Summary

“You love your mother, Sherlock?”

John watched the muscles in Sherlock’s jaw jump. He nodded in one sharp jerk.

“Then we’re going to her party and making her happy.” John let out a resigned sigh. “As a ruddy couple, you bastard.”

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
John was beginning to question the science of dating websites.

Amelia had been a 93% match — she was a sweet-faced, willowy doctor appreciative of 19th century novels and 21st century true crime television — and still she had dashed from the restaurant before the entrée could arrive. She was the third this month alone.

John racked his brain for a reason. The restaurant was a nice place, modest but nothing to scoff at — he’d been with Sherlock several times, and the waiters were obliging and agreeable. He’d worn the jumper Sherlock had once declared “not the most hideous thing ever to have offended my eyes.” He’d opened doors, listened intently, dispensed compliments he’d divined through Sherlock’s methods as the ones she’d most enjoy. He thought conversation had been going pretty well — the Lake District, the RAMC, the latest case — and Sherlock hadn’t even found it in his busy lounging schedule to perform a long-distance cockblock. Nothing had gone wrong, and thus John had to conclude that the website’s matching software was hopelessly flawed.

He trudged up the stairs to 221B and pushed the door.

“I think I’ve got to change websites again,” he announced as it swung open. He paused when he saw not one set of pales eyes turn to dissect him on the spot but two. “Ah.” He valiantly reined in a sigh. “Mycroft. Hello.” He glanced at Sherlock, who looked in that moment like nothing so much as a startled rodent. He didn’t even do a cursory sweep of John’s person — the usual deductions. John frowned before taking a seat beside him on the sofa, since Mycroft occupied John’s usual chair.

“John, how lovely. You have the most impeccable timing.” Mycroft’s smile was the typical oily affair. He fondled his umbrella even as he tucked his chin inward and drew breath to speak. “It is our mother’s seventy-fifth birthday do next week — I hope you can convince my recalcitrant brother to do the proper thing and attend such an auspicious event. You are, of course, personally invited.” He leaned over, plucked an envelope from Sherlock’s lax fingers, and handed it to John. In green ink and flowery script were his name and Sherlock’s, flowing together like a single, calligraphic entity.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock said, voice like whiplash. “Don’t you have any monarchies to topple?”

Mycroft exhaled through his nose and stood to loom imperiously over the both of them.

“Do consider it, Sherlock. She does so like to see you.” He pinned John with an icpick gaze and nodded once. “John.” He turned his back and left the flat. In a whirl of silken dressing gown, Sherlock was up and slamming the door behind him.

“That utter bag of anuses!”

“That what?” Unbidden, a giggle escaped John’s gullet.

“You heard me!” Sherlock whipped back around and pulled his dressing gown tight around himself. He drew himself up to his full height and attempted to gain back his dignity, but John saw the flush high on his cheeks and the vertical cast of his lawless hair. “That sphincter emporium is trying to manipulate me through guilt like a rank amateur. Who does he think he is? Who does he think I am? Guilt, John! Me! Ha!” With that, he fell twirling back into the sofa, his big, ridiculous skull colliding with John’s thigh. John winced, but Sherlock gave no indication of having caused or
incurred injury.

John pursed his lips. “Yes, I can see that it’s not working at all.”

Sherlock popped up to look John in the face.

“Are you being sarcastic? You’re being sarcastic. *Tedious.*” He threw himself face first into John’s lap, arm dangling over the edge of the sofa like a picturesque consumptive. John rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, which resulted in his elbow resting on Sherlock’s head. Sherlock squawked but made no attempt to extricate himself.

“Are you going to tell me why you won’t go to your mother’s seventy-fifth birthday, Sherlock? Because if it’s just to be contrary, I’ll have to inform you that I’m perfectly capable of rendering you unconscious and presenting you to your poor mother with a big red bow on.”

Sherlock was up again, and now his face was so close to John’s that one deep breath from either of them would have sent their noses into collision. John could have catalogued all the colours in the freckle in Sherlock’s right eye.

“John. You mustn’t make me go. You mustn’t.” Bony fingers curled hard around John’s wrists. Narrow eyes had transformed into wide pools of imploring adorability.

“Now who’s an amateur?” John shoved at him. “Don’t sham me, Sherlock — I see right through you, you know.”

Sherlock’s eyes shuttered and his mouth turned downward into a mathematically perfect arc.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine. But John, I’m being serious. I can’t go to Mummy’s birthday. I just can’t.”

John shifted to see Sherlock better. He took in the unhappy mouth, the gaze trained not on his eyes but on his forehead, the deepening furrow between Sherlock’s eyebrows.

“Hey,” he said softly. “What’s wrong?”

Sherlock turned from him and slouched backwards into the cushions.

“Sherlock?”

“Oh, *piss.*”

“Sherlock.”

A sigh. “It’s not what you think.”

“Then what is it?”

Sherlock sighed again and closed his eyes. “Oh, John. You care far too much, and it absolutely *pains* me not to exploit it.”

John had some choice words about Sherlock’s version of not exploiting him, words about the laundry and the tidying and the pouty lip, but before he could get them out, Sherlock continued.

“No, I wasn’t abused or neglected or otherwise traumatised by my mother or anyone likely to be at the party. Other than by the simple fact of being related to Mycroft, of course.”

John clenched his jaw. “And yet you deliberately led me to that conclusion. Why?”
Sherlock looked everywhere but at John. “I don’t want to go, John.”

John huffed and stood.

“I’m making tea — Lady Grey, thank you very much, and you can’t have any because you’re a turd.”

In the kitchen, John was banging around preparing the tea when Sherlock sidled up to him.

“John.”

“Nope.”

“John. John.”

“Go away.”

“John.”

“Sherlock, honestly. I’ve been ditched on a date for the billionth time and I just want to relax without my flatmate using me as some kind of elaborate social experiment for once. Can I have that? Can you give me that, please?”

“I’ll help you change your dating site profile. You’ll attract women who are less dull.”

John turned to level an unimpressed look at him.

“In exchange for what?”

Sherlock pressed his lips together.

“In exchange for what, Sherlock?”

“For ringing Mummy and telling her you’re terribly sorry but neither you nor I can make it.”

John turned back to his tea and poured a splash of milk into it. He pushed past Sherlock and made his way back into the lounge, where he settled into his usual chair. Sherlock trailed after him, then stood awkwardly to the side of John’s seat.

“Unless you can give me a good damn reason, Sherlock, then no, I’m not doing that, and yes, I am making you go see your mum on her birthday.”

“She thinks we’re dating.”

John gaped at him and tipped half his tea into the carpet. He swore, and before he could even get up, Sherlock had swept out and then back in, rag in hand to cover the spill.

“So you see now,” he said. “Why we can’t go.”

“Jesus Sherlock! Why the hell does she think we’re dating?”

“She thinks we’re affianced, actually.”

“Oh my God!”

Then, all protests to the contrary, Sherlock looked guilty. He fidgeted, dressing gown belt worried between his fingers, preposterous toes wiggling away into the Oriental rug.
“You told her. You bloody well told her we were together, Sherlock, why?”

“I had to!” He dropped to his knees and put his hands on John’s armrests, effectively trapping him. He was close again, eyes big again, mouth wet and pursed again. “She —” He dropped his voice and leaned in even farther. “She cried at me, John. She despised of my being alone. I couldn’t bear it. I did the only thing I could.”

“You lied!”

“To spare her! Don’t find some arbitrary point on your moral compass from which to condemn me on this one, John, because I will never believe you’d do differently.”

John rubbed his eyes and left his hand to cover them. He hissed a breath out from between clenched teeth before dropping his hand again.

“I would have made someone up if I absolutely had to, Sherlock.”

“I live with you.”

“So?”

“I bring you along on cases.”

“Sherlock.”

“You make my bed.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“It made the most sense. It was the most convenient explanation. Making up an imaginary boyfriend who also tolerates me would be too easily spotted as a ploy, John. It had to be you. It had to.”

John blinked into Sherlock’s face. Soon he had a frown to match the one he saw there.

“I don’t tolerate you, Sherlock,” he said. He cleared his throat and drew up all his nerve. “You’re my best friend.”

Sherlock held his gaze for a fraction of a second before he rocked back and stood in one fluid, enviable, hateful motion.

“Then you know,” he said. “You know how unlikely it is for there to be anyone else. She’s not stupid, John. You’ll call her, then?”

John stared up at him. He took in the tense shoulders, the singular eyes, the strange, dear face in that strange, dear skull. The layers of hurt he refused to acknowledge.

“You love your mother, Sherlock?”

John watched the muscles in Sherlock’s jaw jump. He nodded in one sharp jerk.

“Then we’re going to her party and making her happy.” John let out a resigned sigh. “As a ruddy couple, you bastard.”

Sherlock stared at him, and then said, “John. It’s not just a party.”
John groaned. “Christ, Sherlock. What now?”

“It’s five days’ travel. Anywhere she wants to go, with anyone, which includes Mycroft. Mycroft, John.”

It was John’s turn to stare.

“You owe me a lot more than a profile-revamp, Sherlock.”

“John. I appreciate your offer…”

“Does it physically hurt you to say that?”

“…but you don’t have to do this. You can say you have a job, she’ll never know you’re technically unemployed and haven’t actually done—”

“Yes, Sherlock, all right, I get the picture.”

Sherlock issued a gruff, exasperated little sound and John could see him just barely contain the stomp of his foot.

“John — I’m trying to be kind. You could help me out.”

John’s mouth twisted into half a smirk.

“Not a chance,” he said. “Now sit down and tell me what our story’s going to be.”

Sherlock sat, but his eyes bored so hard into John’s that John considered checking for dents or third degree burns or some other kind of impact injury.

“Our story,” Sherlock said faintly.

John took a cleansing breath and then a sip of his tea.

“How we got together, what we like to do in our spare time, general couple stuff. It has to be convincing, and Mycroft will probably need, I don’t know, a memo in triplicate about it if he’s going to help with the ruse. Which I assume he is, considering how he postured like an obnoxious peacock in here.”

“Peacocks are spectacular to look at, John, you should work on craft of metaphor.”

John snorted. Half of Sherlock’s mouth quirked up in one of his particular, peculiar smiles.

“I’m serious, Sherlock. We go in a united front or this whole thing falls apart.”

Sherlock looked intently at his nose. When he took a deep breath and opened his mouth, John knew he was in for it.

“Getting together’s easy — it happened within two months of meeting and was a natural progression of our living as flatmates. I hurried the process along by going nude beneath my dressing gowns because I liked you but I have poor flirtation skills — something we turned into one of those annoying private jokes couples have — and finally you took pity on the both of us and ravaged me most thoroughly. When we’re not out on cases or conducting experiments or doing up your little blog, we enjoy a reasonably adventurous sex life and non-British food and deducing passersby and exploring hidden places in London. You proposed to me over bibimbap one night after closing a case and I accepted, but we’re both quite committed to having a long engagement.
You watch crap telly and you think I enjoy it secretly but really I’m just humouring you, which I’m willing to do now but monogamy tends to beat such things out of one, so don’t expect it to go on for much longer. I pore over your old textbooks looking at medical oddities and you pretend it irritates you but really you find it rather charming even though you’re the one who will have to put the books away later, and monogamy never quite manages to beat that out of you.” Sherlock blinked, and John clapped shut his hanging jaw. “Is that sufficient?”

John tried to keep his mouth from further flapping. He set his tea down and glared. “No!” he said. “You lose interest in ten years but I still moon about after you like a pathetic lapdog? No, if we’re going to make up some kind of fantasy togetherness narrative anyway, we might as well both be delirious on oxytocin for-bloody-ever. You are gone on me, Sherlock Holmes, and you’ll bloody well act it. And! I get to be narked about your socks on the floor and how you never do the washing up and the residue your experiments leaves wherever you happen to conduct them and the nature of your farts every time we eat at that one place by the dentist’s office —”

“No!”

