of others against me. Once someone has lost my good opinion, it is impossible to regain it.” Mr Holmes’ tone was stiff, as if giving away even this bit of information pained him.

Pride. Now there was something that was not surprising in the least.

Nodding, John replied, “I certainly will not laugh at you for that either, for I am much the same way. I suspect, however, my threshold for offense is much higher than yours, Mr Holmes, and therefore our circles will differ widely.” He stood, tucking his book under his arm and nodding to all three of the occupants in the room in turn. “Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I am going to retire for the evening.”

He felt Mr Holmes’ gaze track him the entire way out of the room.

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John sat on the edge of the bed, presently dressed in his smallclothes and nightshirt, as he ran a hand along the fine silk coverlet on the bed. He’d checked in on Molly before coming to his room, and was pleased to find her fever had broken and she’d been sleeping soundly. So much so that even laying a hand across her forehead had not been enough to wake her.

Now though, in the silence of this room a good bit later, in the dim light of only a single candle flame, he allowed thoughts of the evening to creep into his mind. He breathed deeply through his nose and raised his chin, trying to suss out what was making him anxious and unsettled. Repeatedly, his thoughts circled around to one subject.

*Mr Holmes.*

A tap on the door made him stand quickly and rush forward to open it. There could only be one reason why someone would come to retrieve him at this time of night; Molly must have taken a turn for the worst or had called for him. Either way, he felt his heart kick in his chest. When he swung the door open, however, he was completely unprepared for the sight in front of him. Mr Holmes, looking much as he had in the drawing room, but for the expression on his face. He looked upset, in comparison to his usual composed manner.

“What is it? Is it Molly? Has she worsened?” He tried to edge his way around Mr Holmes, but found he could not, as the other man blocked the exit with his body.

“No.” Mr Holmes’ voice was rough, and made John stop short. The tension drained out of his body.

“Then what...?” Looking up, he found Mr Holmes looking at him in that riveted way again, taking in every facet of his face and his question drifted away into the darkness, unasked. John could feel the other man’s warm breath on his cheeks, and realised with a start just how close they were standing to each other. He tried to take a step back, but Mr Holmes caught him by the arm to arrest John’s movement, his slender fingers gripping tightly.

“You are...disconcerting, Captain Watson.” The admission was difficult, if Mr Holmes’ expression were true to his feelings.

John was not afraid, nor was he intimidated. Far from it. John Watson knew his capabilities better than anyone else, and therefore knew Mr Holmes posed no physical threat. Attempting to extricate

himself out of Mr Holmes' grasp, however, was only successful in pulling him nearer to John, who could feel the buttons of Mr Holmes' jacket through the fabric of his nightshirt. His body responded traitorously before his brain thought better of it.

"Mr Holmes, I suggest you let go of me, because I could truly care less if you-"

Cutting off his reply and any further coherent thoughts in his head, Mr Holmes pressed his mouth to John's, his soft full lips seeking contact almost desperately. Shock made John unresponsive and rigid, and then Mr Holmes threaded his fingers through John's hair to cup the back of his head and pull him impossibly closer. John gasped and Mr Holmes took immediate advantage, sliding his tongue along the inside of John's mouth, slow and sensual in a way that was suggestive of far more illicit endeavours. Warmth pooled in his belly and wound its way around his lower back in reaction.

*Dear Lord, the man knew what he was doing.*

Before he thought about his behaviour and the fact that anyone walking by could see them here, he gave into the madness, gave everything to it, a moment of insanity in a sea of expected respectability and social regulation, where the roar of his blood deafened him to reason. His hands inched up to grab at the lapels of Mr Holmes' fine wool jacket, gripping it within clenched fists. John kissed back, but did not give up control easily, twisting and pushing Mr Holmes roughly against the doorframe, his thigh sliding between Mr Holmes' long legs. The hand at the back of John's head tightened spasmodically, causing John to grunt deep in the back of his throat.

*Oh God. Yes, please.* He might have whispered it aloud.

Mr Holmes stilled, pulling his head back, panting damp breaths against John's kiss-swollen lips. John's urge was to immediately follow that sinful mouth and claim it again, but instead John watched him, waiting. His eyes were closed, his sharp cheekbones flushed and lips turned near red from the kissing, lips that pressed together and then turned in a grimace. The hand in John's hair loosened, and dropped heavily to his side. Tendrils of ice made their way through John's veins like frost spreading on a windowpane. John let go, pushing himself back and away within his room, willing his desire to fade. He knew how this would go before Mr Holmes even opened his eyes.

When Mr Holmes, indeed, did open his eyes, they were cool and aloof and could not look at John directly.

John swallowed hard. "I think you need to leave, Mr Holmes." John's voice was brittle and clipped.

"Yes...I..." Mr Holmes cleared his throat and John could see him working up to saying something, something that would more than likely make John want to hit him more than he already did. He clenched his fists at his sides, and stiffened his spine, adopting a military posture out of years of habit.

"I suggest you do not say a word, Mr Holmes, as I am sure it will have something to do with your lapse of judgement or something along that vein. Please be assured we are both at fault and it will not happen again and no one will be the wiser." John's stomach rolled inside his belly, full of acid that threatened to rise in his throat.

What the bloody hell had he been thinking? He felt like a fool for allowing his desire get the better of him. But no, he wasn't the only one to blame here, and he needed to remember that.

Mr Holmes' jaw worked, clenching hard enough the muscle ticced under the strain. He met John's

gaze then, his eyes still distant, but as they stared at one another, a shadow passed across them quickly. So quickly John thought he might have imagined it.

John nodded sharply. "Good night, Mr Holmes," he said tersely, and shut the door firmly without waiting for a response.

## Chapter 4

The morning dawned grey and dreary, but there was no rain, and for that, John was eternally grateful. He sat in the window seat, his legs drawn up so his chin rested on his knees, as he gazed unseeingly at the fields separating Netherfield Hall from Longbourne as he'd done for the past hour. He'd slept poorly, tossing and turning in the expensive Egyptian cotton bed linens which made his own seem like unrefined burlap in comparison, his mind analysing and reanalysing the events of the preceding evening, only to come up with more questions than when he'd started. By the time he'd dressed and made his way to Molly's room, he'd forcefully put aside any further thoughts of Mr Holmes beyond that of a rather unpleasant neighbour.

Motion outside on the closely clipped lawn caught his eye and he looked down to see the object of his wandering thoughts striding up from the stables, looking windblown and exhausted, his hair damp from sweat and his missing his usual topcoat and cravat. Mr Holmes stopped at the water pump set to the side of the garden, pulling on the handle until water gushed out into the trough below. Leaning down, he doused his head thoroughly and stood up quickly, face to the sky as he closed his eyes and squeezed the excess water from his hair before he scrubbed his hands through his inky curls. The water dripped down and wet his shirt, making it cling appealingly to his long torso.

"John?" A soft voice from behind him pulled his attention away from the view. Molly was awake, her eyes clear and a smile on her lips. He smiled in return and in relief.

"Molly, do you think you might feel well enough to leave today?"

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The footman opened the door, and John noticed straight away he had not lost his pinched, deprecatory expression. He wondered if he was always like that, or saved his sour expressions for when guests arrived at Netherfield unexpectedly.

"A Mrs Watson and a Miss Watson, sir." He stood aside, allowing Mrs Watson and Harriet to sweep into the sitting room, where currently he, Miss Lestrade, Mr Lestrade and Mr Holmes sat drinking afternoon tea. John had done an admirable job so far avoiding Mr Holmes either entirely or simply ignoring his presence in the same room, and was rather proud of himself for doing so, though it had not been difficult considering Mr Holmes seemed to be doing the same. They'd been in the formal sitting room for the past half hour and hadn't even looked at each other, John choosing to engage Mr Lestrade in conversation about his horses and his penchant for fox hunts, while Mr Holmes talked quietly with Miss Lestrade.

John stood at the footman's announcement, and cringed inwardly at his mother's immediate dominance of the space with her voice.

"What a beautiful room, Mr Lestrade. So well laid out and well-appointed. I do hope you intend to stay here at Netherfield," she simpered, and John sighed internally. He knew where this was headed.

"Well, I certainly am enjoying my time here. It's very diverting, wouldn't you say, Holmes?" Mr Lestrade said graciously.

“It’s adequate, although the company is not as varied as that in town.” He’d made no move to rise or to greet the new guests in the room, but instead eyed them shrewdly, as if he were gathering information for future use. And John cringed, knowing now the level of detail Mr Holmes could collect from a seemingly casual glance.

“Adequate?” Mrs Watson retorted shrilly. “I assure you, Mr Holmes, we here in the country are quite social and there are many families to dine with and to keep one entertained. I cannot see where London has the advantage over the country, though I do grant the shops are plentiful and its public places are appealing.”

Mr Holmes raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Indeed.”

Mrs Watson huffed, visibly offended. John’s mother may have been loud and over-forward, but she was no fool, and recognised when she was being mocked. John had no desire to defend Mr Holmes, but could not fight the habit of taking the role of peacekeeper.

“Mother, I think you could agree there is more of a variety of people in London than here, if nothing else.” John saw Mr Holmes’ eyebrows draw down in momentary confusion before schooling his face to a proper level of haughtiness.

“I will agree to no such thing, John. We are just as cultured here in the country as anyone in London. You forget the dance we just attended!” Her eyes glittered in her perceived triumph.

“Yes, we cannot forget such a social occasion,” Miss Lestrade commented drolly, taking a sip of her tea and blinking innocently.

Harriet chose then to speak up. “Oh, please tell us you’ll have a bigger, grander one here at Netherfield!” She bit her lip and smiled hopefully as she looked between Mr Lestrade and Miss Lestrade, her blue eyes sparkling with the enthusiasm of youth. “You could invite the regiment. Think of all the new people you could meet!”

Miss Lestrade coughed delicately into the back of her hand and Mr Holmes looked fully at John for the first time all day. His expression was inscrutable, and John remained calm on the outside, yet was both embarrassed and affronted on the inside.

“When your sister is completely recovered, we will be sure to plan one,” Mr Lestrade replied, not at all put off by Harriet’s brashness. Turning to Mrs Watson, he beamed at her. “Now, come, Mrs Watson, let me take you to Molly. She’s feeling ever so much better and will be pleased to see you.”

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The Watsons’ carriage awaited on the gravel drive, looking small and quaint when compared to the grandiose lines and angles that made up the front of Netherfield Hall. The sky grew lighter by the moment, and weak rays of sunshine filtered through the thin layer of clouds. The Lestrades and Sherlock stood on the white marble steps to see off their guests, Sherlock standing slightly behind the others. He was tall enough to be able to see over their heads as he stood rigidly, his hands clasped behind his back and he was exceptionally glad no one could see how tightly he gripped his own fingers. He watched Captain Watson lead a recovered, yet still frail looking Miss Watson down the steps to stop in front of them; navigating them with care. Mrs Watson and the younger Miss Watson already waited in the carriage.

“I don’t know if I can ever thank you properly for your hospitality and graciousness,” Molly Watson said warmly. Captain Watson smiled along side her, but it didn’t reach his eyes.



*Ah.*

*Angry, then.*

*Who is he more angry with for my lack of control and his ardent response? Me, or himself?*

Sherlock had been avoiding picking apart his own culpability for their singularly exceptional kiss. He'd only meant to talk to Captain Watson privately; to suss through his uncommonly strong response to the other man and therefore snuff the gnawing feeling that wrapped around his chest when the other man was near. He hadn't intended on kissing him, and even if he had, he wouldn't have expected to enjoy it so bloody much. As it was, after Sherlock had the door so firmly closed in his face, he'd fled to his room and did his best to forget he'd ever done such a thing. Sherlock Holmes was no innocent, but he could not justify an attraction to *anyone*, much less John Watson. He didn't care to encumber himself with the burden of emotional attachment, as he was perfectly content with his life as it stood.

He hadn't fallen asleep for a very long time.

"Really, you are welcome any time you are feeling even the least bit poorly." Lestrade could do nothing but stare with his heart in his gaze as he regarded Miss Watson, who smiled politely. Sherlock had to fight not to roll his eyes. How did *anyone* ever get to a point where they simply lost their head like his friend had apparently lost his? He would never understand, nor fall victim to the absurdities of sentimentality.

Greg smiled at Captain Watson and waited for him to nod before taking Miss Watson's elbow and leading her to the carriage to help her inside.

Captain Watson bowed slightly to Irene. "Thank you for the stimulating company. I am sure I will look back and find my memory ill-equipped to compete with the truth of how instructive my time here has been." His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides before he pressed his palms flat upon his thighs, as if to stop himself from doing something habitual.

*Agitated.*

*Interesting.*

Irene paused for a moment, and Sherlock sensed her tensing next to him, but her response showed nothing of her physical reaction. "Not at all, Captain Watson. It is I that have been enlightened, and I'm sure Mr Holmes would agree to the same." Her eyes skated toward Sherlock fleetingly. "The pleasure has been *ours*." A smile curled her mouth.

A flash of reaction flickered in Captain Watson's blue eyes, and Sherlock thought for certain he had caught the subtle inflection in Irene's voice, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned to Sherlock, a sudden tightness pulling at his lips as he inclined his head slightly. "Mr Holmes."

Sherlock nodded back, feeling a little off-balance and not quite understanding why. "Captain Watson."

When the carriage finally pulled away, and Lestrade had retreated happily into the house, Irene turned to Sherlock and grinned smugly before sailing past him and through the door.

Sherlock observed the carriage until he could no longer see it on the horizon.

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John watched the countryside pass by, tired and distracted as his mother and Harriet prattled on about the finery of Netherfield Hall. He wished desperately for her silence, for his head was beginning to ache from his lack of rest the night before and her voice scraped like ragged fingernails on the inside of his skull. He turned to his family, his tone unintentionally abrupt. "Yes, Mother. As you have mentioned several times in many different variations, Netherfield Hall is something to be admired. I am sure its occupants appreciate your emphatic esteem of the grounds and the rooms you were able to see."

His mother and Harriet stopped short, both looking a bit nonplussed. Molly's eyes were closed as she leaned her head against the side of the cab, but he knew she was awake, because she smiled slightly.

His mother recovered directly, however, shifting the subject. "I don't think Mr Holmes did as much. He is such a disagreeable man. He is full of pride and thinks of himself too well, in my opinion."

"That may be so, but he is a friend of Mr Lestrade, and I imagine Molly would consider it a kindness if you at least try to treat him respectfully."

Mrs Watson huffed indignantly. "He shall be treated as he so deserves."

Just what *did* he deserve? John wondered. Granted, Mr Holmes was a pretentious git, but the man was bound by the expectations of his class; born and raised to look down upon everyone not in his station. Could he blame Mr Holmes for this? No, but that didn't mean he had to like it. John couldn't deny he was physically attracted to Mr Holmes, that much had been laid out as obvious the night before; he only regretted Mr Holmes had been privy to his vulnerability. He closed his eyes briefly against the memory of soft, full lips on his own, banishing it into a small, dark corner of his mind.

The carriage slowly drew to a halt, rocking them side to side. Confused because they were not yet to Longbourne, John leaned to look out the window to see what was the matter. Several rows of cherry red uniformed regimentals marched in formation along the crossroad leading to Meryton, blocking the path of the carriage and those within it. There must have been two hundred or so troops within view, with more off in the distance, trailing behind several carts of provisions and supplies. Officers rode along the edges, their bearing erect and demanding attention. John felt a sudden errant wistfulness for his days in the calvary. He rubbed at his shoulder absently, but his mood was lightened by the sight of something so familiar.

Harriet sighed beside him, "There must be *thousands* of them." Mrs Watson grinned like a silly school girl beside her. Even Molly had given up the deception of sleeping to take a look so all four of them crammed against the small window of the carriage. Several of the soldiers had taken notice of their audience and smiled broadly or give a friendly salute, and one of them, a dark haired, devilishly handsome man winked. He stood a little apart from the others and actually stopped to rock back on his heels and wave impishly. The mounted officer on the other side of the road noticed he was out of formation immediately.

"Oi! Moriarty! Back in line!" Moriarty laughed and trotted back to his spot with a sassy waggle of his eyebrows.

"Ooooooh. *That* one. I think I've just died and gone to heaven." Harriet held her hand to her forehead and leaned heavily on her mother, who laughed.

John chuckled, amused, and then urged them all to sit back in their seats, as they could see the end

of the line approaching. He leaned out the window a bit to call to Jeremiah, their aged footman.  
“Jeremiah, please carry on when you can.”

## Chapter 5

John sighed and put the letter down on the dining room table, pinching the bridge of his nose; though his true urge was to walk right back up the stairs and crawl into his bed, throwing the coverlet over his head to block out the day. But no, he could not, no matter how much he wanted to. He opened his eyes reluctantly and observed his family around the table for a moment, all of them chattering happily, not noticing his sudden change of heart, before interrupting.

“Mother, you’d best let the cook know we are to be receiving a guest for dinner this evening.” His comment brought the conversation to a halt; serious in contrast to their light-hearted banter. Molly looked at him, her eyes concerned, the only one who listened to the tone in his voice.

His mother, unmindful of his attitude, screeched excitedly at Molly, “Mr Lestrade! Molly, you sly thing you. You never said a word! Harriet, darling, ring the bell. I must speak to Hill about the menu directly!” She waved her hands frantically about at Harriet as if she didn’t know where to let them land. Harriet made to get up.

Molly was shaking her head in denial already, looking confused. “No, Mama, I don’t-”

“No, it is not Mr Lestrade.” John’s voice cut through the sudden activity like a knife. His mother deflated quickly, slumping back into her seat at the news, Harriet sitting back down beside her. She was never one to miss gossip if there was any to be had. “About a month ago, I received a letter, and replied to it, for I thought it was a case of some delicacy requiring early attention. It was from father’s cousin, Mr Anderson, who, apparently now that he has received his ordination and been given patronage has decided he is wont of a spouse. My response was polite, but apparently not clear enough to keep him from seeking here.” John looked at Molly, who blinked at him, wide-eyed.

“A spouse?” she mouthed.

Mrs Watson groaned. “Oh, do not speak of that odious little man. There is good reason why we have not seen him since you were young, John, and Molly was just a babe. Your father could not abide by him; he was a snivelling little brat, even then.” She grimaced. “You are saying he wants to marry one of you.”

John gritted his teeth. “Yes. That seems to be the idea.”

Harriet snickered. “Oh, this is fantastic!” John glowered at her.

His mother’s eyes zeroed in on John, and suddenly he felt as if he were three years old again and had gotten caught nicking boiled sweets from the pantry. Her gaze turned thoughtful, a finger tapping against her bottom lip in contemplation. “A patronage, you read in his letter? Perhaps from someone of good stature? That could mean a very promising career for him, wouldn’t you say?”

Now it was John’s turn to groan, wanting to stem this before it grew out of control. “Mother-”

She leaned over and patted his hand. “Now, now, John. Molly is as good as engaged to Mr Lestrade, and when she goes to live at Netherfield, it is probably that Harriet and I will go with her.” Molly made a quiet strangled sound next to him. “Time changes people, and it is with good likelihood Mr Anderson has grown into a suitable prospect.”

John was so aghast at such a complete turnaround; he completely lost the power of speech.

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The family gathered outside of Longbourne as an elegantly appointed phaeton travelled down the gravel drive, led by two impressive gleaming black horses. The lone occupant sat high on the perch, back ramrod straight, black clothing visible from where they all stood.

“And here he comes,” murmured Molly under her breath. “You don’t suppose he is a sensible man?” She looked at John hopefully.

“From the sound of his communication, I wouldn’t hold out hope.” John’s lip twitched. “Indeed, I truly suspect quite the reverse.”

The phaeton rolled to a stop and Mr Anderson, in his long black clergyman robes, stepped down from his seat. He was of average build and unimpressive; his facial features were vaguely rat-like and his expression lent to that impression. Stepping over to the Watsons in a dramatic flutter of black fabric, he removed his circular brimmed hat and bowed deeply. John, Molly and their mother looked at each other over his dark head in mild surprise, while Harriet giggled openly.

Standing up, Mr Anderson’s face could be called nothing less than simpering. “My dear Mrs Watson.” He grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles, then turned to John, his eyes assessing. “Captain Watson,” he nearly purred, inclining his head.

His smile combined with the intimate tone elicited a shudder from John, which he hoped was not noticeable, and he forced his own countenance to remain congenial. “Mr Anderson, welcome to Longbourne.”

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The maidservant unobtrusively brought in the tea service on a tray, setting it on the table before quietly slipping back into the kitchen.

Mrs Watson reached for the pot to begin pouring. She cleared her throat. “So, please tell us about your patroness, Mr Anderson.”

“*Patron*, actually. I am very fortunate Sir Mycroft Holmes has been generous and kind in his patronage of me.”

*Holmes?* John nearly dropped the teacup his mother had just passed him, liquid sloshing over the edge to land on his knee. He rubbed at it absently.

“I’m sorry. Did you say *Holmes?*” John’s voice definitely did *not* squeak just a bit.

Mr Anderson blinked and looked around the room, realising the Watsons were all staring at him, waiting for an answer.

“Why yes, I did. Sir Mycroft Holmes of Rosings Park.” He looked confused. “Why do you all looked so...shocked? Surely you have heard of Sir Holmes?”

Mrs Watson answered. “We are acquainted with a Mr Sherlock Holmes, and are...curious if they are of a relation?”

“Why yes, they are brothers, though I have never met him. Sir Mycroft Holmes is the eldest in the family, and resides at Rosings Park as opposed to Pemberley, where the younger Mr Holmes resides. But let me tell you of Rosings Park, for I believe you will appreciate the grandeur of such a place. Why, the fireplace alone is made of imported Italian marble and cost...”

Mr Anderson’s voice trailed off into a drone inside John’s head as he assimilated this new information about Mr Holmes. He felt vaguely uncomfortable with the fact there was yet another connection, albeit thin, between them. It discomfited him.

Molly nudged him from her spot next to him on the settee. “John,” she whispered. “Are you alright? You don’t look well.”

He replaced the smile which had slipped off of his face. “I’m fine.”

John had certainly learned how to appear to listen (he did grow up with Mrs Watson after all), but after a seemingly interminable amount of time in Mr Anderson’s company, he found himself straining to keep his eyes open.

“...have been treated with such affability, such cordiality as I never would have hoped for. Sir Mycroft Holmes is the epitome of gentlemanly behaviour and his influence is something to be admired.” Mr Anderson continued, oblivious to the midpoint stares of the room.

Molly cleared her throat, shaking herself to focus. “That’s so...Does he live near you, sir?”

Mr Anderson nodded. “My lovely home is only across the lane from Rosings Park.”

Keeping a straight face, John commented, “Only a lane? Fancy that, Molly.”

“Oh, yes. You may imagine sir how happy I am to offer compliments to show my appreciation.”

John had to bite the inside of his cheek and Molly leaned into him, her frame vibrating with restrained mirth.

“Sir Holmes is lucky you possess such a talent for flattery. Do you offer these pleasing attentions on the spur of the moment, or must you practice?” John asked.

Mr Anderson looked sagely at John, then at the others. “Oh I do practice, sometimes I even write down and arrange such compliments in the event that I may adapt them to any occasion, though I try to give them as unstudied air as possible.”

“Excellent,” John replied. His eyes stung.

---

It was finally warm enough to venture outside after long endless weeks of rain, the sun peeking through the clouds enough to dry the grounds. John and Molly ambled slowly around the edge of the properly confined English garden, enjoying the blessed warmth on their faces. They walked slowly, enjoying the quiet. Harriet was gone, in town with Lily, a good friend, while their mother and Mr Anderson sat talking under the oak.

“I don’t like the way that looks.” John nodded subtly toward them. Their mother always got a certain gleam in her eyes when the wheels were turning in her head, and she wore that look now. John knew her goal. She may think Mr Anderson was a weasel in minister’s clothes, but his

connections and prospects were decent. Combining the wealth of Longbourne with Mr Anderson's parish would solve their financial issues and set his mother's mind at ease about John's future. She cared not about the leanings of John's heart, or that John was the head of the household at Longbourne. She wanted him married and settled. But John was no feeble opponent when it came to what he felt was right and just. His mother would have to maneuver through her disappointment when her scheming did not work out this time.

Molly grimaced. "She's up to something."

John sighed and tilted his head up, ceasing to walk any further and closing his eyes as a ray of sun touched his face, warming his skin. "That much is obvious. Let's hope it does not amount to much in the end."

"It would not be an issue if you had someone of interest, John."

He brought his head down, blinking the sun out of his eyes. "That would be astounding, considering I would have to conjure such an interest out of thin air."

Molly looked at him astutely, pursing her lips a bit. "Hmmm..."

"What?"

"Maybe not out of thin air?" She raised her chin, as if defying him to contradict her.

Heat rose to John's face, and he had to look away, his eyes focused on the pond across the yard. "I don't know what you mean."

"No?" A sweet smile graced her face, all innocence and guilelessness. Her eyes, however, told a different story.

"Molly, your imagination runs wild. There is no one who is interesting enough to hold my attention," John scoffed.

She sucked in a breath. "Interesting turn of phrase, love. I wonder where I have heard that before?" She smirked knowingly and walked away, leaving John momentarily stunned before he hurried to catch up with her, determined to steer away from the subject altogether.

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"Mrs Watson, I am charmed by your eldest daughter. She is a lovely young woman and holds herself with great dignity and bearing. I daresay even Sir Mycroft Holmes would agree with me, though he is spare with his blandishments." Mr Anderson eyed Molly and John as he and Mrs Watson made their way through the other side of the garden, following the dirt path to the old oak tree. Underneath its great boughs sat a carved stone bench, shaded from the sun inviting rest from passer-bys. He gestured to the seat, waiting politely until she lowered herself before he did so himself.

Mrs Watson hummed in agreement. "Yes, Molly is much admired, but I must tell you, Mr Anderson, it is very possible she will be engaged soon." They both kept their eyes forward, and Mrs Watson looked out at John and Molly talking quietly. She looked at him slyly. "John, however, has no such attachments..."

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As John and Molly watched, Mr Anderson stood and nodded at their mother, then started making his way toward them, a determined smile on his pointy features.

“John,” Molly whispered urgently, tugging on his sleeve.

He took her elbow and steered her toward the gravel road, walking briskly. “Come on. To town we go.”

Molly giggled now. “The bend in the road? At the willow?”

John winked at her, reminded of when they were children. When going to town on foot, they always took off running pell mell after the bend in the road at the end of their drive, racing gleefully until they reached the tailor’s shop at the start of town. Most of the time, John would win their race, but not always, despite Molly’s restriction of a dress.

As they neared the great weeping willow tree, with its great low-hanging branches and leaves which concealed much, John threw a look over his shoulder in hopes Mr Anderson had already given up his pursuit of their attentions. They would have no such luck, however, and now the man was having a difficult time keeping up without looking undignified.

They turned the corner, obscured by the tree and on silent signal, took off running, Molly hitching her dress so she didn’t trip over the long fabric, John’s face flushed and reckless the entire way, not looking back even once more.



## Chapter 6

Slowing down to a walk, and then finally a stop outside the town's singular dress shop, a winded John and Molly collapsed against the outer wall and laughed side-by-side until their eyes ran. When they'd finally caught their breath, Molly put her hands to her pinkened cheeks.

"Oh my, John. That was so very childish of us. Maybe we shouldn't have."

John felt a twinge of guilt, but not enough of one to regret avoiding Mr Anderson. "No, maybe not. Next time he tries to corner us in conversation, I'll make sure we stay and pay him the utmost attention in recompense, for whatever amount of time you need to ease your guilt." His lip twitched.

Molly's face was so comically aghast John burst out laughing all over again. She smacked him on the arm, giggling along with him after a moment.

"John? Molly!"

A yell from across the road brought them both around, and John looked over to see Harriet waving to them, beckoning them forward, her friend Lily talking animatedly with a dashing young officer in uniform. He seemed vaguely familiar, and as they got closer, it dawned on John where he had seen him before. It was the same man they'd seen earlier from their carriage on the way home from Netherfield, the cheeky one who had stepped out of formation to wave.

John had to hand it to his youngest sister. When she wanted something, there was no holding her back until she had attained it.

The man smiled winningly, his grin wide and friendly. Harriet practically bounced on her toes next to him, she was so excited. "We just happened to be looking for some ribbon, didn't we, Lily?"

Lily nodded, her fresh round face bobbing. "And we met Mr Moriarty. He's a Lieutenant!" Harriet's friend's voice squeaked and didn't match her solid frame.

"Harriet described you well. I do believe I would have been able to pick you out of a crowd." Mr Moriarty bowed neatly toward Molly, who smiled. "Enchanted."

His accent was Irish, the slight lilt of his voice giving him away. When he turned to John, he nearly beamed.

"And you as well, Captain Watson." He reached out and shook John's outstretched hand, his grip cool and firm. "I understand you have been in the regimentals as well? Captain, correct?"

Something about the man was immediately ingratiating, and he found himself mirroring his open smile. "Yes. Retired now, obviously, but formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers."

"Really?" He looked impressed. "Tough bunch, that. On the continent, then?"

"And India for a bit as well," John nodded in affirmation.

They all started walking down the lane, Harriet and Lily walking ahead, and Molly on the other side of Mr Moriarty. Stopping outside of a milliner's shop, the girls skipped indoors, dragging Molly along with them while John and Mr Moriarty waited, their reflections looking back at them from the plate glass window as the sun shone warm overhead. Mr Moriarty wore the red uniform,

edged in gold and black, his epaulet fringe neat and tidy. The crisp white pants and black riding boots he wore were immaculate, emphasising his trim figure.

“I certainly hope they do not ask for my opinion, for I have very poor taste.”

John smiled at him, captivated by his easy air. “How brave of you to admit that.”

“No, it’s the truth. For example, my rooms in town I decorated on my own, and I thought I had done so well, but my haphazard results have reduced grown men to tears of mirth.”

“Then why not change them, and save yourself the humiliation?” John asked, amused.

He shrugged. “I’d be denying people an opportunity for pleasure.”

“So you don’t mind if people laugh at you?” John peered at Moriarty incredulously. Who honestly enjoyed being on the receiving end of another’s caustic humour?

“Oh, I *mind*. I just hold the thoughts that run through my head close to my chest, and laugh right along with them, and they never are the wiser.” His smile turned wry. “I am not one to forget, but I can forgive long enough to entertain their humour.”

John looked over at him, intrigued. Mr Moriarty watched the girls inside through the glass intently, and therefore properly distracted enough for John to study his profile.

He was of a height with John, but slighter in build. Straight, dark hair was cut shorter than perhaps fashion dictated, but it well complimented his features. Dramatically arching eyebrows framed eyes of the darkest brown, and as they had chatted while they walked, John noticed how expressive they were, twinkling and creasing with small crow’s feet that showed this man loved to laugh.

John wondered if Mr Holmes had any such lines. He doubted it, silently berating himself for thinking of the man at all.

Harriet came bounding out of the shop door. “John, please lend me some money!” She tugged on his arm.

“You already owe me a considerable amount, Harry,” he chuckled. “Besides, how many ribbons does one girl need?”

Harriet’s face fell, and John felt poorly about it. Mr Moriarty must have seen it in his expression, for he touched John’s elbow and met his eye with a wink before addressing Harriet.

“I believe a lady of distinction should be in possession of as many ribbons as she likes.” He spoke to her with the utmost respect.

“Come, let’s see what you’ve in mind.” He led her into the shop, glanced over his shoulder and winked saucily at John before turning his full focus on his companion. John followed after a beat, charmed.

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“...and I promise to pay you back every penny!” Harriet clutched the parcel to her chest, her heart in her navy blue eyes. They were outside again, their shopping finished.

“You are too generous, Mr Moriarty, and spend on a girl’s whim.” John kept his tone light to take the sting out of the words.

Moriarty shrugged and grinned good-naturedly. “When I can be.”

They strolled along the walkway, which was busy for this time of day, more than likely due to all the men dressed in red uniforms out for a stroll. They couldn’t tarry too much longer in town, or it would be dark soon, but the company stayed intriguing and lighthearted, and John was enjoying himself. His attention was on Mr Moriarty as the others in their group walked a little ahead.

“So tell me, Mr Moriarty,” John began, “how long will you be stationed here? Through the winter perhaps?”

The other man made a thoughtful noise. “That depends on what the French have in mind. Of course, I look forward-”

John grunted as nearly collided into Molly, who stopped short. “John, look!” she exclaimed, her face alight with a smile.

Riding toward them was Mr Lestrade on a gleaming chestnut mare, accompanied by Mr Holmes.

“Mr Lestrade!” Molly greeted as they neared. The man in question jumped off his horse with alacrity and hurried over to where they stood waiting, grinning from ear to ear. He acknowledged the entire group with a smile, but riveted his eyes on Molly.

“Miss Watson! How fortunate to have run into you! We were just on our way to Longbourne,” he gushed. The sunlight picked up the few silver strands threading through his hair, John observed. He truly was a handsome man, and his eyes were all for Molly.

A moment passed before John turned with mild trepidation toward Mr Holmes, who stayed mounted on his horse, but Mr Holmes’ focus was not on John at all. Not that he was expecting it to be, but he certainly didn’t expect to see what he did. Mr Holmes and Mr Moriarty stared at one another, unmistakably acquainted. And by the contemptuous way Mr Holmes looked down his nose at Mr Moriarty, the association was not a positive one.

“Please, Mr Lestrade! When are going to have a ball at Netherfield?” Harriet asked, her eye bright with hope, her hands clasped together. Lily held on to her elbow with both hands, quiet, but nearly as animated.

“Soon,” he laughed.

John was engaged in observing the tense silence weaving its way between Mr Holmes and Mr Moriarty. Mr Holmes spared John one brief glance, his full lips pressed together tightly before he turned his horse around and rode off without a word.

John examined Mr Moriarty curiously, whose gaze had settled on mid-space, his face grim for the first time that afternoon.

“Mr Moriarty, what is the matter?” John looked from him to the retreating back of Mr Holmes.

The other man cleared his throat, shaking himself out of his stupor, to beam a smile at John. “Nothing...I...Nothing is the matter.” But John saw the shadow behind his eyes.

John’s gazer narrowed shrewdly. Harriet and Lily waved and bounded down the road upon seeing another friend, and Molly and Mr Lestrade began to amble down the street. Apparently Mr Lestrade did not notice or care his friend had deserted him.

“You will excuse me if I don’t believe you.” He raised an eyebrow and waited.

Mr Moriarty blinked owlishly. “I...No. You’re right. I’m just taken by surprise.”

“You know Mr Holmes.” John’s heart kicked against inside his chest uncomfortably, and his palm slipped inside his top coat to rub absently at his sternum. His heart thumped hard against his hand.

Hesitating before answering, Mr Moriarty searched for something in John’s face before his shoulders sagged a bit and his breath left him in a heavy sigh. “Yes. I do.” His handsome face twisted. “I *did*,” he corrected.

