### This Land We Have Chosen

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| Additional Tags | Alternate Universe - Canada, Canada, Alternate Universe - Victorian, Victorian, Hysteria, Virgin Sherlock, Alternate Universe - Farm/Ranch, Farmer John, Sexuality Crisis, Masturbation, Prostate Milking, Prostate Massage, Pining, Mutual Pining, Dead Mary, but I'm still somewhat sympathetic, Colonialism, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, But only a little, more like potential alcoholism, India, i.e. John was in India not Afghanistan, for various reasons, Goats, Horses, Cows, Geese, basically all your farm animals, also, Moose, Bears, not the fun kind, Squirrels, You know I am going to try and tag for everything here but I bet there's eventually a tag limit, Canadian Politics, oh my god there's a tag for that, I blame Justin Trudeau, Canadian Shack, it is definitely that, Demisexual Sherlock, Complicated Relationships, John's Danger Boner, Canon-Typical Violence, moose violence, ungulates, For Science!, I'm not tagging this with poop, but people talk about poop a lot, but not in a sexual sense and I swear it's significant, bear puns, anderson is into bestiality again, OR IS HE, look I'm sorry it's his name, goats in heat, Did I say slow burn?, Slow Burn, the slowest of burns, Sharing a Bed, Awkward Boners, the most awkward, look be glad you're not in an UST situation where you're forced to wear button flies all the time, Unresolved Sexual Tension, for a loooooooooooooooooooong time, Awkward Flirting, Awkward Hugs, in chapter six everything is awkward okay, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, PTSD John, To a point, Panic Attacks, bad 19th century science, Bisexual John, sorry that's so far down but I take it for granted so often, implied Mrs Hudson/Greg Lestrade, non-con animal sex kind of, explicit goat sex, Voyeurism, not of the goat sex that's okay, Angst with a Happy Ending, Sherlock is a huge nerd, Comeplay, Wet Dream, jumping to highly erroneous conclusions, Mycroft Meddles, More panic attacks and more awkwardness, Past Mary Morstan/John Watson, past Mary Morstan/John Watson/James Sholto, a little hand porn to go with your pining, that and life lessons from goats, Animal Death, Dissection, Sherlock grabs the wrong ends of several sticks, Sub Sherlock Holmes, Light Dom/sub, Skinny Dipping, escape goats, accidental boner contact, Mud, Mud fighting, Banter, Play Wrestling, the goats are
This Land We Have Chosen

by redscudery

Summary

It’s 1866. John Watson is a former army doctor who served in India. He left the service after a mysterious traumatic incident and has been farming in the backwoods of Canada. Sherlock Holmes is an avid botanist and possible hysteric who is a very loud thorn in his brother Mycroft’s side. Since Mycroft wishes to run for Parliament during the first Canadian election, he knows he needs his troublesome younger brother out of their hometown of Carleton before he can precipitate any scandal—and what better place for a botanist than a backwoods farm? Especially when it’s run by someone who just might be able to treat Sherlock’s hysteria?

(Aka Red writes a m/m pioneer romance novel, complete with extra!virgin!Sherlock, rugged farmer in linen shirts!John and judgmental lesbian goats.)

Notes

I mentioned this in the preface, which you don’t need to read, but this fic is almost complete. I have 12 chapters that are finished and betaed, and the four remaining chapters are plotted and partly drafted. I will, so help me, finish it.

I need to thank tiltedsylogism and jinglebell for giving me the germ of this fic, and girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on. The hugest thanks go to the world’s best beta, doctomerdington, who has been amazing throughout this very long process and continues to be so. Without her this fic would not exist and I am so, so grateful.

RE: the tags: because of spoilers, I update the tags as I post chapters. Overall, I think that the
main triggers in this fic are probably going to be Sherlock being really, grossly naive about his sexuality and the panic attacks related to John's past trauma, but I'm going to tag for everything I can think of. If you see something you want tagged, let me know. I promise a very, very happy Johnlock ending.
John Watson has made a life for himself in the backwoods of Canada. He’s alone, and it’s a hard life, but it’s his life, and it’s quiet. Then, in the middle of a blizzard, he receives an imperious letter asking him to take in a young botanist by the name of Sherlock Holmes. John refuses, initially, but dark circumstances force him to change his mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Watson! Jakes is down!"

"Here! They're coming out here!"

"Form ranks!"

"Watson! Hurry!"

"To your left!"

"John!"

John Watson sat up. The brilliant blue sky and hot, fragrant air of Agra faded to the diffuse, chill light of a Canadian April, but Mary’s face, half-obscured as it had been then, still floated before his eyes.

He scrubbed his face with his hands and stared blankly, head pounding. He was half a world away, but even with the whiskey, dreams haunted him and made the long winter nights a thing to be feared.

Thirty years old, he thought to himself. He would surely live another thirty years. If he spent nearly every night like this, the years would be long ones.

Harry’s plaintive call broke into his reverie, and he shoved the thick wool blankets aside and got out of bed. The air in the small cabin was icy, and outside the wind whistled forbiddingly. He shrugged into his heavy coat and poked up the fire before shoving the door open. Another blizzard, dammit—he leaned into it and pushed. He'd have to shovel the front later, but for now he needed to get to Harry before she started destroying things.

Wading through the fresh snow, he crossed the short distance to the barn. Harry's cries were more frantic now, and Clara had begun to add her voice. Pretty soon the geese would start up, and then he’d be deafened.

"I'm here, I'm here," he called, pushing the door open. The barn was warmer than the house—a little riper, to be sure, with the accumulated scent of a dozen animals, but warm. He shrugged off his coat and hung it on its nail, then picked up the hay fork and started to fill the mangers, Harry's and Clara's first, because he could see that Harry had gnawed another notch out of the bars while she was waiting to be fed. At least if she escaped she couldn't lay waste to his kitchen garden or his
clothesline this time—there was still at least two feet of snow on the ground.

"Get goats, they said," he muttered, pulling Harry's silky brown ear. "More milk for less feed, they said. Trouble, they didn't say."

Harry allowed the caress, then nudged Clara towards the full manger. They were both soon eating, absorbed in their food. The geese, Philemon and Pierrette, honked companionably at him until he tipped corn into their trough, then turned their attention to pushing the chickens away. John scattered more corn on the side to defuse a fight, then hopped over the bar to check for eggs. Only a couple now; feed was getting meagre this late in the winter.

John turned his attention to his horse, Arthur, and the oxen, Jack and Hamish. At least they didn't cause trouble, he thought grumpily as he fed and watered them. Isadora, the Shorthorn cow, was more of a mix; John never knew whether she was going to kick him or lick him at milking time. Today it was lick, though she was dry at the moment, and John rewarded her with the first turnips from the bucket.

"Old bag. Bet you'll feel better when that calf has come," he said, eyeing her enormous belly; she was due any second. Isadora chewed her turnips and did not answer. He'd often wondered, when he was a child, why his father talked to the animals, but now he knew—they were better than people (or, if they weren't, at least you didn't know what they were saying). Also, he didn't have much choice; if he wanted to talk to another person, his nearest neighbours were four miles out.

It had been his choice. He'd never wanted to see another person again, after Agra, and seven years of self-imposed exile hadn't changed his mind. The goats and the geese were usually enough for him, though they were poor company in the house and their conversation did leave a little to be desired.

Still, visits with his neighbours were sometimes unavoidable, given the barter system that had evolved between them. It began as a matter of necessity: neither he nor Greg Lestrade had wives, and Mrs. Hudson and the widow Donovan shared a fairly unreliable hired man. John and Lestrade cut wood and helped harvest the women's crops, and in return, Mrs. Hudson made their clothes and the widow Donovan provided them with butter, cheese, and preserves. It wasn't that John disliked any of them, exactly, but he rarely felt inclined to seek out their company outside of their fairly regular business transactions.

John shoveled out the stalls quickly, starting to feel his own stomach growl, then donned his coat and went to the pond for water. One day, he would have a pump in the barn, he thought, as the icy water soaked into his gloves.

By the time he had carried enough water for the smaller animals and led the larger ones out to drink, he was shivering. He carried a bucket into the house for himself and filled the kettle. At least the fire was warm. He set the spider down by the fire to heat. He had one egg, and there was enough salt pork to grease the pan, at least.

His day stretched before him. There would be no woodcutting, and so unless Isadora calved, there were only his meals to look after. He could look over his planting forecast for the spring, but his lack of ready money made him shy away from it; it had been a poor harvest last year and he'd had to eat some of his seed potatoes and grain.

He could write, he supposed. His commanding officer had suggested it when he'd left the force, but John felt stifled by the cyclical mundanity of his life. What was there to write about? Since coming to Canada, he ploughed and planted in the spring, cleared in the summer, harvested in the fall, and cut wood in the winter—when it wasn't blizzarding, that is—and when it was, he sat inside. He knew his journals, such as they were, were useful for future reference, but sometimes he missed practicing
medicine, for both the challenge and the money.

And yet he would never go back, not beyond occasionally helping Stamford, the local doctor—that was a line he could not cross. So he farmed, and he spent his evenings with a bottle of whiskey and the fire, hoping he would sleep without dreams. It was a life, though a hard and uncertain one.

He fried his scrap of salt pork and then put in the one egg and a hunk of his own hard bread into the grease. Tea and breakfast, such as it was, would make him feel better, he supposed, though it would do nothing fatten his purse.

Washing the dishes not thirty minutes later, he was surprised to hear a knock at the door. He swung it open to reveal Lestrade's boy, Dimmock, shivering in the wind and cold.

"Letter, Dr. Watson."

"Dimmock! Come in right away, lad! Is your horse in?" Dimmock shook his head, numb; John sent him inside.

Dimmock was huddled by the fire when John came back in; John shook the snow out of his boots and gave the boy a blanket and some warmed-over tea.

"A letter?" he asked, when Dimmock's teeth finally stopped chattering. "Why in heaven's name would you come out today? I'm surprised Lestrade allowed you to come."

"He didn't really want to, Dr. Watson. But the man insisted, and he paid so much that Lestrade said we were honour-bound to deliver it on time, as long as I promised to follow the line all the way. It wasn't so bad, you know, on our side, but your line road was real snowy."

"Well, you'll have to stay here until it stops blowing, anyhow. Get that tea inside you while I read it, and then we'll have a game of checkers."

The letter was heavy, written on the kind of paper John had only seen once or twice in his life. It unfolded with a rich crackle.

River House, Carleton

April 2, 1866

Dear Dr. Watson,

I hope you will forgive my presumption in writing to you without an introduction.

You have been highly recommended to me for assistance in a delicate matter. My brother, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, desires to write a monograph on the medicinal plants of Ontario. Wishing to encourage him in his scientific pursuits, I am in search of a place for him to board whilst he does his research. However, since he also suffers from an excess of humours which render him morbid and snappish, not to mention deeply uncivil, I wish him to be in the care of a medical man.

I am offering ten Canadian dollars per month, for the months of May-August, with a bonus of $50 should he not only stay the full growing season, but also accept whatever treatment you, in your medical opinion, deem necessary. I will arrange for him to come to you.

If you accept my proposal, no response is necessary. I will deposit the money at the Dominion Bank in Bonne Chere on April 20th, and you may expect my brother as soon as the snow melts.
John folded the letter quickly. Just the heavy, confident stroke of the writing made him angry, and the contents themselves were beyond the pale. No reply needed, indeed. He went to the kitchen bureau for paper.

Scotch Bush Farm
Bonne Chere
April 4, 1866

Mr. Holmes,

I am afraid I no longer practice medicine. In addition, I do not accept boarders.

Sincerely,

John Watson

He sanded it, sealed it with his seal and tucked it into Dimmock's drying coat.

"You'll take this back for me, yeah?" he said, and reached for the checkerboard.

Isadora didn't calve that day, nor the next, nor the next. It was a week later, on one of those warm April days when it's easy to believe that spring is really coming, that she finally did: beautiful twin heifers, quickly and in the middle of the day. This unlooked-for bonus made John feel that perhaps this would be the year he would finally have enough money to eat all winter, and perhaps even hire a man to clear more land. He raised two fingers towards Mycroft Holmes—undoubtedly an overfed city man who felt he could do what he liked in the world.

That night he recorded the calves’ names in his journal: Alice and Louise. He'd go to Bonne Chere tomorrow, if the crust was good for sleighing; he needed tea, sugar, thread, ink and flour. It would deplete his purse a good bit for now, but the sale of the extra calf would fill it up again, and he'd been living on a lean supply of food for too long.

The next day was fine as well, and John was on the road early. He stopped at Lestrade's, who needed tea and paper, then went to Mrs. Hudson's and the Widow Donovan's; they had no requests but all were quite happy to see him—including Higgins the billy goat, Harry's nemesis. So effusive were their welcomes, particularly Mrs. Hudson's, that he barely escaped being fed scones and kept late. At the bridge, he passed by Stamford's, but Stamford was out on a call. John watered the horse and continued.

The river was frozen solid, and so he was able to cut five miles from his journey. He was still glad to
see Bonne Chere appear on the horizon, and Arthur trotted into the livery stable gladly. John left him there, happily eating a warm mash, and walked down to Angelo's grocery, in good humour and hungry himself.

"John!" Angelo shouted the moment he came in. "You are not dead! Come and have some stew, my friend, and I have a whiskey you will adore!"

"Righto, Angelo," John said, taking his coat off. "I'm famished."

"Excuse me," said a woman's voice, John turned and saw a tall, statuesque woman, beautifully dressed.

"Hello," he said, licking his lips. She was not someone he knew, and all for the best, he supposed.

"Of course!" Angelo exclaimed, "So sorry, Miss, I was not thinking of the right thing. John, this lady would like to speak with you; then you come back for food and drink, yes?"

"If the lady insists," John said. She was the most beautiful woman he'd seen in a long time.

They walked back towards the hotel, and, without a word to Sam at the front desk, the woman led him up the stairs to a front-facing sitting room.

"What's this, then?" John asked awkwardly at the door, but she did not answer. Instead, she opened the door without knocking and led John in.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Watson," came an unfamiliar voice.

John moved through the doorway to see a tall, slim man--not overfed, damn it all--in an impeccable suit leaning against the wall as though he had every right to be there. If this wasn't Mycroft Holmes, John was a Dutchman.

"I am Mycroft Holmes."

"And why are you in Bonne Chere? I sent you a refusal." John raised his chin.

"I am here--at some great inconvenience to myself--because I do require your assistance."

"My refusal stands."

"It's a great shame," said Mycroft Holmes, sighing, "My brother is, shall we say, somewhat of a burden."

"Well, find someone else to bear it."

"You are uniquely qualified."

"I'm really not. And why have you come so far? Surely there are city doctors that would do a better job." Mycroft's eyebrows rose at the word 'city'.

"Carleton is barely a city, but, yes. And Sherlock knows all the local doctors on sight; he won't stand to be examined by them. But he lives for science, and since I know you have several unusual botanical specimens in this area, I thought perhaps he might be convinced to travel."

"I know next to nothing about botany."

"But you do about medicine, and no doubt you have numerous contacts amongst the local Ojibway
tribe who are familiar with the plants. In any case, Sherlock is rather solitary."

"I've no room."

"The loft is good enough, and I will provide his bedding and a small allowance of food."

"The lo..... No. I don't want to, and that's reason enough. Good day." John nodded to the young woman and turned on his heel.

"I regret, Dr. Watson, that I do want you to, above all things. It would be a shame if I had to persuade you."

John wheeled back towards Holmes.

"Persuade me?"

"Regretfully, yes. I hold a number of your debts, now, and I would hate to demand payment immediately."

"You utter bastard!" John thought of the few coins that he had drawn from the worn leather bag that served him as purse and bank both. Mycroft Holmes' shoes cost more than his home, he'd wager.

"Needs must."

John examined his face. There was no breath of fear, no bluff; this was a man who would stop at nothing.

"This is against the law," he tried.

"You will find, Dr. Watson, that the sheriff is willing to oblige me as well."

"Of course."

"It really is not such an onerous task for a man like you, Dr. Watson."

"You don't know me."

"I know enough."

"I doubt that very much."

"Do you have any questions about my brother?"

"I haven't agreed to take him."

"Ah, bravery. It is the kindest term for foolishness I know."

"If he comes to harm, I won't be responsible. I don't have time to nursemaid anyone but my livestock and my land."

"Sherlock is very resourceful, when he chooses to be. If he does not choose to be, you have my full permission to leave him to suffer the consequences of his actions."

"I will."

"Here is an advance of $10, to stock your larder."
John took it, the weight of it in his hand more damning than any prison sentence. He couldn't afford to tell this man to go fuck himself, but he had rarely wanted to do anything more.

"Furthermore," Holmes added, "His excess of humours may be hysteria, though it will be up to you to diagnose it. If you treat him for hysteria--I believe the accepted method is manual stimulation to paroxysm, but of course you are the expert--and it is effective, I will pay off your land."

"That won't be necessary." John said shortly. "I am accepting money for his board because I must, but no more. I will neither treat him against his will, nor will I require him to remain. He may come and go as he pleases, for medical reasons as well as moral ones. You can stuff your other offer up your arse."

“I insist that you see to...that aspect of his health. Otherwise, I will—regrettably—be obliged to take action.”

“Fine. I’ll examine him. But you must abide by my decision.”

"Very well, Doctor Watson. I believe you are indeed the man for the job."

"Are we through?"

"Unless you wish to discuss additional payment for regular written updates."

"I do not."

"Then we are finished," Mycroft Holmes said, in a pleasant tone, and held out his hand. The corner of his mouth twitched, and John knew that Holmes expected a refusal.

Well, better give the gentleman what he wanted. He nodded curtly and left.

It took two whiskies and half a bowl of Angelo’s delicious stew before he felt even a little himself again. Angelo, too, had been unusually silent. Suspiciously silent, even.

"What would have happened if I hadn't gone to speak with him?" John asked. Angelo’s eyes cut down.

"Angelo."

"No credit, and an immediate demand on your note. He bought it from me for more than the full price, in hard cash. John, you must excuse me."

"Difficult to refuse," John said. In the colonies, even storekeepers were often cash poor. "No hard feelings."

"More whiskey?"

"Best not, thanks." He did want to buy a bottle, but even though Mycroft Holmes' money sat heavy in his pocket, he refused. The whiskey had become too much of a mainstay, perhaps, in the cold winter, and now, with an uninvited guest coming, he could not afford to have his judgement clouded. Instead, he selected the items from his list: flour, sugar, tea and side of bacon. On reflection, he added a barrel of dried apples, since his were long finished. Then, well provisioned but in a terrible temper, he set out.

The road home was not so pleasurable as the road out had been. The sun was setting, lighting up the
snow before him and making it difficult to see, and the indignity he had suffered at Mycroft Holmes' hands irritated him. So he would have a guest, all summer, and a sick city-dweller at that. He could not imagine how a Holmes brother would look, or act; he could imagine how it would infringe on his privacy and his work.

He was in foul mood by the time he passed, Mrs. Hudson's. Higgins gave his usual loud welcome, both olfactory and auditory, but John didn't stop to greet him. He pressed on to Lestrade's. The moment he pulled up, the door swung open before he could knock.

"John!" Lestrade opened the door as soon as he pulled into the yard. "How late you are! I'd ask you to stop for a bite, but you'll be wanting to get home to the animals. If I'd known you'd be so late I'd have sent Dimmock over to do your animals."

"Thanks, Greg." John handed him the parcels and his change. "I've had a rum thing happen, though. Ever heard of a Mycroft Holmes?"

Lestrade's lips thinned.

"From Carleton?"

"Yes. What do you know?"

"Rich." Lestrade was curt and did not look at John. "Family money is from England; parents moved out when their heir disgraced the family. Middle brother has political ambitions. Younger brother is a scientist and the best of the bunch, although he's a temperamental devil."

"That letter was from the one with political ambitions."

Lestrade blanched. "Mycroft?"

"Slim arsehole, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth?"

"Right."

"He's decided that he's shipping his younger brother to me as a sort of glorified exploration expedition--and he got hold of all my credit notes to oblige me to board him."

"Sounds like him. Well, be prepared for considerable oversight and having your cabin turned upside down. Although," Lestrade looked at John assessingly, "you might enjoy the company."

"Fat chance of that," John said. "I can barely stand you."

They both laughed at that, and John left Lestrade's clearing feeling a little lighter.

The sun dropped out of the sky as he left Lestrade's, and he struggled to keep Arthur on the road. Thankfully it hadn't snowed, but by the time he got home he was chilled. The house was icy, too; he stoked up the fire and went to the warm barn. Harry was yelling her head off, of course, but food, water, and a chuck on her chin calmed her down, and him, too, really. Maybe Harry would scare Sherlock off. Maybe, at the very least, she'd eat his undoubtedly extravagant clothes.

The house had warmed, though not much, and he drew the latch and closed the curtain over the entry. Setting a huge kettle of water to boil, he unpacked his provisions and sat down with a sigh. He'd wash, he'd eat, and he'd make a plan.

Or maybe he'd just wash and eat, he thought, as he felt the weariness sink into his bones. He hadn't
felt this type of fatigue in a long time: the fatigue of being manipulated and directed. At least that was a novelty.

That night, without the whiskey, he dreamt of the days before Agra. Mary smiling at him through her fan, Commander Morstan urging them to dance, that first kiss the same night, almost shocking. Then, Captain Sholto was asking him, in Mycroft Holmes' voice, to take the rear and protect the men. He couldn't. He couldn't protect the men. He couldn't protect himself, he thought, as the rebels poured down upon them and Mary's dead face rose dancing in front of his eyes. He woke with tears on his face this time, his chest heaving. He got out of bed as soon as he could, but several minutes had elapsed before he was able to do anything but hold his body together.

Damn these dreams, he thought, and reached for the whiskey bottle.

The next morning, his head was pounding, and he felt a wave of shame and anger. He could not show this weakness to anyone else, least of all to the brother of the man who held his livelihood in the balance. He would suffocate and die if he had to leave the woods and become a doctor in a small Canadian town--were he even able to buy a practice. He had to discharge this distasteful treatment—to give up one summer to preserve his home.

Resolutely, he rose. It was snowing again, and the wind swept his home quarter. He would do the barn work and then, he thought, he would give his mind over to thinking about his guest and possibilities for treatment. Hysteria. Manual stimulation. John tried to remember exactly what it was that he was forgetting. He'd seen the papers, when they came out, but he knew there were some cases in which it was contraindicated. But which? After his breakfast, he turned to his few books, but even they were outdated, and he found no answers.

Still, he thought, it was not a risky procedure, and if it did not work there would only be perhaps some small depletion in energy for the patient, easily remedied with fresh air and perhaps a balsam tonic.

He would, he thought, have to find some sort of slippery medium. Tallow, perhaps, though that was none too easy to come by. Gun oil? Seemed a shame to waste it. Perhaps he could concoct something; Mezenee might be able to help him too, he supposed.

That decided, he set it aside with a firm mental shake of his head, and set to assessing his home. It was at least another two weeks until any outdoor work could be done, and perhaps he could make some small repairs to the interior to make it more comfortable in that time.

The cabin was twenty feet by fifteen, with the long end, and thus the entrance, facing northeast. The fireplace was to the right upon entering, a large, open stone hearth with a kettle hook and a grate. His kitchen bench was a small "L" that began on the far side of the fireplace wall and ran to the middle of the facing wall; his canisters of tea and sugar were kept there, as was the basin, and his barrels of salt pork and flour were underneath. His few dishes and a bronze clock—his only decorative item, a relic of his late grandmother Watson—were on a shelf by the window. From the floor under the shelf, a ladder reached up to the loft, where John stored the tools that were not in use and where now he would store his unwelcome guest. He must see to a bed, he supposed.

His own bed was in the corner under the ladder, a low, homemade thing, roughly made up with spruce branches and wool blankets. A chest in the middle of the far wall held his clothing and sewing implements. The corner to the left of the door was reserved tools and a wide log carved into a chair that he used for working, the barn being big enough only for the animals. The only other piece of furniture in the house was the hard wooden settle, immediately to the right of the door, and the small square table in front of it. There were only two tiny windows, glass being both dear and scarce. One sat above his kitchen bench, while the other opposed the fireplace.
That was all there was, but there had been much less when he had arrived. He shuddered as he remembered his first winter in the shanty—eight feet square, no windows, and a decomposing roof. He’d been cold for nine months, and he’d stepped on goat turds every day of it, as he’d had no barn.

Since then, he had managed to clear 15 more acres and build. Now he had a house, a barn, the old shanty, a cold cellar, and 25 acres cleared of one hundred and fifty was no small thing, and he looked back on his hard work with a sudden flash of pride.

He would not make a bed, he decided; he would not do a single thing to make his home something it was not. Let Holmes choose between spruce branches in the loft or the narrow settle, since it too was long enough for a man, though narrow, and it was closer to the fire. He would bear this intrusion, but he would do no more. He had three weeks at least before Holmes arrived, and he would make the most of his solitude until then.

That decided, he took his rifle and snowshoes and headed to the northwest woods. Game would be mostly thin and stringy, but he was tired of salt pork, and he had a mind to look at the bear caves at the riverbend. The male bears would be coming out of their hibernation, thin and cranky and dangerous, and somehow that suited his mood.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected title for this chapter was “Broke Farmer With Goats.”

I also have a playlist for this fic (mostly Canadian music, but not always). Each chapter has a theme song and there will be an Easter egg of sorts in the chapter, usually an adaptation of the lyrics. This chapter’s theme song is “Save This House” by Spirit of the West, and obviously it’s the chapter title.

The fictional town of Bonne Chère, Ontario, is situated about where Bancroft, Ontario is today. It was, in 1866, a farming community along the Bonne Chère River, and it still is today. There is not, to my knowledge, a Scotch Bush farm, but come on, that's pretty funny.

It is not a coincidence at all that in 1866, as Canada was preparing for its first federal election, Bancroft was not in any riding (that’s Canuckian for “electoral district”) at all. Telling you now for reasons.

John is 30 here, which makes Sherlock 26 and Mycroft 33. I wanted them to be relatively young because it worked better for John as a farmer, but also because of the plausibility of Sherlock being a virgin still. An added bonus is that we get to see Mycroft as younger and more ambitious.

In case you get any idea that I am exaggerating even slightly about goats eating everything and being a pain in the ass, I promise I am not. I grew up on a farm and I can personally guarantee that goats are like that. Thankfully they’re also affectionate, adorable, and intelligent, and so it balances out. Mostly.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos. Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Unfortunately Interesting

Chapter Summary

“See here. The rules are simple and you will listen to them. The first: do not get yourself killed or seriously injured. The second: do not make more work for me. I've got enough to do. Break these," John fixed Sherlock with the glare that had made many subalterns wish they were somewhere else, "and I ship you back to where you will have many more rules than this."

"Nobody ships me anywhere," Sherlock grumbled, but a look flashed across his face that made John feel more reassured than anything he'd seen so far.

Or: Sherlock arrives at Scotch Bush and simultaneously charms and horrifies John with his rudeness and vivacity.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on. Doctornerdington, my main beta, has done her best to limit my lack of clarity and deserves all the thank-yous. All remaining idiocies are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The snow melted quickly in the two weeks that followed, and, outside a brief visit from his Ojibwa friend Mezenee, who brought him a pot of beaver grease. John was too busy to look out for anything but his land and his stock.

After all, he had resolved not to think about the impending arrival of his would-be patient. The fence adjoining the barn had sustained a greater than usual amount of damage in the last big storm, and Harry, followed by Clara, had been roaming at will, which was dangerous not only for the hardy pea shoots and onion sets in the kitchen garden, but also for John's clothes, both in and out of the house.

One day, they had actually come up behind him while he was eating and started chewing the clothes on his back. After that, he'd cut them collars from one of Hamish' old harnesses and attached them with a stout chain to the east side of the barn just so he could plough his home quarter in peace.

There, however, he ran into greater trouble; the ground was wet still, and his plough stuck fast. Encourage the oxen as he might, swear at the mud as he did, nothing would move it--he would have to dig it out, and quickly, if he wanted to sow his wheat in time. It was the only cash crop he grew, and he needed a large yield if he hoped to free himself from the clutches of Mycroft Holmes as quickly as possible.

He had very nearly dug down to the clay holding the plough fast when Harry and Clara began to bleat. When Arthur began to whinny, and even patient Hamish looked up, he knew he had a visitor. Throwing his shovel down, he looked up to see Mike Stamford, the doctor from the bridge, coming
down Scotch Bush road on his large, placid horse, Fiona.

Well, it could have been worse, he supposed. Mike was a garrulous man but knew, generally, when to hold his tongue, and that was more than John could say for most people. And though he was a heavy man, he was strong, and he could help John with the damn plough, being significantly more intelligent than Hamish the ox.

"Mike," he shouted, when Stamford had tied his horse at the barn and greeted the goats. "Come and help!"

Stamford swung off his horse.

"I see you've been keeping tidy," he said, a grin stretching out his broad, cherubic face as he eyed John's mud-streaked chest.

"You know me. Always a dandy. Now take off your spotless garments” –Mike himself was mud-spattered from his journey—“and help me move this plough; I hit clay, damn it. Then you'll stay for tea, or whiskey if you will, and tell me what you need?"

"I'll help you sure enough, but can't stay. I have a pressing appointment over in North River. I just came by to deliver a parcel."

"A parcel? Tell me it's food."

"Nah, it's a living parcel. I left it sulking on the last ridge, but it should be along soon; it appears to be mortally afraid of bears—at least, it went white as a sheet when I mentioned the high bear population up at the caves.”

John shook his head. It? Sulking? Afraid of bears?

Oh.

"This parcel doesn't happen to be named Sherlock Holmes, does it?"

Mike laughed.

"It does indeed, and I have to say, friend, better you than me. He's got two speeds—surly and silent, or never shuts up—and he’s deuced odd besides. Still, you won't be bored, and that's something."

"I'm not bored," John said reflexively, though the ghost of the whiskey bottle did flit across his mind. He wasn't bored.

"Be that as it may. Oh, here he is. Moving pretty quick for someone in a sulk. Must have seen a bear." Stamford pointed southeast, and John saw a tall shape in the distance. It was clinging crazily to a rangy chestnut mare with the worst trot he'd ever seen. No bears in sight, either. Maybe he'd seen a moose—those, at least, were worth running from.

"Mike, can he...Holmes, I mean...ride? Is it just the horse?"

Stamford snorted.

"That's what he'd have you believe, but he doesn't appear to like horses much more than he likes bears. I guess in Carleton he takes carriages or walks."

John cursed. Just as awful as he thought. An odd, surly-or-talkative city boy. He wished Mycroft Holmes to the bottom of the Saint Lawrence River.
And then Sherlock Holmes got closer and John mentally raised up Mycroft a couple of hundred feet.

"This isn't the wrong place, is it?" Holmes said sharply, scrambling off his horse and throwing the reins down. Bad habit in the backwoods, that, John thought, but the rest of his internal tirade was cut short as he caught sight of Holmes's face. In the midday sun, it was arresting, all angles and disdain, looking down from a great height. His skin was the light cream of someone who rarely went outdoors, much less worked outdoors. Nevertheless, Holmes gave an impression of great vigour and elasticity, and John was—unexpectedly—intrigued.

"Are you quite through?" said the vision.

Choleric, John thought; perhaps Holmes did need some sort of treatment to relieve his humours.

"If you are Sherlock Holmes I am." John said gruffly, conscious of a smirk on Mike's face that he did not quite like, "This is the place your brother meant to send you. Whether it's the right place is up to you."

Holmes levelled a gaze at him that made John feel no less agitated.

"Africa or India?" Holmes asked, seemingly out of the blue.

"India," John said, quite taken aback; he glanced at Stamford for some evidence of surprise but Stamford's face remained placid.

"I suppose that is your residence?" Sherlock asked, indicating the cabin with a dismissive flutter of his hand.

"It is." John stood straighter, waiting for some kind of comment, but Holmes just tossed his head and disappeared into the cabin, leaving his horse where it stood.

"Yeah," Stamford said, breaking the silence. "He's like that, I've learned."

"Awful," John replied, but he wasn't so sure he meant it. The man's manners were off-putting, but since it absolved him of any pretense at social niceties, it was something a relief, all told.

John didn't see Holmes again until late afternoon, when the plow was rescued and Stamford had refused a drink and taken his leave. John thought he heard him say something about "impeding the narrative" as he rode out of the clearing, but it could have just been the wind.

Scraping the mud from his boots, John went into the cabin. He wasn't quite sure what he was expecting, but Sherlock Holmes kneeling on his hearth and peering into the hearth was not it. Holmes was in his shirtsleeves, his deerstalker and unwieldy though doubtless expensive coat carelessly scattered over the floor.

"Burn mostly birch wood?" came his muffled voice.

"Mostly," John said.

"Odd that you don’t have a stove. Most settlers with a house would do. More efficient."

"I have more time to cut wood than I have money. Now, do you mind very much if I start the fire? Lake's still too cold to wash in, and I'm covered in mud."

"Just a moment," came the voice again.
John looked longingly at his bullwhip, curled up on the wall by the door.

"No fire, no supper," he tried.

"Eh, supper." Sherlock's shoulders made what could only be a dismissive gesture from the inside of the hearth.

"I'm hungry, so I'm going to cook. You're supposed to be under my care, so you'll be served food whether you eat it or no."

"My brother," Sherlock said, sitting back on his heels with a sigh, "is the most tiresome person in this world."

"Not sure about that," John muttered, as he went for the kindling.

Predictably, Holmes didn't offer to help. He sat...no, lounged on the settle--John had not been sure that was possible--and watched silently, his eyes tracking John's every movement, his long fingers twitching as John boiled fiddleheads and fried bacon and potatoes.

They ate in near-silence, too. Sherlock tasted everything, holding the fiddleheads up to the light with intense interest. Appetite good enough, John thought. In fact, as he scrutinized Sherlock's tall frame, spare but healthy, he wondered what exactly, besides the rudeness, had caused Mycroft Holmes to send his brother away. Lestrade had said "political ambitions"…

"He's running for Parliament," Holmes said, his mouth full of potatoes and tea.

"What now?" John asked. He shook his head as if to clear it. A psychic derangement, perhaps?

"I'm perfectly sane—more so than you, I suspect. I observe, that is all. I see your past in your bearing and movement, and your present in your gestures."

"You can't possibly," John said.

"I can," Holmes's eyes flashed in the fading light. "You stand with military bearing and your accent isn't Canadian, so service, but British service. You've got that scar on your shoulder, so wounded in action, and while there are many places to be wounded in action right now, only two types of regiments wear boots like the ones you have, and those are stationed in Afghanistan and India. And I am saner than you--that scar is not enough of an injury to prevent you from doing farm work, so clearly there's mental trauma."

John flinched.

"Yes. A betrayal, perhaps? As for just now, you looked at me while I was eating—assessing my food intake, obviously—but you're clever enough to see that I'm not visibly ill. You're wondering what, then, would motivate such a lazy slug as Mycroft to travel so far from a pastry shop he deems appropriate, although you can't have known about his pastry addiction so I suppose that's of no matter. Clearly he's getting me out of the way, but just as clearly, he's not the type of man to have a socially damaging vice—worse luck—so there must be something wrong with me. I'm eating well, though you think I'm odd, and it's a puzzle that you can't quite piece out," Holmes paused. "So I gave you the answer."

"Mr. Holmes," John stared at him open-mouthed for a moment, "That was...remarkable."
"Sherlock, please," he said, and grinned. "Remarkable! That's not usually what people say."

"And what do they usually say?" John asked.

"Piss off."

John couldn't help but snort, and suddenly they were both laughing companionably.

"So you're a pain in your brother's arse, then, and he's offloaded you on me on the pretext you need medical treatment?"

"Medical treatment? Is that why he chose you? Well," Holmes said, hesitating, "That, and the fact that this area isn't in any electoral district, so the political repercussions of my presence are minimized."


"Unbelievable. So what did you tell him?"

"That I'd treat you if you wanted to be treated, or if you showed serious symptoms, but otherwise you were welcome to do just about what you liked."

"Did he offer you exorbitant amounts of money for written updates?"

"He did."

"Did you refuse?"

"I did."

"Pity. We could have split the fee. Think it through next time." His mouth quirked and John had to laugh again.

"I do have some dignity, you know."

Sherlock looked around the small cabin.

"But only one room."

"Two! Well, one-and-a-half. The loft," John said, pointing up, "counts as part of a room."

"And that's where I sleep?" Sherlock asked.

"The loft or settle, your choice."

"I suppose your bedding is unspeakable either way?"

"I have exactly two geese and I am saving them for eggs and food, so there are no feather beds here, no. Spruce branches are what I'm using now, and it'll be hay once I have hay—and if I can spare it. The blankets are good wool."

"Geese?" Sherlock was immediately diverted from the question of bedding. "I read a very interesting article on bird intelligence recently. Do you mind if I perform an experiment or two on yours?"

"First my life story and now geese? I thought you were a botanist."
"My brother, as usual, has minimized my scientific interests, which are diverse," said Sherlock with disgust. "He wishes I would write a monograph on medicinal plants, which, I tell you frankly, is almost enough to keep me from doing so. However, I am fully convinced that such a monograph would be profoundly useful, and so I persevere, despite constant familial setbacks."

John had to laugh at Sherlock's open admission of contrariness.

"I'm starting to see why he wanted you out of the way. Animal experiments can be very messy."

"He didn't mention that, did he? Honestly." John was about to protest, but Sherlock continued, apparently bent on explaining himself. "Quite by chance, I had gotten hold of what I believed to be a hybrid between a domesticated dog and a coyote, a hybrid I wished to examine for anatomical irregularities before it decayed further."

"Further?" John asked, despite himself, "How far along was it?"

"Three to four days at most. The brain was liquefied, which was not ideal, but a competent analysis would still have brought important information to light."

"And Mycroft prevented this?"

"He ordered me out of the second drawing room, which is really the limit. And I planned it well, too--kitchen unhygienic, stables would 'scare the horses, Sherlock'," Sherlock said, in an uncanny imitation of Mycroft's rather flat voice. "And of course the first drawing room was out of the question; Mother's harpsichord is there. Not that she can play, mind you, but she does love that instrument."

"So the second drawing room was the best choice."

"It wasn't really--no pump, you understand--but the ventilation was adequate. If he had let me add a laboratory space to the house, there would have been no issue at all."

"Look," John said, suddenly alarmed, "There will be no experimenting in this house."

"No, of course not. You've no appropriate table space. But can I build one down by that little lake there?"

"Be my guest," John said. "And, as for the geese, you may not kill or maim them."

"Oh, I won't."

"Well then," John hesitated. "Just be careful."
"Don't worry, the geese will be whole and safe when I'm finished." Sherlock said, with confidence.

John choked on his tea.

"Sherlock," he said, when he had gotten his breath back, "have you ever... left the city?"

"Once, when I was seven," Sherlock said, suddenly dreamy. "Mycroft took me to our nurse's farm. I spent the whole day exploring and didn't want to leave. But he made me. Stupid Mycroft."

"Were there any geese there?"

"No. More's the pity."

"I see." John subsided for a moment, torn between laughter and horror. "There are two rules here,
Sherlock Holmes."

"Rules!" Sherlock snorted. "You have got to be joking."

"I'm really not," John said, standing up.

"The only reason I let Mycroft send me here was to get away from his constant surveillance and reprimands. 'Don't insult the ambassador, Sherlock!'" Sherlock's voice went up several octaves in imitation, "'You can't go down to the poorhouse at night, Sherlock!' 'No dead dogs in the drawing room, Sherlock!' Ugh. Hidebound."

"Your coyote hybrid, I suppose... no. See here. The rules are simple and you will listen to them. The first: do not get killed or seriously injured. The second: do not make more work for me. I've got enough to do. Break these," John fixed Sherlock with the glare that had made many subalterns wish they were somewhere else, "and I ship you back to where you will have many more rules than this."

"Nobody ships me anywhere," Sherlock grumbled, but a look flashed across his face that made John feel more reassured than anything he'd seen so far.

“So will you be missed, in Carleton?”

An odd look crossed Sherlock’s face. Too late, John remembered the “piss off,” and tried to catch his mistake.

“No young ladies, then?”

“No. The fairer sex is not something that excites my interest.”

“Oh.” John didn’t quite know how to parse that particular sentence. “So you’re a bachelor, like me.”

“Quite,” Sherlock said, his expression unreadable. John flexed his hand, uncomfortable. He leaped up.

"I have barn work to do, now. Will you help me, or will you wash up?"

Sherlock opened his mouth but John did not stay to hear the words, striding out into the dying light. The door banged.

Well.

When John came back from the barn the few dishes were done, and Sherlock was on the settle writing in a leatherbound notebook. Sheaves of paper lay on the floor beside him. John thought he saw a picture of a fiddlehead on one of the pages.

John did not disturb him, reaching behind the settle only to hang up his coat. He dipped some hot water out of the kettle into the kitchen basin and washed his hands and face, then pulled up his work chair near the fire to warm himself. Sherlock glanced up at him, without a smile but with a friendly expression nonetheless. John felt, with surprise, no awkwardness. Their early conversation had been almost pleasant, despite its distinct oddness, but he felt no urgency to renew it, and Sherlock clearly wasn't inclined to talk. Instead, John settled down to stare at the fire, as he did most nights, though tonight there was no whiskey glass in his hand.
The fire, though, did not have the same novelty as the man on the settle, and John found his gaze drawn towards him more often than he might have otherwise anticipated. He was handsome, though oddly so; his features were quite pronounced. His body, like his face, was long and lean, and his hands and feet quite abnormally large. Taken singly, only his large, changeable eyes and mobile mouth were beautiful, but the overall effect was one of striking good looks. Certainly his brain was striking, though John worried about what it would mean to have a devotee of science in the house all summer. Too, he worried about what it would mean to have such an attractive person in his house all summer. Any thrill would do, he supposed, when he'd been alone as long as he had.

Well, he supposed, at least Sherlock could be silent, which gave him one up on Harry. And, he thought, laughing to himself, he'd shown no sign of wanting to chew his clothing. So that was two ahead of Harry. He imagined Harry watching their human interaction enviously.

It was only when a log dropped in the grate and made him jump that John realized he had been dreaming, half-asleep in his low work chair.

"I'll have to turn in," he said, stretching. His shoulder pained him, with all the shoveling, though he knew he would have to do more tomorrow.

"Quite so," Sherlock said. His hair was standing on end now, and he was holding three sheaves of paper in one hand.

"Would you rather sleep in the loft or here on the settle?" John asked, suddenly cross. He was tired, and he should have decided it earlier, he supposed, but he didn't feel like cajoling now.

"Sleep." Sherlock said, then waved his free hand. "Sleep is boring."

"For you, maybe," John said, "but I ploughed four acres today, and dug my heavy plough out of clay. And I have to do the same tomorrow. I need to sleep. The loft or the settle?"

"Oh, the loft, I suppose."

"Very well." John rose, then as he was about to step outside to relieve himself, was reminded that perhaps Sherlock would need to do the same. "There are no indoor conveniences here. The outhouse is twenty feet southeast of the door."

"Quite so," Sherlock said again, though John did not feel as though he had been heard, if the quite complex notation on one of the sheaves Sherlock had been making as he replied was anything to go by.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

John went to the outhouse; when he came back Sherlock was in the very same position as he had been for the last half-hour. Suddenly secure that he was nearly as alone as he had been the previous night, John stripped to his shirt and climbed into his bed. As he settled gratefully into the wool blankets, he glanced up one last time at the unfamiliar sight of someone else in his cabin: Sherlock Holmes, unwelcome and yet reluctantly interesting, bent over his papers, one curl shining in the firelight.
The rejected title for this chapter was “Hello Hot Stranger Who Is Definitely Not Hysterical.”

The theme song is “Someone New” by Hozier. Did you spot the reference to the lyrics?

I did a lot of thinking about how to include First Nations people in this story, because this is, however peripherally, a story about colonialization. Ultimately, I included a few comments about the local tribe (Ojibway), but left it alone overall. I am not sure that was the right choice, but given the way the story got away from me in terms of length (this was supposed to be a 2k one-shot) I’m leaving it that way for now.

It is my fervent headcanon that Sherlock dislikes horses. They are intelligent in a way he doesn’t care to understand. I am willing to entertain alternate headcanons (I really enjoyed the riding AU someone wrote a while back), but in this fic, he hates horses and that’s important. Also, in this fic, some horses hate him. There’s an Easter egg related to that that’s introduced in this chapter.

Sherlock is also afraid of bears, for some reason. He is not, however, afraid of moose, and frankly, if you had to run away from one non-human entity in the Canadian woods, you should run away from moose first about 90% of the time.

I love Mike Stamford SO FUCKING MUCH I cannot even.

A couple of historical, hand-wavy inconsistencies: it’s too early for fiddleheads (fresh fern shoots) when they eat them. Fiddlehead season is usually mid-May. Pretend the’re canned or something. Also, I couldn’t find any evidence for coywolf hybrids in the mid-19th century in Canada but that doesn’t mean they didn’t exist. Sherlock seems to think they do though and who am I to deny him?

I almost added a Sherlock POV here and then chickened out. Basically, Sherlock thinks John is interesting and he’ll hate it a lot less than he thought.

Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Sherlock breaks both house rules (“Don’t make more work for John” and “Don’t get injured”) as well as the third, unwritten rule (“Don’t ask about a relative stranger’s bowel movements”) in the first flush of his scientific enthusiasm. John experiences more adrenaline in Sherlock’s first week than he has in the last two years put together. And a mama moose has a very nasty surprise.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on. Doctornerdington, my main beta, has done her best to limit my lack of clarity and deserves all the thank-yous. All remaining idiocies are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John woke in the night, and realized that he had fallen relatively easily to sleep. He looked up through the cracks in the loft floor, listening to Sherlock’s occasional rustling. There were no signs of sleep derangement: Sherlock Holmes was, apparently, an alarmingly quiet sleeper despite his whirlwind personality. John fell asleep again, tired out from the day’s barrage of novelty.

He slept heavily. When he woke the next morning, it was to the completely unaccustomed sight of a long pale face and black curls hanging over his face, discomfitingly close.

"Wha...!" he exclaimed, skittering back.

"I expected you to rise earlier, Dr. Watson. Is there tea? Also, there's something making an unholy noise in the barn. Geese, I presume?"

"Among other things," John said, pulling his blanket over his lap, angry somehow. "Now if you'll excuse me."

"Yes, do get up." Sherlock said, and slithered out of John's personal space and over to the settle. His papers seemed to have multiplied overnight, and there was a handful of fresh fiddleheads on the table.

John scrubbed his hands through his hair and sighed. Maybe he should let Sherlock try and experiment on the geese. It'd be no more than he deserved.

He wriggled into his trousers, conscious of Sherlock's thoughtful eyes on him.

"I'll come to the barn this morning," Sherlock said, as soon as John's feet had touched the floor.

"Lovely. Come on, then," John said, pulling on his socks, and boots.

"No tea?" Sherlock responded, clearly horrified. John had seen that look on the faces of newly
commissioned officers being shown the regiment's latrines.

"Animals come first," was all he said, not quite suppressing a smile.

“Fine,” Sherlock said with a sigh that threatened to shake the rafters of the cabin, and laid down his pen and accompanied John to the barn. As John took down the harness, Sherlock bypassed all the other animals, and came up short before the fowl pen.

"Geese," he breathed, dropping to his knees and studying them for a long moment. "Real, live geese."

Philemon and Pierrette seemed relatively unmoved by this attention. Harry, as usual, was quite perturbed at being ignored, and Arthur, usually so calm, was making deep, horsey noises of irritation.

"Whoa, boy." John tried to settle Arthur, but he would not take his eyes off Sherlock. Was it the coat, John wondered?

Sherlock’s horse stood placidly. John reached out to her and stroked her soft cinnamon nose.

“Does she have a name?"

“Wha—who? Oh, the horse. No. Mycroft was hoping—and I have no idea why because usually he is more perspicacious than that—I would give her a name and somehow “bond” with her. I’ve been calling her Idiot Horse.”

“Oh.” John stroked her nose again. She didn’t look that idiotic. “Good girl.”

"Is there a scientific reason to speak to animals?” Sherlock asked seriously. “Do they mind you better? Do they gain flesh more quickly?"

John snorted, but paused to consider his answer nonetheless.

"No real reason. Only to keep myself sane—don't use my voice very much otherwise."

"Don't use your voice?” Sherlock’s interest seemed piqued. "Aren't you the local doctor?"

"No, that's Stamford. I don't practice."

"You don't? And yet you're a man of considerable intellectual power.” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. "So you subliterate your intelligence. Why?"

"Farming requires a great deal of brainpower. Now, will you help? The horses need watering.” John held Arthur’s lead rope out to Sherlock, but Sherlock did not take it. In fact, neither Arthur nor Sherlock appeared to wish to be any closer together than they already were; Arthur's ears were straight back and Sherlock was wearing an expression of studied nonchalance. John grinned to himself, contrasting Sherlock's fluid physical grace when on foot with his sack-of-potatoes demeanour on horseback.

“Perhaps the fowl?” Sherlock asked.

"Very well." John said, and indicated the feed basket.

Taking a handful of corn, Sherlock leaned over the pen and began to dole out grains one by one, first to Philemon and then to Pierrette. The chickens, ignored, surged around the geese, cackling. The geese themselves accepted the first few offerings, but quickly became impatient. Sherlock seemed aware of this, but continued as he had begun, until Pierrette surged up out of the pen and perched on
the bar, beating her great wings. Philemon, not to be outdone, honked as loudly as he could, and Sherlock jumped back in surprise, tripped over the lead rope, and fell into John, knocking him back onto the floor.

Disoriented at first, John was only conscious of the pain in his shoulder; he cursed. Then, Sherlock's weight crashed down upon him and John's breath was crushed from his body. When it returned, and with it consciousness of a body over his own, a radiating heat and some expensive hair oil. He pushed away.

Physical contact was dangerous; if he allowed his awareness of Sherlock to penetrate his touch-starved consciousness, he would make a fool of himself right here.

"Get off me," he growled, but Sherlock, after a brief pause to regain his breath, was already leveraging himself off. His arse lifted off John's thighs, none too soon, and he stood and extended a hand.

"Your geese," he said, with a certain aloofness in his voice, "are aggressive."

"And you're a city fool," John snapped. Sherlock barely looked as though he had fallen at all, much less spent days travelling through the woods. He was still all elegance; his clothes, though plain, were finer than anything John had ever owned, and his handsome face seemed calm. Only his ruffled hair showed that anything untoward had happened, and that was not enough to make John feel any less homely, crumpled, and old.

"This is," he said, drawing himself up, "definitely more work for me. Please go back to the house and let me finish. If you wish to help, you may fill the kettle at the spring and set it at the fire."

“I…I will,” Sherlock said, “but may I please stay?” John looked at him searchingly. “Geese,” Sherlock said, and waved his hands. Gratified by the tenor of his apology, and pleased to notice that there were goose droppings on the back of that pristine coat, John relented.

“Very well. Just… do as I say.”

Sherlock looked at John intently. John was used to being listened to when he did speak—by humans, that is; Harry was currently chewing his trouser pocket, though he’d told her off three times—and Sherlock was surprised at his own willingness to listen. He cleared his throat and turned his attention back to the geese.

“You were withholding food. They don’t like that.”

“They’re familiar with routine, then?”

“They are. Watch.” John opened the door of the pen. The geese automatically stepped back, letting the chickens surge out; then, when the way was clear, walked sedately towards the outer door.

“Interesting that the larger goose takes precedence—the male? Is it to protect the female?”

“I never noticed.”

“Do they range free all day?”

“They do. Saves food and keeps them from being bored.”
“And you’re not afraid of them being eaten?”

“They can take care of themselves.”

“How?”

“Once, I saw Philemon give a fox a bloody nose with his wing. They’re wickedly strong.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock’s mind whirred. “So would you say the likelihood of seeing that again be high? Foxes are attracted by food sources, and you have these chickens, but do the geese protect the chickens?”

“Look, I really must get these chores done. Tea?” John said, as he led Hamish past Sherlock to the water hole. The ox’s shoulder shoved Sherlock back towards the horses’ stalls. Arthur shied back towards Sherlock and gave a small whicker. Sherlock did not like its tone; it sounded rather menacing than otherwise.

“Perhaps I will,” he said, looking uneasily over his shoulder. Arthur whickered again: definitely menacing. Why did horses have to be so bloody opinionated? He looked at his own horse—or rather the horse that Mycroft had selected for him for the journey. She too was looking at him, although her gaze was one of mild amusement. Score one for Mycroft, he supposed, for giving him an idiot horse.

“Get off my foot, ye goddamn bastard!” John’s words were heated, but his tone was not. Sherlock peeked around the door to see Hamish leaning heavily on John as he drank from the pond. John’s hands were outstretched along the beast’s huge roan shoulder, slowly leveraging a ton of ox off his left boot. Each muscle in his forearm stood out, clearly defined; how much force was he exerting, Sherlock wondered, and how was it that his high-fat diet did not leave a single trace on his body? Something to be more closely examined, it was certain. He headed towards the house, his notebooks and tea.

John completed his barn work in a hurry, both curious and dubious about Sherlock’s ability to make a drinkable beverage. Harry bleated at the cursory patting she received, and even Arthur snorted.

“I have to protect my cabin, old boy,” John said, giving him a reassuring pat on the nose as he led him to water. Fresh smoke was billowing out of the chimney, so at least a fire was going. With any luck it would be confined to the stove.

When John came in, milk pails in hand, Sherlock was sitting in front of the pile of papers. Two cups, one full and one empty, sat beside him.

“That tea in your canister is vile,” Sherlock said, “but I didn’t add anything to it, so I suppose you should thank me.”

“Thank you, I suppose,” John said, reaching for the full cup.

“No! That’s mine.”

“I only have two cups. Therefore, the full one is mine, and you can refill the other one.”

“Oh.” Sherlock looked up, “I could. If there were more tea.”
“You drank the whole pot.”

“Tea stimulates the faculties, John, and while my faculties barely need stimulating, the quantity of new information I expect to gather today prompted me to draw upon it.”

John stopped in the midst of straining the milk and stared.

“And what is it that you plan to do today?” he asked.

"I'll attempt to test the level of avian intelligence via the humours; old-fashioned, I know, but the current theory is that feathered animals have a less-developed circulatory..."

"Wait," John interrupted. 'What exactly does that mean you are doing with my geese? I ask because geese are expensive, and I don't want you endangering their lives."

"I'll be careful," Sherlock said, ignoring John's snort of disbelief.

All was quiet as John fried breakfast—there were four eggs today, thankfully—and Sherlock only spoke again when they had plates in hand and there was more tea.

"Why do you keep them, then?"


“Company? So you do need companionship.”

“I have companionship.”

“Human companionship. Why don’t you marry? You’re tolerably good-looking and while your temper is rather uneven, you’re industrious, and eventually you’ll be prosperous. Many women would have you.” Sherlock said this last with a rather disapproving look on his face, as though what women would do were the least interesting thing he could imagine.

“I was married. My wife died. I have no interest in marrying again.”

“Like geese, you mate for life.” Sherlock scribbled something else on his ever-present paper; John was grateful that he did not pursue the subject. “Most interesting. How, then, would you rate the bond between your pair of geese? High? Casual?”

“They’re very fond of each other, very protective. They dislike being separated. However, they do disagree, particularly when food or goslings are involved.”

“Quite, quite,” Sherlock muttered, still scribbling. “That’s fine. I may have further questions later. Where will I find you?”

“I intend to finish ploughing the bloody home field, and if I can, move on to the north field.”

“What are you planting?” Sherlock seized another piece of paper and readied his pen.

“Winter wheat, first, then potatoes, then Indian corn and pumpkins.”

“And do you have a kitchen garden?”

“Of course. The onions and peas are in, and the lettuce too. Too cold for anything else still.”

Sherlock said nothing else, but—quite rudely, John thought, although at least he could respond in
kind—pulled out a handful of notes and began to read. Well, that concludes the interview, John thought to himself. Then, a sudden abashedness came over him—he should probably at least offer to feed his guest. Some doctor he was.

“If you need anything, there’s bread on the bench, though it’s not fresh, and cheese. I don’t usually make a hot dinner, midday; just bread and cold bacon or salt pork. Supper is the big meal.”

“And does your diet consist mostly of bread, potatoes, and bacon?” A fresh sheet, now.

“Mr. Holmes…” John objected, realizing suddenly, that he would spend much too long answering these questions, if he let himself. Why did he wish so to recount the mundane details of his life to someone who barely acknowledged his response? Perhaps it was simply to watch the speed of his mind; Sherlock had drawn no conclusions since his adroit deduction of John’s thought processes the first night, but that had already created in John a desire to see and know more. Furthermore, Sherlock’s all-encompassing interest was a heady thing. His face, already handsome, was transformed by his passion.