“Don’t deny it!”

“Fine, but what about you and that place with the waiter who didn’t know his parents were on the verge of divorce? You’re like a malodorous one-man symphony!”

They were locked in a moment’s mutual scowl before they both dissolved into a fit of giggles. An eternity later, still choking on the remnants of his laughter, John said, “You know, I think we might actually be able to pull this off.”

—I don’t think I can do this,” John said as Sherlock cradled his hand on the sofa.

“We’ll never convince anyone of our mutual devotion if you spook at my touch like some kind of ill-tempered Shetland pony, John.” Sherlock pulled his hand closer to his face, inspected the tips of his fingers, made a considering sound.

“Oi! Why am I a Shetland pony?”

“Shut up I’m memorising your fingerprints.”

John saw it as if in slow-motion — the tender pink tip of Sherlock’s tongue emerged from his mouth and made contact with the pad of John’s index finger.

John yanked his hand back. “Okay, you definitely don’t have to memorise the taste of them,” he said. “Jesus, Sherlock.” He wiped his hand on Sherlock’s shirt and sent him a sour look.

Sherlock rolled his eyes — John had catalogued many of Sherlock’s eye rolls, and this one was, “It’s not my fault you don’t understand science, simpleton.” John flicked Sherlock on the ear and got an offended grimace in return for his efforts.

“And its sensitivity, its capacity for detecting nuance —”
“Stop right there.” John held up a hand and raised his brows. “Are there any circumstances under which your mother would need to know what my fingerprints taste like?”

Sherlock was still for a matter of seconds.

“At least thirty-seven. Wait! Forty-one.”

“Are any of them likely to occur on our trip?”

Sherlock pinched his lips together, eyes shuttering.

“I thought so,” John said. “Okay. Just. Sit there and hold my hand and don’t be so you about it.”

Sherlock did. John stared at their hands entwined, pale and long and slender around his own, worn and square and callused. He wondered if Sherlock moisturised.

“Of course,” Sherlock said into the silence. “Dry skin is so uncomfortable.”

John sighed.

“Maybe we should try a cuddle with the telly on.”

“There’s nothing good on.”

“A film then.”

“Boring.”

“Well, what do you propose then, if you’re so full of good ideas?”

“We should find Lestrade and hold hands during a case.”

“No.”

“Why not? Couples do that — I’ve seen them. Doing basic activities, only hobbled by the irrational need to claim physical ownership over another person’s body. It’s perfectly normal.”

John used his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. He used a breathing exercise Ella once told him he should try.

“We’re putting the show on for your mum, Sherlock, not all of Scotland Yard.”

Sherlock pulled John’s hand closer. John opened his eyes to find Sherlock inspecting his knuckles now. He turned his hand over to squeeze Sherlock’s, and Sherlock looked up. John lifted one corner of his mouth in half a smile.

“They’d take the piss. And we’re just trying to do something nice for your mum. It’s for her, not them, do you see?”

Sherlock dropped his eyes and nodded.

“I suppose,” John went on, “for the next few days, the best plan of action is just to get used to being near each other like this so it doesn’t seem forced when we’re with her. That’s all. No one’s expecting us to plaster ourselves all over each other. We’re English, and we’re men, after all.” Even if we’re playing gay, John thought. Well. Even if I’m playing gay.
Sherlock smirked.

“When Mycroft was seventeen and terribly spotty, Mummy somehow got a photograph of him kissing a girl from town. She distributed it gleefully with the Christmas cards.”

John felt the conflicting needs to laugh and to crawl somewhere dark and hidden.

“Bloody hell, why?”

Sherlock let go of his hand and flapped his own about dismissively.

“Oh, she thought it was sweet and wanted everyone to know. And then she found a formula of some sort and forgot about it. Mycroft was summarily dumped, though, that was hilarious.” He stood and whirled about as if trying to find something. “John! If we arrange a similar picture and gift it to her in advance, maybe she won’t lurk about with her cameras trying to catch us unawares!”

“Oh my God.”

“We’ll make it quite soppy, too, she’ll like that.”

Sherlock darted into his bedroom, and John heard the rustling of a man trying to find a camera amid God knows what else was in his closet.

“Sherlock!” John called. When he got no answer, he went over there and hovered in Sherlock’s doorway. Sherlock was on his knees before the closet, half inside and rummaging. John rolled his eyes to see Sherlock’s trouser-clad bum bobbing about with the effort. “You can forget it. I’m not…fake making out with you for a picture.”

Sherlock popped up, hair a mess.

“But John! She’ll find a way. She always finds a way.”

“Mycroft came by his predilection for spying honestly, then?”

“John.” A trembling lip.

“Sherlock.” John held up his hands as if to ward off from the big imploring eyes Sherlock was trying to manipulate him with. “It’ll be much more convincing if it happens organically, if she can see real evidence of us… being like that and put it together herself. Giving her a picture is far more suspicious than it is convincing.”

Sherlock dropped the look and stood, suddenly himself again.

“Your logic astounds,” he said.

“Gee, thanks.”

Sherlock began to pace.

Sherlock snapped his fingers.

“I know just the thing,” he said. “Matching underwear!”

“No.”

“Just a bit, peeking out from our trousers; it implies intimate his and his shopping excursions. So
“There’s nothing elegant about pants, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s face screwed into a scowl and he threw his hands up.

“Well what then? For a serial monogamist you’re not bringing much to the table here, John. Why do your girlfriends put up with you?” He flapped a hand and scrunched his nose.

John flushed. This entire, preposterous endeavour… What was once funny now felt like something heavy and hot in his stomach. Sherlock was the one always interrupting John’s dates, driving his girlfriends away, deducing them into the Stone Age. Sherlock was the reason John hadn’t had sex in at least six months. Sherlock was a presence that loomed so large there was room for nothing else in John’s life.

“I wouldn’t know, since you make damn sure I never have any!” John whirled around to stomp up the stairs and into his own bedroom, where he could slam the door quite dramatically, but he was yanked backward before he could enact his plan and enveloped in a surprisingly warm though unsurprisingly bony embrace.

“How about this?” Sherlock said low into his ear. Without his volition, John’s body sagged into the hug. Sherlock smelled good — a familiar smell that hung about the flat, but one to which John had never quite been so up close and personal. It was nice. Warm. Uncomplicated. He fit perfectly into Sherlock’s shoulder. He struggled a bit in the circle of Sherlock’s arms, but it was mostly for show. “We can do this,” Sherlock whispered. “We can put on a proper show, like this.”

John turned to face Sherlock and his arms came up loosely around him. “And then afterward you’ll fix my profile and promise not to be a shit to the girls I take out.”

Sherlock released him, brow furrowed, scrutinising.

“If you like,” he said.

John cocked his head, but suddenly that expression was gone and Sherlock bounced from heel to toe and clutched at John’s shoulders, a madman grin stretching his face. One of his shamming expressions.

“Practice kissing!” he said.

John blew a raspberry at him and ran away.
“So she’s just not going to tell us where we’re going?” John asked. He frowned, peering at the invitation for the millionth time. All it had was a time to be at the airport and a list of items to bring. It looked like they were in for some weather.

“She’s whimsical,” Sherlock said, and, as if only just thinking of it now, threw into his posh little case the only jumper he owned: a lightweight V-neck cashmere number in plain navy. “Stop that, John — it’s not going to say anything new no matter how hard you stare at it.”

John ignored him. “You ready?” he asked. He slung his holdall over his shoulder and adjusted his jacket. It was a godawful time of day, sunlight barely trickling over the horizon, and no doubt Mycroft was drumming away at his brolly in a Rolls Royce just outside the door.

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

“Got your charger?”

“Yes.”

“Because you remember what happened last time we went somewhere and you didn’t have your charger.”

“John. I’ve got it.”

“And you remember what we talked about? How couples act?”

Sherlock scoffed — as if he didn’t go around deleting things left and right, as if the holding hands experiment hadn’t been a bit shit, as if John’s concerns were completely baseless. John sent him a flat-mouthed look of exasperation before ushering him out the door and locking it behind him. Sherlock shoved his case at John and strode down the stairs. John pressed his eyes and prayed for forbearance.

He closed and locked the front door in time to catch sight of the flapping tail of Sherlock’s coat disappearing into the black car. He marched up to it and tossed both parcels into the backseat indiscriminately. He felt satisfied upon hearing a sound not dissimilar to Sherlock being punched in the stomach. Smiling, he ducked and took a seat. He saw that Sherlock wore a wild grimace, case and holdall in his lap and at his feet, while Mycroft looked constipated by the effort expended to keep from laughing.

“Juvenile,” Sherlock said with a sneer.

“Mycroft,” John said, and Mycroft nodded in greeting. The car shifted smoothly into gear as it sped up.

“John. I don’t suppose Sherlock explained to you the rules about our mother.”

John glanced at Sherlock, who had apparently decided the blackness outside the window was far more stimulating than this conversation. John sighed and turned back to Mycroft.

“Have at it,” he said.

The “rules” mostly involved not disturbing her when it appeared she was thinking, which could be
happening, as far as John could tell, at any time. If she paused in her actions or her words, if her
gaze drifted, it was best to extricate oneself quietly and leave her to it. For some reason, Mycroft
felt it necessary to enumerate every possible context in which this could occur, but it all boiled
down to one thing: leave Mummy to her thoughts and go about your business. By the time he was
finished, the Rolls had pulled into a private airfield and they were greeted by a man wearing a
flight attendant’s uniform.

“Good morning Dr. Watson, Messrs Holmes,” he said. “I do hope your journey here was a pleasant
one.”

“Yes, thank you,” Mycroft said, handing the flight attendant his own case and brushing past him to
climb the stairs into the aeroplane. John frowned after him and intended to exchange a few words
with the flight attendant to ease the sting of interacting with Mycroft Holmes, but his mouth
stopped working properly when he realised exactly in what circumstances he currently found
himself.

“Jesus Christ,” he said to Sherlock, who had come up just behind him. “Of course you lot have a
bloody private jet.”

“Mummy becomes nervous in the intimate proximity of strangers.”

John, for the first time since agreeing to this farce, felt a bloom of trepidation. In some perverse
way, he had been quietly looking forward to meeting “Mummy,” as both the Holmes brothers
persisted in calling her without hints of irony, but now he wondered if he were somehow in over
his head. If Sherlock’s brand of Holmesian peculiarity was as much as he could handle without
losing his mind. If Sherlock and Mycroft were, against all odds, the diluted version of the
concentrate that was the matriarch. John wondered if he’d have any warning before his brain
exploded.

“With your shield or on it, Watson,” he muttered, and followed Sherlock up the stairs.

The inside of the aeroplane was a sleek, modern affair in whites and blues. John entered in time to
see Mycroft straightening after placing a kiss on his mother’s sharp cheekbone. She was of
middling height and carried a bit of extra weight John fancied she was rather entitled to, being
seventy-five and all. Her hair was white and cut in a bob, though it curled wildly in every direction
with no impediments. It was not styled to within an inch of its life like her youngest son’s, but it
looked fine — it rather suited her. She wore a well-cut dress that was forgiving of her middle and
looked as comfortable as it was expensive. She turned, caught sight of Sherlock, and grinned —
and it was as blinding as looking into the sun. She opened her arms and Sherlock practically
bounded into them. Mycroft was pressed against the bulkheads by the force of their collision, and
John saw his face sour as he rolled his eyes hard enough to affect the Earth’s rotation.

When mother and son broke apart, she peeked around Sherlock’s body to look inquisitively at John,
and John stepped forward, extending his hand.

“It’s so good to meet you, Mrs. Holmes,” he said. “An honour, truly.”

She made a small tittering sound as she clasped his fingers.

“I’m no one’s missus, John,” she said, and if he didn’t know better he’d have fancied the
conspiratorial look she sent him to be flirtatious. “You may call me Mummy, like a good boy.” She
rose up on her toes to feather a dry little kiss against his cheek.