John felt something heavy in his belly, turning his stomach with a feeling he didn’t quite want to identify. He pounced on the chance to find out more about the enigmatic Mr Holmes, and again, didn’t care to analyse *why*.

“Might I ask how?” He felt a blush creep up his neck.

“You may.” He motioned forward, starting them after Mr Lestrade and Molly. “Mr Holmes and I have a history.” John swallowed. “I have been connected with his family since I was an infant.”

Starting a little, John glanced at Moriarty’s profile. “An infant.”

“Mmm.” Moriarty nodded. “You look taken aback by that, and I don’t blame you, considering the cold manner of our meeting just now. Do you know him well?”

*Soft, full lips against his own. Long fingers carding through his hair.*

“Not well, no. I spent time in his home, and I found him...” He cleared his throat and Mr Moriarty looked at him oddly. “...very disagreeable. I hope his presence will not drive you away.”

Mr Moriarty laughed, “Oh, I am not one to scare off easily, Captain Watson. If he does not wish to see me, then he must be the one to do the avoiding, not I.”

“I must ask, Mr Moriarty. How is it that you disapprove of Mr Holmes?” John was curious, unbecomingly so, if he were to examine his motivations closely. Conveniently, however, he chose not to do so.

“Do you really wish to know? I think I might rather you form your own opinions of the man.” Mr Moriarty watched John closely, waiting for his reaction.

He could say no. He could say no and that could be the end of it. Knowing details about the man and asking for more was a slippery slope, and John didn’t feel like sliding on his arse down that hill, but unfortunately his heart didn’t communicate very well with his head at that particular moment.

“Yes. I do wish to know.” Why? *Why* did he need to know?

Moriarty’s eyes skittered away, looking up at the sky before he answered. “He ruined me.”

John stopped, his hands clasped behind his back, his brow furrowed. “How...?”

Moriarty drew in a great breath through his nose. “My father managed Pemberley, his estate. He and I grew up together, his brother being much older in age, and Sherlock and I became close. It was lonely in such a big place. We were the only little boys at Pemberley and we both liked to make mischief, so we got on well, at first. He was brilliant back then. Still is. But I looked up to him. Wanted to be like him. His father treated me like a son, perhaps more than he should have,

and Sherlock grew jealous. When his father died, he bequeathed me a hefty sum, but as executor of his father's will, Sherlock defied his wishes and denied me."

John stood open-mouthed, agape at the fact Mr Holmes, even the rigid, prideful man he was, could be so cruel. "But why? Why would he do such a thing?"

"Because of his pride. I was only a servant's son, when it came down to it, and he saw me for nothing more. Too lowly for his consideration."

John could identify with Mr Moriarty in that moment, having been on the receiving end of Mr Holmes' disdain. He considered the other man with sympathy.

"That is...that is terrible." He smiled at Mr Moriarty, touching him lightly on the arm before letting his hand drop, happy to have found another person who had suffered the indignities of being under Mr Holmes' scrutiny.

## Chapter 7

The great, ornate doors of Netherfield opened before John and his group, the footmen pushing the tall panels wide before them. Candlelight flickered in every fixture, reflecting off the gilt edged mirrors lining the hall and the gleaming cream marble floor. John followed the gesture of the footman on right, entering a room with his family close behind him. They all paused in the doorway, agape at the opulent grandeur before them.

The ballroom was awash with reflective surfaces and soft looking fabrics; sheer white organza draped along backs of chairs against the walls, though most of the seats were empty, the majority of the several hundred guests either chatting amicably in small groups, or in a swirl of elegant dance in the centre of the room. The musical ensemble played beautifully, not too loudly and yet not so quiet as to be drowned out by the casual conversation of so many people.

The women were all dressed in their best, and John imagined that the majority of them wore new frocks, and he had no doubt that most of the men had new finery as well. John looked down at his own clothing quickly, a flash of self-consciousness flitting through him, before he named himself ridiculous and ceased doing so. He knew he cut a fine figure this evening, and would even admit to investing in a bit of new clothing himself for the occasion.

Soft, caramel-coloured suede breeches fit snugly to his legs, and although John was not used to the cut, he could appreciate that he looked admirable in them. The cropped topcoat was a darker shade of brown and complemented his frame. Chocolatey suede, double-breasted, and high in the collar, the tails reached to hit behind his knee. But truly the waistcoat underneath was the entire reason John bought the new ensemble in the first place, even though it only peeked out below the closed buttons of the topcoat. Vertical striping caught the eye in cranberry and sage, with threads of soft yellow and cream that broke up the solidity of darker shades. It was probably the most colourful article of clothing that John Watson owned.

When he'd walked out of his room at Longbourne earlier in the evening, adjusting his crisp white cravat, Molly had sucked in her breath and covered her mouth, her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

"Oh, *John*," was all she could say.

He'd have to readjust the finances to cover the expense, but that one look alone from his sister made it worth every single penny.

John heard his mother sigh behind him as she took in the grand room, bringing him back to the moment at hand.

"Oh, *my*."

Harriet squeaked and ran off almost immediately, as she'd spotted her cadre of girlfriends from across the room. Mr Anderson hung back, looking slightly confused and much too soberly dressed for such festivities.

John turned his head as Mr Lestrade strode up to Molly, all smiles.

"Miss Watson! You're here! I'm so pleased you could make it." His eyes sparkled and his cheeks were flushed.

Molly smiled shyly. "As am I. Thank you for inviting us."

He cleared his throat and rocked on his toes, then seemed to remember that there were others

standing next to the object of his affection.

“How are you, John?” he said, clapping John lightly on the back in greeting.

“Very well, thank you Greg,” who nodded and almost immediately led Molly off into the crowd, entreating her to allow him to get her refreshment. John and his mother watched the assembly, Mr Anderson having thankfully misplaced himself in the melee of people. It seemed as if everyone he knew had attended this evening, with the exception of Mr Moriarty and Mr Holmes. He’d seen neither of them in the crowd, and told himself the disappointment he felt arose strictly from the absence of his newest acquaintance. Though in truth, John was not surprised Mr Moriarty did not show himself.

“I dare say Mr Lestrade is the most pleasant gentleman I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. And how he dotes on Molly!”

His mother’s avid focus on her eldest daughter and Mr Lestrade talking at the refreshment table, John slipped away to have a look around. He caught more than a few admiring glances along the way, and smiled to himself. Though used to being more understated, John was certainly not averse to subtle regard.

Curiously looking into one of the side rooms, John craned his head to see small groups of people playing cards whilst others sat on settees around the smaller area. It was quieter in here, and meant for conversation, and not necessarily what John was in the mood for. He turned to exit and nearly ran over Sally Donovan.

“John! Oh I am so glad you are here. Please save me from my father’s matchmaking designs.” She snickered and looked over her shoulder. Her father talked animatedly to a group of young gentleman while glancing at her occasionally. They were obviously discussing her.

“Only if you’ll do the same for me.” He motioned with his chin as he grabbed a glass of champagne from a tray-passing attendant and took a sip. His mother had found Mr Anderson and they, too, were in deep conversation. John nearly groaned in exasperation.

She followed his gaze. “Whom is she speaking with?”

“That is my father’s cousin, Mr Anderson. Boastful. Rambling. Silly.” He took another long pull from the glass, nearly emptying it.

She made a thoughtful sound, gazing for a moment with a contemplative look upon her face before her attention snapped suddenly to John.

Sally stepped back for a moment and looked him up and down, her eyes widening. “John Hamish Watson. You are *dashing* this evening.”

He chuckled. “You sound surprised.”

Her eyes narrowing, she replied, “No. You are always handsome, John, only you like to hide behind bland clothes and the needs of your family. Tonight though, you *shine*.”

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Sally pulled John by the sleeve back through the door into the ballroom, intent on avoiding her father, all the while chattering in John’s ear above the music.

“My sources say you’ve met someone interesting, perhaps interesting enough?”

John looked sharply at his friend. Why would she think he was an admirer of Mr Holmes? How had she--

“Julia saw you talking animatedly with someone in uniform not too long ago in town.” Sally blithely interrupted John’s slightly panicky train of thought.

*Oh. Not Holmes. Moriarty, then.*

“It seems you were engrossed in happy conversation and could not be distracted.” She eyed him as they stopped by the refreshments. John set down his empty glass, picking up another, its bubbly liquid sparkling in the candlelight.

John chuckled, willing his heart to slow down a bit before answering. “That would be Mr Moriarty. He is engaging enough, I imagine.” He smiled behind his sip of champagne, his eyes twinkling.

“*Engaging?*” Sally rolled her eyes. “The word is that he is very handsome, indeed.” She scanned the room and John observed her eyes alighting on the several red uniformed men milling about or dancing elegantly in the centre of the room. “Will you introduce me, if he is here?”

“I would if he were, Sally. But it seems he is not in attendance tonight. He and Mr Lestrade’s friend, Mr Holmes, are...estranged, so it is not a shock not to see him here.”

Sally made a disappointed noise before her gaze drifted over John’s shoulder, where it paused and travelled up as she looked at someone apparently quite tall. Her eyes widened a bit.

Stiffening, John felt the presence behind him, and a shiver ran unchecked down his spine.

“Good evening, Captain Watson.” A distinctly recognisable baritone wrapped tendrils around John’s chest and pulled tight.

Eyes flicking to John, something in John’s expression made Sally’s eyes widen even more, before returning to the man standing behind him.

Taking a breath, John stepped to the side and turned.

He counted himself lucky he didn’t groan out loud.

Mr Holmes wore a topcoat and breeches of dark grey, exquisitely tailored to fit his long slender frame. From this close, John could see the fine pin striping of lighter grey throughout, all the way to the end of the tails emphasising Mr Holmes’ height. The waistcoat underneath was a paler blue and grey paisley that had to have been picked specifically because it matched Mr Holmes unearthly eyes. His cravat was a dark navy blue silk, and John smiled slightly at the nod to colour. It pleased John, for some inexplicable reason, to have figured out something that seemed to be a habit for Mr Holmes. The man had a penchant for bold colours, despite his sometimes dour manner.

He looked stunning.

“Mr Holmes,” John greeted, hoping desperately the other man couldn’t hear the slight unevenness of his voice.

His hopes were dashed as he watched Mr Holmes’ lip twitch. They stared at one another for a beat before Sally quietly cleared her throat politely, snapping them both out of it.



“May I have the honour of the next dance, Captain Watson?” Mr Holmes’ voice was so very serious, and a slight tightening around his mouth gave away his tension.

Stunned into silence, John’s mouth fell open in astonishment. He heard Sally gasp behind her hand, but couldn’t turn to acknowledge the sound. Swallowing past the dryness in his mouth, John considered refusing the request briefly, but it was fleeting. A lifetime of manners drilled in his head, John answered, “You may.”

Something flickered through Mr Holmes’ eyes, but John couldn’t interpret what it meant before the man nodded in acknowledgement and briskly walked away. As soon as the other man melted into the crowd, his grey tails snapping behind him, John sagged, his shoulders slumping.

“What was I thinking? I . . . I am an idiot.”

Sally did not have a comment, which caught John’s attention more than anything she could have said ever would have. When he looked at her, she grinned at him cheekily, and finally responded. “Something tells me you will find him very agreeable, John. If not now, then later.”

He retorted, “I think not,” but he couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eye when he did.

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The music began again, a steady repeating rhythm in time with John’s heart. This wouldn’t be difficult, or painful, or humiliating. It was only one dance. He could make it through one dance.

Mr Holmes placed a long fingered hand on his own hip and bowed, along with the others in the line parallel with him. John’s line mirrored the motion and stepped forward until he and Mr Holmes nearly touched, only a handbreadth apart. He held out a palm to Mr Holmes, who took it after a moment’s hesitation. His fingers were warm as they curled around John’s and John tried to ignore the frisson of connection he felt where their skin met.

“I do love to dance,” said John, wishing to break the awkward silence between them.

“Indeed. It is most invigorating.” Mr Holmes looked as if he’d rather be doing anything else at the moment, his face pinched. John was amused only because he chose to see the humour of the moment, the ridiculousness of this situation as they twisted and turned around each other.

He smirked. “It’s your turn to say something. I mentioned something about the dance, now you remark on the crowd, or the number of couples.”

Mr Holmes looked at him oddly. “You would like me to comment on the crowd?” He took a quick scan around them. “As you wish. The man to your right. His shoes are too tight and they hurt him. He’s dancing with his-” He glanced at the man’s partner. “-sister because his wife is, at the moment, talking to someone younger and more handsome than he. The woman to my right is with child, and she’s feeling ill right now but does not want to tell her husband because he is having a good time, and so she will suffer in silence until he has a few more drinks and she can leave with her mother, who is watching them from behind me. The man leaning on the wall-”

John choked out a laugh and held up a hand to stall Mr Holmes from continuing. “No. Please. Leave the poor people alone.” The man was absolutely terrifying in his lack of brevity as he picked these people apart.

“As you wish,” Mr Holmes said again, narrowing his eyes on John. “How about you, then? May I comment on you?”

The way he phrased that, the way he looked at John like he was under the lens of a microscope was unnerving. John could have blamed the exertion of the dance, had anyone asked about his shortness of breath at that moment.

“If it amuses you.”

Mr Holmes raked his eyes down John’s frame, pausing here and there, but John knew he hadn’t needed to do that. He’d seen all he’d needed to at first glance, taking all John’s details in and laying him bare.

“The garments are new, and not normally your style, particularly the splash of colour your waistcoat brings. The boots are not, but they are of good quality and you’ve had them awhile, long enough to have them recobbed. You want to be noticed, but don’t want to overshadow your sisters. That is new for you, the wanting to be noticed, and it makes you a little uncomfortable. You are a more than adequate dancer, and I’d say you learned to add your own personal flair for it later in life, specifically in the army and perhaps in India, and I’m betting you know a few dances the establishment would never allow at an assembly such as this.” Mr Holmes flung a careless hand around to indicate the crowd as they weaved in and around others in the line. John felt a dark flush creep up his neck, heating his ears and raising the hairs on his skin. Holmes continued, “You haven’t eaten yet tonight, though you’ve had...two glasses of champagne, and you spent the afternoon riding for pleasure on the countryside before you got ready for this evening.”

Mr Holmes fell silent and John swallowed hard, precisely when their hands were to meet again. In this particular part of the dance, their palms and forearms pressed together while they circled one another slowly. Something John had done hundreds of times during his life now felt entirely different, underscored with tension threatening to undo him. Their eyes met, and the rest of the room drifted away. Mr Holmes’ countenance was schooled, but his eyes were alive and sparking with the workings of his mind.

Sherlock Holmes was a brilliant man, but he already knew that, and John wasn’t about to feed his ego.

“I was surprised to see you in Meryton the other day.” Mr Holmes’ eyes shuttered as quickly as if John had snuffed a candle. They stepped away from each other in sync with the others in their respective lines.

The other man’s mouth twisted just a bit. “Do you walk to town often with your sisters?”

“Yes, when the weather is acceptable. It’s a great opportunity to meet new people. For example, when you and Mr Lestrade happened upon us, we had just made a new acquaintance.” A struggle was happening behind Mr Holmes’ eyes. John couldn’t see it happen, but he felt it, even as they spun away from each other and back again according to the confines of the dance.

“Mr Moriarty is very good at making friends, much as a spider is good at spinning a web. But the true measure of him is whether or not he is capable of retaining them, once made.” Two high spots of colour bloomed on Mr Holmes’ cheeks.

“Interesting.” It was John’s turn to scrutinize Mr Holmes. He was undeniably agitated. His sharp features may not have betrayed his anxiety, but his body language screamed it; sharp, jerky movements had replaced his natural long-limbed grace.

Mr Holmes noticed. “May I ask what you are doing?”

“Nothing other than trying to make out your character, Mr Holmes.”

“And?”

“There are many sides and accounts of you as to puzzle me.”

The music ended, and polite clapping started around them.

“You are a smart man, Captain Watson. I expect you to use your intellect to suss out the truth of the matter.” Pressing his lips together, Mr Holmes bowed smartly and turned on his heel, leaving John in the middle of the dance floor.

---

He watched from the edge of the ballroom, sipping on his third glass of champagne, feeling the bubbles rise to the top of his head and stay there, making it light. John still hadn't eaten, and thought about moving to the buffet room, but he was rooted to the spot. He surreptitiously watched Mr Holmes as he stood near a group of gentlemen, listening and occasionally partaking in the conversation, though he didn't truly seem interested in what was being said.

A breathless Mr Anderson rushed up to John, which was not exactly a welcome distraction. “Is that Mr Holmes? My dear Sir Mycroft Holmes' sibling?” He was nearly giddy and John felt a looming sense of trepidation.

“I do believe it is, Mr Anderson, but per-”

“I must make myself known to him immediately!” Mr Anderson clapped his hands together and started to turn away.

“But Mr Anderson! He will consider it an impertinence-” But Mr Anderson was already gone, cutting through the crowd decisively toward Mr Holmes.

Acute embarrassment cascaded over John like a wave as Mr Anderson interrupted the small group. The object of his focus did not seem to notice him, so he raised his voice to a near bellow to catch their attention.

“Mr *Holmes!*”

The room around them quieted in immediate response. Mr Holmes turned around, looking at Mr Anderson with such a look of horror that John could watch no more. He spun on his heel and fled to the nearest room.

It was peaceful here; two small groups of people sitting and playing at cards, though no one seemed to be concentrating very closely. John leaned heavily on the doorframe, just watching for a moment as he tried to forget about the scene in the other room. He was pleased to do so, for the hour was getting late and this place seemed a respite. And it was, for nearly fifteen minutes before Harriet and her group of friends burst through the door of the room at the other end, hovering there so they could see the guests in the ballroom clearly. John could hear her talking loudly in her group of equally obnoxious friends as they giggled and pointed at guests. He cringed and went in search of a quiet place he might wait out the embarrassment of his family.

He wandered away from the festivities, down a hallway and making an uncalculated turn. Quieter in this passage, he sighed in appreciation and let the tension flow out of him. Picking a door at

random, he opened it, finding it completely dark and blessedly silent. He slipped inside and shut the dark panelled door behind him, immediately wilting against it, relieved.

That is, until he heard the quiet rustle of fabric from across the room, and then a deep rich voice.

“Are you *lost*, Captain Watson?”

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

Well, here you go. Some smexin' ahead.

*“Are you lost, Captain Watson?”*

*Bloody hell.* He just couldn't win. John shut his eyes against the darkness for a moment before he answered the now all too familiar disembodied voice.

“No, Mr Holmes,” he replied heavily, “I am not.”

The distinct scratch of a match strike had John's attention, focusing his gaze toward the sound. Mr Holmes' long fingers held the match to the wick of a pale cream taper, the rest of him eerily shrouded in shadow until the flame caught and held. A draft filtered through the room, for the flame wavered unsteadily but John could now make out Mr Holmes lying supine on a settee, his long legs drawn up, his face turned toward John. One arm thrown casually over his head, Mr Holmes' pale eyes reflected the flame, making them glow. John caught his breath and flushed hot and fast at the sight, for even though Mr Holmes was fully clothed, he'd never seen a sight more erotic. Knowing the light of the candle didn't reach him well across the room, John let himself look his fill. He didn't have to care for Mr Holmes' personality to appreciate the beauty of him as a man.

Mr Holmes did not reply, the silence stretching out between them.

“And you, Mr Holmes? Why are you here?” John regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth, knowing without a doubt what had driven him in here. His cousin could motivate the dead to flee.

“I felt I had enough of the festivities for the evening,” he replied drily. “But I have my own rooms I can retreat to. I expect you need the space more than I at the moment.” John cringed at the knowing tone in the other man's voice, even as Mr Holmes unfolded gracefully from his position, his leonine movements mesmerising.

A small noise escaped John, unbidden, and he cursed silently when Mr Holmes paused in the process of rising, obviously hearing the sound. Candlelight playing tricks with his eyes, it looked as though a slow smile spread across Mr Holmes' sharp features, but even as the thought came to fruition, the smile disappeared as if it never existed at all.

Mr Holmes stood and stepped around the candle in its stand on the floor, straightening and smoothing his clothes before walking toward the door and John who stood against it tensely.

Something was terribly wrong with John. He should have been moving, shifting out of the way to let Mr Holmes pass, giving himself the space and privacy he needed. Indeed, though Mr Holmes' face lay in shadow now that the candle threw him in silhouette, John could sense the other man's hesitation when John did not move aside.

“Captain Watson, I assure you, it is much easier for me to leave you to your peace if you let me-”

“No.” The word had a life of its own, jumping out of John’s mouth.

*Dear God, what was he doing?*

Silence loomed for a beat, and John was certain that his heart hung suspended right along with it.

“No?” Mr Holmes sounded bemused. “Then what would you have me do? There are no guests to discuss, no coup-”

Mr Holmes stopped speaking abruptly and looked down sharply at John’s hand on his chest. His heart beat strongly under John’s fingers, the pulse rapid, giving lie to his calm tone.

There lay only darkness between them, deep shadows and a vague idea of body shape and angle, and John wondered a little giddily if he could not see this happen, was it real? Mr Holmes’ breath picked up, faltering when John slowly closed his fist on the fabric of his shirt, his fingers working themselves under his cravat.

“I don’t even like you.” John’s voice sounded out of sorts, even to his own ears, and he winced.

“No,” Mr Holmes replied. John decided not to try and figure out whether Mr Holmes was confirming a returned sentiment, or was questioning his truthfulness.

Mr Holmes took a half step forward, leaning into John’s hand, their only point of contact. Warm breath fanned over John’s face and he felt an overwhelming urge to see Mr Holmes’ eyes, to look at them this close so that he could identify their true colour, to map them out and discern why it was they seemed as if they changed shades. John felt lightheaded and the situation surreal, but he didn’t care, even though he should.

He wanted this, just for tonight.

“Are you going to stop me, Mr Holmes?” he breathed it like a challenge, and the words came out with an edge. His limbs tingled and his blood buzzed through his veins.

Mr Holmes made a faint sound.

“No.”

John pulled him forward by the shirt roughly, crushing their mouths together at an awkward angle, silencing the voices in his head warning him that tomorrow he would regret this, that this was not worth it because, for God’s sake, all this man felt for him was contempt and disdain.

The kiss was neither elegant nor kind, not full of sweet promise or stemming from a deep abiding affection. It came from the basest of physical desires and needs that John had put aside for far too long.

At least that was what he told himself.

Mr Holmes laid his hands on either side of John’s head, palms flat against the door and John pulled him in even further by the shirt, so that now their bodies pressed flush against each other and John had to turn his head to the side to breathe. Mr Holmes swooped down, seizing the moment to press his warm, wet mouth on the exposed skin of John’s neck, unerringly tonguing the sensitive skin under his jaw. John’s other hand flexed hard on Mr Holmes’ waist, pressing his fingertips in through the layers of fabric.

“Captain Watson,” Mr Holmes moaned, scraping his teeth lightly along John’s jaw and canting his hips forward.

*Oh.*

John breathed out harshly, “Mr Holmes, I think-” his hand slid around, under the other man’s topcoat to caress and cup his arse. “-that we have passed the point of formalities.” He tugged Mr Holmes forward, grinding them together. He wanted -no, he *needed*- to hear his given name come from that mouth, even if he couldn’t see it.

“*John,*” Mr Holmes whispered immediately, as if he had been waiting for permission, and John couldn’t stop the shudder that ran down the spine, or the ache in the erection that pressed against the other man’s thigh.

*Sherlock. Sherlock’s thigh.*

Unclenching his fist from Sherlock’s shirt, John stretched his fingers and worked them between the folds of fabric until he felt skin, glorious, warm, smooth skin. Sherlock sank against him without warning, groaning at the contact and trapping John’s hand against his chest. He lifted his head and their mouths met, desperate and aggressive, as they breathed each other’s breath, exhaling and inhaling the humid air between them. Their tongues twisted together and explored, sliding over teeth and palate in a cadence that pulsed in John’s groin.

Extracting his hand, John reached around and used it to run down Sherlock’s thigh and grip under his knee, pulling up so that they slotted together perfectly, the rightness of the fit making his already pounding heart kick even harder in his chest. They started a rhythm then, one that they both knew from experience or from instinct or some combination of the two that had them undulating against one another in sync.

Sherlock, until this point, had kept his hands off of John, using them as leverage or support, but now they both moved at once, one cupping the back of John’s head, fingers threading through John’s hair, the other wedging between them to tug impatiently at the placket of John’s breeches. Deftly unbuttoning them, John didn’t have time to protest, even if had wanted to, before Sherlock reached inside to push down John’s smallclothes. His fingers wrapped around John’s hard length, warm and sure, and God, John knew that he was not going to last, so long it had been since he’d been touched in such a way. He broke their kiss, arching sharply against Sherlock’s palm, hands scrabbling to find skin, grasping at Sherlock’s shirt under his waistcoat, while the other man stroked him in long confident swipes. The angles were all wrong, they were mostly dressed and they were standing when they should have been lying on a bed, but John couldn’t catch his breath, Sherlock’s mouth back on his neck again, his hot, open-mouthed kisses going as far as they could along the neckline of his shirt and cravat.

Damned clothing.

Finally John’s hand met skin, the expanse of Sherlock’s back, shifting lean muscle and smooth skin damp with sweat. The hand on his cock paused for a moment, and then moved away, causing John to make a pained sound of protest. Relief crashed through him as he felt Sherlock yank at his own breeches, pulling them and his smallclothes down around his thighs and leaning forward until they touched skin on skin, the heat between them searing. Sherlock cried out at the contact, and froze, rigid and on edge, panting harshly.

“You’re close,” John murmured, letting go of Sherlock’s thigh to reach between them and take them both in hand, pressing their lengths together. Sherlock’s entire body jerked.

“Yes,” he hissed, both hands dropping to John’s hips to simply hold on as he pressed his forehead into John’s jaw, riotous hair curling against John’s face. “*Move.*”

John huffed a breath, amused. “Demanding, aren’t you?”

Sherlock responded by pressing hard enough with his fingertips on his hips, John would surely see bruises on his skin in the morning.

John groaned brokenly at the thought.

He began to stroke them both in his grip, fingers passing over the swollen heads of their cocks, trailing through the precome there to mix between the two, teasing Sherlock's slit with a fingertip until Sherlock was a writhing mess against him, no longer still. Their cocks sliding against each other, the friction was nearly overwhelming, sending intense ripples of sensation surging through John that rapidly brought him to the precipice of orgasm.

Sherlock tugged needfully at John's hips, and he complied, twisting his wrist just so, and thrusting enough that even though he couldn't *see* Sherlock, he could *feel* him falling apart before him; a subtle trembling spiralling into hot, wet pulses between them, coating John's hand and making them both slick. Sherlock turned his head to find John's mouth again, hungrily kissing him with a deep, guttural groan that reverberated deep inside, triggering his orgasm in tight, clenching waves. Intense and vivid, John came with a harsh cry, shattered there, against the door with a man who thought himself so much better than John.

They sagged against each other, Sherlock leaning most of his weight on John as if he could not hold himself up, their breath calming gradually and their blood cooling.

The musky smell of sex hung heavy in the air, and John breathed it in, revelled in it while he could.

John could feel the shift in Sherlock as assuredly as if Sherlock had bellowed in his face. Tension seeped back into his frame, his hands loosening their grasp on John's hips and falling away. John gently let go of their softening cocks, cleaning his sticky hand on the tail of his shirt and then tucking it back in while Sherlock presumably did the same, though in the feeble light of the far away candle he could only hear the rustle of fabric.

In the silence, the sounds of erasing what had just happened were deafening.

When Sherlock stilled before him, his silhouette unreadable, John fought the urge to bare his teeth at what he knew was coming.

"Captain Watson-" He should have expected this; a verbal slap in the face in which Mr Holmes would show his regret, but that didn't mean it didn't sting.

"No." John interjected flatly.

"You do not know what I was going to say." Sherlock said stiffly.

John laughed without humour; whatever lassitude sex with Sherlock Holmes had granted him evaporated in an instant. "Anything that starts out with '*Captain Watson*' after we've just done that, is not anything that I need or care to hear." His fists clenched at his sides. "*Mr Holmes*, I am not some swooning maid. We are grown men, and I do not expect anything from you, nor will I ever."

"You must understand that we-" Sherlock began again.

"Oh, I *do* understand. I just cannot see the point in discussing it any longer, can you?" John ignored the fact that his voice was rough. "You clearly desire me and yet you just as clearly are ashamed of that desire. There's nothing more for us to say." He stepped aside.



Sherlock hesitated, and then reached for the door, opening it enough to let the warm light from the hall illuminate him. His face was flushed, whether from sex or the conversation, John did not know, and his hair stood at odd angles. A few damp curls clung to his face, and if this had all gone differently, John would have brushed them back with his fingers. As it was Sherlock's expression remained as it always was, cool and aloof, the only difference being his full lips, pinkened and slightly swollen now, were pressed tightly together and lines of tension gathered around his eyes. He paused for a moment, as if he were going to say something but thought better of it at the last moment. Clearing his throat, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed, he did not look at John before slipping out and quietly shutting the door behind him.

John stood in the darkness, staring at the door for a long while before laying his forehead against the cool wood and closing his eyes, cursing himself ten times a fool.

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Sherlock leaned against the window frame in the dark, the last of the guests leaving as he watched from the shadows. Well-heeled boots crunched on the gravel drive as carriages and phaetons were driven around by the footmen, stopping in front of tired revellers making their way home for the night.

Muffled voices filtered through the leaded glass panes, distorting conversations that he didn't really care to hear anyway. He was agitated and restless, his mind pulled in too many directions at once, and he felt stretched thin, brittle and fractured. Thoughts crowded his brain, belligerently jostling for position and dominance, one refrain repeating over and over above the rest.

*What is it about John that makes me forget myself? Makes me want?*

Below him, Harriet and Mrs Watson exited out of the front door, their heads close together as they talked animatedly, and though he couldn't suss out what they were saying, the high pitch of their voices still grated on his already frayed nerves. Molly Watson and Greg came next, walking a respectable distance apart. They paused on the steps and spoke in quiet tones, a polite but vaguely remote smile on Miss Watson's face. Greg reached for her hand, placing a gentle kiss on her knuckles. She tilted her head and said something that made Greg laugh before stepping away to let her get into the carriage which had just pulled up.

When John trailed outside and finally became visible, Sherlock's hands fell away from their steepled position under his chin to the windowsill to grip it tight, his mind going blessedly silent. John held his head high and walked with purpose, turning to stop and talk to Greg for a moment. Sherlock observed him shake the other man's hand firmly and smile at him jovially in the warm lamplight. Greg clapped him on the shoulder and threw a happy glance at the carriage before returning back into Netherfield, therefore leaving John alone on the drive.

John Watson stayed for a moment staring at the ground, still, the lamplight playing with the shadows on his face, his fingers flexing and fisting against his thigh.

*Ah. Not so calm, then.*

Raising his head and setting his shoulders back, John Watson nodded smartly at no one- *The brave soldier. What do you fight against now, John?* -before striding to the carriage and climbing inside.

The Watsons pulled away down the drive and Sherlock sucked in a great breath through his nose,

only realising at that particular moment he'd been holding it in the first place, his lungs burning uncomfortably. Turning, he sat down heavily on the window seat in the darkness, closing his eyes against the overwhelming wave of thoughts crowding his mind once more.

## Chapter 9

The Watsons sat in silence around the table, the morning light filtering brightly through the lace curtains. Molly yawned delicately behind her hand, her eyes clearly tired. Mrs Watson moaned quietly, her head heavy in her palm, eyes closed and her face pinched. John winced slightly when Harriet set her fork on her plate a little too loudly, the sound ricocheting inside his head. Perhaps that third...no *fourth* glass of champagne had not been such a grand decision on his part. He took a bite of dry toast before laying it down and pushing his plate away.

*Good God. What had he done last night?* John rubbed at his hip, knowing that indeed, there were purpled bruises in the shape of fingers under the fabric of his breeches and smallclothes. He flushed hard at the memory, then gritted his teeth against it, willing his traitorous body into submission.

No. He would not dwell on it. Not at all.

A not-so-subtle clearing of a throat brought everyone's head up and around. Mr Anderson shifted nervously on his feet, broad brimmed hat in his hands. He gripped it so hard that it crumpled under his fingers. Smiling at everyone, he brought his gaze around to John as he spoke.

"Good morning, my dear cousins." He cleared his throat again.

John was not in the mood to deal with Mr Anderson, his mind awash with conflicting thoughts left over from the night before. As a result, he hadn't slept much at all, frustrated at his own lack of control. He was on edge, and Mr Anderson was helping not in the least.

Mrs Watson, alert now, looked between John and Mr Anderson with avid interest. Pushing her chair back quickly, she stood and made for the door, grabbing at Harriet's arm as she passed. Harriet made a sound of protest.

"Come, Harriet dear." She threw a significant look at Molly. "Molly, Mr Anderson has something he needs to say to John."

John groaned. "Truly, do stay. Mr Anderson must excuse me. He surely has nothing to say that anybody need not hear. I'm about to attend to some duties myself." He made to rise.

"No, no. John, I *insist* that you stay and hear out Mr Anderson."

The man in question smiled widely and John had an absurd urge to burst into laughter, but kept his countenance. Sighing in defeat simply because he didn't have the energy to do otherwise, John sank back down on his chair as the three women made their escape. Molly, at least, managed an apologetic look before the door shut behind them on their way out.

"Believe me, Captain Watson, your attention to familial duty rather adds to your other perfections. Almost from the moment I entered this house I singled you out as a companion in my future life." He sat at the table in the seat John's mother previously occupied and set his mangled hat in his lap. "Before I am overrun by strong emotion, pray, let me explain my reasons for marrying."

"Mr Anderson-" John tried to intervene but Mr Anderson barrelled over him

"Firstly, it is important for every clergyman to set an example for his or her parish; to be in a state of happy matrimony. Secondly, I have been urged by my esteemed patron, Sir Mycroft Holmes, to find a spouse and settle into family life. My object in coming to Longbourne was to choose such a spouse. And now nothing stands in the way-" he awkwardly lowered himself down on one knee.

It was absolutely necessary to interrupt now.

“Mr Anderson, will you please get up? I have given you no reason to go on like this.”

The other man continued blithely, unperturbed. “I am to understand,” Mr Anderson said with a wave of his hand, “that it is not unusual for those being proposed to reject the addresses of those whom they secretly mean to accept. I know you mustn’t seem to eager.”

John flushed, short-tempered to begin with this morning, exasperation causing a rush of breath to leave him all at once. “Mr Anderson!” His voice began to turn strident in his efforts to gain the other man’s attention. “I assure you that is not my intention. I am...honoured, but I must respectfully decline your proposal.”

Mr Anderson blinked, momentarily taken aback. He visibly regrouped to try to further his cause.

“I must add, that Sir Mycroft will certainly approve of you, for you are an active, useful sort of person who has not been brought up too high-”

Standing abruptly, John stood over Mr Anderson, and tried his level best to not strangle him on the spot.