“Salt pork, too. Are you regular?” Sherlock broke into his thoughts, and John revised his last thought. Not heady—uncomfortable, intrusive. Ridiculous, even.

“Mr. Holmes!”

“Sherlock.”

“Sherlock! Yes, I eat a great deal of salt pork. No, I will not discuss my regularity with you; the outhouse is to the northwest if you wish to pursue the matter further.”

Sherlock was about to open his mouth to ask another question, but John forestalled him.

“Now, daylight in the springtime is not a good time to ask a bush farmer anything. I’m going to harness the oxen, and then to the field. Don’t make more work for me.”

“I will not.”

“Very well.

John’s second snort of disbelief was louder than the first, but he left the cabin without further comment.

Sherlock was quite pleased with his experiment, really. Without a dynamometer, it was his best bet to calculate the force of a goose’s wings; the sensitivity of a fox’s nose would have to wait. In addition, it would shed some light on the goose’s problem-solving skills.

The only significant obstacle to this scientific progress was John’s disapproval. Sherlock looked down at the far end of the home field, where John was turning the oxen. It took, by his pocket watch, seven minutes on average for John to cross the corduroy bridge over the creek and make the trip down to the end, then ninety seconds to turn and another seven to come back, barring any unforeseen encounters with clay holes. The seven minutes in which his back was turned were vital; Sherlock was certain that John would not countenance anyone climbing up to the roof of the old shanty with Philemon tucked under his arm, much less Sherlock with a plan to throw the goose off.

John reached the end of the field, turned, and headed back down. Sherlock approached the geese, corn in hand, and began to lure them towards the shanty.
There, however, his scientific inquiry hit a snag. The geese followed him willingly enough, but the transition from luring a goose to securing a goose under one’s arm proved to be much more difficult than Sherlock had anticipated: their necks, he discovered, were a significant obstacle, to say nothing of their temperament. Furthermore, though Sherlock was an able climber, scaling a rough log building with a twenty-five-pound goose was a challenge even to his ability. Finally, it was clear that Philemon, also, did not countenance being carried to the top of the shanty at all, as several large welts along Sherlock’s arms attested. The bright side, however, was that Sherlock had a much better idea of the intelligence of *Anser anser domesticus*.

His second attempt, with Pierrette, had gone no better. He had been forced to empty his own traveling case—thankfully he had provided himself with a large one—and use that as goose transport. He had a fleeting concern that it might affect his results, for though he had managed to get Philemon inside with only one or two more welts, the anger the bird felt might give him greater force, but then, when faced with a fox, a goose might be equally angry.

Finally up on the roof of the shanty, Sherlock marked his position meticulously and stabilized himself before opening the hissing bag. He had measured Philemon’s wingspan at nearly two yards, and while he would not be able to avoid the beats entirely, he could minimize their effect by being prone on the roof as he liberated the goose. Then, he hoped, he could see just how well geese could problem-solve, and possibly estimate the force of the wings as well.

Unfortunately, his estimate of goose intelligence was still a trifle low, and Philemon broke from the bag like an avenging angel before Sherlock had had a chance to lie down. His wings caught Sherlock in the midsection—it was enough force to bloody a fox’s nose, Sherlock thought, as his breath left his body—and toppled him over the edge of the shanty. Sherlock made a grab for the roof but was unable to secure a grip. He fell to the ground feet first, but his left foot hit a stick and he rolled over on his ankle and hit the ground like a felled tree, still breathless.

Philemon set up a loud honking, and before Sherlock could move to observe him more carefully, Pierrette was behind him, hissing. He tried to stand but could not—damn ankle—and so was forced to crawl away from her threatening beak. He could not crawl away fast enough to avoid several sharp blows to his shins.

“What in blazes is happening here?” John. Sherlock found it hard to believe that fourteen minutes had passed since his experiment, such as it was, had begun, but he looked over to see Jack and Hamish standing placidly at the edge of the field. In fact, he had quite a significant audience; Isadora looked at him in bemusement, the calves peeking out from behind her. Both Clara and Harry were baa-ing loudly, Harry straining at her chain in order to get closer. Idiot Horse was watching him closely. Only Arthur had his back to the whole scene.

“An experiment. Avian intelligence. Or have you forgotten our discussion?” Sherlock kept his tone brisk and business like.

“I’m fairly sure that there’s no problem with avian intelligence here,” John said, watching Philemon glide down gracefully towards Pierrette, who greeted her mate with satisfied honking noises.

“They are significantly more intelligent than I imagined. Now, do you suppose you could help me inside? This ground is most uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable! That’s all? Is this what you mean to do all summer? Endanger my animals—the animals that I distinctly remember requesting you to leave alone not an hour ago—damage my buildings, and take up my time just when I need it the most? You deserve to stay right there and be laughed at by livestock.”
“I...I should have prepared more thoroughly.” Sherlock admitted.

“You should have left my bloody geese alone!”

“I should have realized the sack wouldn’t work. Maybe if I tied a string to their legs and made them fly...” He trailed off, his gaze now directed more intensely towards the geese.

“You will not. You will study the damn plants you came for and let me run my farm!”

Sherlock looked at the geese wistfully. They were rubbing beaks and making small geesy noises.

John looked at the geese, then back at Sherlock. He was furious—Sherlock had had no right to do what he did, and what’s more, absolutely no call to begin another experiment—but he was also possessed with a sudden urge to laugh. Sherlock sprawled in the mud with his city clothes did make quite a picture, and John suddenly wished he had seen the whole “experiment”. His lips twitched.

“Do you have a long rope?” Sherlock asked.

“Bloody Christ!” John roared, his desire to laugh erased. Without a word, he seized Sherlock’s arm and helped him to the cabin.

Inside, he deposited Sherlock on the settle and motioned for him to remove his coat. Sherlock did.

“I take it that’s ‘no’ for the rope?”

“You take it correctly.”

Sherlock sighed.

“Hold out your leg.”

“I thought you didn’t practice.”

“I don’t take boarders either.”

Sherlock fell silent, wincing as John crouched before him, carefully removing his boot, and then his sock.

The ankle wasn’t so bad but it would require binding and significant rest. John shook his head, and fetched his meager store of medical supplies.

“Why the roof of the shanty?” he asked, once the foot was bound.

“Repeatable results, John. Scientific method. You tell me that this goose bloodied a fox’s nose, and I seek to assemble the data that proves it true or not.”

“Or you could just believe me.”

“That’s faith, not science.”

“Well, it seems to me that faith hurts a lot less than science. Look at your ankle; it’s swollen to twice the normal size. And,” John glared at Sherlock, as he appeared to wave away the injury as a small
price to pay, “I won’t mention that enormous scrape on your neck, but I will say that I am not ploughing right now and it’s your fault.”

“You’re fussing. Everyone fusses over me.”

“It’s because you’re an idiot.”

Sherlock cut his eyes at John, but did not seem to take offense.

“I’ll make supper,” he offered contritely.

“On that ankle? And how do I know there won’t be dead coyote in the stew, yeah?”

“It takes relatively little effort to fry salt pork, and I will have to serve salt pork because I can’t go outside and find a dead coyote. Although I will say that goose sounds good.” Sherlock said dryly.

John’s explosive laughter was a surprise to both of them, but it broke the tension.

“Leave the geese alone and you can cook. I am nearly finished with the home field; I’ll just take out bread and cheese and then I can stay out until suppertime.”

Sherlock nodded, nearly meekly, and stayed sagely on the settle with his papers for the rest of the afternoon. He rose carefully to make a simple supper of fried salt pork and potatoes (no roughage, he noticed, and made a mental note to see if he could add some kind of green food to their diet), which John ate with appetite. Their evening was much the same as the preceding one, though John retired earlier, insisting on taking the loft bed so that Sherlock didn’t have to climb.

Sherlock watched him take the ladder with a slight smile, and felt a stab of sympathy for John’s hard life—and now he was saddled with an unwelcome guest as well. Nothing would atone for Mycroft's manipulation, but he could, he supposed, contribute more to the running of the household than simply unskilled labour like dishwashing. That would certainly placate this small, angry man, and perhaps allow for greater freedom than Sherlock himself would otherwise enjoy. And, Sherlock could not help but admit to himself, John Watson was almost as interesting as his geese and his backwoods.

“Today, John,” Sherlock said the next morning, as though he didn’t have a strained ankle and several significant contusions, “I am going to conduct a thorough survey of the environs. This”—he waved a government ordinance map—“is essentially useless to me. I should manage that by dark, I suppose.”

“Are you doing this on foot or on horseback?” some imp compelled John to ask.

“On foot, obviously.” Sherlock’s mouth primmed up, and John tried not to laugh. “Otherwise I risk missing valuable specimens.”

“I have two hundred and fifty acres.”

“As I said. A day’s work. I need to get the feel of the land—breathe it in, understand it.”

“Your ankle is not even close to right yet. Do you wish to be confined to the cabin for weeks? I said you could walk on it because I felt you would be sensible, but if you cannot understand the simple cause and effect in this case, I will be obliged to insist that you rest.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Sherlock drew himself up to his full height and looked down his long nose
at John.

“I was an army doctor, Sherlock Holmes,” John’s voice was low and calm. “I could break all the bones in your body while naming them. Don’t posture in front of me.”

A nameless spark flared in Sherlock’s eyes, then died. He coughed.

“I would have thought you’d be more concerned about Mycroft’s bad opinion,” he said, stepping back.

“Shameless manipulation,” John grinned, generous in victory. “Unworthy of that great brain of yours. You may walk a mile, perhaps two, but no more. That will take you along the whole south line, and that will have to be enough. Besides, he added, twisting the knife a little, “The north line is right by a bear den—the sow bear up there has got twin cubs, which means she’s unlikely to want visitors.”

Sherlock put his nose in the air and did not answer.

“There are snowshoes on the outside of the cabin, if you want them,” John said, and left for the barn.

John was already shoveling the plough out of a second muddy spot when he saw Sherlock emerge from the cabin, moving slowly and dressed in his expensive coat. John wondered who had advised him on his clothing choices for the backwoods. The fit was impeccable, but the fabric—he’d end up in rags in no time, with those fine trousers. And he was in boots—thankfully, those were good—but no snowshoes. John wondered just how the man planned to get through the uncleared forest-surely he’d seen the quantity of rotting snow when he had come cross-lots with Stamford. Still, as long as Sherlock got back before dark it wasn’t his problem. John shook his head and turned back to his shovelling with resolve.

Sherlock himself had been surprised, when he left the cabin, to see the sun so high in the sky. He could still make the rounds of the property—it had been no trouble to discover John Watson’s deed of sale, with the coordinates of the land, in a metal box under the so-called bed—but he would have to walk briskly and be at his sharpest. Thankfully, the cheap swill John called tea did not lack in stimulation; his heart raced as he swung his collecting box over his shoulder and stuffed a notebook into his coat. Upon reflection, he wrapped a chunk of bread in a spoiled sheet and added it to his pockets. He wouldn’t have to eat it—he’d been frankly horrified at the dense, unpalatable nature of that common item—but at least he’d avoid being harassed about his food intake. He was beginning to suspect that John, despite his very sensible suspicions about Mycroft, would take the role as protector seriously, and that included eating.

Duty discharged, Sherlock set off for the southeast corner of the property. John was quite consciously ignoring him, so he did not salute; instead, though he limped, he quickened his pace as best he could, compass in hand. There were some excellent examples of Iris versicolor just sprouting by the barn pond, he noticed, and among the stumps on the field adjacent to the one John was ploughing, but he could collect that on the return trip. Right now he wanted to see what type of terrain lay along the south line.

He almost changed his mind when he got into the woods at the correct coordinates and realized that there was still a significant layer of snow upon the ground: rotten snow, which did not hold his weight, but made him flounder ungracefully and painfully. Despite his soaked trousers, however, he was unwilling to return to the farm clearing; instead, he persevered, slowly, noting humps that could be stone ridges and depressions that could be swamps.
Damn the bush, anyway! Sherlock felt a sudden desolation at its hiddenness and obstinacy. Not only was he unable to find a thing useful to his research, but John had certainly known the forest would be unwalkable, and as such, knew him already for a fool. A fool! He wasn’t one; he was the brightest scientific mind in the Canadas; science required error, as his experiment with the geese had shown. He floundered on, past boulders and trees, furious.

Later, he would say that it was only because he was absorbed in scientific observation that he did not see the moose tracks in front of him, nor the twin moose calves lying in a nearly-thawed brush pile just around the base of a sheer rock wall. Their soft brown coats were nearly invisible in the dried leaves, and they were still as mice. Sherlock nearly stepped on them.

When they flinched, he froze. He knew he should step away; he was aware of that much, but he had never seen such young ones before, and their charm was undeniable. They had huge ears and plump whiffly muzzles, and though they were breathing fast, they did not move, which allowed Sherlock to examine them closely. Not more than a week old, then, and ….

A crack of branches somewhere behind him told him that he perhaps should draw his examinations to a speedy conclusion. Damnation! He stood, reluctantly, prepared to abandon his excursion—for his ankle ached and he was sick to the teeth of being damp already. He had no sooner turned towards the farm clearing, though, when he heard another, closer crash, and a snorting sound. Bears! He thought, and began to walk faster, but then the crash was louder than a bear might be. He snuck a look back and was horrified at what he saw: a moose, a female moose, quite clearly the mother of the twins, bearing down upon him.

“Now,” Sherlock said uneasily (being unsure of the intellect of *Alces alces* and always willing to privilege intellect over instinct), “Your babies are perfectly safe.”

The moose did not stop advancing, and her ears did not even flicker towards him. A bad sign. He felt a flush of adrenaline urging him to fly, not fight. He took hold of himself.

“They look quite healthy, too. Your milk must be nutritionally complete.”

Still no response, only a steady, menacing advance, and so Sherlock gave way to instinct and took to his heels. He had, at least, the presence of mind to dodge between trees, in order to keep an advantage over the moose, who had a longer stride and—presumably—no injuries. By the time he reached the edge of the farm clearing, however, he was tiring, and in imminent danger of being trampled.

While he was using all his energy avoiding the moose until he could get to the barn, or the shanty, or the house, he was distantly aware of a cacophonous sound, presumably the livestock reacting to this unlikely spectacle. Where were the geese and their powerful wings now, he asked himself, and was briefly distracted by the question whether or not the force of their wings would be enough to stop a moose. Unlikely.

Then, another noise rose above the rest.

“Oi! Over here!” John. John was yelling at the moose, and waving his hands frantically. Fool. Did he not know that that would likely call the moose away from… Oh. Sherlock did his best to veer towards the blur of homespun that was John in order to help the endeavour, but he felt a spike of pain in his ankle and pitched forward into the mud of the field. As he collapsed, he saw a flurry of activity to his right: John running, a stout wooden plank in his hand, *towards the moose*.

“John!” Sherlock yelled, but he could stop nothing. He felt the burst of air as the moose ran past him, now bent on John. What had he done? Perhaps Mycroft was right and he did always cause trouble; if
the moose trampled John Watson, it would be Sherlock’s fault.

And yet he could not tear his eyes away from the scene. John had stopped running, and was standing directly in the moose’s path. Sherlock watched in agony as the moose came closer and closer. His fear turned to admiration, however: when the moose was within one pace of him, John stepped neatly to the side and swung his plank directly in her face. It connected with a solid thump, and the moose reared back. John pulled the plank back again, ready for a second blow, but the moose had had enough. Pirouetting on her long limbs, she galloped back towards the forest and her babies, periodically shaking her head.

Sherlock turned to stare at John, openmouthed. John’s bravery had been uncomfortably devastating. What would his reaction be? Fear? Anger? Sherlock found himself unable to predict his reaction, and his interest was further piqued.

Then John smiled.

John could not have helped smiling. That had been the most exciting thing to happen to him in ages, and he felt exhilarated, alive. He had faced down five hundred pounds of angry animal, and he had triumphed. It was ridiculous, but he had, and now he wanted to whoop, to leap, to fight more, perhaps.

He looked down at Sherlock sprawled on the ground; Sherlock’s eyes were huge, his curls were tousled, and one of his buttons had given way, exposing the pale collarbones at the base of that long neck. Suddenly, John did not want to whoop or leap—rather, he wanted to touch. To dominate. To pin Sherlock down and take. He clenched his fingers and shook himself, fighting to keep the surge of adrenaline confined to his upper body, but the blood slowly ebbed to his cock. He tried to focus his anger back towards Sherlock, towards the foolishness that once again was keeping him from his work, but he could not find it. Only desire, and then, thankfully, laughter.

Sherlock himself felt rather mixed up. He had no precedent by which to judge John’s actions, and he felt that his wish to ascribe them to personal liking of himself was unscientific. It was tempting, though; the exhilaration in John’s face was contagious, and there was a slight edge to his expression that roused Sherlock’s blood.

“Terrible incident, that,” John said, his voice self-consciously light.

“Appalling. Are you sure she won’t come back?”

“Convinced.”

“Did you just face down a moose for me?” Sherlock asked, answering raillery for raillery.

“I did,” John said, laughing, “But it wasn’t a very smart moose.”

“The geese are undoubtedly smarter. And her babies are healthy.”

“Poor babies. Destined to be raised by an imbecilic mother.”

“Well!” Sherlock remembered their soft muzzles and beautiful liquid eyes. “I wonder if a young moose could be raised by humans and thus be smarter.”

“Absolutely not.”
“You have no scientific basis for that statement.”
   “It was a flat refusal, not a dissertation on zoology.”

“You’re sure?” Sherlock looked up at John with his most beseeching gaze. It would be possible to get the babies away, he was sure, especially if John were willing to ply the his board again.

“Er,” John’s breath had caught. Sherlock was looking up through his eyelashes, his lips plump and slightly open, and it was unbearably distracting. “I’m sure. How,” he said, taking a firmer breath, “did you manage to stumble upon the babies in the first place?”

Sherlock launched himself into the tale, and told it with verve. John found the conversation with the moose especially hilarious.

“Sherlock Holmes, moose are the most dangerous things in these woods, after men, and yet you try to reassure one? You’re a bloody idiot!”

Again, Sherlock could only smile. He’d been called an idiot twice in twenty-four hours, but John Watson insulted him with warmth and admiration. Really, it was impossible to be angry at someone who had assaulted a giant ungulate to protect you. It created a bond, he supposed.

“An idiot I may be, I suppose, if only in the ways of moose…”

“And geese.”

“And geese. Kind of you to spare me the moose jokes. Now, do you suppose you could help me inside? Again?”

John held out his hand, disconcerted despite himself as Sherlock’s much larger hand engulfed his.

“Can you walk?” He drew back as soon as Sherlock was steady.

“I can, but it hurts. Is there a stick nearby?”

John looked at Sherlock, rumpled and muddy, and steeled himself. He was a grown man, with a strong will, and physical contact with this attractive person was not the hardest thing he had ever done.

“Here,” he said, “Put your arm over my shoulder. Very good. Shall we?”

“Thank you, John,” Sherlock said, and John did not let the warm rumble of his voice affect him at all as they slowly made their way to the cabin.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected title for this chapter was “Don’t Fuck With Geese. Or Moose.”

The theme song for this chapter was really hard to find. I finally decided on “If I Were A Moose” by Fred Small, which, despite the weird YouTube iterations, has quite relevant lyrics. Do you like the song? Did you find the Easter egg?

Again with the fresh fiddleheads! Okay, so there’s this south-facing slope near the barn by the lake and it warms up much faster than everywhere else. That’s where those are
Another one of my obsessions is names. I especially like old-fashioned Quebec names, of which Philemon is one. He was almost called Phydyme, which is my favorite.

I actually forgot all about milking Isadora until I had finished chapter 12, which means I had left out approximately 120 gallons of milk from the story. I mean, I genuinely forgot, but also, for a farmer without a wife or partner to do the dairying, that much milk is really inconvenient. Nobody can drink that much, and it takes a significant amount of labour to process it. It needs to be strained (run through cloth to remove sticks and dirt and whatever), then left to sit so the cream rises to the top. Then it needs to be skimmed (have all or part of the cream removed) and the cream needs to be churned for butter. Hand churning is no joke. Then you’re also left with milk, which can be drunk or made into cheese or used in baking.

And all of this requires VERY VERY CLEAN instruments, so you’re also looking at at least an hour and a half a day of hauling, heating, and boiling water, then scrubbing dairying tools. Honestly, I should have just given John a pig so he can give the pig whatever milk he can’t eat. Maybe I’ll do that.

You may be unsurprised to learn I can do all the things above, though thankfully we DID have running water by the time I was old enough to help with the dairy work. And to be clear, our farm was really just a hobby farm (my parents were back-to-the-land hippies) so I wasn’t doing the kind of work my friends on real working farms were doing, but I definitely milked a lot of animals and did a lot of dishes. Also I really, really hate unpasteurized milk. Always have. It tastes like cows smell.

You really should leave most animals alone. Geese can be really social and friendly but they aren’t dummies. Lesson: never put a goose in a sack, and definitely don’t climb on old shanty roofs. Any farm kid can corroborate the first, and I can personally corroborate the second (see also: old chicken houses, old barns, old woodhouses, old outhouses…look, we only had two t.v. channels and lived at the end of a 3km dirt road, okay? And I like to climb.)

Moose babies are the actual cutest things. They are soft and small and golden-brown and whiffly. I don’t blame Sherlock for being smitten.

Regarding John’s defensive maneuver: my mom hit our Black Angus cow over the head with a rotten two-by-four because she was charging me. So people do hit ungulates with boards in Canada. Occasionally.

As always I feel I need to thank venvephe for the idea of John’s danger boner. She prompted me with it one time and I think every fic I’ve ever written contains it now.

Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

A chance encounter in the woods brings John flashbacks and nightmares. Sherlock asks some unanswerable questions and makes some unexpected observations. Harry is in heat and doesn’t care who knows it—and John is surprisingly sympathetic, for some reason that has nothing to do with Sherlock Holmes at all.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on. Doctornerdington, my main beta, has done her best to limit my lack of clarity and deserves all the thank-yous. All remaining idiocies are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The leaves were on the trees and John’s fields were ploughed and seeded by the time Sherlock was truly up and around again. He had properly begun his botanical work—joking to John that flora were significantly more tractable than any of the fauna he had so far attempted to study-collecting first around the buildings, then the edges of the fields, and finally in the smaller woods on the home quarter. He had also, to John’s delight, devoted himself to the kitchen garden, and now it flourished as it had never done before. It was not yet June and bean and pea plants were popping up, and the onions and lettuce were already edible. He had also taken over the bread-making, with a success that had made him quite puffed up; his salt-rising bread was better than Mrs. Hudson’s, though John didn’t intend to tell him that.

All was not completely rosy, however. John had sometimes had cause to remonstrate with Sherlock. Though he cooked, he didn’t eat enough, for a start. He did not sleep adequately, either, and the scientific experiments he engaged in (often while he should have been sleeping) were often messy and inaccommodating. John had had to draw the line at dissecting animal scat indoors—especially on his few dishes—and insist that all experiments involving fire be conducted during daylight hours. (Once, while attempting to compose a phlegm-inducing draught, Sherlock had become temporarily blinded and knocked a bread sponge into the fire, making the house quite uninhabitable for the better part of the night. They had slept on pallets of hay in the shanty and been chilled all night.)

Still, John was also flabbergasted by the improvement Sherlock’s scientific energy brought to his life. He, at least, ate better, and the plants Sherlock brought in added sorely needed variety to their meagre spring meals.

Sherlock had even met Lestrade, and despite Sherlock’s incivility and Lestrade’s wariness, the meeting had gone off quite well. Sherlock had led with a rude comment about Mycroft’s size, and Lestrade had warmed right up, though there had been a look in his eyes John hadn’t quite liked. Just how did Lestrade know the Holmes family?

Mystery notwithstanding, Sherlock’s proper survey of John’s land had not been done, a fact he
bewailed at every opportunity.

Finally, one rainy day, John took pity on him.

“We can go today.” he said, “There’s no use hoeing; the ground’s heavy as can be. I thought I’d walk the perimeter of the property and mark out this summer’s clearing.”

Sherlock did not react immediately—as though John was proposing supper or chores instead of an excursion that he had wanted to do for some time.

John sat and waited. Finally, Sherlock replied.

“On foot?” Sherlock confirmed.

“On foot,” John said, “Though you do realize it means carrying our lunch.”

“Pshaw. If I see another piece of fried salt pork I’ll scream.”

“There are also cold potatoes.”

Sherlock shot him a withering look.

“Bread?” John tried, and got a small shake of the head for his trouble. “You need to eat more. I can see your blood through your skin.”

“It’s my aristocratic heritage.”

“It’s a sign of low vitamin density, which might contribute to your brother’s assessment that you are hysteric.”

“I am not hysteric.”

“I haven’t seen it.” John admitted, “But I’ve been busy.”

“You are awfully concerned about my physical well-being, even though I’m an imposition and an inconvenience.” Sherlock looked at John sceptically. There was something there, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. Unusual…and frustrating.

“I didn’t want you here but now that you are you might as well be well. And I don’t want to lose my farm. Lettuce?” John asked, hopefully. Not terribly nutritious but it did contain vitamins.

“You won’t. And I suppose.” He took the outstretched leaf with a sigh.

“How can you say that?” John was meticulously shredding the lettuce in his own hands.

“My brother wouldn’t have chosen you if he hadn’t felt you were,” –here Sherlock rolled his eyes —“up to the task of taking me on.”

“So I should be more careful about actually treating you?”

“If you must. But you know I’m healthy.”

“You’re healthy enough now. But your habits will eventually break you down.”

“Transport. My body is just transport.”

“You would repair a cart, or feed a horse.”
“My transport is tired of salt pork.” Sherlock made a face so ludicrous that John was forced to laugh.

“I don’t blame it. Don’t worry, though, we’ll run out soon enough.”

“Is there no way we could go to town before that?” “Impossible in this weather. The mud clings to the wagon and it would take three days I don’t have; on horseback, it’d be shorter but that’s no way to really bring anything back. I’ll take my gun on our walk and try to get a deer, though they’ll be thin or pregnant.”

“Never mind,” Sherlock said, “Salt pork it must be.”

They set out up the north line, John carrying their lunch, since Sherlock was burdened with collecting bags. Though the rain never stopped, their pleasure increased rather than decreased as John surveyed his land with satisfaction end Sherlock gathered new specimens. Their intercourse was characterized by an unusual comfort, involving though it did bickering, insults, and inattentiveness.

It was during a brief bout of this inattentiveness, as they turned down the east line on their way home, that Sherlock nearly fell into the Bonne Chere ravine.

“Easy there!” John exclaimed, as Sherlock leaned over to look at a particularly interesting example of *echinocystis lobate*, lost his footing, and slid down a four-foot rock face onto a thin ledge, “That’s the biggest ravine in this area; one more step and you’ll go crashing through those trees to the bottom.”

“Yes, Nanny,” Sherlock said, winding his hand around a think spruce and pulling himself back up. “I’d catch a tree, and it doesn’t seem like it’s that steep.”

“You think so because you’ve never seen the bottom,” John said, “but about ten yards down this side, the trees peter out, and all there is left is broken rock. Richards’ Brook turns into a waterfall just to the west there, and it’d be a hard landing. Also, there are bears at the bottom—they like the caves at the base of the cliffs.”

“Stuff. You threaten me so often with bears that I’ve come to believe you just use them as,” Sherlock paused, smugly, “bugbears.”

John stared.

“Did you just make… excuse me, attempt to make, a pun?”

“It was quite clever, I thought, whatever you think.”

“I think it was terrible. Unbearable, in fact.”

“That was worse.”

“Horribilis, in fact.”

“That’s an interesting distinction—*Ursus arctos* and *Ursus arctos horribilis*—but they have nothing to do with the *Ursus americanus* that’s presumably at the bottom of this ravine.”

“Stop, for the love of God,” John said, wheezing.

“That wasn’t meant to be funny.”

“It was funnier than your puns. Look out!”

“What…oh, thank you.”
“That’s definitely not bear scat.” John felt an unexplained shiver down his spine at the sight of a pile of human feces in the middle of the trail.

“No. It’s homo sapiens. And one that hasn’t been eating an excess of salt pork.”

“Did you… no. I wonder who’s been around here.”

“Someone passing through, surely?”

“I suppose. It’s an odd place for it, though.”

“This worries you.” It wasn’t a question. John frowned.

“It does.”

“Past trauma or present enemies?”

“I don’t have any present enemies, excepting your brother.” John said tersely.

“He’d leave a bigger pile of shit; it’s not him. Come on, let’s go; there’s a *viola canadensis*.”

John followed, trying to shake the slight unease that had settled between his shoulder blades. There was no reason for people not to pass through this area, although it seemed unlikely, given the lack of roads and, frankly, of destinations. And who shit in the middle of a trail?

The silence behind him told him that Sherlock was not looking at his viola whatsit either. John wondered what was running through that enormous, agile brain.

“You’ve never said why you have nightmares.”

Ah, John thought. That’s what it is.

“That’s because it’s none of your business.” John replied.

“You’re clearly connecting this,” Sherlock gestured to the pile of feces, “with something in your history; you’re shrugging it off, which means you don’t really think your instinct is correct. It’s probably not correct, but you’re still concerned.”

“I said it was none of your business, and I meant it.” John walked faster.

“Do you really think someone would have followed you from India?” Sherlock peered into his face with intensity; John could not believe he’d found that attractive.

“Look, just shut up, all right?”

“You do. And a lover, at that. More than one.” Sherlock was clearly fascinated, but John felt his past boil up inside him, threatening his hard-won equanimity. His left hand clenched and unclenched. He strode ahead.

Sherlock caught up to him in an unfairly quick amount of time.

“You don’t want to talk about it.”

“Stunning deduction.”

“Very well.” Sherlock subsided.
They walked in silence for nearly an hour. Only when they neared the final corner did Sherlock speak again.

“I won’t deduce, if you prefer me not to.”

“My farm is my life now.” John said, glad of Sherlock’s offer.

“Such as it is.”

“It’s fine.”

Sherlock said nothing once again. John could sense the effort of silence rolling off him and appreciated it.

“There’ll be some interesting carnivorous plants shortly,” he said. Might as well offer positive reinforcement.

“A swamp?”

“More like some low ground, though yes, it extends northeast into a proper swamp.”

Sherlock bounded ahead, his long legs allowing him to clear fallen trees with ease. He was graceful, although John thought his enthusiasm made him seem less so; he looked so young when he wasn’t being a terrifying know-it-all.

Sherlock, meanwhile, had headed along the line John had indicated, quite eager to see the plants in question. He had certainly heard of pitcher plants and sundews before, but to see them in person was something else entirely. He laid a cautious hand on his collecting bottles as he leaped over one more tree.

Then, he landed in another pile of scat. This one, he discovered, was not human.

He took three entirely involuntary steps back, then stopped and stood stock-still.

“I told you there were bears,” John said, as he drew as level as he could, considering the circumstances.

“I just… I know they’re not as dangerous as moose, now; it’s…”

“They scare you. It’s fine. Probably reasonable. Now clean your foot and we can bypass the swamp, if you like.”

Sherlock looked at John’s face closely, checking for hints of concealed disdain or mockery, but there were none. There was only frankness, tinged with sympathy for what must seem, to a man used to the woods, foolishness.

First the moose, now this. Sherlock felt a warm curl in the region of his heart, enough to start a frisson of unease in his own mind.

“There are squirrel vertebrae in this bear scat,” he said, by way of thanks—and distraction.

John looked at him, nonplussed.
“There were squirrel vertebrae in the human scat as well.”

John’s uneasy feeling was back, suddenly.

“Bears don’t eat squirrels, as a rule,” he said, looking around—for what he didn’t quite know. Sherlock caught his uneasiness and smiled, though he could see John asking himself if that smile was meant to be reassuring.

“Maybe your local squirrels are slow and stupid,” Sherlock said, and John couldn’t help but laugh.

“Maybe I should see if I can catch some. They can’t be worse than salt pork again.” John had been mostly joking, but the horror on Sherlock’s face was enough to make him want to try.

“I’d rather eat carnivorous plants, I think. Or at least see them. Let’s go!”

As they slogged through the last thick band of spruce trees towards the swamp, Sherlock watched John out of the corner of his eye. He had settled, though not completely, and his mind was on getting home rather than the mysterious frequency of squirrel bones.

John was thinking of home and fire at this point, though he too was observing Sherlock’s mood, both the pleasure in the plants and the slight emotional disequilibrium. Though Sherlock was expressive, he, like John, did not really wish to plumb the depths of their characters. They both preferred action.

Their return journey was marred by no further events, and both Sherlock and John trudged home with a niggling worry and a better understanding of the other. However, their time to ponder these unknowns was limited; when they arrived, Harry was, predictably, yelling her head off.

“Anyone would believe that that animal never eats.”

“She’s sociable,” Sherlock said, “She likes people.”

“Don’t encourage her. She thinks she is people.”

“She’s better than most people.”

John snorted. He had thought the same thing so many times he could not deny it. Annoying she might be, but he always knew what she was thinking.

“She’s worse right now. Probably about ready to be bred—Mrs. Hudson should be around soon with Frank.”

“Frank?”

“Frank Higgins, her goat. He’s the father of most of the baby goats in this area.”

“Why don’t you take her to him?”

“Mrs. Hudson likes to get out, and Frank does too—or so she says. I’ll take Isadora to Byron…”

“She named her bull Byron.”

“She did.”

“And her goat Frank?”

“Yes, Frank for her husband. She’d have named Byron Frank too if she’d not been worried about confusion.”

“Not a good marriage, then?”
“As far as I know, no.”

“Like yours?”

“Sherlock!”

“It will be very instructive to meet her, then.” Sherlock said, as though he had never said the other thing.

“And Frank.”

John frowned. Sherlock’s face had taken on an innocent expression that he was learning to distrust, but he decided that he had better let the conversation move away from sensitive subjects like his own marriage.

“How I think you'll like her. Mrs. Hudson.”

“I rarely like old women.”

“I stand by my statement.”

“Indeed.”

“She makes excellent bread.”

“Good for her.”

“Did you want to water the horses?” John grinned.

“My specimens need care,” Sherlock replied, all dignity.

“Don’t forget supper,” John called, as he went to liberate Harry from her purgatory.

“Bloody salt pork,” Sherlock muttered, stalking into the house.

Supper was, of course, salt pork and potatoes, with some of the early wild cucumber that Sherlock had gathered to stave off scurvy. John ate without tasting, though, still slightly preoccupied with his discomfort at the human scat in the woods. Sherlock ate the potatoes and cucumber, but only pushed the salt pork around. Eventually, John speared it with his fork and put it on his own plate. He was hungry, at least.

“No dog,” Sherlock exclaimed.

“Pardon?”

“You've no dog.”

“Oh. No, no I don’t. I…Dogs are…er, dogs are surprisingly hard to get here, and they must be trained.”

“I see.”

“Do you like dogs?”
"Not exactly." Sherlock sounded evasive. "What about cats?"

"Dearer still. Mrs. Hudson has promised me a pair from her new litter, but those are not yet ready. So beware of mice," John said, "Although if you want to experiment on those, we have them in quantity."

"Much obliged," Sherlock muttered, and turned back to his notebook. Another clue, he thought, to the emotional trauma that made John cry out in the night, and wake up bathed in sweat—he thought Sherlock didn’t see, but the cracks in the loft floor went both ways, and while people were not his usual study, he was even more intrigued now. He would sit up, he decided, and observe. John had eaten heavily, and even taken a cup of whiskey, which he rarely did. He would go to bed early, and sleep soundly for the first part of the night; when the effects of the whiskey wore off, the dreams would start. Sherlock opened notebook 29J and added the date, the quantity John had eaten and drunk, and the number of miles they had walked to the table therein.

John, meanwhile, was staring at the fire. They had had a pleasant day, and so he would stay up, Sherlock knew, for longer than he wanted out of some misguided sense that Sherlock needed companionship.

“Go to bed,” Sherlock said, and John started. He rubbed his eyes, and for a moment, in the dim light, he looked very young. Sherlock wondered whether he had smiled more before India.

“Think I will. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Sherlock replied, but John had already gone outside to relieve himself. He shivered a little as he came back in.

“Chilly night,” he said, before he got into bed. “Keep the fire up, please.”

“‘Course.” Sherlock watched him hump the blankets up around his feet and settle down with a small sigh. Checking his watch, he noted 9:12 in the notebook. He didn’t turn back to the fire, though; instead, he watched as John fell asleep, his breathing slowing, then taking on that deep soft rhythm it did when he was particularly fatigued. Then, his body went limp under the covers, and Sherlock turned back to the fire.

The dreams began earlier than he had expected. Absorbed in sketching the sundew, Sherlock was startled when he heard John’s low groan, as if in pain.

“Left!” John called out, his voice low.

He was silent again for a long moment. Sherlock reached for his notebook. He observed John’s face was flushed and his hands gripping at the sheet, clenching and unclenching as they did when he was angry.

“No! Back! Sholto!”

_Cholto_. Something new. Sherlock noted it carefully.

For a long time after that, John only muttered and thrashed. His feet came loose from the blankets; Sherlock could see the sheen of perspiration on his forehead.

Sherlock remembered what it had been like waking from an illness during which he had been dosed with laudanum: trembling and soaked to the skin with the effects of the medicine. John seemed much the same.
“Mary!”

His wife. And yet Sherlock heard a note of anger—he was familiar enough with it. Intriguing.

“Mary’s there. She’s there. Sholto!”

More anger, and anguish, too. Sherlock rose and approached John’s bed. To his surprise, John’s eyes were wide open and the expression on his face was one of betrayal and horror. Sherlock recoiled. This was not the John of this morning, warm and honest. This was an unrecognizable man, one that was suffering. Sherlock hoped he would never see this expression directed at him.

“Stop her!” He reached out and grabbed Sherlock by the shirt front. His eyes were wide; his pupils dilated. “Stop her, Sholto!”

Sherlock held his breath. John’s distress was palpable, but there was, logically, not a thing he could do to reduce it. He must simply wait for the episode to subside.

Oh, and extricate himself. He reached up with both hands in order to pry John’s fingers from his shirtfront, but the strength of that hand, small in his, was nearly alarming in its intensity.

“She’ll hang!” John choked out, his eyes never leaving Sherlock’s face. Sherlock’s belly flipped over and he felt the prickle of tears at the naked pain in John’s gaze.

“John,” he said, as calmly as he could manage, “you are dreaming.”

The grip on his shirt did not slacken.

“John,” he said, more loudly. “John. John!”

“She’ll hang,” John said, but more quietly.

“Wake up, John. We are in Canada. I am Sherlock, not Sholto. Wake up. You’re safe.”

“Sholto,” John whispered.

“Sherlock.”

“Sho—Sherlock.” John pulled his hand back under the covers. His pulse still beat erratically. He shook his head.

“Sherlock?” His eyes were unfocused, but the terror was no longer there.

“Yes. It’s Canada. You’re safe.”

“Sherlock,” John said again, but his breathing had changed, and his eyes were closing.

Sherlock drew a shuddery breath himself. He added logs to the fire, for it was as chilly as John had said: 60 degrees Fahrenheit, 16 degrees Centigrade, too cold to sit comfortably.

When he had warmed himself, he sat down to add his observations to the already complex table in his notebook. John’s words and physiological symptoms were easy enough to note, but they did not, he thought with dissatisfaction, convey the full effect of the moment. How, though, to factually render what he had felt when John pleaded with him, or when that iron grip had seized him? Surely it was sentiment, rather than data? After some thought, he laid his pen down. The table would have to suffice.

He did sleep that night, though it was not refreshing, interrupted as it was with jumbled images of pleading faces.
John was surprised to wake before Sherlock the next morning. He looked for Sherlock’s boots, in case he’d gone out to the garden. No, there they were by the door, obnoxiously large and still shiny, despite nearly a month of backwoods living. How did Sherlock do it? He’d never seen him cleaning the damn things, and nobody else was there to do it.

John rubbed his eyes and set the water on before going to the barn. Tea was a necessity this morning; he hadn’t dreamed last night, but he’d woken still tired and wrapped in twisted blankets. That pile of scat in the woods had caused an avalanche of painful memories. What was done was done, and he could do nothing further—as a rational man, he knew that. And yet his cursed brain could not leave the fear and betrayal and shame behind him.

A frantic bellowing assailed his ears. Damn everything! Harry was in heat, and she didn’t care who knew it. Clara, in sympathy, was bellowing much more loudly than she usually did, and the other animals were making more noise as well. Probably desperate to get out of the loud barn, he thought, and pulled his own, very dirty boots on.

When he came back in, Sherlock was sitting up on his pallet, hair mad and face creased with sleep. John felt heartened.

“So you finally slept some, did you?” he asked. “Tea’ll be on in a moment, if your transport would like some.” Sherlock grunted, then fell back into bed hard enough to shake the loft.

“I get the pot to myself then?” John said. “Righto.”

“Horrible man.” Sherlock’s voice was muffled by blankets.

“I’m not carrying tea up the ladder. We established that.”

No response. John set the tea to steep and, since he’d only found two eggs, fished around in the barrel for salt pork. Even he, who didn’t care what he ate, was tired of it. Maybe he’d have to break down and butcher a chicken—the brown hen hadn’t been laying much, and though she might start, it might do them both good to eat something that hadn’t been brined to within an inch of its life.

Sherlock’s feet hit the floor, and shuffled towards him.

“Fine,” John said, and held out the cup. Four sugars, no milk. They were almost out of sugar, too. He hoped things would dry up soon, or he’d have a bad crop and he—the brown hen hadn’t been laying much, and though she might start, it might do them both good to eat something that hadn’t been brined to within an inch of its life.

Not that Sherlock would be here in the fall. Which was fine.

“Why is that goat so loud?” Sherlock complained.

“In heat. She needs to be bred.”

“And how does one do that?”

“One waits for Mrs. Hudson to bring Higgins around. Which she will, soon enough. She’s got a sixth sense for these things.”

“And what do we do in the meantime? Wear earplugs?”
“You should go out and visit with her. She’d probably like a little company.”

“And be deafened? No.” Sherlock was as out of temper as John had ever seen him. He looked oddly ungraceful, folded up into an angular ball on the settle, his long pale feet sticking out towards the fire.

“She likes you.”

“If she’s wanting to be bred, I am of no interest to her.”

“I’m glad she’s of no interest to you.” John laughed. Sherlock perked up, just slightly.

“Is that a common…er, predilection in these parts?” he asked, reaching for a notebook.

“I don’t think so,” John said, laughing. He had heard stories in the army. “But I have my suspicions. Mrs. Hudson’s hired man, Anderson, is very fond of his horse.”

“Oh! Do you suppose I could interview him?”

“Sherlock!” John studied his face; there was no dissimulation, only the glow of scientific enthusiasm. He shook his head. “Sherlock, we will grant our neighbours the courtesy of pursuing their sexual proclivities in peace.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“That’s against science.”

“Good for privacy, though.”

“Privacy is boring.”

“Says you,” John said, turning back to the breakfast preparations. A prickle of discomfort enveloped him. His cock stirred in his trousers as if to remind him privacy had indeed been in scant supply recently. His usual routine—frigging himself in the morning—was impossible now. Being outdoors when Sherlock was indoors and indoors when Sherlock was outdoors was more complex than it sounded, and he hadn’t brought himself to completion since Sherlock had arrived. No wonder he was so jumpy.

He sighed. He wasn’t an animal; he was a rational being. Once per fortnight was perfectly adequate in order to avoid congestion of the testes. More than that was sheer indulgence, and so required a simple test of will to control his frequency.

Now that his mind was on the subject, he looked over at Sherlock. He had not noticed him doing anything of the sort, for which he was, in general, thankful, but it did cause him to wonder if Mycroft Holmes had not been correct. If Sherlock did not frig himself to completion, or if he did it so infrequently that he suffered from testicular congestion, then his health could be at risk. He resolved to raise the subject at an appropriate time.

For now, though, he would exercise his own rational will and extinguish the buzz of physical need that was affecting him. He looked intently at the salt pork as he cut it, concentrating on the jiggle of fat under his right hand and the sharp smell of brine in his nostrils.

“John!” Sherlock’s voice hit him in the pit of his belly, amplifying the fading buzz. “Do you want me to make breakfast?”

“No,” he said quickly, “No, I’m nearly finished. You stay there.”
“If you insist,” Sherlock said, and went back to his notebook.

_Rational_, John thought, listening to Harry’s desperate baa-ing. _I am a rational human being_.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected chapter title for this chapter is “A Bear Shits in the woods. Also, Boners.”

The theme song is “Talk Dirty to Me” by Poison. Yes, I was a child of the eighties. No, I cannot decide whether these theme songs should be funny or evocative. Do me a favour and don’t put them together in a playlist unless you want musical whiplash. Or suggest a better song, I’m all ears. LMK if you find the Easter egg.

There are a couple of species of carnivorous plants native to the Canadian boreal forest: the pitcher plant, which is quite a large plant, and sundews, which are tiny, Venus-flytrap like plants. They are SUPER COOL.

I contemplated buying a piece of salt pork (available at any local grocery store here, along with horse meat) to show you but it’s too warm for baked beans. It’s really not so bad, but I would not want to eat it every day.

Congestion of the testes isn’t a thing. We’re really getting into some Bad 19th Century Science territory starting now, as you will see. This idea of “testicular congestion”, though, is actually contrary to most Victorian science and the reason this fic takes place in the backwoods. In fact, men were encouraged to conserve their essence. From the Victoria & Albert Museum page: “the body was also defined as a closed system of energy, physical, mental and reproductive expenditure were held to be in competition. Hence the notions that male sexual 'excess' led to debility and female reproductive health was damaged by intellectual study.”

I KNOW THIS CHAPTER HAS YET ANOTHER REFERENCE TO ANDERSON AND BESTIALITY. I’m sorry, he’s a convenient whipping boy and I can’t help myself.

Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
As Sparks Fly Upward

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John’s impromptu fishing trip yields worm units, mushroom banter, revelations about family, an awkward conversation about virility, and an incipient case of hypothermia. Also, some fish.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on. Doctornerdington, my main beta, has done her best to limit my lack of clarity and deserves all the thank-yous. All remaining idiocies are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We're finally out of salt pork," Sherlock said, as he was making breakfast one morning about a week later. "Thank God."

John snorted.
"You've rarely said a truer thing."

“I say true things all the time. And one fact cannot be truer than another. ‘We’re out of salt pork’ is just as true as ‘You’ve been constive for a week’, is it not?”

“Christ, Sherlock, do you have to discuss my bowels?”

“It was a simple example.”

John rolled his eyes. “Stop talking about my digestion. I only meant I’m damn glad to be out of salt pork.”

“Very well, be as imprecise as you like.”

“It’s called ‘idiom’.”

“Or ‘idiot’” Sherlock muttered.

“Are you calling me an idiot?”

“Oh, don’t worry, practically everyone is.”

“Delightful. See if I ever feed you again.”

“I feed you. And we can’t go to town in this weather, so I really will be doing the work.”

“We can’t go in this rain,” John said. “It’s the dampest spring I’ve seen in a long time; we’ll be up to our ears in mud the whole way.”
"What about fish?" Sherlock asked.

"Could do. Do you like to fish?"
"I thought you would fish. I will take specimens."

"I see." Despite this admission, John was tempted. "Not much in this lake, though, it's so small. But we could travel up back to Shoe Lake and fish there."

"You're worried about taking a day away from the farm, though," Sherlock said. John raised his eyebrows.

"I'm not a complete idiot, John. I know this is a critical time."

"It is, but we have to eat." Energized, John took a last bite of his bread and stood up. "I'll look out the fishing equipment; will you pack us food?"

"Please," Sherlock said, his voice low.

"Please, then," John said, and looked up at him, but he had mistaken Sherlock's tone. Sherlock was already wrapping a fresh loaf of his new salt-rising bread in a clean cloth, not asking him to say please.

John fled to the toolshed. As he filed rust off his best fishhooks, he cursed his own weakness. He'd done a good job of staying rational and keeping his distance, physically, but there was something so compelling about Sherlock Holmes, something so easy in their intercourse, that he could not maintain an intellectual, or, indeed, emotional, distance. And where John’s emotions went, his body followed—though, to be fair, his body had already been there from the time Sherlock had slid ungracefully off his horse in early May. Discovering that Sherlock was a brilliant, mercurial, ridiculous arsehole on top of that had been the coup de grace.

It would have been easier to ignore his own attraction had Sherlock professed some interest in women, but he clearly had none at all. John suspected that if Sherlock loved at all, he loved men, which meant that there was a chance that John’s caresses might be well-received, if they were offered. But that would land them both in a terrible predicament. When, not if, John arsed it up, Mycroft Holmes would rampage, John would lose his farm, and Sherlock would lose his family’s approbation.

Well, he was a rational man, and he could rationally keep his hands to himself. And they were going fishing, after all, a most wholesome activity. There was no room for debauchery while angling.

By the time he’d thought this through and set up his rods, Sherlock was digging worms near the barn (slowly, it's true, measuring each one as he went and recording it in one of his ever-present notebooks, but digging nonetheless). John marveled at the abandon with which Sherlock got dirty when he was doing something he wanted to do rather than something John told him to do, then laughed.

"Ready?"

"Almost. Do you know, there’s a quite enormous variation in the size of these? I'm going to build a box and track their age and nutrition," Sherlock looked up at him, "If you're amenable." It was his charming smile, to be sure—John recognized it now—but it still worked.

"Fine. Can I help with the digging?"
"No, this is the last. Given ten worms of between two and five inches, and given one inch per baiting, we have between ten and twenty-five worm units, which is sufficient to catch all the fish we can eat for a while."

"What, no salting?"

Sherlock's horrified face was John's reward.

"Fine, fine. Only fresh food," he said, and swung up onto his horse.

Shoe Lake was seven miles from the farm, but through the back of John's farm and across the tail end of Mrs. Hudson's property, it was a ten-mile ride. John looked for traces of deer through the first part, but soon stopped, reasoning that they would have to turn around if he shot something, and he wanted to fish now, and use Sherlock's "worm units".

"You're laughing at me," Sherlock said.

"I like the sound of 'worm units'" John grinned, and Sherlock ducked his head, a pleased smile on his face.

"I'd have used a more scientific term, but there is none, so I had to improvise."

"It sounds very scientific indeed."

"As long as I meet your expectations, John."

The sound of his name in Sherlock's mouth was very sweet indeed, and for a moment their mutual pleasure in the day and each other's company seemed to fill the dark pine woods through which they were riding. Then Sherlock saw some unusual mushrooms and leaped from his horse, causing Arthur to stop stock-still in the path, blocking John's way.

"My expectations were to spend less time in close quarters with a horse's arse" John yelled without rancour.

"This is a fascinating example of a sulphur polyphore, John."

"If we can't eat it, let's go. Your worm units are weakening by the second."

"No respect for science."

"I refuse to dignify that with a remark."

The sun was actually visible in the sky when the lake came into view. The horses picked up the pace when they smelled the water, and Sherlock’s nose twitched, assessing. John kicked Arthur into a trot, and Arthur, always ready to distance himself from Sherlock, was happy to oblige. They whisked away, leaving Sherlock and Idiot Horse ambling through the little poplars on the hill, and were down at the beach in a flash. John dismounted on the pebbly shore and led Arthur to the clear water, almost inviting even on the cool May day. Arthur stuck his face in and drank. The shadow of a cloud scudded over John’s face as he began to unload the gear, and he looked up to the west to see whether the rain clouds were coming back. Though the sky wasn’t clear, it didn’t seem likely. Good
news, he mused, thinking of his wet fields.

He had just decided not to start a fire right away when Sherlock came trotting into the clearing—or rather, Idiot Horse came trotting into the clearing, carrying Sherlock on her back like a sack of flour. Sherlock’s curls flopped crazily, and his face was that of a martyr. Arthur lifted his head and snorted derisively.

“Nice little ride,” John remarked.

“Delightful,” Sherlock said, “I’m so pleased I came to the backwoods to be mocked for my horsemanship. I could have stayed home for that.”

“Fresh air makes it different,” John grinned, unrepentant.

“It does not. The scenery and the biodiversity, I grant you, is a slight improvement.”

“You could dissect a hundred coyote-wolf hybrids here and nobody would object,” John said, waving his hand expansively, “Well, perhaps the animals themselves.”

“True,” Sherlock said, handing him Idiot Horse’s reins. “Shall we fish?”

“Oh, so you are fishing?”

“I will attempt it, since you’re already mocking me.”

“Indeed. Come here then, and I’ll show you.”

“What if they don’t bite?”

“It doesn’t really matter if they don’t bite,” John said, and laughed at Sherlock’s nonplussed expression.

Despite a few mishaps, mostly involving Sherlock’s acute enthusiasm when faced with a strike, they had several fine fish by late afternoon. John cleaned them on a big rock while Sherlock meticulously examined the insides.

“You’re getting blood all over your notebook.”

“Details,” Sherlock said, waving one blood-spattered hand. His face was less than three inches from the insides of their one pike; he would need spectacles when he was older, John thought, and grinned at the idea of Sherlock’s vanity being affected by having to wear such a thing. Then he realized he’d not see it. Well, at least he himself would age in peace.

“If we eat now, we’ll have time to get home, though we might have to ride the last part of the way in the dark. I’ll build a fire, shall I?” he said. Sherlock nodded, his wind-ruffled curls narrowly escaping contact with the pile of fish guts beside him. “Don’t get anything unspeakable in your hair, or you’ll have to go swimming.”

“Fine, John.” Sherlock was clearly vastly disinterested in any kind of caution. He had a fish heart on the tip of one long finger, and was peering at it intently.

John looked up at the sky. The sun was lower in the sky than he liked, and the clouds had massed up while they had been fishing. They were due for more rain, and soon. He decided to set up the fire at the edge of the woods, near a little copse of birch and poplar. They could retreat into the thicker
“I’m taking the horses up there, Sherlock,” John said, pointing even though he knew Sherlock was paying no attention at all.

Sherlock came bounding up some time later, coat over his arm and hair and shirtsleeves damp. His notebook looked suspiciously sticky, but John had no plans to touch that.

“That’s very neat” Sherlock said. The fire was well underway and John was arranging the fish on a grill of green willow branches. “And it’ll hold?”

“It will, for the fish that we’ll cook. We’ll save the larger fish for home.”

Sherlock watched with unfeigned fascination as John roasted two large trout, which cooked quickly over the flames despite the light rain that had begun to fall. John flipped them off the grill on to chunks of Sherlock’s salt-rising bread, and, too impatient for fresh food to wait, they ate with their fingers while it was still hot. The rich flesh burned, but it was delicious, and so they took their pleasure with their pain.

“Ahh,” Sherlock sighed, licking his long fingers. “Nanny always told me I would come to no good if I did this.”

John snorted.

“And here you are. My mother was quite particular about it too.”

“Mother rarely dined with us. Too busy with her research, I suppose.”

“Your mother is a bluestocking?”

Sherlock made a horrified face.

“I wouldn’t dare say that word to her. She’s a mathematician.”

“Oh. Right.” John’s composure was slightly shaken, “And your father?”

“Father isn’t anything in particular. A man about town, I suppose.”

“Family money.”

“You needn’t say it in quite that tone, even if your ancestors were arguably more productive.”

“What do you know about my ancestors?”

“Generations of farmers. The men raise good sheep & cattle, and the women are excellent dairymaids.”

“And yours were what?”

“The usual run of corrupt aristocrats and war heroes, with the odd eccentric thrown in.”

“And you’re this generation’s eccentric?”

“I suppose,” Sherlock sighed.
“Any madness in your family?”

“No more than in yours. You should be careful, you who ran away from the farm.”

“I wasn’t the only one.”

“No,” Sherlock looked at him thoughtfully, but did not ask.

“I had to go,” John said, emboldened by Sherlock’s silence.

“I was stifling. There was a medic’s course two towns away, and so I went. Ha—I mean, it wasn’t the best at home, Dad and I never got on after I grew big enough to question his decisions.”

“You kicked over the traces.”

“As it were. I mean, I wanted to see new things.”

“And you did. More than you wanted to.”

“More than I wanted to.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“You have no idea what happened.”

Sherlock shrugged.

“People died,” he said, “You felt responsible. But it wasn’t your fault.”

“Something like that,” John said tightly. “More fish?”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Sherlock said, “You…”

“When was the last time you had sexual congress?” John interrupted. Let Sherlock have a turn being the target of an embarrassing discussion.

Sherlock’s face flamed red in the firelight.

“N..ah.. none of your buithiness,” he said.

That was unlike him—a lisp. Indicated uncertainty. John wondered if he had been going to say “Never.”