“Ah,” John said when he stepped back and dropped her hand. He tried to glare covertly at
Sherlock, tried to convey a sense of “how did you forget to tell me what to call her, you utter shit,”
but by the way Sherlock smiled — small, sincere, eyes bright — John could tell the nuance was
lost on him. This was Sherlock as easily, as uncomplicatedly happy as John had ever seen him.
Something in the vicinity of his chest gave a pang.

Mummy patted his hand.

“It was the 70s, you know,” she said in a stage whisper. “I was a free spirit.”

“You still are, Mummy,” Mycroft said.

The flight attendant coughed politely from somewhere behind them. They all four turned to look at
him.

“If you’d please take your seats,” he said, “we can get our journey underway.”

Mummy led them to two pairs of roomy seats placed around a small table. She appeared to
deliberate for a long moment before picking one for herself.

“You sit here, John,” she said after she’d buckled herself in. She patted the seat next to her. John
smiled and complied, while Sherlock and Mycroft exchanged looks of distaste and arranged
themselves in the two seats opposite. They both managed to contort into positions that would
afford them the most space from the other, though Mycroft’s means looked far more civilised.
Sherlock looked like a rude, offended contortionist. “Oren’s going to skip the safety song and
dance because I find it tedious,” Mummy said, “and you are going to sit here and tell me how
many similarities there are between kissing my son and forcing a cat into a bath.”

That startled a bark of a laugh out of John, and he glanced at Sherlock, who only twitched a brow
at him. He saw Mycroft deploy another eye-roll.

“Darling, I swear, you’re going to hurt yourself someday,” Mummy said. She pointedly turned in
her seat to face John and raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“Er…” John cleared his throat. “It’s not as bad as all that. I mean, as long as he’s not on a case.
Sometimes he even initiates, if I’m very lucky.” He ventured a wink in Sherlock’s direction and
was rewarded with the slow spread of the “naughty private smile” Sherlock had been practicing.

The aeroplane began taxiing, and finally lifting off, as Mummy continued to ask borderline
invasive questions about the quality of Sherlock’s underpants and his cover-stealing habits and so
on, and John answered with as much evasive manoeuvring as befitted a grown man being
interrogated by his would-be mother-in-law. Mycroft and Sherlock watched them with the quiet
intensity of a Wimbledon audience. Mummy nodded along, smiling and looking rather absent-
minded, and John tried to shift the conversation toward safer subjects, like the time Sherlock dyed
everything John owned green. But Mummy wouldn’t have it, and when they reached altitude, she
asked, “So, John, is he a top or a bottom? Or, what do the young people say these days, versatile?
Switch?”

“Mummy!” Sherlock gasped, and John knew, knew it was a sham job, but the note of scandal in
Sherlock’s voice was convincing enough that he flushed to the tips of his ears as if on cue. Mycroft
was attempting to suppress some kind of unflattering snort, and John hated him.

“Darling,” Mummy said to Sherlock, “I’ve been waiting ever so long for you to bring home a petit
ami, and it is my birthday.” She turned back to John, and the shape of her eyes was different from
Sherlock’s but their imploring quality was the same. John did not, however, have the same
immunity.

“Erm,” he said.


Mummy only laughed, a bright, unselfconscious sound that filled the cabin of the aeroplane. “Bottom then,” she said in a stage whisper, and John felt the threatening edge of hysteria. “Oren!” Mummy called. “Drinks!”

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After less than two hours in the air, they landed in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. John fairly pranced off the plane, though the airport itself was nothing to etch into his memory, despite the giant chessman holding vigil over the baggage claim.

“I don’t see what you’re so happy about,” Sherlock hissed into John’s ear as they waited for Mycroft to secure their transport from the airport. True, John could attempt to contain the bounce in his step, but he believed one hundred percent in anything that made Sherlock scowl so.

“Because I’ve never been to the Outer Hebrides!” John said. “And I’m going to see the stones and the broch and the borealis and the puffins! And I’m Scottish!”

“Your father is Scottish — whereas you can’t even pronounce ‘broch.’” Sherlock sniffed. “God, what are we going to do in the bloody Hebrides for five days? How long can someone look at scenery? I’d wager they don’t even have murder up here.”

“Shut up, imperialist pig,” John said mildly, and some twenty feet away, Mummy looked up from whatever she was scribbling in a tatty notebook and smiled at them. On impulse, and because it would annoy Sherlock and appease the full feeling in John’s chest at the same time, John rocked up onto his tip toes and landed a swift kiss on Sherlock’s cheek. Sherlock pinked up a bit and ducked his head. A glance at Mummy told John she was making a soppy face at them, and just then Mycroft appeared to tell them their hired car was ready.

“It’s a bit — ah, smaller than our usual means of conveyance, Mummy,” he said.

“Of course it is,” she said, “Have you seen the roads? They barely fit a single car.”

“I’ve never been here, how can I have seen the roads?” Mycroft was beginning to sound irritable, and when John looked at Mummy, there was a warning in the lines of her face rather than hurt.

Sherlock veritably swooped in, complete with fluttering coat flair, and snatched the keys dangling from Mycroft’s fingers.

“I’m driving,” he said, and stalked off out of the tiny airport.

“He always does that,” John said apologetically. Mycroft looked increasingly sour, and John shifted his duffle on his back in discomfort. “I’ll go make sure he’s not terrorising anyone, shall I?” He followed Sherlock out, but he heard what Mummy said to Mycroft anyway.

“You promised me, darling, that you would be pleasant and get along.”

John didn’t hear Mycroft’s reply.

He found Sherlock in a tiny blue Peugot, rifling through some kind of welcome packet and a map
of the Western Isles, a furrow of concentration deepening between his eyes. That little crease inspired a burst of affection in John’s chest, though he chose not to analyse it. He dropped his bag off in the boot and began to enter the back seat but Sherlock whipped around looking like an offended ostrich.

“No no no, John,” he said. “If I’m driving you have to be up front, plus your legs are shorter than Mummy’s so Mycroft will have to sit behind you so his legs don’t cramp. He *complains* so, you have no idea.”

“My *legs* are shorter than your short mother’s?”

“She has an unusually short torso.” Sherlock wasn’t even looking at him anymore. He had the map out and a booklet of Hebridean sights on top of it, a fingertip trailing down the page. John sighed and went around to the passenger’s seat.

When he was settled in, he tried his chances with the question he’d been avoiding. “Are you going to make this trip miserable, Sherlock?”

Sherlock looked up, surprise raising his brows. “What?” he squawked.

“I mean,” John went on, “that no one, especially your poor mother who’s been planning this trip for God knows how long, is going to be able to have a good time if you and Mycroft can’t keep a lid on it. So can you do that, please? For her? For *me*?”

“I’m not the one—”

“It’s a joint effort, Sherlock, and it’s so plain even I can see it. Carrying on complaining and then turning around to scratch each other’s eyes out. You’re not children. I’m asking you to tone it down so no one drowns themselves just to get away from the pair of you.”

Sherlock’s mouth snapped shut, his lips pinching thin and white. He gave a short nod and turned back to the map.

In his peripheral vision, John caught sight of Mycroft, laden with luggage, and Mummy, notebook in hand, heading towards them. He placed a hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck and squeezed gently. Under his palm he felt Sherlock startle, though he gave no outward appearance of it. He leaned in close enough that he could smell him.

“We’re going to have fun, if you let us,” he whispered. “And there’s no one else I’d rather be on a trip with.”

He pulled back just as Mycroft and Mummy opened the doors to the back seat, but caught the beginnings of a smile playing around Sherlock’s mouth.

“I rented a cottage just outside of town,” Mummy said. “Self-catering!”

“Just like the proletariat,” Mycroft muttered, and John heard the dull slap of Mummy’s hand against his arm.

“So we’ll go there first,” she went on, “and it should be stocked with all manner of necessities, and then we’ll decide our itinerary. Yes? Yes.” She waved a piece of paper in the space between the front and the back, and Sherlock took it from her only to shove all he had in his lap at John.

“Everything’s in Gaelic,” Sherlock grumbled. “It’s not a language — it’s a bunch of drunken Celts grunting at each other.”
“It’s pronounced Gàidhlig,” Mycroft piped up from behind John. “Like Gandalf.”

“Shut up, Mycroft.”

“Boys, please.”

They both went silent and Sherlock began to drive. John had settled himself in for some fine scenery when he felt a tapping at his shoulder. He turned around to find Mummy had leaned forward between the seats and now pinned him with dark blue eyes.

“They weren’t always like this, John,” she said. “Do you know what Mycroft did when Sherlock was born?”


“Mummy, I would love to know,” John said.

“Well.” Mummy sat back, and John watched what he could of her in the rearview mirror. “He was seven and still insisted on dressing just like Christopher Robin. Oh, John, do you know who Christopher Robin is?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. I’m pleased you were not robbed of such things despite your unfortunate upbringing.”

“Mummy,” Sherlock hissed.

“Anyway, he was quite insistent, John, that he was not seven but six, because you’ll recall Milne wrote Now We Are Six and he was quite incapable at the time of separating himself from those books. He even had this absolutely hideous Winnie the Pooh my mother gave to him specifically to torture me — you know, the dreadful Disney one that had come out in 1977? So much less charming than the classic book version. Anyway, he dragged it with him everywhere, it was filthy. Oh, Mycroft, you were so precious I should have invented something to keep you that way.”

John glanced in the side view mirror to catch Mycroft wearing a put-upon look. In the periphery of his vision was Sherlock, looking especially smug.

“I told him he was going to be a big brother and wasn’t he excited? He declared he was not, and that when the baby came he would run away to live with the honey bears and the rabbits and the owls and the tiggers. I said, ‘Mycroft, tigers are not native to England,’ because I do not hold with lying to children, John, but he was quite obstinate. His nanny would find him preparing for his triumphant escape by packing into a small bag whole sleeves of Bakewell tarts and all of his little friends — that tatty bear and a donkey and a rabbit and a piglet. I would say, ‘Mycroft, how do you expect to live on Bakewell tarts?’ and he would say, ‘Bakewell tarts are a nutritious, balanced meal, Mummy,’ and I would say—”

“And then I was born,” Sherlock interjected.

“Oh.” Mummy paused, and John glanced at Sherlock. Their eyes met, and Sherlock conveyed a moment’s regret, then his gaze was back on the road. “Right. Sherlock was born in January, a terrible winter if you are old enough to recall 1981, John, terrible. He was a bit early, and had a touch of jaundice, and his hair was fair when he was born. He was so small, John. He was so small.” She went silent and in the mirror John could see her staring out the window. Neither Mycroft nor Sherlock said anything. John swallowed and hunched into his seat a bit.
He wondered if ‘maintaining Mummy’ was the only thing that could forge a truce between Mycroft and Sherlock. He would expect now, with the conversation stoppered, that the brothers would take the opportunity to harangue each other about whatever embarrassing minutiae they’d deduced about each other while John was oblivious, but instead silence settled into the car, an invisible, overbearing passenger.

John’s doctor brain kicked in — was Mummy prone to depression, mania, mood swings of the bipolar variety? Was she medicated, or did she suffer without chemical intervention? What toll did it take on her children, her colleagues, the people around her? What had Mycroft and Sherlock had to do to soothe her when there was no one but them?

What fathomless history was John not privy to? What had he never even considered about this family, with their endless foibles, their untouchable intellects?

Several minutes passed thus, and then, as suddenly as she’d stopped, Mummy started up again.

“Sherlock was born in January, on a Friday afternoon. I had a home birth, John, I cannot abide hospitals. Or crowds. Or people with their unbearable hovering. I had a doctor, and a midwife, and it was all quite above-board, you understand. Now, the nanny — what was that one’s name, Mycroft?”

“Ms. Miller, Mummy.”