“Sir, please understand! Let me be plain and straightforward. I am perfectly serious when I say I will not marry you. You could not make me happy and I am, without a doubt, the last man on earth who could make *you* happy.”

*No, Mr Anderson. Certainly not.*

Mr Anderson stood, finally, comprehension dawning on his pointy features.

“But-”

“No.”

“Are you-”

“Yes.”

It seemed clear that John must leave absolutely no room for misunderstanding within Mr Anderson’s mind, and John’s tone, stance and countenance quite forcefully telegraphed that he would brook no further discussion on the matter.

Mr Anderson, for his part, finally understood John’s resolve. Bending down to retrieve his hat, He scrunched it on his head, apparently not caring altogether much that it was still crushed from his earlier ministrations to it. It looked patently ridiculous in contrast with the serious look on his face, caught somewhere between disbelief and resignation.

Mr Anderson bowed slightly at the waist, and turned on his heel, his black robes flapping behind him as he retreated out the door.

Immediately, Mrs Watson bustled in the room from opposite. John’s mother, nearly apoplectic, screeched, “What is the matter with you? You threw away a perfectly good opportunity!”

John peered at her, incredulity written all over his face. “An opportunity for *what*, exactly? A lifetime of misery? Because being married to him? That’s all that would be afforded to me.” Frustrated, he scrubbed his hands through his hair and looked at her plaintively. “You wish me unhappy?”

Mrs Watson threw her hands up in the air. "You've ruined it, simply ruined it." She looked like she was about to cry, but John was no stranger to this sort of manipulation and had, over the years, built a sturdy defence against it.

"I hardly agree with you, Mama, but it is done and I will not change my mind."

No, he'd no sooner marry Mr Anderson as he would Mr Holmes, though for two entirely different reasons.

John watched as a gambit of emotions flickered over his mother's face before it settled on exasperated. "Oh, you ungrateful child. Nobody can tell what I suffer." Her histrionics were worthy of the stage. Making a pitiful displeased sound and stalking out, she finally left John in peace. He slumped back into the chair and laid his head on the table, thumping his forehead against the polished wood.

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John's brow furrowed in consternation. "I don't understand. Why does he need to leave Netherfield? Does he not know when he will return?"

He sipped at his tea as the fire burned low and casting shadows in the sitting room. Molly sat in her habitual spot on the settee, legs tucked underneath her whilst the rest of the household was sleeping. Molly held a letter in her hand that she now passed to John.

"I held nothing back. Read it." She urged it toward his outstretched hand.

The looped, elegant script of Irene Lestrade flowed across the page.

"Mr Holmes is impatient to leave to see his sister and I daresay that we are equally so. I really do not think Georgiana Holmes has her equal in beauty, elegance and accomplishments, and inspires much affection. It is my hope that soon I shall be able to call the lovely talented girl my sister. He will have frequent opportunity of seeing her; and my partiality is not misleading me when I say Greg is most capable of engaging any woman's heart. It is my duty not to foster any false hope in that regard for your ownself."

For her part, Irene Lestrade was undeniably fortunate to not be present in the room at that particular moment. John more than likely would have done something ungentlemanly had she said this to Molly in his range of hearing.

"Unbelievable." He clenched his fist and then flexed his fingers, rubbing his palm against the embroidered fabric under it.

"It that not clear enough?" The sad note in Molly's voice nearly broke John in two. "Can there be any other opinion on the subject?"

"Miss Lestrade sees her brother is in love with you and seeks to persuade him otherwise," he replied.

Molly looked a little disappointed in John. "She has been nothing but kind to me. I cannot imagine she could be capable of wilfully deceiving anyone."

Not wanting to compound the misery of the one person he loved more than anyone by pointing out her naiveté, John kept silent for a moment.

“He loves you, Molly. It couldn’t have been more evident. Go to London to visit our aunt and uncle. Send word that you are there, and he will come to you.”

A spark lit Molly’s eyes. “Truly?” She sighed, some of the tension released from her shoulders and nibbled on her lip. “I’ll write a letter to them and then follow it immediately.” Pulling her finger along the rim of the teacup she held in her lap in contemplation. John watched her. Mr Lestrade was a lucky man, to have the love of his sister, and he hoped that the man knew it well. Molly Watson was gentle and kind, with a sharp sense of humour and presence of mind lurking just below her placid, shy exterior.

She looked up from under her eyelashes. “Is mother speaking to you yet?” The non sequitur made John blink before he answered ruefully.

“No. And to tell the truth, I am glad of it. She persists in blotting her nose and her eyes whenever I am near, however, to let me know that I am still in low standing with her.” He shrugged and smiled wryly. “I’ve rather enjoyed the silence, however.”

She tapped her finger on the cup. “I am glad I will be off to London, then, because although she does not talk to you, she whinges doubly so at me.” She paused, searching John’s face. “John. Is there something that has been bothering you?” she asked, changing the subject yet again and smiling slightly. “Aside from the unwanted affections of Mr Anderson? You seem . . . preoccupied.”

It was not in John’s nature to lie, and even less so to tell an untruth in particular to Molly. He stared into the fire, watching the dancing of the flames as he tried to frame his answer without shocking his sister’s sensibilities. John had been in the army and had travelled to distant lands, had seen and experienced life where he could before he returned to his life back at Longbourne, while Molly had never even been beyond London. How could he ever explain his extraordinarily poor decision to have an assignation with Mr Holmes? He couldn’t. It was as simple as that.

“Oh? How so?” Acceptably bland.

Molly hummed in thought. “You seem unsettled. As if something is not right.” John felt her staring at his profile as heat rose to his face, and was grateful for the unreliable light of the fire. “You’ve been that way since the ball. Did something happen?”

He didn’t know how to answer, his own feelings far too convoluted to explain properly, and certainly even more so without the use of context.

When he didn’t answer, Molly continued, “Well. You’ll tell me when you are ready, then?” Lovely, kind-hearted Molly. Never one to push, she would let him have his silence on the matter without taking offence.

He turned to her and smiled and hoped it came across true. “Of course. But please do not concern yourself overmuch. It is nothing of consequence, I can assure you.”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, nodding in assent. A line of worry creased her brow despite John’s behest, but she commented no further upon the subject.

“As you wish.”

---

John looked out the window at the sound of wheels rolling down the gravel-lined drive and set down his pen. He smiled at the familiar sight of the Donovans' carriage rolling to a stop in front of Longbourne, the footman dropping down gracefully to open the door for Sally. John wasn't expecting her, but he was glad to see her nonetheless. Molly had been in London for two weeks, and he'd been occupied with duties on the property, so John was ready for social interaction.

Opening the door, he grinned and gave her a quick, tight hug, the ease of a lifetime of friendship loosening social boundaries here in private.

"Sally! What a grand surprise!" He turned with her to walk to the sitting room. She tugged at the bow under her chin and removed the hat from her head before sitting down.

"I know. I should have sent word first." She smiled and motioned him to his own chair, where he perched across from her after waving and nodding at the maidservant who had peeked in to see if they needed refreshment.

"Nonsense. You are welcome at Longbourne any time, with or without preamble." He settled back, throwing his arm over the edge of the chair casually. They talked quietly of family in general terms for a few minutes, the maidservant setting out the tea service between them in the meantime, when Sally sat up just a little straighter and cleared her throat.

"I have news." She smiled, but her eyes sparkled with a bit of challenge, which gave John pause. "Mr Anderson and I are engaged to be married."

John's mouth fairly dropped to the floor. "Engaged?" he asked. "But how . . . I didn't think that you were acquainted." His mind reeled.

Sally laughed. "We met at the ball at Netherfield, John. When he couldn't find you to dance with, he asked me. Please tell me that you do not mind." She raised her eyebrows in question.

"Mind? No, no . . . I . . . Of course not." He smiled anaemically.

"He asked for my hand this morning, and I've accepted him." She leaned forward and patted John on the knee, as if consoling him. "I see that this news is surprising, coming so soon after his proposal to you."

"No, I . . . well, yes, to be honest." The word *surprise* wasn't quite adequate, he feared. He tried to recollect himself for the sake of his friend, or at least make a strong effort for it.

Sally nodded as if this was to be accepted, her face cool and calm. "I am twenty-seven years old, John, and I am not a romantic. I only ask for a comfortable home; and considering Mr Anderson's current position and connections, I am fair convinced that I will have as fair a chance at happiness as the next person."

"But I thought you wanted to avoid your father's matchmaking!" Isn't that what she had said, or had he misunderstood her?

She made an affirmative sound. "My father's matchmaking, yes. Not my own." A flash of doubt clouded her eyes for a moment. "Be happy for me and my decision, please?"

And that decided it; Sally was his best friend, and although he could not claim to agree with her choice of husband, he could not begrudge her happiness.

"Of course." He leaned over and kissed her knuckles with the practiced air of the gentleman that he was. "Congratulations."





## Chapter 10

“Ugh. I don’t envy Sally in the slightest. Fancy wanting to marry a clergyman. He’ll be reading her verses and sermons every night and boring the poor girl to tears.” Harriet shuddered dramatically.

John looked at her askance. “Harry. Mind your tongue. I’ll not have your sour words getting back to her.” Her skin pinkened from the crisp late autumn air, his youngest sister was, indeed, radiant, but her impulsiveness and immaturity sometimes clouded her beauty.

Harriet pulled a face at him before being distracted. “Oh, look! It’s Denny and Moriarty!” She waved frantically to their attention, and when successful, squeaked and clapped her hands together excitedly. She cut a sideways glance at John. “Of course you’ll be keeping Mr Moriarty all to yourself, now won’t you?”

John stopped walking and stared. “Why would you say that?”

Her grin turned slightly mischievous. “Because I could tell how much you liked him,” she sing-songed.

John hissed, “Harriet Watson. You keep your voice down.”

Denny and Moriarty neared and greeted John and Harriet warmly. “Good afternoon! We were just looking for something to amuse ourselves, and here you are!” Denny, having a bright, boisterous personality, had earned Harriet and her friend Lily as fans the moment they met and John had heard enough about Denny and Mr Moriarty that he felt like he knew them well. John agreed he was a kind fellow with a good sense of humour about him, if a bit callow, based on the few times they had come in contact with each other.

Moriarty shook John’s hand and fell into step beside him as they strolled.

“We were hoping to see you at the Netherfield ball, though I understand why it is you didn’t attend,” John commented lightly.

Mr Moriarty made a noise in affirmation. “And I was sorry, indeed, to lose the pleasure of your company, but I decided it would be a poor choice for me to go. Scenes might have arisen unpleasant to more than just myself.”

“I admire your forbearance. Had it been me, I do not know if I would have made the same prudent decision.” John smiled wryly at the fact that he had, in fact, acted carelessly, but in an entirely different vein than the current conversation.

*The press of skin on skin, warm and slick. Fingertips pressed into the flesh of his hips.*

He continued, shoving the memory aside. “I don’t know if I would mind to see Mr Holmes set down, but in Mr Lestrade’s house...It would grieve me to see him embarrassed, though his friend may very well deserve it.”

*That, and perhaps more as well.*

“And through him, your sister.”

“Quite right.”

They walked in silence for a while before Moriarty spoke. "I understand that your cousin is engaged to be married." He raised an eyebrow at John, knowing and flirtatious all at once.

John wrinkled his nose. "Harriet's been talking, has she?"

Moriarty hummed. "Perhaps a bit. I'd have sworn his intentions lay in another direction, according to my sources."

Rubbing the nape of his neck, John nodded. "Perhaps they did, but they took a turn, to everyone's satisfaction." He couldn't quite look Moriarty in the eye, his gaze sliding away.

Chuckling, Moriarty nudged John with an elbow and leaned into him a bit before straightening. "And relief?"

They watched as Denny and Harriet joined a larger group of regimentals and young ladies standing idle on the street, and slowed, staying a bit apart from the animated gathering. Mr Moriarty cleared his throat. "It looks as if we will be off to Brighton soon, if word of mouth is accurate, anyhow."

John felt a flash of disappointment at the news. "Brighton? When?"

"We have not heard officially, but we can expect to leave before the weather turns for the worst. Three weeks at most." Mr Moriarty looked at John, his large brown eyes regretful. "Would that we had more time to get to know each other, Captain Watson, and if my circumstances were different..."

"Or perhaps if old Mr Holmes had never had sons?" John smiled, the irony not lost on him. If old Mr Holmes had never had sons, he'd never have made such foolish choices.

"But that is not the case, therefore, I hope that you and I, at least, will remain good friends?" Moriarty replied, his eyes travelled over John's face, lingering just a moment too long on his mouth, perhaps, before turning to look at the crowd.

John followed his gaze. "I'm sure we shall, Mr Moriarty."

---

John approached the rectory door with some apprehension. Not because the home itself was in any way reprehensible. As a matter of fact, it was a neatly kept, smallish but charming house in the midst of an intricately laid out garden. John assumed that during warmer weather, the blooms and green would be spectacular, because even covered in a thin layer of snow, one could tell that they were well tended. The outer edge of the garden and lawn were flanked on the side of the lane by a great yew hedge that was nearly as tall as the house. The structure itself was constructed of sturdy red brick, symmetrically put together to branch out from the pristine white front door. Above the entrance, a stained glass fanlight presided, and John imagined that during days when it was not overcast and dreary as it was today, that it would cast beautiful coloured patterns on the inside of the home.

He was glad of the opportunity to visit his friend in her new home in Kent; Sally's invitation to visit came at an opportune moment and John had jumped at the chance to escape the meddling of his mother.

Knocking briskly, he waited on the step, rocking a bit on the balls of his feet to stay warm.

The door opened almost immediately.

“John!” Sally enveloped John in a quick, tight hug before stepping back. Mr Anderson hovered behind her.

“Welcome to our humble abode, Captain Watson.”

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“...and from here, we have a simply perfect view of Rosings Park, where we are honoured to dine at least twice a week. Sir Mycroft sends the carriage around for us, when we do, or I should say, *one* of his carriages, as he has many-”

Sally laid her hand on Mr Anderson’s elbow, thankfully interrupting his long-winded diatribe. She smiled serenely. “John has come a long way, my dear, and is tired after the journey from Longbourne. Perhaps you should tend to your duties in the greenhouse? I do know how you enjoy your time in there.”

*Oh, Sally, you sly little thing, you.*

Mr Anderson returned her smile, and then looked at John. “My wife knows me well, and often encourages me to spend time in the garden and outside in general, for the sake of my health.”

John bit back the expression fighting to come to the surface. Sally watched him placidly. Nodding, they both watched as Mr Anderson turned and walked away.

Without looking at John, Sally smiled widely. “Tea?”

They made their way to the parlour, a charming little room in shades of pale blues and greys, sitting with a palpable sense of relief. The room faced the front of the house, and the view of the lawn was, in fact, impressive, the crisp whiteness of the fresh layer of snow visually cleansing the scenery.

“He’ll be busy for some time, so it’s unlikely we will be disturbed in here.” Folding her hands in her lap, Sally looked the part of the lady of the house.

“Are you happy, Sally?” She seemed so, but with Sally, it was always difficult to tell.

Tilting her head, Sally replied, “I am the mistress of a beautiful home, I’m out from beneath my father’s loving but suffocating thumb, and my time is mostly my own. Of course I am happy.” She looked at John, as if noticing something she had not before. “And you?”

John shifted uncomfortably in his seat, ill at ease all of a sudden. “I’m as good as to be expected. Molly is in London, so the only sanity of my home has abandoned and left me adrift.” He chuckled, and Sally joined in, her laugh musical and sultry. He sighed. “I’m glad you invited me here. I needed to be away.”

“Well, I am happy--”

A loud thump and then footsteps rushing up the stairs distracted her. Mr Anderson came to the door, panting and red-faced.

“Great news! Great news!” He gasped a bit and pressed his hand to his face. “We have an

invitation to visit Rosings Park this evening from Sir Mycroft Holmes.” He looked like a giddy youth, full of excitement and vigour.

John felt a bit of colour drain out of his face. *Sir Mycroft Holmes. Sherlock's brother.* Stomach twisting uncomfortably, he smiled wanly.

Sally narrowed her gaze on him, knowing him too well. He gave a silent, subtle shake of his head. *Later.*

Mr Anderson continued, unaware of the silent exchange. “Do not be uneasy, Captain Watson, about your apparel. Only wear the best among your clothes and Sir Mycroft will not think less of you.”

“Brilliant.”

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“So you are John Watson.” Sir Mycroft Holmes sat in his oversized wing backed chair and raked John head to toe with his gaze. He fought not to squirm, relying on his military training to get him through the next few hours. He stood stiffly, as if part of an inspection.

“I am, sir.” John focused his gaze somewhere over the other man’s left shoulder and lifted his chin a bit.

“Hmmm.” Sir Mycroft turned his scrutinizing eyes toward Mr Anderson, just for a moment, completely ignoring Sally who sat beside him. “Well. Your friend appears to be a gentlemanly, handsome sort of man, Mr Anderson.” John couldn’t tell, and didn’t particularly care if the tone was an approving one or not. Once he spoke to Mr Anderson, however, he relaxed a bit and sat down on a fine silk chair. Lovely, yet horrifically uncomfortable.

“Do you have brothers and sisters, Captain Watson?” Condescension dripped from Sir Mycroft from head to foot, from the way he tilted his head to look down his nose at everyone, to the tone of his highbrow diction. Those traits seemed to run in the family, it seemed.

“Yes, sir. I am the oldest of three. My other two siblings are sisters.” Sir Mycroft looked at him with something akin to pity, and for that, John felt a rush of white-hot anger.

Sir Mycroft’s lips pursed. Perhaps he was aware of the struggle within John, and he was amused. “Are your sisters out?”

John cleared his throat. “Yes, sir,” he replied tightly.

“And you. Not married yet.” The disapproval in his voice hung in the air like a cloud. “Military service, however, so I imagine it is acceptable, since you have served your sovereign adequately.”

John bit the inside of his lip and could taste copper. This was to be a very long evening, by the looks of it.

Mr Anderson leaned forward; eager to be a part of the conversation he’d been so adroitly cut out of. “Sir Mycroft is an influential and important member of the royal court. What with all the unrest associated with the regent--”

“Do shut up, Mr Anderson.” Sir Mycroft cut him off without even looking at him.

The royal court. Well, that explained a lot about the attitude.

A maidservant glided in silently and bent to Sir Mycroft's ear, whispering something that made his eyebrow pop up, as if intrigued. John watched the raven-haired woman smile as she spoke, and how Sir Mycroft turned his head just so as he listened. The servant looked up at John and raised a perfectly formed eyebrow in cheeky challenge before drifting off into the shadows once again. Sir Mycroft watched her go before clearing his throat.

"Well. It seems as if we'll be adding a few more to our party this evening." His tips twisted humourlessly.

John closed his eyes and sighed.

An unfamiliar voice from the doorway behind John made him snap open his eyes in momentary confusion. Sir Mycroft watched him closely.

"Uncle Mycroft! I'm sorry we didn't send word that we were on our way!" *We*. Hopes dashed in less than a moment. "I am assured that you have the space for us."

Mr Anderson smiled obsequiously and rose, tugging Sally up along with him. Sally's thoughtful eyes were on John as he rose as well, too polite to do otherwise. Smoothing his topcoat, then tugging it into place, John turned smartly, determined to act as if nothing was amiss.

"My nephew, Colonel Dimmock, and my brother, Sherlock Holmes." Sir Mycroft's tone held something of disdain, but John didn't know if that was something that was always there, or was particular to his nephew and brother. He suspected a bit of both.

Sherlock's eyes widened perceptibly at the sight of John, before his careful mask fell back into place. John nodded at him. He bowed stiffly eyeing Mr Anderson as if he were something brought in by the dog.

A purple cravat, this time. Sherlock was wearing a purple cravat, which looked lovely in contrast with the dark black-on-black pattern of his waistcoat, the collar turned up stiffly next to the starched white lapels of his shirt, his top coat missing. The pale skin of his neck held his attention for a moment, an errant thought twining through his mind *-I didn't get to put my mouth on that glorious pale skin-* before he shooed it away with irritation.

The pants he wore were black as well, and form-fitting, accentuating the generous curve of his backside. It seemed such a shame to waste such an appealing body on such an arrogant arse.

Colonel Dimmock stood a head shorter than Sherlock, and John's overall first impression was a pleasant, if unremarkable one. His wispy sandy brown hair looked windswept, and his tanned cheeks glowed with windburn. They'd ridden fast to get to Rosings Park.

"My guests, this evening, Mr and Mrs Anderson and Captain John Watson." Sir Mycroft waved an indifferent hand in their general direction, but didn't bother to stand with the rest of them. John had an urge to tell him that wealth and influence excused no one from poor conduct, but kept his mouth shut just the same. He didn't want to cause issues for Sally if he could avoid it.

Colonel Dimmock grinned nearly from ear to ear, striding straight to John to shake his hand heartily. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance at last, Captain Watson."

John blinked. "At last, sir?"

"Well, I've heard much of you, and none of the praise has been exaggerated thus far." His smile

was friendly and warm, and showed no hint of glibness.

John didn't know what to say, and felt warmth creep up from his collar, unbidden. "I can well believe that; I am certain Mr Holmes is my severest critic." If Sherlock had anything to say about him at all, it surprised John.

Sir Mycroft's droll voice cut in. "You know my brother, Captain Watson?"

"Yes, sir. I had the pleasure of meeting him in Meryton." Sir Mycroft shrewdly eyed John up and down. He was much like Sherlock in this way, assessing and analysing every word and motion. The man hummed noncommittally, then turned his attention back to Mr Anderson, who had asked him a quiet question, though he knew that Sir Mycroft would be sure to hear every word said within his vicinity. Mr Anderson, Sally and Sir Mycroft began quiet conversation, leaving John, Colonel Dimmock and Sherlock to continue their own.

"I hope that we will see you often at Rosings Park while we are here. I'm fond of lively conversation." Dimmock regarded Sherlock; his eyebrows knitted for a moment, more than likely wondering why the other man had not uttered a word as of yet.

John laughed. "You may have a difficult time finding it here, I'm afraid."

The Colonel said, his tone rueful, "Ah, yes. My uncle does enjoy the sound of his own voice, and seldom requires a response." He leaned in close. "And even if you have one, it's best to have one that matches his own, to be sure." He snickered good-naturedly. John smiled at him. Relaxed and affable, Colonel Dimmock was easy to like.

"I hope your family is in good health." Sherlock said, breaking his silence.

Caught off guard by the simple civility, John stammered a bit. "I...Yes, they are, thank you. My sister has been in town these several weeks, have you not had the opportunity to see her?"

Colour pinkened Sherlock's pale cheeks and his gaze flicked away. "No. No, I have not had the pleasure."

*Guilty. He was guilty of something. But what, exactly?* John scolded himself for not writing to Molly sooner.

John's eyes stayed on Sherlock while he spoke. "You see, Colonel Dimmock, Mr Holmes and I are not the best of friends." Sherlock actually squirmed, though his face remained passive.

Colonel Dimmock made sound of disagreement. "I'm surprised to hear that. You seem to be such an amiable man."

"Why should you be surprised? First impressions are often the best ones, and Mr Holmes' good opinion, once lost, is lost forever. So you see? My first impression must not have been to calibre, and therefore it is a hopeless case, is it not, Colonel Dimmock?"

John watched, fascinated, as a faint flush worked its way up from Sherlock's collar, blending with the pink of his cheeks.

*Interesting.*

Perhaps the man was redeemable, after all.



## Chapter 11

John sipped his coffee in silence, eyeing the group and wondering for how much longer he would be forced to endure. Dinner had been a stilted, uncomfortable affair, filled with Sir Mycroft and Mr Anderson dominating the conversation, if you could call the soliloquy punctuated by moments of unearned flattery conversation at all. Prolonging the evening seemed unnecessary and unusually cruel to the rest of them.

Sally leaned into him and whispered conspiratorially, “What is going *on* between you and Mr Holmes? He hasn’t stop watching you all evening.”

He sucked in a quiet breath. He should have known that he would not get away with avoiding Sally's inquiring looks for long. She was too savvy for his evasions. “Nothing. There’s nothing going on.” He hid his mouth behind another sip of coffee, flicking a glance at Mr Holmes, who was, indeed, observing him at that very instant. The man stood by the fireplace, a fair distance away from the rest of them, the barrier of space protecting him from the awkwardness of the moment at hand.

“Bollocks,” Sally hissed quietly, sitting upright once again, leaving John to choke on his coffee.

“Are you quite all right, Captain Watson?” It was difficult to tell whether or not Sir Mycroft actually cared, or asked only because it was expected.

John waved a hand. “Yes, yes. I’m fine, thank you.” He shot an irritated glare at Sally. Her mouth twitched up at the corner.

“So, Captain Watson, you must have travelled whilst in service. Tell us about your adventures.” Sir Mycroft rubbed a thumb across the handle of his cane, the spiral carved grip worn and shiny from a similar such action. John had not noticed an ungainly manner in Sir Mycroft, and wondered for not the first time that evening why he needed such an accessory. Perhaps he had required it at some earlier point in life and was loathe to give it up.

“I don’t wish to bore you, Sir Mycroft. I was a simply an officer who did my duty, no more, no less.” He smiled benignly, sighing inwardly, because if the last few hours had taught him anything, it was that Sir Mycroft Holmes could be likened to a bulldog. Giving up after being brushed off was not in his nature.

“I would not have asked, had I thought your stories to be boring, Captain Watson. Please do carry on,” Sir Mycroft bid imperiously, as if John had started at all.

Licking his lips, John scanned the room. All eyes were on him and Sally eyed him with sympathy. She alone knew how much he disliked talking about his time in the military. Mr Holmes glanced at his brother, lips thinned, and then back to John.

“Come, Captain Watson, Sir Mycroft demands it!” Mr Anderson pushed, earning a sour look from his wife.

John tried one last time. “I’m afraid that I am not a good storyteller. I do not speak of it much, therefore I am out of practice.”

“You will never improve if you do not practice, Captain Watson.” Sir Mycroft sounded as if he was reprimanding a recalcitrant child.

Mr Holmes had moved to hover nearby, his presence looming above John. “Although we would



like to hear more about your travails,” his eyes drifted to John’s left shoulder, unerringly to the exact place where scarred, twisted skin paid testimony to his *service*, “I’m sure that we will understand if you wish to let it drop.”

John didn’t know why, but Mr Holmes’ defence of him, if that was what that was, worked its way under his skin and chafed.

“Do you mean to frighten me, Mr Holmes, by coming in all this state to hear me talk. If so, do not be alarmed; my courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.” His tone was brittle, even to his own ears.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed on him. “I am well enough acquainted with you, Captain Watson, to know that I could not intimidate you, even should I wish it.”

They regarded each other warily for a moment before Colonel Dimmock cut in, seemingly unaware of the gossamer threads of tension winding between them.

“So tell me, Captain, what was my friend like when he stayed in Hertfordshire?” He looked mischievously at Sherlock, who shot him a haughty glare.

John delighted in their interaction, and used it to his advantage. “The first time that we met, it was a ball, where he danced no dances at all. There were plenty of souls in need of a partner, and yet he chose to not participate in any form.”

Sherlock coloured. “I have not the talent, which some possess,” he looked at John pointedly, “to easily make new acquaintances.”

John kept his expression innocent. “How true, and nobody can be introduced in a ballroom.” The lines around Sherlock’s eyes tightened. “According to your brother, I do not tell stories well because I have not practised doing so. I would agree that it is my fault. Perhaps you only need to follow your brother’s advice and practice more as well, Mr Holmes.”

A flash of something between admiration and irritation passed over Sherlock’s features before he looked away. John kept silent, eyes trailing over the pale skin of the exposed neck in front of him.

When Mr Anderson and Sally rose to leave soon after, John was more than happy to follow.

---

*‘...Mr Holmes came to dinner as well, in the company of a Colonel Dimmock. He was as reluctant as ever to show any signs of gentlemanly behaviour. His contemptuous indifference...’*

Bright sunlight, reflected off the snow outside, filtered into the room, giving John enough light to write. He held the quill over the letter to Molly, unsure of what to say next as a knock sounded at the door downstairs. He ignored it.

*‘His contemptuous indifference seems to be not unique to me, as he acted in such a way to everyone at Rosings Park, though I must say, he holds a peculiar and definitive dislike for Mr Anderson in particular...’*

A soft tap interrupted his thoughts and he brought his focus to the door, where the Anderson’s maid stood patiently waiting for John to acknowledge her.

“Yes, Mary?”

“A Mr Holmes, sir,” she announced before scuttling out of the room before John could respond, Sherlock striding in and taking in the room in a glance, his mere presence sucking up all of the extra space. John scrambled to his feet to meet him, hastily turning over the letter on the surface of the small writing desk.

“Mr Holmes. Good afternoon.”

Sherlock smirked, but didn’t return his greeting. “You are writing your sister. No need to hide it. It’s obvious.”

Bemused and a bit out of sorts, John stuttered, “What...How...?”

“Who else would you be writing, Mr Watson? You are at the home of your best friend, and you would not write your mother, I believe, nor your younger sister. No. You are much closer to Molly, and want to share the details of last night.” Sherlock fidgeted, and his body language was uncharacteristically unsettled as he stood, though his voice oozed confidence.

John cleared his throat, refusing to be baited. “Right. Mr and Mrs Anderson have gone into Hunsford for the afternoon, Mr Holmes. You find me all alone.”

This gave Sherlock pause for a moment before he began to pace in the small drawing room. John watched him in silence, wondering what this was all about.

“My uncle has done a great deal to this house for Mr Anderson. It is quite...adequate.” Sherlock scrubbed a hand through his hair, and he wasn’t looking at his surroundings while he paced. He kept his eyes on the floor.

“He couldn’t have bestowed the kindness on anyone more grateful,” John commented drily.

Sherlock paused and looked up, the amused look on his face bleeding into one more serious almost immediately. He turned and sat down heavily in the side chair and gave him an inscrutable look.

Refusing to be ruffled, John continued the conversation casually.

“Mr Holmes, what brings you here?” John looked down at him, as he still stood near the desk.

“You.” Those full lips pursed together, the tone carried much meaning, and John was taken aback. It was not the response John expected, though in all honesty, he wasn’t sure how Sherlock should have responded any differently.

“*Me.*” He couldn’t think of rejoinder more adequate. Absolutely nothing came to mind as he drifted closer to the other man, who now leaned back in the brocade chair, long fingers tapping incessantly on the arms. His energy flowed off of him in waves, like ripples in a pond. “You’ve no reason to need to see me that I know of, Mr Holmes.”

John stopped near the arm of the chair, looking down in those icy grey-blue eyes as they stared back, the motion in the rest of his body stilling at last. “I said to you once that you are disconcerting, Mr Watson.”

Mouth tightening, John moved to step away, but Sherlock grabbed his wrist to hold him in place.

“Do you care to know why?”

“Oh, I think I quite understand, Mr Holmes.” John tried to tug his wrist from Sherlock’s surprisingly firm grasp, but was unsuccessful. He clenched his hand into a fist. He didn’t need to be told how he’d never do, that Sherlock didn’t want to be attracted to him because John could never be of his station.

“No. I don’t think you do.” His voice was deep, earth shattering in a way that should have been reserved for the darkest part of the night, whispering entreaties in a lover’s willing ear. “I don’t think you do at all.” John stood near enough to see his eyes darken perceptibly in the daylight of the room and he cursed his body for responding automatically.

“All right.” He circled around so that he stood in front of Sherlock, one leg poised in between Sherlock’s long limbs. “I’m listening.” For all the good it -this- would do him.

“You quiet me.” It pained him to say it. John could see it in his face. This was not an admission easily given, but that didn’t mean John knew why that was. Sherlock’s lightning quick eyes flickered over John’s face, his brows knitted, as if he were trying to break him down into component parts on the spot.

“What does that *mean*?” John placed his knee against the chair between Sherlock’s legs, and could feel the heat of the other man through the fabric of his breeches. Sherlock held tight to John’s wrist, and John still held his hand in his fist. The tension which had his body strung tight made his shoulders ache and his breath quicken.

“I see everything. Observations and minutiae crowd my head, fighting for dominance constantly. I manage it, but sometimes it is overwhelming.” Sherlock squeezed John’s wrist, once. “I am near you and it goes silent.” He sounded nearly angry, though John didn’t know toward whom that ire was directed.

Just how was he supposed to respond to that? The more he got to know Sherlock Holmes, the more he didn’t understand the man and it confused and irritated John. Sherlock watched all of this pass over John’s face.

“You do not know what to think, and you are conflicted.” Laughing humourlessly, Sherlock dropped John’s wrist and looked away, exposing his throat. “You have no idea what this does to me; this attraction to someone like you.”

John bristled.

*Someone like you.*

How *dare* he? John felt the pent up frustration with this arrogant git spill over, tearing down his reserve and his good sense. Reacting purely on impulse, he gritted his teeth as he swooped forward to grab the chair behind Sherlock’s turned head, pressing his mouth against the exposed skin of the other man’s neck before licking a wet stripe up to his ear. Surprised, Sherlock shuddered and froze underneath him, but didn’t move to touch John in any way. John could hear the wood of the chair’s arms creak under the pressure of the man’s grip.

“Oh. I think I have an idea,” John breathed in his ear silkily, touching the tip of his tongue to the shell. Without looking, he traced a single finger along the rigid fullness that now pressed against the fabric of Sherlock’s breeches, unerringly stroking from root to tip. “And if you don’t, well, then, you aren’t all that observant, are you, *Mr Holmes*?”

Sherlock moaned, his hips twitching upward. John rubbed the heel of his palm in the same path his finger had taken; the smooth fabric of Sherlock’s silk breeches bunching slightly under his hand.

“But let me give you a piece of advice, Mr Holmes,” John’s voice quiet in Sherlock’s ear, mercy absent in his tone. He thumbed what must have been the tip of Sherlock’s erection, for a damp spot seeped through the fabric. “Don’t think for one minute that there would be any difference at all between the two of us if we were down to our skin with my cock in your lovely arse.” Sherlock let out a strangled noise. “Remember that the next time you think yourself better than *someone like me*.”

And with that, John Watson stepped abruptly away, leaving Sherlock wide-eyed and flushed in the chair before him.

Noise at the front door had Sherlock flying up and rushing out of the room at nearly top speed, his heavy footfalls thudding down the stairs. Murmurs of surprise followed. Moments later, Sally peeked her head in the door at the instant that John sat back down at the writing desk, body faced away from her. It wouldn’t do for her to see him in his current state of arousal.

He was so hard, he ached.

“What on earth have you done to poor Mr Holmes?” Sally looked over her shoulder, as if the man in question was standing there for her to ask personally.

John turned back to his letter, outwardly calm, before picking up the quill again.

“I have no idea.”