“You are a living, breathing man. You must have had…”

“Had what?”

“Experiences.”

“Is your rifle handy? I feel a sudden need to use it.”

“Damn it, Sherlock you are flesh and blood. You have feelings. You have…you must have…impulses. Self-stimulation?” John persisted. Sherlock hunched over his fish skeleton. A brief shake of the head indicated little; was he saying he did not, or that he did not wish to discuss it?

“Sexual release,” John said, using his doctor’s voice “is an important aspect of men’s health. If you are not experiencing, er, emissions every fortnight or so, there is danger of testicular congestion.”
This brief medical disquisition was met with silence. The fire snapped and popped, sending up sparks.

“Transport.” Sherlock said, after a while.

“How far would we get if one of the horses broke a leg? About as far as you got with a sprained ankle, eh?” John exclaimed. “Transport is still important, and it’s the same with every system. You can’t neglect everything!”

“There is a vast difference between asceticism and neglect. Feel free to tell my brother that.”

“Granted.” John did not know what else to say. At least he knew, now, that excess emissions were not Sherlock’s trouble—if indeed, he had trouble with that part of his body. John sneaked a glance at the front of Sherlock’s trousers.

“Everything works, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Sherlock had still not looked up. “I have no, er, difficulties. Everything is proportionate.”

John nodded as noncommittally as he was able. He was starting to wish that he had not opened this line of conversation, even if he knew he was obliged by Mycroft Holmes to do so. It was one thing to insist that Sherlock look to his transport in the matter of eating, drinking, and sleeping.

It was another altogether to delve into his drawers as though he were only a patient when John was already uncomfortably aware of him as a man. He looked at Sherlock’s hands. If he really were proportionate… Better not imagine what that might look like.

“Very well,” John said. Was he blushing himself? Quite likely. He got up.

“Are we going?” Sherlock asked.

“We should.” John said, taking a canvas sack from Arthur’s saddlebags. It wasn’t ideal for fish; he should see if he could trade with Mezenee for a creel. Usually he didn’t have much to trade—nor time to fish, which was the reason he didn’t have a creel—but perhaps if he managed to send Sherlock away safely, he might afford both things.

He slung the sack into Arthur’s saddlebags. Then, he untied Idiot Horse’s reins and handed them to Sherlock, who had stood and was waiting diffidently beside Arthur for John to be ready. Arthur whickered in irritation at Sherlock’s closeness. Sherlock pulled a face at him.

“Honestly, can’t you two get along?” John asked, rather amused than otherwise.

“He started it,” Sherlock said sulkily.

“He’s a horse.”

“Exactly. Too smart for his own good.”

Arthur snorted.

“Smart horses are important. You need a smart horse out here.”

“I don’t. Thankfully I don’t have one.”

Idiot Horse nudged him with her face.
“She’s not such an idiot as all that, though frankly I can’t fathom why she likes you,” John said.

“She doesn’t,” he said. Idiot Horse nudged Sherlock again, as if to disagree.

“Idiot,” he said, though he didn’t step away.

“You’re a pretty soft touch for such a contrary bastard,” John said.

“Self-preservation,” said Sherlock. “If I ignore her she’ll dump me off.”

“She wouldn’t do that. Would you, girl?” John held out his hand to caress her soft muzzle.

Sherlock dropped the reins.

“That’s a terrible habit,” John remarked, and turned to untie Arthur.

Sherlock didn’t respond. Instead, he took three quick steps into the woods.

“ Feather!” he exclaimed, and reached towards it.

“Probably a gro—“

John did not finish. A jumble of sound assaulted his ears all at once: wingbeats, crackling bushes, horses whinnying, and Sherlock’s squeak of surprise. The horses wheeled and ran, reins trailing behind. The grouse—to whom the feather was still attached—landed twenty feet away, then scuttled into the underbrush.

“Fascinating camouflage,” Sherlock remarked, over the sound of the horses’ hoofbeats growing ever fainter. “ *Falcipennis Canadensis*, I presume.”

“Fucking hell, Sherlock!”

“How could I have possibly known?” He actually looked wounded, John saw. “The feather was curved up like a moulted feather; presumably it would have fallen off within hours.”

“It’s…look, you’re right. It was an honest mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake. It was bad luck.”

“Whatever it was, we’re still stuck seven miles from home, it’s raining, and the sun will set in an hour or so.”

“It’s only a three-hour walk, no?”

“About that. It’s the rain that worries me, though. It’ll likely soak us, and I don’t want to risk another sprained ankle for you.”

“I can do whatever you can do.”

“I can’t take the risk.”

“I’m not your patient!”

“You are.” John said, mouth tightening. “Your brother put my ballocks in a vise so that I’d take care of you.”

“You know my brother’s an arsehole and that I’m perfectly healthy.”
“Healthy enough, but you could be healthier. Ergo, patient. I worked for this land and I still have to defend it!”

“I wouldn’t let him take it away.” Sherlock’s face was perfectly honest, and John stared at him in surprise.

He believed him.

He drew a long breath.

“I know.”

“You do?”

“I do. Now let’s go.”

“Yes. Good.” Sherlock said, looking discomfited. He scrubbed his hands through his still-damp curls. “Let’s.”

“That way,” John pointed. “Oh, and, Sherlock?”

“What?”

“You’re an arsehole too.”

Sherlock cut his eyes at John. John kept his face perfectly straight.

Then they both laughed.

“True.” Sherlock said, and his smile was genuine. “But you’re a cock.”

“Indisputably.” John said, and they set off.

Sherlock stared at John’s back as they made their way through the damp spring forest. He tried to read the set of John’s shoulders for deception or dissimulation, but there was none. All their interactions had been scrupulously honest, reflective of John himself. Something unspoken, yes, but it was deeply personal, unrelated to Sherlock. What had happened in Agra—before Agra, even? Sherlock felt the desire for knowledge, for facts, for data, gnaw at him. He resolved to have a second look at the letters John kept hidden in his trunk; they had not revealed anything he had not already known, but perhaps with the fragment more he had learned at the fire, he would be able to glean something new.

New about John’s past, that is. He could rely on his own observations for the present.

Could he? He recalled the embarrassment that John had displayed in asking him about his sexual proclivities. There was something that went beyond a natural reticence to discuss those parts that were undiscussable in polite company, and, truth be told, this mystified Sherlock more than anything. John did not seem to be overly modest of his person, and he had been in the army. That, in addition to his medical training, meant that he would logically be less reluctant to discuss even the most private of—here, Sherlock shuddered at the memory—“urges.” What might motivate such reluctance?

Could it be unfortunate personal associations? Could his wife have betrayed him, and so could he have sworn off sexual contact? Certainly in the month that he had been here, there had been no
woman here.

But then, there was no feminine element in Sherlock’s case, either; he had made that abundantly clear on his first night here. To John’s credit—possibly to the army’s credit—he had not blanched at Sherlock’s admission of disinterest, simply accepting it as a matter of course.

Was the answer that Sherlock himself had not sought out the consultation—did not wish to be “cured” in any way? He was at John’s farm under duress, and so John, caught between his own personal and professional ethics and pressure from Mycroft, displayed tension and embarrassment. It was a plausible theory.

Sherlock wished his brother would keep his long nose out of his life. Mycroft’s designs were all the more horrible because so far he, Sherlock, was enjoying his sojourn in the woods. Mycroft, damn him, had managed to choose the right man, and now Sherlock was forced to be a burden to John Watson.

He did not want to be a burden to John Watson. He wanted, he thought with some surprise, to be his friend.

“All right?” John asked, turning around to see how he was.

“Right enough. We’re almost at the stand of pine trees, aren’t we?”

“Correct.” John’s nod of approval was gratifying. “We’ve got four miles to go yet.”

“I estimate the temperature has dropped about ten degrees Centigrade.”

“It’s likely to drop more by the time the sun’s all the way down,” John said. “We’ll be lucky if it doesn’t freeze.”

Sherlock tried not to shiver. The rain had not let up, and though much of their walk had been through the forest, his coat was wet and his trousers stuck to his legs. He wished he had worn his union suit.

They trudged on in the gathering dark. Though they spoke the odd word here or there, soon John’s entire attention was focused on finding the path. Sherlock watched each step and copied it, not wanting to take the slightest risk of straining his ankle again. John could not carry him; if he fell, he must drag himself home or wait here in the increasingly heavy rain—unthinkable—to be rescued. He was already cold, even with the walking; to stop would mean his muscles would cool, his joints would stiffen, and he would be at an even greater risk of exposure. He must not stop.

Soon, Sherlock’s world had shrunk to watching John’s feet and imitating his steps, one after the other. He was cold, colder than he thought possible. His ankle had begun to ache, but he squared his shoulders and modulated his breathing. John must not know that he was cold and sore. He would take five more steps. At the end of those five, he would take five more. The rain might not end, but their march would. Five more steps.

“All right?” came John’s voice, stead as it had been the first time.

“All right.” Sherlock replied.

Five more steps. A fat drop of rain fell down the back of his neck, and an icy rivulet rolled down his spine to the waist of his trousers. He felt a shiver of cold start between his shoulder blades and engulf his neck and shoulders; he mustered his self-control and drove it back. If he gave over to shivers now he would stop walking, and if he stopped walking he would not start again. He was so very cold, but he took five more steps, and five more after that. It was dark now, and the temperature had dropped again, likely to 2 degrees centigrade. Another shiver at the thought, which he controlled as well. He
would master his body. Five more steps.

Time slowed; each step seemed to take an endless time, so much that when the sound of Harry’s indignant bellowing came to Sherlock’s ears through the wind he was shocked. They had arrived, and he had not stopped walking. He had not betrayed how cold he was. He drew a long, shuddering breath and swung his arms for warmth as they covered the last stretch.

“Finally,” John said. “I didn’t fancy that much, let me tell you.” He turned to Sherlock; though his hair was plastered over his face by the rain, his cheeks were pink and his face open. Clearly, he was not in the same danger of being overcome by the cold as Sherlock was.

“Would you…I mean, d’you mind, going in and starting the fire? I wouldn’t ask, but the animals are hungry and cold themselves. Not,” he added, seeing Arthur and Idiot Horse coming around the barn, “that some of them don’t deserve to be.”

Sherlock nodded. It would be good to get out of the rain. He walked the last hundred feet to the house, then fumbled at the door until it gave way before him. He reached for his buttons, but discovered that they were completely stuck—must be the wet. He’d leave it on, then. Probably better to keep the heat close to his body until the house warmed up; right now, it was barely warmer than outside, though it was at least dry.

Matches. Where did John keep the matches? A tin. In the kitchen. He felt his way over to the kitchen bench and tried to identify the match tin by touch. His hands would not cooperate; he knocked over the sugar and upset the cups before he came to the tin. It was open: an error, but thank goodness for small mercies. He felt for a candle as well, and when he had one, he tried to take a single match from the slippery mass in the tin. They seemed alive in the way they fled from under his fingers, and he cursed as he came up empty again and again. Finally, angry, he dumped the entire tin on the bench and was able to roll one away and position it between finger and thumb. Carefully, clumsily, he tried to strike it against the lid: once, twice, three times. Nothing. He took another and tried again. Still no success.

Sherlock was shocked to feel a prickle of tears in his eyes. Here he was, a nearly world-renowned scientist, and he could not strike a match in the dark. He struck his fist against the bench, sending matches flying every which way. He took another match, and another. Finally, one struck. He lit the candle, his hands shaking, and—blessedly—there was light.

Relief brought more tears, and several overflowed. He shook himself. He would not fail now. He would light a fire, and he would get warm. John would get warm. John needed him to light a fire, too. He fixed the candle on to the bench—crude, but couldn’t be helped, and went to the box beside the hearth. Pulling out crumpled handfuls of birchbark and sticks of kindling, he laid them on the old ashes. It wouldn’t be an elegant fire—Sherlock did love laying elegant fires—but it would be warm. He went for the candle.

He yanked it from the bench, and as he did, the melted tallow slopped onto the wick and extinguished the flame. Sherlock watched it happen as though it were a million miles away, but when the light went out and he realized that he would have to go through the whole process of picking up and striking a match again, he sat down hard on the floor, defeated, and let the tears roll down his cheeks.

He only sat for a moment before the shivers hit him. He had never been so cold in all his life as he was then; his bones themselves felt like ice. His teeth chattered hard, so hard, and he could not have moved if his life depended on it. Sherlock knew his body was trying to warm him; once the first wave of shuddering had passed, he might be able to get up and try again. For the moment, however, his misery was so intense that he could not feel at all hopeful. He closed his eyes, the chatter of his
teeth filling the dark cottage, and waited.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected chapter title for this chapter is “Sherlock Is Bad at Riding. Also, Grouse Are Sneaky”.

The theme song is “Fishing in the Dark” by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Hi, I’m Red and I was a teenager in Canadian cowboy country in the ‘80s. However, I still don’t hate this song. Find the Easter egg.

I’m grateful to Ariane deVere’s transcripts from TAB for the conversation about Sherlock’s urges.

Spruce grouse are very very good at camouflage. The hens especially: they hide in the dead leaves on the forest floor and they don’t move until you’re super close. Then, of course, they burst up in a huge flapping of wings and scare the crap right out of people (and horses, which, as one lovely tumblr post pointed out, are basically couches with anxiety).

Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chills and Fever

Chapter Summary

In the backwoods, there's only one surefire cure for hypothermia: skin-to-skin contact. John makes the sacrifice, and Sherlock's life is saved, but there is a price to be paid: awkward conversations about semen, button-fly drawers, and John's dignity. Also, certain secrets from John's past are revealed, making Sherlock more puzzled than he has ever been.

Chapter Notes

I keep thanking girlwhowearsglasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on, but seriously, this took a long time to write and I was going stir-crazy keeping it to myself. Their appreciative reading and their incisive comments made it easy for me to continue. Doctornerdington, my main beta, has also been the literal actual best at all times.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock could not have said how long he had sat on the floor shivering. He did remember, later, that John’s arrival had brought with it no relief, nor any emotion at all. He had not even started at the sound of John’s voice.

“Sherlock?” John called into the dark room, clearly puzzled at the lack of light.


“Sherlock!” John rushed to him and felt his hands, and his face. Had Sherlock been able to move, he would have taken John’s hands and held them; they were the warmest things he had touched in hours.

“I should have known,” John said, angry at himself, “I should have guessed; you were so quiet. You’re hypothermic!” His hands were pulling at Sherlock’s coat, making quick work of the buttons. Sherlock could neither resist nor help, he simply sat, still overtaken by shivers.

“Can you stand up? Sherlock, answer me!” John set his hands—so warm!—on either side of Sherlock’s face. Even in the dark Sherlock could feel him looking, assessing. “Can you?”

Sherlock shook his head, slightly. He really could not, not yet.

“You’re going to have to, Sherlock, d’you hear me? I’m going to pull you up and take your clothes off. It’s going to be worse at first, because it’s cold in here, but I promise, you’ll be better off dry. Give me your hand.”

Sherlock tried to lift his arm, failed. Tried again, with the other arm. It moved, a little.

John shook his head and, planting his feet firmly, seized Sherlock behind both elbows and pulled.
The force would have surprised Sherlock, had he been in any state to be surprised. Instead he just stood there, swaying slightly, while John efficiently stripped him to his drawers. He noted, as though from a great distance, that he had stopped shivering.

John had clearly noticed the same, and a pucker of worry formed between his eyebrows. He laid his hand on Sherlock’s hip; it was warm, even through the damp wool, and Sherlock moved towards it. John frowned.

“Sherlock, I have to take your drawers off. They’re soaking wet. Nod if you understand.”

Sherlock nodded. It didn’t matter.

John fumbled with the mother-of-pearl buttons on the fine wool drawers with a sense of trepidation that was almost entirely due to Sherlock’s state. He’d stopped shivering now, and though it was dark as the inside of a black cat, John would bet money that he didn’t have that Sherlock’s lips were blue. He needed to be dry and warm immediately, and a dram of brandy inside him as fast as he could be made to swallow. Otherwise—John did not care to think of the implications.

The drawers puddled at Sherlock’s feet. John draped Sherlock’s arm around his shoulders and pivoted him towards the back of the cabin.

“My bed, Sherlock. Aim for my bed.” Sherlock staggered forward, and John only just managed to pull back the blanket before he fell.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice was soft, lost.

“Hold tight. I’m going to…” John was torn. Sherlock needed heat, fast, and the only source handy was John himself. But if John didn’t light the fire, they’d both freeze in the night—and John was none too sure Sherlock could make it through without a hot drink. He covered Sherlock up.

“Hold on, Sherlock. Just a few more minutes.” Thanks to the heat of the animals in the barn, he wasn’t hypothermic, but he would be soon if he didn’t take off his own wet clothes. He took small steps across the cabin, and found the pile of matches. The candle rolled under his foot, and he picked it up.

The light gave the story away; John was once again furious at himself for missing the signs on their long trek home. He bit his lip when he saw the fire, laid in a haphazard fashion. He struck a match; it caught immediately, the flames licking at the small dry branches Sherlock had piled over the tinder.

“Oh, Sherlock,” he said. Sherlock lay like a lump under the blankets, unmoving and uncaring, and John quickened his movements, filling the kettle and piling larger logs around the snapping branches in the hearth. When that was done, he stripped off his own coat and held his hands before the fire.

It was postponing the inevitable, though just for a moment. He knew, as well as he knew his own name, that climbing into that bed and wrapping himself around a naked Sherlock Holmes was the only way to save Sherlock’s life and reason. Yet, for the sake of his own reason, he hesitated.

Then, he remembered. His summer drawers were in his chest; he’d put those on and save himself at least some embarrassment. He spread Sherlock’s clothes over the settle to dry, then his own, and pulled on the linen drawers. They were thin with wear, but they would be protection of a sort.

“Sherlock,” he said, as he approached the bed. Sherlock did not respond. John lifted the blankets and took a deep breath; it was worse than he had thought. Sherlock was unresponsive. He should have
hurried, he thought, mentally chastising himself. He shoved the image of Sherlock nude—long, pale back and surprisingly full bottom shining in the firelight—to the back of his mind. It was time to save a life. The bedframe creaked as he slid between the covers.

John’s feet were the first part of his body to make contact. Sherlock’s calves were icy; he twined his feet around them. Then, the midsection; John recited his Hippocratic oath as he made contact with that glorious arse. He threw his arm around Sherlock’s torso and, turning his head, pressed his cheek against Sherlock’s nape. Lord, but the man was inhumanly cold; it was as though he was carved out of marble. John chafed his shoulders and torso, willing him to respond.

He did not. John lay behind him, chafing with his hands, until the water boiled and he had to tear himself away to make tea. Dumping tea profligately straight into the kettle, he prepared two cups, both with three spoons of sugar, and Sherlock’s with a tot of whiskey. He refrained from putting any in his own; he wasn’t so cold, and he didn’t need any lowered inhibitions, either. The shock of a naked body against his own had already awakened a deep hunger within him, but he stood firm against it.

The tea was ready. John ladled it into the cups, the heat of the fire delicious against his nearly-bare skin. Setting aside his own to cool, he took Sherlock’s over to the bed and attempted to rouse him.

“Tea, Sherlock,” he said. No response. He had joked, last week, that all it took was the word “tea” to wake Sherlock from a deep slumber. He had complained, actually, because his teapot was too small for more than two cups, and he’d missed having two to himself. Today, he wished that his complaint were true; he’d give so much, he thought, to have Sherlock sit up and beckon imperiously. He set the cup on his trunk and shook Sherlock. Still no response.

He climbed back in, his own skin warmed by fire. He slid one arm under Sherlock’s neck, wrapped the other over his torso, and strategically tangled his legs into Sherlock’s long, cold ones.

“Come on, Sherlock. Wake up. Warm up,” he pleaded, rubbing his hands over Sherlock’s chest. Surely the treatment should be having some effect by now. Well, effect on Sherlock. It was certainly having one on him, worry and cold notwithstanding. He twisted his hips back and breathed deeply. If Sherlock didn’t respond, he couldn’t take his torso, the main source of heat, away for long, but he needed some breathing room. He stretched down and rubbed Sherlock’s feet with his own.

Sherlock jumped when John ran his toe along the sole of his foot—ticklish. John, encouraged, did it again.

“No,” Sherlock mumbled.

“Bet that was your first word,” John said, in his ear.

“John?” Sherlock sounded confused, but he was awake.

“The one and only.”

“Ridiculous,” Sherlock slurred his words a bit, “Thousands of Johns.”


John froze. ‘Best’? He could not quite believe it.

“There’s tea, Sherlock, sit up.”
“No.”

“Come on, Sherlock, I know you’re cold, and tired, and you want to sleep, but you need it.” John untangled his legs and sat up himself. Sherlock’s eyes were still closed, but in the firelight John could see that his skin no longer looked so waxy.

“Up,” he said, hauling on Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock wrinkled his brow but allowed himself to be pulled into a half-sitting position.


“Tea, John.” Sherlock said, but did not reach for it. Very well, John thought. He cupped the back of Sherlock’s head in one hand and held the tea to his lips with the other. Sherlock sipped it, slowly at first. Then, he began to drink it in gulps, so quickly that John pulled it back, afraid he’d take too much.

“Wait now. It’ll make you sick—no, it will—,” he said, when Sherlock made a moue that nearly undid him, “so lie back down.”

Sherlock lowered himself from his elbows back to the pillow. A hiccup shook him.

“Better? You should have told me how cold you were, you great idiot.”

“I am cold.” Sherlock said, flinging his arm over John’s waist.

John did not, could not move. Sherlock made a small, displeased noise and pulled him close. John struggled to get away: Sherlock’s arm was just below his navel, and his face was tucked into John’s ribs. Black curls tickled his left nipple.

“Stop moving. You’re warm,” Sherlock said, flinging his arm over John’s waist.

Sherlock flung a leg over John’s thighs. In and out, John, in and out. You’re saving a life. At the cost of his own, or at least at the cost of his sanity.

The breathing control must have worked because in time, John slept. He must have; the fire was much lower the next time he opened his eyes. Sherlock had moved, too; he was on his back now, with only one leg thrown over John’s still. The wind whistled around the cabin.

John checked his breathing—it was easy and smooth, and when he put his hand on Sherlock’s carotid pulse, at the base of long neck. A month ago, when Sherlock had been just an abstract imposition, he’d have wrung it, cheerfully. Now… he didn’t know what he wanted. No, he did. He wanted to touch. But he wouldn’t—Sherlock was unconscious, for a start, and he was a patient of sorts, and he came with an overprotective older brother who had too much power.

John slid his leg out from under Sherlock’s and reapplied himself to checking the pulse. It was steady, though slow. He reached for the tea; it was cool, but Sherlock would still need it. He shook him awake and Sherlock’s eyes opened slowly.

“More tea now,” John said, and Sherlock propped himself up on his elbows again. “How are you?”

“Tired,” Sherlock said, finishing the tea. “Is there more?”
John reached for his own cup, and Sherlock drained that, too.

“Go back to sleep, now,” John slid out of bed, shaking himself as the cold air touched his skin, and padded over to build up the fire.

“Will you come back to bed?” Sherlock asked, a whining hitch in his voice, “It’s still cold. I’m cold.”

John looked at him. In the low firelight, Sherlock was only a pale shadow against the blankets, but John’s brain filled in the missing lines of his body: the broad shoulders, the surprisingly muscular arms, the light dusting of hair on the lean chest. To get back into bed would be a master class in self-control. John exhaled gustily. His breath formed a wispy cloud in the cold air of the room, and he shivered.

“Please,” Sherlock said, pulling the blankets up around his neck. John sighed, and, giving the fire a somewhat more vigorous poke than he had intended, got back into the warm bed. Sherlock was not quite so forward this time as to wrap himself around John, but he did not move from the center, either. John curled himself on his side, his back against Sherlock’s thankfully warm body, and fell asleep.

The moment John woke he knew he should have slept upstairs. He had not moved in the night but Sherlock had, and he was curled against John’s back. His face was buried in John’s hair, his arm was flung low over John’s hip, and his extremely proportionate erection was wedged into a very suggestive position between John’s arse cheeks.

John was already stiff in his drawers—typical morning distension—but he became even more so as the sheer sensuality of his position became clear to him. They were in contact from head to toe, Sherlock’s large, warm, naked body burning against the skin of John’s back and thighs. His hand shifted to hang softly against John’s knee, elbow uncomfortably close to the tent in John’s rough linen drawers. John shivered with the strength of his desire.

Out, and right away. Grabbing the bedframe, he pulled himself to the edge and got up, ignoring the drag of Sherlock’s hand across his arse and the small, sleepy snuffle of discontent Sherlock made at the loss of contact.

Christ, he thought, as he stood up and saw that his cock was pushing out of his flies. He pushed it back in, and even that small contact made his breath short. He felt his assessment of himself as a rational man slip a notch or two.

Well, at least Sherlock hadn’t seen it. And he wasn’t going to, either. John had barn work to do and fields to hoe; he could manage to be outside all day. Squatting down by the trunk, he lifted the lid as quietly as he could to fetch his spare trousers and shirt.

“Good morning.” Sherlock said, voice deep and rough. John jumped as though he had been stung, dropping everything and falling backwards. His head hit the floor with a thump, and his cock bobbed up through his flies once again.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed, scrabbling for decency and his trousers.

Sherlock said nothing, but he did not look away as John yanked his clothes on and retrieved his socks and still-damp boots from beside the hearth. John could feel those eyes taking stock of his every inch. Fine, then. Though he was burning with shame and embarrassment, he stared back at Sherlock as he finished dressing. He straightened up.
“Next time you feel yourself getting chilled, tell me.”

“I will.” Sherlock replied. Then, as John turned to go, “Thank you for saving my life,” he added.

John nodded curtly and left the cabin.

Sherlock flopped back into bed when the door closed behind him, letting his face drop out of the mask of calm he had feigned for John’s benefit. In truth, Sherlock was the opposite of calm; his body, so sluggish yesterday, now tingled from head to toe. His cock was distended more than usual, so much so that bolts of sensation flew up his belly and down his thighs when it brushed against the blankets or his hand.

And yet the blankets were dry. Sherlock frowned. He rarely woke up like this. Usually, when his cock was this hard, it was before he went to sleep; when he woke up, his bed was sticky. He thought, with a brief shudder, that he was glad for the hypothermia; if he had somehow ejaculated on John in his sleep, he wasn’t sure he’d survive the embarrassment.

As it was, Sherlock felt quite shy as dribs and drabs of the last evening came back to him. He had been weak enough that John had undressed him and put him to bed—that was bad enough—but he remembered now, in a hot flush of shame, that he had asked John to come back to bed with him.

Why had he done it? He had been cold, certainly, but the wool blankets had been sufficiently warmed by then to maintain a standard body temperature. It hadn’t been for John’s benefit, either. He had wanted it for himself. John’s presence beside him, in the brief moment of awareness, had been something he had never imagined he could want, but that he now desired above all things.

He rolled over and buried his face in the blankets. The bolts of sensation intensified as the weight of his body came down on his cock and he gasped in spite of himself. His skin felt itchy and his face flushed, and his testicles certainly felt congested.

Perhaps Mycroft was right. Perhaps he was hysterical. He certainly felt a need for relief in the pelvic area. And yet… John’s genitalia (definitely beyond proportional, Sherlock noted) had been engorged as well. Was he hysterical? He certainly seemed healthy, if antisocial and frequently cross. And costive.

Frowning, Sherlock sat up. He needed a notebook. And yet, he was very uncomfortable. His mind kept sliding sideways to the image of John, half-dressed in the firelight. His body was pleasing: a slender musculature that was surely closer to da Vinci’s ideal than anything Sherlock himself had ever seen in life. At the thought, Sherlock’s cock throbbed. Damn! Even his hands were not as steady as they usually were. He shook himself and got out of bed. As he went up the stairs, he stepped in a pile of scattered matches; a stab of shame at yesterday’s weakness deflated his erection, and he did not have the trouble dressing that John had had.

He certainly had made more work for John, and embarrassed them both in the aftermath. Should he leave? he wondered as he filled the kettle and poked up the fire. He could, he supposed, pack up Idiot Horse and his journals and go home to be a thorn in Mycroft’s side once again.

Yet… tormenting his brother was familiar territory, without the zest it once had. These woods were much more interesting, if slightly more dangerous, and there was much greater scope for science. And, of course, there was John. The pleasure of their interaction was not lost on Sherlock; it was as novel as it was unexpected, and it must be preserved.
How, then, to best deal with the situation? Certainly John would still be embarrassed when he came in for breakfast. Perhaps the direct approach would work best. Encouraged, he gathered up the matches and the tin, and scraped the candle from the floor. They would speak man-to-man, as fellow scientists, and the awkwardness would pass. Pausing in the perusal of his J29 notebook, Sherlock smiled. They were friends. *Friends.* It would be quite all right.

His optimism lasted until John came in, stomping his feet.

“Breakfast, eh?” he exclaimed, in a voice so hearty it startled them both.


“Thanks, mate,” John replied, then frowned. He sipped his tea. It seemed to steady him, and he continued.

“Sherlock, what you saw… that’s normal. Normal male physiology, a morning erection. I’m sure,” he coughed, “You have them too.”

“Yes!” Sherlock exclaimed. “Quite. In fact, I did this morning, the same time as you, which proves—not that I need to answer your invasive questions—that everything works perfectly well.”

“Oh.” John seemed a little taken aback at such frankness, but the tension in his shoulders eased a fraction, Sherlock noted, pressing on.

“And, since we’re on the subject, are you due, John, for a sexual emission?” he asked, holding up his notebook and pen with a we’re-all-scientists-here expression.

John blanched. Hm. Perhaps that expression wasn’t as friendly as he had meant it to be, Sherlock thought.

“I’m not the patient,” John said firmly, “You are. Did you have any… urges… with your tumescence?”

Sherlock reflected on the warm buzzing in his belly and the tight heaviness it had engendered. Mental distraction as well; he had not been able to deduce anything of John’s mental state, remaining rather more focused on his own.

“No.”

He knew immediately it had been the wrong thing to say. John’s expression shifted from “game-though-embarrassed” to “Dr. Watson” in a blink.

“That’s very unusual,” John said. “Are you certain?”

“Perhaps some heaviness in…er, that area.” Would it be enough?

“And you didn’t attempt stimulation.” Drat! The doctor was not so easily deterred as the man.


John was looking at him most suspiciously. Sherlock feigned nonchalance.

“You do remember what I said about testicular congestion.”
“I have rarely tried to forget something more quickly.” Sherlock drawled.

John rolled his eyes.

“Fortnightly seminal discharge is important for your-No!” John exclaimed, holding up his hand, “I don’t want to hear the words ‘just transport’ again. Your body is important.”

A muscle fluttered in his cheek. Sherlock’s attention drifted from his words to that muscle. How fascinating John was, in all his moods. His face seemed endlessly mobile, and strong emotion made him a veritable symphony of human reaction.

“…previous experience. Sherlock!”

“Ah. Well. Look, I don’t gratify the urges partly because I don’t know the protocol.”

“The protocol.” The muscle was twitching again, this time, Sherlock was sure, in amusement. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Alone, or with others?”

“I definitely don’t know the protocol with others.” Neat bit of avoidance there, he thought. “I’m not a soldier, with other men easily accessible at all times.”

At this provocative statement, John’s cheek twitched, but otherwise he held his calm. Sherlock grinned inwardly. A shot in the dark, that had been, but a good one. One of those lovers in India had been a man: Sholto? Possibly. Might be Mary’s maiden name, too.

“You don’t need a partner.” John’s face was like a thundercloud but he was still Dr. Watson. Sherlock shivered slightly. “Perhaps you do need treatment.”

“I do not. I am in full possession of my faculties.” He really was not. His symptoms had returned, and, though milder, they were intensely distracting. His attention vibrated between his own body and John’s; never before had he been so aware of someone physically. “Let’s have breakfast.”

John went through their normal breakfast routine with an odd, disembodied feeling. Sherlock’s question about his own sexual emissions had started the scrambling of his brain; his shot about soldiers had finished it. John’s previous rational resolution to reduce his emissions was all mixed up in the previous night’s torment. Sherlock’s confirmation that he was indeed a lover of men sat on top of the mess, something almost too tempting to think of.

John needed to get outside, and soon. He took his plate to the kitchen bench and headed for his boots.

“John?”

“What?”

“I am,” Sherlock approached him, expression honest and hand extended, “I am grateful, more than I can say, for you saving my life.”

John reached out to reciprocate. Sherlock’s hand engulfed his even before John’s arm was fully extended; John had insufficient time to prepare himself for the contact.

Then, Sherlock drew him into an awkward hug. John froze, but let himself be clasped to
Sherlock’s body. His sensible self was screaming that he should retreat; his less sensible self reached out for the contact once again.


Too late. Not only was John half-hard, so was Sherlock, as a stir against John’s thigh attested.

“That’s fine,” he said, clearing his throat and stepping back. “I would have helped anyone. I’ll be clearing up by the far north field,” he added, and fled, leaving Sherlock standing bewildered and aroused in the middle of the cabin.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected title for this chapter is “Hypothermia is Hot (Boners Taken as Read Okay?)”

Theme song is “It’s Getting Hot in Here” by Nelly, I’m sorry.

Dr. Red’s First Aid Tips: DO NOT GIVE ALCOHOL TO PEOPLE WITH HYPOTHERMIA. OR CAFFEINE. THIS IS THE 19th CENTURY. THEY BELIEVE IN TESTICULAR CONGESTION AND PELVIC MASSAGE. DO NOT IMITATE THEM. (disclaimer: I’m not that kind of doctor but JFC even people with literature Ph.Ds, however sketchy, know stuff like this)

I’d also like to add that my darling beta, doctornerdington, added the following comment after that note: “NOTED. No tea or alcohol, but sexing up okay.” She is correct. Sex up those hypothermic people as soon as they are conscious and consenting.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Goat breeding, instigated by Mrs. Hudson, sets the fox amongst the metaphorical chickens. John faces a medical dilemma, and Sherlock learns a few things about anatomy and physiology.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to go ahead and set a little warning on this chapter for the way Sherlock thinks about himself and his body. There's a lot of self-hatred about his sexual desire, so if that's triggering to you you might want to skip the last third of the chapter, although the last 2 paragraphs are probably all right. Let me know if you see anything else that needs tagging.

I keep thanking girlwhowears glasses, ellioop, turifer, and marigolds for reading and cheering me on, but seriously, this took a long time to write and I was going stir-crazy keeping it to myself. Their appreciative reading and their incisive comments made it easy for me to continue. Doctornerdington, my main beta, always knows when to kick my ass and when to be the nicest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John did not come in for lunch that day. His stomach growled, but he could not face Sherlock yet. Instead, he would wait until work exhausted one hunger before he satisfied another. There were plenty of woods to clear, after all. He hefted his axe and turned his attention to a spruce tree that was wider around than he was.

By early afternoon he was ravenous, but he had also managed to get the tree down. The sled was getting full when the wind changed, bringing him the rank, distinctive smell of goat. Male goat. He sighed. The rattle of a wagon and the familiar “Yoo-hoo!” call confirmed it: Mrs. Hudson had arrived with Frank to breed Harry and Clara.

John had long since stopped asking himself how she knew to arrive just as his goats went into heat. She just knew. And, since she brought Frank to him (“Gets terribly upset if he doesn’t have his little walking tour, dear. Ridiculous animal”), it was one less thing for him to do.

“Hello!” he shouted, leaving Hamish and Jack tethered to a tree and pushing his way through the woods to the wagon track that passed as a road.

“John, dear,” she said, waving gaily, “It’s been an age. I was worried you were starving to death out here.”

“It was so wet I’ve had to stay out here. Don’t want to drown in a mud pit,” he replied.

“I was worried you’d be murdered by that strange man Mike brought you.” She shivered at the
thought, rather pleasurably than otherwise.

“You’d enjoy laying me out for burial. Give you something to talk about.”

“Don’t get smart with me, young man, or I’ll turn right back around and you can do without Frank this year.”

John laughed. “Harry would thank you. She loathes Frank more than she loathes anything else, and that’s saying something.”

“Poor thing. Can’t say as I blame her, the old bastard.”

“You love that old bastard.”

“I do not. I tolerate him for the sake of the late Mr. Hudson.”

“You hated that old bastard.”

“True.” She grinned. “Now, are you going to drive back with me or should I just go down to the farm quarter by myself and set up lunch?”

“Lunch?”

“Don’t make that innocent face with me. You know full well there’s food in this wagon for you.”

“I do, thank you. No, wait until I get this last log up and I’ll go down with you.” Somehow, John felt apprehensive about Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock meeting without supervision. What could they possibly find to say to each other? Bread-baking techniques, he supposed, and the state of the garden, recipes for salt pork, John’s digestion…no. No. He secured the logs as quickly as he was able, untied the oxen, and nodded to Mrs. Hudson.

“What’s this young man like, then?” she asked, as he made his way out to the track.

“He’s…” How to describe Sherlock? He was so many things. “He’s a scientist. Looks younger than he is. Arrogant, certainly, and really quite rude. Charming, when he wants to, which is rarely. He bakes bread and experiments on my geese. Bit mad, overall, but strangely likeable.”

Mrs. Hudson was quiet for a moment.

“So you like him.”

“I suppose. No, yes. Yes, I like him. It’s all a bit strange, but I like him.”

“It’s good for you to have company.”

“When it’s not making the house uninhabitable with the stench of burnt feathers or antagonizing megafauna or drinking all my tea it is.” Or being the most desirable person I have ever seen and asking inappropriate questions about penises.

“Even then.”

“I suppose,” John grumbled, and drew himself onto the track behind her.

When John pushed the door open, arms full of Mrs. Hudson’s baked goods and ears full of Harry’s angry yelling (she had begun the minute she’d scented Frank and wouldn’t stop until he was gone), Sherlock was out. John frowned. Sherlock’s boots had still been wet this morning, and, in any case, Sherlock really shouldn’t be out in any kind of boots so soon after his brush with hypothermia.
John set the goods on the bench. He’d just have to wait. In fact, it might be a mercy that Sherlock was gone; he and Mrs. Hudson had to supervise the goat mating rather more closely than otherwise, as Harry was prone to taking chunks out of Frank at key points in the proceedings. John felt he had talked enough about sexual congress in the last two days to last him some time. Having to supervise goat mating seemed to add insult to injury, especially with Sherlock watching. He’d seen John’s cock—the most mortifying event of John’s recent life—what if he began to make comparisons with Frank’s genitals?

“You’d come out on top there though,” his inner voice reminded him. “Shut up,” he said.

“What’s that, dear?” Mrs. Hudson had come in and he hadn’t heard her. “Goodness!” she said, “Not very tidy, your young man, is he?”

“He’s not my… he’s not my young man.”

“No, of course not,” she said soothingly, bustling over to the kitchen bench. “Well, at least he’s done a good job here.”

“How do you know I didn’t do those dishes?”

“They’re not greasy.”

“I have other priorities.”

“Good thing he doesn’t. Is this his bread?” She broke a piece off the current loaf and tasted it. “Quite nice, though the dough is not quite salt enough.”

“John likes it less salty,” Sherlock’s voice broke into John’s consciousness as out of nowhere; John whipped his head around in what he realized must be quite a comic way, but he couldn’t help it. Damn him! He looked up.

There he was, tousle-headed and still beautiful, sitting up in the loft bed. His shoulders were, thankfully, covered, but his shirt lay loosely open, and his long white neck showed to advantage. His face was partly lit by the one sunbeam that shone into the loft, and he looked, John thought sourly, like a perfect angel.

“Well then,” said Mrs. Hudson, “If it isn’t Sherlock Holmes! Of all people, hidden away in the backwoods! Here I was worried that you were some stranger that was going to murder John!”

“Mrs. Hudson!” Sherlock said, smiling back. John frowned.

“You two know each other?”

Sherlock leaped out of bed, seized his boots—why were they there?—and came down the ladder to engulf Mrs. Hudson in a hug significantly less awkward than the one he and John had shared earlier.

“Goodness, Sherlock dear, how you’ve grown!” Mrs. Hudson said, when Sherlock released her.

“She’s a friend of my mother’s,” Sherlock said to John, apologetically. “They were at school together.”


“Well then.” John did not quite know what to do. “Lunch?”
“Right. I am forgetting myself. Sherlock, your bread is delicious, it really is, so let’s have that, and you can save mine for dinner. I’ve got a chicken, and some of last year’s chowchow, a dried-apple pie, and a few other little things. Sherlock, if I had known it was you out here I’d have brought mince tarts; I know you love sweet things.”

“Pie is fine,” Sherlock said, not looking at John.

“Sherlock, d’you think you could…” John waved a hand at the litter of notebooks, pens, and specimens that consumed his table, the settle, and indeed most of the room.

“Oh. Of course, I can clear up,” Sherlock replied, hastily making piles.

Dinner was a rather hilarious event. Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson were droll, scientific, gossipy, and sarcastic in turns. John mainly observed, particularly enjoying Mrs. Hudson’s caustic comments if Sherlock pontificated or bragged. Sherlock, in his turn, accused Mrs. Hudson of being an imbecile at least three times.

Once the pie had been consumed, though, a slight pall fell over John’s enjoyment. He avoided Sherlock’s eyes as he rose.

“We’d better be getting on with it,” he said, “if you’re going to make it home before dark.”

“I’m just going to Lestrade’s,” Mrs. Hudson said. “Frank can take his time.”

“Chance’d be a fine thing,” John snorted. “You know Harry’s going to try and kill him.”

“True. Well, more time at Lestrade’s for me.”

“You like Lestrade,” Sherlock said musingly.

“Who doesn’t?” Mrs. Hudson said, and John shuddered inwardly at the tone of her voice. He had, in the past, suspected the relationship between the two went beyond the borders of the platonic, but given their age difference he preferred not to think about it too closely. Neighbours really did deserve their privacy, and it was none of his affair.

Sherlock stood around awkwardly as Mrs. Hudson and John got into place. It was clear that this was a well-choreographed event: Mrs Hudson led Frank out of sight behind the old shanty, and John untied Clara and followed at a distance. Harry had been shut up in the barn, and she was making her displeasure felt; Sherlock heard kicks and thumps as well as Harry’s increasingly frantic yelling. He went behind the shanty as well.

“Why are you hiding this … coupling when Harry can’t see it?”

“She can,” John said shortly, loosening Clara’s rope a bit. “There are a couple of cracks in the barn wall; I keep meaning to block them up but never quite manage it.”

Sherlock nodded, and turned his head to get a whiff of fresh air. The smell of billy goat was overwhelming, though neither Mrs. Hudson nor Clara seemed too bothered by it. In fact, Clara was straining to get closer to Frank, her tail flicking, her vulva pink and open. Frank seemed outwardly calm, but he was not at all disinterested. He urinated in great spurts over his legs and face, then approached Clara’s rapidly flicking tail. The slow unfurling of his phallus, buoyed by his truly massive testicles, indicated his interest. He sniffed Clara, then, without any further preamble, mounted her.
Sherlock felt John tense from six feet away, but he did not quite dare deduce the tension, fascinated as he was by the slide of Frank’s member into Clara. Clara pushed back against it, easing its entry. Sherlock bit his lip. Certainly he had seen animals copulate before, but never had it seemed so immediately relevant to his own experience. The heavy ache in his own lower abdomen was back. He bit his lip harder to dissipate it, with limited success.

Thankfully, the act was brief. After an interminable quarter of an hour, Frank withdrew without ceremony, John, face motionless, led Clara away to the far side of the house and tied her there.

“She’ll be out of sight of Harry that way,” Mrs. Hudson explained confidentially. “Harry can’t stand the scent of Frank on her.”

“Oh.” Sherlock did not quite know how to respond. He was sure there were scientific questions to ask regarding goat pair-bonds, but he could not formulate one.

“They love each other, you see,” Mrs. Hudson said. “Harry and Clara. Harry’s a complete berk but she does adore her partner.”

“Is… that… usual?” Sherlock could feel the unnatural tone of his voice, but was unable to articulate clearly.

“I’ve seen it frequently…in goats and people. Horses too.” Mrs. Hudson replied. “Sometimes love comes where you don’t expect it. It’s quite natural.”

Sherlock knew, with a horrible clarity, that he was flushing.

“Love is very unscientific,” he muttered.

“You never said a truer thing, dear. Now, here comes John with Harry, so take a step or two back.”

Harry’s yelling had reached ear-splitting levels, and John’s forearms, Sherlock noticed, were bulging with the effort of keeping her in check.

And yet…Harry was moving towards Frank.

“I thought she hated him,” Sherlock said.

“She does. Can’t stand to have him touch Clara. But her body needs his, and she knows it. Oh yes,” Mrs. Hudson practically twinkled, “She’s eager and angry. That’s why we need two people.”

Sherlock was shocked. He watched in silence as Harry pushed her hind end under Frank’s nose. Frank was a little less eager than he had been with Clara, but his piston still rose to the charge, and in moments it was over.

“Get him away!” John shouted. Mrs. Hudson pulled Frank away before Harry’s teeth sunk into his neck. Though she was restrained by John, Harry made a very creditable attempt to kick Frank in the face before she was hauled away. Had she been human, Sherlock was certain her language would have been of the most obscene sort.

“Well.” Mrs. Hudson said, having tied Frank to the wagon. “Plenty of excitement as always. Sherlock, are you quite all right?”

Sherlock was not certain. He felt shaky, dizzy, short of breath; his brain was not the efficient machine but rather a confused jumble of sensation.
“It’s all right, dear. It sometimes catches people this way. Why don’t you go inside and make some tea?”

“Yes,” Sherlock muttered, and went, not standing on ceremony.

John himself lingered behind the barn on pretext of tying Harry up safely—a necessity—but also to regain his own composure. Watching Sherlock’s face as Frank penetrated first Clara, then Harry had been a special sort of torture. The dawning awareness on his face, the flush on his cheeks, and the tension in his trousers all pointed to one thing.

Hysteria. Sherlock was suffering. And, God help him, John would have to provide treatment. He waved Mrs. Hudson goodbye—she was already halfway down the track—and went to find Sherlock.

Sherlock was curled up on the settle under two blankets. His face was paler than usual under his flush, and his hands shook.

“Sherlock?” he said, gently.

“I’m fine, John,” Sherlock rasped.

“You don’t look fine. Care to tell me what the problem is?”

“You know perfectly well what it is,” Sherlock said, moving the blankets aside. His cock was clearly distended, pushing against the fabric of his trousers. John swallowed.

“I can help.” John said, feeling short of breath himself, words rushing out of him, “Do you want me to treat you? I know it’s what your brother wants, but it would honestly help.”

Sherlock shook his head and retreated under his blankets.

“No. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“I will be.” The note of finality was unmistakable.

“Very well.” John said, and went back out, shaken and scrambled in his turn. He knew he could have insisted, but he would—yes, even in Mycroft Holmes’ teeth—respect the wishes of his patients. And, though John had left the profession behind in the wake of that bloody day in Agra, the vestiges of his integrity as a medical man demanded he respect Sherlock Holmes’ wishes. And yet it was the most frustrating thing he’d felt in aeons, because, dammit, he cared for Sherlock as a person and wished for his well-being.

That’s not all you care for, his mind supplied, conjuring once again the figure of Sherlock, nude in the firelight. John pushed away the little voice, angry.

Damn Mycroft Holmes, damn medicine, and especially damn his own useless self for being unable to draw a line between the personal and professional. Would he never be done giving himself trouble? He slammed his fist into the wall of the shanty, which lightened the load for a moment. Then, with bruised knuckles and an angry ache in his belly, John returned to the north field.
Dark had begun to fall before John was ready to go back to the cabin, but he could not in fairness keep the oxen out any longer, and Sherlock would be looking for him, no doubt. He trudged home, exhausted in body and in mind, but still unable to shake the heavy desire that had settled in him.

Herding in the geese, he fed them, then collected the goats—putting them in separate pens for now—and let the horses and oxen in, giving the latter an extra handful of grain. No sign of Sherlock, but the curl of white smoke from the chimney of the cabin told him that dinner was on.

He'd swim. That's what he'd do. It was cold yet, but it would feel good to be clean, and remove the stench of billy goat—both literal and metaphorical—from him in the icy shock of the lake.

Securing the barn door, he walked quickly down to the one spot in his muddy lake that was easy to enter. Without looking back at the cabin, he stripped down and limped to the edge. The first few inches were not cold, but he kept walking, and didn't stop until he was waist deep, toes grounded in the squishy mud. He ducked himself under, almost losing his breath again at the chilly embrace of the water. He damned himself once more although his breath had left his body and re-entered it full of Sherlock Holmes' scent and self. A man, a stranger, and a patient: three reasons why this infatuation was a terrible thing.

John ducked himself again, holding his breath until his lungs strained and his body shivered of its own accord. He came to the surface gasping. As he dried himself with his shirt, forcing himself to go slowly, he resolved to right himself. He could be a professional, and a friend to the man, and he could control his base urges. He was not an animal, after all. He would master himself, and Sherlock Holmes too, and he would begin now. John dried his body with his shirt, covered himself, and stumped towards the house.

Sherlock watched John go towards the lake from the far window of the cabin, and kept watching as John stripped. Sherlock knew he should look away, both for John’s sake and his own, but he could not; he drank in the sight of that muscular body like water. He wished, in a rare moment of unselfishness, that he could reassure John, who he knew was struggling to deal with his unwanted guest, damn Mycroft for breathing, but also with his vision of himself. Sherlock knew he should not tell John (“Don't make personal remarks, Sherlock”) that he had nothing to be ashamed of, physically at least.

His body vibrated at the thought. He bit his lip. He would not force John to treat him; he would not be Harry to John’s Frank. He would master his body; he did not need to bow to its impulses, hysterical or otherwise. He was strong enough to return his body to its normal, brilliant state without troubling John. Besides, Mycroft could not be proven right.

John was nearly at the door. Sherlock stoked up the fire and set the rest of the pie on the table, with two plates.

“Rough day?” he asked as John came in, and his voice was steady.

“Very,” John said. He rummaged in his trunk for his other set of clothes. “Just going to dress; turn around.”

Sherlock did so without comment, but he dropped the same knife three times in quick succession.

John watched Sherlock bang around the kitchen. He was clearly doing his best to suppress his agitation, but it was pervasive; in fact, his condition appeared to have worsened over the course of the afternoon. Anger—never far—surged through John. Why would the daft bastard not accede to
his body’s demands? First the hypothermia, and now this! He was the most stubborn man John had ever met.

He watched Sherlock flip their omelettes onto plates. One of them was broken into tiny bits; Sherlock covered it with a piece of bread and handed John the unbroken one.

“Thank you.” He took small bites, though he was famished.

“I was, er… experimenting with the tensile strength of cooked eggs,” Sherlock said. His voice was deeper than usual, and not as steady.

“And what did you find?”

“The lighter-coloured eggs have a slightly reduced strength,” Sherlock said, but did not elaborate. Instead, he put a forkful of broken omelet to his lips, first smelling, then tasting. He set down his plate and went to his pile of notebooks, and did not return. John, grateful today for the silence, finished his omelet and watched Sherlock’s rather frantic scribbling.

Science, John realized. Science was the way to convince Sherlock to let him alleviate his suffering. Data would convince Sherlock to accept pelvic massage without losing face.

Or, John realized, admitting that his brother was right. Damn Mycroft Holmes again! He’d set Sherlock against treatment just by advocating it, and now John had to dismantle that wall of contrariness as well as fight his own urges. Well, data was the way to do it.

He cast his mind back to his medic course. They had really only touched briefly on genitalia. Hygiene had been covered, but that was not an issue in Sherlock’s case, as he valued cleanliness at all times. There had been a brief lesson on the dangers of both sexual excess, which would lead to a sapping of the fighting spirit, and abstention, which would lead to the aforementioned testicular congestion. He pushed aside the brief sentences on inversion; he could not honourably repeat them, loving women and men as he did, nor did he think it was any use for Sherlock.

Neither the physician nor the manuals had covered the mechanics of relieving testicular congestion, but Mycroft Holmes had said it: pelvic massage. John reached for his one medical text, but all it contained was a brief summation of the results of congestion: “If the patient does not release his spend, a lingering heaviness, aching, or discomfort will result, causing restlessness, moroseness, and irritation of temper.” It certainly sounded like Sherlock.

What John needed to do, he supposed, was to try it on himself. He thought of the birchbark pot of beaver grease that Mezenee had brought him. It was sitting in the open cupboard, and John stared at it, meditatively. He would try the procedure on himself, first, for lack of any other subject. It would put him at ease while performing it, and first-hand data was something Sherlock understood. He would do it tomorrow…no, tonight. Sherlock wouldn’t stir from the house, he had no doubt, and he could say he was checking on the goats.

"I'm going out, Sherlock, to the barn," John said, after dinner. Sherlock didn't even look around as John took the grease from the cupboard; he was staring meditatively into the fire, wrapped once again in his blankets.

Once in the barn, John blocked the door and leaned onto the goat enclosure. He opened the pot of beaver grease and sniffed-- nothing unpleasant. In fact, it smelt slightly of raspberries. He dipped his finger in, and rubbed a tiny amount between finger and thumb.
It dissolved immediately, slippery and silky. John was impressed by the smoothness of the fat and
made a note to thank his friend. Perhaps it would serve to grease some of his finer tools--although at
the price it had cost him he would have to use it sparingly.

Now. The actual procedure. He laid his non-greasy fingers to his neck and took his pulse--normal.
His state of health had been perfectly fine, as usual; perhaps a slight change in digestion since
Sherlock's arrival. He couldn't remember whether a more varied diet had effectuated the same change
last spring. His sleep was excellent, as long as he didn't stop and listen to Sherlock breathe or there
was no burning bread dough in the cabin. He had definitely been drinking less; the level of whiskey
in the bottle in the pantry had descended quite slowly. Sherlock again; his talk was so interesting in
the evening that John did not think of pouring himself a cup. Even Sherlock's silences were
compelling.

How many reasons he had to be grateful for Sherlock; he had objected to Mycroft's imposition, but
Sherlock had been the perfect antidote to his loneliness and misanthropy. And Sherlock had a boon
to the farm as well, taking over duties that John abhorred and thus making the farm more productive.
They would eat well, this winter, and if the harvest was as productive as planned, have grain and
livestock to sell.

A short 'baa' brought John back to his purpose. Clara stood behind him, asking for attention. He
pulled one of her ears, and she pushed against his hand, then began mouthing his shirtsleeve.

"No, now," he said, pulling away. He decided to lean on the pig's rail instead; he didn't need his shirt
eaten while he was trying to perform a medical experiment.

Which, he thought, it was high time he started. He unbuttoned his trousers and drawers, shifting them
down on his hips. The cool evening air was nice on his clean skin, he thought, as he scooped out a
dollop of grease. Arranging himself comfortably, he shook out his hands and took a deep breath,
willing himself into doctor mode. As was customary, he first examined the area with his non-greasy
right hand, palpating first his thigh muscles, then his bollocks, then the shaft of his cock. All seemed
to be in order.

He warmed the grease in his left hand and coated the length of his cock with it. His heart rate was
increasing, he noted, and his cock thickening. As he grasped his whole shaft, he felt it fill more in his
palm. His belly tightened.

He drew his hand carefully from base to tip, and then back down to the base, and he was completely
erect. He measured against his hand as he drew a shaky breath--just shy of six inches, as usual, with
his girth a little wider than proportional.

Fine. Now, the massage: a consistent stroke, he imagined, until the crisis was reached, at which point
the congestion through ballocks and belly would be relieved. He settled his grip, encompassing as
much as he could, and began. One long stroke up, one down. His grip stuttered, and he repositioned
his fingers. One stroke up, one down. There. He could feel his bollocks tightening already. He
breathed deeply.

Then, he settled into a regular rhythm, firm at the base and light over the tip, his hips rocking slightly
for extra friction. His breathing was already harsher, and his pulse pounded in his ears; his cock
stood straight out from his body, glistening with grease.
Then he realized just exactly what he was doing. He stopped.

Pelvic massage, indeed! It was self-abuse, pure and simple, and the heaviness at the base of his belly, through his bollocks and behind, wasn’t congestion – it was desire. Sexual desire. He wasn’t performing a medical procedure. He was wanking.

And it was, as far as he knew, the only treatment for hysteria. He was supposed to treat Sherlock for hysteria. Like this.

His desire grew heavier at the thought. John clenched his fist, and closed his eyes. How was he such a fool?

Images of Sherlock flashed before his eyes: Sherlock arriving, his hair in disarray; Sherlock’s long spare body in the sun, bare chest glistening with icy lake water; Sherlock huddled next to him, erection nestled against John’s arse.