“Ah yes, Ms. Miller — Amy, if I recall correctly. Well. She was not terribly bright, but Mycroft had grown rather fond of her and in my condition I was not in a position at the time to make any necessary changes. But apparently during the…ordeal of Sherlock’s birth, Mycroft had slipped away with his pack of Bakewell tarts and little friends. He was not in the house, nor the stables, nor the groundskeeper’s cottage. It was a terrible winter, John.”

In the side mirror, John watched Mycroft stare resolutely out his window as if he heard none of it.

“Anyway,” Mummy continued, “the driver eventually found him in the garage, quite frozen and utterly inconsolable because he’d lost his bear in that ghastly weather. We decided that in this state he shouldn’t meet his brother yet, so the staff got him cleaned up and warmed up and as calm as they could manage, while I called the seamstress in town to ask for a special favour, and could she be quite quick about it? She could, and the next day my mother dragged Mycroft in to meet Sherlock.”

Mummy stopped speaking again to rummage through a purse. She made a triumphant sound of discovery, and then John felt a fluttering at his shoulder. John craned his neck a bit to find himself presented with a faded photograph, and he took it.

It was Mycroft, a chubby child dressed precisely like Christopher Robin. He was perched on an overstuffed sofa with an orange and red bundle in his arms, legs dangling above the floor. He looked enraptured, unaware of the gaze of the camera.

“He said to me, ‘Mummy, this is just a baby in a Pooh suit,’ and I said, ‘Yes, my darling, that’s your brother, Sherlock. You’re to take care of him,’ and he was such a funny, stuffy little boy John, very serious but charming all the same. He simply said, ‘All right, Mummy,’ and then it was Sherlock he dragged about with him everywhere. They were quite inseparable, John. You’d never believe it now, but they were utterly devoted to each other.”

John imagined he could sense the tandem eyerolls Sherlock and Mycroft let loose.
“Mummy, I’m quite sure you’re boring the stuffing out of our guest,” Mycroft said.

“Not at all,” John said, sending a grin over his shoulder. “In fact, I do hope you brought more of
these lovely pictures, Mummy.”

“I did not know you were a man of cruelty, John,” Mycroft said.

“You see what I live with?” Sherlock put in.

“Oh hush up,” John said.

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The cottage Mummy had rented was nestled in a lush garden just south of Stornoway proper. While it was set away from other properties, the riot of flowers amid the stark Hebridean landscape kept at bay any sense of loneliness. Mummy got out as soon as Sherlock stopped the car and promptly disappeared into the kaleidoscope of colour.

“Oh God, John,” Sherlock whispered at him as they exited the car. “It’s quaint.”

“I am beside myself at the thought of burning some peat,” Mycroft said, popping open the boot. John came round to get his and Sherlock’s bags and directed a sour look up at Mycroft.

“I know you pride yourself on being the mature one here, but make no mistake: you’re just as bad as he is. You’re going to break your mother’s heart, Mycroft Holmes.”

A dull pink suffused Mycroft’s face and he opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“John!” Sherlock cried. “John, come quickly! I’m having an emergency!”

John pulled the bags out but dropped them at Mycroft’s feet before rounding the car. He found Sherlock frantically waving his mobile heavenward.

“John!” he wailed again.

“Sherlock, I’m right here, for Christ’s sake. What is it?”

Sherlock whirled around, eyes wild and wide, and he shoved his mobile into John’s face. John flinched back.

“John, I have no signal! I have no signal, John!”

“Oh, come off it, you prat. Who are you going to text anyway? Mycroft and I are both here.”

Sherlock looked scandalised.

“I never text Mycroft! And what if Lestrade has a case? What if I need my email? What if I need to know the weather? What if I —”

“Sherlock.” John hesitated only a moment before setting his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and giving him a squeeze. Sherlock blinked, and the frenetic haze in his eye cleared as he focused, hawklike, on John. John swallowed, and let his hand slide onto the warm bare flesh of Sherlock’s neck to steady him. “Lestrade knows we’re on holiday and can handle less than a week’s worth of inspecting without you. Your email will be, as usual, full of would-be clients who want you to solve the mystery of their cheating spouse or suspicious neighbour or disappearing handkerchief,
and those can wait too. If you need to know the weather, look out the window. If you need to know something else, you have at your disposal three different people with three different specialities. You will survive without that thing, and you will be civil to your arse of a brother, and you will give your mother the best damn birthday she’s ever had, do you hear me?”

Sherlock jerked his head in a single nod. John stepped back, arms falling to his side. He flexed the hand warmed on Sherlock’s neck.

“Good,” he said. “Now get your bag, I’m not your bloody valet.”

The cottage was a clean, modern affair with a touch of rustic sensibility in its decor. The ground floor boasted a kitchen with hardwood floors and gleaming appliances, a living room area complete with a discarded books library, wood-burning stove and pile of peat, and a roomy bedroom with lots of light, a heavy four-poster queen bed, and its own en suite.

“That’s mine,” Mummy said. “I’ll be doing enough roving about without adding stairs to the mix at the end of the day. Let’s go see what’s upstairs, then.”

The first floor had three bedrooms and a sprawling shared bath with a copper tub, toilet, bidet and shower. Upon beholding it, John declared he’d be sleeping there and threw down his duffle. Mummy laughed and patted his arm.

“Oh, aren’t you funny?” she said. “Sherlock has such good taste.” She led him out with an arm through his elbow, and John caught the tail end of an exchange of facial acrobatics between Sherlock (a self-satisfied smirk) and Mycroft (a repulsed grimace).

The first door they opened revealed a cozy bedroom done in greens and blues. It had a king-sized bed — for one definition of it. It seemed excessively short. Of course, Sherlock had to crow.

“Perhaps we are amongst your people, John!”

“I’ll brain you.”

“Don’t mock your lover so, Sherlock, it erodes the relationship over time,” Mummy said, a note of disappointment in her voice.

“Sorry, Mummy.”

“Don’t apologise to me, darling,” she said, and blinked up at him expectantly.

John had to stifle the giggle that threatened to bubble up. He resolutely avoided the look of banked glee on Mycroft’s face as Sherlock turned to him, cheeks flushed, and said, “I’m sorry, John. I respect you immensely.”

John’s heart hammered. He had expected Sherlock’s regular shamming — but what he just heard was the truth, and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He could feel Mummy’s gaze on him. He took Sherlock’s hand and squeezed it once.

“It’s no bother,” he said gruffly. “Let’s take a look at the rest, eh?”

The next bedroom was gigantic, its three sets of bunk beds decorated in shades of purple. It had its own en suite as well.

“Mycroft stays in here!” Sherlock said.
“Moving right along,” Mycroft said, and pushed open the last door.

It was a medium-sized room done in pastels, this time with two standard double beds, also short, in either corner. Mycroft set his case down.

“This will do nicely, Mummy,” he said. Mummy raised herself up on her toes, and Mycroft bent down so she could place a kiss on his cheek.

“I’m going to go downstairs and take a look at the map now that we can spread it out on the table,” she said. “We can plan our itinerary once you’re all settled.”

Sherlock turned to follow her down the stairs, but Mycroft pulled him back with a lilting, “Oh brother, dear.”

Sherlock whipped around and scowled.

“What?” he said. Mycroft merely raised an eyebrow. Sherlock huffed but went inside, dragging John along by the elbow. Mycroft closed the door behind them and produced from his case a book of recipes.

“Tomorrow night, John, is Mummy’s actual birthday,” Mycroft said, opening the book and laying it on his bed as if it contained the schematics for his next high-security covert plan. “I will divert her for a few hours in the early evening, upon which time you and Sherlock will pick one of these puddings and make it for her. Sherlock knows what she favours.”

Sherlock shouldered Mycroft out of the way and paged rapid-fire through the recipes.

“Here,” he said, stabbing a finger into a picture of a flourless chocolate torte. “And we’ll garnish it with strawberries and cream.”

“Very good,” Mycroft said. He snapped the book shut and handed it to John. “You’ll keep that in your room, and you’ll keep him from slithering his way into mine.”

“Oh, as if you have anything in here I could possibly want,” Sherlock said, jerking his chin towards Mycroft’s case. “What’s that, fourteen three-piece suits and your girlfriend, Brolly McBrollersons?”

John tried not to snort. He really did. Mycroft sneered.

“One of England’s great minds, reduced to schoolyard taunts,” Mycroft said. “Leave me in here to weep for the future.” With that, Sherlock and John were ejected from Mycroft’s room and the door shut and locked behind them.

John found himself crowded against Sherlock’s deceptive bulk in the narrow corridor. He cleared his throat.

“I’ll just take off my coat and decompress a bit, I think.”

Sherlock’s gaze was one that put most people off. John had been weathering it well for the tenure of their friendship, but he suddenly felt the urge to squirm under its intensity.

“I’ll join you,” Sherlock said.

John surveyed the room as Sherlock set his case on the floor by the left side of the bed. King-sized or not, things were going to be… cozy.
“Hell,” John muttered, and Sherlock looked up from pouting at his phone.

“Don’t fret, John,” he said. “I’m sure I can sleep diagonally.”

John groaned as he peeled his jacket off.

“You’re going to be a night octopus, aren’t you? Of course you are, what else did I expect?”

“I’ll have you know I’m a very pleasant bedmate,” Sherlock said, tipping up his nose and smoothing down his shirt. John snorted and flung himself backwards into the bed. Sherlock startled, looking like nothing so much as a spooked peacock.

“I’d like whoever told you that to send me a memo, in triplicate, signed in blood.”

“You’ll learn for yourself soon enough,” Sherlock said. His lower lip was threatening to protrude.

“Oh, don’t look like that,” John said. He thumped the empty space next to him. “Come here, then.”

Sherlock eyed him with suspicion before divesting himself of his coat and scarf and clambering into bed, only to lie beside John woodenly. John shifted enough to take in his profile — that weak jaw, that straight, rising nose, the sweep of dark lashes framing moonlight eyes. Sherlock was certainly a dramatic sight, John had to give him that.

“So who’d you ever share a bed with, then?” he asked. Irene Adler? Boys in public school? Whomever he had tolerated during his junkie days? John had always wanted to know, and now his heart clattered frantically against his ribs. He tried to regulate his breathing, but he knew he’d probably given Sherlock a hundred tells already. But Sherlock kept staring at the ceiling, not speaking. Long moments passed and John thought about just going down for a kip, but finally Sherlock’s lips parted and his voice came rumbling out, dark and deep.

“There was a boy my second year at uni. A young man, really — he was a bit older than I. Victor Trevor. He was — horror of horrors! — a literature student.” Sherlock let out a laugh, eyes soft with the memory of some long ago boy. After a moment, the smile faded into a shadow. “He loved me. I never did find out why.”

They were silent for a bit before John ventured further.

“What happened?”

Sherlock rolled to a seated position and presented his back to John.

“His father,” he said. He got to his feet and scrubbed his hands through his hair. John sat up.

“Sherlock.”

“It was a long time ago, John. Don’t delude yourself into believing I’ve been nursing a broken heart all these years. It was… data.”

Sherlock disappeared without even a clatter of the door, and John was left with nothing but heaviness settling into his chest.

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Turns out, Mummy already had an itinerary in mind, including booked accommodation on the Isle of Harris in two days’ time and a boat trip to other islands departing from Harris’s southerly coast.
“A bit ambitious for five days, I suppose, but I think we’re up for it,” she’d said with a flutter of her hand over the map. “Just a light day today, though, I wouldn’t want to exhaust you poor lambs.”

So, after a bit of a rest, they changed into outdoors clothes — or what passed for it for the likes of Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes — packed lunches and picnicking supplies and off they went up the northeastern coast of Lewis towards Tolsta Head.

“What could this possibly mean, ‘Bridge to Nowhere?’” Sherlock said, waving the map in John’s face. Mycroft had commandeered the car this time, and Sherlock was stuffed into the backseat with John. John swiped at the map and levelled a look of consternation in his direction.