## Chapter 12

*'Dearest brother,*

*I was truly happy to receive your letter, and I apologise for not writing to you first. I must admit, I have had the time to correspond, but I'd been hoping for happier tidings to share with you.*

*It seems as if Mr Lestrade no longer has any interest in me.*

*Once in London, I called upon the Lestrade home in Clapham, hoping that he would be there. Miss Lestrade answered the door, and told me that he was out on business, not to return any time soon. She let me in, inviting me for tea. We exchanged niceties, but she was noticeably uncomfortable and I soon left. Upon my leaving, however, I asked Miss Lestrade to please let Mr Lestrade know that I was staying in London. She promised me she would.*

*I am such a fool, John. I waited every day for three weeks, not leaving our aunt and uncle's home, hoping that he would call upon me. I should have enjoyed myself in the city, for I waited for naught. At the end of three weeks, Miss Lestrade came to visit, but it was clear that she had no desire to be in my attendance, her face full of disdain. She informed me that she had, indeed, given Mr Lestrade my message, but he had chosen to leave town to go on a hunting trip, with no word to pass along to me. She came to say goodbye, she said, and wish me a happy life, for she did not think she would see me again...'*

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His breath ghost plumed in front of his face, the late winter's crisp air pinkening his cheeks. It was cold, but not unbearably so, and the ground was dry and finally free of snow. Mr Anderson's prattling had driven him out of the house on the excuse that he could use the fresh air and exercise, which was not entirely an untruth. Needing to move about and stretch his legs, he chose to take a walking tour of Rosings Park to see it for the first time without a layer of white.

Heavily manicured and formally styled, even throughout the winter, the grounds were intentionally laid out to impress wealth upon the viewer in a very obvious fashion. Formal avenues branched east and west from the main house, but closer to the house lay a series of more formal gardens, including several man-made ponds with pebble paths weaving in between and around them all in a leisurely pattern designed for casual strollers.

Walking in the centre of one of the avenues, the house proper behind him, John turned his face into the sunlight, soaking in the rays whilst he admired the handsome ash trees that lined both sides.

"Captain Watson!" A shout from off to his right brought him to a stop. Smiling, he waved at the man walking briskly in his direction.

"Colonel Dimmock! Good to see you, man." And John meant it. Dimmock was open and friendly, the kind of amiable and undemanding bloke that John enjoyed knowing.

They shook hands, and Dimmock gestured toward the grounds. "I've been taking my annual tour of Rosings Park this morning, and enjoying the weather. Care to join me as I continue?"

John nodded immediately. "With pleasure." Dimmock waved them forward, both men walked on

leisurely with their hands clasped behind their backs. They wandered that way for quite a while, exchanging small pleasantries about nothing in particular.

John's curiosity, however, got the better of him. "Are you of an acquaintance to Mr Lestrade and his sister?"

The other man raised an eyebrow. "I know them a little, I suppose, but only because he's a good friend of Mr Holmes. Lestrade is a pleasant, unassuming sort."

John found it ironic once again that someone such as Mr Holmes could be so close with someone like Mr Lestrade. Their personalities were so diametrically different, they seemed much more likely to repel each other than to create the close friendship that they had apparently cultivated.

"Yes. Mr Holmes is kind to Mr Lestrade and attempts to take an extraordinary care of him," John mused.

Nodding, Colonel Dimmock hummed, "Oh yes, I believe Mr Holmes wishes only the best for Mr Lestrade and steps in when necessary, because if you know Mr Lestrade, you know he is of a naive nature at times."

They paused for a moment to watch a group of geese swooping to land on the lawn before them as John let that statement settle in his mind. Thirty or so in number, the geese huddled near each other for warmth, honking loudly to cut through the silence of the morning. Dimmock continued as the two men moved on, veering far to the right to avoid the ill-tempered birds.

"I understand he lately saved Mr Lestrade from a most imprudent marriage. Most inconvenient," Dimmock commented casually.

This was trivial gossip for Colonel Dimmock, nothing more. But to John, it struck home. His heart skipped a beat.

*Oh, no Molly. No, no, no...*

It took monumental effort to modulate his voice before he answered. After all, Colonel Dimmock could not be blamed for the interference of Mr Holmes.

"Did Mr Holmes give a reason for his intrusion on this girl's happiness?" John tried to sound only casually interested in the answer, as if whatever Colonel Dimmock said meant nothing. Proud of himself, John's voice didn't waver. His hands, however, held all of his tension in the form of fists.

Colonel Dimmock, unaware of John's inner turmoil, shrugged one shoulder. "I understand there were very strong objections to the lady."

John gritted his teeth against the acid in his belly. "And why did he think it suitable to be the judge?"

Dimmock blinked at him, his brow furrowed. He obviously heard the strained tenor of John's voice. "You don't think Mr Holmes' intercession to be appropriate?"

John lifted his chin and looked toward the trees, wary now that he gave too much away in his countenance. "Mr Holmes can say what he likes, and often does, but I do not see what right he has to determine in what manner his friend conducts the affairs of his heart. But we do not know the particulars. Perhaps there was not much affection in the case."

After a few more steps, John stopped, unable to continue. "Colonel Dimmock, I'm afraid that I must get back. If you'll excuse me." John smiled, but he knew by the concerned look on the other

man's face that it didn't reach his eyes, though he said not a word.

"Of course, Captain Watson. May we meet again soon."

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John strode across the lawn, the blood coursing through his veins so fast, he could feel his heartbeat in his temple, berating himself over and over again for any amount of...*anything* he had felt toward Mr Holmes. Despite the icy cold of the day, a trickle of sweat ran down the back of his neck and between his shoulder blades. He tore at the buttons of his topcoat, uncaring that he had a fair distance to go before arriving back at the Anderson's home and he may very well freeze along the way. Pulling the topcoat off, he held it in the crook of his arm as he tugged harshly at his cravat, tugging at it until he was free of the restriction and his throat was exposed to the air. Only then did he feel as if he could take a full breath. He shook out his hand, for it ached from clenching it so firmly for so long. Red half-moon crescents lined his palm from where his blunt fingernails cut into his skin.

"Captain Watson!"

John stopped, and closed his eyes against the voice. He cursed his ill luck.

"Captain Watson, I would speak with you, if I may."

John turned around slowly, stiffening his spine to look Sherlock in the eye. He'd made some sort of haste to catch up with John, if his pinkened cheeks were any indication. Or perhaps it was his obvious agitation that caused the blood to rise to his face. His icy eyes--grey in the morning light--flickered over John, widening perceptibly at the sight of John's bare throat, but it was apparent that he was more concerned with whatever was going on in his head than the fact that John stood visibly upset before him.

Sherlock ploughed ahead, forbearing any greetings or pleasantries. "Mr Watson, I have struggled in vain, but I can bear it no longer. It will not do, and this...*sentimentality*"--he fair spit out the word, his lip curling around it as if it tasted bitter on his tongue--"that I feel toward you will not go away, no matter how I've picked it apart and turned it over in my mind to try and rid myself of it. It will simply not be repressed, therefore you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." His visage was intense, looming.

John's breath stopped in his throat, his mouth agape. He couldn't have replied, even if Sherlock had stopped to take a moment to allow him to do so. As it was, Sherlock's words tumbled out of his mouth as if he couldn't control them, speeding up as he barrelled on, gesturing animatedly.

"I am fully aware I am going against the express wishes of my family's expectations, my friends, and my own better judgement. The relative situations of our families make a connection between us nearly laughable, but most disturbing of all, I am going against all that I have ever believed in myself, that emotional attachments are superfluous and debilitating to one's mental acuity. As a rational man, I cannot reconcile all of these obstacles, but it cannot be helped. Since our first meeting, I have come to feel a passionate admiration and regard for you."

He stopped, and John took his opportunity, having found his tongue.

His tone sharp, John bit out, "Sir, physical intimacy does not equate to affection. I am surprised that a man as intelligent in you needs clarification on this point." John was seething and found it

difficult not to step forward aggressively. Did this man not understand the point of John's outburst the last time they met?

Sherlock made an exasperated sound. "Do not be ridiculous. Of course I do not need 'clarification', as you put it. I am quite aware of the difference between physicality and emotional attachment, though I may profess to not having much experience in the latter. No. Every rational objection I could think of has been overcome by what I feel; and I beg you, most fervently, to relieve my suffering and consent to marry me." The lines of his face were taut and anguished, his eyes unable to stay in one spot for long; his whole body vibrated with barely contained frenetic energy.

John was aghast. Emotions roiled through him in turbulent ripples as Sherlock waited impatiently, heedless of the impact of his acerbic, hurtful words. Did he honestly *think*...?

"Mr Holmes. I appreciate the struggle you have been through. However, I am sorry to cause pain to anyone, but it was unconsciously done. I must decline your most . . . your offer."

Sherlock's brow furrowed, obviously not expecting this response. "Is this your answer, then?"

John spoke through gritted teeth. "I am sure that your feelings on the matter, which you have explained quite clearly, will help you in overcoming it." His cheeks burned, as if on fire.

John started to move past Sherlock, his mind racing and the urge to either fight or flee waging a war inside him. Sherlock stepped in front of him, blocking his way, their breaths fogging the air between them.

"You are offended. Why?" Sherlock's gaze raked over him, making John feel raw and exposed under his scrutiny. He looked genuinely, *unbelievably* confused. "And I can see that you think ill of me. You are tense, ready to strike me if provoked. Why to that as well?" Sherlock's eyes glittered. Some part of him was enjoying this, the battle between the two of them.

John regarded Sherlock with narrowed eyes. "Do you honestly need to ask me that? After all...?" He waved an arm at nothing, trying to encompass his ragged emotions in words as if he could grab them out of the sky. "You tell me that you propose to me against your better judgement, your entire speech designed to insult me. I have plenty reason to think ill of you, and not very many not to hit you, other than my honour as a gentleman."

Sherlock blinked at him. "What reasons are those, that you think ill of me?"

John laughed, and nonplussed at that reaction, Sherlock took a step back.

"You bloody, arrogant *bastard*. Do you think that there is anything in this world that might tempt me to marry a man who has been the means of ruining Molly's happiness? Do you deny stepping between her and Mr Lestrade's relationship, separating them and exposing them both to misery because of it?" Sherlock's face tensed in recognition. "Ah. I can see by your expression that you would not deny it."

"I do not deny it." He looked affronted that John would suggest such a thing. "I did everything within my power to make sure the match would not happen, and I rejoice in my success. I keenly observed their interactions and could plainly see she did not feel strongly for him, and his attachment ran much deeper than hers. The connection needed to be extinguished." He sounded so righteous, so bloody sure of himself.

"She's *shy*." John's shoulder twinged, and he could feel a throbbing headache growing behind his eyes. "She's in love with him, but even so, she's hardly one to show it outwardly. Why, she rarely



lets *me* know how she feels, and I'm the closest person in the world to her!" His tone was strident now. "How dare you decide their happiness? Just because you don't understand it, can't *recognise* the emotion in someone else, does not give you the right to destroy someone else's chance for it!"

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I did it for his own good."

"For his..." Oh, it was all coming out now, all of it. John remarked, "And what of Mr Moriarty? My dislike of you was decided before I heard Mr Moriarty's story of how you reduced him to his present state of poverty."

"Yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed." Sherlock's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"And then you treat his misfortunes with contempt and ridicule," John said incredulously. "You ruin one man out of misplaced jealousy and mock the family I love. It is no wonder that I feel the way I do toward such a man." They were nearly nose-to-nose now. One of them had stepped forward without realising it, and the energy arced between them, hot and volatile.

"And this is your opinion of me? How could you possibly expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your circumstances and the utter foolishness of your mother and younger sister?" Sherlock plainly did not understand his folly. This fact was written all over his sharp feature in clear, precise detail. John felt it prudent to end this conversation, and end it quickly.

"These are the words of a gentleman?" John shifted his stance and shook his head. "We apparently have different standards by which we measure gentlemanly behaviour, but that is fortunate, considering your confessed . . . *sentiments* toward me. Let me make something clear, you conceited, selfish arse. Within a month of meeting you, I may have wanted you under me, but your obvious disdain of the feelings of others made me realize that you are the last man on earth I could ever marry."

Sherlock recoiled as if slapped, cheeks reddening brightly. The charged silence hung heavily between them for perhaps a full minute.

Lips pressed in a thin line, Sherlock said, his tone rigid and curt, "Forgive me, sir, for having taken up your time." He bowed perfunctorily before spinning on his heel and striding off, his long legs making short work of the lawn.

John watched him go for a moment before looking up to the blue, blue sky.

"*Damn,*" he swore quietly to whomever happened to be listening.

## Chapter 13

John awoke the next day earlier than normal, tired, his eyes gritty from lack of proper sleep. He'd tossed and turned during the night, not able to shake the memory of Sherlock's proposal, of the horrid things he'd said.

They'd *both* said.

Rising with a sigh, he dressed for the day, only taking a perfunctory glance at his appearance. Foregoing breakfast, his stomach in knots, John resolved to revive himself with fresh air and exercise. He stepped out of the Anderson's home onto the porch, contemplating his direction and taking a moment to attempt to enjoy the briskness of the morning. Yesterday, after the confrontation with Sherlock, John had returned to the Anderson home and retreated to his room, claiming a headache, speaking little to the other occupants for the rest of the evening.

Now in the daylight again, he was eager to stretch his legs and think through the tangled mire that were his emotions. Taking a deep breath, John stepped down and made his way to the lane which took him farther from the main thoroughfare. He followed along the edge, the park's paling the boundary on one side, and after a few minutes of walking, he passed the great wrought iron gates of the grounds.

Spotting a grove of trees, John veered toward them, wanting to lose himself in the dappled green light.

He tugged on the thread of one of his thoughts, desperate to work through this to his satisfaction. What had Sherlock been thinking? How could he say all of those things, and yet expect John to accept his hand? The man drove him to distraction with all of his contradictions.

John paced around the grove of trees restlessly, pausing every once in awhile to gaze at the gates of the park.

The weeks he had spent here in Kent had made a great difference in the countryside; every day adding to the green of the early trees. The morning was quiet and restful, in direct disparity with the tumult of John's thoughts. He paused for a moment near a great ancient oak, watching the puffs of mist fog from his mouth as he breathed, curling and dissipating in the air before him. His thoughts drifted to the way his breath had done the same yesterday morning, mixing with Sherlock's as they'd stood close; close enough to feel body heat, had they not been bundled up for the weather. John growled, veering his mind away from suddenly wondering what it would be like to feel Sherlock up close under different circumstances where he might actually feel the warmth radiate off smooth, pale skin. He jammed the heels of his palms into his eyes in frustration, rubbing harshly before carding his fingers through his hair.

A sound from his right brought his attention around, and from a distance, he caught a glimpse of a man along the edges of the grove. A flash of unease worked its way through John, tensing his stomach muscles under the layers of clothing. Flashing in between the trees, John knew before the figure stepped out into the open who it was. Sherlock stood before him with some signs of anxiety, shifting from foot to foot, bright blue scarf wrapped around his neck to nearly block the sight of his full lips.

He held out a letter in a black-gloved hand, the cream parchment stark against the leather. His body busy, but his voice calm and not a little haughty, he lifted it just a bit higher, indicating John should take it. "I hope that you do me the honour of reading this letter."

As soon as John's fingers closed around it, Sherlock bowed stiffly, and then turned and stalked out of the grove without another word, and was soon out of sight.

John's arm still outright, he stared at his own fingers, torn between tossing the letter away and devouring it on the spot.

He wanted to cast it onto the ground and forget it existed, he truly did. But he could not.

Overwhelmed by his curiosity, but expecting to gain no pleasure from the reading, John tore at the envelope, pulling out the two sheets, written with a fine, angular hand.

*Dear Captain Watson,*

*Fear not, sir, on receiving this letter, that it contains any repetition of those sentiments which you found so repugnant yesterday morn. I only wish to enlighten you, and incidentally defend myself against the accusations laid at my feet, in particular those relating to Mr Moriarty. The two offences are of a very different nature, the first of which I have already spoken. I did what I thought was best for my friend. I did not believe your sister to be indifferent because I wished it; I believed it on impartial conviction. There is but one part of my conduct in the whole affair on which I do not reflect with satisfaction; it is that I wilfully concealed the fact that your sister was in town, though I knew it from almost the moment she arrived. Perhaps this was beneath me, however, it is done and my methods, although not ones I am proud of, were successful and I do not condemn myself for their results.*

*With respect to the other, regarding Mr Moriarty, you laid before me accusations of a serious nature. If substantiated, those allegations would indeed be grievous, but are, as you will undoubtedly eventually agree, without merit.*

*Mr Moriarty's father was a respectable man who managed our family estate at Pemberley. My father was very fond of him and rightfully held him in high esteem, and aspired to help him any way he could, as his wife frittered away their wealth with her extravagance. As for his son, my father was always fond of the young man, his engaging manner inviting a high opinion. Mr Moriarty and I played together as boys, though he and I differed greatly in our natures, we were amiable enough once given the opportunity. It was many, many years before I saw him for what he was and began to think of him in a very different manner. After his father's death, my father supported him at school and afterwards at university, hoping he would choose a profession that best suited him there, such as within the clergy. His habits, however, were dissolute, and between my brother and I, we deduced the duplicity of his person and went to our father with our observations. He would hear none of it, and we did not argue the point as he was near the end of his life and we did not wish to speed him to his end.*

*Upon the eventual death of my father not long after, his wishes were to continue to support Mr Moriarty through university, however, it was no surprise to Mycroft or myself that Mr Moriarty asked for a sum of three thousand pounds instead, stating he would use the money to study the law. Ignoring my instincts and observations thus far, I gave him the sum on the condition that he not darken our step again.*

*Now free of restraint, his life was one of idleness and dissipation. How he lived, I do not know for certain, though I have reason to suspect gambling supported his habits. I thought our connections thankfully dissolved, but last summer our paths crossed once again under the most disagreeable of circumstances, which I have tried repeatedly, and unsuccessfully to erase from my memory.*

*My sister, Georgiana, left school to holiday in Ramsgate with a friend. Mycroft and I were led to*

*believe that the parents of the girl with which she travelled were of good stock and reputable, and therefore allowed Georgiana to do as she had requested. And thither also went Mr Moriarty to Ramsgate, undoubtedly by design. She was not there long before she was persuaded to believe herself in love and to consent to an elopement. At that point, she was then but fifteen years old.*

*Two days before the intended elopement, I received a missive from the parents of the girl with which she stayed, their guilt overriding their embarrassment at allowing this to happen whilst they were responsible for her person. I rode fast and hard to intercept and came upon them unexpectedly. Georgiana, faced with my censure, acknowledged the plan to me at once. You may imagine my reaction, and with good reason Mr Moriarty left immediately thereafter, relinquishing his objective, which was, of course not my sister, but her fortune of thirty thousand pounds. I cannot help but realise, however, that Mr Moriarty's intent was twofold. Elope with my young sister, and his revenge against my brother and me in particular, would be complete. I am only glad to say that I ruined his plans with glee and satisfaction.*

*I know not what Mr Moriarty has imparted to you, but I hope that you conclude that I tell you only the truth. You may wonder why I did not speak of this yesterday morn. I should have, Captain Watson, and will forever admonish myself for not having done so. For the truth of everything I have related, you may confirm with Colonel Dimmock, who by the circumstance of our friendship, has borne witness to these particulars. If you choose not believe me for your abhorrence of my person, then you can hold no such feelings toward Colonel Dimmock. I will only add, that expect you to use that acumen and astuteness I so admire in you to decide for yourself.*

*Sherlock Holmes*

John sagged against the tree heavily, shoulders slumped as he gazed unseeingly though the branches, the pages of the letter dangling from his fingertips, in danger of fluttering to the ground.

His first thought was to dismiss the entire communication as so much rubbish, because it was altogether much easier to do this, thinking Sherlock a spiteful, unscrupulous man, than for John to admit to himself how wrong he had been about Mr Moriarty's character. Sherlock Holmes was not a liar, as far as John knew. He was arrogant, and supercilious, yes. But he'd not mention Colonel Dimmock at all as a source of corroboration if he were untruthful.

Thinking back over John's interactions with Mr Moriarty in this way shed new light on their conversations. Moriarty had shared intimate details about his relationship with Sherlock far too soon, declared himself the one to stand the high ground against Sherlock, yet didn't show at the Netherfield ball. That Mr Lestrade had esteemed Sherlock openly and without reservation, and had not betrayed him to be unprincipled or unjust spoke volumes to which John had simply chosen to ignore; his own righteous prejudices hindering his ability to see the truth for what it was. He knew nothing of Mr Moriarty prior to the meeting in Meryton. He had heard nothing of his prior life aside from what he said himself. His countenance, voice, and manner had erroneously established him as trustworthy and in possession of virtue. How easily John had fallen into Moriarty's story with no questions whatsoever of his validity. When he read, and reread with close attention, every line proved more clearly that the matter revealed that Sherlock's conduct in it less than infamous, and in fact, it looked as if he were entirely blameless throughout the whole affair.

John, at that moment, felt more ashamed than ever in the entirety of his life, and could think of neither Sherlock nor Mr Moriarty without feeling blind and absurd.

Sherlock's other offence, slighting his mother and Harriet, by calling their actions foolish, also deserved re-evaluation.

He shut his eyes, thinking back to all Sherlock had seen of his family, and grimaced. Of his accusations that Molly did not seem to have affection for Mr Lestrade was not so ridiculous as it had sounded coming from Sherlock's mouth the day before. John knew it to be true, that Molly, though not cold, had not the nature to openly show her emotions for all to see. It was only because he and Molly were so close John could decipher them. Someone not well acquainted with her would not know what to look for. Her feelings, though fervent, were too little displayed.

And as for his mother and Harry, it didn't bear thinking through, considering how often he himself had been mortified by their obnoxious social behaviours. The justice of the charge struck him too forcibly for denial.

Folding the letter neatly and tucking it into the pocket of his topcoat, John straightened, suddenly weary all over again.

When he finally made his way home again, exceedingly grateful the Andersons were out for the duration of the day, the maidservant stopped John in the main hall, explaining that two men had come and gone. A Mr Holmes and a Colonel Dimmock, it seemed, had called upon him to take their leave because they were quitting Rosings the very same day. They'd waited for John for a short while, leaving after Mr Holmes insisted that they do so, asking only that the maid impart the message they had been by and were now on their way back to London.

John thanked the girl blandly, and resumed his retreat back up to his room, a strange mix of relief and melancholy washing through him at once.

## Chapter 14

A week after John read the letter, his stay at the Andersons' drew to an end. He was in the same turn sad to be leaving his friend and relieved that he'd not be reminded of his folly with Sherlock every time he looked out of the window, though a small part of him recoiled at that self-delusion. He'd be reminded no matter where he went. Still angry with himself for being played the fool, he did not entirely let go of his anger with Sherlock, however. No. The man was still culpable for the truly boorish statements he made while fumbling through his proposal, even if they were based in uncomfortable truths.

"It gives me great pleasure to know you have passed the time here with us not disagreeably, Captain Watson." Mr Anderson shook John's hand limply, and John fought the urge to wipe his palm on his breeches when the other man released it. "We have done our best to introduce you to very superior society, and from our connections at Rosings, we may flatter ourselves that your visit has been enjoyable. Our relationship with one such as Sir Mycroft Holmes is indeed an extraordinary advantage of which few can boast." Anderson fairly preened, so sure of himself and his superiority that he didn't even notice when his wife rolled her eyes behind him. John cleared his throat to conceal his laughter.

Sally stood just behind Mr Anderson's side, her smile neutral as she smoothly cut into the conversation. "Good gracious, John!" She stepped forward to envelope John in a quick, tight hug before letting go. "It seems as if you just got here! I will miss you, but know that you are always welcome in our home."

John, truly grateful for her, bowed his head toward her. "Thank you, Sally." He moved down the steps onto the gravel drive, his brown riding boots crunching against the rock as Sally moved with him toward his horse, which was held steady by a young stable hand. Mr Anderson stayed near the house, head cocked like a bird.

"John," Sally flicked her eyes toward her husband who was out of earshot and not really paying attention to them anyhow, his face turned to Rosings Park. "Whatever it is that has been bothering you of late," she squeezed his elbow before letting her hand drop. "You know you can tell me, right?"

John sighed and smiled sadly. "Sally, I've been a fool many times in my life, but never more so than just recently." Sally started to respond, but John held up his hand. "Please, just...trust me. I'll share everything with you when I've sorted it all out myself." She looked at him dubiously, but John knew she would give in, even though she didn't want to. Their friendship was ultimately based on long years of earned trust, and John was asking Sally to honour that by not pressing.

Jaw tightening just a bit, Sally relented. "I'll hold you to that."

"I know," he replied, pulling himself up onto his horse. "I would be truly disappointed in you if you did not."

---

Molly blinked at John, setting her needlepoint on the seat beside her, her face deceptively placid.

The house at Longbourne was quiet for the time being, finally affording them a chance to speak privately. They hadn't had a moment to themselves all day since John walked in the door, since he'd been pounced upon by his mother, asking all sorts of questions about the grandeur and opulence of Rosings Park.

Molly had come home only a few days beforehand.

"I am quite over him, John. I swear I would not notice him if he passed me on the street." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes and behind them there lay a sadness not there before. John's heart ached for her and he felt the pressure inside of him, turning his stomach on its edge.

How could he make this worse for her, by telling of Mr Holmes' (and more than likely Miss Lestrade's) perfidy against the young couple?

He couldn't, in good conscience, make her misery worse.

"Molly, I—" He didn't even know what he intended to say.

Molly interjected, saving him from fumbling over his words. "But tell me, what news from Kent?"

John looked away, and his face burned. "I..." he swallowed. "Mr Holmes proposed." The words came out in a rush and he heard Molly draw in a sharp breath before he looked back at her, her mouth agape.

"John! I scarce believe it, for his severe disposition does not make it seem possible." She leaned close in her astonishment. "Not that admiring you should be astonishing in the least. But this... John. He is in *love* with you?"

John took her hand and gripped it firmly. "I confess Molly, he has other feelings that will drive away any regard he felt for me soon enough."

She eyed him for moment, rubbing her thumb over his knuckles. Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. "And you, John? You obviously said no to his proposal, but that is not the entirety of what happened, is it?" She tilted her head. "You don't *care* for him, do you, after all of that?"

Pulling his hand from her grasp, he shook his head.

Silence hung for a moment, and John felt his cheeks grow impossibly warmer.

Molly's look grew confused as she watched him, but loud noises from the front hall derailed their conversation.

"John! Molly!" Harriet's high-pitched squeal made John cringe. "Mama, tell them!" The two women came into the room, Harriet first, full of excited energy. Mrs Watson followed, smiling widely, and John felt an unaccountable sense of dread.

"Mrs—" their mother began.

Harriet, however, could not contain herself, boisterously interrupting her mother in her eagerness. "Mrs Forster invited me to visit in Brighton!" She bounced on the balls of her feet, ringlets bobbing against her rosy cheeks.

John looked at her sternly. "And who said that you would be allowed to go?"

Her face fell into a well-practised pout, and then brightened again. "But you have always liked Lily and she's coming with me, too! Mama has already consented—" John gave his mother a sharp

look, and at least she had the decency to look mildly chagrined. “-and it’s a perfect opportunity to expose myself to society at very little cost to our family.” She and their mother shared a look that told John everything he needed to know. The two had colluded to manipulate him before they’d even come through the door.

Molly smirked, and whispered out of the side of her mouth. “You know you’ll never hear the end of it if you don’t let her go.” John gave her a sidelong look.

Mrs Watson sighed. “I understand your concern, John, but she is right in this. It will incur us little expense or inconvenience to our family, and she needs the experience in society.”

Faced with both his mother and Harriet’s pleading eyes, he knew the battle was already lost, although he couldn’t let it pass without his thoughts being known. “Allow me to speak plainly. Our...very respectability is called into question by Harriet’s wild behaviour. If you were aware,” said John, “of the very great disadvantage to us all, which arises from the very unguarded and imprudent manner Harriet conducts herself, I am sure you would judge this situation differently.”

*...the utter foolishness of your mother and younger sister...* John flinched away from the thought, saying what needed to be said aloud.

“If we do not check her, she will soon be beyond the point of amendment.” Harriet made a sound that verged on a whine as John looked at her. “I think that sending her Brighton is a poor idea at best.”

“Which arises!” repeated Mrs Watson. “What, has she frightened away some of your lovers?” She laughed as if the idea was absurd. Molly looked pointedly at John, her eyebrow raised.

Smart Molly, putting the pieces together, thanks to their mother’s offhand ranting.

Mrs Watson crossed her arms, staring John down determinedly. “Tell me who she has frightened away, and we shall have words about how overly squeamish he or she is to not afford a youth a little absurdity.” She shook her head, automatically negating the possibility. “Mr Forster is a sensible man we have known for many years, and will watch over her well. Besides, Harriet is too poor to be the object of a fortune hunter.”

Harriet sputtered, “*Mother!*” as if she was offended at something so true.

Mrs Watson ignored her, continuing firmly. “Leave it now, John. All will turn out well.”

John could only hope that to be true, and said as much, before he reluctantly assented, his previous warning drowned out by the enthusiastic squealing of his sister.

---

John fidgeted in the seat, uncomfortable on the less than adequately padded carriage interior. He tried to ignore it, however, for his aunt’s sake, and for his own. He felt a little guilty for leaving Molly to deal with their mother all by herself since Harriet had left for Brighton, but he also knew that Molly had the patience of a saint and could manage very well without him there.

“Oh, John, I do so appreciate you agreeing to accompany your old aunt on holiday.” His aunt, Mrs Hudson, reached to pat him on the cheek. She smelled of roses, the scent mingling with the



worn leather of the carriage. Bright sunlight peeked through the dusty glass windows, highlighting the eddies of dust as they swirled this way and that.

“You are such a sweet boy. Always were.” John smiled at the compliment. He loved this woman to distraction, and it was no wonder. She was as different from her sister-in-law, his mother, as night was to day, her demeanour sensible and levelheaded.

It was a welcome change.

“I’m happy to, and am excited to see Derbyshire.” John hadn’t been there since he was a child with his family, and did not remember much.

The carriage pitched to the left before righting itself on the uneven country road, shifting the two passengers against each other momentarily, and apart again. John looked out the window, admiring the landscape. It was ravishing, lovely and severe all at once, full of mountains and wild craggy outcrops. A few frothy white clouds scudded slowly across the sky. In the distance, John could see the town of Lambdon nearing; wildness and culture in harmony, all in one perfect county.

“It’s stunning,” John whispered more to himself than anyone, but Mrs Hudson heard him anyway. Growing up, he used to swear to his sisters that she had ears like a cat, and always managed to catch them when they were up to no good.

“Well, I was born here and grew up here,” she commented conversationally. “So, I’ll never disagree to that. Why, I met your dear departed uncle in Lambdon whilst he was there attending to business.” She sighed at her memory, tracing a wrinkled finger along the edge of the carriage door. “A little town of no consequence, save for those fortunate to have lived in it.”

Charmed, John smiled. “Then I shall be happy to have seen it with you.”

Mrs Hudson continued. “There are many lovely sights, dear, one of which is Pemberley, which is but five miles from Lambdon. Full of rolling lawns and old elegance, that one. The town owes much of its prosperity on that great estate.”

Pemberley.

*Sherlock.*

Chest feeling tight, John shifted his gaze away from his aunt’s wizened, kind face to the vistas outside once again.

“How fortunate,” he said quietly.

“What say you to visiting there tomorrow before we set out again? It is not so much out of our way.” She sounded pleased at the prospect and if John had a weakness, it was not wanting to disappoint her, despite his sudden sharp anxiety at the thought.

“Do you especially wish to see it, Aunt?” he asked. “I should feel awkward to visit the place without a proper invitation.”

“Oh yes, love, I would. And it didn’t seem to bother you to not have an invitation when we toured Blenheim or Chatsworth.”

Oh, damn her logic. She could always do that; see through one’s arguments and turn them inert on the spot.

John was distressed, though he made a valiant effort to not let his aunt see his inner turmoil. This wasn't her quandary to worry about. He had no business at Pemberley, the situation between he and Sherlock as it was, and also frankly hesitated because of his general lack of interest in seeing another great house. Fine carpets and satin curtains would not turn his head at Pemberley any more than they had at Rosings Park.

“And it is my understanding that the family is away for the summer, so we will be bothering no one.” Mrs Hudson nibbled on her lip and her eyebrow rose, waiting for a response from John. She looked so hopeful.

If it were certain that Sherlock was not to be there, then John would lay aside his misgivings to make his aunt happy.

With the proper air of indifference, John replied, “Perhaps I would like to see Pemberley after all,” releasing the breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding.

## Chapter 15

Mrs Hudson sighed. "I think we've seen enough groves and woods to satisfy even your love for them, John." She leaned her head against the inside of the cab and blinked at John wearily. He had to agree, the grounds were expansive and they'd been admiring the landscape for quite some time now.

"Do you imagine we'll see the house proper by dark?" John mused with humour, though he kept his gaze outside, his mind too occupied for full conversation. Eyes alert, he was nearly overwhelmed with curiosity at everything he saw. Like the surrounding countryside, the parkland was wild and rocky, even at the lowest point where they had entered. They gradually ascended for perhaps a half a mile, and John watched with appreciation as several deer grazed in the distance and a pair of hawks circled overhead.

The carriage reached the crest of a hill, slowing for a moment and turning to allow John a full view of the vista, which included the large, handsome estate that was Pemberley. Mrs Hudson gasped behind him as they both looked out, assimilating what they saw. The building itself was made of stone, set on a small rise of its own and surrounded on two sides by a ridge of high woody hills. Meandering in front of the house was a stream that disappeared off to one side, where John could just glimpse a lake, surrounded by brightly coloured wildflowers that he could see even at this distance. He would have to explore on foot later, and see if there were fish in the lake and what other treasures lay around to find. The landscaping was neither formal, nor falsely adorned, and John instantly warmed to the elegant straight-forwardness of the estate, unmarred as it was by artifice or awkward taste.

It was a family home that spoke of long time wealth and proud family legacy; a place that had been someone's residence for generations on end.

"Oh, dear," Mrs Hudson whispered, and John felt the gentle pressure of her hand on his sleeve. "What would be like to be the master of such a place?"

John did not have an answer for that, but he thought to himself that it might be something, indeed.

They descended, coming to a stop by the front entrance, a maidservant already outside waiting to meet them. John was not surprised, as they'd been visible to the house for several minutes and anyone looking out of the many windows would have caught sight of them. Stepping out of the carriage, John felt the bite of apprehension in his belly at the thought that Mrs Hudson's information on the whereabouts of Sherlock Holmes was incorrect. His fears were soon laid to rest, however, for upon meeting them, the maidservant smiled at their inquiries, confirming that the Holmes' were in fact not in residence for the time being, though they were expected tomorrow with friends.

She welcomed them into the hall, opening the door before her and ushering them inside. "Welcome to Pemberley. I am the housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds."