Oh, John desired him, all right, desired every creamy, frustrating inch. And he had permission, he thought. Permission to take Sherlock’s cock into his hands and give him pleasure. It would settle him, too, John knew it would; likely Sherlock was just too much of an arsehole that nobody wanted to get close enough to fuck him. A few "crises" and he'd be much more tractable.

John’s cock, through these musings, was not indifferent. It bobbed at each image; when John thought of Sherlock naked and hard, reclining on the settle, perhaps, or kneeling. John's hand drifted back to his cock; he could not keep it away. He felt guilt and shame as he squeezed it tight, then began to stroke again. It was wrong, so wrong, to think of Sherlock exposed, cock slick with grease or bent over a fence.

He was a bad man. A very bad man, and yet he did not stop, instead imagining himself settling between those lush arse cheeks, stretching Sherlock and filling him, making him cry out, and leaving him soft and pliant, afterwards. Heat curled through him, and his crisis came quickly, a shudder of sharp relief.

When he opened his eyes, the barn wall was striped with white, and Clara was staring at him. He felt the judgment in her glare was well-deserved.

"I can't do it," he said to her, fastening his trousers, "I won't."

A thump and a rustle seemed to indicate her agreement—or was it her desire to eat the handful of summer hay he had grasped to wipe the wall?

"No, not this," he said, bending towards the spot. "Yuck."

Then, through the crack in the wall, he saw a flash of movement.

Sherlock.

John’s cheeks flamed. He wished, for a moment, that he could sink into the earth and never return. Had Sherlock seen his crisis? If he had… and John thought of the images that had provoked it. Awful—and he had to live with the man.

How much had he seen? John cursed himself. He could only hope that Sherlock’s apparent naivete would protect him from the realization of what John had done, and that Sherlock’s native embarrassment would prevent any searching questions, or worse, curiosity.

Because it was all clear to him now: pelvic massage was no treatment at all, but rather a sexual act
performed in guise of medicine. Treating Sherlock would mean touching to please, not to cure—and John could not allow such a thing, either as doctor or man. Though Sherlock’s suffering was real, heaven knew, John would not, he vowed, lay a hand on Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock’s only thought had been to observe John interacting with the geese alone, but he had remained frozen as John had performed the intimate act which had been his clear intention. As it had unfolded before his eyes, he had been powerless to move. Only John’s strangled exclamation upon seeing him had given his feet wings.

Then, Sherlock fled unthinkingly, away from the cabin and away from John, away from the overwhelming shock and sensation of seeing him in such a vulnerable spot. His whole body burned with exertion, but he kept moving down the southeast line, heedless of any obstacle. Once he reached the track, he turned into the woods, running through the clearish parts until he fetched up, panting, on the top of a small cliff. His legs trembling, he sat on a fallen log, his head in his hands, a crumpled figure in the fading light.

He tried to breathe deeply, tried to get oxygen to his brain, but his body, now in complete revolt, would not let him. Panting, he felt the hysteria return: a heavy ache in his belly and the chafe of his prick pressed against his trousers, tenting them out in an embarrassing testament to his lack of self-control. Why? Why was he like this?

He writhed at the thought of John knowing this of him—but was John not the same, his cock thick and hard, jetting white spunk out in a painful spasm? John had said nothing about treating himself. Yet the evidence supported it—Sherlock had seen the grease on the floor beside him, and he had been manipulating his cock.

John’s cock. Sherlock shifted uncomfortably as images of John's cock, seen incompletely but compellingly through the crack in the barn door. It was thick, hard, and the tip had glistened in the diffuse light; when John's crisis had hit him, the spurt of white liquid had affected them both strangely, John crying out and Sherlock breathless. Then, John's face in spasm floated up before his eyes, and then installed itself, contrary to his bidding, in an alcove in his mind palace. It joined images of John's face in laughter, in anger, in concern.

Sherlock drew a deep though still-ragged breath, his nerves calming somewhat. The constant derangement was eating away at his self-control. He was no longer the man he had been, and these urges—he shuddered at the word—were, must be, at fault. They had once been so rare that they had been taken care of by his unconscious; the nighttime ejaculations had been messy, certainly, but had required no effort on his part. Now, these urges had intruded into his conscious mind and rendered him all but useless.

Could he do what John had done? Could he put his hand upon himself and bring himself to crisis? He had no medium to do so, but perhaps he could still attempt it. Anything was better than this animal half-life, in which his mind was ruled by his body and he could not interact with other people—with John—in a civilized manner.

He reached for his flies, shaking as though he had to piss uncontrollably. When his trousers were finally open and the night air cooling the heated skin of his belly, he reached for his cock. The friction as he pulled it out of his drawers was both exquisite and torturous, and he sighed softly. Remembering the friction of the wool blankets against his cock that morning, he gripped himself more tightly. He recalled John’s rhythm, one stroke up, one stroke down, and replicated it. The bolt of sensation shot through him again, making his knees tremble. Redoubling his stroke, he arched his
hips up and gasped, suddenly frantic to reach the point towards which his body yearned.

He was close to something when his agitated lungs drew in the ripe tang of feces, so heavy in the air he could not take a breath that was untainted. The sudden onslaught tripped the rest of his senses, and he became aware of an odd stillness. He froze, cock still in hand, until the quiet was broken by a grunt, a snuffle, and a series of crashes in the underbrush.

Towards him. Bear.

For one suspended moment, he was aware of the ridiculousness of his situation: sitting on a log, his trousers around his hips, and his swollen generative organ in his hand. Then, another crash in the woods made him aware of the danger. His need had made him unobservant to such an extent that he was not even certain where he was—at the edge of a ravine, yes, but in the dark. A destructive, dangerous force, this chemistry.

The bear—for a bear it was—moved closer. Sherlock buttoned his trousers as swiftly as he could and stood. He would leave, as quietly as possible, and he would walk to the cabin and ask John for treatment. If he did not, he risked greater things than Mycroft’s smugness: his mind and perhaps his life.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter’s rejected title is “Cockblocked by a Bear.” It was very nearly the actual title too but I couldn’t quite let myself do it.

The theme song is “Ahead By A Century” by The Tragically Hip.

I adapted John’s description of Sherlock to Mrs. Hudson from John’s blog.

Also, I know the term “megafauna” is anachronistic but it makes me laugh like a loon so I kept it. I’m not even sorry.

Other things I'm not sorry about: Lestrade & Mrs. Hudson getting it on.

I got the cold convent school idea from a throwaway remark in An Old-Fashioned Girl, by Louisa May Alcott. Also, can you imagine Mummy Holmes and Mrs. Hudson together at convent school?

I cannot adequately explain to you just what a mature billy goat smells like. The closest I can get is that it is oily and pungent, and penetrates every pore you have, whether you touch the goat or not. Also, goat balls are enormous…like, mango enormous.

And yes, goats urinate during sex. This is a thing, and I’m grateful to my friend Marigolds for having looked it up: "A doe in season (in heat) will indicate her interest in breeding by wagging her tail rapidly for the buck; this is called flagging. Her urine contains chemicals which tell the buck that she is ready to breed. The buck will urinate upon his face, beard, and front legs. He will approach the flagging doe, she will squat and urinate, and he will place his nose in the urine stream. Raising his head high, the buck will curl his upper lip to detect the pheromones which tell him that the doe is receptive to being bred. Intermittently with this activity, the buck will walk/run beside the doe as she leads him around the pasture/pen, placing his head beside her head,
kicking one of his front legs forward, hollering "wup," "wup," "wup" and other raucous clucking noises."

The line from John’s medical textbook does not exist in any medical textbook. I am cheerfully perverting science for my own ends.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.
Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
A Reckoning

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock are at cross-purposes over the advisability of pelvic massage until Sherlock’s body takes over and solves the problem...for now. A trip to town means an unwelcome parcel from Mycroft, a delicious dinner with Angelo and some unnerving news from Stamford. John is haunted by his past.

Chapter Notes

As always, my main beta, doctornerdington, and my other readers marigolds, turifer, ellopop, and girlwhowears glasses, are the best. I am also so grateful to all of you that are reading and commenting. You're super funny and your comments are amazing.

Tags are now updated through Chapter 9.

Warning in this chapter for John's PTSD being triggered and a panic attack. If you want to avoid it, just stop reading at the paragraph that begins "John had been enjoying Sherlock’s sharp deductions" and begin again at "Breathing is good." Sherlock said. I'll put a little summary of what you need to know from that paragraph in the endnotes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John trudged along the east line of his property, parallel to the track. He shivered. He’d been searching for Sherlock since Sherlock had fled the barn, but dark had fallen so quickly that tracking was almost an impossibility. The soft leaf-mould and emerging grass hid his trail, even with a lantern and John’s excellent ability.

Damnation! It would be bad enough if Sherlock decided he was upset enough by John’s venality to leave, but if Sherlock himself were hurt...John found himself genuinely worried. As frustrating as Sherlock was, John did not want anything to happen to him.

“Bloody man,” he muttered, as he held the lantern up to yet another false trail. And yet, he couldn’t blame him. He, John, had not expressly forbidden Sherlock to join him, and so he must bear his part of the blame. He sighed. At least the release had done him good, though he was not sure he could look Sherlock in the face again after the visions that had floated before him in his pleasure. They threatened to invade him again now, just as he should be feeling most penitent for his depravity. He closed his mind against the thought of Sherlock nude before him, and trudged on.

A light rain began to fall. It was not as cold as the night of their hike back from the lake, but neither was it warm. John hoped Sherlock had his coat on. If he had come out to the barn in his shirtsleeves, he would catch a chill, and another bout of hypothermia would mean the end of them both.

There! A trail, a real one. Sherlock’s large bootprint was clearly inscribed in the wet grass at the edge of the poplar woods. John followed with relief. Something Sherlock’s size through woods like
these would be easy to trace, especially in a state of agitation Sherlock.

The broken branches proved the truth of this assumption, and John followed them gratefully. He did not, however, call Sherlock’s name, reticent to have it in his mouth; instead, he proceeded rather stealthily than otherwise, so that when he—thankfully—came upon the figure of Sherlock standing immobile in a group of spruce trees by a ravine, he took him by surprise.

Sherlock, oddly, did not exclaim either, looking at him with a strained expression that John put down to the extreme mortification relative to their circumstances. He was about to open his mouth to say … well, what, he did not know, but something, when Sherlock held a shaking hand to his lips. Then, he pointed to his nose. John inhaled.

Fresh bear scat, with that tang that made it clear that this was a large male bear and that he had been eating meat. Dangerous, then, and close by. Nodding at Sherlock, John pivoted and began to retrace his steps. Sherlock, normally noisy in the woods, followed in silence.

They had only gone a few steps when they heard a loud snap of branches and a grunt. John kept to his measured pace, but a crash closer behind him told him that Sherlock had not. Sherlock sped past him, clearly terrified, and out into the cleared area. John followed, almost laughing at Sherlock’s fear, despite their circumstances. Then, he remembered Sherlock was a man of the city, and that these dark woods were just as frightening to him as dimly lit streets were to John.

Of course, terrible things could lurk in the woods, as he himself had cause to remember. He hurried his pace, wishing to be next to Sherlock in case the bear should charge. It would be unusual if it did, but John dared not risk it. He caught up to Sherlock, who had ceased running but was walking as fast as he could towards the glow of the cabin.

“All right?”

“That was a bear.”

“Bears aren’t dangerous, Sherlock, not as a rule.”

“This one is.”

John knew he was right, though he didn’t know quite how he knew.

“Don’t go into the woods after dark,” was all he said, more curtly than he intended.

“I won’t. John,” Sherlock said, then hesitated.

John looked at him. Though the only light was that of the cabin, still some way away, the strain on his features was clearly visible.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock” he said, taking a deep breath. “I should have warned you not to come to the barn.”

Sherlock shivered again, pursing his lips.

“Inside,” he said, jerking his head towards the cabin. “Let’s talk inside.”

John’s stomach clenched. He shrank from this conversation, but he matched his steps to Sherlock. Better to have it out, he thought, steeling himself. He would apologize, and he would conduct himself in a more seemly manner in future. At least, he thought, there would now be a clear line of action: pelvic massage was out of the question. He would have to see about an iron tonic, he thought,
as he stepped into the cabin, but for now toast and tea would have to do.

Once the door had closed safely behind them, Sherlock divested himself of his coat. His hands were still shaking from the bear encounter, and his belly and balls ached from his interrupted attempt at self-medicating. He perched on the settle, leaning forward eagerly as John built up the fire and filled the kettle.

Three deep breaths. He was safe, inside. He did not know why he was so afraid of bears; was it simply that they were the unknown? The solid, definite presence in the dark had had no shape or form; he had not seen, only heard and smelled, and the absence of complete perception had made him nervous. That, coupled with his overwhelming physical sensations, had left him feeling exposed and nowhere, as though his body were dissolving into the forest. There had been no place for either rationality or science, and the immensity of what he could not perceive or know had shaken him profoundly.

And yet he could not go home. He wished desperately to come to terms with some of this. He picked up a notebook, riffled through the pages. What would it serve to record this kind of uncertainty? Words felt inadequate, and so he flipped the notebook closed and watched John instead. His back was to Sherlock and he was slicing bread. Sherlock observed—admired—the lines of his shoulders. Surely they were not as tense as they had been at dinner; had the… act… brought him relief? He opened his mouth to ask, but found himself unable to, at the last moment. This was the ideal opportunity to clarify the physiological outcome of pelvic massage, but he could not formulate his question. Something foreign had gripped him; his eyes lingered on John’s shoulders, his mouth, his hands, and he found he could not ask about John’s physical sensations without blushing.

So he sat, quiet—unnaturally quiet, Mycroft would have said. Or rather, Mycroft would have deduced … what would he have deduced? Mentally, he raised two fingers in the direction of Carleton. Why must he always have the shadow of Mycroft and his greater mind hanging over him?

“Sherlock?” John was holding out a cup of tea and a piece of toast, slathered with butter and Mrs. Hudson’s chokecherry jelly. Sherlock took it gratefully.

“There’s plenty of sugar in the tea,” John added, unnecessarily.

“John…” Sherlock felt he should break the awkwardness, but John forestalled him.

“Sherlock, I’m sorry. I don’t quite know what else to say.”

“When can you treat me?” Sherlock blurted. “You tested it, it was effective—I can tell, your shoulders are less tense and you’re calmer—and I didn’t want to need it but I do. There’s something terribly wrong with me, John. I can’t work, I can’t think, I’m afraid of perfectly natural things. It’s eating me up. It will destroy my mind and my peace!”

John stared at him as if disbelieving.

“You want me…to do to you what I did to myself. In the barn.”

Sherlock forced himself to meet John’s eyes.

“I do.”
The word echoed in John’s ears like a nightmare, and in John’s cock like a wet dream.

“I can’t,” he said flatly.

“You won’t.” Sherlock said. “Why won’t you?”

“Pelvic massage isn’t a treatment. It’s… a sexual act. It’s something lovers do. I don’t… I can’t, with you. It would be wrong-unethical.”

Sherlock’s unwavering gaze felt like the darkest condemnation. John held firm.

“Surely if I consent,” Sherlock said, “it is ethical?”

“If you consent to this, you consent to sexual congress, not a medical procedure.”

“But…” Sherlock frowned. “This is the protocol, is it not? To consent to sexual congress with another person? I’m consenting. With you.”

Inwardly, John groaned. Outwardly, he shifted in his chair.

“Sherlock, the terms are different. With a sexual relationship, there are variables that don’t exist in medical treatment. Consent means different things.”

“Such as?”

“Attraction, consideration, emotions. Consequences,” he added, thinking of Mycroft.

“This is contradictory.” Sherlock’s face was a mask now. “Just yesterday, you urged me to allow you to do this. You believed it to be an effective medical procedure. Today, it’s a sexual act, one that carries dangerous consequences. It’s the same act!”

“Right!” John exclaimed. “And I didn’t know that! I’m a shit doctor, Sherlock; it’s why I’m here, it’s why I don’t practice. I could hurt you!”

“You didn’t hurt yourself.”

“It doesn’t hurt, Sherlock, not physically. It’s another type of pain that is at stake when it’s between two people: your peace of mind, for one, and your heart, for another. Physical contact—sexual contact—raises emotions that can be difficult to manage.”

“And you think I can’t manage them.”

“I don’t know if you can. I don’t know if I can.”

“So you consider us both incompetent. How delightful.”

John put his head in his hands. He ached—he did, he ached to touch Sherlock and yet he must not. He knew he could bring him relief, clear his head, restore his equilibrium! And yet, he would not, because he knew it to be wrong.

“That’s bloody unfair!” John said, low. His left hand flexed and released. “I’m trying to do what I can, and this is what I can. What’s right.”

He knew it was right. If he laid hands on Sherlock’s body and brought him pleasure, only disaster
could ensue. He thought of the shipwrecks of his past loves; he could not subject Sherlock to that.

“Very well.” Sherlock turned further toward the fire, his profile still as marble.

John ached.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock. I am.”

No reply. The silence stretched out as the fire died down. Finally, John rose to prepare for bed.

“Goodnight, Sherlock.” He didn’t ask whether or not Sherlock would turn in. Sherlock nodded, briefly, and returned to his internal contemplation.

Sherlock eventually did bank the fire and stand, stretching his body out of the cramped position he had taken. His muscles protested and the congestion at the base of his spine surged back into his consciousness. He thought, briefly, of taking himself in hand again—in the loft he would be untroubled by bears, surely—but the memory of John’s anguished face stopped him. If it were an act of sexual congress, then he dare not subject John to even an accidental participation, given John’s scruples.

A puzzling thing, Sherlock thought, as he settled under his blankets. He could find no scientific rationale for John’s behaviour, nor could he read it to his satisfaction. John had seemed to enjoy the “procedure” he had performed upon himself. Was that the key to its sexual nature? Pleasure? He himself had certainly felt pleasure in the woods.

Sherlock turned on to his stomach. His cock was hard again—the stimuli must be the memory of his pleasure in the woods and of John’s face as he met his crisis—and he rolled his hips, pressing his cock down into the blankets and the clean hay that now made up his bed. Then, John rolled over, sighing in his sleep, and Sherlock stopped.

Emotions. John had said that emotions were dangerous. Sherlock frowned. He himself found emotions—usually those of others, as he himself was admirably scientific and self-contained—rather tiresome, and so he could sympathize with John’s point of view. And yet—he had felt emotions in John’s company that had not been tiresome. Quite the opposite, in fact—the emotions had been exhilarating, comfortable, warming.

For the first time Sherlock considered the link between his overwhelming physical symptoms and the emotions he had been experiencing. John seemed to be the common denominator to them both: Sherlock knew he had not been so miserable physically until he and John had been close in the bed after that cold, cold walk. He tried to summon up the images of that night; his brain eagerly obliged, replicating the movement of John’s body, his scent, the sound of his breathing.

Then, the misery was back, and Sherlock could no longer think rationally. He was hard, so hard, and he wanted so much. Were John to lay hands on his body, he felt as though he would meet his crisis immediately; were he to put his own hands on his body, it would be much the same, he feared. And yet he could not. He would not cause John any further pain for this. He rolled to his back, gasping as his cock dragged against the blankets, then lay still.

Sherlock breathed in. He would not tremble. He would not roll his hips. He would fall asleep, and he would fall asleep by counting geese. One *Anser anser domesticus*. He breathed out. Two *Anser anser domesticus*. In. Three *Anser anser domesticus*. Out.

The last *Anser anser domesticus* he remembered was the four hundred and thirty-eighth.
When he wakes up, though, it’s like he just went to sleep, and he’s confused for a moment. He shakes his head.

He’s in the bed downstairs. The fire is giving off just enough light that he can see John, naked and basking in the heat of the flames. Then, John walks towards him with a broad smile and the pleasure in Sherlock’s groin flares. He stretches like a cat under the covers, and when John pulls them back, Sherlock’s body pulses. John smiles and sits on the edge of the bed. He reaches for Sherlock. Sherlock shivers, and waits for that hand—rough, callused, competent—to touch him.

John sees him shiver and stops his movement, smiling as Sherlock bites his lip in anticipation. John’s hand hovers over Sherlock’s cock, then drops onto the softness of his belly instead. Sherlock bites his lip.

“Not what you wanted?” he asks mildly. His eyes are warm and ardent. Sherlock doesn’t want to beg, but also he doesn’t not want to beg. John’s hand is so close.

“Please,” Sherlock says, and John takes him in hand, so gently. The first stroke is relief but the second brings his hunger to a sharp point. He nearly cries out when John removes his hand to lick at his own thumb; he does cry out when John’s damp thumb slicks over the head of his cock. John’s hand is so sure as he makes small circles, then takes up a rhythm. Sherlock can only arch into it and let himself be carried away on a rising tide.

When he reaches his crisis, he gasps his pleasure into John’s mouth. The wet splash of semen on his chest takes him by surprise, but the heat in John’s eyes as he watches Sherlock fall apart is worth it.

“You are delicious,” John murmurs, tracing a finger through the pearlescent pools. Sherlock cannot respond; his breath has not returned. His eyes close.

When Sherlock woke, his stomach was sticky and his blankets were too. However, he felt a marvelous sense of lightness, and his head was clear for the first time in days. He palpated his testicles: only a slight residual tenderness.

Relief enveloped him. His body had not betrayed him, it had saved him. There had been some slight delay due to new stimuli, perhaps, but that was understandable.

Sherlock stretched luxuriously in body and mind. He would make a new batch of bread today, with water from the far pond rather than the well, and he would write up his observations regarding his brush with hypothermia. Could geese be hypothermic? It was unlikely he’d be able to find out. Possibly one of the chickens, though.

His mind filled with questions about the relative cold protection of skin and feathers, he dressed and tiptoed down the stairs. John was still asleep, his face slack and the front part of his hair sticking straight up. Sherlock was grateful for his sake, too. He, Sherlock, would turn a blind eye to John’s self-pleasure, and John would be relieved that Sherlock’s body was operating as it should. Pelvic massage and emotion would no longer be their preoccupations; they could devote themselves to agriculture and science, as it should be.

John woke feeling rumpled, with an ache in his balls again. He felt feverish, almost sick, as if his emotions were poisoning him. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then blinked and sat up.

“Good morning,” Sherlock said, elbow-deep in bread dough in the kitchen. He was smiling, to
John’s surprise: the tension of the prior night had vanished and Sherlock looked completely… normal.

“Sleep well?”

“I did!” Sherlock replied with enthusiasm. “My subconscious regulated my genital system most adequately. Although perhaps I will do some washing today.”

John looked at him, comprehension dawning.

“A nocturnal emission.”

“Indeed, and not before time. I should never have worried; I’m so sorry I troubled you, John. It’s just that my system was much more overloaded than it has ever been—perhaps some research is in order—but thankfully my mind is quite restored. You, I perceive, slept fitfully, despite your earlier emission. Perhaps it was the stimulating effect of the tea so late at night?”

“Tea is what’s necessary right now, at any rate,” John muttered, somewhat bowled over by Sherlock’s enthusiasm. In fact, he was not a little concerned. Twenty-six was late for nocturnal emissions, although he supposed Sherlock’s lack of masturbatory habits was a partial cause. And why was his system overloaded now? Could it be…no, impossible. John pushed the idea away. A man that beautiful (not to mention educated and connected) did not become stimulated by a nondescript farmer like himself. It must be the goats.

“I thought I’d go into town today,” he said, finally. “The roads are dry enough, and I don’t have anything but clearing to do today. Will you come?”

Sherlock nodded.

“Will we pass by Mrs. Hudson’s? She promised me some sourdough starter.”

“We can do, yeah, although we’d best go through on the way back. She’ll keep us for ages otherwise.”

“Very well. Let me put this dough in the root cellar, then, and I’ll get breakfast.”

“Just bread and cheese, though. We’d better get moving. I’ll do the chores and hitch up Arthur.”

“Right you are, John,” Sherlock said, and, whistling, went to fetch the cheese.

The road was clear and dry, and the day was fine; they reached Bonne Chere before noon.

“Post office first,” John said, “then the store. Angelo will have some dinner for us if we do it that way.” Sherlock looked bored at the mention of dinner, but followed nonetheless. Before they reached the post office, however, Sherlock peeled away towards the hotel.

“Interesting,” he breathed, but before John could ask what, exactly, was interesting, he was gone. John shook his head and continued on his way.

To his surprise, there was a parcel for him at the post office. There was no return address, but it was heavy, and wrapped in expensive paper.

Mycroft. John was tempted to throw it out immediately, but then he thought that perhaps there were things for Sherlock inside—non-vile tea, maybe—and decided to keep it. Although, it was
addressed to John himself. Unable to contain his curiosity, John perched on the fence outside the post office and broke into the thick packaging. Inside he found a packet of tea—expensive tea, as predicted—some white sugar lumps, and a letter. He sighed.

The crisp paper crackled under his hands as he shifted the tea and sugar clumsily under his left arm. Smoothing it out, he held it up to see that the letter was not a letter at all, but a pamphlet. A lurid picture of a man with a congested face adorned the top corner, and large letters blared “LETHARGIC? IRRITABLE?” above a wall of fine text.

John pursed his mouth. He didn’t need to read the text to suspect what the topic of this pamphlet was. The word “prostate” caught his eye and he quickly turned the sheet over in case passersby saw him holding it. But the other side was no better. John’s ears burned when he saw the sketch of a long cylindrical object and the large words “PROSTATE MASSAGER” below it. Someone had underlined “A Cure for the Refractory Young Man” in purple ink. Exhaling gustily, he crumpled up the paper, cursing Mycroft Holmes under his breath.

What, exactly was Mycroft trying to do? John did not trust him in the slightest, and the appearance of this package at such a critical moment was highly suspect. Did he, Mycroft, believe that pelvic massage was medicine? He had mentioned it in his initial letter, certainly, but why press it? Prostate massage, on the other hand, John knew was medicine. He had seen men in later life unable to piss because theirs was so swollen; early evacuation would have helped, no doubt. Still, Sherlock hardly seemed in need right now, so John filed it away for later reference.

John opened his satchel and pushed the tea and sugar inside. He looked around for somewhere to put the pamphlet, but decided the probability of it being discovered on the ground was worse than carrying it, at least for now. He shoved it into his pockets and headed for Angelo’s store, quite discomfited.

When he arrived, Sherlock was already there, adding to a pile of items on the counter so eclectic they could only belong to him: borax, three kinds of nails, tiny unidentifiable bottles of something, a bag of dried corn, shaving soap, two mismatched teacups, some calico, and the stuffed grouse Angelo kept on the top of his shelf at the back. How in blazes had Sherlock convinced Angelo to part with that? John hoped there would be no forthcoming experiments in taxidermy.

“John!” Angelo exclaimed, his roar filling the shop, “Your friend, he is simpatico!”

“Indeed,” John muttered, darting a glance around the shop. Sherlock was presently invisible but a loud clanking from the corner where Angelo kept his stock of tools signaled his whereabouts.

“Oh, leave him. He found my lost key, you know, he helped me.”

“I helped you a bit!” Sherlock called from his corner.

“Let me get you what you need, John: flour, yes, oatmeal, yes, and sugar, I know. More salt pork?”

“No!” Sherlock yelled.

“Perhaps a ham instead?” More expensive, yes, but he had the money from Mycroft, and Sherlock should eat. The summer wasn’t so long. John would just eat more salt pork when he was alone this fall.

“Whiskey?”

“Not today. Port, maybe?” Sherlock would prefer the sweetness. John added two slabs of chocolate as well, and he and Angelo finished the tally and packed the goods into sacks.
“You been out there a long time with that new friend, eh?” Angelo’s smile was broad and genuine, but there was no mistaking the elbow to the ribs. “He’s a good one!”

“I’m not…we’re not,” John said, frustrated. “He’s a boarder.”

“Oh, okay. All right,” Angelo said, undeterred, “If that’s what you want to say. I understand.” He winked broadly. “Your things are all ready. Come, you, come, Sherlock, have some meat pie.”

Protesting only slightly, Sherlock extracted himself from his corner and shook the dust from his coat. He dropped a log cant onto the counter beside the sacks and grinned at John. John grinned back—Sherlock’s hair was completely mad—but stopped when Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. He was thankful for his thick coat; surely Sherlock couldn’t divine what was in the pocket? He resolved to burn the damned pamphlet at the first opportunity.

They were halfway through enormous plates of Angelo’s meat pie when the store bell rang. Angelo leaped up and disappeared into the main area. A jovial “Doctor Mike!” echoed through the building not a second later, and shortly after, Angelo came into the kitchen with Mike in tow.

“Hello chaps!” he said, with a wide smile. “Getting a good feed in?”

“Mike!” John stood to shake his hand.

“Stamford,” Sherlock said, not unpleasantly.

Angelo reappeared with a full plate.

“Won’t say no, Angelo. I’ve not had a hot meal in two days.”

“Outbreak of something?” John asked.

“No, thank God. Everyone’s healthy and has all their limbs. No, it’s odder still. I’ve been out at the Ojibway camp. There’ve been rumours of some unusual sightings. A large boar bear, close to camp.”

John sucked in his breath. Sherlock was utterly still beside him.

“Did they say it’d been eating meat, by any chance? A lot of meat?” Bears did eat meat—they were omnivores, like humans—but it was rare that it formed the majority of their diet. It would be unlikely that there would be more than one in the immediate area.

“You’ve seen it, then?”

“Smelled it, more like, but it was in the ravine off my south line last night.”

“Anything unusual? Like, er, human footsteps?”

“Squirrel bones!” Sherlock interjected.


“About two miles apart, though—which means nothing, as ursine and human digestive processes are different. I didn’t think to collect samples,” Sherlock said. “It would have allowed us to see how many Sciurus carolinensis had been consumed.”

Mike looked at him nonplussed, but John felt a certain relief. This was a mystery, a disturbing one,
but Sherlock’s quick mental action was reassuring.

“Has there been any damage? Attacks?” Sherlock asked, and Mike shook his head.

“That’s not the concern. They’re uh... they’re worried that nobody has seen the man.”

“This is a huge country,” John said, calmly, and drew a shaky breath. A man in the woods. A man everywhere and nowhere, eating small animals. He remembered Sholto’s bloody hands.

He drew another breath, glancing sidelong at Sherlock. Thankfully, he was glued to Mike’s words.

“Not so huge. And the scat is the same but the tracks don’t synchronize.”

“A local superstition?” Sherlock inquired. “Were-beasts-shifting from human to animal? The wendigo, perhaps—cannibalistic spirits?”

Mike snorted.

“It’s ‘windigo’... and no. The Ojibway know that the most dangerous being in the forest is the white man. They just want to know who it is and why he’s there.”

“That’s ridiculous,” John said. “It’s likely coincidence. Someone’s tramping through, that’s certain. The bear is more worrisome.”

“May be, may be,” Mike said. “But a meat-eating bear is no small danger, so better keep a close eye on your stock and yourselves. No going out at night for any reason.” His face was as stern as John had ever seen it, and yet there was a slight twinkle in his eye. What the hell could he be thinking?

“We’ll do that,” John said shortly, and then instantly regretted the “we.” Thankfully, Mike did not comment, and the conversation passed into other channels.

Sherlock’s mind was busy as they loaded the wagon and headed towards the farm. John had been silent in any case, preoccupied, no doubt, with his worry that the man in the woods was the man from his past. Sherlock himself was not sure this was not the case, and so he was applying every scientific principle he could think of to the problem.

“How you believe in windigos?” he finally asked, after several miles. There was, after all, a great deal to be gained by asking questions to which one already knew the answer.

John did not answer.

“How?”

No response. It was clear that John was irretrievably sunk into a brown study. He tried again.

“I suppose I should have reasoned it out,” Sherlock said. “Mike is smarter than he looks, and the Ojibway have suffered a significant loss of traditional territory, not to mention incursions of disease and alcohol. Do you suppose the Indian has a smaller liver than those of Caucasian descent?”

John shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you believe in windigos?” Sherlock asked, encouraged by the response. John rolled his eyes.

“I rather thought not. What do you make of it, then?”
John paused.

“You aren’t just going to tell me what I think?” he said finally, cutting his eyes at Sherlock.

Sherlock laughed, because he could, today. His mind was clear and sharp.

“You don’t believe in them; they’re unscientific. Except…you don’t *not* believe in them either; you know enough to respect the Indian’s experience, and you reason that there’s something behind those legends, even if this generation takes a more pragmatic view.”

John’s mouth curled up, just a bit. Sherlock continued, a little flushed with his success, “And yet you’re worried, too. Seriously worried. The man that concerned you—that man, someone dear to you—you think it’s him. And you don’t know whether to hide or help.”

Sherlock popped his final “p” in satisfaction. He was right—he knew it. He waited for John’s reaction without looking—waited for the “amazing”, “wonderful”.

It did not come. Instead, John’s face was still and ashen, and his fingers were tight on the reins.

John had been enjoying Sherlock’s sharp deductions, but the last one jolted him back into his deep sense of horror. He recalled those terrible days after Agra. Mary had been dead, and Sholto…Sholto had been losing his mind. It did not bear thinking about, and yet the images marched across his consciousness. Sholto, silent. Sholto, unwashed and unkempt, in the corner of the barracks. Sholto, screaming that he was an animal, worse than an animal, when asked to bathe and dress and resume his regimental functions.

John had smuggled him out at the first hint of court-martial, wrapping his beloved commander in native garb and hiding him in the hills. He could not have done otherwise, but he remembered walking away from the tiny hut he had secured with the aid of a Hindoo orderly, unsure that he would ever see Sholto alive again.

But he had. And when he had… disaster. He drew a long, shuddery breath.

“John,” Sherlock said, and John knew it was not the first time he had said it. “John, please.” His voice was soft and placating. John drew another breath. His fingers loosened.

“It’s all right, John.” John could practically see him trying to be gentle.

“I’m,” he tried, but had to take another deep breath. His lungs betrayed him, though, and he could not get enough air. Dark spots floated before his eyes, and he was cold, so cold.

“John,” Sherlock said, urgently.

John’s head swam. He must have looked appalling, because Sherlock placed one large hand on his shoulder and breathed with him. The heat of his hand was comforting. John drew one shuddery breath, but it wasn’t enough. He dropped his head between his knees, the reins falling out of his hands. His lungs could not take another breath.

“Steady now,” came Sherlock’s voice. John fought towards the sound, drawing in air. Sherlock’s arm had slid around his shoulder and the heat brought him back to himself. He exhaled again, and the next breath came easier.
“Breathing is good.” Sherlock said.

“Berk.” John coughed out, surprised by such a ridiculous statement. “You have said”—another cough—“that breathing was boring.”

“I did,” Sherlock’s eyes flashed in delight, “But that was during an experiment.”

“No,” John replied, voice stronger now, “It was when you dumped the bread dough into the fire.”

“Bread sponge, John,” Sherlock said, mock-haughtily, “Do keep up.”

John’s mouth twitched, but he kept his face straight—until he saw Sherlock valiantly trying not to laugh. Their eyes met and they both dissolved into helpless laughter. They leaned together in the wagon seat, shoulder-to-shoulder, and howled until tears came to their eyes.

It wasn’t until Arthur stopped walking to look back at them disapprovingly that they gained control of themselves. John took up the reins again feeling lighter, as though something hard inside him had been dissolved. Sherlock looked younger, too, his face clear and bright, and suddenly John was grateful for his presence. He was grateful, too, that he had resisted the temptation to touch Sherlock as a lover. He could love Sherlock, he realized, Platonically; any baser desire could be suppressed.

“John?” Sherlock said, a note of worry in his voice.


Sherlock stiffened immediately, and John looked at him searchingly, wondering what he had said. He waited, though, for Sherlock to speak.

And waited.
And waited.
Finally, after they had gone nearly a mile, he could not restrain himself any longer.

“Sherlock? Are you quite all right?”

“Friend,” Sherlock said, wonderingly.

“Yeah.” John frowned.

“I’m your friend.”

“Course you are.” John shook his head. “I know…I mean, I know it didn’t start most auspiciously…”

“Fucking Mycroft,” Sherlock interjected.

“True. But…we’re friends.”

“We are,” Sherlock beamed. Lord, he was beautiful, John thought, and immediately suppressed it.

“That bear had better look to itself,” Sherlock added, “Because we’re going to solve this mystery.”

John laughed.
“Right you are.”

“Shake on it?” Sherlock held out his large hand. John hesitated, just for a moment, and clasped it in a firm grip.

Chapter End Notes

If you skipped the panic attack, what you need to know is that Sholto had a kind of mental breakdown after Agra and sort of reverted to an animal state, gibbering and eating raw meat, etc. John had to smuggle him out of the barracks to save his life.

The rejected title of this chapter is “OF COURSE WE’RE JUST FRIENDS.”

The Easter egg song is “Nowhere With You” by the Joel Plaskett Emergency.

Bears that eat a lot of meat aren’t inherently dangerous (bears that eat a lot of garbage, on the other hand…). This is a “for the purposes of the story” detail.

I have no idea whether pamphlets for prostate massagers ever existed. I think if you’re suspicious of Mycroft’s motivations, you probably should be. Also, as usual, beware of 19th-century science, folks. Evacuate prostates all you want but don’t expect health benefits.

If you’re wondering whether Stamford ships it: he ships it. A lot. Angelo also ships it.

The use of the term “Indian” is only because of the time; I wouldn’t use it today.

“Wendigo” and “Windigo” are both common spellings (there are many more, of course, because it’s been transliterated), but the Canadian Ojibwa generally use “windigo”.

“Hindoo” is a common 19th-century spelling of “Hindu”; you see it in Jane Eyre, for example.

Also, “Platonic” is sometimes still capitalized mid-century. I’M SORRY I HAVE VICTORIAN SPELLING FEELS OKAY.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos. Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Both Sides Now

Chapter Summary

The “just friends” situation is working out about as well as expected: John has to listen to Mrs. Hudson praising Sherlock’s arse while he has a prostate massager pamphlet in his pocket, and Sherlock gets some emotional advice from goats. A mysterious event occurs.

Chapter Notes

I had a lot of help from Doc with this chapter, and turifer and marigolds too. Thank you guys, and thank you to girlwhowearsglasses for reading.

I'm going to thank you guys reading and commenting now, too, because you're such an encouragement. I <3 you, thank you so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning was fine again, and John, after a good sleep, set off for the barn work full of confidence and Mrs. Hudson’s scones. Sherlock had waved them away, being neck-deep in notebooks and—John had not looked too closely—some organic substance. He scanned the yard; nothing out of place. Clara was round, Harry was round and loud, and Arthur was visibly pleased to see him without Sherlock in tow.

As he led Arthur to drink, he surveyed the garden. It was looking lusher than he’d ever seen it; Sherlock had spent a remarkable number of hours planting, weeding and fencing (to keep out the goats, although that had met with limited success). It was almost as though Sherlock had invested in his farm with him, and the thought gave him a pleasant glow. Perhaps he had been alone too long and a friend, a real friend, was what he needed.

The world seemed to echo the truth of this sentiment; June that year was especially beautiful: warm and sunny, with the right balance of rain. The crops grew and flourished. For John and Sherlock, the month was coloured by a deep companionship that neither of them had ever before experienced, but always desired. They were united in their search for the mysterious meat-eating bear; every day that John could spare from his work saw them roaming widely through the woods, carefully scrutinizing each track and trail. And yet, these were not grim excursions. Each expedition rang with laughter, jesting insults, and camaraderie. Sherlock, his scientific enquiry in full flower, was in a frenzy of cataloguing edible and medicinal plants. John, who had known his farm well before, relearned it and cherished it.

In their wanderings, their unspoken agreement was to obey Stamford’s edict to stay inside at night. The usually genial doctor’s solemn tone, combined with their earlier misadventures, made them keep it. By the time dusk fell, the animals were safely locked away, and though the men might sit at the door of the cabin to watch the sun set, they always moved indoors when the dark came. In the flicker of firelight—necessary even in June, to drive the worst of the insects away—they sat...
together, sometimes talking, sometimes listening, always attentive to the other, and in near-perfect peace.

Near-perfect for John, that is, as he fought temptation daily. Seeing Sherlock bending over his notebooks, John would shove his hands into his pockets to avoid touching that long ivory neck. It was the price to be paid for diverting the looming spectre of romance and the inevitable heartbreak that would follow, and so he clenched his hands and held the beautiful evenings to himself as the highest happiness he might expect.

Sherlock, though, was gloriously happy. He could garner John’s praise in a moment—he had only to gesture more broadly while working, or let a theory flow from his mouth to attract John’s attention; when he succeeded, as he inevitably did, the warm glow of it spread throughout his body. The pleasure of real friendship, he thought, scribbling furiously in another notebook labelled “J”. He had felt certain physical stirrings, but none so intense and disturbing as those he had felt in May, and since his mind still functioned brilliantly, he could pay it little attention.

One beautiful day in late June, they were rambling near the house when Sherlock found a perfect, sandy hollow full of wild strawberries. Exclaiming, John began to gather the bright red berries industriously. Sherlock did as well, although he had thriftily stored the berries in his belly rather than in one of the collecting containers John had liberated.

“You’ve got to breathe it in,” Sherlock said, lying back on the grass and examining the sky.

John, still picking, watched him indulgently.

“It?”

“The woods.”

“Theym.”

“Theym, it.” Sherlock waved one hand at the sky. Each long finger was stained red with strawberry juice.

“I do breathe them in. Every day. And you look like you’ve been breathing pure strawberries.” John dangled a strawberry over Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock laughed and made a grab for it, but John eluded him. “No, you can’t have it. I’m picking for the future.”

“You want me to eat more.”

“True.”

“And breathing strawberries is a poor way to get the vitamins. Also, they would obstruct the lungs.”

“For a scientist you’re the most literal man I’ve ever known.”

“I know what you mean, John, but it is the most marvelous day.”

“It is,” John agreed, setting his full basket on the grass and stretching as well. He glanced over at Sherlock, so close to him... then settled his hands behind his head. He still, despite his resolve, could not bear to lay his hands on the grass beside Sherlock’s. The pamphlet Mycroft had sent him was burned into his mind. It was a constant presence in his clothes, as he had not dared burn it, in case Mycroft should choose to test him, but neither did he dare leave it in the cabin. Sherlock rummaged
through his things with no care for confidentiality.

“Do you suppose the bear has moved on?” he said, to distract himself from this line of thinking.

Sherlock squinted over at him thoughtfully.

“I shouldn’t theorize, as we haven’t been able to make it down to the southeast ravine before dark in the last week or two.”

“But your gut feeling.”

“I don’t believe in gut feelings, or intuition. Only facts. And it is a terrible mistake to theorize without the facts.”

“I don’t think it’s gone.”

“That may be the case.”

Something tickled at John’s mind.

“I know….I’m sure,” John said, carefully, “that the—whatever is happening—is not for me.. directed at me.”

Sherlock looked at him, eyes clear.

“No, I think that’s true,” he said, softly. “Are you all right?”

John smiled. He was, oddly.

“I’m fine.”

“Good.” Sherlock stared up into the air again.

“Could…” John did not quite know how to ask. “Could it be…about you? Someone from your past?”

For a moment, everything was so silent that John could hear the tiny breeze rustling through the strawberry leaves.

“There’s nobody in my past,” Sherlock’s voice was curt but his face twisted, just a little. “Nobody.”

John had known that, but to hear him say it…he could not let it lie.

“No childhood friend? No schoolmate?”

“We were taught at home. And the only friend I had was a dog, and he died when I was small.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Dogs die. People die.” Sherlock rolled over and stood up. “Let’s go to the southeastern ravine.”

John followed, the taste of strawberries suddenly bitter in his mouth.

They found nothing in the southeastern ravine, neither that day nor in the week that followed, and while Sherlock’s observations did not cease, their collective nervousness ebbed, just a little.

“I’ve noticed something odd about Isadora this morning,” Sherlock said, coming in from the garden. "She's been refusing her feed, at least occasionally, and making unusual noises."
"Fresh, then," John said, grateful for the information.

"Is that a colloquial term for estrus?"

"It is," John said.

"Why not just say 'estrus'?"

"I will to you, if you insist, although 'fresh' is more efficient, as there's only one syllable, and you now know what it means."

"I prefer to use proper terms."
"Don't tell me you're going to be a pedant."

"I am the last thing from pedantic."

"Only because you think it's beneath you to teach."

"Touché." Sherlock ran his fingers through his curls and turned up his nose at the same time, and the effect was so comic that John couldn't help but laugh.

"The cow is fresh and I'll take her to Mrs. Hudson's tomorrow to visit Byron."

"I can't help but deduce certain oddities of psychology when people give animals human names."

"Of course you can't. Spare me the disquisition; I've got shit to shovel. Will you join me, or are you staying here?"

"I'll stay here."

"Don't want to go through the woods?"

"It'll save you rushing back. You can have dinner with Mrs. Hudson and stop at Lestrade's for a whiskey, if you like." Sherlock said with dignity.

"I'll come straight back. I'd still rather not travel in the dark. That's a generous offer, though."


"You certainly do not."
"I have some experiments I'd like to complete."

"That's more like it. Just don't damage my animals."

"I will not. Bacon and cheese sandwiches for supper, then, with green beans?"

"Sounds fine. I'm sure I'll have sweets from Mrs. Hudson, if I play my cards right."

"Don't let the Widow Donovan sour you."

"Sally is perfectly all right."

"If you say so."

"I do."
Thus it was that John left alone in the wagon early the next morning with Isadora tied to the back and the calves trotting at her flanks. He turned towards the farm to see Sherlock standing by the barn, and smiled. Sherlock was waving with an enthusiasm all out of scale with his usual scientific detachment. Not for the first time, John felt a warm flush of pleasure. He thought of coming home to a fire and supper, almost like the days when he lived at home, or even with the army.

Or, with Mary.

Well, not exactly. They’d eaten at the mess or with her father more often than not during their marriage; Mary had never been one for domestic joys, not that he blamed her. She had been much more interested in those of the flesh. He recalled her laid out before him, pink and laughing on crumpled sheets. He remembered another, darker pleasure: more flesh, harder flesh…Sholto…

No. That way lay madness. Clucking at Arthur, who was only too happy to pick up the pace, John bent his mind to the problem of the swamp in the back quarter.

Once John was out of view along Scotch Bush road, Sherlock turned away. He had intended to let John leave unobserved, but something about the set of John’s shoulders driving out at Isadora’s walking pace led Sherlock to stop and wave. The pleasure of watching John’s face lighten burned deep in his belly. John, for all his obviousness, was someone who called to him in a way that threatened his scientific detachment.

Once John was out of sight, Sherlock went back inside and checked his bread sponge. The salt-rising bread was higher than the bran, but it was new bran, and it did have several large bubbles that promised well. Then, he set the water to boil for more tea—damn John for rationing his stimulants!—and went to the barn to tie the goats out.

Harry welcomed him with a return of her usual enthusiasm. Sherlock looked at her speculatively: eyes and nose moist, hair smooth and shiny. Clara, shyer but still demanding, looked in good condition as well. Both of them were plump with babies—twins, he suspected, in Harry’s case.

“And you felt better,” he said, “after sexual congress?”

“Maa,” said Harry, looking him right in the eye.

“And yet you hate Higgins.”

“Maaaaaa.”

“Quite.” He reached out and pulled back her eyelid to check her sclera, then stroked her smooth ears. Had her pupils changed during their—he hesitated to call it a conversation, but could not think what else it could be. Perhaps John was not so mad regarding talking to animals.

He took the goats out one at a time, enduring their loud complaints as they were separated, and being butted out of the way at their reunion. Harry. Certainly, these two were as pair-bonded as the geese, despite both being female.

Same-sex pair bonds were not unknown to him. There was historical precedence; seventeenth-century pirates, in fact, had had a system called matelotage, in which pirates became partners in plunder and in bed. Closer to home, Sherlock had known boys at school that way, though their system had been much more secretive and dangerous. He recalled a house master finding two boys
together in the baths, and the whipping they had received.

There was nobody, though, to enact such punishment here. Could he engage in such activity? He pondered. He had always eschewed anything regarding romance or physical proximity, believing it to be an unnecessary frill. Science was the key to life, and it was science that his brain, and, perforce, his body yearned. He had not felt any great desire for any person, and so he had been able to devote himself to the work.

Until John Watson, that is. Since coming to this backwoods farm, Sherlock had, he knew, felt the bodily yearnings that plagued humanity at large. Those desires could only be sexual, and those were exclusively directed towards John.

He cast his mind back to what John had said about sexual desire: that it destroyed one’s peace of mind.

Who had destroyed John’s peace of mind? Sherlock’s vast brain worried at that problem like a rat at a biscuit. And yet, as he thought of their excursions and their evenings by the fire—the way John made sure he ate and slept and behaved like a person, the way Sherlock pushed John to the edge of his intellectual capacity—he felt perhaps that they were already a pair.

He looked at Harry and Clara standing side-by-side, eating companionably. Perhaps a platonic pair bond would not be the worst thing in the world.

Why? he wondered, and flipped open his notebook to record some of the symptoms of his condition:

*First*, that he had not wanted to flee the farm immediately was suggestive,

*Second*, that he had taken on certain daily duties that were, at times, onerous, and yet he maintained them,

*Third*, that he had needed to follow John to the barn when he had deviated from his usual habits,

*Fourth*, that the sight of John’s genitalia and the manipulation thereof had had such a strong effect on him,

*Fifth*, that he could now predict John’s emotions and feelings with some accuracy,

And, perhaps most damningly,

*Sixth*, that he *cared* what John thought of him. Worse (seventh?) he cared what John felt, not only about him but in general. He wished, actively wished, for John’s well-being. It was a disturbing feeling.

Better to suppress it, he supposed, although he was starting to have his doubts about the efficacy of that particular method. He had tried it, long ago, and had only the faintest memories of that once-beloved friend.

If it were to stay that way, he should move on. Shaking his head, he thought of the day before him. He had managed to make a proper tincture of yarrow; today he could try it on all the animals without consequence, so that would keep him occupied for a while, he supposed. And he would likely have time to make scones before John returned. He’d had some luck with camomile in the batter; it seemed to have reduced John’s nightmares, if only a little.

Since their reckoning in late June, Sherlock had noticed, twice, John returning from the fields with a slightly decreased tension in his shoulders. Sherlock knew what had been done, however fleeting,
and the image, disquietingly, did not leave him. That, combined with the groans and cries John emitted in his dreams, was gradually making Sherlock aware that he would no longer be immune to the rising tide of physical discomfort and mental disquiet.

Really, the line between science and human relations was thinner than it should be, he thought, irritably, and went to get the tincture. Philemon had been honking rudely at him for days, and an eyedropper down his throat would be just the right revenge.

John made no headway with his thoughts on swamp drainage. His soldier’s habit of observation still beat in him, and so almost as soon as he was out of sight of the house, he turned his attention to the mellow green of the woods, watching for anything out of the ordinary.

There, a dark red bush. There, a crow’s nest. There, a dark stump like a moose. There, broken grass. Then, a chattering squirrel. Then, a flash of light where no flash should be—but no, it was only the sun falling low. He shook himself.

“Too much Sherlock Holmes,” he muttered to himself. His voice sounded odd in the woods. Also, he was not entirely sure there was such a thing as too much Sherlock Holmes.

Well, perhaps, he thought, remembering the long sweep of Sherlock’s pale, cold body. A feeling of dread unrelated to marauding bears, and entirely related to his visit to Mrs. Hudson’s descended upon him. Her prescience in the face of any kind of romantic or sexual entanglement was frankly unnerving. He steeled himself as he pulled into her yard.

"John, dear," Mrs. Hudson said, bustling out of her cabin as he tied Arthur up. "Isadora’s fresh, then? Take her over to Byron and I'll put the kettle on. Sally's busy with the garden but she'll be in by the time it boils, and as for Anderson, he's in the far field and he can just make do with his bread and cheese."

Relieved that he wouldn't have to make small talk with Anderson, John untied Isadora and led her to the pen where Mrs. Hudson kept Byron. The latter came over to the bars as soon as he scented Isadora; a fine, mostly roan animal, he stood by the fence, making it difficult to bring Isa in.

"Back off, you bastard," John said, without heat. Byron's huge glistening cock was already out, and while John was profoundly uninterested in beasts (unlike, apparently, Anderson, who, Mrs. Hudson had intimated, had been dismissed from his previous place for certain irregularities in his care of the livestock) he could not help being impressed by the size of the bull's equipment.

Isadora seemed fairly impressed too; as soon as John had freed the bars she charged through, still with the rope on her neck. She shoved Byron aside, though, and went to sniff the manger. When Byron came over to sniff her arse, she didn't move, ignoring him—but she didn't run.

She's been spending too much time with Sherlock, John thought sourly.

Which would make him Byron. Certainly when he looked at Sherlock he felt quite like Byron apparently did when he looked at Isa. Sherlock's arse was much nicer, though.

Animal metaphors. God, he needed…something. He shook his head and shut the bars.

"John!" Sally Donovan's voice carried across the barnyard, and turned with a guilty start.
"Widow Donovan, hello." Her long strides ate up the ground and soon she was beside him, long black curls blowing in the wind.

"I hear you have a house guest," she said, without preamble.

"I do, yeah. Not that I wanted one."

"He's difficult, isn't he?"

John thought about Sherlock setting fire to the stove, harassing his geese, laughing in delight as he caught a fish, working in the garden. Difficult wasn't exactly the word for Sherlock, although it described John's feelings pretty well.

"He's unusual." John finally said.

Sally's beautiful face was still, for a moment. Then she stopped walking, looked him in the eye, and said,

"Look, stay away from him. Don't get entangled. He's not right, and he could hurt you. They...His family could hurt you." There was genuine pain in her voice.

John drew back, surprised at her intensity. She didn't look away, but held his gaze.

"I'll be careful," he said. "I've already had a taste of what the brother can do."

"Have you," she said. It was not a question.

John waited for her to continue, but she turned abruptly and went towards the cabin. He followed, wrongfooted.

In the field behind them, Byron mounted Isa, to the apparent pleasure of both parties.

Mrs. Hudson was fussing over the teapot when they came in; an array of jams and baked goods was already on the table. John hung up his coat and Sally's shawl, washed his hands in the basin, and sat, helping himself to a gingersnap.

"John Watson!"

"Hello, Mrs. Hudson. How are you?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle, except for my hip. You look fine... though you didn't bring Sherlock, more's the pity. What a nice boy he is." Sally's face was a study in neutrality.

"He had some experiments to do, he said. He's got some new bran for bread."

"That's good. You eat better since he came, don't you? He's been good for you."

"Perhaps. Fall still can't come soon enough, though." Sally nodded, almost approvingly. Mrs. Hudson looked up, bright-eyed but serious.
"I don't believe it. Let a man like that go?"

John opened his mouth to protest.

"And he's handsome too," Mrs. Hudson added. "Lushest arse I've seen in an age."

"Close your mouth, John, or flies will get in." Sally said, then rounded on Mrs. Hudson, "And don't you suggest that I make up to him. A more useless husband I could not imagine, and I have Anderson as a model."

“Oh, no, dear, he is quite unsuited to you. He’s utterly disinterested in our sex.”

Now both John and Sally’s mouths were hanging open.

“For goodness sakes,” Mrs. Hudson tutted. “You young people are so staid.”

“So…” John fiddled with a scone. “When you say he’d be good for me, you mean….”

“Oh, now, I would never presume.” Mrs. Hudson pushed the cream towards him, her expression so angelic John could barely credit her with her scandalous utterances of the moment before. John took the cream, speechless. Sally sipped her tea.

The sun was low as John turned along Scotch Bush road. Scanning the forest, he shivered a little; things were harder to see at dusk, and each dark shape seemed slightly more sinister than it had that morning.

Since when had he been afraid of the woods, he wondered to himself. Never before had he felt so exposed in Canada—India had been a different story, with its unfamiliar vegetation and fauna—but Canada? Never. Until now, fear had seemed a long-ago thing, the well of terror run dry after the siege of Agra and Sholto’s decay. Why, now had a fresh spring risen up to plague him?

A branch cracked. He straightened his spine and looked about; he wished he had brought his rifle. Was that movement or wind? Probably nothing.

The high, irritated chirping of a threatened squirrel echoed over the soughing of the wind in the trees. It wasn’t close enough to him to be because of his passing through.

Maybe not just the wind, then. He clucked at Arthur to speed up; Arthur did so, obviously looking forward to home.

The squirrel stopped, and John could hear only the sound of Arthur’s hooves over the blowing wind. He was not far from the homestead, now; he strained his eyes to see whether the light from the cabin was visible.

And yet…he felt somewhat abashed to see Sherlock again. Mrs. Hudson’s calm acceptance that he and Sherlock might, or rather should, love one another had made him question himself. It was still unethical, as Sherlock was in John’s care, but perhaps if that were not the case, a liaison would be something to be considered—if he were not so sure of his own fundamental unfitness to love someone consistently and well.