“You realise when you shove it up my nose like that I can’t actually read it, right?”

“John, it makes no sense. Why would anyone build a bridge if it weren’t going anywhere? Inefficient. Preposterous.”

John took the map and smoothed it out to see what Sherlock was bleating on about. Just north of Tolsta Head, the map marked this “Bridge to Nowhere” with a little red star. He inspected the rest of the island — standing stones every time one opened one’s eyes, apparently — until Sherlock brayed out an impatient grunt and he had to hand the map back to him.

“Can’t you just let go a bit?” John asked softly. “Enjoy the discovery and revelation of things, instead of trying to logic them into oblivion before you ever encounter them?”

Sherlock looked up from trying to set the map on fire with his thoughts. John fancied that his hair rose up around him in a frazzled cloud electrified by pique. He tamped out the urge to smooth it down.

“Just — switch off for a bit,” he went on. “You’re on holiday in one of the most beautiful places on earth. Enjoy yourself, Sherlock.”

At that, Sherlock’s mouth tightened and went bloodless. John experienced a distinct sinking sensation behind his ribs.

“Of course to a pedestrian mind, enjoying oneself is synonymous with not thinking at all. I apologise most sincerely for having forgotten my place when keeping the company of the lowest common denominator. It won’t happen again.”

“Sherlock!” Mummy snapped. “Apologise now!”

“I am not a child! I will not be treated like one!”

“Good lord,” John heard Mycroft mutter.

“It’s fine,” John said, raising his voice. And, lowering it again for an audience of one, “Sherlock. I’m the one who’s sorry, okay? I’m sorry.” And he was. He knew better than to rubbish the intellect of the most intelligent man he’d ever met. Sherlock couldn’t help the way his mind worked — or the way that had made him a pariah. That frenetic, infuriating, glorious, gorgeous mind had been, at times, his only solace. On impulse, John reached over and squeezed the lean muscle of Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock blinked at him before turning away to stare out the window. A moment later, his hand came down and rested on John’s.
The coastal landscape of the Isle of Lewis passed peacefully as Mycroft navigated the single-lane B895. It was a riot of contradictions: rolling hills lush and green; severe cliff faces; sands in black and white, rocky and smooth; the waters of the Minch as blue and depthless as summer’s twilight sky. There were hardly even any other cars to interrupt the scenery. Definitely sheep, though. The occasional goat.

They reached Tolsta Head in less than half an hour, which surprised John.

“The island is quite small,” Mycroft said as he parked the car on a promontory. John only twisted his lips in reply. While he had become accustomed to Sherlock reading his mind, he was not sure he’d ever be able to stomach the same from Mycroft.

Sherlock was out of the car like a shot and scurrying down the embankment before even saying anything. The lush hill gave way abruptly to a steep drop, and five metres below them stretched rocky crags and a long beach for as far as John could see. The sun shone, glittering along the gentle waters of the Minch and mediating the chill lingering in the air. It smelled fresh, of salt and sea and unspoiled things.

“Better follow Himself,” Mummy said with a nod to Sherlock’s shrinking figure approaching the water. “Mycroft and I can take care of lunch.” She waved away his protests.

By the time John got down there, Sherlock had divested himself of his trousers, socks, and shoes and discarded them in the sand to wade out into the water and scale a gigantic rock formation that jutted proudly into the air. Thankfully he had worn a pair of swimming trunks as per Mummy’s orders. John was certain they must have cost a small fortune to fit as they did, though at first glance they were the most nondescript, inoffensive pair of swim shorts he had ever seen, black and plain. Sherlock on the rock cut a dashing figure, lit by the sun, hair whipping wildly to one side in the wind, staring off into the horizon as if he were born to the sea and still longed for it. John fumbled for his phone to take a picture.

He took five. He’d have to make a photo album, he decided, and entitle it, “Sherlock Looking Dramatic, 2014.” John snorted.

“Come up, John!”

“You’re the one likes climbing things, Sherlock, not me.”

“But you can see the gannets dive bombing for fish! They can hit the water at sixty miles an hour!”

“Believe me, I can see them from here.”

Look Sherlock, he wanted to say. Look at you just enjoying this. John wanted to stand back and admire the rare sight of Sherlock tranquil. Sherlock with his face tipped up to the sun, his skinny white legs with their sparse smattering of black hair exposed to the open air, the muscles in his shoulders and arms lax in contentment. John knew it wouldn’t last, but he wanted to savour it nonetheless.

John took off his own jeans and felt a bit foolish — bright blue Sainsbury’s swim shorts indeed. He went up to where the water lapped at the sand and waded in to stand by Sherlock’s rock. The water was perfectly clear, a bit too cold for comfort, but the shock of it settled something unnamed and riotous in his blood.

He and Sherlock watched the gannets soar in the middle distance. They watched them drop, wings tucked against bodies, and spin sharply into the Minch, only to rise again, triumphant.
Lunch passed pleasantly. Mummy seemed to know an inordinate amount of information about gannets, and at one point Mycroft and Sherlock diverted their verbal hostility into a battle of squirting sunblock which resulted in an unfortunate sunblock-in-eye “accident” for Sherlock, but altogether they passed a few hours at Tolsta Head just talking about fuck-all and wandering up and down the beach. Sherlock climbed every rock he could, until his hands and knees were red and abraded, occasionally beading up blood. John tutted over them, but Sherlock didn’t even seem to notice. John felt no particular urge to go anywhere — he wanted to preserve this outing forever, as if by closing his eyes and listening to the Minch and knowing Sherlock was near and not going anywhere ever again he could stop the steady passage of time. But Sherlock had gone antsy, and when Mummy mentioned the Bridge to Nowhere, he was halfway up the hill to the car before anyone else could even shake the sand from the blanket.

“We must stop to look at Caisteal a’ Mhorair first though, darling,” Mummy said when she, Mycroft, and John got to the car. Sherlock had somehow clothed himself in his usual toffery and looked impeccable as ever. The only thing that gave him away was the colour in his cheeks and the salt-stiffness of his hair as the wind ruffled through it.

“Why are you speaking at me as if there are rocks in your mouth, Mummy?”

Mummy glared at him and he deflated.

“It’s one of the only proper castle ruins on Lewis,” she said. “A horrible man once sent his wife there to be imprisoned, can you imagine?”

Sherlock’s face lit up and John herded him into the backseat before he could accost his mother.

“A very long time ago,” John said firmly. He gave Sherlock a pointed look, and Sherlock rolled his eyes expansively.

When they got to Caisteal a’ Mhorair, they stood over it on a grassy headland. It barely looked like a manmade structure — like Sherlock’s many fingers of rock, the towers rose from the sands uneven and unwelcoming. It seemed as though time and the sea had weathered it down to its constituent parts. The tide was rising, lapping at its foundations.

“I’m going to climb it,” Sherlock said, and began to go down sideways. Mycroft caught him by the collar and hauled him up.

“If you want to solve the mystery of the Bridge to Nowhere, you will do no such thing,” he said. Sherlock shoved him away with a snarl. John stifled a groan. The very worst thing Mycroft could do was attempt to reverse psychologise his contrarian brother, and more than that, he should have known as much.

“On the autopsy report, my cause of death will just say: Holmes brothers,” John muttered, and though Mycroft and Sherlock blasted him with twin sour looks, Mummy favoured him with a smile that crinkled all the skin around her ocean-coloured eyes.

“I should like to find if there’s a way inside,” Mummy said, “but I’m afraid this one’s too much for me. I’d never get back up.”

“I’ll take you on my back, Mummy,” Sherlock said, and John almost melted at the sheer sentiment until Sherlock ruined it all and continued speaking. “Or John will — he was a soldier, you know. Practically a donkey.”
“No one is carrying anyone on his back, for God’s sake,” Mycroft said with a huff of exasperation.

“Oh don’t be silly,” Mummy said. “Anyone with eyes can see how John favours his right despite being sinister. His battle wound still pains him, yes?” And here she batted her eyes at him.

John cleared his throat. Had he been favouring his right side?

“Quite right, Mummy, well-spotted,” he said. “Especially in the damp.”

“And it’s damp out, Sherlock, really,” Mummy said. She turned back and headed towards the car. “Come along.”

Mycroft gave Sherlock one last look of disgust before following her, and the owlish expression Sherlock pinned on John didn’t stop him from reaching up and flicking his ear lobe.

“Ow!”

“Donkey indeed,” John said, and marched off to the car with Sherlock on his heels, calling his name.

The Bridge to Nowhere was not far at all from Caisteal a’ Mhorair. And sure enough, it was just a concrete bridge nestled in some flora. It was on a headland that overlooked the coastal sands down below. There was a plaque declaring it the only relic of Lord Leverhulme’s failed route from Tolsta Village to Ness. Down on the beach were some other people, caravanning. John could see them cracking cans of beer, reclining in beach chairs. Their voices and merriment carried all the way up to the Bridge to Nowhere. Mycroft sneered at the display, and John could tell Sherlock wished to do so as well but also wished never to be seen agreeing with his brother. John wondered if his face would break with the strain of it.

Mummy chided them. “Don’t be so elitist,” she said. “It takes all kinds, you know that. Where do you think I got you lot?”

Mycroft and Sherlock had never looked so much alike as when they were gaping at their mother in abject horror. John took a picture and wondered how much it would cost to get it blown up and framed for over the mantle. Perhaps he’d have a copy made for New Scotland Yard.

“Mummy…” Mycroft lowered his voice. “You told me my father was an MP.”

“And he worked very hard to earn his position.” Mummy’s eyes went soft and dreamy and just a touch filthy. “And in the garden. And on the grounds. And in my—”

“Yes, Mummy, thank you,” Sherlock said, mouth pinched into a moue of distaste.

“Please tell me Sherlock’s father was a travelling circus performer,” Mycroft said.

“No, of course he was, dear,” Mummy said.

“Don’t patronise me, Mother,” Mycroft grumbled.

“I’m going to follow this path,” John said in a raised voice. He had crossed the bridge, and beyond it there was a worn footpath that led around the summit. He was not three strides in before Sherlock matched his pace. He could hear Mycroft and Mummy following along behind them, speaking in low murmurs. Sherlock and John trudged along in companionable silence, their hands occasionally brushing. The path was narrow, and before them unspooled nothing but vast waters. The endless blue of the ocean made John feel free, almost as if it would take nothing to rise into
the sky and head towards the horizon. His hand brushed Sherlock’s again, and he wondered if he were really Peter in this scenario or if he were Wendy dragged along for the ride. There was something perpetually childlike in Sherlock, after all — and sometimes that wasn’t even an insult. On good days, he approached the world with a wonder John envied. And if anyone could defy the laws of physics and take to the sky, it would be Sherlock Holmes. He’d done it once before, after all.

“Don’t go brooding on me, John,” Sherlock said. The interruption broke John’s reverie and he glanced over. Sherlock was staring resolutely ahead, brows furrowed, mouth drawn downwards.

“What are you—”

“And don’t lie. It is not among your considerable skills.”

John’s mouth snapped shut, but Sherlock kept going.

“When you think about my… absence, your shoulders hunch by three degrees, your breathing becomes shallower, and you clench your left hand as well as your jaw. You might as well be broadcasting on BBC 1.”

John reflexively clenched his jaw. “Well, I can’t help it, and you don’t actually get to dictate my emotions or my expressions of them. I’m not having this row with you right now. We’ve had a lovely day, can you leave it there?”

John took Sherlock’s silence as acquiescence. They walked further, the white of the sand below stark against vivid blues and greens. The world looked like a painting. The world looked as if John could reach out and smear the oils, make it his own. He felt Sherlock’s hand nudge hesitantly against his, the spindly fingers unpracticed and fumbling.

John tangled their hands together and held on.