They followed her into the dining room and John's gaze immediately drew upwards at the vaulted ceiling, then back down to the large, but well-proportioned room. The furnishings were exquisite, yet not ostentatious, a subtle handsomeness that didn't need to exert its presence with force to be noticed. Mrs Hudson, in the midst of discussing the layout of the estate, did not notice as John drifted toward the window to look upon the grounds. From here, and he surmised from any vantage point at Pemberley, the view was astounding. The entire scene, the river, the scattering of trees on its bank, the wood in the background, and the winding of the valley were exceedingly pleasant to the eye. When they moved on to the next room, equally beautiful, the view changed in

angle but grew no less admirable. It seemed as if Sherlock's tastes were more subtly genteel than John might have thought, with less conspicuousness and more true refinement than that of the master of Rosings Park.

A pang of regret shot through John, not because he needed or was covetous of all of this finery, but because he became conscious of the fact Pemberley was a physical manifestation of its master.

Elegant. Handsome. Proud.

John trailed behind the two older ladies into a room decorated in pale peach and various shades of greens. This was obviously a woman's room, judging by the floral touches and the dainty writing desk in the corner, which looked over an informal garden directly below the window.

"This was Mrs Holmes' room, where she used to take care of her correspondence every morning over a cup of tea." Mrs Reynolds sounded as pleased as if it were her very own. "The piano is being brought down to go over there." She gestured to a blank spot in the room. "It was a present from Master Holmes for Miss Georgiana."

A thoughtful gift for someone he plainly cared about.

"Mrs Hudson wandered along the edge of the room, looking at the portraits that hung throughout. She paused in front of one. "Oh dear. John, come look at this one."

John walked up beside her and gazed at the full-length portrait of a man standing next to a black as night horse, his long fingered hand on the pommel of the saddle, and an amused quirk to his generous mouth.

A lock of dark hair hung traitorously over one cocked eyebrow.

Oh...*God.*

"What an entirely captivating man. Don't you think?" John's aunt smiled at him. Sometimes Mrs Hudson knew his tastes better than he did.

"Without doubt. It's a very good likeness, I'd say," John murmured, eyes skittering over the long lines of his neck, the shadow emphasising his cheekbones accurately, even in oil paint.

*Why was he so affected by a portrait for God's sake?*

Mrs Reynolds focused her gaze on John. "Oh, does the gentleman know Master Holmes?"

Both his aunt and Mrs Reynolds looked at him curiously.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, a little."

The housekeeper beamed, excited now. "Then you surely agree that he is a handsome gentleman, and so very kind as well."

John felt heat prickling the tips of his ears as Mrs Hudson's gaze turned from curious to keen.

"Yes, of course," he replied, glad of the steadiness of his voice.

Happy to talk apparently, Mrs Reynolds continued. "Aye. Never a cross word I've had from him, though I've certainly earned my share, and his brother, the other Master Holmes, had not one compunction about giving them to me when I deserved it." Her mouth twisted a bit, then softened into a smile. "I've known the younger Master Holmes since he was four years old. He was a kind

hearted, good natured child, and he's grown up to be a likewise man."

She paused and looked conspiratorially between John and Mrs Hudson. "I've something to show you, if you like. Something that will impress upon you just how brilliant Master Holmes really is, because he is not only kind, but he is not one to let his mind idle, as other gentleman of his station tend to do." She beckoned them down the hall, leaving Sherlock's disconcertingly accurate portrait behind, and John felt the oddest urge to tiptoe and whisper if he needed to communicate, though he knew no one was there to hear them.

They stopped outside of a closed door, where Mrs Reynolds turned around, suddenly looking stern. "Now, this here is Master Holmes' personal room, and we've all got strict orders not to touch anything inside, lest we disrupt his work. We don't always understand what he's doing or why, but important people call on him occasionally for his knowledge, so we adhere to his rules implicitly."

John and his aunt exchanged glances and then nodded at Mrs Reynolds, who obviously expected some sort of acknowledgement. John's curiosity nearly overwhelmed him now, for he knew that whatever was behind the door was something to do with the work Miss Lestrade alluded to back at Netherfield.

Satisfied, Mrs Reynolds opened the door, and the natural light filling the room immediately surprised John. The outer wall had been replaced with floor to ceiling windows, allowing the space the maximum amount of daylight to pour in. Shutters were affixed to all of the windows if the occupant desired privacy or darkness during the day, but at the moment, they were all thrown wide. Along one entire wall were shelves, crammed full of books, obviously in no particular order, and in such a disarray John cocked an eyebrow at Mrs Reynolds in silent question. She shrugged.

"We aren't allowed to touch the books either." That must have been difficult for a dedicated housekeeper such as Mrs Reynolds to handle.

The opposite wall was also lined with shelves but these held all sorts of objects instead, both identifiable and unidentifiable. From John's perspective at the door, he could see a set of several small glass jars filled with what looked like different types of soil, a large pelvic bone of a creature not human, a magnifying glass, and many other items John would need to be closer to be able to name. John took a step to do just that, but Mrs Reynolds stood in his way, shaking her head firmly.

"I apologise Sir, but I can only let you look from here and that is it."

"I promise I won't tou--"

Mrs Reynolds interrupted, waving a hand in front of John's face, "Won't matter. Master Holmes would know if someone other than himself stepped into the room, even if you didn't disturb a thing."

John would have expected a servant to be a bit frightened by that oddity, but Mrs Reynolds stated it as if she were describing the weather outside.

John made a noncommittal noise, his eyes scanning the room over her diminutive shoulder, Mrs Hudson peeking around him to get her own view. There were two large oak tables set perpendicular to each other. The amount of equipment found on both was astounding, to say the least. Glass beakers and bowls, copper coiled piping and what looked like a human skull cluttered the surface. Everything was sparkling clean, ready for use, despite the chaos of the room in general. In the middle of it all stood the centrepiece of the arrangement: a brass microscope, well

used and well taken care of, a fact made obvious by its appearance, even from this distance.

Chemistry.

That's what the equipment was all about. Sherlock Holmes ran experiments. John, in his military travels, had once been in a scientist's laboratory in France, and the space looked somewhat similar, even down to the cluttered feel. Brilliant minds often do not worry about the detritus they leave behind when they worked, apparently.

John was silent as he took all of this in, but his aunt looked around and said drily, "I am overwhelmingly pleased that you are his housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds, and not I."

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John left Mrs Hudson and Mrs Reynolds in quiet conversation, intending to explore the grounds. He stood outside on the front step for a moment before striking out toward the lake. Following the path of the stream along its meandering path, he stopped more than once to admire the cool clarity of the water. The day had grown frightfully warm, and the stream reminded John of wading in the river by Longbourne as a child, trying to catch the damselflies as they flitted in their erratic, zigzag patterns.

A heavy thicket of ash trees concealed the majority of the lake's shoreline, and the rest was lined with a riot of wildflowers of all sorts and colours. John smiled at the mesmerizing hum of flying insects, the sound a pleasant reminder of summer. As he neared the edge, splashing off to his left brought him up short. Imagining that the deer he had seen earlier had made their way to the water source to drink, John inched closer, hoping to get a glimpse of them to see exactly how large they were. They'd seemed like a healthy herd from far away, and John wondered absently if Sherlock hunted them for sport, or if he just enjoyed the aesthetics of them roaming his property.

What he saw, however, was certainly no deer.

A dark haired head emerged from the surface of the lake, followed by a lean, tightly muscled back. Rivulets of water ran down pale skin, making it glisten in the afternoon sun. John swallowed thickly, rooted to the spot, unable to move backward or forward. His choices were removed from him as Sherlock abruptly turned around, sinking back into the water back up to his neck.

Neither man said a word, the silence electric between them, and then both tried to speak at once.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry--" John started to back up.

"Captain Watson, what are you--" The words fell away into silence once again.

John grimaced and pulled his shoulders back, fingers clenching at his sides. "I didn't expect to see you, sir. We understood that your family was not here, or we would have never presumed to intrude." He took a hasty step backward and started to turn away on his heel. "I'll just--"

Sherlock surged up from the water, hand out. "No! Wait, please!" He gestured toward the pile of clothing on the grass at the edge of the lake. "To answer your question, I returned a day early. Let me put myself together and I will give you and your..." Sherlock raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

“My aunt,” John choked out, fighting to keep his eyes on Sherlock’s and not wander toward the smooth skin of his chest or the pebbled rosy flesh of his nipples, or the faint trail of dark hair that started low on his belly and disappeared underneath the reflective surface of the water.

Sherlock tilted his head and dropped his hand to his side. A slight smile touched his lips. “Aunt. Of course. I’ll give you and your aunt a tour of the grounds.” He started toward the shore, and broke eye contact. John nearly sagged with relief that was terribly short-lived. Arising from the water, John saw that Sherlock had kept his small clothes bottoms on, but the thin white linen, now soaked, did nothing to hide the man’s body as they clung indecently low on his narrow hips and to every curve they touched.

Oh, and they were such lovely curves.

Sherlock gracefully bent to pick up his clothing and John’s knees nearly gave way at the rush of desire he felt for this man, his blood pumping swiftly through his veins. He must have made some noise, for Sherlock straightened quickly, his clothes held in one hand in front of himself. Heart kicking in his chest, John could only stand and watch as Sherlock approached cautiously, his narrowed eyes moving over John with speed, calculating and evaluating.

John watched a trickle of water make its lazy way down Sherlock neck and pool next to his collarbone.

“Physical intimacy does not equate to affection, Captain Watson,” Sherlock rasped quietly. John’s eyes snapped up to his as the familiar words hung in the air between them. When he spoke, John’s voice was rough, knowing well enough that his face, his *body*, betrayed his desire. “No. No it does not, Mr Holmes, but I would not wish to--”

Sherlock made an exasperated sound and stepped close. “I am not some fragile flower to be crushed so easily, and I still know the difference between the two and which side you fall upon,” he growled, and John’s body reacted forcefully, though he managed to stay still up until that point. Now, before this man, his will crumbled into so much dust.

“You are still an arse,” John hummed as he gave himself up to it, studiously ignoring the maelstrom of feelings working inside of him at Sherlock’s nearness. He leaned over to suck the water that still remained in the hollow of Sherlock’s neck, mouthing the skin there. Sherlock tasted of sunshine and fresh water and the man gasped softly, shuddering, dropping his bundle of clothing on the ground at their feet.

“And this does not mean anything more than what it is,” John breathed against the cool, moist skin.

His voice strained, Sherlock replied, “Of course not.”

Long fingers clutched at John’s shoulders, pulling him closer, pressing their bodies together, cloth against bare flesh. John kissed that long neck as it arched back on an open-mouthed groan, Sherlock’s face toward the sky. He could feel moisture from Sherlock’s body wicking through his clothing as their bodies touched, and his cock pulsed. Hooking his fingers in the waist of Sherlock’s bottoms, John tugged, because he had to *see*.

Resting his forehead on Sherlock’s chest, he bowed his body away slightly and looked down, admiring the perfection with which this man was put together. He trailed a finger along the dusky pink tip of Sherlock’s long, slightly curved erection, already glistening as the head pulled out of the foreskin, hardening further as John watched. Sherlock’s breath turned uneven; though it was obvious he tried to control it.

Now, John needed to *touch*. To make this man fall apart under his fingers while he watched, the sunlight warming the back of his neck.

John traced his fingertips through the thatch of black hair at the base of Sherlock's cock, then lightly up the ridge of the underside before wrapping his fingers around it and stroking upward, sighing softly at the velvet smooth texture of skin. This was so different than what had transpired at Netherfield, out here in the dappled sunlight where John could watch Sherlock's hips cant toward him, see the muscles of his stomach bunch in reaction to John's touch. See everything in crystal clear detail.

Sherlock's hands threaded through John's hair, flexed hard. "John," he moaned breathily. "Please..." he pleaded, and something in the tone of his voice brought John's gaze up. Looking back at him, Sherlock's expression was one of desire, need, and some indefinable emotion that made John hesitate, and John's mouth went suddenly dry at the stark vulnerability in Sherlock's face.

There was movement in the trees behind them, then a familiar voice calling out, "John?"

Sherlock's eyes -they were blue today, like the sky- widened and immediately shuttered. John stepped back, hastily releasing him and dislodging Sherlock's fingers from his hair. He smoothed it down quickly.

His aunt had come to find him and would be upon them at any moment.

Sherlock stood frozen in place, his smallclothes around his knees and his erection curving proudly against his belly. He looked glorious and as much as John loved his aunt, he cursed viciously at her timing.

"The lake," John hissed.

Jarred into action, Sherlock immediately turned, pulling at his errant clothing as he did so, and strode into the water. He dove head first after a few steps.

Mrs Hudson came around the edge of the trees only moments later. John's heart raced.

"John! I thought you might be down here. The stable boy came to tell Mrs Reynolds that Mr Holmes--" Splashing from the lake had his aunt squinting over the water, where Sherlock hovered with only his head showing, watching them. His expression was inscrutable. John kept his body averted, but looked her in the eye.

"Oh, I see you've found him." She patted John on the shoulder, and then beamed a happy smile. "Come up to the house when you are ready, dear, and properly introduce your old aunt to the gentleman. I should like to meet him, I think." She let her hand drop, nodding and turning to go. Before she disappeared back around the trees, however, she tossed over her shoulder, "But you'll want to dry off a bit, love, before you do." And she winked at him.

Startled, John looked down at himself and noticed just how wet his clothing was, thanks to Sherlock, although that could have been explained away somehow. What might have been more difficult to clarify was the wet, darkened handprint on the fabric of his topcoat, directly where Mrs Hudson had touched his shoulder.

Sherlock cleared his throat. "Why don't you go on ahead...ah...I will follow shortly." He gestured with his chin toward the house.

John nodded. "Right, then." He paused, opening his mouth to say something, *anything*, only to find that the words wouldn't come. Nothing seemed right or appropriate. Snapping his lips shut,



he pressed them together in a tense smile and bowed shallowly, turning on his heel and leaving Sherlock behind.

## Chapter 16

Mrs Hudson smiled widely at Sherlock. “Well, dear. It was a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for allowing us to take up so much of your time.” The sun shone brightly on her weathered face and she squinted as she looked up at him. The carriage horses nickered softly on the drive.

Sherlock smiled back at her, easy and relaxed, the picture of elegance, discounting the fact his hair was still damp and lay in an untidy disarray around his face.

“Of course, Mrs Hudson.” Glancing at John, expression subtly shifting to something more reserved, he said, “I apologise for not receiving you properly, Mr Watson. I do not mean to give you any impression that you need to leave. You are more than welcome to stay, if you like.” As far as John could tell, Sherlock was not making any allusions to their encounter at the lake. His sincerity leaked into his tone and expression.

John shifted on his feet, ill at ease. He had been so for the past hour as Sherlock had led them around the rest of Pemberley they had not seen yet with Mrs Reynolds, sharing histories and anecdotes of the property and its inhabitants. They’d even managed to see the famous Pemberley library, which was just as exquisite as Miss Lestrade touted it to be. The entire time, Sherlock managed to act as if nothing had transpired earlier at all, whilst John could think of nothing but those long fingers running along his scalp, of water droplets glistening like diamonds on pale, creamy skin.

It made for a rather uncomfortable tour.

“You are not giving me any such impression, sir, but I think we must be going,” John said graciously.

A shadow darkened Sherlock’s eyes for a moment. “I...You are not displeased by Pemberley. I can see you like it.”

John laughed, surveying the grounds and feeling some of the tension draining out of his shoulders. It truly was a lovely view any direction he looked. “As would anyone, I should think. I cannot imagine anyone would disapprove of such a stately place.”

Sherlock smiled wryly. “But your approval is difficult to obtain, therefore all the more valuable once reached.” His voice rumbled like thunder, even in casual conversation such as this.

John swallowed, paused and thought about *what* he said, feeling vaguely ashamed for creating an impression of himself to inspire such a comment. “Thank you,” he managed.

They stared at each other, the tendrils of their connection weaving and winding between them.

John gripped the bottom of his topcoat to keep from reaching out and just *touching*.

Sherlock cleared his throat and pulled his eyes away to address Mrs Hudson, leaving John to stare at his profile. “Are you staying for much longer in Lambdon?”

Mrs Hudson looked perceptively at John for a moment, and then back to Sherlock. “At least another two nights, I should think. I grew up here and I would enjoy spending time in a place that brought me such happiness.”

John tried not to react, for he and his aunt had discussed no such arrangements. As a matter of fact, they were to retrieve their belongings and be off this afternoon. He narrowed his eyes at her,

but she blinked back at him without any obvious guile.

“I’m glad to hear it then.” Sherlock looked pleased.

Mrs Reynolds, who had been waiting patiently off to the side of the porch, smiled at Mrs Hudson and motioned with her head to the carriage. She and Mrs Hudson went ahead a bit as John and Sherlock lagged behind.

Sherlock stood, contemplating the grounds, then reached up and rubbed a hand on the back of his neck. A hawk cried in the distance and they both looked up, watching it wheeling in a circle over something on the ground. As if addressing the sky, Sherlock said, “The rest of my party arrives tomorrow, and I know my sister would like to meet you. Would I...Would it be asking too much if I brought her by the inn tomorrow morning to introduce her to you?”

John’s heart skipped a beat, and not sure that he wanted to analyse why at that very moment, he answered, “I would be honoured to make her acquaintance, Mr Holmes.” He was being honest; he did want to meet Sherlock’s sister, needing to see if she was as perfect as Miss Lestrade had indicated, or if she was just as flawed as everyone else. Would she be like her brother, Mycroft? Arrogant and imperious, rude and abrasive? Or would she be more like Sherlock, who under close examination was truly different than his brother, proud and loyal to a fault, observant and painfully honest?

As if by silent signal, they both moved toward the carriage, where Mrs Hudson waited patiently inside. Mrs Reynolds was nowhere to be seen, having already taken her leave. John turned at the door, and held out his hand. Sherlock looked at it for a moment before grasping it in his own, his skin warm, and his grip firm.

“I hope to meet again very soon.” Sherlock held on, and John did not wish to break contact. He was finding it difficult to take a full breath when Sherlock finally let go, his fingertips lingering against John’s palm in a way that made John shiver and heat rush to his face. Sherlock let his hand drop and bowed formally, a glint in his eye that could be cast as nothing but flirtatious.

“Good day, Mrs Hudson. Good day, Captain Watson.”

John recovered quickly enough, pivoting to enter the carriage.

“To you as well, Mr Holmes.”

---

John woke up early, unable to sleep in the uncomfortable bed, sore and tired. Yet, at odds with his aches, he groomed and dressed with alacrity. Not wanting to stray from the inn, he sat with his breakfast in the main room whilst he wrote his obligatory letter to his mother and a more truthful, open letter--minus certain details--about yesterday’s occurrences to Molly.

*‘...You would love it here, Molly, and enjoy the sights as much as I. It seems as though I have been wrong about a great many things, Pemberley and Mr Holmes in particular, in addition to my folly in believing Mr Moriarty. I know you told me I should hold no guilt for being deceived, as we all were drawn in equally, but I don't enjoy being played the fool and the knowledge of his dishonesty weighs heavily upon my shoulders. I can only hope he will do no one any injustice that cannot be rectified...’*

The sound of a carriage drew him away from the table to the window, where John saw Sherlock, Mr Lestrade and a young lady approaching in a curricule.

He turned and leaned on the wall, his heart beating hard in chest. Taking a deep breath, he stared up at the rough-hewn ceiling, disconcerted by his own discomposure. John wondered at himself, at this unexpected turn of feeling. Was it seeing the vast expanse of Pemberley? The wild beauty of the grounds, the elegant grandeur of the main house?

No, he wasn't fool enough to think seeing evidence of the wealth he already knew Sherlock possessed had much, if anything to do with it. It was more than that, but what was to come of it? What could possibly happen when John knew very well the disdain Sherlock held for his family and his station? Physical attraction or not, it seemed an impossible barrier to overcome.

His thoughts in an uproar, he had time to straighten and smooth his pale yellow waistcoat before the maidservant announced their arrival.

"If you please, sir. There are two gentlemen and a lady waiting for you. Shall I send them in?"

John nodded, "Yes, thank you, Hannah." She curtsied shallowly before scurrying out of the room.

Moments later, Sherlock walked through the doorway, taking in the surroundings, eyes coming to rest on John. Sherlock's expression was placid, though his body language told a different story. He fidgeted, fingers tapping restlessly against his breeches. Obviously, he was not nearly as calm as he would like to project, and John was glad for it. It meant he was not alone in feeling out of sorts.

"Mr Holmes. A good morning to you," John said, hoping he didn't sound as flustered as he felt.

A smile touched the edges of Sherlock's mouth. "And to you, Captain Watson." He cleared his throat and stepped aside. "May I introduce to you my sister, Georgiana. Georgiana, this is Captain John Watson." His eyes softened markedly when he looked at her and encouraged her forward.

Miss Holmes was tall, taller than John; and though she was only sixteen, she still appeared womanly and graceful. She had Sherlock's features; dark, wavy hair pulled into an elegant chignon at the back of her head, blue-grey eyes that tilted up at the corners and well-defined cheekbones. She was beautiful in the same unconventional way that Sherlock was handsome, her features just imperfect enough to make someone look closely and come to the conclusion that all together they equalled a lovely young woman.

Smiling timidly, she tilted her head in greeting. "How do you do, Captain Watson?" Her voice quiet, it was immediately apparent to John that Georgiana was painfully shy. He was glad of being wrong in his assumptions and found he liked her instantly.

He bowed formally, and smiled. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Holmes. I have heard so much about you."

She blushed, though she looked him in the eye. "And I about you."

Sherlock watched him with intense concentration, his body finally still, undoubtedly gauging John's reaction, which was only to nod.

Motioning behind them, Sherlock said, "Mr Lestrade is here as well, and was insistent on seeing you. May I summon him?" He had already started walking toward the door before John answered with an amused, "Yes, of course."

John and Georgiana watched his retreat in silence. To her, John commented, "I understand you are very fond of music and talented on the piano, Miss Holmes."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I love music, yes. But talented? No. I can manage, but that is the extent of my musical prowess." She giggled a little girlishly, and John laughed with her.

"Well, I would still love to hear you play."

"Of course. My brother said you are a brave man and fought in the regimentals. I would love to hear about your travels," she asked hesitantly.

Surprised, John replied, "Well, you shall if you like. But your brother has greatly exaggerated my time in service. I can attest to the time in interesting places, but I would not conclude I am brave because of it."

Georgiana looked shocked. Shaking her head, she said, "Oh no. That could not be so. My brother does not exaggerate. He is incapable of it and only tells the absolute truth as he sees it. That is the way his mind works, though sometimes he is kinder than he should be to me."

He only told the absolute truth. That was something John now knew first hand.

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. "An ideal older brother, then."

"Yes, most certainly better than I could have ever asked for."

Curious, John asked, "And what of your other brother? Are you close with him as well?"

Georgiana laughed; a pretty, musical sound. "Mycroft? I know you have met him."

John nodded.

"Then you may have surmised it is difficult to be close to one such as he. He cares for me as a father would, and is as protective as Sherlock, but was a grown man with his own household by the time I was born. Sherlock was at Pemberley with me as I grew up." She shrugged prettily, as though that explained everything.

"John!" Mr Lestrade burst in the room, all smiles and animation as he interrupted and shook John's hand firmly. Sherlock trailed closely behind. "So good to see you again! I can't tell you how happy I was when Holmes told me you were staying in Lambdon, so close to Pemberley. I can see you are well." Words tumbled out of his mouth almost faster than he could control them.

John chuckled at his enthusiasm. "Yes, yes. I am well."

"And your family? Are they all in good health?" Mr Lestrade looked around the room briefly, almost as if he expected them to be hiding under the table or behind one of the chairs.

"Indeed, Greg. They are." John watched Sherlock out of the corner of his eye as the man moved around Mr Lestrade to stand at John's elbow, completing the circle of the four of them. His stomach fluttered.

"And your sisters? Are they both at Longbourne?" Greg's eyes lit up, hopeful and eager.

"No, Molly is there, but my youngest sister is in Brighton for the summer." It felt good and right to ease Greg a bit. He caught Sherlock's eye and raised a brow slightly, intending for the message to be clearly understood by Sherlock. *You were wrong about my sister and your friend loves her. Shame on you.* The other man blinked and flushed, eyes skittering away.

Greg smiled at John's answer. "It's been too long. Nearly eight months, if I am counting correctly. Since November."

"I think you must be right," John agreed.

"Oh yes. I know I am. I don't think I remember a happier time than those few short months at Netherfield." Greg looked wistful.

"Captain Watson, my sister has a request to make of you, if you would," Sherlock interjected, glancing at his sister. Obviously grateful, Georgiana smiled at him.

"Of course."

"Captain Watson," Georgiana laid her hand upon his forearm in her excitement, and squeezed. "We would be honoured if you and your aunt would come to Pemberley and join us for dinner. Would tomorrow be convenient for you?" She glanced at Sherlock, who nodded at her.

"Splendid idea. Just splendid!" Lestrade piped in.

*Dinner. With Sherlock at Pemberley.*

John took her hand in his and lightly kissed the back of her knuckles before letting go. "Thank you, we would be delighted. We have no engagements that would conflict."

Georgiana looked more than pleased, but it was Sherlock who answered. "We look forward to it."

---

The next evening, after a lovely supper, Georgiana's sweet voice rang through the drawing room as she played the piano, John sitting on the settee in a place nearest her as the last note drifted into silence. She took her long fingers off of the keys as Mr Lestrade clapped his hands together in unabashed delight.

"Splendid as always, Miss Georgiana!"

Mrs Hudson, Miss Lestrade and Sherlock were sitting off to one side of the room around a small table, their conversation quiet and indistinct.

"I agree, Miss Holmes. Will you play another?" John asked. She was a delight to listen to, and her music put John at ease.

"Oh, thank you. I fear I was not faithful to the piece, but I am grateful that you choose to ignore how I slurred through the last page." She giggled behind her hand. "And to answer your question, I'll only play another if Sherlock joins me with his violin." She raised her voice and leaned to the side so she could see past Mr Lestrade, who leaned against the piano.

Violin. Sherlock played the *violin*?

"Sherlock. Will you play with me?" She blinked prettily as his awareness was pulled away from Miss Lestrade and Mrs Hudson. "Please?"

John's stomach tightened as Sherlock looked at him, and then back at his sister. "I don't think our guests--" Sherlock began.

John interjected before he could finish. "Oh, most certainly we *would*, Mr Holmes."

Miss Lestrade simpered. "My dear Mr Holmes, do not feel obligated to play. I am sure Captain Watson and his aunt would understand if you declined." She cut a glance at John, looking very certain of herself. John fought an urge to bare his teeth.

Sherlock, already standing, looked down his nose at her. "Miss Lestrade, thank you for your...thoughtfulness, however, if our guest wishes it, I would be happy, not obliged to play." He strode over to the side of the room, leaving Miss Lestrade to mull over the words, looking as if she tasted something bitter.

Bending to retrieve his instrument which had been in a case, obscured from view, he picked it and a bow up and made his way to stand next to his sister, opposite John's position. Mr Lestrade moved to take his place near Miss Lestrade. Sherlock leaned to flip the pages of sheet music in front of Georgiana, face intense, as he selected something by tapping it with his forefinger.

She looked a little worriedly at her brother, then straightened her back and placed her fingers on the keyboard when he nodded, their silent communication full of reassurance. So different from Sherlock, this young lady. Georgiana Holmes wore her heart on her sleeve, and Sherlock reacted with warmth and grace around her that made John smile.

It was truly eye opening.

Feeling Sherlock's gaze upon him, John looked up just as the other man raised the violin to his chin and began the music in tandem with his sister.

John sat mesmerised, watching him play. Never having been much moved by music before, John did not expect the impact listening to Sherlock would have upon him. The music was vibrant and emotional, but it was *how* Sherlock played that wrapped around John's heart and squeezed. Much of the time, Sherlock kept his eyes solely on John, not needing to refer to the sheet music. Georgiana followed, body swaying to the rhythm as it swelled and receded. The world narrowed down to the two of them once again, the gossamer threads of the music creating a vacuum in which nothing and no one else existed.

It felt as though Sherlock was trying to communicate through the music, and John would have to be blind and deaf not to realise his message.

As the piece neared its end, however, it seemed as if Sherlock could do nothing but close his eyes and play, and good God, when he did that, John's heart simply ached. Gone was the stoic, proud man, the man who seemed to shun any but his own. In his place was a man whose expression painted a picture of passion and sentiment that made John catch his breath in awe.

Georgiana was an adequate player, but Sherlock...Sherlock was *exquisite*.

The piece ended and the room stood silent for a moment before Sherlock opened his eyes, already focused on John, who became conscious of the fact his fingers covered his mouth and his throat felt thick and useless. He let his hand fall from his lips into his lap.

Somehow, *somehow* he found his words to issue them forth, his voice rough. "That was...That was *amazing*."

A slow smile crept over Sherlock's face, lighting him from the inside out, and his eyes glittering.

Georgiana looked to and from them both, her hands slowly clasping over her heart as she did.

“Pray, Captain Watson. Is the militia still stationed at Meryton?” Irene’s silky voice broke the spell and all three of them around the piano looked at her. Mrs Hudson glanced at her sharply.

John cleared his throat, brought abruptly to the present by her inquiry. “No, they are encamped at Brighton for the summer.”

Miss Lestrade’s manner turned sympathetic, making John immediately wary. “They must be a great loss for some of you.”

Glancing at Sherlock, who looked at Miss Lestrade flatly, John replied with feigned casualness, “We are enduring it as best we can.” He turned his attention back to Georgiana, thus ending the conversation. “Miss Holmes. If you would play another, I would be glad to hear it.”

She smiled sweetly at John and nodded, turning the page to a new selection whilst Sherlock met his gaze. The edges of his generous mouth twitched in amusement.

---

Irene looked at Sherlock, her eyes narrowed on him as she sipped her tea, the two of them alone in the room, their guests gone and the others having made their way upstairs. “He looked so very different this evening. Not well at all.”

Sherlock huffed. “I saw no difference to speak of. Perhaps a little tanned, but that is hardly surprising considering he is traveling in the summer and he enjoys the out of doors.” His long fingers trailed along the edge of the settee, stroking absently, a cup of tea resting on one knee. Irene watched the movement of his hand like a hawk watches a mouse in a field.

“Hmm. For my part, I must confess, that I never saw much handsomeness in his face. His features are nondescript and not offensive, I’ll point out, but nothing in his countenance strikes me as unique or memorable.” She laughed, sounding false to Sherlock’s ears. “I seem to remember you saying you did not find him attractive in the least when we met him last fall in Hertfordshire.”

Sherlock put down his teacup, his fingers hesitating on the edge for just a moment before responding. This needed to stop, and stop this evening. Tapping the cup twice with his finger, he turned to regard her closely. He knew what she was about. He’d known for years what this woman wanted and that she thought she would attain it through sheer persistence and the disassembling of any possible threat to her goal. Up until this point, he hadn’t cared much, for there had not been anyone he held enough feeling for to care one way or the other. But now, for her to speak of John in this way was unacceptable and offensive.

“I may have thought that way when we first made our acquaintance, in truth. But I have since come to know Captain Watson to the extent that I have, for several months, considered him as one of the most handsome men of my acquaintance.” Irene’s lips parted in shock as he continued, standing and bowing curtly. “Now, if you will excuse me, I think it is time I retire for the evening.”

He turned smartly and strode out of the room, a smirk on his face, not allowing her to respond, for there was nothing in this world she could say to change the course of his mind.





## Chapter 17

“John, dear,” Mrs Hudson poked him with a finger, snapping him out of his reverie.

He trained his eyes on her and found her looking at him oddly. “Hmm?” She was right to look at him so. He couldn’t do anything but grin this morning. Everything amused him and he looked forward to the day.

“You are smiling,” She took a sip of her tea and raised an eyebrow at him over the rim of the cup, “as if you have a grand secret.”

John blinked at her, trying to school his features to no avail. “It’s a beautiful day, Aunt. We’re about ready to go and spend some time in it, and why wouldn’t I be happy to spend time with my favourite--”

Mrs Hudson laughed, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “Oh John, try and flatter me all you like, but your wise old aunt knows that look. You, darling, are smitten.”

Sputtering, John huffed out, “I don’t know what you mean! How could I possibly--”

She rolled her eyes and put her cup aside, grasping his hands across the table with both of hers. “*How could you possibly?*” She shook her head. “Possibly what? Care for a man who is well situated, well mannered,” John started to protest, albeit feebly, but Mrs Hudson talked right over him. “and looks like he belongs in a grand artist’s painting?” She squeezed his hands. “Easy to do, I would say.”

“But, he has been so intolerable. So impossible in manner.”

“No more than you can be, I would wager.”

John’s mouth fell open. His aunt laughed again, and patted his hands before putting hers in her lap. “Sometimes it’s difficult to see what is in one’s own mirror and we need it pointed out to us by another.” Her face softened at his expression. “John Hamish Watson. It is not likely you missed how he looked at you during the whole of our visit last evening. I know what you have told me of his behaviour prior, but it hardly seems likely this is the same man? He was nothing if not gentlemanly and polite, and treated you, and *me* with utmost respect.”

“But the way he spoke of my family--”

“John. Do you imagine I was immediately fond of everyone in your family?” She asked wryly.

Rubbing the back of his neck, thinking of his mother, he looked at her sheepishly. “Point made.”

Before he could comment further, the maidservant scuttled into the room bearing two letters, which she handed to John before retreating back from whence she came.

“From Molly!” John turned them over in his hand. “No wonder I haven’t heard from her. I had been wondering why we hadn’t...She wrote the direction very ill, indeed!” He glanced up at Mrs Hudson who had risen and was currently donning her bonnet. “Would you be very upset if I postpone our outing?”

His aunt waved a dismissive hand at him. “Pssh. Of course not. I am very capable of walking about on my own. I will walk to the market and will call back for you in an hour.”

John smiled at her as she made her way out the door before returning to the letters in his hand, opening the first and laying it out upon the table.

As he read, his heart dropped into his stomach.

*'...do not wish to alarm you, for Mother and I are well, but I must tell you of distressing news concerning Harriet. We were to bed last night and an express came. Mr Forster had written to inform us Harriet had gone off to Scotland with one of the officers in the militia--Mr Moriarty! We were shocked and Mother is beside herself. I cannot say I am happy about this in the least, but I only hope his character has been misunderstood. His choice can only be disinterested at best, considering this family can give him nothing for this ill-conceived match . . .'*

The rest of the letter contained some minor details John only scanned through before tearing open the other, his eyes flicking over the page.