Suddenly, the crackling sound of a mature tree breaking filled his ears. As if in slow motion, he saw
a large spruce fall out of the woods at the side of the road. It was falling directly on to Arthur, who, to his credit, had sped up when he heard the crack. John leaned forward and urged him on faster still, and the back wheels of the wagon cleared the place where the tree fell just as the first branches touched the ground.

“Whoa, boy.” Arthur was not a nervous horse, but he was reluctant to slow; when he finally did stop at John’s command, he stood shifting uncomfortably.

John sat for a brief second in the still wagon. It was not yet dark, and he would not be breaking their resolution about being in the woods after dark if he were to examine the tree—and he should. Something did not feel right. He leaped out of the wagon and tied Arthur to a (very solid) birch tree. Then, hefting the axe that had been in the wagon bed, he walked back to the base of the fallen tree.

In the dim light, its reasons for falling were not immediately evident; John squinted as he leaned over to check, his hand firm on his axe. Running his hand down the thick trunk, he got to splinters—which indicated a natural fall—and then, chillingly, to the blunt-edged marks of an axe.

Someone had deliberately cut down a tree while he was in the road—and he had not heard it. He trusted the evidence of his senses: if he had not heard anything, there had been nothing. How, then, had it fallen?

A pretty mystery, and one that needed to go back to Sherlock Holmes as quickly as possible. With a last glance around the base of the tree for tracks, John went back to a grateful Arthur and, with heightened alertness, pointed the cart towards home and Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected title for this chapter is “Dumb Dumb DUMMMMMMMMM.”

I also forgot to mention earlier that this whole fic was called Hysteria, Hypothermia, and Half-Hearted Heterosexuality for a while, and The Finest Part of the Line for a long while. I like the current title better.

The theme song for this chapter is “Both Sides Now” by Joni Mitchell.

The strawberry patch scene is gloriously self-indulgent but can you IMAGINE Sherlock’s hands, tipped red with strawberry juice, waving around? I can, and I do it frequently. There’s an alternate universe in my head where John breaks and just sucks one of those fingers into his mouth and they bang right there. Then they leave their clothes in a heap outside and go to bed again and when they get up in the morning Harry’s eaten every stitch they own but they don’t care because their testicles are free and so are they.

Also, John, Mary, and Sholto totally had a threesome in India. They DID.

Matelotage is a pretty cool system. I haven’t done a ton of reading on it, preferring to consecrate my research time to goats, but if you would like to read about it, here’s the ref: Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition, B. Burg. It’s older (1995) but still regularly cited.

I went ahead and named the bull Byron because this is the internet in the 2010s and Byron can take it.
This fic almost had a pair of kittens (called Bonny and Shih, for Anne Bonny and Ching Shih, famous pirates) but I sadly cut it out because I knew it would add probably 5k to the fic—Sherlock baby-talking kittens (“They’re animals, John, it’s quite all right”), John being reluctantly charmed by kittens (Imagine Sherlock seeing them curled up on John’s shoulders at night), Harry and Clara befriending the kittens (both of them can ride on Harry’s back when she’s pregnant), etc.

Here’s a little cut snippet:

“Oh, that reminds me, John,” Mrs. Hudson said into the silence, as if she had not just said something horrifying. “Emmy’s kittens are ready. Will you still take two?”

“Yes, please. Two females, if you have them.”

“Of course. Provide a little balance.” She winked.

John sighed. The idea of Mrs. Hudson masterminding a romance between Sherlock and himself was becoming more real—and more terrifying—by the moment.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
A Hold on Me

Chapter Summary

John has a dangerous mystery, a moribund squirrel, and a neglected potato patch on his hands. What he doesn’t need is an argumentative, insubordinate Sherlock as well...but that’s what he’s got.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to doctormeredington, girlwhowearsglasses, turifer, ellioop, and marigolds. <3

Your comments give me absolute life. I’d especially like to thank SherlocksSister, who summed up John Watson's character throughout this novel with the pithy phrase "God forbid you should have a feeling." Oh, John. Let yourself have a feeling, dammit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And you didn’t hear anything?” Sherlock had taken the news of the accident with an odd combination of concern and disinterested fascination. He had stopped in the middle of cooking bannocks and was now pacing around the cabin, his hair in wild disarray, questioning John about each detail a second time. John, toasting his face and the neglected bannocks in front of the fire, suspected there would be at least a third time.

“I was thinking of something else,” he said, glad the fire was already flushing his face, “but since I heard a squirrel not five minutes earlier, I would have heard something like an axe.”

“A squirrel,” Sherlock muttered, flinging notebooks aside rather like a busy squirrel himself.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.” John carried the bannocks to the bench. “Ham?”

“Hm.” Sherlock said, dismissing the ham with an imperious gesture. “And it was cut.”

“Yes.” The bannock was delicious. John reached for his tea but Sherlock had scooped up his mug and was drinking it in long gulps.

“That’s mine!”

“Not enough sugar,” Sherlock held it out. John gave him a stern look but spooned some in nonetheless, then went to find Sherlock’s discarded cup. He needed tea—he wasn’t distraught, exactly, but he was uneasy.

“Looks like it was definitely meant for us, eh?” he asked Sherlock.

“Don’t have enough data to say. Lestrade’s property, eh? Could he, or that boy…Donaldson? Davidson?”

“Dimmock.”
“Either of them cutting bush in the area?”

“Not on the way out. And it was dark for cutting on the way back.”

“Are either of them stupid enough to…No—I see your face—they’re too experienced and Lestrade too careful to have left a tree half-cut that close to the road. Some people would, but neither of them.”

“I wouldn’t be concerned if I thought it were them.”

“I know.”

Sherlock paced back towards the fireplace, stepping up and over the settle as though it were part of the floor. His hair brushed the beam on the ceiling before he dropped to the floor with a thump.

“D’you mind?”

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Sherlock said, riffling through the pages of a fresh notebook. Picking up his own cup of tea, he plunked down on the settle and stared into the flames.

John, seeing he was not going to get another word from Sherlock for the rest of the evening, set water to boil for dishes. When those were done, he poured two small glasses of port and broke up some chocolate. Setting Sherlock’s share at his elbow, John sank into his chair and watched the fire…and Sherlock, despite himself. The firelight illuminated Sherlock’s distinctive profile and tinted his dark curls with a warm light, and the whole picture was of such pure perfection that John wished he could immortalize it. He was no artist, though.

And yet… He rose, and went to his trunk. Opening it quietly, he drew out his diary. The pages of the service-issue notebook were slightly yellow, the ink faded; he handled even the cover carefully so the ill-kept leather would not crack. His pen was equally neglected, but he set it right with a quick polish and dipped his pen in Sherlock’s inkpot. The pen felt strange in his hand, but another glance at Sherlock—this time, his hands, curled around a glass—made him think of that first night, and the afternoon that preceded it. He held his pen with more certainty, and began.

It was on a muddy spring day that I first met Sherlock Holmes, and I thought him a terrible inconvenience. He arrived on my farm, two hundred and twenty-one miles from his home, Carleton, on a ridiculously-named horse with the worst trot I had ever seen. His appearance was like no man of my acquaintance…

He wrote until his eyes were scratchy and his mind was quiet. His subject had barely moved, though the port and chocolate were gone.

“Good night, Sherlock,” he said, softly.

“Good night, John.”

John slept well, and dreamlessly.

Sherlock, though he had slept only an hour or two, and that sprawled uncomfortably in John’s chair, woke the next morning at first light—a dim grayness that promised an overcast day. He sprang to his feet nonetheless, ignoring the heaviness in his drawers. He could, today; his mind was ticking over briskly, parsing out the possibilities of the silent fallen tree. It was not ordinary in the least, and the potential of the situation sparked along his neurons. He strode out to fill the water bucket, then back
into the cabin.

“John!” he shouted. John stirred under the blankets. “John!”

“I’m up,” he said. Sherlock stood over him—and if he glanced at the state of John’s midsection through the blankets, it was only for informational purposes—and waited until his eyes were satisfactorily open, then moved on to start tea and breakfast. It was dreadfully boring, but John needed calories, and he himself could use the slight tonic that tea would provide.

John, to his credit, was dressed and ready in record time. Before the sun was fully up, they were riding a very disgruntled Arthur and a quite cheerful Idiot Horse towards the scene of the incident. Harry, and to a lesser extent Clara, were expressing their disapproval at being left behind, though Sherlock had given them half a cold bannock each, much to John’s disgust.

“You’ll spoil them.”

“They were already rotten,” Sherlock had shot back, hoping for a smile. He’d gotten one too, a quick grin that showed John’s dour mood melting at the edges.

Sherlock had been on alert from the time they’d turned on to Scotch Bush Road. His ears were constantly straining for any unusual sound. He’d tasted the air every twenty metres, and halted their ride twice to look at the grass on the side of the track. The smooth grey light of the cloudy day was perfect for observation, at least.

“More likely any evidence is on the other side,” he said, “but better safe than sorry.” He’d map the whole thing into a notebook later, but for now he was just trying to get to the scene as quickly as his sense of scientific inquiry would allow.

At last they turned the corner leading towards Lestrade’s, and the fallen tree came in to view.

Sherlock slowed Idiot Horse to a trot, then a walk, and finally slipped off her altogether, examining every inch of the verge. He could sense John’s impatience, and his own was barely restrained. However, he was determined to do the thing rightly, and so he contained himself.

“Can I help?” John said, holding Arthur back with a firm hand. A warm flush went through Sherlock’s body—the pleasure of companionship, he thought fleetingly, and turned his attention back to the grass. No disturbances, not up until about ten feet after the fallen tree, and that could easily be John’s tracks.

He approached the tree itself. Starting at the top, he worked his way down, examining each of the branches for signs of interference. John stood by, holding the horses and keeping a watch of sorts, if his alert shifting of position was any indication.

The tree appeared to be about fifteen years old, if the height and branching was any indication. It was not afflicted with any known diseases or parasites, and would have made proper timber in a dozen years. Not one of the robust branches had been interfered with in any way, and by the time Sherlock reached the cut part of the trunk, about a foot off the ground, he was properly puzzled. He had expected, if the felling were simply mischief, that the top of the tree would have been restrained by a rope of some sort, but there was no indication that such a thing had been done.

The base of the tree had certainly been cut nearly all the way by an axe, and an axe of the sort that was quite common in this part of the world: an iron head, and a handle of some home-whittled wood, most likely maple. No foreign splinters were in the wood, and the pattern of axe blows told no tales either. Any adult of average size could have made the cuts, to the best of Sherlock’s knowledge. He
cursed his lack of experience with axe marks.

He ran his hands down the base of the tree to the grass. He was unsure of what he was looking for, but this mystery seemed rather boundless and so he continued.

“Think you’ll find anything?” John asked. His back was ramrod-straight. It changed him, Sherlock thought, momentarily distracted. He was always dignified, but this military bearing, purposely forgotten habit though it was, gave him an extra layer of gravitas (no mean feat, as Idiot Horse was currently nibbling at the pockets of his linen trousers for bannock crumbs) that quite took Sherlock’s breath away.

“Doubtful,” Sherlock said, feeling in the grass at the base. He stood up, and started pacing out ten paces in every direction around the tree. He took out a roll of string and measured the distance between the fallen tree and each tree next to it. Then, he noted each species present within that circle. But as for clues? Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

It was quite infuriating, but there was something, something on the edge of his consciousness that nagged at him.

“Can we ride back about half a mile?” he asked. John nodded, and they remounted (John swung easily onto Arthur’s back, damn him, though his legs were much shorter than Sherlock’s).

“We can,” John said. “D’you think we should tell Lestrade about this?”

“Not yet. Only if we have to. Best to keep it to ourselves just now, in case we can get other information.” John nodded, and they continued on.

The ride, however, was not fruitful, and when they came in sight of Lestrade’s cabin they turned the horses around to ride home. John’s hands worried Arthur’s reins, and Sherlock kept his eyes trained on the road.

“Should we move the tree?” John pulled up right beside it instead of going around as they had before. “If Lestrade sees it, there’ll be questions.”

“Probably,” Sherlock said. He leaned over Idiot Horse’s withers and slid to the ground with a bump. Together, he and John dragged the tree to the side of the road and left it.

The horses didn’t shy at the noise, but Arthur danced back. Sherlock did not miss John looking at the horse sharply.

“He doesn’t usually shy?” he asked.

“Something’s amiss,” John said, and went over to take Arthur’s reins.

Sherlock stood still, smelling the air. The sound of an angry squirrel broke the silence.

“That’s what I heard before the tree fell,” John said. The tension in his shoulders was back, and he looked uncomfortable again.

“I don’t think we’re in danger,” Sherlock said, “But the squirrel is definitely part of this equation, somehow.”

John laughed.
“We’re not chasing individual squirrels all over the county, are we?”

“Would you, if I asked?” Sherlock smiled as engagingly as he knew how. John made a face, but his body language told Sherlock that he would, indeed, spend a precious late spring day chasing vermin if Sherlock asked.

He swung up into the saddle.

“Come on, John. I can do nothing more here. I’ll go over my measurements at home.”

Home. Sherlock had called his cabin home. A warm flush suffused John’s insides; he didn’t dare look at Sherlock, but instead mounted Arthur, directing him towards the cabin.

They rode a short way in silence, Sherlock attentive to each inch of verge once again. John watched him, letting his own alertness lapse a little and drawing in a deep breath of fresh spring air. Sherlock did seem healthier than ever possible when he was absorbed by a mystery in this way, his brain seeming to run faster even than when he had been dissecting fish or experimenting with bread. And his generative organs seemed to bother him not at all.

He could leave again in the fall, and he would be much less troublesome—in theory. What he would be returned to the confines of city life might not be the complete Sherlock Holmes, John mused, but he would have vented his excess energy and perhaps acquired more—some, at least—salutary habits.

John did not quite dare think about what his own life would be like without Sherlock’s presence. He knew, of course, but he would not dwell on it yet. Better to occupy his mind with this concrete mystery, disconcerting though it was.

His thoughts were disrupted by Sherlock’s sharp intake of breath. Immediately, a charge of adrenaline animated him and he reached for the rifle slung across his back. He was just about to cock the hammer when he saw the object of Sherlock’s attention: a dead squirrel lying on the path.

Or …? As Sherlock leaped to the ground, the little creature spasmed and rolled over, clearly trying to drag itself away from the threat. Sherlock slowed his step and extended his hands; the squirrel chittered feebly.

“Quick, John,” he hissed, “Your handkerchief!”

John let his rifle fall and reached into his pocket, but Sherlock was already there, tugging at it. John stayed still, bemused. Arthur, unamused by Sherlock’s proximity, aimed a bite at the back of Sherlock’s coat. Sherlock, completely focused on gathering up the squirrel, did not notice.

“Stop that,” John yanked Arthur’s reins as he slid off. Arthur snorted and danced back. “Sherlock, he’s in a bad way. Wouldn’t it be kinder to end it for him?”

Sherlock’s suddenly anguished face was his answer.

“Very well, then,” John said, and reached out. “Give the hanky to me, I’ll make a carrying pouch of sorts. Hold Arthur.” He shoved the reins into Sherlock’s hands and did not wait for his hands to close.

He took his first good look at the squirrel. It was a young one—very young, and small, though fully developed. It shook on the ground, and as he picked it up he saw that it had a bloody nose—not a good sign, but he said nothing. It bit at him, but its jaws could not close.
“What can you do, John?” Sherlock was hovering anxiously over him. Arthur, his ears flat back, followed reluctantly.

“Keep it quiet, mainly,” John said. He felt the urgency in Sherlock’s voice and marvelled at it. A brief moment, a tiny creature, and Sherlock was already deeply concerned with its well-being. John opened his mouth to tell him that the thing wouldn’t live, but closed it again. Sherlock would see soon enough.

Mounting the horses proved rather difficult. Sherlock tried to hold Arthur but Arthur pranced away, then crowded close to John and the squirrel whilst trampling Sherlock’s feet. Sherlock, meanwhile, tried to stay as far as possible from Arthur, muttering imprecations all the while.

Finally, however, John got up on the horse, though with some jarring of the little squirrel, and they rode home. It was a measure of Sherlock’s concern that he let Idiot Horse crowd as close to Arthur as Arthur would allow.

At home, Sherlock went to fill the kettle without prompting and even—John nearly fell over—bringing in an armload of wood to stoke up the fire. John, the now-unconscious squirrel cradled in one hand, sank down into his chair. Baby animals, especially injured ones, needed to be kept warm, and he was the best heat source around.

Not that it would matter, but he pushed that thought away. Sherlock came over and knelt beside him to examine the squirrel once more. His face was so close John could smell his hair.

“What d’you think got it?” Sherlock asked, looking up at him. It was a new experience, having Sherlock’s face tilted up towards his own, and John found he rather liked it. Sherlock’s lips were pink and parted, and his eyes were earnest.

_Danger._ John pushed those thoughts aside too.

“It’s young to be out on its own, and we didn’t see any others. Probably its nest was disturbed.”

“By a bear.”

John sighed, and shivered.

“Could be. Makes sense.”

“But we can’t presume.”

“Better not to. I’ll have to go back when this little one’s stable.”

“We’ll have to go back, you mean. You’re not going into the woods alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You may well be but I’m still not going to allow it.”

“You’re not my keeper.” Sherlock stood up and brushed at the knees of his trousers.

“I bloody well am, and I’m bloody well going to do my job. You’ll stay here until we can both go.”

“Try and stop me.”

“I will try, and succeed, in stopping you.” John’s fist clenched. He did not need Sherlock running around loose in the woods when he already had a dangerous mystery, a moribund squirrel, and a
neglected potato patch on his hands.

Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but what he was intending to say was never spoken because the little squirrel drew a long, shuddering breath, convulsed, and died.

John stroked the little thing’s cheek, and looked up at Sherlock, whose face was frozen.

“It’s for the best,” John said softly. “His brain was damaged, most likely.”

Sherlock swallowed. John could see a glistening in the corner of his eyes but said nothing further, waiting for Sherlock to speak.

Sherlock reached out and touched the dead squirrel’s tiny ear with one massive finger.

“He’s truly gone?”

“He is. Or she. I can check, if you like.”

“It’s all right, John,” Sherlock drew a shaky breath. “I’ll perform a full post-mortem.”

“You… you’ll what?”

“A post mortem.” Sherlock strode towards the settle. “It’ll give us plenty of information.”

“Don’t you want to bury it?”

Sherlock turned to face John, genuine shock in his eyes.

“Bury him? And lose all that data?”

John shook his head.

“If you’re sure,” he said, and held out the squirrel.

It was not the key to the mystery, Sherlock thought, but it was something. He could finally do, rather than observe, and though John’s face primmed up in sentimental disapproval (why? He had advocated killing it just a short time ago) he seized the tiny body from John’s hands and set it on the kitchen bench. John opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“I’ll clean up afterwards,” Sherlock said, forestalling any comment, and began to rummage under the bench for the nest of tinware he had stored away for experiments.

John, who apparently could not leave well enough alone, dodged back towards the kitchen, grabbed the latest salt-rising loaf, and wrapped it in clean linen. Setting it down on the chest by his bed—he nodded and left.

Sherlock frowned and then, with the hand that had not touched the squirrel, moved the cheese as well. Might as well allay John’s fears, and since he, Sherlock, had no intention of cooking today, their lunch (and probably dinner) might as well be protected.

He laid out the baby squirrel carefully, humming as he did so. His mind ticked through the steps with perfect efficiency; what a pleasure work was. John’s cabin did lack some amenities, but he found what he needed here and there. He was sure John wouldn’t begrudge him the pins he needed, for example, and the knife could be washed.
Sherlock forgot his worries over the strange attack while he worked, but the post-mortem was over quickly. The belly contained nothing unusual, and the traumatic injuries to the brain were consistent with accidental impact.

Dropping his scalpel, he began to pace. Was it just coincidence? Hard to believe. There was some malicious force at work here, and yet its influence was so shadowy Sherlock could not grasp it. The only thing he could take hold of was bears, squirrels, trees, footprints…and shit. Why hadn’t he taken a sample? He cursed himself.

There must be a link—but how? Why?

He would return to the site -- yes, he would. John was hoeing the potato patch on the far side of the house and would not see him; he could run there and be back before John required lunch. Perhaps there was more to see, after all.

To think was to act, and, leaving the kitchen as it was, Sherlock seized a collecting bag and a notebook and stepped into the bright sunshine. He scanned the barnyard, knowing that if Harry or even Clara saw him the jig would be up immediately. Thankfully, John had pastured them out behind the barn to the south, and so the coast was clear.

Sherlock made his way along the road until he was at an angle at which John might see him. He dodged behind the trees at the end of the home quarter until the coast was clear, and began to run.

With each long stride, his spirits rose. He ran faster and faster, reaching a sprinting pace that he maintained until he reached the end of his wind. Then, he slowed to a more reasonable pace, his heart pumping and a smile on his face despite himself. He had been so absorbed with his new life here that the pleasures of physical exertion had quite fallen out of his mind, and it was good to do it again.

Physical pleasure… exertion had, to date, been his only real physical pleasure. He was now aware of a different physical pleasure—or rather, a deliberate participation in that pleasure. A spark of curiosity animated him: What if it was worth it? What if the pain, the emotional pain that John had presaged when he had refused to cure Sherlock’s hysteria faded in comparison to the bodily feelings? If they were anything like this soaring feeling he felt after trying his body to the limit, he might be ready to risk himself and try such a thing. Of course, the trouble would lie in convincing John, who was remarkably stubborn to his duty, once he had decided to execute it.

He would have to consider it…later, when the chase wasn’t on. He marked a blaze on the trail beside where the squirrel had been, and headed into the woods.

John, when he noticed the sun was high in the sky, felt rather calm than otherwise. Hoeing potatoes morning was repetitive and oddly soothing, and having the house in view had allayed some of his fears regarding recent events. He sighed, and, propping his hoe up against the shanty, went in to lunch. Not that there’ll be anything but bread and cheese, he thought, but it didn’t matter. He wondered how Sherlock was faring with the squirrel; the curious switch in his emotions when the little beast had gone from alive to dead had seemed genuine enough, but John wouldn’t feel quite right in his mind until he had verified with Sherlock. He didn’t want any unacknowledged emotion putting his patient out of equilibrium now that they seemed to have struck a golden mean in terms of companionship.
The state of the cottage sent the golden mean flying right out of John’s mind. Entirely Sherlock-free, the main area was instead a jumble of scientific implements, paper, and squirrel bits. The skin was spread out and drying over the fire, and so, John noted faintly, were the contents of its stomach and intestines. On the good plates, such as they were.

That Sherlock had left in a hurry seemed clear; the door had not been completely shut, and a layer of notebooks had been blown to the ground by a quick exit. Where could he have gone? John doubted that he was at the outhouse; he would have seen him, or hailed him. There were no animals in the barn to attract him, and the garden was empty as well.

Perhaps he had gone to look more closely at the squirrel nest in the large cedar tree in the swamp. John shoved his boots back on and tramped down behind the garden. The cedar tree was immediately apparent, growing up tall and straight—but there was no Sherlock in it, even after John paused to see if the branches moved.

Where was the man, blast him? John retraced his steps to the cabin door. Dropping to his knees, he examined the grass just off the paths to the barn; a careful look showed him that, by the shanty, an individual trail revealed itself, and it was heading towards the main road.

There was no need to panic, John told himself. Sherlock was likely looking at something within sight of the homestead.

Except of course he wasn’t. He’d gone back to the scene of the fallen tree, as sure as John was standing there, deliberately betraying their agreement, and putting them both in danger.

Was he, though? A question slid into his mind: was he, John Watson, panicking? Was his fear rational?

John eyed his rifle. Sherlock was probably safe in broad daylight—as safe as someone of his idiocy could be—but John didn’t like being unprepared.

On the other hand, this was a glorious opportunity to give Sherlock a proper scare, and maybe even keep him within reasonable bounds until this mystery was solved. Shedding his heavy boots, John went to find his moccasins. He’d show Sherlock what was what.

John followed Sherlock’s tracks to the edge of Scotch Bush road, but chose his entrance to the woods carefully, about six paces from the crushed grass that indicated Sherlock’s path. He had taken care to walk without breaking trees, John noted with a slight approval, but was still incredibly easy to track by any standards, the great git.

The trail wound and backtracked, and John caught up with Sherlock in quite a short time. Within fifteen minutes, he heard the characteristic noise of a tall man moving through spruce woods, and so he found a convenient pile of dry bracken and secreted himself at its edge to assess the situation.

Sherlock clearly had found nothing, as his empty collection box and mad hair indicated. He was carrying a handful of birchbark but nothing else, and he looked cross. Holding up a tiny strip of birchbark, he let it float with the wind. He followed it, examining where it lay, then took tweezers from his pocket and pulled out a series of plants. He stowed these in a collection jar, then sat down, rather heavily, and stared at what he had gathered.

John waited until the now well-known thoughtful expression formed on Sherlock’s face before padding softly into the clearing. His practiced pace got him to within two feet of Sherlock, whose brown study was certainly well advanced. Foolish, John thought to himself; any bear could have snuck up on him, and any person too.
“Holmes!” John barked, grabbing Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Oh!” Sherlock exclaimed, leaping back at John’s touch. His face dropped down into an impassable mask almost fast enough to hide his consternation at being thus surprised.

“You utter ass!” John exclaimed, and, without further ceremony, he grabbed Sherlock by the collar and pulled him down to eye level. “How dare you endanger yourself and my farm in this way? No, never bloody mind,” he added, as Sherlock opened his mouth—*such a mouth*, his traitorous mind supplied—“You’re coming with me, and you’re staying on the home quarter until you can be bloody trusted!”

Sherlock did not immediately respond. His face was a study in conflict; like so many subalterns caught out, his pride was warring with his conscience about having done wrong. He gave Sherlock a bit of a yank, just to see the conscience come clearer on his face.

Instead, he saw something else entirely. Sherlock’s cheeks flushed red, and his face took on a slightly pained expression.

Oh.

John let go of Sherlock, who straightened up and brushed his hands against his trousers.

Knowing that it would be a dead giveaway to look at Sherlock’s trousers himself, John looked Sherlock in the eye. Sherlock looked at the ground.

“You will return to the home quarter. You will stay there, unless you have my permission to leave. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, faintly, his cheeks still flaming.

“Good. Now go.”

Sherlock turned and went with surprising meekness. John permitted himself a smile. So that’s what it took to cow Sherlock Holmes: a little military discipline. He would definitely remember that, he thought, and he followed Sherlock towards the road.

Then, Sherlock halted suddenly, and John, being rather closer than he should have been, bumped into him.

“Keep moving,” he growled, but Sherlock only took one step forward and stopped again.

“Wait,” he said, quietly. “Listen.”

John listened, but it was the scent that struck him before the sound.

“Bear.”

“The same bear.”

There was no mistaking the heavy scent of musk and feces. John unstrapped his rifle as quietly as he could. There was no guarantee that it was the same bear but he wanted to be ready.

“By the birches,” Sherlock whispered, but even though John strained his eyes he could not see anything. He shouldered his rifle.

They sat for several agonized minutes, waiting for the smell to get stronger or for the animal to
burst from the trees, but nothing happened. Instead, the woods got quieter and quieter. Even the usually garrulous chickadees stopped “chee-chee”ing amongst themselves. John pressed his lips together; Sherlock became so still as to seem almost inhuman. The woods were waiting for something.

Then, the silence was broken by the faraway chittering of an angry squirrel; the chickadees began again, and a slight breeze raised the little poplar leaves into a flutter. Sherlock exhaled.

“Gone,” he said.

“We’d better go back,” John replied. “Something’s not right, and all the livestock is out.”

“Pretty sure the geese will keep everyone safe,” Sherlock said, with a little smile.

John shook his head. He could not feel quite so sanguine in the face of such a nebulous threat. How he would prefer to have something to fight right in front of him, rather than a series of ominous? echoes!

Their arrival at the farm, heralded as it was by Harry and Clara’s plaintive cries and Idiot Horse’s enthusiastic whinnying by, was somewhat reassuring. The geese came up to meet them, much to Sherlock’s delight, and nothing appeared even slightly changed.

Still, John was reluctant to leave again. He put his rifle away and went back to hoeing potatoes without giving Sherlock another look. Sherlock, subdued, went into the cabin presumably to clean up the results of the morning’s experiment. He emerged some time later, smelling of soap and bearing bread and cheese for them both. John took his share and ate it gratefully; the sun was quite high in the sky by then, and though he had forgotten meals, his stomach certainly hadn’t.

“I found something, you know,” Sherlock said, once John’s mouth was full. John nodded, signaling him to continue.

“Bear scat?”

“Some. But not ours. I found this.” He pulled a tiny collecting vial from his pocket.

“Hair?”

“Dog hair, to be precise.”

“What’s surprising about that? Nearly every farm hereabouts has a dog, and the Ojibway camp has several.”

“Are any of them this colour?”

John scrutinized the sample more closely.

“I couldn’t say.”

“Well, I’ll tell you right now, they aren’t. And that’s because this is a very old sample. Look at the lustre, and smell the mould.”

John frowned.

“Could something have dug up a dead dog? Could it be squirrel fur?”
“Squirrel fur. Really, John! There’s no agouti colour on the strands!” he shook his head scornfully. “Like so many, you see but you do not observe.”

“And the dead dog?” John persisted.

“That is the more probable of your ludicrous theories, but no. There would be earth on the hair, and there is none.”

John just grunted in annoyance and, brushing the crumbs from his hands, picked up his hoe. When he turned around, Sherlock had returned to the house.

Dinner was cold bread and cheese again, but at least it was cold bread and cheese in a clean cabin. Sherlock was largely silent, and John the same. Then, mindful of the danger to his livestock, John did his chores before dark and locked the cabin door soundly.

Neither of them, it seemed, had much to say even once the day’s work was done. John recorded their activities in his notebook as he had begun to do, and Sherlock paced. It was a relief when bedtime came.

They went to bed, but not to sleep. John could hear Sherlock’s irregular breathing, so different from his regular, quiet sleep. He himself was fighting away the memory of Sherlock’s flushed and submissive face; he rolled on to his stomach and shut his eyes. It had not been two weeks, though almost, and ceding to his animal urges was not helpful in any way. Sherlock’s own animal urges had been awakened today, and John wondered whether the man would allow himself to relieve them. Depending on nocturnal emissions was not an effective long-term strategy and could damage Sherlock’s nervous system.

John wished again that Sherlock was one of those men—those people—that did not wish for physical love. It would have made this whole situation much simpler. But no, Sherlock did desire, and they were in this situation because of it, and because John was honourable, dammit. He pressed his face into the pillow and tried to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The rejected title for this chapter was “Squirrel Guts and Disobedient Subs.”

The song is “Wondering Where the Lions Are” by Bruce Cockburn.

In most pioneer centres, axes were sold as heads only, at least in part because sending wood handles out to backwoods farms was coals to Newcastle. I’m sure you all remember the part from Little House on the Prairie where Pa carves the axe handle; that’s basically what happens.

As you all may suspect, repeated nocturnal emissions will not damage one’s nervous system.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.
Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Harry and Clara's escape touches off a wild chain of events: manure piles, and unexpected tumbles, mud fights and erections, fallen trees, and some very special carving. Sherlock tries to learn about axe cuts but discovers something rather more troubling.

Chapter Notes

It's a nice big juicy chapter this week, thanks to doctornerdington and her ninja chapter-dividing skills. Ellioop also provided a great suggestion for this chapter, and girlwhowearsglasses, marigolds, and turifer were amazing cheerleaders.

Warning for Sherlock feeling ashamed of his desire in the latter part of the chapter. Tags are updated through Chapter 12.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John was not aware he had dozed off, but apparently he had, because when Harry’s shrill baaing pierced his consciousness, he leaped straight out of bed, stumbled, and fell like a tree, his whole length laid out on the ground. He had barely realized what had happened before he sprang up, his wits coming back to him. The piercing wail continued, from closer this time, and Sherlock’s face shot over the edge of the loft.

“I’m fine,” John said grimly. “But get your boots. The goats have escaped. I must not have closed the barn door properly last night.”

“You did,” Sherlock said, ruffling his curls into place. They were getting long, John thought. How would Sherlock maintain them? Lestrade’s rough barbering would certainly not be up to his city standards.

Another bleat, and the rattle of the door stopped his daydreaming. He rose, and went slowly to the door, but Sherlock reached it first, clearly alarmed by the intensity of Harry’s cries. They were truly impressive to someone unused to her resilient vocal cords, not to mention her sheer evil genius. The word “wait” was on John’s lips, but it was too late. Sherlock had flung open the door and was yelling.

“Harry! John! Is she hurt?” he cried, and bounded out into the barnyard, presumably in search of whatever was making Harry bellow. John, who knew by bitter experience that nothing was wrong with her except that she was a goat, and a particularly cussed one at that, sighed. Instead of rushing out into the yard, he doubled back for a heel of cheese and, as an afterthought, a ripe piece of pickle from the bench.

He stepped out into the morning and paused on the front step to take in the situation. Sherlock had stopped running and was standing stock-still midway between the barn and the cabin. His face was a
study in confusion; his hair was rumpled, his brow was wrinkled, and his mouth hung open unbecomingly. The geese were keeping a relatively wary distance from him, but hung within view, just in case he had food. The chickens, having no such scruples, were cackling around Sherlock’s feet. John almost laughed, but the laugh caught in his throat when he realized that both Idiot Horse and Arthur had emerged from the barn, and that neither Harry nor Clara were anywhere to be seen.

He ground his teeth in annoyance. Usually (well, the last two escapes) he had been able to catch Harry by the simple expedient of extending some tempting morsel through the door and seizing her by the collar as she craned her neck to take it. This would have worked at least one more time, based on the speed by which he’d been able to catch Harry before, but now it was out of the question, and they were in for a morning’s aggravation, no mistake.

His first act was to close the barn door: John and Hamish, at least, were still where they were supposed to be. Pocketing the bread and holding the pickle uncomfortably in his left hand, he hailed Sherlock.

“We need a plan.”

“A plan. For animals.”

“Really, Sherlock? Do you think you can outsmart Arthur?” Despite his annoyance, John grinned as warring expressions met on Sherlock’s face.

“Point taken,” Sherlock grumbled, ceding to reality.

“At least Harry is dry right now,” John said, offering a tidbit of cheer, “Eating green onions makes her milk taste terrible.”

“Might make good cheese, though,” Sherlock replied, diverted.

“It might. Now, help me. Who’s the weakest link?”

“Idiot Horse, obviously.”

“Idiot Horse will come back, you’re right. Arthur will come back if you hide.”

“He hates me so much.”

“He does.” John laughed. “Still. Harry will be the hardest nut to crack. She hasn’t escaped for at least six months and she’s bound to enjoy her freedom.”

“Will she go far?”

“She might do. Usually not. There!” Harry had emerged from behind the shanty, Clara at her side, and, with a small, smug bleat took off down the carefully hoed potato field.

“I can catch her,” Sherlock said, and, without waiting for John’s approbation, Sherlock tore off after them.

“No!” John shouted, but his effort was quite lost. As soon as Harry perceived that someone was after her, she would run, dodging and leaping like one possessed. Clara was fast as well, though not so tricky.

The goats would, John knew, eventually wander back, but with the threat of bear nearby, he didn’t quite dare risk letting them loose in the woods. He took to his heels, reflecting that getting Sherlock
under control was almost as difficult as catching Harry.

Sherlock, meanwhile, was racing towards the runaways. As his feet sent the good dirt of the patch flying, he was calculating the number of strides it would take to catch Clara, who, already somewhat impeded by her belly, was the slower of the pair. Twins, Sherlock thought, as he put on an additional burst of speed. He was almost within arm’s reach until she capered to one side, leaping ninety degrees to the right over two rows of potatoes and landing at a run. Sherlock tore after her, cursing. He really needed more running practice and, incidentally, to measure goat land speed. Pre-and post-gravidity, if possible.

He could hear John shouting behind him. How extraordinary that John had not devised a better method of catching escaped caprines than chasing them very slowly.

As he accelerated out of the potato patch it seemed to him that John was shouting something, but as Clara was still in view, and Harry had actually stopped to wait for her on the edge of the track, Sherlock elected to run first and listen later. Surely John would see the sense of this plan, and if he did not, well, Sherlock could always keep running. He put on speed.

Harry watched him, her yellow-green eyes narrowed. Her hindquarters bunched slightly. Sherlock leaped one more row of potatoes, theorizing that if he could see her hindquarters equally, he would be able to determine which way she would jump. He had not, quite, calculated that his jump would cause her to change direction. He was thus unprepared for the frankly unscientific leap Harry made, jumping over Clara and free of the potato patch. She landed at top speed and disappeared into the woods.

Sherlock didn’t slow, however. Clara was still within reach and he would catch her if she didn’t put on a sudden burst of speed. He leaped the potato patch, but his jump startled her as well, and she tore back towards the shanty, eyes rolling and little tail flying. In a split second, Sherlock made the decision to follow. Harry would have to concede if Clara was returned to the barn.

However, as he discovered, she was faster than she looked, and even his top speed (10% higher over unploughed ground, he estimated) was insufficient. He had closed the gap somewhat, but she remained stubbornly just out of arm’s reach.

If only she wouldn’t zigzag so! Her trajectory was wildly unpredictable and made her harder to catch. Sherlock couldn’t help but admire it—though the shortest distance between two points was a straight line, she seemed somehow to be immune to the laws of physics. How he wished he had some sort of device that could record this chase, he thought, as he rounded the corner behind the barn.

But wait—there! Clara had jumped to avoid the flock of chickens and her deviation was carrying her towards the manure pile. If she got stuck…Sherlock lengthened his stride a little further. His muscles groaned.

Almost there. Clara’s haunches tensed as she flew towards the heap of manure.

Sherlock launched himself forward in anticipation.

Clara touched down lightly and flung herself over the outside edge of the pile.

Sherlock was not so lucky.
The thing about a manure pile made up of manure from multiple animals, is that there is nothing certain about falling in to one. There are hard bits and soft bits, squashy bits and putrid bits.

Clara had hit a hard bit, a large outcrop of dried ox manure.

Sherlock, on the other hand, landed on his side in a squashy bit, a mingling of several different types of manure, mainly chicken, a strong contender for the most pungent of manures.

This, Sherlock quickly realized. He had also realized his error in not thinking about the qualities of aggregated chicken manure prior to his sudden immersion; surely it would do well in the garden?

It did not, however, do well on humans. He wrinkled his nose. His clothing was definitively ruined, as was his hair; he dared not think of his boots. In fact, what he needed to think of was removing himself from the pile, and frankly, that posed a bit of a difficulty. It meant extending his arm down into the pile, in the hopes of finding firm ground from which he could push himself up. And yet, extending his arm into the pile seemed a rather unpleasant choice. He decided to first try pulling himself up using the strength of his lower body. Tensing his abdominals and flexing his gluteus muscles, he succeeded in pulling himself nearly to his knees (an additional problem, as his knees sank deeper into a soupy concoction of horse and ox manure) before falling back into the pile.

He tried again, and he was nearly free of his odiferous, embarrassing position when John rounded the corner of barn.

“Sherlock!” John exclaimed, and Sherlock, startled, fell back into the pile, face first.

Sherlock Holmes’ lush arse sticking out of his manure pile was the most confusing thing John Watson had seen in some time. Lust, hilarity, pity, and frustration jangled through him all at once, and he stood rooted to the spot, escaped animals temporarily forgotten.

“Bloody buggering fuck!” came from the pile—rather muffled, to be sure.

John snapped out of it, tamped down his lust, and hurried to the edge of the pile. Extricating Sherlock was going to be problematic; the only point of non-manure covered contact was the back of his trousers, and though John’s lust was temporarily subdued, he did not see how grabbing Sherlock by that particular portion of his anatomy was going to keep it that way.

“JOHN.” An insistent exclamation from the manure pile.

“All right, keep your hair on.” John rolled up his sleeves, hoping he sounded more nonchalant than he felt.

Making sure his feet were on solid ground, John grasped the very highest part of Sherlock’s trousers.

“For God’s sake don’t wriggle,” he admonished. “If you fall sideways we’re both done for. Just let me pull you up to your knees.”

“Fine,” Sherlock’s voice was still muffled, but it wasn’t so petulant, and John felt sure Sherlock would do as he was told. He braced himself and yanked. Sherlock rocked up directly towards him, but not all the way. He dropped back into the pile, with a frustrated “Ugh!”

“Sorry,” John said. There was no help for it; he was going to have to take Sherlock by the very seat
of the trousers. He seized the fabric.

*I’m barely touching him.* Even the brush of that flesh, through trousers, was enough to enflame him. John took a lungful of manure-heavy air, braced his feet once more, and pulled.

This time, Sherlock’s lower half rocked back and his torso emerged from the pile with an unpleasant squelch. He gained enough freedom to put his knee down, and John removed his hand from the fabric of Sherlock’s trousers with alacrity.

“My foot’s still stuck.” Sherlock said, not turning his face towards John.

“Take my hand. You should be able to step out then.” Their hands clasped, and John exerted more force. Sherlock was nearly out, almost, and hell if his face wasn’t the funniest thing John had seen in a while, skin and hair plastered with chicken shit. John bit his lip and pulled one last time. Sherlock, free now but unstable, staggered towards him.

John moved to dodge, but where empty air had been a moment before, there was now a solid wall of warm, hairy flesh. He bounced right off and careened into Sherlock, who had still not quite righted himself. The force was sufficient to propel them both back into the manure pile. John heard a muffled curse as Sherlock landed rather deeper than he had before, then cursed himself as his own knees met the wet slurry. He put out his hands to save himself but they met only manure.

That is, except his face. It collided with Sherlock’s arse.

“Oh!” Sherlock squeaked.

“Oh!” Sherlock squeaked.

“Sorry, sorry,” John said, and extricated himself from the pile in the only way he could—by rolling. Springing up the moment he reached solid ground, he extended his hand to Sherlock, but Sherlock had seen the sense of the rolling plan and was nearly out himself. John stood, to get out of his way.

“Bloody horse,” he said, as Idiot Horse (because of course it was she who had sneaked up behind him to watch the action) nudged him in a friendly manner.

“No chance a bear would get her,” Sherlock grumbled, finally pulling himself to his feet on solid ground.

“Not for a moment,” John replied, and he had to laugh. Certainly they must have looked—did look, for that matter—ridiculous, the pair of them; he didn’t blame Idiot Horse for enjoying the show. Sherlock’s hair was quite on end, and the relative pristineness of his shirt had been irretrievably compromised. What John could see of his own self was similarly disastrous; he could feel an unpleasant trickle down his back that promised the rest of him was just as bad.

“Swim?” Sherlock asked. “Though without our clothes, perhaps. Since they need laundering, I might as well make a brief analysis the interaction of manure and fiber. Your linen will be quite a contrast to mine.”

John nodded, a trifle flabbergasted.

“I’ll be able to test that new chamomile mixture too.” Sherlock said, brightening visibly. “It has a trifle more lye in it—“

A flicker of movement caught John’s attention—an ear, to one side of the barn.

“—then I didn’t let the mixture… what is it?” Sherlock, thank God, didn’t turn his head.

“It’s an animal we’re trying to catch.” No use in saying her name. “Keep talking.”
“Oh, I didn’t let it cool naturally; I couldn’t quick cool it because we’d no ice, but instead I decided…”

Letting Sherlock’s speech run under the surface of his consciousness, John reached out the hand with Idiot Horse’s reins towards Sherlock as slowly as possible. If only he noticed—there! He was extending one finger towards John, still talking about saponin and temperature. John reached out a little farther, and farther still. Almost…

Just as Harry poked her entire head around the corner of the barn, John transferred Idiot Horse’s halter rope to Sherlock’s hand, then, in one fluid movement, leaped towards the errant goat. He missed her collar upon landing, but the weight of his body bore her down, and he was able to wrestle his hand under the leather strap and subdue her.

“Beautifully done!” Sherlock said, applauding. Idiot Horse’s rein dangled loosely from his hand, but John had no doubt she would stay near Sherlock. Her attachment to him was remarkable, all the more so because he showed her no marks of affection.

Harry baaed miserably all the way back to her goat house. John tied her up with a certain satisfaction, then, hoping to convince her that her situation was not the most dire, gave her the rind of cheese to chew. This favour caused Clara to materialize from behind the shanty, giving little bleats of the most pathetic kind. Sherlock caught her before she had quite reached John and Harry, but at John’s nod, let her tow him over to Harry and nuzzle her for her share. Harry promptly dropped the last shred of cheese; Clara picked it up, and Harry bleated in a satisfied way.

“They’re truly bonded,” Sherlock said, and if his face had not been streaked with numerous excrements too horrible to catalogue, John would have said he looked almost delighted.

“They’re meant for each other,” he said, without allowing any kind of emotion into his voice. “It’s funny how things work out. And now I’m going to the pond. Manure is all very well in small doses, but I smell like a public convenience.”

Sherlock frowned, then stepped forward to sniff him. John drew back, but not before he got a lungful of Sherlock’s odour. “And so do you. Pondwards, now.”

“You don’t smell like a public convenience. Nor do I, come to think of it, but it’s true that the alkalinity of the goose droppings bring it closer to that particular smell.”

John couldn’t help but laugh.

“I should know better than to make sweeping claims. Are you getting the soap? I’m starving, and there’s no way either of us can get breakfast like this.”

“I will say that I am more awake without tea than I have ever been, I think,” Sherlock replied, and with no further comment, went to gather his pot of soap from the shanty.

As much as John regretted losing several good daylight hours to chasing animals and bathing, it was a glorious day for a swim. The sun shone fiercely, and the vivid green of the trees around the shining pond made a beautiful picture.

He did not wait for Sherlock; instead, in a hurry to de-manure himself, he quickly stripped, dumped his soiled clothes beside the large granite boulder that served him as a washing rock, and waded in. The water was pleasant to the touch, and he sank with delight under the surface. Clouds of filth came off him.
Diving down, he seized a double handful of sand to scrub the rest from his skin, then broke the surface again.

“Is it fine?” Sherlock asked. He was standing on the edge of the water, unbuttoning his shirt.

“Lovely,” John replied. He turned away to allow Sherlock the privilege of undressing unobserved, and began to scrub his arms and torso with the sand. White skin began once again to emerge.

A splash told him that Sherlock was now in the water, and indeed, as he turned, he saw his white shape gliding towards him underwater. He seemed impossibly long and fast, a mysterious water creature.

When he broke the surface, however, he was just Sherlock, again, splashing and shaking his head with vigour.

“It’s the perfect temperature,” he said, clearly delighted. “And good thing too. What do you suppose causes the staining?”

“Don’t know. Get some sand to scrub it off—but don’t use the peat mud, it’ll stain just as bad or worse.”

“As if I couldn’t tell sand from peat mud.” Sherlock took a deep breath, puffing out his cheeks absurdly, and submerged himself. John watched him swim slowly underwater—unnecessarily so.

“Come up, you fool,” he muttered to himself, and just as he said that, Sherlock did, breaking the surface several feet away.

“So,” Sherlock said, holding up two hands. “Whichever shall I use?”

John shook his head. In his left hand, Sherlock had the same golden-brown sand as John had used. In the right, he had an enormous glob of peat mud, running black and sludgy down his arm and staining his pale skin further.

“City boy,” John replied, mock-mournfully. “I suppose I have to tell you everything. Use the one on the right.”

Sherlock looked at his hand and raised one eyebrow questioningly. Then he shook his head sadly.

“Treachery,” he intoned, in such a funny voice that John snorted with laughter. “For it was a trick question, meant to separate the loyal from the disloyal.”

“And I’m disloyal.”

“You’re an arsehole.”

The gust of delighted laughter that escaped John at that moment surprised even him, but he let it come, bubbling up, until it was cut off by the receipt of a faceful of peat mud. He struggled, silently, for a moment, before ducking under the water to rinse his face.

“Cock,” he wheezed, when he surfaced, spitting out water and a stray twig or two.

“Indeed,” Sherlock replied. His face was deceptively nonchalant and John could see that he had seized another ball of mud. He dove just in time to avoid it; the splash reached his ears as he propelled himself towards another area where the bottom was muddy.
John took his time before coming up. He opened his eyes under water to determine Sherlock’s location. Knowing his bubbles would betray him, John held his breath until his lungs burned to maneuver himself into a position on Sherlock’s right that he knew would surprise him.

He waited. One beat, two, until Sherlock turned his head to look to his left. He leaped out of the water and struck: two enormous balls of mud hit Sherlock in the curls and the other hit his shoulder blade.

Sherlock squeaked. There was no other word for it, a high-pitched noise that must have originated in the base of his belly.

“Hah!” John could not restrain his triumph. Sherlock wheeled around, fury and pleasure at being outsmarted warring on his face, and John’s smugness turned to laughter again—that is, until Sherlock launched himself at John. Hampered by the soggy bottom where he had been standing, he failed to get sufficient lift to actually grasp him, but he came close enough that John dived to the right, swimming away underwater.

When he popped up, Sherlock was standing over him—how, John had no idea—his hands splayed out and a nonchalant look on his face. Before John could twist away he felt himself grasped by one arm (the undamaged one) and one leg. He twisted in vain for a moment; Sherlock’s large hands were very strong, and he could see that he was about to be hurled away into the peat bottom. Then, his training came back to him and he remembered something he had seen in hand-to-hand combat training. It would have to be modified for water, but it could be done.

As Sherlock began to gather the energy to fling him, John stopped struggling suddenly and made himself dead weight. It was enough of a shock that his body dropped down into the water a little. Then, John hooked his free leg behind Sherlock’s and, with his free arm, pushed against the water and surged towards him. Sherlock’s stance was not stable enough to withstand the force, and he fell backwards.

He did not, however, let go of John, and it was thus that John found himself colliding with Sherlock’s body, nude and cool and alive. That impact was sufficient, it seemed, to make Sherlock let him go as well, but they were still entangled.

The water lubricated their contact, and they slid together, each scrabbling for some purchase that was not the other. John’s chest was at Sherlock’s waist, his left arm thrown up and over Sherlock’s right shoulder. Sherlock’s legs were floating free, and he had grasped John around the torso. Sherlock’s stance was not stable enough to withstand the force, and he fell backwards.

The slide of a nude body against his own—and a vigorous, healthy nude body, not one half-dead with cold—was a delicious shock, but also one that put him in the same uncomfortable situation as that terrible night: his body could not tell that this was no time for base urges. Even the water, so deliciously cool, was no deterrent, and John set his foot on the ground bent on backing away and freeing himself before any telltale swelling could result.

Sherlock, however, was not so quick—or rather, he was quick: quick to erection. As John slid away over Sherlock’s hips to freedom, Sherlock’s heavy cock bumped against John’s belly.

Damnation.

Sherlock felt his cock swell with a growing horror, but could not free himself before John became aware of the evidence. He felt John’s body slide across his with a mixture of pleasure and agony; he disengaged as fast as he could manage, then dove under water. The coolness did nothing to diminish
the heavy, hysterical throb in his pelvis, but perhaps he would drown, quietly—anything so he would not have to see John Watson’s disappointed, worried face again.

Then, anger engulfed him, and instead of damning himself, he damned, for a moment, John Watson. If John were not so bloody tied to his moral compass, perhaps Sherlock would not be in this predicament. Scruples, indeed. John was clearly not repulsed by homo-sexual bonds, and, while Sherlock was not an expert on human relationships, it seemed to him that their pair bond was no less natural than Harry and Clara’s. John demonstrated care towards him, and they shared affinities, which even the fear of what Mycroft could do did not cancel out. Besides, Sherlock hoped that John would understand that Sherlock would never allow Mycroft to harm either of them. But especially John.

Was it then that John did not find him physically attractive? Or rather, attractive in a way suitable for coupling? Sherlock knew that his outward appearance was more than acceptable, but the chemical formula that led to coupling was seemingly indefinable (witness Harry’s frantic acceptance of Higgins’ overtures), and so perhaps he did not reach John’s standards, whatever those might be. He found that he wanted to reach John’s standards.

His lungs burned, and he had to breach the surface of the pond. He was facing away from John, thankfully; the idea of looking him in the eye seemed more than he could take, though whether it was because of his complicated emotions or his anger Sherlock could not say.

How did normal people live like this? Of the dozens of people his age in Carleton—encountering them had been unavoidable—most of them were married now, although not always to the people they had preferred. Had they gone through these same desires, the same uncertainty? The messiness and the loose ends were unbearable.

“Sherlock!” John called. Sherlock walked out of the water and continued walking. He was going to make tea—a massive quantity, in the kettle itself—and then he was going to drink it alone, on the roof of the shanty if necessary. He could live out this crisis—he cringed at the word—in peace.

“Sherlock,” John called again, but Sherlock did not answer.

John stood waist-deep in the water and watched Sherlock stalk into the cabin, doubtless ashamed of his visible arousal. John himself was surprised—not to say a little pleased—that he himself had not felt any undue sexual excitement. A little frisson, certainly, but not the full-blown hunger he had felt before. He had relieved his own needs behind the shanty recently enough (Sherlock had been safely absorbed in compounding violet jelly), so clearly his control was improving. He straightened his back. He might yet make it to September unscathed.

But would Sherlock? John felt an additional pang of guilt.

He had known Sherlock experienced sexual response. It had been foolish to swim together; it had been worse than foolish to precipitate a wrestling match. He should have known that it would be unnecessarily stimulating when Sherlock could not, or would not, relieve his own urges.

It genuinely hurt John to see Sherlock suffer, and while laying his own hands on the man was out of the question, surely there was some other solution.

He dressed, slowly, taking the time to dry his body in the sun, since Sherlock could not see him. There must be something, anything, he could do to help.
Perhaps it was time for the prostate massage treatment.

As he drew on his trousers, the pamphlet crackled in his pocket. John extracted it from its constant resting place, as he had learned by now that Sherlock could not be trusted to respect normal conventions of privacy. Unfolding it, he perused the design as if he did not know it by heart: the slim, curved figure, to reach the gland, and the broad, flat base, presumably to avoid a disappearance into the fundament.

Sherlock would have to be well-prepared, but the beaver grease would do for that, and John could be patient. A slow, consistent opening, that would be key. At this thought, his cock stirred; he himself was not averse to such a thing—a flash of one sultry Indian night crossed his mind, a tangle of limbs, slick oil on long fingers. He shivered, then squared his jaw and damped the buzz of desire in his mind. Prostate stimulation could be a sexual act, but its medical application was quite different; he felt on surer ground here than he had for pelvic massage. Draining the gland really would alleviate some congestion, though not as completely as the sexual act, and Sherlock should feel some improvement.

John pulled his shirt over his head, pleased. He would prepare a massager, and if Sherlock’s distress became unbearable, he would offer to apply it.

And after all, September was only two months away.

In the end, John did not say much to Sherlock that day. He had seen him, at a distance, returning to the house with two empty teacups and a thoughtful expression some time after John had taken bread and cheese and gone to his potatoes. John subsumed himself in the hoeing; he had lost at least two days of work with the mysteries plaguing them, and he desperately needed to make it up.

The sun beat down on him as he bent over the rows, heaping up the dirt around the potato stems. The plants were robust—a side effect of the excellent weather, and he began to hope that he would have food throughout the winter as well as seed potatoes the following spring. He had plenty of cheese, thanks to Isadora’s twins, and plenty of pickles, thanks to Sherlock. If he could preserve some meat—the ham he had gotten in Bonne Chere had been the most delicious thing he had eaten for some time—he would be well-set up to make it through the winter. He redoubled his efforts.

When he stopped for dinner, he was more than ready for it.

Wiping his forehead, for it had become quite a warm day, he sat down on a felled birch tree at the edge of the new field. He unwrapped Sherlock’s good bread and cheese and uncapped his bottle of cold tea with relief.

As he ate, he cast his eye about for a branch from which to carve the massager. He found it in an instant, halfway up the log upon which he sat. One branch, slightly thicker than his two fingers, and curved: nearly the correct dimensions for a prostate massager. John’s cheeks flamed up, but he wasted no time in hacking the branch from the tree and hefting it in one hand; there were no knots, and the gentle curve could easily be transformed into one that would reach an engorged gland. Would he need it? Would the carving of the item lead to uncomfortable questions? On the one hand, Sherlock was clearly in need. John cut it quickly.

Sitting on the log, he began to carve it into a facsimile of Mycroft’s pattern. Soon, he had lost himself in the pleasure of making. His knife was sharp and the wood was beautifully grained, and so the object took shape under his hands. He made the curve slightly more pronounced than originally intended, and lengthened the handle for greater manoeuvrability (and, he thought, because Sherlock...
Holmes was bloody tall).