—

After dinner in town — Thai at Mummy’s insistence — Mummy suggested they take in the sunset from the porch of the cottage. The sun wouldn’t set properly until late evening, but the sky was shot with pink and orange and John did not mind the prospect of simply watching the colours churn overhead.

“I’ve heard you can see the aurora from here, sometimes,” Mummy said, settling into one of two rocking chairs with a cup of drinking chocolate. Mycroft lit a pair of midge-repelling torches on either side of the porch and then took the other rocker, which left John and Sherlock to sit beside each other on a wooden swing seat.

“We’re probably a bit early in the season for that,” Mycroft said.

“I used to make you boys exactly this drinking chocolate, do you remember?” she said. Her voice had taken on a faraway quality, as if she were not with them anymore. “Sherlock preferred a bit of malt in his, and Mycroft favoured a dash of cinnamon. My little boys.”

Sherlock slouched in the swing and sent it swaying with a kick more forceful than necessary. He had melted into John’s side and was clutching his own mug of drinking chocolate without having tasted it yet. Mummy had gone silent, and a glance at Mycroft showed him staring into the horizon, unreadable. His mug of chocolate steamed forgotten at his side. John’s arm was pinned uncomfortably by Sherlock’s weight, so he pulled it free and, after a split second’s pause, he settled it around Sherlock’s shoulders. Sherlock gave a low hum of satisfaction and burrowed closer.
Are you really a cuddler or are you shamming? John thought. He didn’t know what he would do in either scenario come bedtime. One spelled confusion all over, the other a curious disappointment, and the anticipation sparked a gathering dread. Something had to give tonight, and John suspected it was his entire sense of self.

The sun set slowly. Conversation meandered when it flowed at all, but the silent moments in between were peaceable and nourishing. Sherlock barely even fidgeted, and John wondered how long this reprieve would last.

“Tomorrow’s a big day,” Mummy announced as the sun disappeared and rendered the sky a deep indigo. The stars shone like they never did in London. Mummy stood and stretched, arms raised and back arched. “We ought to rest up well.” When she turned to enter the cottage, she shot John a saucy wink that inspired his ears to burn.

Upstairs, clothes shucked and clad only in his usual sleeping attire of t-shirt and underpants, John slid into bed beside Sherlock and said, “Your mum’s going to give me a heart attack.”

Sherlock’s eyes roved suspiciously over John’s chest as if he could deduce through sheer force of will the likelihood of its imminent explosion.

“She neither startled you nor stuffed you full of sweets, so I fail to see how—”

“She is a shameless flirt! And I’m pretty sure she told me with her eyes to wear you out with sex tonight so you’d sleep.”

Sherlock’s mouth shut and curled up in the corners.

“She likes you,” he said, pleased. “I knew she would. She has a weakness for your type.”

“My type?” John bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know,” Sherlock said, flapping his hand in John’s direction. “Sturdy hands callused from honest hard work, rugby shoulders and the calves to match, of a social class her awful mother would have called ‘unsuitable,’ competent, handsome, uncowable in the face of her… characteristic Holmesian peculiarity.” He produced a book out of nowhere and braced it against his pulled-up knees. He fixed his gaze upon its pages. “Your type.”

John forced his mouth to shut, but could not seem to stop staring. Sherlock wore no shirt, and though John suspected he slept in the nude back at the flat, he dearly hoped he’d seen fit to wear pants tonight. His buttermilk skin was interrupted here or there by moles, and he had little chest hair in a shade far lighter than what appeared on his head or limbs.

“Well.” He floundered for something to say. “I think I’d have been a lucky man if I’d been born forty years earlier.”

Sherlock glanced at him and favoured him with another small smile. John wished he had something to say about how lucky he felt now, to be not only alive but among the living, with Sherlock right here right now and nowhere else he’d rather be, but the words grew sticky and tangled before they even got to his tongue.

“My father was a post-grad in Biology at Cambridge,” Sherlock said. “She was over forty, and he fifteen years younger and from the West Country. A fling, she said, while she was lecturing there. He never knew about me. And Mycroft’s MP — the same story, I expect, though perhaps without the age difference. She liked short-lived affairs, and she liked shocking people. She wanted us, and she wanted to have us alone. But no matter what was ever said about her, she was a good mother,
John, you must not think otherwise.” Sherlock’s tone had taken on a note of pleading, though he was doing his damnedest to hide it under the usual veneer of forceful superciliousness.

“Of course she was,” John said. “I didn’t think for moment she was anything less.”

Sherlock held John’s gaze for a long while before discarding the book and slouching down into the bedding. He curled up on his side facing John.

“We’re right above her,” he whispered, then quirked an eyebrow. That startled a laugh from John.

“Oh no,” he said. “I refuse to sit here and make sex noises while your mother’s in the room below us.”

“She probably has an ear trumpet pressed to the wall in anticipation.”

John started giggling, and when that happened Sherlock could never keep it together either, so suddenly they were two grown men giggling under the covers in an overly short bed. John was dizzy with it, his vision blurred, his stomach sore, and before he knew what was happening Sherlock had slumped against him, his face mashed into John’s shoulder and his arm slung across John’s middle. They both breathed heavily, and John closed his eyes. Sherlock was too solid against him, his bony presence too… comforting. It made John forget that this whole trip was a moment out of time, that in a few days they’d go back to real life, real manic blood-spattered Technicolor life, and it would all have been a fantasy. The thought that all of this could dissipate like fog struck John in the solar plexus. Sherlock’s breath was too hot on his sensitised skin.

“So… what are your plans for my new profile?” John asked.

Sherlock didn’t respond for long moments, but at least the heavy breathing tapered off. Finally he pulled back and put pressure on John’s hip.

“Turn on your side,” he said.

“What are you—”

“This bed is too short, John, and I know you can’t appreciate what that’s like for people who fit into grown up clothes, but I have to curl up so I’ll go this way and you go that way and thus we’ll never fool your body into thinking it might do something appallingly homosexual.” With a shove, John was on his side and blinking into the dark. He felt Sherlock shifting beside him, and then a chill where his body heat used to be.

“Oi, I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up, I’m sleeping.” Sherlock’s voice was muffled, as if there were a pillow over his head.

“I’m just not…”

“I know what you’re not, John Watson,” Sherlock said, and it sounded so final, so much like the end of something good. John swallowed past the shame that had gathered thick at the base of his throat. There was no more talking.
A Very Happy Birthday

The Butt of Lewis was the northernmost point of the island, and that’s where they were headed this morning. They’d have to go northwest up the A857 and turn to the east to get all the way there, only to double back and take the A858 west to the middle of the island and the Callanish Standing Stones.

“Island infrastructure,” Mycroft said with disdain as he neatly avoided a sheep who had decided it needed to take a rest right in the middle of the road, approaching cars be damned. “ Couldn’t possibly get anywhere but in a roundabout manner so it takes all day and one can stop and speak to each neighbour about nothing along the way.”

“I suppose you know how it could be improved,” Mummy said.

“Of course,” Mycroft said with a scoff.

“And I suppose you think these people here should be grateful to you for knowing better than they do about their home, at which you are a guest.”

Mycroft clammed up, and John saw a placid smile overtake Mummy’s face as she turned to look out the window at the great crags that rose up on either side of the road. In the backseat, Sherlock was tucked into the door as far from John as he could get, poring over the map and pretending John wasn’t there at all.

“What are these pi looking things?” he said. He insinuated himself between the two front seats and tapped the map beside Mummy’s head. “See here? ‘Clach an truiseil,’ pi. ‘Steinacleit,’ pi. ‘Dun borve,’ pi. ‘Dun eisdein,’ pi.”

“It’s Gàidhlig, darling, not German. Don’t sound so… severe.”

“Mummy.”

“They’re not pi, Sherlock,” John said, “they’re the map’s symbol for standing stones. There are standing stones all over Lewis. There’s a whole key over there on the left, you know. Did… did you delete reading maps?”

Sherlock turned his head to stare at him as if he didn’t recognise him at all.

“That’s right,” Mummy said. “We’ll be seeing Callanish today, and won’t that be lovely? I’ve always wanted to see it.”

“What are standing stones?” Sherlock asked. Mycroft groaned and Mummy sighed.

“Jesus, Sherlock, did you delete standing stones?” John said.

“I delete things when they’re useless and taking up valuable real estate in my mind, don’t look at me like that,” Sherlock snapped. He yanked the map back and folded it up with quick, jerky movements.

“But I mean… Stonehenge? Does that ring any bells at all? It’s not even that far from London.”

“Sounds like a stupid hair band from the ’80s.”

“We visited when he was small, John,” Mummy said. “Back then a boy could climb all over it and
no pinched visitor’s centre employee would come scold him. Oh, I’ll send you the pictures, they’re so precious. He was pretending to be a dragon, remember Mycroft? It was during his King Arthur phase.”

“Are they just stones that stand?” Sherlock asked, tone snide. “What’s so marvellous about that that we should know where each of them is on this map?”

“Many of the stones are several tonnes, Sherlock,” Mycroft said, knuckles white on the steering wheel. He spoke as if his teeth were clenched shut. “They were erected thousands of years ago, and no one knows how. Is that good enough for you? Does it pass muster for your standards of map-making and what other people should find to be of interest?”

“You’re one to talk, you condescending foreskin.”

Mummy gasped, and John barked out Sherlock’s name.

“Oh, what?” Sherlock demanded. “I’m not permitted the same behaviour he permits in himself? I’ve never encountered another such bloody-minded hypocrite in my life, and it pains me, it pains me that I am forced to keep his company like this, that you lot act as if enduring the utter excrement he calls conversation is something I owe him. I tell the truth and I am deemed awful and shocking. I lie and it’s the same. What do you want from me, Mummy? John? What does anyone want from me?”

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mummy said, and John was horrified to hear the humidity in her voice, the edge of tears.

“Look what you’ve done!” Mycroft snapped.

“Stop it!” John said. “Just — just stop. God. Both of you, apologise to your mother right now — sincerely — or I swear I will tie you two together and leave you on the side of the road to be rescued by sheep farmers.”

“I did nothing wrong!” Sherlock said.

“You did everything wrong!” Mycroft said.

“You are both inconsiderate arseholes, how about that?” John said. “Sherlock, no one wants anything from you but a modicum of tact, Mycroft, you don’t get to complain that Sherlock is a superior prat because he learned it at your feet, and for God’s sake, it’s fine that Sherlock deleted standing stones because now we get to watch him see them for the first time and I’m bloody well looking forward to it, so everyone grow the hell up and act like civilised human beings!”

The silence that settled in the car was thunderous. Finally, John put on his Captain Watson voice and said, deadly low, “I’m waiting.”

“You have my apologies, Mummy,” Mycroft said quietly.

“I’m sorry, Mummy,” Sherlock said. She reached back between the seats and patted his knee. Mycroft’s hands gripped the steering wheel tighter.

The rest of the ride was silent and oppressive. When they reached the red lighthouse on the Butt of Lewis, John got out of the car and marched over the grass and straight onto the rocks that joined land to sea. Thirty metres below, waves crashed against cliff faces. Distantly, he heard Mycroft’s voice say, “Mummy, it’s not safe!” but he paid it no mind and soon there was a presence at his side. He looked over and found Mummy beside him at the precipice, peering down into the
“Do you want to know the essential difference between my two children, John?” she asked.

John shook his head — not a ‘no,’ but an expression of his confusion, his helplessness.

“Mycroft wants control,” Mummy said. “He will manipulate anything, no matter how small. He will trick you into eating something he’s decided you should have for breakfast, for example. It gets him nothing but the satisfaction of having done it. He has always been thus.

“Sherlock is simpler, John. Ever since he was born, all he’s wanted is to know everything. One day when he was, oh, eight perhaps, he realised he would never accomplish that. I don’t think he’s ever quite got over the disappointment.”