*'...I hardly know what I should write, but the news is now worse than we originally thought. It appears Harriet and Moriarty did not go to Scotland, as we had initially believed. Mr Forster came yesterday, having left Brighton the day before. He has come by information that Moriarty never intended to go there, nor intended to marry Harriet at all. Mr Forster traced them as far as Clapham where he found they moved into a hackney-coach, and all we know further is they continued on the London road. He stopped at several inns in Barnet and Hatfield, but met with ill success. No one had seen them. Our distress, dear John, is very great. Can we suppose her so lost to everything? We expressed our hopes that circumstances would make it possible for them to be married privately in town, but Mr Forster fears this is not likely, and he said he feared Mr Moriarty was not a man to be trusted. Mother has taken ill from her worry and has retreated to her room, though I cannot say I am regretful about that small detail. I am glad you have been spared some unfortunate scenes. I would like to be greedy and say I want you to return home, for I need your strength and your steady disposition, but I know once you receive this, you will be the honourable man you are and try to find our sister. Please, John. Do what you need to do, but do it in the best and safest way . . .'*

John gripped the letter so hard in his fist; the parchment tore as it crumpled. "Bloody hell!" He stood, his heart pounding in his chest, his emotions in turmoil. He darted toward the door, but before he could open it himself, the maidservant did so from the other side.

"If you please, Sir," she looked nervously at John. Sherlock stood behind her.

"Captain Watson, I hope this is a good--"

"I beg your pardon, Mr Holmes," he interrupted, tension turning his voice into something not his own, "but I cannot delay. I must find Mrs Hudson this moment and then be on my way."

Sherlock looked at him with wide eyes. "Good God! What is the matter?" he exclaimed, his calm exterior erased at the sight of John, whose colour had leached from his face as he vibrated with the anxiousness to be gone already.

John looked at him, the urge to tell him everything warring with his natural instinct to protect his family. There existed such concern in Sherlock's eyes (grey today), John's resolve shattered into pieces. Still, he hesitated, not knowing how much he wanted to divulge.

"John. What is it?" Sherlock said.

John breathed through his nose, and as he exhaled, he started to speak.

"My sister," he shook his head, "my *youngest* sister has made a most grievous error in judgement.

I've just had word from Molly that Harriet has run off and eloped with..." John swallowed, repulsed the words even had to come out of his mouth, "with Mr Moriarty. She's got no money, no connections, nothing that should be tempting for him, and yet..." His voice trailed off as he watched Sherlock's face harden. "She is lost. The last word we have places them more than likely in London and you have walked in as I am preparing to travel there at once."

"Are you certain?" Sherlock's voice was intense.

"Yes." John scrubbed his hand through his hair. "I know very well nothing can be done, and I fear I will not be able to find them, but I have to try." He could almost feel Sherlock pulling away from the conversation, though the other man did not move a muscle. His stance subtly changing, the look in his eyes gradually growing remote, Sherlock's reaction couldn't have been clearer.

John observed this transformation and instantly understood what it meant. This further proof of his family's unacceptability was an assurance of the deepest dishonour. He had no illusions about what Sherlock must be thinking, but neither could he condemn him for it. It only served to make him understand in that moment what could have been, that he could have loved this man when now all hope was lost.

He felt as if he could barely take a breath and had to turn swiftly to the window to earn himself distance. He gripped the sill until his knuckles turned white and leaned his forehead against the windowpane.

The silence behind him was deafening.

A full minute passed before Sherlock cleared his throat, breaking the tense stillness. "You are correct. You must be on your way and I have overstayed my welcome. I will give my sister your regrets that you will not be able to come to call upon us once again at Pemberley."

John looked over his shoulder and forced a smile. "Yes, thank you. And please, if you would, your discretion in this would be much appreciated." Sherlock's mind was obviously elsewhere, his eyes cast out the window beyond John.

"Of course. You are assured of my secrecy." Sherlock bowed crisply. "I shall leave you now." He didn't wait for a reply as he exited the room, leaving John to whisper his goodbyes to empty air.

---

John sat on the edge of the bed, his head heavy in his hands, blunt fingers digging into his scalp. It had been two and a half days since he left Lambdon after receiving word from Molly about Harriet and Moriarty. He had since acquired a sturdy horse, and had ridden hard, stopping only briefly along the way in Northampton to rest and feed both himself and his mount. Arriving in London the day prior, he'd chosen the first inn he'd seen, not particularly caring about location nor amenities. Setting out immediately after securing a room and tossing his things carelessly inside, he only too soon realised he had no idea where to begin. Swallowing some of his pride, he went to his aunt and uncle's home in Cheapside --the same whom Molly had just recently stayed with-- only to find them gone, having quit the city for an extended holiday on the continent. As the maidservant closed the door politely in his face after relating the information, John felt conflicted. He could have done with his uncle's help, having another able body to help with the search, but he was also relieved he was not forced to recount the entire disaster once again to yet

another person, even if it *was* family.

Having Sherlock know of this unwelcome situation was bad enough.

Next, he had called upon the acquaintances his family knew and associated with in London, though they were few. Concentrating only on the families that included young women Harriet got on with, he greeted them using the pretence of social niceties, when in reality he only hoped to talk to Harriet's friends to find out what they knew, if anything. Of the three he'd visited, it was apparent none of them had heard from or seen her since the last time the entire Watson family had been in town.

Now, in the flickering candlelight of his small, but serviceable room, he wanted to scream in his frustration. He needed to scour the inns of London next, but the task was overwhelming in its magnitude. At any point after he started, Harriet and Moriarty could move to another of dozens of inns in London proper, perhaps one John had already checked, therefore rendering his work null and void. Or perhaps Mr Moriarty had friends or acquaintances in London with whom they were staying and John knew nothing of those possibilities at all. It truly seemed hopeless.

John lay down on the uncomfortable mattress and stared at the ceiling, ignoring the sounds of noisy drunk patrons in the common room below as he allowed himself to wallow in self pity for just a little while, his throat feeling thick.

What an utter fool he'd been.

About Harriet. He'd thought her silly and imprudent, not capable of intentionally making a choice which could ruin herself and consequently her family.

About Moriarty. He should have seen his duplicity for what it was, for something too perfect to be true often was not as it seemed. He should have told everyone of his character as soon as he had read of it from Sherlock, yet had chosen and even insisted for Molly to keep it a secret, thinking to save his family from some humiliation for taking such a man to heart, but even more so, hoping the man and his issues would just disappear and be forgotten when the militia moved on to Brighton.

About Sherlock. Oh, this was the worst. Yes, the man was arrogant and proud, but no more so than John himself. There was more to him than what John had been afforded on his first impression, and his shame nearly crushed him. And now this news of Harriet, well, he knew it would only solidify Sherlock's negative view of his family.

Leaning over to blow out the candle and shrouding the room in darkness, he threw his forearm over his eyes, sighing into the darkness.

Perseverating about his mistakes would not help. It would not mend them, or bring his sister back and erase what she had no doubt so foolishly done. It was only a waste of energy and time. Laying there in the dark, he slowly pieced his resolve together again, building it from lessons learned and the revelation of his own imperfections.

Even so, it was a long while before John Watson fell asleep.



## Chapter 18

John sat up quickly, a bead of sweat trickling down the small of his back, heart pounding hard in his chest. Disoriented in the early morning light, the whispers of his nightmares faded away as he wondered what had woken him.

A sharp rap sounded against the flimsy inn room door in a quick staccato.

*Ah.*

Scrambling out of bed, nightclothes sticking to his skin, John padded barefoot to open it a crack and peer out.

“Captain Watson,” Sherlock Holmes greeted brusquely, his palm flat against the wood frame.

John, too shocked to respond, simply stepped backward to allow the other man entry.

Sherlock vibrated with energy, his shrewd eyes taking in the small space and then John himself. John tried not to react self-consciously under the scrutiny, picking at the tail of his shirt to peel it away from his damp skin.

Seemingly oblivious to John’s state of undress, Sherlock’s eyes slid away over the room once again. “Gather your things, Watson. I’ve better accommodations for our purposes. Get yourself together and I’ll meet you downstairs in fifteen minutes,” he said imperiously as he spun toward the door. He’d been in the room for less than thirty seconds.

John spluttered, utterly confounded and offended at the same time. “Wait a damn minute!”

Sherlock paused and turned around, eyebrow raised as John continued. “Firstly, Mr Holmes, I do not know how you found me,” At this Sherlock made an exasperated noise, but John held up his hand to stem any interruption. “but how dare you presume to judge me. I’ll have you know, I didn’t care to waste any time--”

This time John couldn’t stop Sherlock from talking over him.

“I know. *That’s* how I found you. Simple deduction, really. The first inn on the road from Lambdon. And don’t be an idiot.” John bristled, but Sherlock waved his reaction off dismissively. “I am simply saying my home is more centrally located.”

John blinked, nonplussed.

His home.

*Sherlock’s* home.

John began to protest. “I...Mr Holmes, I do not think that it would be appr-- Centrally located for *what?*” Sherlock spoke as if he could read his mind and it grated.

Sherlock made a long-suffering noise and continued. “Captain Watson, your choice of accommodation was impulsive at best, and possibly dangerous at worst. I know where your sister and Moriarty are staying and we can conduct ourselves more efficiently from a central point. Thus, my home.”

Gaping openly now, John stepped forward and grabbed a handful of Sherlock’s black topcoat

before he'd even registered that he had done so. "Where are they?" he demanded.

Looking down at John's hands, Sherlock did not answer straightaway, lips parted and blinking slowly. He covered John's hands with his own, and for a moment, time hung suspended between them as skin contacted skin and the electricity arced between them.

Inexorably, Sherlock raised his gaze, and John was close enough to see inky black eyelashes, see how they curved up naturally to frame his striking eyes. John could feel the warmth of Sherlock's breath on his face as Sherlock's fingers pulled John's gently away from his clothes and stepped back.

John felt unaccountably bereft.

"Fifteen minutes. Downstairs." Sherlock's eyes lingered appreciatively now on the bare hollow of John's throat before retreating through the doorway, leaving John staring dazedly at the wall across the corridor.

---

Twelve minutes later, Sherlock nodded approvingly as John stepped up to the chair in which he sat, meagre bag in hand. John, having thrown his things together and dressing hastily, had some valuable time to think about what Sherlock said, and putting together what he knew about the man, made a few deductions of his own.

Without preamble, John started, "You used your connections with the law enforcement to find out where they are." Miss Lestrade had said he played at solving mysteries and poked around unsolved cases. Perhaps he had enough contacts where this could be possible.

Sherlock set down his teacup on the small side table nearby. A few early rising patrons milled about, talking quietly, while the innkeeper busily picked up dishes and rubbish left on the serving tables from the evening before.

Standing, Sherlock smoothed the fabric of his topcoat before replying. "Brilliant assumption," he began, "but wrong." He looked at John, who felt a bit deflated, his eyes glittering. "No, I am simply aware of Mr Moriarty's whereabouts because he is a creature of habit, and therefore is easy to trace. I *did* speak with a few people I know, however, and there is more to the story, but I will have to tell you on the way to my home." His eyes were evasive as he shifted to walk past John, who grabbed his arm firmly to hold him in place.

Of all the questions he needed to ask, one pressed against his conscience more than any other. "Why are you doing this, Mr Holmes?"

Sherlock gave him an odd look. "Captain Watson, we all have our vices, and mine specifically, are puzzles. I cannot willingly walk away from one." His brow furrowed and he paused, as if he might have more to say, but fell silent.

Ah. So, this was because of the puzzle then, and not for any other reason. John dropped his hand and Sherlock immediately continued toward the inn's front entrance.

"Come along, Captain Watson. Our carriage awaits." He swept outside, obviously assuming John would follow, the tails of his topcoat swinging dramatically behind him as John trailed behind, questions firing at Sherlock's back.



*Dammit, why couldn't the man stay bloody still?*

“What sort of habit are you referring to? And why must we stop at your home first? Can we not go to them right this moment?” John asked, formality only an afterthought as he climbed into the cab of the well-appointed carriage waiting out front. Sherlock knocked on the roof, indicating to the driver they were ready and they lurched forward into the spare traffic of early morning London.

Sherlock sat back against the plush blue velvet seat, eyeing him amusedly before he spoke. John's fists gripped the edge of the seat, alternately wanting to strangle the man sitting across from him and crawl into his lap. He chose to do neither.

“Which question would you like me to answer first?” Sherlock drawled lazily, though his fingers tapped an incessant rhythm against his lean thigh.

“Why can we not go to them straightaway?”

“They are not there, and before you ask, I stopped along the way to your accommodation to make certain. According to the innkeeper where they are staying, they will be returning in roughly two hours, so we have some time. We can drop off your belongings and you can plan your next step.” He sounded so relaxed, so cocksure and confident.

“What sort of trouble, besides the very obvious, are they in, Mr Holmes?” He leaned forward, very aware he was being overly aggressive, intruding in Sherlock's personal space, their knees knocking together in the enclosed cab, but the other man didn't seem to be bothered. On the contrary, he watched John raptly; eyes unblinking, the small smile disappearing before he answered.

“As I mentioned before, he is a gambler. I have found that he has made poor wagers and now holds the receipts to some hefty debts,” he answered bluntly.

John closed his eyes and groaned, his head hanging between his shoulders as he gripped his scalp with tense fingers. Gambling. His sister and Moriarty being on the wrong side of a gambling debt was terrible, frightening news, the sort of news that could lead them to grievous harm.

Sherlock's voice was quiet, and John could swear he felt a brush of fingers along his arm before it disappeared. “We can use this to our advantage, Captain. *Think*. Don't let your emotions get the better of you and cloud your mind. What do you imagine he would do to have those debts erased?”

John's head snapped up, his eyes narrowed. “Erased?” He laughed without humour, and it was a bitter sound. “You acknowledged it yourself, Mr Holmes. My family is barely managing as it is, and I've no connections that would be in a position to help me.”

Sherlock looked out the window, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “That is not true.” His lips were thin and pressed against his teeth.

John sucked in a breath. “What you are doing . . . what you have done already is more than I could have hoped for, Mr Holmes. I do not presume--”

Sherlock's look stopped him cold. “Oh, but you *do* presume.” A shadow hung behind his eyes, sad and angry all at once and John recoiled slightly, unsure of what that meant. Sherlock glanced away again. “Though you have good reason to do so. Have no doubt that I am aware of our circumstances, but know I will do what I can to help.”

As the carriage pulled to a stop, John sat speechless, guilt sitting heavily in his belly.

“We have arrived.” Sherlock didn’t look at him as he opened the carriage door and stepped out, expecting John to follow without question. It took him a moment before he could make his legs acknowledge the command of his mind and climb out of the cab.

They were somewhere in the wealthier part of London; the town homes lined up neatly against each other like soldiers in formation. Sherlock stood at the door of one, looking back at him patiently.

The bottom level of the building was of white marble, while the second and third were of more traditional red and tan bricks. Along the second storey, black wrought iron scrollwork lined the bottom portion of all the regularly spaced rectangular windows. Sherlock shifted to the side, turning the knob and stepping into the darkness, revealing the number on the door.

221B.

Jogging up the two steps, he stepped inside, his eyes adjusting as Sherlock struck a match to light an oil lamp on a small table near the door. The house was quiet, and tilting his head the silence pressing on his skin like a physical presence, John could sense they were alone. Sherlock stood, his face wrapped in shadows, but John knew he watched him intently.

He could *feel* him looking.

“There is no one else here. Did you dismiss your servants so we could be alone?” John flinched, belatedly aware of how that might have sounded.

Too private. Too *intimate*.

“No,” Sherlock replied. “Sometimes Mrs Reynolds forces her way into my carriage when she knows I am coming so she may tidy up the place, but other than that, I like my privacy when I am in London, even from servants.”

John raised his eyebrows in disbelief. A gentleman of means simply did not live without a household staff. It was unheard of. Sherlock’s low chuckle made him smile automatically in response.

“Come now. The main living area is upstairs. I rarely use any other floor other than the second.” He leaned down and picked up the lamp, illuminating his face. The warmth of the soft yellow light played with his features, softening sharp angles and lines to make him seem younger. He gestured by waving a hand, turning to lead him up the stairs into a most unexpected space.

The small sitting room was clearly not meant for anyone but Sherlock himself, the clutter of his daily life strewn about haphazardly about the room. Books and papers littered every surface and as Sherlock knelt to tend to the fire in the grate that had burned low, John slowly spun around. A low whistle emanated from John, unbidden. “I take it Mrs Reynolds has not been here recently.”

Sherlock looked up from his industry with a small smirk. “She was here last week.” His eyes roved the room and he shrugged sheepishly. “She tends to stay away from my workspace.”

“Obviously,” John muttered under his breath, setting his bag down on a chair by the fire, his attention drawn to a small room on the left. A central table dominated the room, though there were shelves and cupboards lining the space as well. Every space had something upon it, and John knew *this* was where Sherlock spent the majority of his time.

The table looked similar to the laboratory space he had seen at Pemberley, though this one was actively in use. Several glass dishes were filled with a variety of colourful substances, some

looking rather viscous and possibly dangerous. A glass beaker hung suspended from a metal contraption above a low burning flame, its contents an odd colour of green and bubbling thickly. It smelled of something unidentifiable as John leaned in to get a closer look, and then veered away once he discovered it was not a pleasant odour. A microscope dominated the table in the centre, its surface burnished and well worn.

“An idle mind is the devil’s playground,” Sherlock said, standing near enough that John could feel his warmth behind him.

“Hmm. You don’t seem one to worry about the devil, Mr Holmes,” John quipped.

Sherlock chuckled before moving around John to fiddle with the flame, and the space he had occupied felt cold, though a well-fed fire now crackled cheerily behind them.

“No, you are right on that account. Though my idle mind may make one think of devils, for it is never truly so, and is chaotic when not occupied by experiments or mysteries to solve.” He smiled wryly, looking at the table full of clutter. He picked up a glass tube with long nimble fingers, looking at its contents carefully before setting it back down again. “My work, where sometimes the two collide.”

“You experiment. Draw conclusions. Try something else, changing variables to achieve results.” John nodded and huffed a laugh at the other man’s surprised noise. “My travels have afforded me the luxury of seeing great and memorable places, a scientist’s laboratory being one of them.” He made a motion to encompass Sherlock’s things. “Please, tell me about what you are doing,” John said, inspecting a round dish with a raised lip containing a fuzzy orange substance. When there was only silence, John looked up curiously, only to find Sherlock looking back, a dazed look on his face before irritation danced across his eyes and his expression became rigid.

“You would not understand and it would bore you.” He said curtly, but in his tone John could hear a note of...hurt, and John let that sink in before he responded, thinking about what that meant, instead of the cavalier words.

Oh.

*Oh.*

John might be the first person who had honestly shown any interest in what Sherlock Holmes liked to do most of all, and that awareness twisted his stomach into knots and gave him the impetus to press.

He smiled, and when he answered, John kept his voice neutral. “I may not understand everything, but I would not ask were I not curious, and I would be glad of your help if you should educate me where my lack of knowledge is apparent.” He tapped the table next to the glass dish he had just inspected, pleased at the spark of interest he spied in Sherlock’s eyes.

“Now. Tell me of this.”

A slow grin blossomed on Sherlock’s face, bridging the rift between them somewhat, creating a fragile balance of trust. John shifted to stand closer to Sherlock, their shoulders brushing as they both leaned down to look more closely at his work.

## Chapter 19

They stared at each other in the muted light of the room, Sherlock's long forefinger pressed to his own full lips, indicating the need for John to be quiet. Not that the gesture was necessary, considering they had been waiting in silence for a long while already. Footsteps and Harriet's telltale high-pitched girlish giggle sounded just outside the door as the handle turned and his sister and Moriarty tumbled in, her cheeks pinkened from laughter. Moriarty on the other hand, looked tired, yet amused at his companion. Both were slightly dishevelled, their clothing not quite crisp, their hair not quite neat, as they smiled brightly at each other.

They stopped short as they saw both men in the room, Sherlock with his long legs stretched out before him as he sat in the room's only rickety chair, John stood near the dirty window which looked out onto a back alley, where he had been watching hawkers and street walkers touting their wares in harsh Cockney accents for an hour. John's tension, which dissipated earlier during his time spent together with Sherlock on Baker Street, came back tenfold the moment they stepped foot in the substandard inn room.

Now all John Watson felt was anger built upon his own foolhardiness as well as his sister's.

"Harriet Elizabeth Watson," John said sharply.

She looked at him wide-eyed, the smile on her face faltering. "John?" Then she clapped her hands together in excitement, ignoring the thunderous look upon his countenance. "John! You've found us! Isn't this exciting and romantic? Please don't be angry, we were going to come home soon, weren't we, love?" She looked happily over at Mr Moriarty, who returned the smile half-heartedly in her direction.

"Yes, of course we were," he responded, his eyes flitting warily between John and Sherlock.

John stepped close to her and had to calm himself to grasp her arm gently, instead of shaking her hard enough to rattle the teeth out of her head at her immaturity and lack of foresight. "Harriet. You need to go down to the common room and wait for one of us to come and get you."

"But, why--" John shifted his hand to her elbow and spun her around, firmly moving her toward the door.

"Harriet. Do as I say." His tone brooked no argument, and it focussed her attention on him entirely.

She paused, looking at him carefully. "John? Whatever is the matter? Is everything all right?"

Incredibly, after all of this, she had no idea what she had done. John wanted to throttle her, but no matter how furious he was at her, he did not wish for a scene with his sister in the centre of it all. "It will be, Harry. Now, run along. We will not take but a few minutes." She nodded, her brow furrowing a bit before she shrugged it off and flounced down the stairs and out of sight.

John shut the door and stared at the worn wooden panels. "I am wondering, sir, if you realise the precarious position in which you stand at this moment?" His voice held a knife's edge, calm, but intimidating for all its quietness. It was this ability, this way of holding his anger and frustration back that saved his life many times over while in the militia. Back stiff and shoulders back, he turned slowly and looked the man up and down, ignoring Sherlock who watched him intently.

"I must apologise. I am afraid I do not know what you mean," Moriarty replied, eyes now riveted

on John, but his sly grin gave him away.

Sherlock stepped closer, imposing and stern. “What he *means*, Mr Moriarty, is that we are aware of your impending debts, and have the means to dismiss them if you do as Captain Watson instructs.” His eyes flicked around the room, though John knew it must have been only for effect, for Sherlock thoroughly searched the space when they first arrived. John had not been entirely comfortable with that, even though the character of Mr Moriarty did not afford him any courtesies, but he had not said a word to deter Sherlock from doing so. The search yielded nothing of use.

Moriarty narrowed his eyes and sneered at John.

“You can’t possibly think *you* can pay those receipts.” He laughed derisively, turning partly away in deliberate disrespect. “Why, I don’t even--” He didn’t get a chance to finish, for John had had enough, his temper flaring hotly in his stomach. Swinging with all his might, he struck Moriarty on the jaw with his fist, spinning the man around and landing him sprawled on the floor in an ungraceful heap at Sherlock’s feet.

John crouched down near Moriarty’s head; close enough so that he need not speak above a whisper to be heard. “Your debts will be taken care of, and in your infinite gratitude, and your wish to not inflict any more unpleasantness upon this family, you will marry my sister--” John looked at the small mantle clock, “--in precisely two hours.” Moriarty started to turn over, shoving up on one hand and groaning pitifully, but John pushed him down again with only a token effort.

“You will be given a minimal yearly allowance from my own pocket, sufficient enough to use to house and feed my sister and keep her in good spirits, though I imagine you will have to stay in the militia for as long as possible to supplement your income.” John laughed with not a trace of humour. “No need to thank us for our generosity, Mr Moriarty. Mr Holmes and I have already taken care of the details for you, and will be pleased to stand witness to your happy tidings.” John stood, straightening his clothing and flexing his fingers, which ached now the adrenaline ebbed from his system. “Now get up,” he said through gritted teeth, “and play the part of a gentleman.”

Sherlock came to stand next to John, and presented Mr Moriarty with two plain brown wrapped packages as the man stood groggily on his two feet, rubbing his jaw. “Your wedding clothes, sir. You may say the dress for Miss Watson is a gift from yourself, if you prefer,” Sherlock said coldly.

Moriarty grimaced as the packages were shoved into his hands. He smiled sourly. “Yes, of course. How very considerate of you both.”

“More than you deserve, Mr Moriarty.” John replied. “But I do what needs to be done, and so will you.”

---

Harriet and Moriarty were married in a small church with John, Sherlock and the clergyman’s wife the only attendees. Sherlock used his money and his contacts to arrange the ceremony on short notice, because much to John’s chagrin, he would not have been able to accomplish the task on his own.

Harriet insisted when they managed to get back to Longbourne, there would have to be a large party thrown in their honour, as her family and friends were not able to attend the wedding.

She looked lovely in her new bridal gown, a posy of flowers purchased from the back alley John watched from the inn window earlier in her petite hands, and she was as happy a bride as she could be, completely unaware of the drama that had unfolded in the room above her head while she impatiently sipped tea in the common room of her inn.

Mr Moriarty successfully played the role of the happy groom, smiling and beaming at his young bride. John had the occasion to wonder if Moriarty didn't truly love his sister, for as he said the vows, Moriarty was precise and clear and sounded ever so serious about the words that came out of his mouth.

As for John, a great weight was lifted from his shoulders, knowing his sister's honour, though a bit tarnished, was still relatively intact, inasmuch as his family members could still walk the streets of Meryton or anywhere else without having to hang their heads in shame.

And all of this was possible because of Sherlock Holmes, a man who surprised him at every turn.

---

The carriage ride back to 221B was a silent affair, save for when they first climbed in and sat down, finding themselves alone and able to talk freely for the first time in hours. At that point, Sherlock only commented, "That thing...That thing you did when you hit him." He waved his hand around aimlessly. "That was good." John blinked at him, a little stunned by both the words and the way Sherlock suddenly turned ineloquent, so he'd simply huffed in acknowledgement and let his mind roam over the day's events.

He didn't know who Sherlock was going to speak with to be able to make Moriarty's debts disappear, and he wasn't sure if he cared to find out.

He didn't know how he would manage to pay an allowance to Moriarty, though he was now bound by his honour to do so, but he and his family would cope somehow. He would find a way.

He didn't know how he could ever find the words to express his gratitude toward Sherlock in a manner which could convey the enormity of what his help meant to John. But again, he would find a way.

There were many things he did not know, but the way of his heart was not one of them.

No, he knew his heart now, and almost wished he did not, for the futility of the knowledge made him ache.

He was falling in love with Sherlock Holmes.

Now, the two men made their ascent up the stairs to the second floor of 221B, Sherlock leading and John following close behind, their steps slow and perhaps a bit tired.

Once inside the cluttered sitting room, John smiled as he took off his topcoat and laid it carefully across the back of the settee on top of Sherlock's while the other man knelt down to work the fire, though it was already warm in the room from the embers.

He looked around the room and thought about how this space encapsulated Sherlock as a man. Calm and cool on the exterior, proper and elegant. Yet on the inside, there lay a chaotic mix of layers that John wanted to peel away and study. The science, for example. John let his eyes drift to the cluttered worktable, smiling and biting his lip when he thought about how passionate Sherlock became when explaining what he was studying in all the glass dishes and tubes. No, John did not

understand much of it, but it did not matter. As he'd watched the other man talk animatedly, his icy eyes shining with enthusiasm for sharing the smallest details, John knew what it was to experience happiness based on someone else's joy.

Clearing his throat, John waited patiently until Sherlock's hands stilled and he turned around, rising from his position on the floor.

John moved to stand in front of him and look him in the eye. "Thank you." He said it simply, and without formality, but he put all he had in those two words.

Sherlock's expression was enigmatic, but his tone was slightly brittle. "Captain Watson, I do not require your gratitude."

"You will have it anyway."

The firelight played with the shadows on Sherlock's face, highlighting the dips and planes of his countenance in a manner that made John's breath quicken.

He was so beautiful, and never more than now did John wish he could paint like a master, so that he could capture the way Sherlock looked right then.

Desire flooded John in a warm exultant rush, pulling his palms up Sherlock's waistcoat to the first button, which he expertly flicked open with a thumb.

John realised this was an extraordinarily poor lack of judgement on his part, likely to leave him bruised and hurting no matter the end result of this evening, but he could not stop himself.

Sherlock placed his hand over John's, stilling his movement, his brow creased. His voice was even. Forced. "I certainly would not expect you to show your thanks like this, had I asked for it." His eyes snapped.

Blinking, John took a moment before he laughed, low and deep in his chest. "For someone as brilliant as you, that is quite possibly the most foolish statement I have ever heard you utter." Sherlock's mouth dropped open. "This has nothing to do with gratitude. Nothing at all."

Tension melting away from him, his expression heating, Sherlock slowly let go of John's hand to slide his arms around John's back.

"I am pleased to hear that." He raised an eyebrow. "Just what is this, then?"

John hummed, flicking open the remaining three buttons in quick succession and slipping the deep red waistcoat off of Sherlock's angular shoulders, letting it fall to the floor with a soft murmur of sound. He tugged on the hem of Sherlock's shirt. "This is tonight. This is..." He pressed his lips to pale skin. "...want and desire." *An indulgence.*

Fingers pressed into the small of his back. "Then, by all means," Sherlock breathed, "let's indulge."

John started, and then smiled as his lips brushed against the shell of Sherlock's ear. "What do you want?"

Sherlock did not answer at first, but when he did, his voice was rough. "My name. I want you to say my given name." John could feel the kick of Sherlock's heart in his chest.

John paused, opening his eyes.

He hadn't said it out loud yet. He had used Sherlock's name inside his own mind for so long, it almost made him laugh at the suggestion that of *anything*, this was what Sherlock wanted from him. But John did not laugh, for he knew why he had avoided it for so long.

Because it would mean something. It would mean *everything*.

He swallowed, hesitating only a token moment before surrendering, knowing he had been lost long before this moment.

"Sherlock," he whispered, closing his eyes again to absorb the shudder that rippled through Sherlock's body at the sound of John's voice.

"Again," Sherlock breathed.

"Sherlock." John kissed him softly, just below the ear. Sherlock clutched at John's shoulders, fingers digging through layers of fabric.

Dragging his mouth slowly along Sherlock's jaw, John repeated, "Sherlock."

John raised his head and brushed his lips across Sherlock's parted ones, tracking the dark flush blooming across the other man's pale cheeks.

"*Sherlock*," John rasped again, right before he swallowed Sherlock's responding moan with a languorous open-mouthed kiss.

Sherlock's thumb traced a steady pattern at the edge of John's shirt along the sensitive skin of his wrist, sending tendrils of pleasure through John in unexpected ways from such a simple touch. They kissed slowly, as if savouring the moment.

As if they had forever.



## Chapter 20

### Chapter Summary

Beware: Smexin' ahead. \*evil smirk\*

*They kissed slowly, as if savouring the moment.*

*As if they had forever.*

The rosy dusk of evening had darkened into night, the only light now from the feeble fire Sherlock had half-started.

John reached up to grasp the end of Sherlock's crisp white cravat, tugging the knot free in a flutter of snowy fabric. He touched his fingers to the hollow of Sherlock's throat, feeling the strong pulse there, then trailed his fingertips down to the jut of rigid collar bone at the vee of the opening of Sherlock's shirt. Even at that faint caress, Sherlock reacted, gasping quietly and pulling John closer so his thigh rested between John's. The pressure was slight, but enough that it left John wanting more, and he circled his hips, letting Sherlock feel just how much their closeness was affecting him.

Pulling away just far enough to speak, Sherlock panted into John's open mouth, his words rumbling. "And you, John? What do *you* want?" John felt the question settling heavy upon him, knowing it was a dangerous question to answer completely. He could be truthful, but not entirely forthcoming.

*You.* "To be inside of you. To feel you inside of me. All of it." *All of you.*

Sherlock groaned, his hands suddenly everywhere at once. He crushed his mouth against John's, stealing his breath for his own, as he pulled and tugged at John's clothing.

Working the tail of Sherlock's shirt out of his breeches, John pulled back long enough to lift it over Sherlock's head, the other man's arms lifting only long enough for them to slip through before wrapping them around John's back, one hand buried in John's hair, the other sliding under the fabric of John's waistcoat. With a few quick motions of his fingers, the buttons of Sherlock's breeches slipped free, loosening the fabric around narrow hips. John ran a palm down the rigid line over the thin fabric of Sherlock's smallclothes.

"I need to see all of you," John said hoarsely. Sherlock stepped back, and quickly shimmied out of his clothes and his boots, standing tall in front of him. He was as impressive nude as he was in his finery, all sharp angles, pale, unblemished skin and lean muscle. His erection arched up and away from his body, visibly hardening further as John watched.

"Beautiful."

Sherlock reached out, twining his fingers in John's cravat and winding it around his fist, and then using it to pull John toward him and connect again, an edge this time to their kiss that had John's nerves singing. Towing him by the neck as they kissed, Sherlock led him blindly forward until

they stood in the doorway of a room.

Sherlock's bedroom.

*Oh, God, yes.*

He walked him forward until the back of Sherlock's legs hit the edge of the bed, where John pulled back for a chance to catch his breath. In contrast to the chaotic mess characterizing Sherlock's sitting room, a quick glance revealed Sherlock's bedroom was surprisingly spare in furnishings, elegant, yet uncluttered in a way that told John even Sherlock needed somewhere peaceful to retreat.

"On the bed," John said gruffly. Placing his palm on Sherlock's bare chest, he pushed gently and Sherlock fell backward with little resistance, catching himself on his elbows, a smirk on his flushed face. He scooted until his shoulders hit the pillows, then leaned over to quickly light the bedside candle, its low light flickering teasing shadows across his body.

John shed the rest of his clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor before putting a knee on the bed. He paused, letting his eyes rove over Sherlock in repose. Seeing him like this, waiting for him, a long and unbroken line of pale skin against the dark coverlet, caused a delicious heat to coil in John's belly. Sherlock raised one knee and placed a hand on his own chest, trailing his fingers down his belly to come to rest on his hip. His erection stretched over his stomach, twitching slightly as John watched.

"John." It was all he said, just the one word, but it pulled him inevitably forward like a magnet until John crawled up onto the mattress. Pressing his lips to the inside of Sherlock's thigh, John ran the tip of his tongue along the soft skin there until he reached the juncture of hip and leg, where he sucked lightly. Sherlock's leg fell to the side in invitation and John listened with a grin when Sherlock's breath stuttered for just a moment. He looked up the long expanse of Sherlock's torso, meeting the other man's hooded eyes and holding them while he licked a slow, torturous stripe up his erection. Sherlock opened his mouth and arched his neck, pressing his head into the pillow then snapping it back up as if he was afraid he would miss something if he did not witness it with his own eyes.

Sliding the tip of Sherlock's cock in his mouth, John's tongue teased the flared ridge of flesh before it dipped into the exposed slit at the top, tasting the salty bitterness there. In response, Sherlock's hand shot to John's head, firm but not insistent, and he twisted his body, bowing off the bed as he groaned. His entire body trembled under John's touch, and John had to palm himself hard and rest his head on Sherlock's abdomen to catch his breath, letting Sherlock slip out of his mouth wetly.