Once he had the rough shape of it, he shoved it into his capacious pockets. A new problem presented itself—where to store the thing? He could not, for obvious reasons, carry it in his trousers, nor could he keep it in the cabin. He stowed it in the cloth that had carried his lunch, for now, and hefted his hoe with purpose.

Sherlock did not come out to him that day, but John, fired by nervous energy, finished the potatoes and started on a new patch of clearing. He should really have begun to mend Jack’s harness, he thought, but going back into the cabin before supper seemed impossible with that apparatus tucked uneasily into his lunch things.

He would have to find a place to conceal it; there was no other way. The house was impossible, and the barn no better; Sherlock was entirely too comfortable commandeering anything he felt was essential for his experiments—except the geese, which made John smile still. The shanty, used for tools and food storage, was no better.

John ended up, rather uneasily, truth be told, hiding it under a shingle on the outhouse roof, as Sherlock spent the least time there of all the buildings. In the ensuing days, he would be able to work at the tool on his own visits to the outhouse, making it smooth. Once it would assuredly not give Sherlock splinters in his arse, he would polish it with a little beeswax, just to be sure. When he was finished, he would have a rather efficient little tool, long enough for its purpose, but not so thick that it would incommode a man unused to penetration in his nether parts.

That last thought left him slightly breathless, but he tamped it down. It was a medical procedure, and he would perform it as necessary. Not tonight, though. Tonight, what Sherlock needed was not medicine but reassurance: reassurance that there was no shame in normal physical response, and reassurance that John was still his friend.

True as it was, it was something that might be harder than medicine, even. John squared his shoulders and nerved himself to enter the cabin.

Sherlock was there, preparing their supper in silence.

“Good day?” John asked, as he came over to the bench to wash his hands.

“All right,” Sherlock nodded. He did not seem especially concerned, to John’s relief, although his face wore a slightly abstracted air.

“I finished the potatoes.”

“I saw,” Sherlock said. “I started a mold experiment.”

John looked at the row of little glass containers along the back of the bench. At least one of them contained squirrel viscera. Another was, without a doubt, chicken manure.

“Um,” John said, “Haven’t you had your fill of manure outdoors?”

“I’ve neutralized the more pungent matrices with a plant acid I’ve derived,” Sherlock said.

“That’s a no, then.”

“I had not been fully aware of the potential of manure prior to my closer acquaintance with it this morning.”
“I see.” John could not help but smile. The workings of Sherlock’s mind, his intense devotion to science, held enough charm that he, John Watson, was allowing all sorts of horrible things in his kitchen.

They ate sitting on the grass outside, a delicious soup of chicken, dumplings, and greens, with a sweet bread, jam, and tea. When they had cleared the dishes, John drew a long breath.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said, rather self-consciously. Sherlock nodded, as if it were his due. John opened his mouth to say something further, but caught Sherlock’s eye and closed it again. Sherlock hunched forward, wrapping his long arms around his knees.

John looked out over the farmyard. Idiot Horse and Arthur were browsing at their pickets. The chickens were still clucking around, drifting ever closer to the remains of the meal. Harry was baaing frantically at the length of her tether.

“She likes you,” he said to Sherlock.

“And you don’t know why,” Sherlock said glumly.

“I do,” John said, indignantly. “You treat her better than people.”

“Than you, you mean.”

“No—no! Just…”

“Goats are better than people, and it would follow that they deserve better treatment.” Sherlock said, and, unwinding himself, stood to gather the dishes.

“Sherlock, it’s fine, you know.” John put a careful hand on his foot. “It’s all fine.”

Sherlock shrugged.

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

In the days that followed, John took rather longer trips to the outhouse than usual, and Sherlock took no notice—or said nothing if he did. His appropriation of the beeswax also went unremarked, though, John was sure, not unnoticed. Sherlock had been mumbling things about bees and honey with increasing frequency, and John expected to find a beehive in the garden any day now.

“You’d have a less labour-intensive source of sweetener,” Sherlock said one evening after dinner. He had just scraped the last of the sugar from the canister into his tea.

“It’d attract bears, though, wouldn’t it?” John had given up on sugar when it had become evident that they would run out.

“It might. Harry would defend us.” Sherlock set his cup on the bench and bent to retrieve something from the bottom shelf. Setting it on a glass plate, he took his scalpel from the meticulously maintained leather pouch and began to poke at the plate.

John rolled his eyes, but he came over nonetheless to see what Sherlock was dissecting: a dead bee.

“What kind is that?”

“A common *apis mellifera*. I found it in the roses, but it had strawberry pollen on it.”
“Would that make good honey?” John rarely tasted honey; Mrs. Hudson did not keep bees, nor did Stamford or Lestrade.

Sherlock looked up, thinking.

“It would be very subtle. Perhaps a little perfumed. But it would be caloric, which you need during the winter.”

“You do love sweets,” John said.

Sherlock frowned.

“I like bees,” he said, after a pause.

“And sweets.”

“It’s science.”

“And sugar.”

Sherlock said nothing.

“Fine,” John said, after a moment. “But remember that we still have a rogue bear problem, not to mention a deranged lumberjack at large, and I can’t go anywhere with you before the potatoes are done.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. John swallowed a scalding mouthful of tea and licked his lips.

Sherlock stared, and bit his lip. John looked away. The quiet hung in the cabin for a long moment.

“There’s a storm coming,” Sherlock said, finally.

“It’ll be a big one,” John replied. He went back to his seat; the heat in Sherlock’s eyes had him both discomposed and wary.

“No bears out and about, at least.”

John had to laugh.

“I just hope this roof doesn’t blow off,” he said. Part of the shanty roof had done, once, and he’d spent a very uncomfortable night.

Sherlock looked up scornfully.

“Course it won’t. You built it, and while you can be an idiot about bees and science…”

“I’m a doctor, Sherlock.”

“Oh, don’t take it personally. Almost everyone is an idiot. As I was saying, you may be an idiot about science, but you’re very handy.”

John shook his head, but a warm glow spread through him. Sherlock was well enough, if he could be caustic. And, if he were caustic towards John, well, he was not angry, odd as that might sound. That, given the events of the past week, was a significant relief.

John stood, draining his cup.
“I’m going to bed. I’ve got a lot to catch up on, tomorrow.”

“Very well. Idiot.” Sherlock’s mouth quirked, just a little, and John could not help but respond. He nodded sharply, almost militarily.

“Arsehole,” he said mildly, and they both laughed. Sherlock’s face transformed when he smiled; his somewhat forbidding aspect melted away to make him…not more handsome, but certainly very appealing. A little like Ja—no. John would not set his thoughts that way.

“Goodnight,” he said.

“Goodnight, John,” Sherlock replied, and they smiled at each other again.

Though all was calm inside, it was not so outdoors. The cabin did shake that night with the first great summer storm, and the enormous cedar at the edge of the swamp had been knocked down.

“I’m sorry to see it go,” John said, as Sherlock was slicing bread. “But it is just the thing to repair the garden fence and keep those spoiled goats out.”

“As if I spoil them.”

“Don’t think I don’t realize where the crusts go.”

“Do you suppose there are any birds’ nests in there?” Sherlock said, dodging the question. Somehow he couldn’t quite bear to have John question his devotion to the goats; it seemed too close somehow. He took up his teacup and followed John out the door, ignoring the goats complaining noisily on their tethers.

Sherlock concentrated instead on increasing his knowledge of the way axe cuts could indicate stature and strength. That seemed one way to help unravel the puzzle of the mysterious cut tree the other day. It had been a constant presence at the base of his mind, interfering with his botanical investigations almost as much as the low thrum of feeling that John’s proximity inspired. Sherlock felt agitated, as though he could burst out of his skin at any moment, and he was determined to reduce the threshold of irritation in one way, if he could not in another.

He settled himself on a boulder near where John was working, pen poised. John hefted his axe and, planting his feet in the wet bottom of the swamp, swung at an angle. The axe struck, sending sprays of bark into the air. Sherlock caught one and set it aside for later study; he did not want to miss the first cuts. They began broadly, at fifteen or twenty degrees, an inch or two at a time, and then John began to cut sharper angles, pulling out flat chunks of wood with a breathtaking efficiency.

In fact, it was not until John had been cutting steadily for several minutes that Sherlock realized that he was holding his breath. It was not until John paused, that Sherlock realized he had been watching the flex of his back muscles through his shirt as much as he had been watching the expert movement of the axe through the air. He stood, quickly, and pushed John aside to measure the cuts in the wood.

“D’you mind very much? I’ve got a lot to do today.”

“I don’t mind, no,” Sherlock said, deliberately casual as he looked at one particularly deep cut.

Then, Sherlock glanced sideways at John’s arm, partly hidden under his linen shirt. Before he could censor his mouth, he was asking a question he knew to be presumptuous.
“Do you think I could measure your bicep?”


By the time the sun was midway to the zenith, John was halfway through the enormous tree. He paused to remove his shirt, wiping the sweat from his forehead at the same time. Sherlock sat as though he was one with the granite upon which he sat: hard everywhere and entirely immobile. He could not ask to measure John’s bicep again now.

This reluctance had nothing to do with making John grouchy while holding an axe. It was due to Sherlock realizing that while he had always been interested in anatomy, he had never truly realized the pull of the subject when observations could be made on a living person. The flex of John’s back muscles was utterly fascinating, pinkening Sherlock’s face in a way that had nothing to do with the sun. He forced himself to focus on only the scientific nature of the muscles, rather than the fact they were attached to John Watson; any dwelling on that fact resulted in an uncomfortable consciousness that his drawers were too tight.

Not again. He could not reveal himself to John, and he would not lay himself out to be vulnerable. He could trust his body to bail him out in extremis. Maggots, he thought. Goat feces.

It was unsuccessful. He shifted his position, biting his lip as his cock pressed awkwardly against the fabric of his drawers. I should look away, he thought.

He did not look away as, with one final heave, body tensed from neck to buttocks to calves, John split the great tree in two. The full flex of every muscle and John’s satisfied sigh nearly cost Sherlock his sanity; he worried his lower lip and shifted again. He could feel his own pulse making his cock throb; he was so hard it hurt.

“There’s a job well done,” John was saying. He was turning around. He would know. “What do you think of…Sherlock?”

But Sherlock was gone.

Chapter End Notes

This title is barely a reject, because it makes me laugh (it’s from “Company of Fools” by Great Big Sea, which is actually the theme song of a future chapter), but I did call this chapter “Escape Goats” for a while.

The actual theme song for this chapter is “Mari-Mac”, also by Great Big Sea. If you’ve never heard it before, the refrain gets faster and faster, which is pretty much what this chapter does.

One of the most unrealistic things about this story thus far has been that the goats haven’t escaped. Goats are possibly the hardest things to fence in ever because they are smart and can jump very high. They laugh at barbed wire. They thumb their noses at gates. The first pair we had on the farm once worked together to get out of a six-foot-high board fence reinforced with chicken wire. So in the interests of truthfulness, out the goats had to go.
And, of course, once they’re out they’re really really hard to catch. I promise I’m not exaggerating the chase even a little. OR, honestly, in a horse being curious and/or silly enough to come and see what’s happening.

Also, I mean, you knew I had an opinion about the stinkiest manure. Pig manure does give chicken a close run, but in the end, there’s a slightly higher level of whatever stinky organic chemical compound (look, I asked my friend who holds a Canada Research Chair in organic chemistry and he couldn’t tell me so … stinky compound, okay?) in accumulated chicken manure.

Heaping dirt around potato stems helps increase the number of potatoes you get per plant.

I’m grateful to ellioop for pointing me towards these Finnish wooden dildos (http://teatiamo.com/). They look very like what John might have made. I’m also indebted to her for the delightfully-worded suggestion that John take his time carving the massager: “A little puddle of quiet where he just... commits to the thing, and having become complicit in it, decides to do it His Own Way, and with Excellent Craftsmanship and Consideration. Possibly correcting the design to accordance with his own experiences in the deltas of Upper Shagistan.”

Next week is another HUGE and delicious chapter. I'm super excited for you to read it. I will say that I might have to skip a week after that because I’m not entirely finished Chapter 13. I’m hoping to get it done but the term has started and I’m working 80-hour weeks for the next few weeks.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos.

Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Confessions are made, cures are sought, and John is very, very restrained.

Chapter Notes

Everything that happens in this chapter is consensual. I hope I've made that clear enough. If you're uneasy about "medical" situations turning sexual you might want to skip this chapter. Also, Sherlock is still having flashes of shame about his erections.

If you want to know what happens to the handmade prostate massager this is absolutely the chapter for you.

Doctornerdington slaved over this chapter and really helped make it better. <3 Marigolds, ellioop, turifer, and girlwhowearsrglasses provided a lot of squee and I am grateful. I have been DYING to share this chapter with you.

Thanks for all the awesome comments. You guys have made me laugh so much and I so appreciate you taking the time to write feedback.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John felt a flush of terrible excitement. He had caught only a glimpse of Sherlock’s congested face as Sherlock retreated, but he had had time to see the strained flies of Sherlock’s trousers.

It was time, then. He laid down his axe, and went to the outhouse to fetch the massager.

Though he knew the pamphlet and procedure by heart, but he read it again as he walked to the house: “Prostate massage: A firm, repetitive pressure on the gland will cause it to drain; a clear fluid will flow from the urethra, indicating success. Afterwards, a nearly boiling towel should be placed over the genital area, which will deflate the erection without inducing the discharge of the man’s vital essence which may be conducive to lethargy.”

Right, then. Into the breach, as it were.

When John entered, Sherlock was hunched on the settle again. Without speaking, John poked up the fire and located his cleanest towel. He kept his back to Sherlock until he was able to secrete the massager under the towel on the bench.

“Sherlock,” he said, once the kettle was on. Sherlock did not answer.

“Sherlock, stand up.”

“Why?” Sherlock said bitterly. “So you can realize, again, that I am abnormal?”
“No! No, Sherlock, you are not abnormal.” John said, gently. “And I can help you. There’s another treatment, one that really is medical.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed into his skeptical expression, and John rejoiced, inwardly.

“Describe it.”

Shit.

“There’s a gland,” John began hesitantly, “at the base of your organs of generation.”

“Last time I looked there were two,” Sherlock said, deadpan.

“Not those glands.” John hid a smile. “This is a single gland: the prostate. It provides a matrix for seminal fluid.”

“Provided by the glands we’re not discussing, fine. I presume this gland is internal, then?”

“It is. The access is ah, internal as well.” John looked Sherlock in the eye.

“Not surgical, I imagine.” Sherlock was equally unflinching.

“No. I have the appropriate tool, however.”

“Is that what that is?” Sherlock said. “I did wonder. You got a nice sheen on it with the beeswax.”

“I should have known you’d find it, but yes.”

“You shouldn’t have left it outdoors. I don’t fancy mould up my arse.”

“Honest to God, I have no idea how you managed to live to the advanced age of twenty-six.”

“Powerful parents, mainly. Also, I run fast.”

“I know you do. In any case, yes, that’s it—the tool, lubricated, presses on the prostate, resulting in drainage of the fluid that causes congestion. It may cause a slight discomfort, but you should feel some relief.”

Sherlock looked up at him, his pale eyes almost grey in the diffuse light of the cabin.

“And it is entirely medical. It means no… sexual liaison between us?”

“No, of course not. No, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried about that, John. As I have intimated, I am not averse to such a liaison. You, on the other hand, appear to be.”

The bitterness in Sherlock’s voice shocked them both. John drew his chair to face Sherlock on the settle, and sat. His heart hammered in his chest.

“I…” He stopped. His breath seemed trapped in his body. Sherlock said nothing.

“I…” John tried again. The misery on Sherlock’s face was pure torture. “I am not… averse. I cannot, for very good reasons that you are entirely aware of—

“But do not agree with,”

“—that you are entirely aware of, begin a sexual liaison with you, but I am not averse because of
“So you have an interest in…me? Sexually?” Sherlock persisted. His face was wearing its most alert expression; John, despite his flustered state, could not help but recognize it as Sherlock on the trail of an absorbing mystery.

Had he ever thought that Sherlock’s mind was an amazing phenomenon, his attention superlative? Watching it deployed on something else was one thing, but that was nothing to having the whole brilliance of the man and his mind focused on oneself. John felt simultaneously miniscule and larger than life. He opened his mouth to answer and shut it again.

“John,” Sherlock breathed.

“Y-yes.”

“Yes, you have an interest in me?”

“Yes.” John said more firmly. He was terrified but also strangely relieved. At least they could acknowledge this infatuation, and thus, perhaps, watch it wear away like any other ill-judged attachment.

“I see.” Sherlock’s words were not comforting, but John had not expected comfort. Or a reciprocal admission, if it came to that. Though Sherlock had already made it clear that he was interested in a sexual liaison, he had stopped short of saying that he was attracted to John. The signs were there, perhaps, but John did not dare explore for fear of discovering something more powerful than his own will.

“And, given your scruples, you are comfortable with this procedure?” Sherlock’s voice carried concern. About him. About John Watson. John steeled himself.

“I cannot offer you anything but my medical expertise, Sherlock… and my friendship, if you’ll have it.”

Sherlock’s face was blank for a moment, then a soft smile transformed his face.

“It’ll have to do. It’s more than I expected, any how.”

“You’re not so bad,” John said, rising. “Now take off your trousers and lie on your side on the settle.”

“Such sweet words.” Sherlock said, “Are you sure you’re not trying to woo me?”

“Certain. No, not facing that way. Facing the back of the settle, arse out.”

“As you say, Captain Watson,” Sherlock replied. The sound of those words in that voice was arresting, but John bit down any desire. He ladled hot water into the dishpan and washed his hands well, then emptied it out the door. Refilling the pan, he dropped the folded towel into the water and went for the beaver grease.

He bit down the urge to laugh. This had been nearly the most ridiculous conversation of his life, the frankest avowal of his unusual preferences to date, and he was about to stick his finger, and then what was essentially a wooden cock, up the arse of the person he desired most in the world.

Grease in hand, he steeled himself to face the sight of Sherlock curled on the settle, mother-naked. He turned.
He nearly dropped the beaver grease. Instead of lying down, Sherlock had stood; his hands were on the back of the settle and his legs were parted. His arse, sleek and beautiful, was spread and ready.

It was so much worse than John had expected – and so much better. He coughed.

“Well?” Sherlock impatient was worse than Sherlock passive; it woke the beast in John’s gut, the beast that demanded submission, that fed on it. The beast that was decidedly non-medical.

“None of your lip,” John growled, and Sherlock’s arse quivered. John dipped his left hand into the beaver grease and laid his right on Sherlock’s lower back. To his credit, Sherlock did not flinch, but John’s cock gave a jump that he was pretty sure Sherlock had felt.

“Hold still,” John said, and placed his finger on Sherlock’s arsehole. Sherlock drew in a short, sharp breath, but it was not of pain, and John could see that his bollocks were already drawn up. He felt a sympathetic throb in his own drawers. He took a deep breath himself and readied himself to tamp it down, but then he stopped and, for one brief, glorious moment, allowed himself to feel his desire.

He knew—knew as sure as he knew the sun would rise and set—that Sherlock would be pliant and warm under his hands. He knew that there was no debauchery he could perpetrate that Sherlock would not joyfully accept. He knew, too, that if there were not the double spectre of loss hanging over him, that he would spread those delicious arse cheeks and ready Sherlock with his fingers, and then his tongue. He shivered.

Then, he stopped. I am a very bad man going to a very special hell, he thought, and pressed the tip of his lubed finger into Sherlock’s arse.

“This may be uncomfortable,” John said. He made his hands and voice as gentle as he was able. “Bear down a little.”

Sherlock did not reply. John waited. When Sherlock’s body relaxed a fraction, John pushed past the second tight ring of muscle. A shudder took Sherlock, sweeping down from his shoulders to his haunches.

“All right?” It had not been a shudder of fear, or of pain, or even of disgust, but if Sherlock wished to stop any reason would be acceptable.

“Fine,” Sherlock said. John both heard and felt that word, and it traveled up through his body like a shock.

“A little more, then.” His whole finger was inside Sherlock now. Sherlock was hot, overheated, even and his body was slick and tight. John slid his finger out a little, then in again, feeling the muscle relax by tiny increments. Sherlock’s breathing was slightly more sterterous than it had been, and John cursed himself that he had not thought to auscultate Sherlock’s lungs before starting.

Holding one finger firmly inside Sherlock, John laid his right fingers on Sherlock’s jugular pulse. Fast, but that was to be expected.

Then, he laid his hands on Sherlock’s ribs. Sherlock was breathing deeply but steadily.

The next step, then. Replacing his hand on Sherlock’s lower back, John crooked his finger down and located the prostate.

“Ungh!” Sherlock bucked forward and John lost contact with it.

“Did that hurt?” he asked, reaching for it again more carefully. It was prominent; it might very
well be painful when touched.

“No,” Sherlock’s voice was low.

“Sherlock, tell me the truth.”

“John,” Sherlock said more loudly, almost too loudly in the quiet cabin, “It is not painful. Quite,” he panted, “the opposite.”

John swallowed.

“Sherlock, I am going to do…to make…an external examination. I will have …I’ll have to touch you, all right?”

“Unnecessary.” Sherlock’s voice was still very loud. “My…I am erect, almost painfully so.”

“That’s…normal. It's normal. It makes draining the prostate slightly more laborious, but it is normal.” John was glad when he closed his mouth. If he’d said “normal” again he would have had to slap himself.

“Then proceed.” Sherlock said, and John thought he might have to slap himself anyway. The sound of Sherlock’s voice rumbled through him like dynamite.

John picked up the massager and held it in his free hand, gauging its weight again, but also feeling its smoothness with pardonable pride. He slicked it with grease; the sound it made coincided with another huff of breath from Sherlock.

“I’m going to take my finger out, and put the tool in, Sherlock.” John kept his voice steady. Sherlock nodded acquiescence and sighed as John slid his finger gently out. He spread Sherlock’s cheeks and set the blunt tip of the greased massager to the charge.

“It’s thicker than my finger. Tell me if there’s too much stretch.”

“Do it.” Sherlock arched his back, the long sweep of his buttocks even more pronounced with the movement. John bit his lip. Then, he steadied himself and began to work the curve of the tool into Sherlock’s arse. He listened to Sherlock’s breath, sliding it in on the exhale. The breaths were getting closer together, and by the time the curve was in, and only the length remained, Sherlock was panting audibly.

“Almost there,” John said, as soothingly as he was able. “Tell me when I have it.” He worked the tool out a little, then in further, and out again. Sherlock’s hips were rocking a little in rhythm with the motion, but it was clear when John had hit his target. Sherlock’s movements stuttered and a breathless gasp escaped him.

“There?”

“Yes.”

“Can you feel any fluid?”

“Ah…” Sherlock’s response was barely audible—John would have to look. Holding the tool in place, he took a small step back and squatted, at eye level with Sherlock’s arse and cock.

What he saw shocked him deeply. Sherlock’s cock was painfully erect, the veins engorged with
blood. It bobbed against his belly, as Sherlock’s arms were shaking slightly with the strain of holding still. A thick line of clear fluid dripped from the purple head to the settle.

“Christ, Sherlock,” John exclaimed. “We’d better stop.”

“Nothing?” Sherlock looked down between his arms and caught John’s eye. He looked an utter mess: he was flushed, pupils wide and lips plump.

“Lots.” It did seem to be working, but at what cost? Sherlock seemed almost distressed, and John himself could barely breathe.

“Don’t stop.” Sherlock’s voice was low and pleading, and it would have taken a more disciplined man than John Watson to refuse. Adjusting his stance, he began as gently as he could to put a regular pressure on Sherlock’s prostate, while Sherlock rocked into it.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the wet sound of the massager working back and forth, but before more than a minute or two passed, it was broken by Sherlock’s low groan. John felt it in his fingertips as the utterance shook Sherlock’s body. Suddenly, the situation seemed urgent; the scent of heat and arousal filled the room, and then Sherlock was convulsing with another strangled groan. John watched, openmouthed; there was no longer clear fluid dripping from Sherlock’s cock, but drips of white spunk.

John stared at Sherlock’s cock, then at the mess on the back of the settle. Sherlock’s panting was the only sound in the cabin. John’s knees were protesting. He knew he should withdraw the massager. And yet he remained where he was.

Sherlock was equally silent. His body shook, for a moment, and then was still.

“Sherlock!” John stood, and eased the massager from his arse as gently as he could. Regardless of germs, he let it drop and nearly ran for the hot towels.

When he got back, Sherlock had collapsed to one side on the settle.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock. So sorry. I didn’t think it would end that way.”

“With me ejaculating on your hardwood furniture?” Sherlock’s voice was raspy, rough. “I’m aware I’m not normal, thank you very much.”

“It’s—it’s not that, Sherlock.”

“You didn’t expect a climax. It was medicine, you said.”

“It wa—it is. It’s just… you’re sensitive, and that’s fine.” John did not add that he had never seen a man come to crisis from prostate stimulation alone. He also did not add that it was one of the most erotic sights he had ever seen.

“I feel better,” Sherlock sighed. He reached out for the hot cloth John was holding.

“Understandable. You should be less sensitive now.” John choked out the words, seized with an urge to disappear—to run, to hide. To find the most physical job he could find and work at it until his body was bent and exhausted.

He was fooling himself, though. No labour could take this deep heavy desire from him.

“Good. Look,” Sherlock said, as though he was reading John’s mind. “I’ll put myself back
together."

“I should keep an eye on you. Do you want some water?”

“No. Go. You’re going to the south field to clear. I know how to find you.”

“You’re sure you’re all right.”

“Quite.”

There was nothing else for it but to leave him. John did not flee, but he left the cabin as fast as he could, and if he stroked himself to a nearly painful crisis the minute he was behind the cedar stump in the swamp, who was to say?

After the door closed with a crash behind John, Sherlock dropped his head to the back of the settle and drew a long breath. His limbs were heavy and yet light, his arse was slick and pleasantly strained, and his mind was suffused with a glow that could not be dampened by his unexpected crisis and John’s shocked reaction.

He had told John he felt better. In fact, “better” didn’t cover it; his whole body felt marvelous, as though he had run far and fast. He stretched into the feeling, letting any residual shame wash away. Was this what sexual congress was like? His relief after having woken up with sticky sheets was a pale shadow compared to this.

But what about John? He had been discomposed, nervous, and tense.

Sherlock rolled his picture of John around in his mind. John, admitting his attraction. John, his voice curt and clipped, his gestures restrained. John, his hands shaking but taking exquisite care.

Was John bringing himself off now? The tension in his shoulders as he had fled the cabin suggested that he was.

Sherlock was suddenly seized with an impulse to find him, to touch him. To bring him to the same marvelous feeling (How long would it take? Surely not long, despite Sherlock’s lack of expertise); to collapse in his arms (Would it feel better than being in John’s arms when he was cold and miserable? Almost certainly.). There were so many possibilities, scientific and non. His cock throbbed.

John would refuse, of course. He was too haunted by his past experience and too hagridden by his present scruples to allow any kind of congress.

But could he be convinced? Sherlock focused his mind—so easy, now—and considered the problem.

What drove John Watson? Survival, now, and, he thought, companionship. Danger, excitement, and...

“None of your lip”, he had said, in a tone that had, paradoxically, invited insubordination. A challenge. That’s what he needed, what would allow him to stop thinking too much.

Sherlock pulled on his trousers and reached for his notebooks, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. In this, at least, he could provide what was needed.
In the week that followed their disastrous—to John’s mind—attempt at prostate draining, John was never sure which way was up. He supposed, as he was shovelling out the barn one evening, that he should not have allowed himself to expect that Sherlock Holmes would behave in any kind of predictable way.

In fact, John admitted to himself, he had expected Sherlock to be calmer and more tractable, but those hopes had been summarily dashed. Though Sherlock had been increasingly focused on his investigations and experiments, he had been extraordinarily aggravating in his personal habits. He had spent the rest of that fateful day attempting to identify the dog hair and its source, without luck. Then, he had decided that the best solution to his intellectual impasse regarding the source of the dog hair was to attempt to find a substitute for tobacco. The various rank “cigarettes” that he produced over the subsequent days drove John ever wilder, and the tension in the cabin had risen rather than dropped.

“I don’t know why you bloody have to smoke it in here?” John exclaimed one rainy afternoon. He had been mending harness when Sherlock had flung the vial of hair into the corner once again and lit up a roll of brown leaves that looked like a particularly repugnant mink dropping.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, John, it is raining outdoors.” Sherlock’s snide tone grated over John’s strained nerves.

“And you have to make both indoors and outdoors uninhabitable?”

Sherlock’s only answer was a rather unpleasant cough.

“Give me that,” John ordered, holding out his hand.

“I am not some subordinate you can order about.” Sherlock said, and took what John felt to be an unnecessarily large draw from his mink dropping.

“Oh really?” John said, and stood up. It was ridiculously satisfying to tower over Sherlock for a moment. Sherlock, a saucy smile curved his pillowy lips, looked up at him with a nonchalance that could only be feigned. And yet how John would love to wipe that look from his face!

“I am your guest, John.”

John restrained the urge to grab a handful of dark curls. He knew, just as certainly as he knew Sherlock was driven by bravado, that Sherlock would obey him instantly if he pulled his hair. His hand flexed.

“You are a pain in my arse right now,” he said, instead. “You will extinguish that revolting item.”

“And if I don’t?”

The sheer cheek made John’s face twitch with rage.

“I will extinguish it for you.”

“Dear me, Dr. Watson,” Sherlock said, his lips still taunting. His pupils, however, had dilated. John flushed, remembering Sherlock’s reaction at being surprised in the woods, and was even more certain that Sherlock would crumble under a strict physical control. As James had done, had wanted. It had been sweet to have his captain on his knees, and it would be even sweeter to have Sherlock Holmes on his.

He glanced at the crux of Sherlock’s trousers, which confirmed his suspicions. Sherlock was clearly
aroused—by him, *him*—and while that was too close to the bone for John to feel quite comfortable, he did have an option.

John could do it again. He should do it again. He could take out the massager and, with a clear and doctorly explanation, oblige Sherlock to lower his trousers once more.

And yet he was not sure he was capable of being clear or doctorly this time. Last time he had been calmer, and he had still felt the hitch in his own breath and a strain in his drawers. Knowing he could make Sherlock climax would make it infinitely worse; enjoying the “treatment” from beginning to end as a man rather than as a doctor was unconscionable. Sherlock had been so soft, so responsive—he had experienced pleasure without a single touch to his cock, and just thinking of that in passing made John dream things he definitely should not dream.

He reached out and plucked the offending cigar (it was really an insult to use the term cigar) from Sherlock’s lips instead. He strode to the door and flung it out.

“No more.” He said. “Look to your mould collection instead. At least that doesn’t smell appalling.”

“As if you didn’t know that my moulds need to sit for at least another thirty-six hours.” Sherlock’s voice was petulant. “You are being deliberately provoking.”

“I?” John slammed the door. “I’m being deliberately provoking? You’re the one filling the indoors with the reek of God knows what, and then pouting when you’re asked to consider basic courtesy.”

“Courtesy! What is courtesy in the face of science?”

“Science my arse!” John let his voice rise with no small feeling of pleasure. If Sherlock wanted a row he’d get one, and anger was easier than desire—to a point.

Sherlock, in response, ruffled his hair with both hands before flopping like a limp carrot on to the settle. His head was down, and one long leg draped over the back. He let out an enormous gust of a sigh.

John, for a moment, was not sure that he had not hurt Sherlock’s feelings, and yet he was sure that his assessment of Sherlock’s cigar experiment was not incorrect. It was not science, but a humbug upon which to displace his feelings—of inadequacy about their inability to find reason or rhyme behind the recent pattern of events, most likely, as well as his unresolved sexual needs.

Suddenly, John was ashamed of himself. He too was displacing his feelings, for the same reasons. Could he not extend a hand of compassion? He took a breath.

“Where did you go to school?”

Success. Sherlock snorted despite himself.

“You don’t really want to hear about my disastrous schooling,” he pronounced.

“Don’t I?” John grinned.

“You don’t. You’re as bored as I am and you want me to stop being provoking.”

“Let me guess: you made many tutors quit.”

This earned him a second snort.

“They were deeply unqualified.”
“I can imagine.”

“One didn’t believe in circulation of the blood. Didn’t believe in it, John. As though science were a matter of faith!”

“I’m not surprised. You know, once I found out that Anderson—you know, Mrs. Hudson’s—”

“He actually believes that—”

“Wait!” Sherlock started up. “Harry’s bellowing.”

“She’s just bleating…no, she is bellowing. Someone’s coming.” John rose to go to the door but Sherlock sprang up at a speed that seemed unlikely given his previous languor.

“It’s Dimmock,” he said, from the doorway. John, who could not see a single thing through Sherlock, shrugged. “He probably has letters. Sometimes I do get mail.”

“I don’t like it,” Sherlock muttered. John rolled his eyes, but a small stab of concern shot through him nonetheless. Sherlock’s feelings were not to be disregarded.

Dimmock’s arrival was nothing short of a relief for Sherlock. Though he had succeeded in igniting John’s rage, his own desire was also white-hot: if he was not imagining what John might do to him when his control snapped, he was replaying every moment of the prostate massage in his head. His notebook was filled with diagrams that were decidedly not botanical, and his one need was for John to touch him again.

Despite his physical urges, Sherlock was surprised at just how calm he felt in the wake of his own admission to himself. Desperate, but calm; he knew, now, what he wanted, and though he lived every day in fear that he would reach out and touch John and be rejected, he was at least not at war with himself.

He could not look at John’s hands without feeling them slide, so gently, into his arse, and he felt he would go to the grave with the feeling John’s handprint seared on his back. Every time John raised his voice in response to Sherlock’s provocation, Sherlock’s desire spiraled higher. He knew that his control was finite, and though he was testing John, John’s response tested him. He should have included that in his calculations, but desire, until so recently unknown or a source of shame, was still something of a mystery to him.

And yet, he had felt no shame. Surprise, yes, when John’s words or movements caught him in the pit of the stomach and his cock sprang to life. Curiosity, when he woke every morning in torments of desire—that is, if he had not ejaculated into his blankets. It had become so severe that he had taken to sleeping in a spare shirt rather than have to wash the blankets again and again under John’s watchful eye.

What was most puzzling was that the dreams that made him spend himself were dreams that did not seem so very obscene. In the last one, John had held him close and whispered words of love and safety, his firm hand stroking Sherlock’s body. He knew that was what he wanted, but it was odd that it should bring him to such a pitch, so often. Even thinking of it in the daytime could cause a surge of desire.

The one thing he would not do was bring himself off with his own hand. He could not quite explain
why, yet, and so he endured, hoping that an answer would come to him.

Sherlock bounded to the door as Harry’s bleats amplified with Dimmock’s approach. The boy was in a hurry; he wouldn’t stay for a snack and a game if he were, so much the better. Sherlock held out his hand the very minute the boy was within speaking distance.

“Letters?” he said, and the boy, his face impassive, emptied his pockets. Something for John from England—that was rare—and a bill from Angelo’s, and…

Damn. Sherlock held Mycroft’s missive between thumb and finger like a particularly distasteful specimen. What was that ruthless cake fucker doing now? Meddling, that was certain. He turned on his heel and returned inside.

John’s voice rose, pleasant, to greet Dimmock, but Sherlock blocked it out of his consciousness. Tossing John’s letters on a chair, he threw himself onto the settle and turned the letter over in his hand. Written in a hurry, sent express (which meant individual courier, but even Mycroft’s individual couriers wouldn’t come to Scotch Bush). He’d probably want an answer.

“Please sir,” Dimmock came self-consciously into the room, “I was told specifically to wait for an answer, sir.”

“That’s all right, Dimmock. Would you like some bread and cheese while you wait? Sh—Mr. Holmes will write one.”

“I will not.”

“There’s supposed to be an answer.” Dimmock had made, as of yet, no great proof of intellect, but he was clearly good on following orders.

“My answer is verbal: my brother can keep his great nose out of my business. Tell his courier that.”

“Sherlock,” John remonstrated.

“That is all.”

“I’m supposed to take an answer back.” Dimmock repeated.

“Sherlock!” John’s voice was sharp. Sherlock knew he’d have no peace until he’d answer the damn thing, but he’d be damned if the answer were anything more than “sod off”.

He opened the letter. Why was Mycroft’s penmanship so perfect, even when he was writing under great pressure? At least there was what looked like a spot of jam on one corner.

_Brother dear,_

(Why did Mycroft always do that? It fooled no one.)

_News has come to me of a potentially dangerous situation, in which you have characteristically embroiled yourself. It is, however, an imperfect report, as you may suspect, and so I require you to write me a detailed account of the particulars. I expect your letter immediately._

_P.S. Could it be that you are getting involved? We all know how well that went last time. Do you remember Redbeard?”_
The letter was undated.

“What is it?” John again, all concern. “Is everything quite all right? Your parents?”

Poor John. Bound, in so many ways, by conventional feeling. Sherlock almost let the thread of pity he felt for him cut through his anger.

And then he did not. Redbeard, indeed.

“My brother,” he said, “is an interfering, imbecilic…” He was halted in his flood by John’s expression: open, attentive, but with his head tilted towards Dimmock, whose eyes were already as wide as saucers and getting wider.

“Very well.” No use but to get it out of the way. He went to his things and pulled out the most stained piece of paper he could find. With his homemade ink (quite good staying power, but did tend to unevenness) he wrote the shortest missive he could manage.

*Everything perfectly under control. Please send me my pickled salamanders by return of post; they are in your second-best trunk.*

*SH.*

*P.S. sod off*

He scrawled his name and sealed the letter, smiling; the lack of capital letters in the postscript was quite the right touch. And his salamanders would be useful here; he thought they might be slightly different than the ones in John’s lake, and it would be worth comparing.

He handed the letter to Dimmock.

“Right. And Mr. Lestrade says he’ll be raising his barn next Saturday, so please come.”

“We’ll be there,” John said, and Dimmock, who seemed only too happy to scarper, letter in one hand, bread and cheese in the other. He waved briefly, and was gone.

Sherlock sat back with satisfaction.

“What was in the letter?”

“Sheer nosiness,” Sherlock said, reaching for it and flinging it into the fire.

“Right then. So what did you write back?” John asked, his own letters dangling from one hand.

Sherlock told him.

Even after two months with John Watson, he was not fully prepared for the strength of the laugh that John emitted. It was a deep, satisfied laugh, and he, Sherlock Holmes, had caused it.

He began to laugh as well.

“His second-best…” John was wheezing. “Sherlock, I swear, that is the most…the funniest… I can’t.”

“You should hear what’s in his second sock drawer.” Sherlock giggled.

“I’m not sure I want…no, tell me.”
“All the rejects from my coprolite collection.”

“That’s a coprolite, when it’s at home?”

“It’s a fossil.”

“A fossil? That doesn’t sound very unpleasant.”

“Oh, it’s not. Fossils are stones, there’s no great worry. But… coprolites are fossilized shit.”

“Jesus,” John said, and the wheezing began again. “Of course he wouldn’t like it, the fastidious bastard.”

Sherlock’s face had started to take on a strained feeling, and he realized, after a moment, that his facial muscles were tired—from laughing. Him. Because of John. He looked at John, whose head was thrown back, still laughing, the column of his neck exposed, his shoulders shaking.

John, who understood him, even though he had never wanted a boarder. John, who respected—smoking items aside—his experiments. John, who saved him from enraged moose and tried to pull him out of manure piles. John took care of him and was, when it came down to it, the most interesting person he had ever met.

“All right, Sherlock?” There it was. Sherlock met John’s eyes—dark blue, so dark that they looked brown in some lights.

“I’m perfectly fine,” he said, softly. He wondered what it would be like to touch John. Not just receive his touch, or brush against him, but to touch him deliberately, and absorb that care and confidence and warmth through his own skin. He threaded his own fingers together to help him resist.

“You were quiet.”

“I was. But I’m fine.” And involved. So very, very desperately involved.

Chapter End Notes

Rejected title for this chapter was “I Just Happen To Have This Hand-Carved Prostate Massager Right Here.”

The song for this chapter is “I’m Your Man” by Leonard Cohen. I just cannot get away from that song; it’s so FREAKING romantic (for fictional characters. I would not want that in my life. Boundaries, Leonard). However, the song “Your Backyard” by Burton Cummings because as aforementioned I think I am farging hilarious.

THIS IS NOT GOOD SCIENCE.
I mean, prostate milking is fun, yes. The idea of seminal discharge taking away from other systems is a Victorian one, true. BUT DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME OMG.

wait. I guess you could. I mean, medical kink/prostate milking, then aftercare isn’t such a bad idea. Just don’t overboil those towels, because I made that shit up.
If you’re wondering if this was partly inspired by that ridiculous/hot reddit thread about the dude who discovered prostate stimulation, then YES yes it was. I know it’s been done with Sherlock fic but it was so hot that I still had to make this happen.

Re: smoking gross things you dry in the woods—what, you’ve never done that? I don’t even smoke and I used to try and make tobacco with all sorts of weird forest greenery.

As I said last week, I am still not 100% finished Chapter 13 and work is insane right now so I may have to miss next Sunday. I'm going to try not to, because I do have most of it written, but next week is busy too.
The next morning, John woke to a quiet cabin and sun streaming into the windows. He got up, stretched, and looked upstairs: no Sherlock. He looked at the door: no boots.

A cold fear seized him. Had Sherlock decided to leave, now that the rain had stopped?

Then, he shook himself back into sense. Notebooks decorated the settle and the floor, and Sherlock’s fine overcoat was draped over the attic bed. Surely he would go nowhere without those.

Pulling on his trousers and boots, he went out to the barn. As he stepped into the bright summer morning he saw the chickens were already out and breathed a sigh of relief. Sherlock must have come to collect eggs, a conclusion that made much greater sense than Sherlock running away.

This was almost immediately borne out by Sherlock himself coming around the corner carrying a bowl heaped with eggs.

“Morning, John,” he said, with such a brilliant smile that John was rather rocked back on his heels. Had he had another nocturnal emission? No. Best not to go down that road.

“Morning!” John smiled back.

“Those hens are laying beautifully now,” Sherlock said smugly. John rolled his eyes. Sherlock had insisted on giving them a warm mash through the rainy period despite John’s loudly stated opinion that it was cosseting pure and simple. Now, apparently, he would have to concede that it had worked.

“Very well, Sherlock, you’re a genius with poultry,” he said, and watched Sherlock’s broad smile
become broader.

“I’m a genius, full stop.” Sherlock said, and swept into the house.

John shook his head and went to the barn. When he came in again, the cabin was filled with a savoury fragrance that made his mouth water. The little table, so seldom used, was set, and Sherlock was at the fire.

“What’s all this?

“Breakfast.”

“It smells wonderful.”

“I thought you’d like it.” Sherlock’s face was smug again.

John washed his hands at the pump and sat down. Sherlock poured tea and turned smartly back to the fire, bending solicitously over the bake kettle.

John definitely did not look at his arse. Instead, he sipped his tea and looked out of the window. He was a rational man, he thought to himself.

“Here we are,” Sherlock said triumphantly. “Careful, it’s hot.” He set a steaming dish on John’s plate: it was eggs and bacon and…something green? John peered at it more closely.

“Baked eggs with bacon and spinach,” Sherlock said, placing a mountain of buttered toast between them and sitting down.

“How did you…it smells divine, Sherlock.” John said. He took a piece of toast and dipped it into the bowl. It was too hot on his lips, but so rich and delicious he ate it anyway.

Sherlock watched him dig further into the dish. John felt a little self-conscious at the intensity of his gaze, but as he worked through the layers of buttery creamed spinach and rich bacon his eyes nearly rolled back in pleasure. He suppressed a groan as he spooned up the dregs of cream.

“It’s perfect, Sherlock,” he said. Sherlock’s cheeks, already pink from the heat of the bake kettle, flushed deeper. His little half-smile was unreasonably beautiful; John had a sudden urge to run his thumb over that plump lower lip.

“You haven’t eaten anything,” he said instead.

“I will,” Sherlock said, fiddling with his utensils. “There was something I wanted to say, first.”

“Go ahead,” John said, voice steadier than he felt.

“It’s, well, I want to propose something.”

“So soon?” John said, in a falsely hearty voice, and silence fell heavily over the room.

“I won’t joke,” Sherlock said fiercely, his cheeks even pinker. “I want us to be lovers. So do you. It is foolish to pretend otherwise.”

“It is. But…” John had to break eye contact; Sherlock’s face, wide open and earnest, was more than he could bear.

“Please, John.” Sherlock reached out and covered John’s hand with his.
John could not draw away. Sherlock’s warm hand over his own felt right, though it was not. He wanted so desperately to curl his fingers around Sherlock’s and hold on to him, just for a moment, but he knew he should not.

Then, Sherlock leaned forward and kissed John swiftly on the lips.

John didn’t pull back. He didn’t move forward either. Sherlock’s lips were soft and his mouth tasted of cream sauce and desire. The slide of his bottom lip was as delicious as John had always known it would be.

“Please,” Sherlock whispered against his mouth.

The single word was enough to galvanize John. He drew back, fighting down an impulse to push the table away and hold Sherlock close.

“Please, John,” Sherlock whispered. “I’m sorry. I want…”

“Don’t be sorry,” John sighed. He looked Sherlock in the eye. “We both do. I just… I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I daren’t. You’re a good man, Sherlock Holmes,” he said, knowing it was too little. He felt something inside himself crack.

“Not good enough,” Sherlock said bitterly, and withdrew his hand.

Outside, huge grey clouds were massing in the east. More rain, John thought, and left the cottage.

As the new spate of rainy days wore on, Sherlock’s provocative behaviour returned and reached new heights. He commandeered John’s blankets to make the settle more comfortable. He refused to wash his mould experiments out of the dishes. He attempted to start an ill-advised experiment with coals on the hearth that might have burned the cabin down. He did not dress, or eat, or even sleep, as far as John could tell. He did make bread, but baked some type of herb into the loaf that John ate that made multiple trips to the outhouse a matter of necessity rather than subterfuge.

At every gross breach of civility, John would try, and fail, to remain calm. The moment he lost his temper, Sherlock would submit meekly to the dressing down, a tantalizing flash in his eyes that would force John to turn away in order to maintain his composure.

Time after time in that long, damp week, John had thought of the prostate massager, now lying casually in his chest, rather like an undetonated explosive device. Sherlock’s shocking climax and John’s own ensuing arousal had ensured it could not be used again. His knowledge had failed him once again—prostate massage was a medical procedure, but given the circumstances it was one he could not in good conscience repeat.

He had already had to abandon his vow to restrict self-abuse to once a fortnight; he now allowed himself once a day. Otherwise he would crumble under the strain and most likely lay hands on Sherlock, who, aggravating though he was, did not deserve to suffer John’s unpalatable mixture of anger and desire.

He would hold fast, he told himself, but still, Lestrade’s barn raising could not come soon enough. A change of scene would do them both good.
After several days, Sherlock became oddly quiet. He ceased tormenting John and devoted himself to the garden and to the goats. In fact, it seemed as though every time John looked at him, he was standing by the goats, watching them nuzzle each other, or talking to them. It gave John a slight sense of unease, but he supposed it was better than Sherlock brooding about romance.

And then, one sunny afternoon, Sherlock deliberately let Harry into the cabin and ignored her while she wreaked havoc.

This time, Sherlock noted with satisfaction, John did not attempt to remain calm.

“Bloody buggering fuck, Sherlock!” John yelled, grabbing Harry’s collar as she chewed up part of his best blanket. Sherlock leaned against the kitchen bench and watched him drag her outside, knowing that his own nonchalance would make John even wilder. He shivered, anticipating, and was not disappointed when John burst back into the cabin, his cheek working and his shoulders set.

“What in the hell are you playing at, Sherlock Holmes?” he roared.

Sherlock shrugged. “I’m cataloguing her food preferences.” Complete nonsense, of course. Sherlock glanced over to the chest where the prostate massager was stored. John was too overwrought to see it now but it would lodge itself in his psyche.

“Horseshit! You are bloody not.”

“I am.”

“You are deliberately trying to provoke me.” John’s hands clenched, and Sherlock shivered again. The memory of those hands on him was enough to shorten his breathing and make him half-hard. He shifted, letting John see.

John glanced down but did not retreat. He moved into Sherlock’s personal space, challenging him.

“That’s conjecture.” Sherlock’s voice was weaker than he had hoped it might be. John was looking up at him, and the look made Sherlock want to fall to his knees. He stiffened his spine instead.

John stepped back and sat on the settle uneasily but he leaped up again as if remembering. There, Sherlock sympathized; he sat on the settle because there was no other place, but every time he looked at it he saw splatters of spunk.

“You can’t do it, you know.” John said, his voice normal now. “I won’t allow you to provoke me into doing what I know to be wrong.”

“Your moral compass needs recalibrating.” Sherlock fought down the cold feeling that swept through him at the word “wrong”. He knew that John was not thinking of him, of them, when he said it; he was thinking of past events and past consequences.

“Says you.”

“Obviously. Harry can’t talk.” Sherlock knew he was now at a delicate point in their negotiations. “There has to be some kind of compromise.” His voice barely wavered, he thought proudly.

“Just…let me think about it, Sherlock. I have to consider everything. I can’t rush in.”
“Are we not compatible?” They both knew the answer, but sometimes it was better to ask questions one knew the answer to.

“Yes, but for how long? Do you really want to be buried in the bush all your life?”

“I’ve lived more in my time here than I ever did in Carleton,” Sherlock said, his fervour unfeigned.

“This year. But what about the years to come? It’s all very well now, but we’ll bugger it up somehow, Sherlock, and then what?”

“You can’t hide yourself away because of one past mistake, John. I want to take the chance. Why don’t you?”

John looked at him then, his eyes wide and his mouth set.

“Because I care for you, you absolute arsehole!”

“I know,” Sherlock said. John gaped. “And I care for you. Yet it appears our desires are incompatible—I wish to care for you by becoming lovers; you wish to care for me by protecting me from yourself. Which is rather a cowardly way of doing things, not to mention rather unflattering to me.”

“You’ve never had a lover. I can’t be the first!”

“You think I should go to Lestrade? He’d have me.”

John reeled back, suddenly furious. “You had better bloody not!”

“Oh, so you can dictate my behaviour now?”

“Mycroft practically set me up in loco parentis. What in the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Mycroft is an excuse. You are afraid, nothing more.”

“What if I am? It only shows my persistent unfitness!”

“You’re a person, John! A human being! And you deserve what happiness you can find in this life!”

“I’m glad you think so, Sherlock, but I will do what’s right, for once.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“I’m bloody tired of you telling me I’m wrong! Don’t you think I want this too, even though I know I can’t have it?”

“Take it, then!” Sherlock came close to him again, dangerously so. “Take me.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” John said, “You really don’t.”

“Try me,” Sherlock said. His hands were shaking. He could see John’s weight start to shift towards him; blood rushed to his lips and his cock as John’s body—when had he ever thought John slight?—pressed into him.

John’s hand was raised…it was winding itself into his hair. A slight tug nearly brought Sherlock to his knees again; his scalp seemed inexorably connected to his groin.
“You want this?” John whispered, and Sherlock nodded frantically, burying his nose in John’s hair. “This is what you’d get.”

Suddenly John’s mouth crushed down on his with a force that left Sherlock breathless. He couldn’t—didn’t—breathe; he was nothing but sensation, opening his mouth under the pressure of John’s lips until their tongues slid together. It was a curious dissolution of the self; he felt as he had that night in the woods: open, at one with everything. It was too much and not enough. He gasped, taking in welcome air and the scent of John’s body against him.

John stiffened and pulled away from him at the sound. His hair was mussed and his lips red, and Sherlock knew that he was as hard as Sherlock himself.

“Gods, Sherlock,” he said, running his hand through his hair. “I shouldn’t have…I can’t.”

Sherlock could have howled in frustration. He reached for John’s hand and held it. Then, when John was looking at him again, he bit his lip. John flushed red, looking suddenly uncertain.

“liked it, John.”

“I know. I—I did too. Look, maybe we…maybe we can? Be something? But I need to think about it. Can you give me time?”

Sherlock’s heart leaped.

“I liked it, John.”

“I know. I—I did too. Look, maybe we…maybe we can? Be something? But I need to think about it. Can you give me time?”

Sherlock’s heart leaped.

“I think I can,” he said. His heart fluttered as John ran a thumb over the palm of his hand.

“Thank you.” Two small words, but Sherlock felt as though they spoke more than he could have ever dreamed of.

There were clear skies the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. After what seemed like an age of wet clothes and of wrestling with wet wood and slippery axe handles, it was delicious to go outdoors and feel warm and dry.

Nothing more had been said about being lovers. They had exchanged one more kiss, barely a brush of lips, one day as they had crossed paths in the doorway of the barn, but nothing else. John had spent his days clearing, gradually trying to reorganize his heart around Sherlock’s open desire.

He also watched Sherlock incessantly. Right now, in fact, Sherlock was crouched at the edge of the pond, letting Harry nibble his shirt and Clara nibble his ear. He was stroking Clara’s neck, his hands almost dwarfing her. His face was open and happy.

John felt a warm surge of affection. Perhaps it would work, after all.

Suddenly, a brilliant idea seized him, and, though he felt a little foolish; it bordered on the romantic, and he was old enough to be well past it. Still, he thought. He squared his shoulders and walked over to the goats, who ignored him. Sherlock looked up and smiled.

“Look,” John said, “D’you want to have a bonfire tonight? That pile of stumps and roots in the south field is nearly dry, and no bear’ll come near us if we have a fire going.”

Sherlock stood, his eyes speculative.
“Can I divide the roots by species?” he asked. Clara butted his thigh and he caressed her head reflexively.

“If you must. But I’m going to clear while you do that.”

“Very well,” Sherlock made a mock huff, and John laughed.

“Let’s bring cheese to toast; I wager you’ve never had that before.”

“Food is nothing but fuel,” Sherlock said.

“Liar,” John took the risk of shoving Sherlock in a friendly way. “That egg dish was much more than fuel. It’s my turn to give you something good.”

“Cooking is a science.” Sherlock’s mouth was very prim, and John laughed out loud.

“If that’s how you’re going to be,” he said, and went on to the shanty.

That night, they gathered bread, cheese, a knife, a bottle of port, and matches, and traipsed down to the south field. The sky was beginning to turn a pale orange, and the air was clear. A few mosquitoes rose up around them, but they were slow and stupid. The heat had subsided; there was no wind.

“Perfect night for a fire,” John said, as he spread a cloth on the ground and set the food down.

“Indeed,” Sherlock said. He had already pulled a notebook from his pocket and was climbing to the top of the tallest root pile.

“Make clean piles,” John called, knowing it was futile, and slung his axe over his shoulder. He turned towards the bush and began clearing some smaller trees away.

When the sun had dipped to touch the horizon, the sky was blazing orange and pink, and the large burn pile had become two piles. Sherlock’s hands and face and shirt were black with peat, and John’s shoulders ached. He put down the axe and stretched out his hands, but he had scarcely had the chance to finish before Sherlock leapt over with matches in his hands.

“If we start the two piles at once, I can measure burn rates. There’s tinder at the base of each one. Do hurry up!”

“Fine,” John took the match and knelt at the base of his assigned pile. “Now?”

“Now.”

They touched their matches to the nests of curled birchbark simultaneously, and each crackled immediately, sending thin streams of smoke up into the cooling air. John stood back and watched the little tongues of flame lick up towards the smaller dry roots. This was the most satisfying part of the clearing process: digging out the gnarled roots had been hellish, and seeing them ignite and burn meant that he was so much closer to a fully cleared farm.

“Mine’s faster,” Sherlock said, almost gloatingly.

“As long as it burns, Sherlock,” John replied, poking his fire and watching with satisfaction as the sparks crackled up into the darkening sky.

“I thought you were competitive.”
“Not tonight. And not when it’s about luck rather than skill.”

“Luck! It’s simple botany…and chemistry.”

In the fading light, Sherlock’s hair was just another dark shadow, but his skin gleamed. His hands were on his hips, and his shirt buttons strained a little. His ridiculous cupid’s bow mouth curved upwards, shining in the firelight.

John’s mouth went dry, a little.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“I’m filthy,” Sherlock replied.

“That too,” John couldn’t help but laugh.

“Thank you,” Sherlock said, almost gravely, “So are you.”

“I’m so ordinary.”

“You aren’t.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Sherlock smiled, but said nothing.

John, a little overwhelmed, turned away to deal with the food. It was so much, so good, all at once, and he didn’t quite know what to do about it. The obvious, yes, but somehow he didn’t want to rush in. It was unfair, he thought, as he unwrapped the new cheese. He knew just how Sherlock was now, in desire, and the thought was a hunger inside him.