Mummy’s profile was softened by age, but John thought he could see Sherlock in her mouth and eyes, Mycroft in her nose and high forehead. Between the two of them, there seemed hardly anything left to be her own.

“Sherlock is mine, you see, John,” she went on. “Mycroft… has always belonged to the world. But Sherlock is mine. Mycroft resents what he perceives as favouritism; Sherlock envies Mycroft’s relative freedom from me.”

“Sherlock loves you,” John said without hesitation, and Mummy’s eyes flickered over him though she did not turn her head. She turned her gaze back to the horizon and tipped her face up to breathe deeply.

“Yes,” she said, “but you say that as if love is uncomplicated and straightforward.” She turned sea-green eyes on him, and he felt flayed, exposed. “Is that the way it is between the two of you?”

John’s breath caught. Uncomplicated and straightforward would never be how he described the relationship he had with Sherlock, but, at the same time, there was something simple about it. He had killed for Sherlock a day after meeting him, and he’d done it without hesitation. He had made a decision in that moment, and it was to tie his life to Sherlock’s. He’d never thought to look back, to regret it. Even stroppy, or smelly, or conducting experiments on him, Sherlock Holmes had become the north star in John’s sky, and following him was the simplest thing in the world.

“No,” he said, and cleared his throat. “But worth it.”

Mummy’s smile was small, curled, familiar. He was not twelve meters away on another rock, but at the sight of it John missed Sherlock fiercely. Mummy patted him on the shoulder and said, “You go on, dear.”

John traversed the juts of rock until he had crossed over to where Sherlock stood. He didn’t acknowledge John’s approach, but John gathered up all his nerve and came up close enough to lay his forehead on Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock startled at the contact, but did not shrug him off.

“I’m sorry,” John said.

“It’s not your fault Mycroft is a diseased urethra.”

John snorted — he’d have to start keeping a notebook of the names Sherlock called Mycroft. He ventured to put his hands lightly on Sherlock’s hips, and Sherlock stiffened.

“Not about that,” John said.
“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well. It’s no bother.”

John exhaled, feeling cleansed by the salt air.

“I like it here,” he said. “And I’m glad to be here with you, and your mother, and even Mycroft, when his mouth is shut.”

Sherlock hmphed. “If you hadn’t come I would pitch myself off this rock.”

John let his arms come around Sherlock’s narrow middle and he squeezed hard enough to expel the air from Sherlock’s lungs.

“Don’t say that,” he said. “Don’t ever say that.”

“John, I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it, I’m sorry.”

John nodded, but didn’t let go. Sherlock’s hands came to rest over John’s on his stomach.

“I like the rocks,” Sherlock said eventually. John smiled into Sherlock’s jacket.

“I know you do,” he said.

“And I like that Mycroft is nervous of heights.”

“Sherlock.”

“Not good?”

“It’s… it’s fine. Just don’t let your mother hear.”

Sherlock declared the blackhouse village on A858 “boring!” and used the opportunity of everyone else being occupied to commandeer the car.

“John’s in front!” he said when John, Mycroft, and Mummy came back to the parking lot.

“Oh, Sherlock, really,” Mycroft said, but dutifully sat behind the passenger’s seat when Mummy showed no sign of being perturbed.

“You’d probably have learned something, you know,” John said. “They’re very interesting.”

“They’re made of stone and straw, John. People lived in them until the 1970s. Without indoor plumbing.”

“Yes, and that’s interesting.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes before pulling out and making his way south.

“Dun Carloway Broch is next, darling,” Mummy said. “Don’t drive past it just because you don’t like it.”

“One can climb the broch,” Sherlock said. “That’s much better than playing looky-loo in hobbit
holes.”

John gaped at him.

“You’ve read *The Hobbit*?” he said faintly. “And you didn’t delete it?”

“I read *The Hobbit* to him when he was very young,” Mummy said. “He liked it very much. He used to believe it was the true story of medieval England.”

“Mummy!”

“Hush, dear, John is charmed.”

“I am, a bit.”

Sherlock pouted, but John could tell it was for show. He pulled away from the parking lot and made his way south.

Before John got the chance to settle in for the passing scenery, they were at the broch and Sherlock was saying he needed to stand at the top.

Dun Carloway Broch was a circular structure, once a fort, made of drystone and cutting a severe figure against the sky as they approached. The top had crumbled away, but what was left rose tall and imposing from the top of the hill. Once they parked, Sherlock was up the hill, coat flapping behind him, before John even got to the tiny welcome centre at the foot of the path. Inside, he stuffed a tenner into the donation box in case Sherlock did something horrid like steal a piece of the broch. He walked through the rather creepy animatronic introduction to the broch which showed how the people who lived here would have gone about their daily lives. At the other end, there were hats and magnets for sale. John gave the bored shopgirl a polite smile and left to trudge his way up the hill.

Mycroft was leaning against the south wall as Mummy aimed a camera at him.

“Make your face do something other than suck lemons, Mycroft, for God’s sake!” she shouted.

“That’s just my face!”

“You’re not too good for this, Mycroft Holmes! Now smile!”

John gave her a squeeze on the shoulder as he passed. He rounded the northwest wall to the entrance and saw Sherlock taking slow, deliberate steps up the sheer drystone. He was about halfway to the top, and the precarious position made John nervous. The broch was open air, but there was still a doorway he had to duck under to enter. Inside, he raised his voice.

“That’s quite high enough, Sherlock.”

Sherlock paused in his ascent and his razor gaze honed in on John from on high.

“You didn’t mind the rocks at the Butt of Lewis,” he said. “Those were much higher and so was the likelihood of death if one were to take a tumble.”

“Yeah, well, the rocks at the Butt of Lewis weren’t of questionable make and possibly about to crumble into the sea.”

At that, Sherlock simply held out his hand, and John was forcibly reminded of another time he reached up to Sherlock from down below. He felt his heart stumble, but Sherlock’s eyes were clear
and he wanted John with him. John swallowed and breathed through the calming of his heart before he pulled himself up to climb the broch.

He got to where Sherlock was, wind already strong enough to send his hair into disarray.

“Don’t worry, John,” he said. “Those Iron Age Scots didn’t do such a bad job.”

“There are a few loose stones,” John said. Sherlock just tilted one corner of his mouth up in half a smile.

“So don’t step on them and we’ll be golden,” he said.

They got to the top, where John could see for miles nothing but heather and grass and a glittering blue loch.

“Hello, Mummy,” Sherlock called out over the wind. Down on the grass, Mummy stepped backwards for a clear view and pulled the camera up to her eye.

“Put your arm around John!” she said.

Sherlock huffed. “Posed pictures are hideous,” he shouted, but slung an arm around John’s shoulders and made a sincere attempt to look dashing anyway. John slid his around Sherlock’s waist, smiled, and dropped it again when Mummy was done. John turned from the sprawl of Lewis’s natural wonders and looked up admiringly into Sherlock’s face.

“What?” Sherlock said, and John detected an imminent pout.

“Nothing,” John said. “Just — you’re a good son. At the end of the day.”

They stood for a moment there at the top, Sherlock’s hair whipping all around his face, the splendour of nature dazzling all around them, and all John could see was the depth of nameless colour in Sherlock’s eyes.

Then, “Let’s drop a rock on Mycroft’s head.”

“Sherlock!” John couldn’t hide the laugh that rose up. Sherlock’s own laugh, a low rumble like distant thunder, curled around the base of John’s spine.

“A little one,” Sherlock said, “a pebble.”

“Shhh, I’m going to choke to death, shhh.”

Sherlock held a tiny piece of the broch between his thumb and forefinger over the edge of the wall, other fingers pointed delicately upward as if he were taking tea at the palace.

“Don’t you dare!” John said even as he tried to stifle the giggles. Sherlock’s smile was big and lopsided, happiness stretching his face into a caricature of himself. It was more endearing than it should have been. It was honest.

Sherlock flicked the pebble, and it arced a respectable distance away from Mycroft. Mummy had come round, presumably to enter the broch, but Mycroft stayed where he was, eyes surveying all that spread out before him.

“The view’s much better from up here,” Sherlock called down.

“Yes, thank you,” Mycroft said, and made no move to shift his arse. Sherlock and John exchanged
a roll of their eyes.

John leaned his side against Sherlock’s and felt him lean back. It was warm, solid, and welcome as the wind stung John’s ears and turned the end of Sherlock’s nose red.

“My hair may never recover, John.”

“Don’t worry, dear, we’ll resuscitate it with the toffiest products at Harrod’s.”

“Oh shut up,” Sherlock said, soft and fond. He slipped his hand into John’s and John let him.

Sherlock caught sight of the Callanish Standing Stones before they were even close to the parking lot and lost his bloody mind. He was suddenly plastered against the window and firing off questions too fast for John to process.


“Sherlock, I’m trying to drive, for God’s sake!” Mycroft said.

John had the urge to grip Sherlock’s collar in order to keep him from opening his door and rolling out to take a run at the stones. He settled for taking hold of a sleeve.

“One minute, Sherlock,” he said. “Probably not even that.”

Sherlock made a stroppy, impatient sound. In the visitors’ parking lot, there were no other cars, and in the welcome centre there were only two employees: a pensioner at the helm of the gift shop, and a hapless English professor-type tidying up the attached café. Now that John thought of it, the broch had been the same.

“Mycroft,” John said, “did you do something so there wouldn’t be anyone else here?”

Mycroft raised his nose, smoothed his shirt down, and looked distinctly aristocratic as he favoured John with look of distaste.

“We told you, John,” he said primly. “Mummy dislikes crowds.”

“You’re a good boy,” Mummy said, linking her arm through his.

Sherlock had disappeared through the back of the gift shop. By the time John came through, Sherlock was leaping over the gate halfway up the hill to the stones. John took a moment to marvel at them while Sherlock stormed the cluster of them, tall and proud amid the grass and peat. The main event was an arrangement of thirteen oblong slabs rising upward in a circle. Fairy circles, John thought. When he was a boy and the world seemed only hostile and sharp, he used to wish the fairies would come take him away. They never had. The appearance of the stones, weathered and dotted with moss, still inspired a sense of wonder in him. Looking at them, he understood why tales of magic and fairy folk would persist. The stones and stories endured even as empires fell. They had before and they would again. John could appreciate that.

Sherlock had found the tallest stone, about five metres tall in the middle of the circle, and had pressed up against it, arms outstretched and curling round the sides as if hugging it would keep him from flying off the edge of the earth.
“Please tell me you’re not actively trying to knock that down,” John said as he approached.

“How much do you suppose this weighs, John?”

“I couldn’t possibly make a guess.”

Sherlock huffed. “Guessing is for children and idiots, John! Deduce!”

“For Christ’s sake! It’s not a regular shape, and I don’t know what kind of stone it’s made of or how dense that would be per cubic metre. I can’t make a deduction, and what’s more, I don’t care to. They’re beautiful, Sherlock, and they’re amazing. I just want to look at them.”

Sherlock glared at him with the one eye John could see, mashed as he was against the stone.

“Is that what beautiful, amazing things are for?”

“Oh come off it,” John said. He crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re amazing, fantastic, brilliant and beautiful, especially that bit between your ears. So go on, bright boy, tell me how much this thing weighs.”

Sherlock became a whirlwind of coat and hair and scarf around the stone, running his fingertips over its entire surface, reaching up as high as he could, knocking with a single knuckle here, pressing his ear there. John was content simply to watch him be in his element, the sight as magnificent as the view from Dun Carloway Broch or the Butt of Lewis or the Bridge to Nowhere. Then, abruptly, Sherlock dropped to his knees, head pressed to the base of the stone, nose in the peat, and was still. John furrowed his brow.

“Sherlock?”

“Shh.”

And then John saw the pink tip of Sherlock’s tongue extend from between his lips and make contact with the slab of rock. John wanted to laugh. John wanted to groan. John wanted to hug him so tight his bones ground together. Only Sherlock Holmes. John wouldn’t have it any other way. Behind him, he could hear approaching footfall, and then Mummy and Mycroft were there.