After a moment, Sherlock tugged slightly on John's hair, urging him upward silently, and John obliged, lifting himself up on his hand and knees to mark his path up Sherlock's body with the gentle scraping of teeth and flicks of his tongue to soothe whatever sting he may have caused. Sherlock's abdomen bunched and released under John's ministrations, and as John drew gently on one of Sherlock's rosy pink nipples, Sherlock moaned softly and ran his fingers through John's hair, cupping the back of his head with the palm of his hand. The flesh under John's tongue pearled and hardened. Within their embrace, John could feel the dampness between he and Sherlock, precome slicking the space between them, the musky sultry scent entwining around them both.

John kissed his way up to Sherlock's neck, spending a good amount of time tracing the line of his collarbone with his tongue, pressing the flat of it against the pulse point at the base of Sherlock's neck and sucking when he found it produced a bright keening sound from Sherlock who writhed beneath John's body, brushing their skin together, hot and electric. John bit his lip when their

erections aligned, his brow resting against Sherlock's cheek as he panted harshly.

Lifting his head, hands holding him up on either side of Sherlock's shoulders, he and Sherlock locked eyes as John undulated his hips, grinding himself against the other man. The friction was exquisite, but Sherlock was even more so. His face was covered in a slight sheen of sweat, the colour was high in his cheeks, and his eyes, half-hooded with desire, burned dark, the pupils eating up the blue. The tip of his tongue darted out to wet his lips as John watched and John swooped in to chase it with his own, kissing him slow and deep. Sherlock's fingers ran up and down John's back, pausing to trace the raised skin of John's scar and then down again to caress John's arse as they rocked together in a slow languid rhythm. John turned his head slightly to break the kiss, and murmur into Sherlock's mouth.

"What do you like?" John's sexual encounters had taught him it didn't really matter who was where during sex. He appreciated every aspect, but understood not everyone did.

Sherlock kissed the corner of John's mouth and canted his hips, increasing the pressure between them and making John gasp.

"I *need* you--," Sherlock wrapped an ankle around the back of John's thigh, "to make good on what you said--" He wound his other leg around John and traced the line of John's jaw with his tongue, "--and put your cock," He nipped John's earlobe and a whimper escaped John before he could stop it. "--in my '*lovely arse*'." With that, Sherlock licked the outside of John's ear and thrust his hips up in a way that nearly made John fall apart right then.

"*Jesus...Sherlock,*" John groaned, reaching under Sherlock's knee to lift it and press it up toward his chest. "Have you any--"

"In the drawer," Sherlock rumbled.

John leaned over, and pulled open the drawer blindly in the dim light, faltering when Sherlock drug his lips across the scar on John's shoulder, mapping the puckered flesh with the sensitive skin of his mouth. John lay suspended, stretched out with his hand around the small bottle inside as Sherlock ran the tip of his tongue along the ridges and valleys. Shuddering, John made a strangled sound, not only because it felt pleasant, but because of the lovers John Watson had ever had, not one of them, neither male nor female, had touched his scar with such...*reverence*.

"This pleases you," Sherlock observed, breath ghosting against his skin.

John's throat felt thick, and he shut his eyes. "I..." He swallowed. "Yes."

Sherlock stilled, and John knew he had heard the catch in John's voice. "Then I shall keep doing this for as long as you like." He sucked lightly where scar met smooth skin.

Pulling the small bottle out of the drawer, he shifted off Sherlock, who made a dissatisfied noise, and held the bottle up to the light. The clear fluid rolled like an ocean wave as John shifted the bottle back and forth. He raised an eyebrow at Sherlock, who nodded at John's silent question.

John sat up on his knees and worked the cork out of the bottle, tipped it, and poured some of the liquid out. Rubbing it between his fingers, he put the bottle back on the bed table and leaned forward to kiss Sherlock once more. Their mouths met as John reached between Sherlock's legs, tongues lapping against each other, tasting each other. John ghosted his fingers over the smooth skin of Sherlock's erection and down through his downy pubic hair to caress the delicate skin just in front of his entrance, applying just enough pressure that Sherlock let out a wispy moan and nipped at John's tongue in response.

“John, *please*,” Sherlock breathed.

John paused, feeling the desire within him to hear Sherlock reiterate that endlessly. Now, tomorrow, twenty years from now. His chest tightened and he pushed the thought away.

This was tonight. Only tonight.

John traced a finger around rippled skin, nudging gently and feeling the resistance. One foot now back on the bed, Sherlock pushed against John, belying his impatience, but John would have none of it. If this was to be the only time he would be able to make love to Sherlock, he would not be rushed. He wanted to remember every moment.

He sucked gently at Sherlock’s lower lip, ignoring his silent plea and kissing him once again. Sherlock melted, his arms winding around John’s back while John pushed his finger inside Sherlock’s heat, massaging past the tight ring of muscle. Finger slick, he drew it out and slowly pressed all the way in, feeling Sherlock’s muscled wall tighten around him.

“*Sherlock*.” John shuddered, overwhelmed.

Sherlock groaned and twisted his body at the sound of his name.

“Sherlock,” John whispered, nudging Sherlock’s chin up to mouth the tender skin along his throat as he worked his finger in and out. “Open for me.” Fingers flexed against his back hard enough to bruise, but Sherlock’s legs fell open and John prepared him with another finger, then soon after, another. He moved unhurriedly, and then turned his wrist until he could feel the firmness he sought, brushing it gently.

Arching his back off the bed, Sherlock gasped. “Oh, *God. John*.” Falling back, Sherlock wiggled, dislodging John and began to twist to change position. Understanding his intent, John pushed at his shoulder.

“No.” John kissed him softly. “Like this.” He wanted to see him.

Sherlock paused, then blinked slowly, a shadow flitting over his expression, then a small smile touching his lips. “Yes,” he agreed, his voice rough. “Like this.”

John sat up, reaching for the bottle once again, but Sherlock already had his fingers around it, pouring it in his hand and setting it away. Sherlock’s mouth parted as he reached for John, wrapping his slick palm around John’s length and sweeping upward.

John’s cock throbbed insistently within Sherlock’s grip. *Thisthisthisthisthis...*

A deep, brilliant heat worked its way through John’s lower back and abdomen, tightening his balls dangerously. John fell forward on one hand, the other skating over the pale skin of Sherlock’s chest. Looking down, he watched as Sherlock guided him with one hand between them, moving and shifting until John’s erection spread the muscle of his opening, and then pressing it inside. John watched in awe as he disappeared within Sherlock’s body.

John’s groan was deep and guttural, his voice raw with all the sentiments and adorations he wanted to let pour out of his mouth but did not for its effect would be to break the intricate spell between them. His groan ended in Sherlock’s open, pliant mouth as John was overcome with sensation and emotion. His body moved on its own, rocking into Sherlock gradually until he was buried deep inside.

They lay there, panting, sweat covering them both, John’s arms shaking with the effort of holding back, of not taking Sherlock hard and sharp and quick like his body demanded. His heart

thrummed hard against his chest.

“Christ, Sherlock. Oh, *Christ*,” John choked out, snapping his hips forward over and over in Sherlock’s heat, watching Sherlock’s eyes flutter closed and his teeth biting that already reddened lower lip. John was on fire, incinerating from the inside out, and he could do nothing but let it happen.

Shifting his knees, John’s angle changed just enough so his cock rubbed against Sherlock’s bundle of nerves which made Sherlock cry out and grind against him wantonly. He wound the fingers of his clean hand through Sherlock’s curls, now damp with perspiration and tugged gently.

“Open your eyes, Sherlock. Open your eyes and look at me,” John rasped, because, *God*, he was on the edge already and he wanted to be looking into those eyes when he came.

Sherlock did so only after John tugged again, eyes glittering and pupils blown wide. Long, wiry muscled legs wrapped around John’s back, heels digging into his buttocks, restricting John’s movement. His weight on his forearm, John reached with his still wet hand and wrapped around Sherlock’s cock, feeling the sticky wetness and using it as he thumbed foreskin and then the crown. Sherlock froze, his face beautiful in his ecstasy. Internal muscles rippled around John in a wave a moment before Sherlock cried out his name brokenly and arced away from the bed once again. Hot ropes of come splattered between them, coating John’s hand and their bellies, smoothing away whatever friction still remained.

John felt his own orgasm crashing into him.

Unstoppable. Unparalleled. Soul deep.

He gasped, tensing as he snapped his hips once, twice, three more times inside of Sherlock, through the intense surges that tore him asunder and put him back together.

John’s thrusts slowed until finally he collapsed against the other man, heavy and boneless, his cheek pressed against Sherlock’s shoulder.

Gradually they drifted down together, heartbeats calming and breaths evening out until the sweat cooled on their skin. Sherlock’s heels slipped down and off of John, his hands resting lightly on John’s waist. Fingertips traced patterns on his skin, and John came back to himself in increments, his self-awareness crowding in on him. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the thoughts that seeped in, unwanted and unwelcome.

Sherlock pushed gently on John’s shoulder, indicating he wanted to move, and when John shifted his weight to his side, easing out of Sherlock as gently as he could, Sherlock rolled away from him to stand. Picking a washrag off of his dresser where it lay next to a basin and pitcher, Sherlock cleaned himself off efficiently before blowing out the candle and handing a second cloth to John and crawling back down on the bed. John used it and dropped it on the floor; suddenly self-consciousness crept over him like a cold fog.

Before he could utter his question, Sherlock settled in, pressing himself from shoulder to thigh against his side, wrapping an arm around John’s torso. “Don’t be an idiot. You will sleep here,” he murmured, and John could hear the sleep pulling at his voice. John nodded, not trusting his own voice and grateful for the darkness.

He laid his arm over Sherlock’s and listened while Sherlock’s breathing evened out and deepened. He tried to stay awake as long as he could, memorizing the way Sherlock’s skin felt warm against his, the way the fine hair on his chest and arm felt under the pads of his fingers.

He would remember everything.

After tonight, John needed to return to Longbourne and tell his family of the proceedings which occurred today. Once there, he knew he could not be returning to London anytime soon, as he would have family duties and the monumental task of trying to fulfil his promise of an allowance for Mr Moriarty and Harriet.

He had no illusions about this evening. This was only for tonight; a lowering of John's defences that currently had him raw and vulnerable.

Though Sherlock might have feelings for him, the man felt strongly about John's lack of connections and the conduct of his family --with good reason-- and would have no commitment to return to Hertfordshire.

It was unlikely he would see Sherlock again.

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John slipped out of 221B in the early dawn of the next morning, Sherlock still asleep, warm in his bed, his curls in lovely disarray around his face.

He was a coward and he knew it for leaving this way, without waking the other man up to say his goodbye, but he didn't think he could bear it.

Finding a stray piece of parchment, he wrote a brief note, saying little of what he truly wanted to say, and left it on the bed table next to Sherlock's bed, running his eyes along the curves of Sherlock's body, half hidden under the sheet, one last time.

He left as quietly as he could.

*Sherlock,*

*Forgive me for leaving before you awoke, but I do what I must to preserve my heart.*

*I wish you happiness, and hope you will find contentment in someone who is deserving of you.*

*Yours,*

*John*

## Chapter 21

Mrs Watson shot upright from her prone position. “Married! Harriet is *married!*” She sprung out of bed with such alacrity that one would never know she had spent the last several days bemoaning the tragedy that had befallen their family name. John and Molly stepped back hurriedly to move out of her way.

Her face radiated pure, triumphant joy. “And how I knew it would be--John, I knew you could manage everything! How I long to see her, and dear Mr Moriarty, too! Oh, my dear daughter! How merry we shall we be when we meet!” She clapped her hands together in a way that reminded John of his youngest sister, and he winced, feeling more than a little disgruntled that their mother chose not to remember the circumstances surrounding this event.

“Ring the bell, Molly! I must get dressed and tell Lady Monroe first thing!” his mother continued, pulling clothes from the armoire, frothy garments fluttering to the floor in her haste. “Oh, to see her face! That my daughter of only sixteen is married before hers!”

“Is that all you think about?” John was exasperated. Tired and dusty from his journey from London, he hadn’t even the time to change as of yet. His emotions frayed and on edge as it was, his mother’s attitude only served to aggravate his mood.

She, in her exaltation, ignored John. “Mrs Moriarty. Oh, how that sounds!” she crowed to the ceiling.

Stopping in mid-stride to her vanity, Mrs Watson looked around wide-eyed when a thought struck her. “But where shall they live?” Her eyes darted around worriedly. “Harris Lodge perhaps? I understand it is vacant. Or maybe Ashworth? That is so far, though. I will not be able to bear having her more than ten miles away.” She obviously was not in need of an answer, but John felt it necessary to say his piece.

“She will live wherever the militia takes them,” John said curtly, finally drawing his mother’s full attention.

“But surely he will retire from the militia and earn his pension.” She spoke to John as if he was a foolish boy.

He gritted his teeth. “I am afraid that you are under the misunderstanding, Mother, that the annual allowance this family will have to part with will be enough for them to live anything but a meagre existence.”

She looked at him, aghast, while Molly silently raised her eyebrow at John’s tone. “Well, then, we must give them more,” his mother said indignantly.

“No.”

Waving a hand dismissively in John’s direction, she began, “I hardly think--”

“That is correct.” John interrupted. “You hardly do. For example, it has completely escaped your notice that this family is barely able to make ends meet. I am giving them more than we can afford or they deserve as it is.”

His mother blinked at him as if he spoke a foreign language. Then her face readjusted itself into one of excitement again. “When are they to arrive here at Longbourne, John? I so miss Harriet, and I grow impatient for her return.”

John stared openly at her obvious avoidance, then pressed his lips together in resignation.

“They will be here three days hence, Mother.”

---

“What are you hiding, John?” Molly said at John’s shoulder.

He stood looking blindly out the window of the sitting room in the direction of Netherfield, though he did not see anything in the darkness but the memories inside of his own head. Finally being spared a moment alone, he had excused himself after supper to find the solitude to think through the past few days. Molly found him this way, startling him out of his reverie with her words.

He glanced over his shoulder at her worried expression, his brow furrowing. “Hiding?”

Molly shook her head sharply at him. “You may fool Mother, because that feat is not especially difficult to accomplish given the state she is in, but you cannot fool me. You are sad, and I can see it in your eyes. What has happened?” Tilting her head, she scrutinized him with a narrowed gaze.

John sighed, turning to regard his sister, weighing how much he should tell her.

“Although I did travel to London to search for our sister, I did not find her on my own. I had the help of a...a gentleman.”

She looked confused. “And this makes you sad?”

Clearing his throat, John continued, averting his eyes.

If he concentrated, he could still feel Sherlock’s arms around his back, legs around his thighs, the soft whisper of breath against his skin. He swallowed hard.

“Mr Holmes used his connections and his knowledge of Mr Moriarty to track them down and came to me with the information.”

“Mr Holmes?” Molly said, surprised. “But why would he bother to do such a thing? And why would it affect you so?”

John spoke slowly in reply, picking out the words with great care. “Mr Moriarty had created problems for himself that required monetary intervention of the sort this family could not well afford.” He felt a pang of guilt for not telling his sister the entirety of the tale, and shifted on his feet. “Mr Holmes more than just found them, he assisted in making the man’s debts disappear and therefore I was able to pressure Moriarty into marrying our foolish sister. Mr Holmes has seen this family at the lowest of lows now, and we owe him so much.”

Molly was silent for a moment, taking that all in, but she widened her eyes with comprehension when she replied, “He is still in love with you.”

John shrugged uncomfortably. “Perhaps.” His breath felt harsh in his throat, hearing those words and knowing he could do nothing about them.



“Undoubtedly,” Molly corrected, her eyes softening. “I understand why this may make you anxious, but not why it makes you--” Her hand crept up to her mouth, and her eyebrows shot upward. “Oh. Oh, John. You love him, too, don’t you?”

His eyes slid away from her altogether too perceptive gaze once again. “It matters not. His proposal was an impulsive one, brought about by sentiment he was uncertain of how to handle, and he has already stated that he would not repeat it.” Stepping away from Molly, needing to separate himself to breathe for just a moment, he sat on the edge of the settee and looked up at his sister earnestly. “He sees our family in such a light, that how could he have others know, *his family know* of his affections of which he is ashamed? No. He has no reason to return to Hertfordshire now that Mr Lestrade has quit Netherfield,” Molly winced and John reached to clasp her hand, feeling remorseful for speaking of something able to so hurt his sister, but needing to say it aloud. “I will not see him again.”

She came and sat next to him, placing a soft hand over John’s. “John, I cannot pretend to know the workings of your mind when it comes to Mr Holmes, but I trust your judgement. He must be a good man if he is able to secure your adoration.”

“The best of men,” John responded roughly.

She sighed, scooting closer and leaning her head against his shoulder. He let go of her hand and slid it around her back.

“Then, I am so very sorry, John,” Molly said, wistfully. “It seems as if the eldest Watsons are destined for heartbreak, are we not?”

Placing a kiss to her hair, John smiled sadly.

---

The hot summer sun beat down upon John’s head. He only wished it to be over as soon as possible, but inevitably, as with anything that one wished to hasten along, time seemed to drag.

John watched, his hands clutched behind him, as Harriet stepped out of the carriage, Mr Moriarty following closely behind. Her triumphant grin made Harriet’s pert face glow with an edge that made him press his fists tightly against the small of his back.

His mother and Molly stood on either side of him; ready to receive the newlyweds, though John would rather Harriet and Moriarty had not stopped at all.

“How long it’s been since we’ve been Longbourne! Lord, it seems like ages, yet here you are, all of you the same.” She giggled, more amused at herself than anything else, as she placed her hand on Mr Moriarty’s elbow. He, at least, had the decency to look at least a little chagrined at her behaviour.

Mrs Watson squealed and rushed forward to gather her daughter in her arms, kissing her on both cheeks before stepping back to look at her. “Oh my dear, dear Harriet at last! We’ve missed you so! And look at you, now. A married woman!”

Harriet laughed again. “Oh, we’ve been far too merry to miss any of you.” She grinned cheekily at Moriarty. He smiled back and John noted with a little relief that it did not appear to be forced. “Haven’t I caught myself a handsome husband?”

Ecstatic, their mother answered, "Certainly, dearest daughter." She turned to Moriarty. "You are welcome here at Longbourne, sir."

John bit his tongue and tasted copper.

"Thank you. You are kind and good," Moriarty replied, head dipping with deference.

John cleared his throat. "Well, shall we go in, then?" He eyed Moriarty, a small part of him pleased that he couldn't meet John's gaze.

"Yes, please," Molly said graciously, turning to enter the front door.

Harriet moved quickly to stand next to Molly, and did her best to look down her nose at her, though Molly was several inches taller. "No, Molly. I take your place now. You must go lower because I am a married woman and you are not." She bit her lip and grinned, "Lord. Mrs Moriarty! How lovely that sounds!" Sashaying ahead, she missed the fleeting narrowed look Molly gave the back of her head. John caught it, though, and smiled wryly as they followed their mother and Mr Moriarty inside.

"Three days, Molly," John whispered. "They will be here only three days."

---

John pinched the bridge of his nose, and thought about retiring, but knew that was impossible. He had one thing left to accomplish, and he couldn't go to bed quite yet. He'd been writing letter after letter to his creditors, the family's bank, and to the family accountant, moving and shifting their finances around so that Harriet and her new husband would get the money he had promised and yet the rest of his family would not end up penniless and hungry. Things would be tight in the Watson household from now on. Extremely so.

Sighing, he threw down the quill and opened his eyes, catching his breath at the sight of Harriet leaning against the doorframe, studying him intently. She smiled.

"How do you like my choice of husband, John? I know he was once a favourite of yours."

"I like him well enough for a brother-in-law. You are the one that needs to be content with the man." He kept his tone as neutral as he could, knowing he would not help matters by apprising Harriet on how her marriage came to be.

She hummed and nodded. "It's too bad we couldn't have all gone to Brighton. I could have managed to get you and Molly married, too, were I given the chance."

He grimaced at her lack of tact. "Thank you for your consideration, Harriet, but I care not for your method of getting husbands."

She smiled widely, her eyes glittering. "I am a married woman now. It doesn't matter how it happened." She sighed, her mood shifting once again and looked around the room. "It is such a shame he couldn't have worn his red uniform at the wedding, or had an honour guard with their swords drawn as we exited the church. I suppose that having you and Mr Holmes there was pleasant enough, though I wished for more to attend my most happiest of days."

John stood. Obviously his work was finished for the night, and he wished to quit his sister's presence before he said something that he would regret. When he passed her at the doorway, she

stopped him.

“Do you still wish me to not say anything to Mother or Molly about Mr Holmes attending my wedding?”

“If you would. Now, if you will let me pass.”

“Of course. Good night, brother.”

---

The day of Moriarty and Harriet’s departure soon came, and Mrs Watson was forced to submit to a separation, though this was unwilling upon her part.

“Oh, Harriet! When shall we see you again?” Mrs Watson’s hands fluttered around her face, her eyes glistening.

Harriet flounced past her mother and climbed into the carriage to settle in next to Moriarty. She turned to lean out of the small window, squinting in the bright light of the afternoon sun. “Lord, I don’t know. Perhaps two or three years!” Grinning widely, she beamed at her family, heedless of her mother’s expression at that pronouncement, and leaned briefly against her husband with clear affection. He chuckled quietly behind her. John watched him, the way he smiled at Harriet when she wasn’t looking, and grudgingly had to admit it seemed likely Moriarty actually cared for his sister. Although John found this insight enlightening and a bit of a relief, it in no way excused his behaviour.

The sound that emanated from John’s mother made him wince. Molly put her hand on his arm and squeezed.

“Not for two or three years? What am I to do?” She cut a glance at John. “And your brother will be so cruel as to refuse to take me into the North Country.” She sighed heavily. “Please tell me that you will write soon and often.”

Harriet scoffed merrily. “I just don’t know, Mother. We married women do not have much time for writing. Molly and John may write to me, however, as they will have naught better to do as I shall as the wife of a soldier.”

John walked to the carriage and put his hand on Harriet’s arm, though when he spoke, he did so to Mr Moriarty.

“Mr Moriarty, I trust that you will take care of my sister to the best of your abilities.” John’s stare remained steady. A small muscle twitched near Mr Moriarty’s eye, but he slipped an arm around his wife’s waist, causing her to preen.

“Of course, Captain Watson. Thank you to you and your family for your continued generosity and hospitality. But, alas, duty calls me to the North and so we must bid our adieus.” He smiled handsomely and waved to Molly and Mrs Watson as John stepped back to let the carriage move.

Goodbyes exchanged, the three of them watched it as the carriage made its way down the drive. John listened to his mother’s quiet crying as she dabbed at her eyes.

“He is a fine fellow,” John said, and if either of the two ladies heard the irony of his tone, they chose to ignore it, “as anyone saw. He simpers and smirks and charms us all. I should find it

highly unlikely that I should ever find another brother-in-law such as Mr Moriarty.”

## Chapter 22

Mrs Watson rushed through the door of Longbourne, tugging at the ribbon under her chin to loosen her bonnet. She was out of breath as she came upon John and Molly at the dining room table, having an early supper.

“He’s back!” Her eyes were alight with the fire of one with purpose.

It did not take a stretching of one’s mind to determine whom their mother meant.

John glanced at Molly, who sat motionless, fork in hand, lifted halfway to her mouth. Setting it down on her plate carefully, Molly raised her chin.

“Whom, Mother?” John was proud of the way her voice remained steady.

“Why, Mr Lestrade, of course! He’s brought that disagreeable Mr Holmes--” Molly grasped John’s hand under the table, “--and I understand it is a hunting trip.”

Beaming at Molly, their mother leaned in close. “Oh, Molly. Such an opportunity!” John was suddenly reminded of a shark he’d once seen strung up in a fish market in India. He was of a mind to tell her so when she straightened quickly and called out loudly. “Hill? Hill! We must polish the house from top to bottom!” Groaning dramatically, she swept toward the door, bonnet ribbons trailing behind from her hand. “Where *is* that infernal servant?” John and Molly were left staring after her.

“Molly?” Pivoting toward his sister, worried, he saw her eyes were still locked on the door their mother had just barrelled through. Her expression slightly dazed, John squeezed her hand and let go when her gaze finally came around to him. Her auburn ringlets framed her face, and John could see the light scattering of freckles across her cheeks. They stood out a little more clearly now, her skin was leached of much of her colour.

“Do not look at me with such concern, John. I can assure you this news does not affect me with either pleasure or pain.” Her eyes flickered and she gave him a small smile, her hands methodically smoothing the lace tablecloth under her fingers. “If it is merely a shooting party, we shall not have the occasion to see him anyhow. And for it, I am grateful. Not for myself, but I dread other people’s remarks.”

John could hear their mother barking orders at the servants in the next room, and he wondered yet again if the woman had any consideration for anything but her own designs.

He did not know what to make of Molly’s comments, but knew her better than anyone. She was not fooling him in the least.

“Then I shall venture none, except for it is unfortunate a gentleman cannot come to house he has legally rented without rampant speculation.”

“Yes, it is too bad, is it not?” She nodded, agreeing with him.

“Then we shall think of him no more.”

“Yes,” Molly said, sounding determined, though her countenance revealed an entirely different sentiment.

John smirked.

“John!” Molly half-heartedly shoved at his shoulder, rocking him back a bit before they both dissolved into laughter.

---

Mr Lestrade stood stiffly on the drive and stared at Sherlock, agape.

“Do close your mouth, Lestrade. It is altogether unappealing to look down your throat.” Sherlock said, his tone bored.

Snapping his mouth shut, Mr Lestrade narrowed his eyes. “You decide to tell me *now* she was in London for all that time and you concealed it from me?” Gravel crunched under his feet as he leaned forward.

“Yes.” Lips pressed thin, Sherlock’s cheeks burned.

“But, why?”

“I can offer you no justification save for my arrogant presumption based on a failure to recognise your feelings, and Miss Watson’s,” Sherlock replied tightly.

“And?”

“And what?” He peered at Lestrade, eyebrows drawn inward.

Lestrade waited patiently, an unlikely smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Sherlock sighed dramatically. “Oh, as you wish, if you need to hear it. I should never have interfered.” He gritted his teeth. “It was not a worthy act of a gentleman or of our friendship and I...*apologise.*”

“Do you admit you were in the wrong?”

“I just said so, did I not?” Sherlock made a disgusted noise, not because he did not mean what he said, but because he was entirely unused to the position he was in.

“*Sherlock.*”

“Yes. Yes, I admit I was wrong. Utterly and completely.” Sherlock threw his hands in the air in defeat before letting them fall to his sides.

Lestrade grinned, delighted. “I have never, in all our years as friends, heard you express regret. I shall mark this down as a day to be remembered.” He clapped Sherlock on the shoulder. “Do I have your blessing, then?”

“You do not need it.” Relieved his friend so easily forgave, Sherlock relaxed a little.

“No, but I would like to know I have it all the same.” Lestrade looked hopeful.

Sherlock’s voice was embarrassingly gruff when he replied. “Then you have it.”

“You are off, then?” Concern etched on Lestrade’s face as he shook Sherlock’s hand.

“I’ll be back by supper two days hence, when you will be able to share all of the pertinent details of the time I was away. Now, *go*.” Sherlock motioned with his chin across the fields in front of Netherfield to what lay beyond.

Nodding, and then laughing giddily, Lestrade ran toward the stables as fast as his legs could carry him.

Sherlock watched for a moment, then let his gaze wander in the direction he’d indicated. He stood there for a long while even after Lestrade pounded away on horseback, contemplating his next move before deciding he had wasted enough time and turned on his heel toward the stables himself.

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“Three days he has been back at Netherfield, and he has seen fit to shun us. He is not going to do his duty and call upon this household. You are both going to die old and unmarried,” John’s mother wailed, flinging herself down on the settee.

“Mother, please,” John said in exasperation. A headache lurked just behind his eyes without hope of relief for his mother had been lamenting the absence of Mr Lestrade for the past two days without pause. He’d retreated to the drawing room to try and get some peace earlier, but his mother had unerringly found him to continue her blustering.

The maidservant bent to pour tea at a small table by the window, her back to them as she attended to her task.

“A year ago, when he first left Netherfield, I was so sure he’d marry one of my children and it all came to nothing. I shall not be played the fool again.” She fanned herself, as it was exceedingly warm in the room. His mother did not expect a response, and therefore John did not give her one, wishing Molly would hurry and come downstairs to give him someone to communicate with.

“Pardon, ma’am?” The maidservant said quietly.

Mrs Watson, piqued her diatribe had been interrupted, sighed irritably, “Yes, Wendy?”

“There is someone coming.”

Molly walked into the room just then, moving to stand next to Wendy at the window. John watched as Molly’s hand slowly rose to her own neck.

He looked over her shoulder to see a lone horseman making his way up the drive. Dust plumes trailed behind the horse’s hooves as it trotted and John could easily discern the gentleman riding, even from this far.

It was Mr Lestrade. Sadness flooded through John when he observed only the single rider, yet it was not as if he expected anything more from Sherlock.

“Molly, run and go put on your blue gown,” Mrs Watson ordered. Molly started to move but John’s mother grabbed her arm. “No, no, stay where you are.”

Molly drifted to the settee and looked up at John, her expression a mixture of wonder and happiness.

“Sit up straight, Molly. Pull your shoulders back. A man could go a long way without seeing a figure such as yours, if you would only make the most of it,” their mother harped.

Mrs Watson got up and rushed through the doors of the drawing room, dragging Wendy behind her and closing the panels to wait by the front entrance, leaving John and Molly alone.

“He shall come and I will not be a wilting flower. I will not be embarrassed and then we may meet as...as common and indifferent acquaintances.” Molly’s voice did not waiver, but it sounded rehearsed to John’s ear.

John looked at her sceptically. “Of course, Molly.”

“Do not think me in danger now, John.” She narrowed her eyes at him, nearly daring him to contradict her.

“I only think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever.”

Molly picked up her needlepoint from the side table, and John sat down next to her after lifting up his cup of tea.

They sat there frozen, pretending to be in repose, when the drawing room doors opened and Wendy showed Mr Lestrade in, followed closely by Mrs Watson.

John set down his cup, stood along with Molly and bowed politely. “Greg. It is good to see you once again.”

Smiling widely, Mr Lestrade agreed. “Yes, It is good to see you as well, John.” He nodded at Molly, blushing brightly. “Miss Watson.”

“Mr Lestrade,” Mrs Watson cut in. “We are very glad to see you! It has been far too long since you were here and a very long time since you have called upon us last. A great many changes have occurred since you departed. Miss Donovan is married now, as is my youngest daughter, though I am certain you have heard of it already; I expect you’ve read about it in the papers.”

“Yes, indeed, I--”

“My daughter and Mr Moriarty have gone to the North country, where they are to stay for I do not know how long.”

“Do you plan on staying long at Netherfield on this visit?” John interjected, trying to deflect attention away from that particular subject.

“Our plans are not settled yet, but I hope to stay for several weeks. Uh, yes...” He gazed at Molly with his adoration plain in his eyes. “I’d like to stay several weeks.”

“When you’ve shot all the birds at Netherfield, please do avail yourself of the ones here at Longbourne as well. We would be pleased to oblige you. You may, of course, bring your friend as well.” Mrs Watson mentioned the last as an afterthought, and it obviously tasted bitter on her tongue.

“Ah, well. Mr Holmes has run off to attend to some business and will not be back for a few days yet.”

A twang of regret made its way through John at those words.

“So soon?” slipped out of John’s mouth. The words came before he could stop them.



Lestrade blinked at him a moment, but did not get a chance to answer, as Mrs Watson asked, “My Molly looks well, does she not?”

Mr Lestrade tugged on his waistcoat nervously. “Er... Yes, yes, she certainly does.” The two only had eyes for one another, and it was easy enough for all to see.

John’s mother made a small noise and started retreating out of the door. “John,” she said, winking.

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, looking to Molly. He did not want to leave her alone with Mr Lestrade if it was not what she wanted. She glanced at him briefly and smiled.

Sighing, John returned his attention to his mother, who widened her eyes at him dramatically.

“John, you are needed upstairs.”

“Yes, Mother.”

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John stood outside the door to the drawing room watching his mother as she pressed her ear against the door. Knowing it would not make any difference if he told her how inappropriate she acted, John turned and strode down the hallway outside into the sunshine. He glanced back and through the window he could see Mr Lestrade down on one knee, Molly’s fingers on his face and the brightest smile he’d seen on his sister in a long, long time. A bittersweet smile crossed John’s face, an unwelcome ache finding its way into his heart.

Making his way through the brightly flowered garden, he sat down heavily on the stone bench under the oak tree. It was cooler here, though not by much. John, however, noticed little of the surrounding environment as his emotions got the better of him. Happiness for his sister warred with a pervading sadness within John, weighing him down until he hung his head in his hands and he had to force his breathing into submission.

So lost in his own thoughts was he, that sometime later when a pair of riding boots came into his range of vision, he did not immediately react.

Lestrade’s eager voice jolted him back to the present. “John? May I speak with you?”

Sitting up abruptly, John schooled his face into a mask of calm. He hoped desperately Greg would not see anything beyond a neutral expression.

The other man wrung his hands together.

“I feel I need to explain my behaviour before I come to the matter at hand. May I sit?” Greg gestured to the place beside John.

“Of course. Please do,” John replied. Even through the fog of his own emotions, John knew very well what this was about, though he would not offer up his own knowledge of the topic. He would let Lestrade speak his piece, for in spite of the happiness radiating from the man; John could see the guilt behind his eyes. The man needed to expunge those feelings, and John was glad to hear it.

Lestrade cleared his throat before he spoke, sitting up straight and meeting John’s eyes. “I am afraid I have made your sister the victim of a huge misunderstanding,” he began.

*No, not you. That was your sister and Sherlock who managed such a thing.*

“Suffice it to say, I have been in the wrong, and I must apologise to you for my actions toward your sister.”

John raised an eyebrow. “You are under the mistaken impression it is I whom you need to apologise to.”

Greg blushed, and glanced toward the house, absently waiving away a damselfly hovering near his head. “I have expressed my profound regret to Molly.”

Something in his tone made John chuckle. “My sister, though seemingly timid, is stronger than anyone except those very close to her appreciate. She did not make it easy for you,” John stated, amused.

“No. No, she did not. She is worth all of the apologies I needed to give, however.” Greg pulled himself together to continue. “John, I wish for your blessing in asking for your sister’s hand in marriage.”

He looked so hopeful John smiled wide, his happiness for Molly crowding out the sadness of the thought of her leaving Longbourne. The absence of her constant companionship would leave a terrible hole in John’s life, but his sister would never know it if he could help it.

“I give it to you with no reservations, Greg.” John held out his hand and the other man grasped it firmly, pumping it up and down vigorously in his enthusiasm. “I would be proud to have you as a brother-in-law.”

Tension visibly released from Greg’s shoulders as let go of John’s grip and stood, regarding John. “Thank you, thank you!” He paused, looking as if he experienced some internal debate. Giving into whatever self-conversation he was having, Greg said, “Have faith, my friend.”