“Here,” he said, holding out a green branch with a chunk of cheese on the end. “Hold it over the fire, then catch the melted cheese with the bread. Then, do it again.”

Sherlock took it wordlessly and crouched by the nearest pile of logs, assessing the new coals as they glowed. He selected a space carefully and held out the cheese, warming it on each side.

John shook his head.

“Don’t toast all your sides at once,” he said, putting his cheese over the second-best spot. “Or you’ll lose your cheese.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Sherlock said, but he stopped rotating the square.

The fire crackled, and the warm smell of food and smoke rose in the air. They sat, with greasy fingers, enjoying the rich cheese over bread and watching the last of the sunset. John was gratified to note that Sherlock ate a substantial wedge of cheese and at least half the loaf before drawing a long sigh and taking a healthy swig of port out of the bottle.

“Just fuel, is it?” John said teasingly.

“It was good,” Sherlock said, wiping his hands on the grass. “But there’s no need to be so smug.”

“Says the smuggest man in the universe.”

“Only when it’s justifiable.” Sherlock’s lips shone in the firelight.
“Can I kiss you?” John said, and Sherlock, undisturbed by the abrupt shift in conversation, nodded, leaning forward in anticipation. John threaded his hand in those curls, tugging, so that Sherlock’s mouth was half open by the time their lips met.

Later, neither Sherlock nor John could say with any certainty what happened next. Sherlock knew that he had heard a cracking, but whether it had been the fire or something else, he could not tell. John’s attention was drawn from the kiss by a crash and a volley of sparks. He looked up in time to see a tree fall across their fire, a slender poplar with something tied to its tip.

Then, a scream echoed through the night, long, drawn-out, and chilling.

They jumped apart.

“Sherlock,” John said, grabbing his axe.

“Go,” Sherlock said. He already had his hands on the tree, pulling it out of the fire. John sprinted around the back of the fire, but could see and hear nothing unusual. He sniffed the air, on a whim, but no bear scent hung in the air either. It was too dark to see much of anything, and far too late to begin a search.

“Sherlock!” he shouted. He turned around and raced back towards the fire. What if the shout had been a ruse to remove Sherlock from him? He ran faster.

He came back to see that Sherlock had the whole tree out of the fire. With his hands on the unburned bark, he was looking over each inch of the tree carefully, from bottom to top.

They saw it at the same time. Tied to the top of the fallen tree was the figure of a dog, crudely fashioned in straw.

A straw dog. Something tingled deep in Sherlock’s memory; he couldn’t grasp it, but a gnawing dread installed itself at the base of his spine. This was something to fear, something that tickled at a hidden memory.

“Nasty,” John said, and reached out to untie it. Sherlock grabbed his wrist to prevent him.

“Not yet,” he said, and pushed away the fear to focus on the observable facts. The dog was about four inches by six, a rough representation rather than a specific species. It was made of fallow hay, not the straw he had originally thought, and tied with what looked like cream embroidery floss. The eye was a single black boot button. The whole thing was attached to the branch with a willow withe.

Sherlock observed the knot closely: a granny knot. The simplest of knots, but eminently suitable to this purpose. The floss itself was not knotted, but sewn tightly. He frowned, then liberated the dog from the tree with careful hands.

“Our stalker is neat-handed, I’ll say that for him,” John said, crowding closer.

“Her.”

“A woman?”

“No man sews like that.”

“What woman would do this?”
Sherlock paused.

“I don’t know. And I don’t like not knowing.”

“So it’s a woman.”

“I don’t know, John,” Sherlock said, furiously.

“But why draw our attention in this way?”

“Our assailant wants us to know they’re watching.”

“To what purpose?” John shivered. He remembered India, which had seemed to have eyes everywhere—and, in fact, had had eyes everywhere. He fought down a wave of panic, worrying his lower lip with his teeth to keep his focus. The fire swam before his eyes.

“John,” Sherlock said, concern lacing his voice. “John.”

John shivered and blinked. He bit his lip again and tasted blood.

Then, he felt himself enfolded into Sherlock’s embrace. He felt suddenly small, but the heat of Sherlock’s body and the rapid beat of his heart were soothing.

They stood like that for a while, despite the clear danger, until John felt he could pull back.

“I’m all right.”

“You’re not,” Sherlock said, chafing his hands. “Look, let’s go in. We can investigate tomorrow.”

He let John go and began to search around the fire for a burning brand to light their way back.

John stared at him.

“No arguing,” Sherlock said, briskly. “You’re cold and shaking. The night is dangerous. We are going.”

John felt better as they approached the cabin. Sherlock made him stand outside with the light while he checked the mezzanine and every nook and cranny. Then, he brought John in and he locked the door with a sigh of relief.

“Sit,” he told John, after wrapping him in a blanket. He himself did not sit, but paced around.

“It doesn’t make sense!” he said at last, kicking the settle.

“Hey now!” John’s objections were tepid. “Don’t destroy my furniture.”


“What can I do?” John asked.

“How many women within a day’s ride? We need to see their boots.”

“We can’t very well ride about the district asking to look at our female neighbours’ boots, especially at this hour.”
“Tomorrow, then.”

“But tomorrow, nor the day after, nor Sunday. Monday will be Lestrade’s working bee. Just about everyone will be there.”

“That’s a long time from now.” Sherlock ran his hand through his curls, making them stand on end. “Who embroiders?”

“Nobody I know. Mrs. Hudson hates it, and so does Sally. Dimmock’s mother might, but frankly if she’s the one out playing pranks in the dark I’ll eat Harry whole.” John sat in his chair, and then stood again. He went to tidy the bench instead, but gave up. It seemed so ineffective. “Do you think we’re really in danger? This seems like a warning, but nobody’s harmed us.”

“It is a mistake,” Sherlock said, leaping on to the settle and surveying the whole cabin, “to theorize without knowing all the facts. Tell me about the other neighbours?”

“I can’t think of any that might do something like this.” Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I didn’t ask your opinion. Give me more data.”

“It’s a small place. Stamford at the bridge, Mrs. Hudson, Sally, and Anderson there. Lestrade and young Dimmock are my neighbours. The Dimmocks live further out, towards Five Trees and so do the Knights and their son Henry. Sarah Sawyer—her husband’s dead—lives with her companion Soo-Lin Yao not far from there; they trade work with Will Lyons, who’s baching it like me. And there’s the Ojibway camp.”

“So: Mrs. Hudson, Sally, Mrs. Dimmock, Mrs. Knight, Sarah Sawyer, Soo-Lin Yao, the Ojibway.”

Sherlock leaped down from the settle and seized a notebook.

“I can’t see any of them doing it. Who has the time? Why a dog?”

“Speculation, John.” Sherlock continued to scribble. “Although, your question regarding the dog is marginally useful.”

“Oh, thanks. But you haven’t seized on the very important fact that every single one of these women lives on a working farm and couldn’t spare the time to trek down to my farm for a practical joke.”

“John, I am entirely convinced that none of your farming neighbours did this. We’re looking for someone clever, someone very clever.” He held up the straw dog. “But why so clever? It’s a game, that’s what it is. But who’s playing? What are the rules? There must be a pattern, John.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I, quite. Now be quiet.”

John sat back down. He knew he should go to bed, but his nerves were too raw for sleep. Instead, he took down his shotgun and began to clean and oil it as Sherlock examined and measured the dog.

Neither of them slept that night.

They went back to the south field as soon as it was light, before chores or tea. The root piles were still smouldering, and the traces of their picnic were visible in the shorn grass.
Behind the piles, however, there was no discernable sign of any activity beyond their own footprints. Sherlock combed the grass meticulously from the bonfires to the woods, but not a sign could he see.

“Could we have imagined it?” Sherlock demanded again, in a tone that John knew, now, meant that he was not expecting an answer.

“I don’t see how. I think it happened. I think someone wants attention.” John said firmly.

“Mine or yours? It can’t be both of us; we barely know each other.”

John flinched. “I suppose.”

Sherlock looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“You think it’s aimed at the two of us.”

“I’m hoping it’s aimed at the two of us.” John squared his shoulders. “If it’s aimed at me, I’ll be a damned mess. If it’s aimed at you, I’ll be . . .” he gulped, “worried. We can deal with this, the two of us.”

Sherlock nodded. He felt the ring of sincerity in John’s voice and his vague unease was soothed.

“So how did the tree get on the fire?” John asked, hoping to focus Sherlock’s thoughts.

“It wasn’t thrown,” Sherlock exclaimed. In several long bounds, he covered the distance between the piles and the woods. John followed more slowly, examining the grass again as he went.

When he arrived, Sherlock was standing in a copse of trees looking up. John could, once again, see nothing.

“Everything’s upside down,” he complained, “and backwards.”

Sherlock did not respond, but continued staring up. John followed his line of sight.

“You looking for ropes, or a platform?”

Sherlock ran his hand along the bole of the thickest poplar at the edge of the forest, but said nothing.

“It can’t just have catapulted on to the fire from nowhere.” John added.

“Backwards,” Sherlock muttered, then looked at John. “Catapulted. Of course. John, you’re brilliant!” he said, and took off at a flat run. John followed as fast as he could this time, and was surprised to fetch up at the little wood on the home side of the south field.

“It’s here somewhere,” Sherlock said, and dropped to his knees. He scrabbled around in the grass, examining the base of each young tree.

“What is it?” John asked, kneeling beside him. “What am I looking for?”

“Striations. Damage to the bark. Something.”

“Something,” John muttered, and started to look.

They crawled around along the edge of the wood for some time. Then, Sherlock gave a great shout; when John got to him, he was pointing ecstatically at the bole of a slim poplar.

“Our culprit has a small hand,” he said, indicating some irregular smudges on the middle part of the
John stared at the four even slashes at the top of the tree.

“Sherlock.” He couldn’t quite express it.

“They’re so even. Have you…” Sherlock trailed off when he saw John’s face.

“That’s a bear slash.”

“Impossible.” Sherlock’s face went comically still.

“I guarantee you it is not.” John said.

“But it’s as recent as the damage at the base of the tree.” Sherlock examined it again.

John nodded.

“That can’t be right.” Sherlock said.

“That our mysterious prankster has a tame bear?”

“There’s a precedent.” Sherlock bit his lower lip. “John, I need bear scat immediately.”

“How?”

“We have to go back to the trail up by Richard’s Brook.”

John shook his head. Tearing off into the woods and leaving his farm unattended was out of the question. Letting Sherlock go to Richard’s Brook alone was out of the question. Going himself… could he go, himself?

“We can’t. And that’s final. It’ll have to wait.”

Sherlock set his face mulishly, but John raised a firm hand. “It’s simply impossible. And if you do it, I will send you back to your brother. This person is trying to scare us, not hurt us; the best thing we can do is,” here, he nerded himself, and lied to Sherlock, “go about our business. This person will show themselves again, and we will have more information.”

Sherlock stared at him for a long moment without speaking. John recalled seeing much the same expression on Harry’s face when she ran to the end of her tether and was jerked back.

“That’s your final word?” Sherlock asked.

“It is, and I am not, in any sense, joking.”

“Very well, John,” Sherlock said, with a calm that sent a shiver of disquiet through John’s body. “But we’ll be at Lestrade’s work bee early.”

“We will,” John said, and with that Sherlock had to be content.
Honestly I called this chapter “Famous Hot Mess” for about two months but eventually decided I could have called it “Hot Lips.”

The actual theme song of this chapter is “Common Disaster” by the Cowboy Junkies. The Easter egg is really the lyrics of the song itself; they’re a HUGE HONKIN HINT about how everything is going to go down.

Honestly I have no idea whether giving hens hot food in summer makes them lay more. We used to feed our hens chicken food and compost and nothing more. They still laid plenty of eggs. If any poultry experts want to weigh in below, though, I’m interested.

I spent a while thinking about the egg recipe Sherlock makes for John and ended up picking this: http://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/baked-eggs-with-bacon-and-spinach-360549. I don’t think it was something that was common at the time but I feel confident in Sherlock’s ability to come up with something like it.

A bake kettle is essentially a large Dutch oven, cast iron with legs and a tight-fitting lid, that could be hung over a fire or buried in coals to function as a pot or as an oven. This link provides a pretty neat example: https://hearttoheartcookery.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/img_8839-001.jpg

Once again, I can’t guarantee an update next week. I hope to have something for you, but I’d rather wait and give you a good chapter than just drop something small.

Come and see me on Twitter (@scudery) and tumble (redscudery) for ridiculous military headcanons and other things. Thanks for reading!
Company of Fools

Chapter Summary

Lestrade's barn raising means there are a plethora of new suspects...er, people...for Sherlock to meet, and John's bachelor status is cause for comment. Many food items are consumed, many drinks are drunk, and many dances are danced. There are confidences in the woods--and danger, too.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience. I'm working 50+ hour weeks this semester and I don't really remember how September went. From now on, I am going to go to a monthly update schedule. It's not ideal, but it's what I can guarantee. I'll do my best to update more frequently than that.

My best thanks to Doctornerdington, who betaed the first part of this chapter under significant time pressure. I'm posting it all, because I want it up, but if you see any errors it's my fault. I'll repost the second part of the chapter once she's had a chance to work her magic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Despite their early start, John and Sherlock were not the first men to arrive at the work bee on Saturday morning. There were three wagons in the yard and Lestrade's spacious cabin was already bustling with women.

“Morning, John,” Lestrade shouted, popping up from behind the enormous pile of logs meant for the barn. “Morning, Sherlock.”

“Morning!” John shouted. Sherlock had already leaped off Idiot Horse and, leaving her reins dragging on the ground as usual, legged it into the house, bundle of bread in hand.

John waved and, scooping up Idiot Horse’s reins, walked over to Lestrade.

“Morning, Greg. He’s just anxious to show Mrs. H that his sourdough is better than hers.”

“He’s welcome to try,” Lestrade laughed. “He’s something, that one.”

“He is that. Look, Greg,” John searched for the right words, “we’ve had something rather odd happen.” At Lestrade’s concerned nod, he told him everything, from the first fallen tree, to the dead squirrel, to the final creepy horror of the straw dog.

“And you think it was a woman?”

“Sherlock does.”

"He's sharp. Better trust him. Let me know if there's anything I can do.”
“Will do. Nice wood you’ve got.” John felt a wave of relief, moving on to normal subjects.

Greg nodded thoughtfully. “Mostly spruce, but I hope it’ll last. I’ve got larch for the roof.”

“How big will you make it?”

“Big enough for my teams and at least one other, maybe two. The river road is much more travelled than it was even three years ago; I’m getting more, er, custom, than ever before.

“You’re going to be needing someone to do your cooking before too long,” John said.

“I hear Sherlock makes good bread,” Lestrade laughed. “Maybe he should come.”

“You’re welcome to him,” John replied, but he clenched his fist nonetheless at the unexpected spike of jealousy. “He left squirrel entrails on the dishes last week. I nearly shot him.”

It was true enough, he supposed – even if it was only half the story.

“And I thought him showing up here a few weeks ago and telling me that I’d been chopping all wrong was bad.”

“He did what?”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. He meant well. I told him to fuck off and he did. Found a loaf of bread and some onions the next day, so he was properly sorry.”

John shook his head. Just wait until he got his hands on that man. He was so very grateful for Lestrade’s forbearance; far from being furious, as most men would be, he was understanding.

“Is he helping us today or is he helping with dinner?” Lestrade asked.

Another example of Lestrade’s understanding. For the first time, John wondered how the more traditional Dimmocks and Barrymores would react if Sherlock helped with the food rather than the barn. He was less worried about Lyons, given what Dimmock had let slip once about his frequent visits to Lestrade.

He shrugged. “I’ve no idea.”

“It doesn’t matter, really,” Lestrade said.

The Barrymores drove into the yard just then. John shook Mrs. Barrymore’s hand, then the Major’s. Could these two, the definition of “solid citizen”, be responsible for the straw dog? John frowned. This uncertainty had the potential to poison all of his relationships. His eyes flicked to Mrs. Barrymore’s neat moccasins as she walked towards the house. Some of the raw anxiety he had experienced in his first year in this community came flooding back to him; he struggled to keep his posture relaxed, holding his left hand rigidly at his side.

“Haven’t seen you for a while, Watson,” the Major said. “How’re you keeping?”

“Well enough,” John replied, “Potatoes a little late but Isadora had twin heifers this year.”

“That’s champion. You’ll need a dairymaid before long—or a wife.” His tone was jocular, but his smile was thin; John knew that his unwillingness to take a wife inexplicably irked the man. He
winced.

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.” The falseness of his own voice jarred him, and he stood dumb for a moment.

“John!” Gratefully, John swivelled his head around and saw Will Lyons enter Lestrade’s yard. Raising two mental fingers to the Major… and pushing away guilty thoughts of Sherlock, John couldn’t help but look Lyons over appreciatively. At nearly six feet tall, Lyons was well-muscled and handsome; his dark eyes, high cheekbones, and smooth skin spoke of his Chinese heritage.

Maybe that was the solution to his problem. John wondered if Lyons would be up for it. He smiled, a degree more warmly than usual, and Lyons smiled back. Was that a spark of interest in his eyes?

“Lyons,” Barrymore nodded. He and Lyons were close neighbours, and John realized he had no idea how those two interacted. He’d never needed to know before, he supposed.

“Major,” Lyons said. “John! How’s your city botanist?”

John met Lyons’ eyes boldly.

“Acclimating well enough, I suppose. Got on the wrong side of a moose, but my garden’s never been better.”

“Everything’s a trade-off,” Lyons laughed. “Is he here? I haven’t seen anyone from the city in years.”

“He’s somewhere about.” John suddenly felt protective of Sherlock. “How are you? Heard you had a bit of trouble with your oxen.”

Lyons began a tale of bad harness and deep mud, and John allowed himself to be swept into the flow of it. He was genuinely surprised when Lestrade and Cyrus Dimmock came over, both swinging axes. Young Joe Dimmock followed them, looking slightly hangdog the way he always did when his father was present.

“Looks like Stamford’ll be late, so let’s get started. Unless you’re going to gas all day, lads, and then eat me out of house and home anyway?” Lestrade laughed, though the laugh didn’t reach his eyes. John thought he saw Lyons wince.

“Gentlemen, let us pray for the success of this venture,” Cyrus Dimmock said, rather unctuously. There was no church even in Bonne Chere yet, a lack that Cyrus and his wife were trying to correct. Meanwhile, there was prayer at every opportunity. Frankly, John was surprised that they had allowed Joe to chore for such an obvious atheist as Lestrade, but his money was as good as anyone else’s, he supposed.

“Joseph? Will you pray for us?” Dimmock had his hand firmly on his son’s shoulder. The boy wriggled a little, then, sighing, bowed his head and muttered “Dear Lord thank you for this beautiful day please bless our endeavour and keep us safe amen.”

“Amen,” said Cyrus sonorously, looking up with satisfaction. Young Joe sighed.

“Let’s get at it.” Lestrade set his cap back on his head and swung his axe up on to his shoulder. “I’ve paced out the spot. Major, Mr. Dimmock, if you’d start planing for the roof? Joe and I split those logs last week. John, Will, and I will notch. Joe, you’re to sharpen axes and fetch water.” At
Joe’s protest, he added “And you can take your turn notching once we’ve enough to start lifting.”

John watched each man heft his axe and then lifted his own.

A nervous energy crackled through him as he chose a log, moved it to a safe distance from Lestrade and Lyons—who had their backs to each other, he noted—and began to slice a deep v-bed in the wide end. The slight unease he felt in company was intensified; chances were good that someone in this very yard was responsible for the tricks. He swung his axe harder, making chips fly.

Sherlock had taken only a step or two into Lestrade’s cabin when he was struck by how unusual it was. He had entered via a door very similar to John’s cabin, but instead of one main room, there was a sort of entry hall, with a bedroom off to each side. Two bedrooms, both with town-made beds and, apparently, sheets. That was rather a puzzle, especially as neither seemed to have been slept in recently.

A guesthouse, perhaps? He had just begun to look about when he was confronted by a face he had never thought to see again.

“Sally.” He kept his expression neutral. How did one react in such circumstances? Unsure of himself, he advanced his hand. “From Carleton Academy.”

She looked right through him.

He persevered. “The chambermaid, no? You served…you…” He stuttered to a stop as her face closed up. “Mycr—“ he tried again. Something wasn’t right. Why wasn’t it right?

“Don’t say that name,” she hissed. “Or your own. We’ve never met, and we never will,” she said, and turned sharply away from him.

He looked after her, simultaneously scanning her for information and rifling through his mind palace for more. Why could he not remember?

He focused again. Her cap told him she was a widow—the Widow Donovan, so obvious now. She lived with Mrs. Hudson, but despite Sherlock’s several visits he had never met her. That had been deliberate on her part, he saw now.

Why could he not put her in her proper place? He remembered most people, and yet her exact place in his own past was unclear in his mind, hovering just beyond reach. He slapped the wall in frustration.

The door banged.

“Move your delicious bottom, if you don’t want it pinched,” Mrs Hudson said, bustling through, laden with lettuces from the garden. Sherlock stared after her for a moment.

“Horrible old woman,” Sherlock called, his cheeks pinkening. Did John think he had a delicious bottom? He was beginning—arresting thought—to suspect that John did think so. Sherlock himself had never really thought of bottoms as such, but now he rolled that new idea around in his mind. He had no trouble bringing the curves of John’s arse to his mind; though he hadn’t realized it at the time, his mind had stored the image of John sliding underwater. He could almost taste the cool lake water on his own lips as he recalled the jackknifing grace of John’s body, the compact curves of his arse
breaching above the water for only a moment. It did have a pleasing shape: lean hollows above the sweetly rounded gluteus muscle, all set against a muscular back and strong thighs.

Sherlock shivered. He was very nearly hard already; traitorous thoughts of John’s hand on his arse were intruding, distracting him from his purpose. He worried his lip and forced his startlingly reluctant mind back to the problem at hand: the straw dog and the person that had planted it.

He hurried through into the kitchen, where Sally—why could he not recall more?—was at the stove, stirring an enormous kettle of beans. Her back stiffened at the sound of his step; he resolved to leave her strictly alone until he could place her. Mrs. Hudson had shaken her lettuce dry and was now tearing it briskly as she gave breadmaking instructions to another, unfamiliar woman.

“Use both hands, Sarah, it won’t bloody bite you,” she said. Sarah, who was slender with shining red hair, made a rude gesture in her direction and continued kneading expertly with one hand.

“Oh, there you are, Sherlock dear,” Mrs. Hudson said, “Do tell Sarah to stop wasting time.”

“So this is the famous breadmaking city boy,” Sarah said, entirely unperturbed by Mrs. Hudson’s disapproval. She held out her free hand. “I’m Sarah Sawyer. I farm over by Willows with my partner, Soo-lin.”

“Nice to meet you, Sarah,” Sherlock said. Her gray-green eyes were clear and straightforward in her open face, and her grip was firm, but not self-consciously so. Very confident, then, with men and women.

“I hear you’ve been experimenting with salt-rising bread. That’s quite tricky—at least Soo-Lin says so and she’s the expert—but I’d love to taste yours, and she probably would too. Where has she gotten to, anyhow?” she asked Mrs. Hudson.

“Eggs,” Mrs. Hudson said. “And she’ll likely be back in good time, which is why I sent her and not you.”

“Crabby old bat,” Sarah said affectionately.

“Sherlock, be a dear and take that dough off Sarah’s hands. Sarah, you can peel potatoes since you’ve apparently left what little sense you have at home.”

Sarah rolled her eyes but pushed the bowl towards Sherlock and went to wash her hands at the pump. Sherlock followed to wash his own.

“How long have you been in the backwoods?” he asked, as she set the water gushing. She moved over to allow him access to the water too.

“Five—no, seven years now. Just a little before John came.” she said, passing him the soap.

“It’s unusual for women to homestead alone.”

“It is,” she grinned. “Need a good team of oxen and a strong back.”

“And yet you’re not out helping with the logs.” Sherlock dried his hands and passed the towel to Sarah.

“Ah, it’d scandalize the Major, and that’d bring trouble down on Lestrade. And it’s like a holiday, wearing skirts and being in the kitchen, though I wouldn’t want to do that always.”
“Don’t let Soo-Lin hear you say it’s a holiday,” Mrs. Hudson said, scoldingly. “You’ll be making your own breakfast for a month.”

“Soo-Lin knows full well she’s the driving force of our operation,” Sarah said airily, picking up a potato in one hand and a knife in the other.

“Are you taking my name in vain?” came a gentle, laughing voice. A slender woman, with dark hair and black eyes came into the kitchen, her apron laden with eggs. She was about to say something else when she caught sight of Sherlock and shut it again. Her face closed in on itself and she took a half-step backwards.

Sherlock did not move, but stored that reaction in the back of his mind.

“Sherlock’s all right, Soo,” Sarah said, already at Soo-Lin’s side. “He’s living with John.”

Sally put the lid back on the beans with a clang that made them all jump.

“Sally! Of course. How remiss of me,” Mrs. Hudson grabbed Sherlock’s sleeve and dragged him forward. “Soo-Lin Yao, this is Sherlock Holmes. His mother is a friend of mine, and he’s a botanist.”

“Scientist,” Sherlock corrected, then caught himself. He held out his hand, slowly. “Good morning.”

“He’s brought salt-rising bread, Soo. Can you imagine fussing with that?”

“John prefers it,” Sherlock said. Soo-Lin had not moved to shake his hand, so he withdrew it. She relaxed just a fraction. “Sarah says you’re the bread expert in your household.”

“I am,” she said. “Where would you like these eggs, Mrs. Hudson?”

Sherlock nodded, feeling rather awkward, and turned away to finish washing his hands. The kitchen fell silent as they all set to their tasks; only the clank of plates, the sizzle of meat, and the gentle chink of eggs being put to boil could be heard.

Sherlock considered Soo-Lin’s reaction to the sight of him. It was not hostile, as Sally’s had been, but fearful. She had no reason, as far as he knew, to fear him, but perhaps she feared men in general. He would watch, at dinnertime.

Then, more footsteps were heard, and two new women, both large and matronly, came into the kitchen.

“Good morning, all,” said the taller of the two. If she were born in Canada, Sherlock thought, he’d eat his hat; her accent held the ringing tones of someone who had at the very least, seen people hunt, and more likely led the hunt—it positively echoed.

“Julia!” exclaimed Mrs. Hudson, “And Prue! Do put down your things—oh, you didn’t bring your famous mince tarts, Prue, honestly, you shouldn’t have!”

“She really shouldn’t have,” Sarah muttered, materializing at Sherlock’s elbow, “They’re totally inedible.”

“Julia, dear, I’d like you to come and meet Violet’s son. You remember, Violet Grondin that was? Holmes now? This is her youngest boy, Sherlock. Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson had divested the loud
woman of a covered dish, “This is Mrs. Barrymore and—blast it, Prue, put the tarts down and come here—Mrs. Dimmock.”

Sherlock shook hands with both women. Mrs. Barrymore simply nodded; Prue Dimmock muttered a “how d’ye do” in her flat Canadian voice. As he had expected, neither seemed to be quite the type to have perpetrated the kind of unconventional hoax as the straw dog—although if the loud woman knew his mother anything was possible, he supposed.

Mrs. Barrymore took up a towel and began to polish Lestrade’s already impeccable cutlery; Mrs. Dimmock was set to stirring the beans. From Sarah’s one raised eyebrow, Sherlock was fairly certain it was meant to keep her from ruining any food items. Neither woman made any further attempt at conversation with him.

Once his bread was in the oven, next to a truly enormous haunch of meat, Sherlock found himself setting up huge trestle tables outside. When these were prepared to Mrs. Hudson’s satisfaction, he was put to finding enough seats for all the men; every possible chair was pressed into service, from Lestrade’s fine maple dining set to logs from the woodshed.

Sherlock did not object. He watched Major Barrymore plane his way meticulously through the pile of logs beside him: every time he finished a log, he lifted it seemingly effortlessly into a neat stack, despite his age. Cyrus Dimmock, working beside him, was both slower and less industrious. His pale eyes darted around the barnyard, more concerned with others’ work than his own. Nasty man, Sherlock thought to himself, but without enough imagination to scare and threaten. His weapons were the conventional ones: censure, shame, exclusion.

Joe Dimmock knew that, Sherlock was sure of it. The shape of the boy’s shoulders, so different from his usual quick, industrious bearing, told the full tale. He’d left his home as soon as he could, that was certain.

Right then and there Sherlock swore that, even if they had to hire him themselves, that young Dimmock would never go back home.

Themselves. He knew, of course, that John would hire Dimmock on in a moment if for some horrible reason he lost his place with Lestrade, but it was oddly comforting to think that he himself would be part of the decision. That, and the three kisses between them, suggested a certain relational solidity that left Sherlock suffused with warmth. Their pair bond was coming along nicely, really.

Stamford arrived just before noon, driving his wagon into the yard to friendly shouts from everyone.

Sherlock was concentrating on carrying the enormous pot of beans from kitchen to table when he heard the commotion Stamford’s arrival caused. Setting it carefully on the huge table, he shook his hands loose and went to greet him.

And then he saw that Stamford was not alone. There was a woman beside him, and another woman—no, a young boy, as well.

As far as he knew, Stamford lived alone. How very interesting.

The young woman was small, with a very straight back. She stepped easily down from the
wagon, but there was a constraint somewhere—ah. The clothes. She was dressed in a conventional town outfit, but it sat uneasily upon her, her blue serge hem dragging in the dirt. Recent, then, and not made for her.

“Sherlock!” Stamford exclaimed, and Sherlock made his way cautiously forward. “Miss Kuskatoo,” Stamford said, smiling at her encouragingly, “This is Sherlock Holmes. I believe you might share certain interests. Sherlock, this is Miss Molly Kuskatoo. She is my new apprentice.”

Miss Kuskatoo nodded nervously. Sherlock held out his hand.

“Is that wise, Miss Kuskatoo?” he asked, as her hand disappeared into his own. Her little frame tensed, and both she and Stamford were opening their mouths when he continued “Stamford’s the most appalling hand with pharmacopeia I’ve ever met. You’d be better off with John…er, Dr. Watson, for that portion of your training.”

Miss Kuskatoo’s face as he said this was a study in contradictions: relief, anger, and laughter played across her delicate features.

“I have every faith in Dr. Stamford,” she said, finally, lifting her chin.

Stamford shook his head and chuckled. “It’s true that my pills are more uneven than not. John doesn’t practice any more, Molly, but perhaps he’d be willing to discuss his techniques. Come to that, Sherlock, you’re fairly hot on chemistry; Miss Kuskatoo could learn some things from you, too.”

“Stamford!” Sherlock jumped; he had not seen John arrive, and when he turned to look he was glad he had not. His face was damp with sweat, and his shirt hung open. He smiled at Sherlock briefly, incandescently, and Sherlock stared, shocked out of his purpose.

“Speak of the devil!” Stamford laughed, and shook John’s hand with a wide smile. “John, you must meet Miss Molly Kuskatoo.”

“A pleasure,” John said, extending his hand towards Molly. Sherlock scrutinized his face, but the smile, so bright for Sherlock, had dimmed to no more than a pleasant expression. Socially acceptable, but no undue interest.

Molly’s own small, piquant face relaxed—wary of men, and not just because of the constant resistance to her study of medicine. She was relieved that nobody so far had seen her as a woman worthy of interest. Understandable, if curious.

John moved away, back to his work, and Stamford introduced Molly to the other men—without telling them, Sherlock noticed, that she was his apprentice. He did have a certain sense, Stamford, though his face did not give that impression.

Speaking of…Sherlock looked around for the boy. He’d leaped from the wagon when Molly had descended but had not stayed nearby to be introduced. There! He was watching John work, now—jumping forward to heft a log onto the pile. Was it an effort in good faith? The log was well beyond his strength, and predictably John stepped up and tossed it into place with seemingly no effort. The boy nodded abashedly, moving back into the shadow of Lestrade’s shed.

Looking to prove himself, Sherlock thought. And willing to take risks. He watched as John put down his axe and showed the boy how to lift the end of the log safely. The boy smiled shyly, and came out of the shadows, standing ready to help.

It was startling, really, how even someone as cantankerous as John could seek to make others feel
at ease. Sherlock watched a little longer, looking not only at the boy’s quick movements but John’s assured ones, before he was called back to himself by Mrs. Hudson’s high-pitched summons. He turned away from the sight reluctantly.

John sat down to dinner gratefully. He was next to Greg, which he appreciated, and the boy Stamford had brought. Felix? Frank? Frederic? He couldn’t remember. Still, he was quiet and polite, and he didn’t make comments about wives or church that would have stretched John’s tolerance to its limits.

He smiled when he saw Sherlock come out bearing an enormous roast.

“Good thing he’s here,” Greg said, smiling. “Sarah could do it, but it makes the Major costive.”

“Prat.” John said, laughing.


“All right, Greg?”

“As right as it can be,” Greg replied. “Don’t worry, you’ve got your own problems.”

“If I can help, I will,” John said. The crease in Greg’s forehead gave the lie to his nonchalant tone.

“Eat, John. The afternoon always feels longer than the morning.”

“We’ll be finished before you know it,” John said, not untruthfully, “It’s going quickly. Thank you, Mrs. Hudson.” He looked away from Greg to thank Mrs. Hudson for serving him from a massive bowl of potatoes.

“Enjoy, my dears,” she said, depositing a small mountain on Greg’s plate and moving on.

The meal ended with pie upon pie. John went back to his dwindling pile of logs with a full stomach and renewed strength. The boy (Friedrich? Floki? Philemon?) was faithful to his post, and before the sun began to set they were able to move over to helping Greg and Joe lift the last of the logs up to the roof.

“It’s nice,” young Dimmock said, admiring the perfect slope.

“A job well done,” the elder Dimmock answered, coming up behind Joe and clapping him on the shoulder. “We ought to thank God for the help.”

“You were a great mover yourself, Cyrus,” Lestrade said, his smile wide…too wide, John thought. He looked for Sherlock as though to confirm his thoughts, but Sherlock was nowhere to be seen.

“The farmer’s life brings many benefits,” Cyrus said heartily. Joe looked embarrassed, and even Greg’s typical good humour wavered.
“Supper’s waiting,” John said, so heartily he startled even himself. Gratefully, young Joe made a beeline for the tables. The rest of them followed more slowly, setting the tools away and washing their hands at the pump.

Supper was just as sumptuous as dinner. John pushed his plate back after a truly enormous meal, and wiped his mouth. He didn’t refuse a glass of rum, though, and he smiled encouragingly at Joe when Greg poured a tot into his glass.

“It’s been a long day,” John said. “Drink up.”

“Father says that drink is the Devil’s water.” Joe said, though not reluctantly.

“What do you think is in his glass?” John asked. He’d seen Cyrus wink at Greg.

Joe glanced at his father, dumbstruck. “And if I don’t like it?”

“You don’t have to drink it. But if you want to, you can.”

Joe took a sip and made a face. “I’d rather cold tea. This tastes like medicine.”

“Can I have it?” Stamford’s boy materialized at Joe’s elbow.

“Aren’t you a bit young?” John asked. (Fidelio? Fortinbras?)

“Old enough to know what’s good,” he said, and took a long swig.

“John!” exclaimed Cyrus. Damn him, John thought. “We’d better close our day here. Pray for us!”

“You’re the man for the job, Cyrus. I insist.”

Cyrus preened. John glanced at Sherlock, who had just come in to remove the bowls of preserves. Sherlock caught his glance, but cut his eyes away so quickly that John knew he saw and disapproved. Dimmock senior was a bloody hypocrite, that was certain.

The prayer dragged on, but finally Cyrus drained his cup of tea, rose from the table, and said, “Thank you, Greg; thank you, Mrs. Hudson; thank you, ladies.” (At this, both Sarah and Sherlock made a face.) “We had better be away. Mother, if you will?”

Mrs. Dimmock rose, her face still pink with the effort of helping with two enormous meals, and shook hands all around.

“Won’t you stay for pie, Cyrus?” Mrs. Hudson asked.

Dimmock senior shook his head. “Must get back to the livestock. But we wouldn’t say no to a bit of a basket. Mother suffers from lumbago in her wrists and her pie crust isn’t what it once was.”

Mrs. Dimmock blushed fire-red, and Joe rose out of his seat before Molly Kuskatoo dragged him down again.

“Of course, Cyrus,” Mrs. Hudson said, and vanished into the house. When she emerged a moment later, bearing an entire pie, her face made John shiver. He was willing to bet that nobody in their right mind would want to eat that pie. Mrs. Dimmock, when Mrs. Hudson gave it to her, handled it with an uncharacteristic delicacy. Cyrus Dimmock was supremely unconcerned.

John shook his head and watched the Dimmocks and the Barrymores roll away into the gathering
dark with something like satisfaction.

The party that was left was very merry, toasting everything from the delicious meal to the perfect barn to the confused chicken who wandered up to the table.

“The grownups are gone, now,” Lestrade laughed, as he served Mrs. Hudson an enormous glass of whiskey. His eyes, John noticed, slid after Lyons, slumped at the end of the table with Sarah by his side.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, young man,” she said with a wink.

“Tisn’t flattery,” he said, bestowing a smacking kiss on her soft cheek. His eyes had not changed track. Lyons didn’t move.

John cut his eyes to Sherlock, who shrugged.

“It’s getting dark,” Lestrade said. “I’ll light the fire.”

“I’ll do it,” young Joe said, and soon a very enthusiastic bonfire was crackling in the yard.

“Sherlock, did you bring your violin?” Stamford asked, and at Sherlock’s nod of assent everyone, even Sally, cheered.

“To friendship!” Sarah exclaimed, once he had fetched it, and everyone raised their glass. Sherlock began to play an infectious tune, and it wasn’t long before they were all dancing, despite their heavy supper.

John was the last to rise, but he did rise, and he found himself swinging and being swung, first by young Joe and then by Sarah. Then, he found himself promenading with Lyons, his hand on a truly spectacular bicep.

He didn’t look at Greg, but when he looked at Sherlock, the glint in his eyes was somewhat alarming. He dropped Lyons’ arm as soon as he decently could and went back to his place. He nodded at Soo Lin—he had learned to let her come to him. She did, sometimes; other times she would only dance with the women.

Sherlock smiled at him, still fiddling madly. Mrs. Hudson moved through the dance like quicksilver with Sarah; Lyons and young Joe, the latter blushing madly, followed. Molly, light as could be, promenaded with Stamford, who, though a heavy man, was an excellent dancer. Sally and Soo-Lin completed the set, laughing.

John took a swig of his rum. A feeling of well-being that had nothing to do with alcohol settled over him. For some reason all these people gathered together, each odd in their own way, felt more like home than any place he’d ever been.

“He’s handsome, your man,” the boy said. John jumped.

“He’s not…”

“He is.”

“He’s…not my…” John stopped. The words fell like ashes from his mouth.
Because he was, wasn’t he? John looked at Sherlock. His body swayed with the music and his face was dreamy with pleasure. He was right at home here, and at John’s, too. With John.

John’s heart lurched. Could he let go of Sherlock when the fall came? He had to, he knew, but could he?

“It’s all right to say,” the boy said. “It’s not unnatural, and them that says it are wrong.”

John looked at him, almost angrily, but the boy’s young, white face remained unmoved. A chill skittered down John’s spine.

“Where did you say you came from?” he asked, but the boy just laughed.

“You love each other,” the boy—Finlay!—said softly, and though John’s anger was a fact now, solid in his chest, he knew it was true.

Sherlock was not so lost in the music that he did not see the conversation, nor see John reaching for the rum once again, his anger plainly stamped on his face. But he didn’t stop fiddling, and soon John’s glass was empty and he was rising to dance with Sarah. Sherlock raised the tempo, and then everyone was dancing a mad reel, whirling in the firelight. Sherlock’s only regret was that he could not dance and fiddle at once; it was a heady feeling, calling the tune for all these people, but he would have liked to abandon himself to movement, perhaps even cling to John as Sarah was clinging to Soo-Lin as they passed, or kiss, as Sally was kissing…Stamford? He filed that away for future reference.

What he knew unequivocally, however, was that they were all free, here, free to live as they chose. He, too, would be free if he stayed.

Could he stay? The thought assailed him suddenly, and he shifted to a slower tune. John had not asked him, nor did he seem likely to. He wondered, for the first time, if he himself could homestead; if he could build a farm up as John had done. After a moment’s contemplation, he knew that was not what he wanted. He wanted to stay on his present terms: as part of John’s farm and John’s life.

Well, then, that was exactly what he would do. His parents had always thought him unreasonably stubborn (a bit rich, surely, coming from the people who had burdened the world with Mycroft). There was no reason he shouldn’t apply that stubbornness to getting exactly what he wanted.

The dance continued. People dropped out gradually, tired from their strenuous day, but Sherlock fiddled until the last pair (Mrs. Hudson and Lyons) admitted defeat. He set down his fiddle and took a glass of watered rum gratefully, but though his arms were very tired now, he wished they could have kept on and on.

“Thanks very much, Sherlock,” Lestrade said, sitting down rather heavily beside him. “Wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

“It was wonderful,” Molly Kuskatoo added. “I’ve never heard such music.”

“Good man, Sherlock,” Stamford said, clapping him on the back. “We’d best thank you and go, Lestrade,” he said. “Mrs. Strickland north of the river is due to have her baby any moment, and I promised I’d attend her. Molly, Finlay, can you be ready?”

“Certainly, Dr. Stamford,” Molly said. The boy nodded, smoothing his hair back. Something about his movement caught Sherlock’s attention; he felt as though he had seen that gesture before, often.
He looked again, but the boy had risen and his back was to Sherlock.

Sherlock cursed to himself. Why hadn’t he paid more attention. He had forgotten his purpose in his enjoyment, and now they were no closer to solving the mystery of their persecutor than they had been when they arrived.

Young Joe was heading into the house, burdened with dining chairs. Sherlock looked around for John, who was nowhere to be seen, and he felt his stomach drop even further. Had John left without him? Surely not. He knew that was not the case. Only Stamford had announced his intentions of leaving, and was harnessing his horses. Mrs. Hudson and Sally were staying with Lestrade; Sarah and Soo-Lin’s leisurely movements meant they were likely doing the same. That only left Lyons and John unaccounted for.

A hot rush of jealousy filled Sherlock’s belly. He had seen John grasp Lyons’ bicep appreciatively, and while Sherlock could objectively appreciate Lyons’ beauty, the idea of John appreciating it from up close was not a pleasant one. He lifted a chair and went towards the house.

“Have you seen John? Or Lyons?” he asked Lestrade, who held the door for him. Lestrade looked at him sharply, brown eyes tight in his handsome face.

“Why does everyone seem to think I know exactly where Will is at all times?” he demanded peevishly.

“Obvious, isn’t it?” Sherlock said, and suddenly it was. He recalled the way Lyons’ fingers had sunk into the flesh of Lestrade’s arm as they had swung past. John’s brief enjoyment had been entirely different.

Lestrade scrubbed at his silver hair and sighed. “Is it?”

Sherlock just looked at him.

“Well,” Lestrade said, “at least you’re in the same boat. I suppose that’s a comfort.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Still a comfort,” Lestrade said, waving him into the house. Sherlock shook his head. How could someone be both so perceptive and so illogical? Maybe it was the rum.

John was still nowhere to be seen when Sherlock came outside again after having deposited his chairs and said good night to a tipsy Mrs. Hudson. Sarah and Soo-Lin had been nowhere to be seen, and even Lestrade had disappeared. The bonfire had died down to a glow of coals, and the deserted barnyard felt uncomfortably lonely in the starlight.

Then, he heard the soft clip-clopping of horse’s hooves, and John came around the corner of the shed, leading the two horses and carrying a dark lantern. Sherlock let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Ready?” John’s voice was softer than usual—the drink, most likely, but something else as well. Suddenly, Sherlock wished he could see his face in the light.

“Ready,” was all he said, reaching for Idiot Horse’s reins. Their hands brushed as he seized them, and a shiver shot through him. John coughed, then spoke.
“You were magnificent tonight,” he said. “I never knew you could play like that.”

“And here I thought you’d left in a hurry because I was so terrible,” Sherlock said, all in a rush, then instantly regretted it.

“I would never leave you behind, Sherlock,” John said softly. His face was a dark blur in the fading light of the bonfire but the sound of his voice enveloped Sherlock like the warmest of blankets. How foolish he had been to doubt.

“I know. I do,” Sherlock said, and swung up on Idiot Horse, more or less gracefully. John mounted Arthur, more gracefully, and they set off.

As they climbed the hill south of Lestrade’s potato field, the moon emerged from behind the clouds and cast a silvery light over the fields and woods.

“Beautiful night,” John said, almost dreamily. “I remember, in India, it was always so hot. A night like this was cause for celebration.”

“It was hard for you, in India.” Sherlock said.

“It was.”

“You can tell me,” Sherlock said, barely daring to breathe. He could almost hear John deciding whether or not to reveal this secret.

After a long moment, John replied.

“I can, I know it. Maybe you should know the worst.”

“Nothing could make me think less of you.”

“Please don’t say that. Not yet.”

“I am an excellent judge of character.” Sherlock allowed his pride to show through his voice, and was rewarded with John’s small huff of laughter.

“Fine. I was assigned to a regiment near Agra. I had expected the army to be hard work, but it wasn’t, and I didn’t know what to do with myself. I had learned during my training that I could not permit myself to gamble; and whoring was largely out of the question.”

“You didn’t like the way the army treated the whores.” It was as clear to Sherlock as if John had said it.

“No. I didn’t. Or the orderlies or the native enlisted men either. It was wrong, Sherlock. So very wrong. I was given orders that were immoral, meant to civilize the heathens, but in reality it was only a way to drain the land of wealth. There was no respect for a culture older than our own.”

“Must have been hard to stomach.”

“And then I met Mary Morstan, the quartermaster’s daughter. She felt the same; Sho—some of the other men did, too, but it was harder to talk to them.”

Sherlock burned with curiosity—at last, they were getting to the mysterious Sholto—but he let John continue.

“We fell in love and married immediately. She wasn’t very domestic, so we made do on that
front, but she was passionate, and so alive. And it gave me something to do,” he finished, with a self-conscious laugh.

“But it wasn’t enough?” Sherlock asked, feeling towards something heavy.

“No. She couldn’t live on the profits of injustice the way I could. She wouldn’t have servants, and she wouldn’t take the luxuries her father tried to give her. I … did for a while. I’m not a good man, Sherlock.”

“Good takes time.”

"Mary—she was good, or so I thought."

"She sabotaged your unit."

“She did. We had orders—the siege of Agra. We were sent to relieve it, and she knew. I didn’t tell her, but she knew. Her father, maybe. She told the opposing force, and they destroyed our regiment.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said.

“Maybe it was for the best.” John sighed heavily. “But the men themselves, they didn’t deserve it. The army, yes. Not the men. So many good men were lost or broken.”

“Sholto?”

John looked at him, sharply.

“You call his name when you have nightmares,” Sherlock said, and even the shadows on John’s face couldn’t hide that it wasn’t the first time he’d been told this.

“Our commander. Strict, but good. He walked the line between duty and compassion better than anyone I’ve ever known. The betrayal of our regiment finished him.”

“You cared for him.”

“He was worth caring for.”

“And he was lost? Killed?”

“Lost.”

“Mary’s fault?” Sherlock knew he was on thin ice with this last question but the desire to know was too strong.

“It was my fault!” John said, quietly.

“It couldn’t have been.” Sherlock was sure of that at least.

“It was.”

“How? You didn’t betray your regiment.”

“It was …more than that.”

“More than betrayal?”

John’s voice, when it came, was heavy.
“We…we…had one night together. Sholto, and Mary, and me. Mary suggested it—she knew things, and she knew about…me, and him, and she made it happen. It was perfect then, but it was about more than fucking, in the end.”

“She knew that, too.” Oddly, Sherlock felt no jealousy towards this ghost of John’s past.

John’s shoulders slumped. “She did.”

“Then she was happy about it, John.” Sherlock could see it, though he didn’t understand it—he wanted John to himself—but that Mary had wanted to share John was certain.

“Then why did she betray us?” John said bitterly.

“Her passion for justice was stronger than her love for you.” Sherlock felt a pang stating it so baldly, but he had heard too much pain in John’s voice to be gentle with Mary’s ghost.

“She caused so many deaths. Sholto would have been court martialled if he’d been in his right mind.”

“He wasn’t?”

“After that, no. He was taken to the infirmary, of course, with wounds, and he slept for three days. When he woke…there was nothing. He wasn’t himself. I took him back to his quarters but he wouldn’t eat, or sleep, or talk. He…” John’s voice cracked, “he gibbered, Sherlock.”

“Mental breakdown under stress. Common in traumatic events.” He knew it was the wrong thing to say.

John exhaled shakily.

“We spirited him out, finally. An orderly helped us—though God knows we didn’t deserve it—and I hid him in a shanty up in the jungle. I visited him when I could. I brought him food. But his humanity…”

John stopped speaking, and Sherlock heard him fighting for deep breaths.

“You did your best. You did your best, and now you’re here with me.”

“I am, that.” Dear Newton, Sherlock thought, his voice is so strangled.

“I’m glad you’re here with me, John.”

“Me too.” A longer breath.

Sherlock guided Idiot Horse closer to Arthur so he could reach out and grip John’s shoulder. Arthur made as though to dance away, but Sherlock reached over and grabbed the near rein.

“You may not like me, you bloody animal, but you can’t get rid of me,” he hissed. Arthur pranced again.

“Sherlock,” John said, his voice tight again.

“It’s all right, John. It’s all right. You did what you could.”

“No,” John said, “I mean there’s someone. Something. Here.”
“Could it be her?” Sherlock felt a low panic, breath caught in his throat. “Did she live, John?”

“I don’t know.” John’s voice was hollow.

Sherlock sat back up on Idiot Horse, still with Arthur’s rein in his hand. He drew a deep breath, and caught the tang of bear. His skin crawled, and he gripped Idiot Horse’s mane in his left hand. She snorted reassuringly—of course she would, the moronic animal—and kept her pace.

Then, Arthur reared. Swearing, John tried to control him. Sherlock, startled, swung round in his saddle. Idiot Horse tried to compensate for his swift movement, but it was too late; Sherlock was already sliding from the slick leather.

The forest floor came up to meet him, and then everything was blackness and pain.

Chapter End Notes

The theme song for this chapter is “Company of Fools” by Great Big Sea, but it was almost “Problem Bears” by the Tragically Hip.

So this chapter doesn’t exist now, but for a while Chapter 13 was called “Handyman” sung to the Christina Aguilera song “Candyman.” That was largely prior to finishing this up; originally this chapter had John demonstrating how to jerk off to a trembling unsure Sherlock, but the story took a different turn. I’m SORRY OKAY.

This chapter’s actual rejected title was “Good Buns, Bad Buns”.

“Nothing” is cutting a bed in the log so that the two logs will rest together. It’s not a sex thing. (IT COULD TOTALLY BE A SEX THING.)

Molly’s surname comes from the 1901 & 1911 census of Ojibwe families in Brunswick, Ontario: https://acanadianfamily.wordpress.com/2017/08/25/census-surnames-4/#more-75689

When I say “pharmacopeia” it means “medicine-making.” Sherlock’s accusing Mike of being a lousy medical chemist, basically. Mike honestly doesn’t mind. He’s able to admit his faults.

Mrs. Barrymore is basically Bertie Wooster’s Aunt Dahlia from P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves & Wooster series.

Some elements of the barn-raising in this chapter comes from a partial description of a work bee from Susanna Moodie’s Roughing It in the Bush. She, of course, hated work bees, but I am pretty sure lots of people enjoyed them.
I’m not sorry about the Lestrade/Lyons tension. NOT SORRY. And I don’t know why I never thought of shipping Sarah and Soo-Lin before. They are GREAT together. Please take it as read that Sally and Stamford eventually hook up, too.

There is a lot of talk in this chapter, too, and part of that is the mystery and part of that is setting up for what I am devoutly hoping I can turn into a series of original queer romance titles.

Thank you so much for reading and commenting. I <3 you. Come and chat on Twitter (@scudery) and tumblr (redscudery)!
Chapter Summary

The consequences of Sherlock’s fall from his horse are rather more serious than either he or John expects, and many things go bump in the night.

Chapter Notes

So I’m terribly sorry that there was such a long hiatus with this fic. Life happened a lot and I was just completely overwhelmed. But 221bcon gave me new resolve and plenty of squee, and I’m ready to go again.

I also have to thank CWB for a) commenting on every chapter and b) bringing in a whole new wave of readers to this fic. It has been incredibly motivating and I am profoundly grateful.

The organization for this chapter was difficult (what r plots?) and Doctornerdington was very very helpful in sorting out the order of events. Then, of course, one scene GREW and the chapter had to be split anyway. Whatcha gonna do?

The tags are current to the end of this chapter, which has really, really earned its E rating. If you don’t wanna read sexy banter about people washing their bits with linen towels, this is not your chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John kicked Arthur up and had gone halfway out of the clearing when he realized that neither Idiot Horse nor Sherlock was with him. Cursing the fog of alcohol in his brain, he wheeled Arthur around.

The moon had disappeared behind another cloud, but the white blaze on Idiot Horse’s face was a beacon in the starlight. She made no noise as he approached, tossing her head in what looked like approval to John’s befuddled mind.

“What the fuck have you done?”

“I didn’t do a damn thing,” Sherlock said, sounding cross. Thank God.

“Not you, you berk, the horse.”

“Don’t blame her. She was startled.”

“She almost never startles. That is the point of her, or so I was given to understand.”

“Something startled her. It’s not her fault.”

Idiot Horse snorted, as if in agreement. John shook his head—Sherlock coming to Idiot Horse’s defense was a new development, and it gave him a warm feeling in the pit of his belly—and
dismounted. “Where are you?”

“Here, under the horse.”

John felt his way along until his left hand made contact with Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Your head… can you move?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t lose consciousness, I don’t think.” Sherlock’s breath was warm on John’s hand, and John squeezed his shoulder.

“Let me check you anyhow. Can you stand?”

“Of course. Help me.”

“Shift yourself, you ridiculous beast,” John said, elbowing Idiot Horse out of the way. He grasped Sherlock under the arm and pulled, and Sherlock rose, a little unsteadily.

“I’m going to touch your head and neck.”

“If you must.”

“I want to be sure you’re all right. It’s no joke falling like that. You’re sure you didn’t lose consciousness?”

“I didn’t.” Sherlock said, but he held still while John reached up and palpated his temples, then the sides of his head, then the back. Sherlock’s hair was soft and his skin warm—a good sign—and each inch of skin that was intact was a relief.

Each inch of skin was a terrible temptation. John knew he was in deep—dangerously so—but it was too late. He would set the world on fire to protect this man. His man.

“I…”

“Yes?” Sherlock’s voice was soft in the darkness.

“You’re all right.”

“That is what I have been saying.” This time Sherlock was not peevish at all.

“We should go before whatever spooked the horse comes back.”

“Should we?” Sherlock said. He set his hand to John’s waist. It was huge and warm. John’s world tilted just a bit.

Sherlock knew with every fiber of his being that what was in the woods was dangerous, and dangerous in some way that went beyond the native conditions. And yet, he stayed in the clearing, in the pitch dark, with both horses untethered, because John’s breathing had changed, and that change was the most important thing in the world.

“It’s all right,” Sherlock said, and pulled him close. John made one step as if to move away, and then, suddenly, came back and pressed against him, fiercely. Sherlock allowed the warmth of John to
register in his senses.

After a brief silence, he laid one hand on John’s shoulder. His stomach fluttered.

“Sherlock,” John said, his voice warm and low.

“I’m sorry.” Had he been too forward?

“Don’t be.” John took his hand. “I…I think I’ve been wrong. Pushing you away.” He cleared his throat.

“You think you’ve been wrong to refuse…congress with me?”

“Er. Congress, yes, but also… more.”

“More.”

“More. A… a…”

“A romantic entanglement?”

“A…” John snorted, a welcome sound in the still of the night.

“Must you call it that?”

“A pair bond?”

“Never mind. ‘Romantic entanglement’ will do,” John said, very softly.

They were facing each other now, their chests rising and falling almost simultaneously.

“It seems to me that some token is customary at the conclusion of a successful courtship,” Sherlock ventured.

“I hardly think this courtship is concluded,” John replied dryly. “But, if you like… I could kiss you?”

“Please,” Sherlock said, the word loud in his ears.

John’s fingers came to Sherlock’s jaw, the lightest touch. Like magnets, they drew him down towards the sound of John’s breath. Sherlock did not tremble, but it was a near thing.

He bent forward a little further. John tilted his face up, and then their lips were together.

It was soft, at first; John’s thin mouth was warm, brushing against Sherlock’s lips gently but firmly. Sherlock’s world narrowed to the mingling of their breaths and the increasing pressure of John’s lips on his own. He reached out to bring John closer; he wanted John flush against him.

Then, John opened his mouth slightly and bit Sherlock’s lower lip, very gently, and all Sherlock’s breath released in a long trembling sigh. His cock felt heavy. The breathlessness of the day of the prostate massage was back, but this time Sherlock let himself feel it, feel John, whose body was solid against him, and was… was that John’s cock against his thigh? He pressed forward.

John’s kiss was more insistent now, his tongue sliding along Sherlock’s. Sherlock could scarcely tell where he ended and John began, and it was overwhelming in the most delicious way. Sherlock’s hands tightened low on John’s waist; the curve of his hip flexors was evident even under the bunched cotton of his work shirt. And oh, delight! John’s hands had settled at Sherlock’s waist, the
tips of his fingers brushing the top of Sherlock’s arse, the palms pressing and steadying him.

It seemed to Sherlock as though the kiss would go on forever; everything receded around them, and it was though the sound of their kiss was the only thing in the forest.

Until it wasn’t.

John was about to bite Sherlock’s lower lip again (honestly, that lip should be bitten at every opportunity) when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. His spine prickled with the certainty that he was being watched.

“Sheerlock,” he whispered into Sherlock's mouth.

Sherlock tensed.

“Yes,” he said. It was not an expression of desire.

The clouds covering the moon had slid away while they were kissing, and in the brighter light, the woods were thrown into greater relief. Birch trunks shone like lanterns; spruce trees shone like feathers.

It seemed to John that the woods were preternaturally silent. His own heartbeat was the loudest thing there; Arthur was as still as could be, and so, for a wonder, was Idiot Horse. Sherlock seemed to be barely breathing. His hand—for they had not let go of one another—was cool. He resisted the temptation to run his thumb along the skin of Sherlock’s wrist. Unease flowed through him.

They were definitely not alone. He could not have said what alerted him—certainly it was not a noise of any kind—but his eyes were drawn to a slender tree to his left. Behind that tree was a person. A small, slender person.

His breath hitched and his grip on Sherlock’s hand tightened. Sherlock squeezed back, and John was relieved that he wasn’t hallucinating, at least.

Still, he did nothing, waiting for Sherlock to move. What did one do, or say, to mysterious figures in the woods? Adrenaline coursed through him and he began to sweat. He stiffened his spine against a tide of familiar, helpless desire, slowing his breathing and letting Sherlock’s utter calm hold him in place.

Sherlock felt John tremble beside him, but he also felt the absolute iron discipline that kept him at Sherlock’s side. Left to himself, Sherlock knew that John would have called out, and even confronted the figure—useless, ultimately. This person clearly did not mean to harm them outright, but nor did they—she?—mean to be caught. Their stealth meant they would be difficult to catch if it came to a footrace.

So Sherlock stood there with John in his arms. Willing himself very still, he focused all his attention on the curve of shoulder and arm behind the young poplar. The clothes were dark; what was not indistinguishable was undistinguished. This was, almost certainly, the person responsible for the trees and the straw dog. They had come closer and closer and now, for some reason, they were within reach, and Sherlock’s brain trembled with excitement and teemed with theories.

What did she want? Why were they the target? Why the hair, or the button-eyed dog, or the bear? How had they somehow tamed a bear? Were they responsible for the squirrel? Their aim did not appear to harm, as such; they could have hurt either John or Sherlock very gravely at any time in such an isolated area. Mental torture? More likely; John was very susceptible, as Sherlock well knew, and even he himself was not immune. Certainly, this current situation was one that could
cause considerable mental stress… but why? To what end? Sherlock had had little use for most humans, but he felt he had not made any particular enemies; people tended to avoid him. John had more possible cause to think himself a target, but the prospect of his past ghosts being alive or coming from India seemed very unlikely.

“Balance of probability, little brother,” he heard in his head, and he shooed the voice away, blocking the “Shut up, Mycroft” that rose in his throat. He watched, trying to focus on some concrete detail. The figure seemed impossibly slender. It swayed slightly.

Sherlock turned away from John a little but kept hold of his hand. Impractical for fighting, but as he had previously gathered, there would be no fight.

“What do you want?” he asked. His own voice seemed loud in the darkness.

There was no answer.

“Who are you?” he asked again. Still no answer.

Sherlock watched the still figure. Exemplary control, he thought, and took one step towards her.

She did not move. He could now see the very faint rise and fall of her breathing.

He made a decision.

“Come, John,” he said, and began to walk out of the clearing. John stumbled, then followed, scooping up Idiot Horse’s reins as he passed. Arthur, clearly disgruntled, went on ahead.

Their pace was slow and measured, though Sherlock held John’s arm in a very tight grip—out of fear for himself, rather than fear that John would not follow his lead. He had learned, in their time together, that John would follow him to the ends of the earth if he had to. And now John was following him—both home, and then… to bed? Sherlock felt his ears flush in pleasure.

A movement in the trees, a crackling of branches, startled them all. Idiot Horse strained at her reins. Arthur shied, then ran. John held himself still. Sherlock risked a look back.

The figure was still there, even clearer now with the moon behind it.

Behind her. It was a woman, he was sure of it. The stance tickled at Sherlock’s brain. He had seen it before, seen that set of shoulders. But where? It couldn’t have been with a bear; he would have remembered.

“Sherlock,” John said, urgently.

“Slowly,” Sherlock replied. Five more steps and they would be out of the clearing. Thirty, maybe forty steps, and they would be onto the home quarter with the cabin in sight.

He smelled the bear. Held himself in place, now, with the solidity of John’s muscles under his hands. He would not succumb to fear.

“There.” John had looked back, and as he did, he saw the faint outline of a bear. It was right beside the human figure. Right beside it.

Sherlock turned away. He would not flee.

“Don’t run,” John warned, unnecessarily.
He didn’t. He consciously relaxed his muscles and let the horrible scent fill his nostrils. He would be more than his instinct. He would.

They were in the woods now, Idiot Horse preternaturally calm beside them. John walked with purpose.

Five more steps. Ten. He could see the moonlight shine on the cabin window.

What guaranteed their safety, there? A bear was one thing, but a person—a person with a bear, no less—quite another.

“We’ll keep them out,” John said. Sherlock felt his own grip relax fractionally.

The road was almost within reach, and then their feet were on it. Sherlock was nearly jumping out of his skin, but he felt John’s tension ebb slightly as they left the woods—then rise again as they approached the cabin.

“Might not be safe,” he said. “And we have chores, too.”

Frantic bleats from Harry and Clara began at the sound of John’s voice. Even the geese set up a plaintive honking. They made it to the door of the barn—then jumped as something crashed against the wood.

“Harry?”

“Harry.” John shook his head. “She’s a bloody menace.”

“She missed you. Let’s open it together.”

They set themselves against the door and pushed it open, blocking it just in time for Harry to crash against them. Sherlock had to laugh.

“You’re getting slow, Harry.” She butted against him, hard, and he grabbed her collar. “Settle down.” He pulled a crumbled mince tart from his pocket and lured her back to the pen. John closed the door again and began to unsaddle the horses.

“I’m going to water them here,” he said, and took down two pails.

Sherlock nodded, tossing the last handful of grain to the fowl.

“I’ll keep watch.”

The moonlight glinted on John’s hair as he made his way down to the pond, and suddenly Sherlock’s breath was short from something other than nerves.

How had they made it here, finally? They had faced terror—could still face terror, considering that they had not yet checked the inside of the cabin, where their safety was by no means guaranteed. And yet, the only thing Sherlock could think of was that only a few buckets of water stood between them consummating their relationship. He was suddenly nervous, dry-mouthed. He licked his lips.

John filled the last of the buckets. It was good to be able to see everywhere, although he still felt as though he was fighting against nothing at all. It was endlessly frustrating to be confronted with this nameless threat, this fear that permeated their lives. Their life.

He looked towards the barn. Sherlock was still standing watch, wedged in the doorway in case Harry should try to escape once more. His face was cast in shadow, and yet John felt as though he
could trace every feature.

He *would* trace every feature. Soon. Despite the danger, despite the uncertainty of their position, he would be able to touch every part of Sherlock that he wanted to touch.

*You shouldn't do it. You'll hurt him,* an evil imp said, but he crushed it down.

Sherlock wasn't a patient. He didn't need treatment. He needed friendship. Love. And so did John. They were equals, here and now and always, and they would remain so. And equals could engage in mutually beneficial interactions—sexual and otherwise. John squared his shoulders, picked up his buckets, and consigned that imp to the depths of the manure pile.

"This is the last batch," he said to Sherlock, and made his way through to Hamish and Jack's stall. Sherlock gave the goats one last caress as he left, and Idiot Horse too.

"Getting sentimental?" John teased, for something to say.

"She's all right, for a horse," Sherlock answered.

"Good girl," John said, and patted her silky nose. "Shall we go in?"

"Can we... since it's light... can we bring a bucket of water in?" Sherlock sounded suddenly unsure.

"Of course. Good idea. We should check the house, though."

"Right. You're in first, or am I?"

"Me first," John said. Now that they were so close, he didn't want Sherlock harmed—or scared.

"I can protect myself," Sherlock said, divining his thoughts.

"I know. But you're going to get water, so that makes it even."

"I see," Sherlock said. "Slave labour."

"Not quite," John reached up and touched his cheek, only for a moment. Sherlock smiled, shy.

There was nothing at the door of the cabin to cause alarm, but John knew that that meant little, given the calibre of the threat they were dealing with. He stepped cautiously into the room, shielding himself with the door, and allowed his eyes to adjust to the light.

Nothing.

If he were doing the ambushing, he would wait in the loft, ready to jump down on his prey. He made his way quickly up, patting through the dark corners by Sherlock's bed—former bed, he thought in passing. Nothing.

He reached up into the beams of the roof. A small person could hide there, if they wanted, but there was nobody.

"It's safe," Sherlock said.

"I haven't looked everywhere yet."

"It will be safe."
"I'm not taking chances"

Sherlock proved to be right, however. John’s thorough search showed that the cabin was as they had left it.

“Very well, then,” John said. “I’ll light the lamp.” As golden shadows were cast throughout the room, Sherlock shut and barred the door, then leaned against it.

"Water?" John asked, and Sherlock jumped. He looked nervous.

"Oh," he said, flustered. "Of course."

"I'll go," John already had the bucket in his hand. "D'you want to light the fire?"

"Yes. Of course. Wait, no. I'll stand watch for you."

"Thanks."

John filled the final two buckets with nearly-warm lake water, and came back. He suppressed the urge to speed up his pace as he approached the house. It was as if the lamplight had made the rest of the world unsafe; who knew, now, what lurked at the outside of lighted circle.

Sherlock barred the door again, this time for good.

"This guarantees nothing," he said.

"It doesn't," John agreed. "We probably shouldn't let our guard down."

"But we're going to?"

"If you want."

Silence fell.

"I do."

John had all he could do not to reach out to Sherlock then and there. He looked wrecked and vulnerable already, in the aftermath of their fright and their long, long day. Had it really been only that morning that they had arrived at Lestrade's, bread and axe in hand? John could feel fatigue in his own limbs as well, but he pushed it away.

"Me too," he smiled, and stripped off his shirt. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of himself.

"I need a real bath," he said, as he tried in vain to make the soap lather in the cold water.

"You... you don't... it's all right." Sherlock was looking at him, eyes wide and mouth open. John felt a pang of arousal already at the focused attention.

"You haven't smelled me."

Sherlock looked away. Then he looked back.

"I have. I mean, before, I have. And... I like it. You smell like a man. Like you."

John felt himself flush. He nearly groaned. How had he thought that Sherlock's attention could not get more arousing? He would be diamond-hard before they even touched if this continued.
"I'm still going to wash, for me if not for you," he said. "But I... I like that you like that."

Sherlock added one more log to the fire and rose. "I'll get a towel."

"Stay turned around for a moment," John said, "while I finish."

"You don't want me to see you?"

John's breath caught.

"I... I..." He didn't know what he wanted.

"Modesty is such a strange construct," Sherlock said, but he turned away to fetch the towel.

"No," John forced out. "If you want to watch. You can watch."

"More than anything," Sherlock said, and sat on the settle facing him.

It was one of the most intimate things John had ever done, under the most dangerous circumstances. With Sherlock there, stock-still in the middle of the room, with God knew what lurking in the woods, John unbuttoned his trousers and slid them over his hips. They fell to the floor. His cock, now only restrained by his drawers, bobbed up, already hard. Sherlock bit his lip.

John dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand. How the hell was he ever going to last? He undid his drawers and let them drop.

Sherlock's face, looking at him naked in the firelight, was the most beautiful thing John had ever seen. His lower lip glistened where he had bitten it, and his eyes were huge and dark.

Their eyes caught, and for a moment they were both silent.

"You are so beautiful," Sherlock said, then.

John looked away. His eyes prickled, shamefully. When was the last time someone had told him that? The last time someone had seen him—his body and his need? It felt like a thousand years.

John held onto the feeling of wellbeing as he dipped the end of the towel in water. Holding his breath, he rubbed it around his pubic hair, under his ballocks.

Sherlock watched, rapt.

John dipped the towel again. A mischievous feeling seized him: he turned to make sure Sherlock could see the curve of his body as he bent to wash his arse, legs, and feet—and Sherlock could, his gaze was like a weight. John could feel himself get harder and harder.

"Aren't you going to wash?" he said, straightening up.

Sherlock nodded, barely.

"When you're done," he said, his voice very low.

"Almost finished," John said. He took his cock in his hand—did Sherlock gasp?—and scooped up a handful of water. Pulling back his foreskin, he washed the head. It was so good—he could have come right there with one, two strokes, with Sherlock's eyes on him, with the adrenaline from the woods fizzing through him.
"Please," Sherlock's voice broke into his thoughts, "I want... may I?" He took a step towards John.

"Better not, not yet." John had to be honest. "If you touch me, I'll... I'll spend. I want it to be good."

"Oh. Yes." Sherlock said.

"I want you to. So much. But I want to touch you. To spend together." The words fell from his mouth in a rush.

Sherlock smiled, then, and John knew he had said the right thing.

"You wash," John continued. "May I watch you?"

"Yes."

"Good," John said. He brushed his teeth, quickly, and went to the bed. Naked, he threw back the blankets and got in, leaning against the wall. He did not cover himself.

Sherlock unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his gleaming, sparsely haired chest. He seemed impossibly long everywhere, and his hands were enormous. John wanted to stay in the moment, to enjoy every second of Sherlock disrobing, and yet he could not help but imagine how those hands would feel on his body. He shivered.

"Cold?" Sherlock asked. He himself seemed calm enough, all of a sudden, even bare-chested and with his hands on his fly buttons.

"Not at all," John said. "Just anticipating."

"Me too," Sherlock said, and pushed his trousers and drawers down in one swoop. His arse was every bit as fine as John remembered, and his cock... He'd seen it before, of course, but never an unobstructed view. It had been worth the wait. Proportional and beautifully shaped, it bobbed erect between Sherlock's lean and powerful thighs.

John’s hands tingled.

"If you don't hurry it up, I'll come over there and wash you myself." His tone was light, he thought, but there was no mistaking the twitch of Sherlock's cock as he spoke.

"You look so comfortable," Sherlock said, reaching for the towel, "I'd hate to disturb you."

"There's a first time for everything, then," John cracked, and Sherlock laughed. He did speed up, however, swishing the damp towel over his chest, armpits, and arse in efficient movements. He bent, as John had done, to do his legs and feet, but he did him one better, giving a full show of his arse as he did so.

"Fuck me," John breathed, at the pretty, pretty sight. It seemed there was no angle from which Sherlock's arse was not perfection.

"Is that an interjection or an order, Captain?" Sherlock said, standing up. He had dipped the towel again and was washing the dark thatch of his pubic hair. Soon he would wash his cock, John knew, and it would be a test of everyone's self control.

"Currently an interjection," John said. "Could eventually be an order."

"I look forward to it," Sherlock said, saucily. Then he took himself in hand to wash, and the expression on his face changed abruptly.
"Oh, I see," he said. His breath seemed to be coming short. "This is rather... stimulating."

"Don't you dare spend, Sherlock Holmes!" John raised his voice ever so slightly. Sherlock had to close his eyes and let his cock go.

"Unfair," he breathed, and dropped the towel.

John wanted to leap up and grab him. Instead, he beckoned.

"You're clean enough," he said. "Come here."

Sherlock approached the bed with enthusiasm, but slowed as he got closer. John sensed his apprehension, and sat up straight.

"It's all right, Sherlock."

"I know."

"Will it help if you tell me what you want?"

"If I tell you what I want I'll spend where I stand."

John bit his own lip, hard. "Sit down."

Sherlock sat. They were so close, now.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Please," Sherlock said, and John did, gently, a brush of lips.

It was as though that single touch had unleashed a beast. Sherlock sank into the kiss with a deep painful groan, his mouth hot and greedy. John held on tight, gripping Sherlock's shoulder and neck, feeling the quick rhythm of Sherlock's breath and the satiny dampness of his skin.

They slid down in the bed, Sherlock slightly above John now. John pulled him closer, winding one leg around him to bring their bodies together. The full contact made him gasp. Sherlock pulled back to look into his eyes.

"All right?" he asked, and bit his lip again. John took his face in his hand; he smiled.

"It's perfect," he said, and nudged Sherlock's mouth so he could bite that lip instead, worrying it until Sherlock had to laugh into his mouth. Then, John surged up, straddling Sherlock and pinning him to the bed.

"John," Sherlock breathed, arching his hips up. He could get no contact, though, because John had positioned himself too far back on Sherlock's thighs. "Bastard!"

"We have time," John grinned. He ran his hands along Sherlock's chest, brushing lightly over the sensitive pink nipples. "There's no rush."

"It's just... there's so much..." Sherlock sounded almost distressed.

John lifted his hands.

"Is it too much?" Belatedly, he realized that, for Sherlock, desire was new—he had always experienced it as a medical condition, and a shameful one at that. "I'm sorry, Sherlock—I forgot. Let
me..." he said, reaching for Sherlock's cock.

"I just..."

"It's new. I know. Tell me how you feel."

Sherlock drew a long, shuddering breath.

"I feel muscle tension. Elevated breathing and heart rate. My cock..." he gestured, "there's prostate fluid emerging." There was, John saw, and his own cock jumped. Then he shook himself and focused.

"Sherlock."

"My cock is almost painfully distended," Sherlock continued. "These are not unfamiliar symptoms."

John had to laugh, but at the same time he cursed a world in which such a man was so unfamiliar with his own self.

"So, physically, you're aroused. But how do you feel?" he asked.

Sherlock stared at him for a moment.

"I just said."

"Emotionally. How do you feel?"

"Oh," Sherlock said. He paused. John slid off him and lay beside him, keeping one hand on his thigh to ground him.

"I feel... nervous. Excited. Curious. I feel happy," he finally replied, looking at John. "I feel like we are on the verge of cementing our pair bond."

John couldn't even laugh. He kissed Sherlock's shoulder.

"All right then. Can you tell me what you want, now?"

"I want to kiss you again. To put your hands on me and make me spend. I want to see you spend."

John smiled.

"That sounds like an acceptable protocol," he said.

Sherlock cut his eyes at him.

"I know there's more. Just..."

"Just not tonight. One thing at a time," John said, and bent to kiss Sherlock slowly and thoroughly, until they were both panting.

"Please," Sherlock begged. John didn't tease him this time, just put his hand on Sherlock's cock, stroking gently over ballocks and shaft. He marvelled at the silky texture, the incredible hardness, the absolute responsiveness; Sherlock's ballocks were already drawn up tight. He gripped the shaft and stroked; Sherlock's thighs quivered. "So good, John," he whispered.

John kept up a gentle pace, not wanting to shock Sherlock with the force of his pleasure. Sherlock let
him, not begging, just taking. Feeling.

Another drop fell from the tip of his cock, John noted with satisfaction.

He licked his lips, wanting to take it in his mouth but not wanting to push Sherlock beyond his limits. He wanted to see Sherlock spend, too, to watch the creamy jet of spunk shoot out onto his pale belly.

His own neglected cock throbbed, but now that they were actually touching each other, he could revel in it.

"I feel... I'm so..." Sherlock was panting now, mouth open and head thrown back.

"Yes," John said, softly, and slowed his rhythm just slightly. Sherlock cried out, a long soft call, and his essence spurted out, hitting his stomach, his neck, and his curls. He shuddered through the spasms, his eyes tight shut. John's arousal mellowed a little, replaced by affection. Esteem.

The danger of love prowled about him, making its presence known.

He had known that would happen. And right now, he could not regret it. He bent to kiss Sherlock's open mouth.

"All right?" He kissed that mouth again, then Sherlock's neck, covering each sleek inch, one at a time, and savouring the intersection of skin and semen. He licked his lips and kissed the notch of his neck.

"Yes," Sherlock breathed, after what seemed like a long time.

"Yes," John agreed. He ran his fingers through Sherlock's hair, then buried his face in it.

"Pull it," Sherlock said, lazily. John took a handful of curls and pulled, gently.

"Mmmmmm. Do it again."

John obliged, pulling gently at handfuls all over his head, until Sherlock fairly purred.

"I don't know why that is so pleasant."

"You don't need to know." John licked Sherlock's ear. "It just is, sometimes. Does your thirst for scientific inquiry never stop?"

"It stopped for a moment," Sherlock rolled to his side, eyes bright. "But now I find myself desiring to investigate once more."

"And I suppose I'm the one you want to investigate?"

"Correct," Sherlock said, and pressed his body to John's. John shivered at the feeling Sherlock's spunk against his cock and ballocks. His desire was returning, fiercer than ever. He thrust into the slickness.

"There's no rush, John," Sherlock said, and seized his hip with one big hand. "I want to touch you."

"You are touching me," John gasped.

"I want to touch your cock with my hand," Sherlock growled, and did so.

"You're lowering your voice on purpose," John complained, but it wasn't a complaint, exactly.
Sherlock's hand was around his cock, engulfing it completely, and John knew he didn't dare look. He wanted to, but he didn't dare.

"You used your military voice on purpose," Sherlock said. "All's fair in love and war, is it not?"

John shut his eyes. Love.

"So it is."

"We both win." Sherlock began to stroke gently—too gently, but John let it happen, slowed his breath and let himself feel. What's sauce for the goose—no gander. What's sauce for the gander is sauce for the gander. He laughed.

"Not you," he said quickly to Sherlock.

"I never doubted it," Sherlock said, and smiled. "Tell me."

John did. Sherlock laughed.

"At least it wasn't goats," he said.

"Can we not talk about goats?" John groaned.

"No goats." Sherlock fell silent, his eyes flicking from John's face to John's cock. "This is fascinating enough."

"Glad to see I can retain your interest."

"John," Sherlock said seriously, "You can always retain my interest." He bit John's ear, and then his neck. Electric sparks ricocheted down John's spine to his cock, and he felt himself dripping onto Sherlock's hand.

"I want to taste you," Sherlock said, biting John's neck again. John's vision went dark, a little.

"Anything," he panted.

"I like that." Sherlock hummed the words against his now-damp skin and began to kiss his way down to John's cock.

John was nearly shaking in anticipation. He closed his eyes against the sight, letting the sensation speak for itself. Sherlock's lips were on his navel—and then his tongue. John yelped.

"You taste salty."

"It was just a sponge bath," John gasped out.

"I like it," Sherlock insisted.

"Wonderful," John said, almost tartly. He was about to say that he was so glad he could satisfy Sherlock's scientific curiosity, but then Sherlock licked the drop from the tip of his cock, and all that came out of John's mouth was a long, low-pitched groan.

Sherlock seemed to take the sound of encouragement. He stroked again, revealing the head, and then, after admiring, took the whole thing in his mouth. John arched his back, trying his best not to push into the divine warmth. The drag of Sherlock's lips on his most sensitive skin was more sensation than he had ever dreamed.
Sherlock took his time, exploring every inch, every vein. John felt the tide of his pleasure rise at the slightest of movements. His hips were rocking up, and Sherlock began to bob his head.

"You're so good," John breathed. "So good. Please."

Sherlock chuckled around his mouthful, and sucked John in deeply, his big hands cupping John's ballocks.

"Sherlock... I'm..." There was no time to warn him, not really, before John was lost, his pleasure running through him like swift water. Sherlock did not leave off, not until the final spasms had left John’s body boneless and damp with sweat. Then, he raised his head and their eyes met.

Sherlock licked his lips.

"You," John said, closing his eyes, “are going to be the death of me.”

"You're not serious." Sherlock smiled.

"Very good. Now come here." John patted the space beside him. Sherlock lay his head on John's shoulder and twined their legs together. His hand still cupped John's cock, safe and warm.

"How are you?" John asked. Sleep nibbled at the edge of his consciousness.

"Comfortable," Sherlock said.

"No distress?"

"My heart is whole and my peace of mind is entirely undisturbed," Sherlock said. He kissed the soft space at the join of arm and chest. "Go to sleep, John."

John let his eyes fall closed for a final time, and slept.

Chapter End Notes

The song for this chapter, as you may have already guessed, is “Hallelujah” (the Pentatonix version, which, Virginia, is NOT a Christmas carol), and do not @ me because I know and honour Leonard Cohen okay but for THIS fic Cohen isn’t the right version largely due to that particular song being insufficiently gay.

I wrote this note and then I realized that Cohen’s “Hallelujah” could be pretty gay but I still stand by my choice. The Pentatonix version is more joyful and these two are having a hell of a good time banging each other silly.

This chapter has had several different names. Originally called “Bears That Aren’t There—Except They Are” (except they aren’t now, because the chapter is twice as long as I was expecting), I spent six months calling it “AUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUGH” and at least one more calling it “The One Where They Have Sex On Purpose.”

Toothbrushes were widely available in Europe starting in the 1840s, and so I’m going to say both John and Sherlock have one. They would have been made from bone and horsehair or swine hair, and looked like the ones here:

Note: I also learned that facial hair was compulsory in the British military between 1860 and 1916. Colour me shocked. Colour Sherlock aroused.

I can’t guarantee when I’m going to post the next chapter, but I’m hoping to surf this wave of productivity a little longer. As for the total number of chapters, I’m still hoping to come in under twenty. This chapter contains, as I mentioned, only about half of the events it was supposed to. This is entirely down to both John and Sherlock being exhibitionists and also my penchant for sexy banter. I’m not sorry.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos. Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!
Raspberry Parfait

Chapter Summary

It’s a beautiful day in the backwoods, isn’t it? That is, until a couple of dead animals ruin things.

Chapter Notes

This chapter does contain animal death and dismemberment, so please be watchful of what’s good for you to read. The death is an important plot point, but if you don’t want to read about the dismembering, you can skip from “Then the bear shifted his weight” to “Get yourself clean and get into the cabin.”

[spoilers]
It is not a farm animal that we love.
[/spoilers]

As always, doctornerdington betaed this beautifully. Without her my indents would be all over the damned place and my emotional arc would be less satisfying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock woke the next morning with no memory of having fallen asleep.

He felt as he had the morning after his nocturnal emission, only magnified twofold. He nearly laughed with the sheer pleasure of inhabiting his body, but he did not want to wake John, who was still in a deep, twitching sleep.

He slipped carefully from the bed and opened the door. The sun was already warm, and he basked in the feeling of it on his naked body. He felt, danger notwithstanding, like he wanted to run nude outdoors, as the ancient Greeks had done.

A loud baaing interrupted his thoughts, and he looked at the sky. It was a trifle late; perhaps he would do the chores (with clothing, as Harry was not to be trusted around anything that appeared to be loose and flapping). Then, he thought, looking at the still surface of the pond, a swim. He would scrub himself clean and slip back into bed with John. He wanted to touch every part of John's body, and he wanted to do it soon.

He turned back into the cabin and pulled on his trousers.

They would eventually have to discuss yesterday’s events, along with the potential perpetrators; he would double-check the barn, just to be safe, but ultimately Sherlock decided to wait until John was awake (and carnally satisfied).

Sherlock was surprised at himself. He felt clear-minded, which was not unusual, but also calm, which was. He could not have imagined feeling this way before, and he liked it. There was no
niggling fear of losing his edge; he seemed to have no edges. He still did not have a full picture of what was happening, but a conversation with John would help. John was no genius, but he had a faculty for inspiring it in others—in him. He was not a bright light, but a conductor of light.

Happy with this scientific parallel, Sherlock slipped on his trousers and boots and went across the yard. He didn’t dare go to the site of yesterday’s encounter, not without John, but he examined each patch of barnyard dirt for tracks. He found nothing.

This was not quite the relief he expected. Something about the absence of any physical evidence disturbed him, giving an otherworldly element to their bear encounter of the night before. As they had never actually seen the animal, it was almost as though it existed in multiple places at once and as such was exponentially more terrifying.

He felt a chill creep across him. Suddenly, it seemed possible that the bush around the edges of the farmyard was populated with invisible bears. He stood tall, planting his feet into the ground against the sudden fear. There was no reason to expect bears to be out, or to charge into a clearing in broad daylight. He would not bolt back to the house.

Once the goats were tethered and the animals all led down to drink, he felt better. It was ridiculous perhaps, but he knew Harry or Clara would send up the alarm if anything appeared in the farmyard.

He stripped off his clothes and waded into the warm pond, letting the silky, peaty water stream over his skin. He dove under, rolling like a seal just beneath the surface for as long as he could. In the last moment before his breath gave out, he scooped up a handful of sand.

He scrubbed himself vigorously; when the sand had fallen out of his hands, he washed his arse and cock with a certain reverence; for the first time, he was delighted at the discovery that he was hardening. John had handled him with so much pleasure, and his body was doing what was necessary to provide that pleasure again to them both.

He stroked himself, taking the feeling in. How had he managed to miss this all his life, to see it as disease? It was a crime, that’s what it was. So many wasted opportunities. Surely there was nothing more harmless than the pleasure of the body? Like running—or swimming. He let himself go and dive again.

Finally, only the threat of John waking while he was gone allowed him to tear himself away from the water. He rubbed himself down briefly with his trousers, but decided not to put them on.

John woke alone, and for one brief, terrifying moment he thought that the prior day had not happened at all.

"I'm here." Sherlock’s voice. John sat bolt upright.

Sherlock was standing in front of the hearth, entirely naked, pouring tea.

“You certainly are,” John said. Water droplets glistened here and there on Sherlock’s skin, and his curls clung damply to his face. The morning sun made his long, ivory body shine.

"Should I dress?" Sherlock grinned.

"I absolutely forbid it. I'm going to put my mouth all over you and I don't want anything to get in the way."
"Very well. But I did offer." The tea ready, Sherlock padded over to the bed and sat down.

"If I'd known all I needed to do to get some tea was to seduce you, I'd have done it much earlier." John said.

Sherlock raised his eyebrow.

"Really. Because I distinctly recall you rebuffing my very generous offer."

"Maybe I wouldn't have," John corrected. "But I regret it, all right?"

"Good," Sherlock said smugly, and kissed him. John's mouth was warm and a little sour, a delicious contrast to the coolness of his own. Daring, Sherlock licked John's lower lip, and John opened to him, their tongues sliding together. Sherlock hummed his pleasure.

"You're delicious," John said. He set his tea aside and began to nip Sherlock's neck. "Come closer." Sherlock stretched out beside him, pushing away the blankets. Then, an idea seized him and he rolled over to cover John's body entirely. John gasped at Sherlock's cool, strong body against him, each inch of muscle and sinew alive and exciting.

"John." Sherlock's voice, pitched low in his ear, rumbled through his body and John couldn't help but arch up against him.

Sherlock pinned John's arms over his head. John let him, but not without wriggling.

"I thought I was in charge."

"Oh, John," Sherlock said, kissing the inside of his bicep, "How wrong you were." He buried his face in the light hair of John's armpit and sniffed.

"Mmmmm," he said, and writhed against John, his cock hard against John's thigh.

"Sherlock!" Caught in an uncomfortable space between arousal and amusement, John tried to pull away, but Sherlock held firm.

"Does this hurt?" Sherlock asked.

"No, but I was supposed to do this to you." John did not quite know how to address this sudden, wholehearted embrace of carnality on Sherlock's part.

"Do you like it?" It was unclear what Sherlock meant by "it", but John gave up when faced with his determination.

"Yes," he gasped, and Sherlock continued his leisurely exploration of John's chest, moving slowly over his ribs, his nipples, and his neck before kissing his way into John's other armpit.

Sherlock did not know what was so intoxicating about John's personal odour--some pheromone, most likely, though there would have to be a significant analysis--but he was undoubtedly affected. He licked up along the inside of the bicep, letting the acrid salt dissolve on his tongue. The texture of John's skin was so soft and fine but also unutterably masculine.

Sherlock felt his earlier stirrings of desire consolidate in his belly. He was hard, and now he wanted —needed—release. John was in the same state already--his usual morning distention was now a cockstand borne of desire, and Sherlock had done that with his hands, and mouth, and body. He let go of John's hands, meaning to slide down and suck him again; the taste of John in his mouth was
already a too-distant memory, and he wanted more.

John kept his hands obediently above his head, and a thrill shot through Sherlock at his obedience.

“Don’t move,” he whispered along the line of John’s hip, and John’s helpless groan echoed in his ears.

John’s cock was straining before Sherlock encompassed it with his mouth. It tasted of the previous night’s spend, and he took it in eagerly.

“Please,” John said, softly, and Sherlock increased his rhythm, grasping the hard root to better direct it. John’s hips began to rock, and Sherlock was already nearly overcome with pleasure. His own cock was rocking against John’s calf, and the heat of John’s skin and the hardness of his bones was delicious.

When their pleasure hit them, Sherlock felt as though he was being taken by a soft, welcoming wave. John’s gasps and his own mingled in perfect unison.

It was some time before they moved, but soon Sherlock’s desire to kiss John again won out over inertia. He arranged himself against John’s warm, sticky body and kissed his way up John’s neck, ending with his lips.

After a long moment, John broke the kiss.

"I've got to get up... the animals are probably starving, nature calls, and honestly I'd like a dip too."

"The animals are done," Sherlock said, smug again at John’s surprised face. "Go; swim."

John took a long sip of his tea.

"Sherlock Holmes," he said. "You are marvelous."

It wasn't until he had gone outside that John's happiness was diluted by unease. Last night's encounter was the most frightening yet, and there was no guarantee of safety. He suddenly regretted being outdoors naked. He hurried from the outhouse to the lake and made quick work of his swim.

"Unnerving, isn't it?" Sherlock said, when he’d returned and closed the cabin door behind him.

"It is," John said, rummaging for his trousers. "I've never been so worried to be outdoors before. It's bloody ridiculous."

"Whoever it is is getting closer to what they want," Sherlock said. “Come and eat.”

"Do you know who it is? Did yesterday give you an idea?" John sat down at the table and picked up his cooling tea.

"It's clearly none of the older women, not unless they're working in concert with one of the younger ones. I put the chances of that at exactly nil."

"You're right about that," John said. "So the younger women? What about Molly?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Absolutely not. She's smart enough, and we have to assume she has the
knowledge..."

"No motive though. Why would she do such a thing? You don't know her, I don't know her," John interrupted.

"Simpler than that.

"Simpler than that?"

"Absolutely. It is impossible to mistake her utter commitment to medicine. That is where her considerable energy and devotion go. She has no motive, certainly, but more importantly she has no time for us."

John nodded.

"I can't think of anyone else," he said. It was frustrating.

"There are other possibilities," Sherlock said, and told him about Sally's reaction to him in the hallway.

"Wait," John said, remembering. "She told you she didn't want to speak to you, that she would never speak to you again? She warned me away from your family. Said you weren't worth it."

Sherlock frowned.

"It's beyond frustrating. I remember everything. All the time. And I don't remember this. There is, thank God, no mistaking Mycroft and I--and, whatever else Sally Donovan is, she's an intelligent woman--so I'm at a loss. And I don't like it."

"Could you have hurt her by accident? Could it have been a simple insult, a simple oversight?"

"It's rare for someone to be so angry about an oversight. One sees it sometimes--it becomes monomania, but again, not Sally. I don't know."

Sherlock threw himself on the settle.

"What if," John said, "What if we started from the beginning? Tell me about where you knew her. Where you met her?"

Sherlock threw his hand over his face. "I remember everything, John," he said, petulantly. "Do keep up."

John frowned. "This is important, Sherlock."

"I do know that."

Sherlock remembered thinking about John as a conductor of light. Perhaps telling John the facts as far as he remembered would allow him to dislodge forgotten details.

"Very well."

"Carleton is a small town that thinks itself a city. It has, besides a flourishing and yet deadly dull lumber industry, a seminary, where the professional class, as well as anyone who is jumped-up enough to think an educational institution run by religious idiots is a good thing, send their children to be--and I use this term as loosely as possible--educated."

“And so your family was sent there?”

“Indeed, despite both Mycroft and I demonstrating—with significant scientific evidence—that it was not worth their money. Their reasons were ‘other children’ and ‘social obligations’—terrible.” Sherlock shook his head.

“Truly awful,” John agreed dryly. “Monsters.”

Sherlock cut his eyes at John but continued. “One would think, after the disaster that was Mycroft’s tenure—he had seized control of the administration before his first term was out…”

“He revolted?”

“You could be pardoned for thinking Mycroft revolting, yes, but open defiance is not his style. Much too gauche. No, he simply took over. He directed, without actually seeming to direct, the school.”

“That seems terrifying.” Truth be told, John was curious as to how Mycroft had directed a school, but he let it lie.

“It didn’t even improve the quality of instruction that much.” Sherlock was disdainful. “When I was there, it was still appalling.”

“When did you start?”
“I was 11, though normally they took children from age 13.”

“Was Mycroft still there?”

“Heavens, no. He was being educated elsewhere.”

“You don’t know where?” “It doesn’t matter where. I had all I could do to keep people from bothering me.”

“They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

“They may have. I had…one friend, of a sort, and he kept the others away in exchange for information.”

“What about Sally?”

“She began to work at the school in my second year. She was a home girl but the family was unkind. Mycroft brought her to the school, actually.” His face twisted in puzzlement. “Why do I remember this, but nothing else?”

“Could you have been mesmerized?” John didn’t truly believe in mesmerism, but very little about their current situation made solid sense.

“Mesmerism is bunk at best, John.”

John shrugged. “We’ll have to figure it out later. What happened next? Did you leave the school?”

“I did. I was educated at home, after the incident with my dog.”

“You were expelled over a dog?”
“In a manner of speaking. He…the dog…didn’t like me being away, so I smuggled him into school. He stayed in the boxroom, and sometimes in my room. That was frowned upon, even with Mycroft’s influence. And then he—Mycroft, not the dog, though I wouldn’t put it past him—bit someone, rather badly.”

“Was that someone hurting you?” John asked.

“He was. So I had to come home.”

“And this person—could he be in the woods? No, you would have told me there was someone to suspect. Right?”

“I’ve never seen him since. He and his family moved to Ottawa not long after,” Sherlock said. “I didn’t miss him.”

“I should imagine you didn’t.”

“We’re still bloody nowhere.” Sherlock stood up. “Can we go back to the woods again? I need data. Answers.”

“We can.” John took his plate to the bench and went for his rifle.

They found very little in the woods, though Sherlock was inordinately thorough. Even the few tracks left by the mysterious woman told them only what they knew already: that she was small and quick, and accompanied by a bear. John’s feeling of unease had lifted but he stayed alert, his rifle at the ready.

Eventually, Sherlock came back to where John was standing, hair disheveled and face irritated.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. This is awful.” He frowned, then, with a swift shift of humour, took John’s hand. John nearly drew away, but let the heat of Sherlock’s large hand comfort him. “Let’s go back by the raspberry patch.”

“Why?”

“Because I like raspberries and so do you.”

John looked at him.

“And that’s your reason? Your whole reason?”

“I can’t have simple reasons to do something?”

“It’s the first time I’ve been aware of it. But I’ll adapt.”

Sherlock laughed, and the air lightened.

The raspberry patch was a warm yellow-green in the hot summer sun. Raspberries hung thick and bright all over.
“The rain has been good for these, at least,” John said, pulling half a dozen juicy berries off a bush.

“I love raspberries,” Sherlock said, reaching out to steal them.

“Pick your own!” John pulled his hand in. This achieved the desired effect; Sherlock seized his wrist and moved into his space, bending to kiss him while trying to abstract raspberries from his hand. John surged forward and bit Sherlock’s lip.

“Ow!” Sherlock drew back and popped a berry into his mouth.

“You like that,” John said, doing it again.

“Maybe I do.”

“When this is finished, I am going to bite you all over.”

“Why not now?”

“There are raspberries to eat.” John reached for another handful.

“And a dangerous threat to solve. Yet here we are,” Sherlock tugged at John’s hand. “Let’s sit,” Sherlock said. “Just for a minute.”

John looked around. There wasn’t much of a clearing, but being surrounded by bushes meant that they’d hear any dangerous approach. He swung the rifle off his shoulder and sat. Sherlock followed suit, his long legs folding gracefully, and he smiled at John, a little shyly. John looked closely at his face, taking in each angle, marveling at his eyes, not any definite colour but somehow all colours. He kissed him again, suddenly, relishing the little jump of surprise before the wholehearted melting of their lips together.

“What changed your mind?” Sherlock asked, eventually, once they were sitting on the ground with handfuls of berries.

“Danger,” John said. “We’re always in bloody danger—or you are. No, wait,” he said, putting his hand over Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock licked it, partly petulantly, partly to feel the texture of John’s skin. John drew his hand away and used it to pin Sherlock’s shoulder to the ground.

“I did not want to endanger your heart. But there have been so many moments where your body was endangered, I have genuinely feared for your safety. And,” John continued, running his hand through his hair, “Yesterday, I could not bear the sight of other men who love men looking at you covetously. So many times, I have regretted not having you for my own.”

“Very possessive—not to mention presumptuous—of you.”

“It is. But you are my own. Aren’t you?” John said, not asking, but rolling over instead to straddle Sherlock’s belly. Sherlock made a half-hearted attempt to push him off, but it was really no true attempt. John’s thighs were warm against his sides, and his weight anchored Sherlock to the ground and also, somehow, to himself. He felt the now-familiar tightness gather at the base of his spine and sighed. The edge of fear he had felt before, the sense of wrongness, was almost completely gone. It was almost like magic, though Sherlock knew it was simple biology. What a fool he had been!

He stretched his arms over his head and stretched out. Through his slitted eyes he could see John watching him hungrily, and he smiled.
“Showoff,” John growled, his pupils dilating. Sherlock opened his eyes wide. “Yes, you. With your curls and your mouth.”

“My mouth is not just for decoration,” Sherlock said, and licked his lips.

“It makes a lot of noise too,” John replied, and reached up to run his raspberry-stained thumb across Sherlock’s lips. “Someone should stop it up.”

“I’d like to see someone try.” Sherlock said, and sucked John’s thumb into his mouth. John’s groan was possibly the most beautiful sound Sherlock had ever heard.

Suddenly there was a wild scream from the barn--Harry, obviously, but so loud and piercing that John immediately knew something was wrong.

"Stay here," he said to Sherlock, and leaped up, slinging the gun over his shoulder in one swift movement, running out of the raspberry patch at top speed, Sherlock at his heels.

It was as bad as he feared. An enormous bear had torn at the door of the barn and had lumbered in. The cacophony increased; the horses' frantic whinnying joined with the goats' distress noises. The smell of bear was everywhere.

"Hie!" John yelled, "Get out!" The bear did not react. John shouldered his weapon, but could not get a clear shot; if he missed, he would hit one of his own animals for certain. He started to make his way closer.

"Get inside!" he shouted at Sherlock. A chill shot through him; Sherlock must be terrified. Even the idea of a bear was enough to scare him; a real bear would be even more horrifying. "Bar it!"

He shouldered the rifle and approached. The geese were making an awful racket.

Then, in a moment John would remember all his life, a figure shot past him and headed straight for the bear.

John stopped, taking in this new information. He looked at the figure. He looked at it again.

Sherlock Holmes had rushed back of the cabin with an axe in his hands, headed directly for the bear.

"Fucking hell," John breathed, then shouted "Sherlock!"

There was no further time to waste. Sherlock had not heeded his call, and he was five steps...three steps... so close to the bear, and before John could catch him, Sherlock had walloped the bear on the arse with the flat end of John's best axe.

John dropped to one knee and shouldered his gun. He would have to shoot, if he could, and he could not miss. Even the door of the cabin would not protect Sherlock from an enormous bear. Especially an enormous, angry bear.

"Sherlock," he hissed, but Sherlock had swung again and hit the bear once again. It was only a matter of time until the bear left what undoubtedly seemed like a delicious buffet and turned on Sherlock.
"Leave them ALONE," Sherlock shouted, "You furry arsehole! You squirrel-murdering parasite!" Another wallop.

John found himself in the horrible position of being amused, aroused, and terrified all at once. Was this Sherlock, who feared bears, putting his body and life in danger to protect John's animals? He could not quite believe it.

Then the bear shifted his weight, and John knew that there was no longer any time to spare.

"Sherlock," he yelled, and this time, blessedly, Sherlock listened. "Run!"

Sherlock, his eyes wild, nodded crisply, almost in a soldierly way, and, with one last blow to the bear's arse, dropped the axe and ran.

He was only just in time. The bear wheeled around on his hind legs, spotted the retreating body, and began to move.

Crack! John's shot echoed through the air. The bear bounced back, rolled, twitched a few times, and was still.

Sherlock stopped in his tracks, turned, and looked, first at the bear and then at John.

"Perfect shot," he said, conversationally, then sank to his knees.

"Sherlock!" John practically flung his rifle to the ground and ran to him and pulled him close. "What in the almighty hell did you just do?"

"Drew him away from the animals so you could get a clear shot, Sherlock replied, burying his face in John's neck.

"You did, didn't you? You're a bloody genius."

"A terrified genius."

"The best kind." John said, kissing him.

"So do I deserve a reward?" Sherlock's hands were creeping around John's waist to his arse.

"More than a bearskin rug and some excellent meat?" John joked into his neck.

"That," Sherlock said, with his hands now full of John's arse, "will take too long. Don't you have a post-stress reaction that verges on the sexual?"

"Um," John flushed, "I do have to at least bleed the bear."

"Why does your reaction bother you so much?" Sherlock pulled back. "I like it." He gripped John's erection.

"It's very difficult to leave the battlefield to have a wank."

"Mmm," Sherlock hummed. In a different, more servile voice, he said "Oh, Captain Watson, let me take your gun for cleaning. And is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Wretch," John felt himself grow harder at the idea of Sherlock serving him.

"I see," Sherlock laughed. "I find I want to watch you dress the bear, but I think perhaps we could
resume this stimulating little mise en scène afterwards.”

"Bring me a knife, then, and let's get to it. Because I do desperately want you." John kissed Sherlock, grinding his erection into Sherlock's thigh before standing, reluctantly.

He made his way to the bear and poked it with the empty gun to make sure it was dead.

It was a male, which had been clear from the scent, but even for a male he was truly enormous. His fur, too, was thick and glossy, and his head was square and impressive. At least four years old, and probably closer to eight. The giant shining claws showed a little use, and there were almost no scars in the skin. It looked very like it had been cared for in some way.

Sherlock came back, holding the big knife and several other things John recognized as his autopsy tools.

"No. Not now."

"I want to. At least the stomach contents," Sherlock said.

"Only--and I cannot emphasize this enough--only--if you wash very thoroughly afterwards," John said.

"Fine," Sherlock said, and set down his instruments.

John began at the end of the bear, as was customary, cutting around the penis and testicles and tying off the urethra and anus. Sherlock watched in morbid--but thankfully silent--fascination.

John emptied it quickly, making sure not to contaminate the flesh, and pulled out the viscera, still warm. Once it was free of the corpse, Sherlock leaped on the pile, while John dragged the bear over to the shanty so he could hang it.

Once it was up, John looked out a barrel, and filled it with water and saltpeter. He'd have to get the meat into the brine right away if he didn't want it to spoil. He sighed at the hard work ahead of them, then turned back to Sherlock to see what he'd found.

Predictably, Sherlock was elbow-deep in guts. He'd flipped the liver off to one side and was carefully opening the stomach.

"It's been well fed," Sherlock said. "Been eating raspberries but that's about all the plant matter. The rest is meat--squirrel, as we suspected, and...wait." He speared something from the stomach on his knife, and held it up.

It was a slice of potato.

Cooked potato.

"Bloody hell." John felt a chill run down his spine.

"That definitely confirms our suspicion, then. Tame bear. What do you suppose are the chances of its owner coming back looking for it?"

"I don't know, John," Sherlock said, quietly. "But somehow I don't want to eat that meat."

John felt something lighten inside him. He hadn't wanted to either, but he hadn't known how to say
"The skin would be good in the winter, though." he said. It was hard to give up an additional source of warmth.

"Keep the skin."

"I could trade it to Mezenee, maybe. Actually, that's what I should do with the meat."

"It shouldn’t go to waste," Sherlock said, and rolled up his sleeves.

The day wore on. As they worked, the rifle was never far from John’s side. By mutual, unspoken agreement, they didn’t stop to eat, but worked swiftly.

By the time they’d butchered the bear, filled the barrel full of meat and shoveled the skeleton and guts up and buried them on the far side of the manure pile, it was dinnertime. Sherlock washed the knives while John did the chores, securing the door with an extra bar as well as a leather strap.

“There can’t be another one, surely?” Sherlock asked, as he tested the door.

“You never know.” John turned and faced Sherlock head-on. “Now,” he said, eyes steely, “Get yourself clean and get into the cabin.”

John slammed the door, and dropped the bar into place. Sherlock took a step back.

"You bloody madman!” he exclaimed. He strode across the room. Sherlock braced himself, but instead of a reprimand, John put his hands on Sherlock’s chest and pushed him up against the wall. "I ought to spank you."

A frisson trickled down Sherlock’s spine and took up root in his groin.

"Maybe you should,” he said. John's eyes widened, and he pulled Sherlock’s head down into a bruising kiss. Sherlock gave himself up to it, suddenly ravenous for the feel of John's skin.

“I thought you would never touch me like this.”

“And you’ll…will you…fuck me?” Sherlock asked.

God, John thought, his smile.

“I will,” he said, “if you promise never to run after a bear again.”

Sherlock drew back. John could see the wheels turning in his head.

“I don’t think I can promise that,” he said, thoughtfully.

“Of course you can’t.” John rolled his eyes, and Sherlock made a superior expression that was belied by his fondness.

“You don’t want me to.”

John blinked.
“No, I don’t. Now come to bed.”

“And you’ll fuck me?”

“I will, with pleasure.” John seized Sherlock’s upper arms and kissed him, hard. “I thought I could avoid it. But if I’ve been fool enough to put you in direct danger of a bear attack, how can bedding you be worse?”

“Glad to see your moral compass has righted itself” Sherlock could not prevent himself from saying, though his lips were brushing against John’s neck.

“It’s not my compass that’s pointing true north,” John said, pressing his cock against Sherlock’s thigh. “Come to bed and let me deflower you.”

“Please,” Sherlock heard himself say.

John crowded against him and kissed him; his physical presence was strength and determination, and Sherlock melted like spring ice under his force. John’s mouth was everywhere, hot and insistent with a sweetness that could not be discounted.

“I’m going to bend you over that settle again. Get the blanket,” John said against his mouth. Sherlock obeyed, his movements swift but a little disorganized. John found himself watching more closely than he had intended, savouring the submission, however small.

“Like this?” Sherlock asked, folding part of the cover on the back of the settle and the rest on the bench.

“Perfect. Now stand like you did before, and try not to shout.”

“To shou…oh. Oh.”

John had not been able to wait. His mouth was irresistibly drawn to Sherlock’s body, and he was reveling in it. Even after the swim, there was the sharp taste of sweat in the crease of Sherlock’s thigh. It tasted like bravery and fear at once on his tongue, and it drove John wild.

Slowly, methodically, John worked his way along the bottom curve of Sherlock’s arse until he reached his arsehole. He sat back on his heels to look, remembering that terrible day when he had given Sherlock the prostate massage, thinking it would help, and instead caused a shift in their worlds. He had wanted so desperately to use his mouth then, to make Sherlock submit, and now here they were: Sherlock sweet under his hands, and him hard and aching, but totally absorbed in making Sherlock feel. Really feel. He bit his lip and tried to settle himself, but Sherlock let out a low groan, bending his knees slightly so John had even easier access.

He raised himself up a little and gave Sherlock’s arsehole a broad lick.

Sherlock nearly howled, pushing back towards him in urgency. Two or three wet drops had fallen to the blanket already, and John had barely started. He wondered if he would ever get to the end of Sherlock’s responsiveness, and bent to his work. The world shrunk to these few inches of flesh, the soft pleading sounds in his ears, and the scent of musk and sex.

“John,” Sherlock begged, after a time, “If you don’t…I’m going to… I want…”

John nearly spent himself at that; he bit his own lip and stood, keeping his hands on Sherlock. He stroked his back and flanks, then reached around to touch his cock.
“No. Please. I want you…fuck me.”

John coated his fingers liberally with beaver grease, but Sherlock was so soft and ready that it took no time at all to open him. The most difficult aspect of the operation was holding them both steady—they were both so ready that several pauses were necessary.

“Are you certain?” John asked, when his cock was slicked and aligned with Sherlock’s hole. “Tell me to stop if you need to.”

“Never stop,” Sherlock breathed, and John didn’t. Sherlock opened for him like a dream, slick and tight, pushing back against him like he couldn’t get enough. John felt him begin to shake much too soon, but it didn’t matter, because he too was at the start of a ferocious pleasure, tearing through him as Sherlock cried out and tightened around him.

The final strokes were gentle; even though he could barely master his own body, John didn’t want to pull out, but Sherlock was as limp as a kitten. He needed to be in bed.

“All right?” he asked, reluctantly moving. “Sherlock?”

“Perfect,” Sherlock said, his voice dreamy. “Can we go to bed?”

John had to laugh. “Yes,” he replied, “Let’s.”

The next thing John was aware of was a banging at the door.

“Bloody buggering fuck,” he exclaimed. He raised his head—from Sherlock’s armpit—and glared at the door.

“Is someone there?” Sherlock sat right up, eyes bright. He leaped up and pulled on trousers, while John searched for his own.

“What are we going to say?” John wasn’t ashamed, but he didn’t want his neighbours in his private business, either.

“If it’s Lestrade, we can ask him if he’s jealous,” Sherlock joked.

“And if it’s the Barrymores?” John could only imagine what they would think.

“Same question.” Sherlock flung open the door.

There was no-one there. Instead, a mummified dog, reddish-brown under a film of tan-coloured sand, lay on the doorstep. Around its neck was a tag that read, in a large, clear hand, “Redbeard.”

Chapter End Notes
The song for this chapter is the Barenaked Ladies’ cover of “Lovers in a Dangerous Time” and I have been listening to it on loop for about a year. I mean, I knew it before that because I am Canadian and they were big when I was in undergrad, but something about the arrangement struck me as perfect for this chapter.

In a way, I’m actually glad the last chapter ended up being 2, because I had 2 songs for it and I couldn’t let either one go.

So THIS is the chapter that should be called “Bears That Aren’t There (except they are)” but honestly I just said “fuck it’ and called it “Raspberry Parfait” because they pick raspberries and everything is perfect. Then it isn’t. But it’s a bilingual pun, however weak, and that’s the way it’s going to be.

The “bears that aren’t there” thing made me want to make a Schroedinger’s bear joke but sadly Schroedinger was born in 1887 so it’s too early. Consider it made here.

I learned some things about bear dressing for this chapter. If you’re interested in why John does these things, this video is useful but graphic: http://www.themeateater.com/videos/skin-butcher-black-bear-steven-rinella/

Stephen Rinella’s hunting ethic is one of the least problematic out there: he believes in hunting for meat only and he’s careful about how he goes about it (on foot, knowing the area, etc).

Something I didn't learn about in this chapter was what large mummified dogs look like. They really do mummify, and they're really freaking creepy. This note brought to you by having discovered [weird, gross details ahead] the mummified head of a dog in a sandpit one time. [/weird, gross details]

I’ve said Sally was a Home girl—a British orphan shipped to Canada for a better chance at a “healthy, moral life”, but Home children didn’t actually start arriving in Canada until 1869: https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/immigration-records/home-children-1869-1930/Pages/home-children.aspx

I’m so nervous for the next chapter, you have no idea.

I think that’s it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, or if you see any typos. Come and visit me on tumblr, where I’m redscudery, or Twitter, where I go by @scudery. Thanks for reading!

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