Confused, John repeated, "Have faith?"

"Someone once told me there are the most complex of feelings lie under the most placid of expressions. Didn't pay much heed to that until this past year, as I fear I should have." He glanced back at the house again, his smile wistful before gazing seriously at John, who was stunned at Lestrade's insightfulness.

"It is true, and whomever said it knows something of human nature, I should say."

"Yes, he does, though he was talking of mysteries and how people innately wish to hide their guilt at the time." He chuckled at John's expression when it obviously dawned upon him Greg spoke of Sherlock.

John, struggling to keep his countenance calm, said, "Why are you telling me this?" Even to John's own ears, his voice sounded uneven.

Lestrade smiled kindly at him, but didn't directly answer his question. "My friend is often unnaturally perceptive, but he is not the most brilliant of men when it comes to the ways of the heart." John started to interrupt, though for the life of him, he did not know what was going to come out of his mouth when he did. Lestrade held up a hand to stop him. "I've already said too much on it, but just, *please*. Have faith, John."

Dry mouthed, John replied weakly, "Yes. All right."

John stared after him, long after his horse disappeared from view.

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Molly unwrapped her arms from around John's neck, her face pink with emotion; her eyes glistening with unshed tears of joy.

"I am the happiest woman in the world!" she said, smiling and radiant. "He loves me! He really loves me and oh, why can't everyone be as happy as I, John? It is too much!"

"He is lucky to have you, Molly. I hope he knows this."

A glint came into her eyes. "Oh, yes. He earned my hand, do not fear. After much explanation though, I could not deny he felt strongly for me, but had feared I did not feel the same. He had not believed-- Oh, John! I am so full of joy!"

"You will be very content together," John chuckled. "Nothing will ever be decided on between the two of you, and you will be so generous you will always exceed your income," he teased.

"Exceed their income?" Their mother must have entered the room without either one of them noticing. "What are you on about? He has five thousand a year. Five *thousand!* Molly! I am so exceedingly thrilled! To think, another of my children married. I knew you had all of this beauty for a purpose!"

Molly's expression sobered. "Oh, John. If only I could see you as content." She squeezed his hand.

No matter how much turmoil lay in John's heart, he would never begrudge his sister her joy.

"Molly, I could never be as happy as you, for first I would have to have your goodness, which admittedly, I do not." He smiled kindly at her crestfallen expression. "Perhaps someday I shall meet someone who will make me as content as can be." *Oh, but I have, he thought, and yet he is out of my reach...*

## Chapter 23

“Mother, no. I do not have even a general idea when we will be wed. For goodness sake, he just proposed yesterday!” Molly called out, exasperation colouring her voice.

John and Molly exchanged looks across the table, and he bit back a laugh as she rolled her eyes dramatically. He could see their mother over his sister’s shoulder, flitting back and forth in the drawing room doing who knows what, incessantly talking about bouquets, fabrics, buffets and the like. It had been less than twenty-four hours and Molly had already whispered once that much more and she would be just as likely to run away and elope like Harriet.

“But you *must* have some desire. I think Spring is best, but oh, that would be so long to wait. Why put off such a happy occasion when two people are so in love?” Mrs Watson’s strident voice filtered unerringly through the walls.

Doing the best he could to buffer Molly from their mother’s overzealous planning, John had stayed as near to his sister as he could all day long, even resorting to bringing his firearm into the house to clean it. Picking up a the flintlock pistol, he rubbed the barrel calmly with a soft cloth, and then held it up to the light streaming through the window to inspect it.

“You know she will not let up until you walk down that aisle, and even then it is debatable.”

Molly made a distressed sound and stood quickly, straightening her skirts and then crossing her arms defiantly. “You are not helping, John Hamish Watson.”

He chuckled as she paced the room slowly and he carefully inspected the main and sear springs before setting it gently upon the cloth.

Mrs Watson’s voice ebbed and flowed according to her vicinity to the room. Neither one of them were listening to her now.

“John?” Molly said softly.

“Hmmm?” He didn’t look up from his task, oiling one of the springs gently and testing it with his forefinger.

“John, there’s someone coming.” Molly sounded confused. “In an enormous carriage.” Her voice trailed off and John put down his supplies and the pistol to stand next to her. Already, he could see the occupant through the plate glass window emerging from his carriage. John groaned loudly.

“Who is it?” Molly whispered to him, as their unexpected guest rapped smartly on the door. They could hear Wendy opening it and offering muffled greetings. It seemed as though their mother heard as well, for she came up to Molly and John just as Wendy led the distinguished gentleman in.

He put forward no pleasantries as he eyed the room with a pinched expression. “What an extremely small hall.” Mrs Watson made an affronted noise.

Wendy, sounding mortified, introduced him. “Sir Mycroft Holmes.” Her duty done, she quickly scuttled out of the room.

Molly and their mother looked at each other, shock evident in their faces at the arrival of such an auspicious, and *rude*, guest. John could read his mother’s expression; her calculating eyes flitted between John and Sir Mycroft with unfettered curiosity.

“And I suppose this is your mother?” Sir Mycroft inquired imperiously. He leaned heavily on his cane, casually crossing one foot in front of the other. John was not fooled in the slightest at his relaxed pose, his every sense alert.

John responded neutrally, “Yes, it is,” giving his mother a small shake of the head when she looked like she was going to interject. Whatever she was thinking would surely make whatever this was worse.

His eyes sliding over to Molly, Sir Mycroft looked her up and down. She shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny and John grit his teeth as the other man asked, “And this, I suppose, is one of your sisters?”

“Yes, she is, Sir. The other is lately married.” John could feel his face heat involuntarily, suspecting by the mere tone Sir Mycroft knew what had happened with Mr Moriarty and Harriet.

Stepping away, Sir Mycroft tapped his cane on the ground as he took a turn around the room. John felt violated in some way, as if the man were looking for fault in the dust or the creases in the fabric of the settee, and was vaguely reminded of the impromptu military inspections he suffered through, and eventually gave, while in the regimentals. Sir Mycroft observed, turning to come to stand in front of the Watsons again. “Your park is very small, and this room is situated as such to be most inconvenient. Why, the windows face full west.” His tone dripped disapproval and John clenched his fists in automatic response.

Mrs Watson looked nearly relieved to be included in the conversation. “Indeed, Sir. But we do not sit in here after sup--”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs Watson,” Sir Mycroft interrupted blithely. “Your son and I have some matters to discuss, if you and your daughter don’t mind.”

John’s mother stared impolitely for just a moment before tugging on Molly’s arm. Molly resisted, looking to John and raising her eyebrows in silent question.

*Is this all right?*

He had nothing to fear from Sir Mycroft, save a ringing ear and perhaps a measure of indignation, so he nodded at her. Immediately, she relaxed into her mother’s grip and let herself be led from the room, throwing a final concerned look over her shoulder as she exited.

When he pivoted to face Sir Mycroft once again, he found the other man staring blatantly at him, sizing him up. “I imagine you are intelligent enough to understand why I am here,” he stated coolly.

John thought for a moment. “Indeed, Sir, I am quite unable to account for the honour of your presence in my home.”

“You do not seem to be afraid,” the man observed.

John touched the table next to his thigh, where his gun rested on the cloth, then let his hand slip back to his side, his point made. “You do not seem very frightening.”

Sir Mycroft did not miss the movement and narrowed his eyes at John’s tone, gesturing at him with the tip of his cane. “Captain Watson, you ought to know I am not to be trifled with. But however disingenuous you intend to be, I can assure you that you will not find me so.” He put the cane down, which was fortunate, as John did not particularly enjoy things pointed at him in such a manner. “I have heard, not two days ago, some very distressing news. Not only will the sister I

just met be most advantageously married, but that you, Captain John Watson, will soon be united with my brother.” John struggled not to react as Sir Mycroft continued. “I knew this had to be a scandalous falsehood, but I thought it necessary to come to your--” He looked around with distaste. “--home and confirm for myself.”

*Married.*

*To Sherlock.*

*Who would have said...*

*Oh...God.*

John ground out, barrelling through his shock, “It is a wonder you bothered to make the journey, since you are so very certain that it is not true. What are you suggesting here?”

“That you insist at once that the information is spurious to anyone who asks.” Looking down his nose at John, John had an idea of the kind of control he had over others, but wondered about his and Sherlock’s relationship. He couldn’t see Sherlock bending to his brother’s will any more than he was going to do; therefore he imagined it was more than turbulent at times.

John huffed. “Your presence here at Longbourne will be taken as confirmation of it, if indeed such a report exists.”

Sir Mycroft banged the end of his cane on the floor in apparent frustration. “I will be satisfied, Captain Watson. Has my brother made you an offer of marriage?”

John got great satisfaction in watching Sir Mycroft’s face pinken in his vexation. “You deem it impossible that he has,” John said.

“Whatever you have done to him may well have drawn him away from his familial obligations. You may have drawn him in, though I do not know how that would be.” Sir Mycroft looked up to the ceiling for a brief moment, as if the answer was somehow written on the plaster.

Memories of meeting Sherlock and their subsequent encounters flashed through his head, and he laughed incongruously, though the muscles in his neck began to ache from the tension riding there. “If I have, I would be the last to confess it.”

“Captain Watson, do you not know who I am? Of the connections and position I hold?” Sir Mycroft’s long fingers --Sherlock’s fingers-- fondled his pocket watch in agitation. “I am my brother’s family and I deem it necessary to know everything concerning him.”

“But you are entitled to know *nothing* concerning me, nor does your behaviour urge me to tell you anything of importance.”

“Let me be clear, Captain Watson, to avoid any more of these dramatics.” He raised an eyebrow, looking disconcertingly like Sherlock for a moment. “My brother shall marry someone of his own station. Now what have you to say?” He said this as if it were the final word; as if neither he nor Sherlock had a voice in the matter at all.

“Yes, let us not be *dramatic*, Sir Mycroft, since we both are above all of that,” John said drily, “I say that if you are so very certain of what he shall do, you do not have any reason to suppose that he will make an offer to me.”

Eyes glittering and lips pressed impossibly thin, Sir Mycroft leaned forward, his voice deadly quiet. “My plans for this family will not be ruined by the upstart pretensions of a man without

connections or fortune and it shall not be endured. Your alliance would be a disgrace. Your name would not be mentioned by any of us.” Sir Mycroft was clearly losing the thread of his patience.

“Those would be heavy misfortunes, indeed,” John replied, his tone flat, refusing to be intimidated.

Sir Mycroft reared back as if struck. “Obstinate man. Apparently I misjudged your acuity, for if you were sensible, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you grew up.”

John pulled his shoulders back, straightening his spine and lifting his chin in defiance of Sir Mycroft’s assertion. “Sir, if I were to marry your brother, it would not be, as you put it, considered by me to be quitting my sphere. He is a gentleman, as am I, as was my father before me. So far we are equal.” The last came through clearly, each word succinct.

“Tell me once and for all, *are you engaged to my brother?*”

John pressed his lips together and wished for all the world that he could answer affirmatively, but he could not outright lie, even to this horrid man. “No, I am not,” he replied evenly.

Tension visibly ebbed out of Sir Mycroft, pulling his shoulders downward. “You will promise me here and now never to agree to such a thing.”

He said it in such an assured, offhand way, as if he had not a doubt that John would blindly agree that John immediately bristled. “I will make no promise of the kind, and I do believe this topic has run its course.”

Sir Mycroft ignored him, obviously determined to say his piece no matter the consequence. “And your sister! Do not think I do not know of the circumstances surrounding her marriage. I have connections and eyes everywhere, Captain Watson. I know it all. Do you think that my brother should be so polluted to have such a sister-in-law?”

“You need to leave.” John growled and started walking toward the door, Sir Mycroft trailing behind.

“You have no regard for any of this then? No regard for the honour of my brother and our family?” John could see his mother peeking out from behind the kitchen door, her eyes wide. Not quiet any more, Sir Mycroft’s voice was brittle. “You are selfish, sir, and seek to ruin him and cause him to be the contempt of society,” he sneered with disdain.

Leaning over to open the door, John pulled it wide. A calmness overcame him, the type that grew from conviction and self-awareness he had not experienced before. “I will act to make myself happy, and my decisions have nothing whatsoever to do with you.”

Sir Mycroft blinked at him, and then nodded crisply. “This is how you want it, then? I shall take no leave of you, Captain Watson. You deserve no such attention.” With that, he spun with amazing fluidity for one in need of a cane and stalked off to his awaiting carriage.

John shut the door firmly behind him, not waiting to properly see Sir Mycroft depart, and rested his head against the cool wood. His breath left him in a rush and he felt a little dizzy; his heart beat too quickly in his chest.

Moments passed before he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“John?”

He didn’t answer. How could he? He could barely move, all of the adrenaline dissipating and

leaving him weak.

“John, I’ve managed to send Mother upstairs. She won’t be kept away for long, mind.” He could hear the smile in her gentle voice as she gently pulled him around to look at her. He found her beaming at him, and his smile was automatic in response.

“Thank you, Molly,” he sighed.

Squeezing his arm gently, Molly nodded and walked down the corridor and into the kitchen, where she closed the door firmly behind her.

Tugging at the hem of his waistcoat, he walked calmly back to the drawing room, where he set about putting away his gun and cleaning supplies.



## Chapter 24

### Chapter Summary

Smexin' ahead...

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John walked slowly in the golden pink light of the morning, hand trailing along the tall grasses growing wild on the edge of the road. The sunlight of the ebbing summer morning warmed his hair and soothed his raw nerves. He'd been up for most of the night and left the house before anyone awoke to walk the grounds and settle his mind, watching the sun rise above the mist, and wondering how it was his feelings had altered so much in only one year.

Coming upon the weeping willow at the end of the drive, he paused, looking up at the subtle sounds of shoe falls on gravel. Two figures moved in his direction on foot, both tall and elegant, one with a smile on his face that could compete with the brightness of the sun, the other more serious and reserved.

Lestrade raised a hand in greeting, and called out, "John! Good morning! Oh, I am so pleased you are out and about. I had hoped we were not calling upon you and your family too early."

"Good day, Greg. Mr Holmes. And, no. We are all early risers, so your visit is welcome."

John's heart thudded in his chest as Sherlock stared at him intensely, his eyes (blue today, to match the sky) glittering. Sherlock said nothing and John felt the pull of him, the inexorable drawing of his body and soul to this man. Looking from Sherlock to John, Lestrade slowly raised his eyebrows in realisation, as if he could feel the electricity arcing between them. He cleared his throat. "Erm. I...I am going to the house now to call on Miss Molly."

John's face heated, knowing very well what Greg saw. "Of course, Greg. I am sure she will be thrilled to see you." He flicked his eyes at Lestrade for a brief moment and smiled gratefully.

Greg nodded, his grin growing impossibly wider as he took a few steps back. "If you will pardon me, then, I will just leave you two gentlemen to...erm...talk."

John barely heard him as Lestrade turned and strode away, a spring in his step.

John cleared his throat. "Sherlock, I want to thank you, for I know you had a hand in the happy resolution for Molly."

"Do not think I am so generous. My thoughts were of you and you alone." Sherlock turned his head and exposed the long expanse of skin at his neck. John swallowed and his mouth went dry, making it impossible for him to reply, even as he watched Sherlock turn back to him with a look so heated, it took John's breath away.

"You left me a *note*." Sherlock's terminal *t* clicked clear with a slight flash of teeth in an obvious show of displeasure, and John flinched, but he stood tall and lifted his chin.

“I thought it was the best choice I could make for myself at the time.” It sounded weak to his own ears, even though it was the absolute truth.

Sherlock replied, “And for me?”

John watched as hurt flickered in Sherlock’s eyes, heard it in the slight inflection of his voice. Guilt washed over him, making his stomach turn and flutter. “I did not imagine you would be affected overmuch.” *I thought you would never end up here. Within reach.*

“You were wrong, though not for the reasons you believe. I did not understand the depth of your affections until I read it, and it gave me...hope.” Sherlock, his brows drawn together, said the word as if he had to wrap his mind around the idea, as if it were new and fragile.

And perhaps it was for him.

“Sherlock...I--” John’s voice trailed away into the warm summer air, his throat constricted.

“I know you spoke to my brother yesterday.” The corner of Sherlock’s mouth twitched.

John ground his teeth at the change of subject and the mention of Sir Mycroft. “Yes.”

Sherlock chuckled. “He told me of his meeting with you, and I feel obliged to say his disclosure had quite the opposite effect of what he had designed, which his intentions typically do.” His face sobered, his eyes roving over John’s face. “Even though your letter left me the evidence I needed, I was not positive until I spoke with him. I knew if you truly had decided against me, you would have acknowledged it openly.”

“Yes, I seem to have no issue with speaking my mind in any way that would abuse you,” John responded wryly, silently condemning himself again for his lack of prudence.

“You have said nothing I have not well deserved. You thought me devoid of any proper feeling, and I do not deny that until I met you, I might have agreed with that observation. I acted abhorrently toward you.” Sherlock’s lip curled derisively; his displeasure of his own actions evident in his countenance. “As a child, I was given good principles, but let them grow into conceit and pride that made me unforgivably blind about what or who could truly bring me happiness. I would have remained in such a state had I not met you.” Sherlock swallowed. “Your words haunt me. That I am the last man on earth you could possibly marry. I cannot let them go.” His eyes burned in their intensity.

“I had not the smallest idea of their ever being taken that way.” No. No, at the time he had thought Sherlock immune to true sentiment and had reacted viciously and without thought.

“I shall never forget them.” Sherlock loomed close, his warm breath a soft breeze on John’s skin. He shivered, despite the summer heat.

“Then please do not repeat them,” John pleaded softly. He could not tear his eyes away. He was ensnared, unable and unwilling to escape.

“You have bewitched me, John. I may not have known love before you, but I know it now. My affections and wishes are the same, though one word from you will silence me forever.” Sherlock’s words came out in a rush, belying his anxiety, his cheeks pinkened.

“I...” John stared at him, speechless, then raised a hand to Sherlock’s face, cupping his jaw. Sherlock immediately pressed into John’s touch. “No words give me greater pleasure to hear,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. He stroked a thumb across the smooth skin of Sherlock’s cheek. “And yes, the answer to your question is yes.” He pulled Sherlock toward him, brushing

his mouth across Sherlock's parted lips as the other man gasped quietly. Sherlock remained still for a moment, as if stunned, before returning the kiss with his entire being.

"*John,*" Sherlock murmured over and over, his voice ragged, their mouths parting and coming together again.

He wound his arms around John's shoulders, and John hummed at the feel of Sherlock's soft mouth on his own, the warm wet stroke of Sherlock's tongue as it sought entrance. Drawing Sherlock against his chest, being held in arms that were strong; arms that could hold him steady and support him nearly overwhelmed John's senses. He did not remember running his hands up Sherlock's back, but he must have, because his fingers were threaded in Sherlock's hair, tugging him even closer. Sherlock pushed against him insistently, leading him under the willow's great sagging branches until his back brushed against the trunk of the massive tree.

He pulled back to kiss the sensitive skin under John's jaw, teasing it with the tip of his tongue before moving to draw the flesh of his ear through his lips. "No one can see us here." His voice rumbled deep and smooth, dropping octaves and thrumming through John's blood.

John opened his heavy-lidded eyes to find this was indeed true. The willow's branches were in full leaf and fell in such a way they were completely concealed within. This was one of the reasons John loved this tree, for it served as a hideaway for him and Molly when they were children.

Now it was suited for a much more interesting purpose.

"That is very...convenient, don't you agree?" John slid his hands down to Sherlock's arse and pulled, shifting until their bodies cleaved together from shoulder to knee.

"You're hard," Sherlock breathed, his breath warm and moist against the shell of John's ear, twisting slightly so John could feel Sherlock's answering arousal against his hip.

"Of course I bloody am," John growled quietly. "I usually am around you anymore," and he turned to draw him in for another kiss. This time John took control at first, exploring the sweet recesses of Sherlock's mouth, and the hot sliding of their tongues made Sherlock moan softly; their rhythm evening to be slow and languorous, loving and tender. There was no fight for domination in this kiss, nothing but the give and take of equals. Sherlock's tongue swept into his mouth and John was lost in the heat and hunger of it as the tension grew.

The burn between them spiked and John could feel the blood rushing through his veins with every thud of his heart; it heated his skin, filled his aching erection. The fabric of his breeches and smallclothes felt tight and binding. Sherlock moved away from the kiss, leaving John gasping and looking up into the green canopy of leaves to catch his breath. John could feel the rough, uneven bark of the tree biting into his back, but it mattered not.

Sherlock caressed John with his open mouth, with his soft lips, as he trailed down his neck, slowly driving John mad.

Sherlock worked a palm in between them, pressing against John's cock and wrapping his long fingers around it. John's hips tilted up in instinctual, automatic reaction.

"Ah, God, Sherlock," he gasped. Fingers tightened around him slightly before loosening and the arm around John's back squeezed perceptibly. Flicking the buttons on the placket of John's breeches to open them, Sherlock slid a hand inside, his warm fingertips grazing the skin of John's belly, causing his abdominal muscles to bunch and his breath quicken. A thumb traced along the soft skin of the underside of John's cock, following the thick vein before sweeping over his flared

head, pulling the moisture beading there along his skin.

Sherlock worried the skin at John's collar with a gentle scraping of his teeth, his tongue darting out to soothe the sting. Kissing the spot sweetly, Sherlock shifted his head back to look at John, his eyes dark and his open lips kiss-swollen as he panted. His thumb circled rhythmically around the tip of John's cock, and John found it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Sherlock watched him raptly, his eyes skipping over John's features over and over again, taking in every reaction. A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth right before his eyes stilled, locking with John's, and holding them as he sank slowly to his knees, John's hands still buried in his hair.

John groaned, heat and tension pooling in his groin, his face flushing hot. "Sherlock, you--"

"I need to taste you," Sherlock whispered, appearing mused and wanton, even with every article of his clothing in place. John made a soft noise he didn't recognize, watching mesmerized as Sherlock pulled at the placket of John's breeches and smallclothes with one hand until John was fully exposed, his other hand pressing John's hip against the tree to keep him still. Pulling a hand free of Sherlock's hair, John clutched the tree for support as Sherlock's pink tongue darted out to trace a path up John's length before encircling him. Sherlock let the head of John's cock part those full lips, gently drawing John inside the warm wetness of his mouth. He ran his tongue along the ridge previously explored by his thumb and John's knees buckled, but Sherlock pressed back with both hands, keeping him steady while he closed his eyes and pulled John in deeper to the back of his throat. Sherlock swallowed, the ripple of muscular movement making John arch his back as he fought not to thrust forward, hips still pinned, and one hand clutched spasmodically in Sherlock's hair whilst the other gripped the uneven bark behind him. Sherlock shuddered around John, and he started to move, and *God*, it was too overwhelming. John was drowning in sensation, trembling uncontrollably, his breath erratic.

"*Sherlock*," John whispered brokenly as he watched the compellingly erotic sight of a fully clothed Sherlock swallowing him entirely. He lost himself to it, letting go as he never had before. Soon his body went tight as his back bowed so he curled over Sherlock's head, sheltering him with his body, his breath hitching on Sherlock's name as he spent in great soul shattering spasms. Sherlock sucked gently, drawing out John's orgasm in explosive bursts at odds with his gentle ministrations. When John eventually became sensitive to his touch, Sherlock let John slip free from his lips and leaned his forehead on John's hip, pressing against him. He moaned against the fabric of John's breeches, his breath coming in uneven gasps and it registered Sherlock had released one of John's hips to yank his own clothing aside and touch himself. Sherlock shuddered hard; his reddened mouth open and his eyes open only a fraction as he looked up at John to meet his gaze. John stared in blissful wonder, watching as Sherlock came in long, hot ribbons, painting the grass by John's feet.

After a moment, Sherlock tugged John down and to his side, avoiding the evidence of his orgasm so they sat together on the grass, Sherlock's arms wrapped around John's shoulders as John leaned against him. John rearranged himself and his clothing and allowed himself to melt into Sherlock's warmth, pulled close against Sherlock's chest. He smiled at the feel of the heartbeat that thrummed so strongly under his cheek.

He sensed the feather light touch of Sherlock's lips brushing his hair and he tilted his head up, searching him out. Sherlock lowered his head; kissing John tenderly, tracing his tongue inside John's mouth slowly, and he tasted himself, salty and slightly bitter.

They pulled apart and John rested his head back on Sherlock's chest, pushing aside the snowy white cravat so he could get as close as possible. "My most ambitious desire is to listen to your heart every day of my life from this point forward."

Sherlock hummed and John felt the vibration run through his skin. Long fingers stroked his back in lazy circles. “You have it in your palm, so you may listen anytime you like.”

Chest constricting with emotion at Sherlock’s admission, John sat up, turning and placing his hands at Sherlock’s neck. He wanted to make sure Sherlock could see him.

“I love you,” John said succinctly, grinning a little giddily at finally being able to say the words aloud.

Sherlock’s eyes widened just a fraction, and his face relaxed into a smile lighting his entire face, his eyes shining. John’s heart tripped in his chest.

“Then we are two fortunate gentlemen. I love you, John Watson, and I count the days until you are mine.”

John huffed a watery laugh, memories of the past year sifting through his head. So much had changed, and he was glad of every single step bringing him to this point, even the more painful ones.

“The marriage will be but a formality, for I am already yours.”

#### Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to [dirtytwentysomething](#) for this beautiful piece of [fanart](#) for this chapter!!

I can't thank you enough!

# Epilogue

## Chapter Summary

Schmoop. That is all.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sky was cloudless, and the day was blessed with a warm late autumn sun that made John turn his face to the sky for a moment to enjoy it. The hedges and trees surrounding the drive at Netherfield were only just tinged with green, most of the leaves having turned to the fiery colours of the season. He could hear the sounds of the guests just inside the door, loud and gregarious for this early in the afternoon, but he understood why they were so, for he was even happier than they on this day. The soft undercurrent of the well-coordinated string quartet playing for their wedding breakfast filtered through the voices and John smiled.

“Are you ready?” Sherlock breathed into his ear, brushing his lips across it in a soft kiss, leaving a trace of his warmth, and then dropping another on his shoulder. John glanced at Sherlock, thinking for the thousandth time that day how fortunate he was to be standing here, next to the man he loved, set to spend the rest of his life with him.

Nodding, he faced his husband, whose eyes glittered down at him in the afternoon sun, a smile quirking his lips, and he slipped his hand into Sherlock’s white-gloved palm.

The smile on Sherlock’s lips came to fruition as a full grown grin when he turned to place his other palm upon the seam of the double door and press against it, swinging the heavy doors open wide. A small crowd of close friends and family had gathered in the entryway, awaiting their arrival from the church with mostly beaming faces. The guests had gone on ahead to meet them at Netherfield while Sherlock and John enjoyed a bit of quiet solitude after the ceremony in the churchyard garden and therefore were ready to greet the newly wedded couple with celebratory drinks in hand.

Molly and Greg, married only a few weeks before, were in the forefront, arms open wide. A teary-eyed Mrs Watson, Sally and the simpering Mr Anderson stood nearby, and Sally squeezed John’s arm as he and Sherlock made their way through the gathering, greeting guests with their smiles and gratitude. Miss Lestrade stood off to the side, lovely as ever in her best garments, but looking as if she would rather be anywhere else, her features sour and the light in her eyes bitter, though she tried to disguise it with a haughty air. John smiled at her all the same. He would not allow her or her waspishness to mar his day of happiness. Notably absent, but not surprisingly so, were Mr and Mrs Moriarty and one Sir Mycroft Holmes, though neither John nor Sherlock were troubled by their absence.

This was to be a day of great joy and love, whether there were three dozen guests or not a one. It would have mattered not, however, if the entire crowd disappeared, for the only person John could see was Sherlock.

---

“Sherlock, what the bloody hell happened to your *face*?”

John stood in the sitting room of 221B, tea service in hand, trying not to drop it in a fit of shock over the sight of Sherlock, standing near his worktable, his face blackened by what appeared to be soot. Two very bright blue eyes blinked rapidly out at him.

“It appears as if one of my experiments has gone horribly awry,” Sherlock replied flatly, his tone indicating that John should have deduced this fact on his own.

Shaking his head and pressing his lips tightly together, John sighed heavily as he leaned over to set the tray down on the side table. “I go to prepare tea for ten minutes, and you manage to nearly harm yourself and burn the room down whilst I am away.” He straightened and strode over to a soot-painted Sherlock, automatically searching for injuries, but finding just one very dirty countenance and a couple of singed locks of hair. Peering over Sherlock’s shoulder, he could see the damage was unfortunately not limited to Sherlock’s person; there was ashy black residue over much of the table and an odd, sickly sweet odour to the room.

*Again.*

Sherlock wrinkled his nose, causing some of the soot to sift down between them. John watched it as it fell like black snow.

“Perhaps I was a little impatient...” Sherlock’s voice trailed off and John huffed.

“Not entirely a surprise, but it may be that we should think about installing a kitchen in the same room as your workspace so that I need not worry every time I wish to make a pot of tea. I could stay nearby to--” John reached up to finger one drooping lock of Sherlock’s hair, only to have part of it crumble away at his touch, “supervise.” He frowned pointedly, though he felt the initial shock ebbing away and turning into something closer to mirth. He sighed, his frown dissolving into a wry smile. “Can you stay away from experiments that involve *fire* for the time being? At least until we construct something closely for clean-up purposes?”

Sherlock grinned cheekily, accurately sensing that John was more exasperated and amused than angry. “I have other pursuits that can occupy my time, certainly.”

John arched an eyebrow at the subtle shift in Sherlock’s tone. Sherlock advanced forward a step, but John stopped him short by placing a firm palm on his chest. The fine muslin of his neatly tucked in --though now filthy-- shirt was thin enough for John to easily feel Sherlock’s thrumming heartbeat.

They both paused to look down, and John smiled slightly at his hand against the white and black streaked fabric.

*In the palm of my hand...*

Clearing his throat, he narrowed his eyes slightly, trying to sound firm, and curled his fingers slightly. “Go wash up first.”

Sherlock turned and retreated without hesitation to the bedroom, where John heard the distinctive sounds of water sloshing against the side of the washbasin. Emerging from the room, Sherlock’s long legged strides ate up the distance quickly as he rubbed his face with a damp hand towel. He’d removed his soiled shirt, exposing his lean torso. John admired his physique for a moment,

the definition of his muscles and the fine texture of his pale skin. John's palms ached to touch him. As he neared, Sherlock scrubbed blindly and subsequently missed most of the mess, until John gently took the towel away from him.

John smiled gently, his chest constricting at Sherlock's streaky visage, briefly wondering if this was how he would be spending the rest of his days, and promptly hoping it would be the case.

"Allow me, Mr Holmes Watson." Even six months later, John loved being able to say that.

Sherlock acquiesced with a quiet sound, tilting his head obligingly when John nudged it this way and that.

"How did it begin?" John said softly, working at a spot high on Sherlock's cheekbone. Sherlock observed him while he worked, eyes piercing, as if he could see right through to John's soul. Sometimes John felt like this was not in his imagination, particularly when Sherlock could often tell what he was thinking even before John became aware of it himself.

"I cannot pin down the exact hour, or the spot, or the look. I am only aware that I was in the middle of it before I knew that it had begun," Sherlock responded with a murmur, his eyes mapping out John's face.

John knew what he meant. It was not one occurrence, or a moment that triggered his love for Sherlock. He just knew that at some point, it was just...*there*.

John nodded, smiling impishly. "Now be sincere. Did you admire me for my impudence?"

Though John was teasing, Sherlock pondered the question for a moment before answering. "That was certainly a portion of it, for it caught my attention. But no. Mostly it was for the liveliness of your mind and the steadiness of your loyalties. You intrigued me when no one else had the ability to do so. You still do."

"You may as well just call it impudence, as that is exactly what it was, no matter how you try to make a virtue of it." He rubbed at Sherlock's nose, removing the last of the grime. "My good qualities are now under your protection and it is up to you to remind me of them on occasion and exaggerate them as you will. It is for me to find opportunities for teasing and quarrelling such as this--" John gestured to the mess behind them on the worktable with a smirk, "--with you often, and I shall begin directly." John tossed the hand towel aside and pressed his fingers to Sherlock's now rosy face, his voice quiet.

Sherlock blinked slowly at him. "I daresay you already have," Sherlock said softly, amusedly.

John moved, running his other arm around Sherlock's waist and stepping near. Sighing at Sherlock's heat as it seeped through his breeches and into John's skin, tendrils of desire ribboned through him in insistent sparkling waves, forcing his breath to quicken. Sherlock's pupils dilated perceptibly.

Running his fingers along Sherlock's spine and smiling knowingly, John said, "And as a gentleman whom I measure all others against, it is my expectation that you will do your best to find a resolution to our temporary conflict in such a way that leaves us both satisfied." He watched as the tip of Sherlock's tongue darted out to wet his lip in reaction.

Sherlock bent his head so their lips were a scant distance apart, and John felt Sherlock's warm breath ghost across his skin, raising gooseflesh on his arms in anticipation.

"And as a gentleman, it shall be my absolute pleasure to do as you wish, Mr Watson Holmes," Sherlock whispered in response as John closed his eyes as their lips finally met, soft and lingering,



for they had all the time in the world.

FIN

## Chapter End Notes

Wow. I can't believe it's OVER! I am sad and happy, all at the same time. The biggest thank you in the world to [ShinySherlock](#), my lovely beta, who was invaluable to me. She was positive, made me laugh, and endured my endless squirreling (SQUIRREL!!!!) to catch things that I missed. Also, I want to thank those of you that commented and gave me encouragement and praise. You guys were funny and motivating, and I am so glad I made you SQUEE! As I wrote, I had alternate chapter names for each chapter to amuse myself because I am ridiculous in that way. Truthfully, I tried to see how hard I could make Shiny laugh, but we thought you might get a kick out of them, too. :D

1. Captain Tight Pants
2. Pickle Juice
3. Sherlock's an Ass
4. Don't Ask to Borrow My Sugar, Sherlock
5. Anderson is Annoying in Any Universe
6. Wherein Jim Looks Pretty in Red
7. John Popped Some Tags
8. John Steals a Base
9. (Please Don't) Put a Ring On It
10. Mycroft, Shut Your Cakehole
11. Is That a Banana In Your Pocket?
12. We Are Never Ever Everrrr Getting Back Togetherrrrrr
13. How's That Crow Taste, John?
14. I Am the Queen of DeNial
15. Slippery When Wet
16. Wherein Irene Deserves a Smack With a Brick
17. I Got Nothin'
18. I've Got Some Art I'd Love To Show You
19. Boom Chicka Wow WOW-Almost
20. [muffled Barry White music in the background]
21. GTFO! (with all it's connotations)
22. You've Got Some Splainin' To Do!
23. Say Hello To My Leettle Friend
24. If You Like It, Put a Ring On It!
25. Goin' To The Chapel...

\*whew\* Now. On to the next work....CHEERS!

Works inspired by this one

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