Sherlock stood with singular grace, looking for all the world like he hadn’t just crawled in the dirt to lick a rock. He narrowed the scope of his focus to John’s eyes.

“5.5 tonnes, with a margin of error of 6%,” he said. “I dislike error, but I cannot know how deeply it is embedded. These are some four thousand years old, did you know?”

“We read the plaque too, Sherlock,” Mycroft said, just as John said, “Brilliant. Extraordinary.”

“How did they do it, John?” Sherlock asked, wonder in his voice. “They must have been so clever.” He sounded so young that something in the vicinity of John’s heart twinged.

John could only shake his head. Without breaking eye contact, he took a step forward into Sherlock’s personal space and registered the quirk of Sherlock’s brows just before he rocked up on his toes and pressed a kiss into the corner of Sherlock’s mouth.

He heard the click of a camera and stepped back again. Sherlock’s lips parted and he blinked suddenly big eyes at him. John cleared his throat.

“Come on,” he said. He took Sherlock’s arm and led him to another stone. “Give me the grand
They took lunch in the café and listened to Mummy lecture on all the standing stones she’d seen in her travels — from Canada to Indonesia and everything in between. Sherlock was rapt. On the way back to Stornoway, Sherlock insisted they stop at each standing stone site listed on their map. None were as extensive and spectacular as Callanish — in fact some were only short, single stones half-sunk in boggy peat — but he seemed to be equally fascinated with all of them.

As they approached town in the late afternoon, Mycroft said, “Mummy, why don’t you take a rest and then I’ll drive you up to walk around Tiumpan Head? We can give Sherlock and John some—” He grimaced delicately. “—private time.”

Mummy made a strange, high pitched sound and turned around in her seat to grin at John.

“Of course, my dear, of course,” she said. “You mustn’t hold back on my account.”

John felt the tops of his ears blaze, and before he could say anything, Sherlock had cut in with, “Thank you, Mummy. John’s so middle class, you know.” John flicked his ear and Mummy sent him a soppy look.

“Oh, you must set a date, darling. I might not be around much longer, and I would so love to stand up for you.”

Sherlock looked indignant. “Don’t speak rubbish! We’ll never be rid of you.”

Mummy’s answering smile was enigmatic and strange — of a quality neither happy nor bitter. She turned back around to face the dash.

“Tick tock, darling,” she said.

As soon as Mummy and Mycroft were out the door to Tiumpan Head, Sherlock dug the cookbook out from John’s bedside table and tramped down the stairs with it.

“Are you really going to do that in those clothes?” John asked. “What’s that, Dolce & Gabbana, for Christ’s sake?”

“What else would you bake in?”

“Well, something not likely to cost my weight in paycheques. Those beachy clothes you were wearing yesterday, for one. You must have brought more.”

“And when we’re at the beach, I’ll wear them,” Sherlock said, eyeing John as if he were Anderson at a crime scene. He flung open the cupboard doors and tore through the stock, occasionally pitching a necessary ingredient in John’s direction. John lined it all up on the countertop: butter, eggs, vanilla, sugar, cocoa powder, and an avalanche of dark chocolate. Sherlock was still knocking around, yanking out appliances and pans and utensils and tools. When that was done, he whipped out a dark roast and began to fiddle with the coffee maker.

“Ta,” John said, “I wouldn’t mind a cup.”

“It’s for the recipe,” he said without looking up.
John sighed. “Right,” he said. “And you couldn’t possibly make any more than what it calls for.” Sherlock gave no response but to spoon coffee into the filter with more force than was strictly necessary.

John gave Sherlock a wide berth and bent over the recipe. It certainly looked decadent. He supposed that constitutional abstinence from food and sleep aside, the Holmeses were a decadent bunch. Only the finest, from socks to jets. He didn’t know where he fit into that, but suddenly a wedding ceremony brimming with excess unfurled in his mind, spills of lilies and orchids marking the path at some country estate with a ridiculous manor name and, at the end of it all, Sherlock in a bespoke suit and Mummy beaming beside him with tears in her eyes.

John shuddered and shook himself. In the moment he’d spent woolgathering, Sherlock had managed to toss sugar everywhere and break an egg on the floor without appearing to notice or care. Stifling a sigh, John grabbed a hand broom and a roll of paper towels and got to work.

“Sherlock,” he said.

A grunt.

“Sherlock, what are we going to do about this?”

“About what, John? I’m making the torte, you don’t have to do anything.”

John, on his hands and knees cleaning up Sherlock’s mess, snorted. He shook his head as he stood.

“I don’t mean about the torte,” he said. “I mean about the fact that your utterly lovely mother expects us to get married someday soon, and I don’t actually fancy breaking her heart and neither do you.”

Sherlock bent closer than he needed to before the food processor, into which he was now measuring out the cocoa and chocolate chips.

“Sherlock, don’t ignore me.”

“What do you want me to say, John?” Sherlock said then, voice ragged and low. He didn’t stand and chose instead to speak directly into the measuring cups. “I warned you not to come. I bribed you, I begged you. How did you expect it would go, that we would prance through some heather and make eyes at each other and then you could go back to your real life and never think of my mother again? No John — this is your doing. This was your choice.”

John clenched his jaw. “You’re asking me to keep up appearances for the rest of your mother’s life, Sherlock. More than that, you’ve all but run us to church already. That’s a tall bloody order and not the deal I agreed to.”

Sherlock straightened, but he did not turn around and he hunched his shoulders inward.

“Then we’ll break up. A few months from now, perhaps. Amicable, I’ll say, which is why you’re still at Baker Street. She’ll hate you forever for me, of course. Because I would not be able to, John.”

John’s throat suddenly tightened. He felt as if he were leading two lives, each with their own versions of the truth: one in which he was Sherlock’s best beloved, and another in which he was Sherlock’s steadfast friend. And yet as the former threatened to crumble under the weight of its own falsehood, he wasn’t sure if the latter would be able to withstand the resulting implosion. He wondered if they were two separate lives at all, or simply dependent strains of a single narrative he
had lost control of.

Sherlock poured steaming coffee into the food processor, and then added a generous amount to a mug which he slid to the side of the countertop. John swallowed and reached for it.

“Ta,” he said, voice rough.

Sherlock just shook his head and began to crack eggs into the bowl.

“What if — look, what if we just told her we’ve decided not to get married? That we’re happy with how things are now, and didn’t care to change it all for the sake of a meaningless piece of paper?”

“And when you get a girlfriend, John?” Sherlock asked. He fixed the cover to the food processor. “What about when you start writing about her in the blog, or when you decide to marry her and move away from Baker Street and me, hmm? What would we say to Mummy then?” He turned the appliance on with a vicious poke and the thick white noise of it filled the kitchen.

John wanted to press his face into the nape of Sherlock’s neck and tell him it hadn’t happened yet and it probably wouldn’t at the rate he was going, that he’d be at Sherlock’s side always, that nothing had to be different, even as he knew it was a lie. Everything was already different.

John didn’t do what he wanted. John threw his soiled paper towels into the rubbish bin and left the cottage through the back door.

—

The territory around the cottage lacked the drama of other parts of the island. It was moorlands, mostly flat and beige and without the interruption of cars or people. John saw a sheep or three. But, John supposed, he wasn’t away from Sherlock and the cottage for a photo opportunity.

John had kissed Sherlock today. Just a little. He wasn’t too arsed about it, frankly. It wasn’t as if he’d slipped him any tongue, and it wasn’t as if John had never kissed men on the cheek or something like that before. But the more John thought about it, the more he wished his friendship with Sherlock encompassed more contact, like the kind they’d been engaging in for Mummy’s sake the last couple days. And the more John thought about that, it occurred to him that he’d never desired that from someone who was only his friend before — not his best mate coming up through school, or any of the army lads with whom he shared bonds both terrible and wonderful, or even any of the women he had been friends with in uni or medical school. There was no friendship like Sherlock’s in John’s long history of being an amiable man who made good friends quickly. Up until now, John had not analysed that. He had not needed to. Sherlock was an extraordinary man, and John had known that the moment Sherlock had opened his mouth in that lab at Bart’s. Why should his friendship be anything less than extraordinary as well?

But it was suddenly not enough. Having got a taste of what it would be like to have the freedom to touch Sherlock — nothing lascivious, nothing scandalous — John found himself craving more. He wanted to sink into the sofa back at 221b and have the allowance to entangle himself with its permanent occupant. He wanted to run his fingers through Sherlock’s hair when it taunted him by being all shiny and curled. He wanted to take the smell of him deep into his lungs and hold it there. He even thought he might like to trace the severe lines of Sherlock’s face with his lips.

The wind blew harder. John pulled his jacket around himself tighter and picked up his pace. He wasn’t going anywhere in particular, but he wanted to get there faster.

All right, Watson, he thought. Moment of truth. There was no room in his head, with no one but
himself for company, to delude himself any longer. He thought about what it would be like to kiss Sherlock. Properly. With tongue, and maybe hands wandering towards rude places.

He’d have to tip his head up. He’d dated women taller than him before, though never for long, and never that much taller. There would be the suggestion of stubble, no matter how clean-shaven Sherlock kept himself. Sherlock’s hips would not align with his own. Sherlock’s mouth would be more cavernous, Sherlock’s hands cradling his face would be larger, Sherlock’s tongue would be more insistent. There would be no breasts, there would be the hard length of a cock digging into his stomach.

John jammed his hands into his jacket pockets. The fantasy didn’t exactly inspire a sudden and inappropriate public erection, but there was a warmth in his gut that wasn’t there before.

Okay, so you could kiss him, it would be fine. Doesn’t mean he wants to kiss you.

That was definitely true. For all John knew, the entire ‘boy at uni’ business had put him off such entanglements altogether. He’d said as much, both that first night at Angelo’s and last night before bed. And yet. Words did not match action, here. Sherlock loved to go on and on about how people were stupid and dull and love was a trick of the brain’s chemistry, but time and again he sought John’s opinions and praise, sabotaged John’s attempts at pulling women, and even, on occasion, swallowed his enormous, suffocating pride to pay John a compliment or tell him he appreciated his presence. There was no one else for whom Sherlock behaved this way. Not Mycroft, not Lestrade, not Mrs. Hudson. Mummy came close, John supposed, but the quality of his desire to please her seemed much simpler. Sherlock did not worry about his place in Mummy’s affections. Sherlock was not jealous of Mummy’s attentions on anyone else. Sherlock did not track Mummy’s movements with devouring eyes.

“Ah, hell,” John muttered.

It all seemed ridiculous now. Obvious, and didn’t that sound just like Sherlock Holmes, all derision and superiority? Both Sherlock and John had made their choices, and they had chosen each other. John was just slow on the uptake. He could only hope Sherlock was as well, but as soon as the thought entered his head he knew it was futile. Sherlock’s own desires would not be something he had failed to observe, analyse, deduce and tuck away into his brain with a clear label. John modified his hope: he hoped he had not been hurting Sherlock for too long.

John checked his watch. He should be heading back soon to make sure he was there before Mummy and Mycroft got back. He turned around, took a blast of wind to the face, and started back.

—

The cottage smelled heavenly when John slipped back in. John thought he might have made an obscene noise.

“Sherlock?” he called.

There was the sound of a herd of elephants descending the stairs, and then Sherlock appeared in the door attempting to look casual. The quick rise and fall of his chest underneath the fresh grey D & G shirt he’d slung on betrayed him.

“You shouldn’t wander off like that,” he snapped. “We have no mobile service, and what if I needed you?”

“What?” John asked. At Sherlock’s scowl, a smirk threatened to erupt from John’s face.
“Pouring the batter into the pan would have been easier!”

“And yet you managed, and beautifully, I imagine.” He moved past Sherlock into the living room and hung his coat up, Sherlock dogging his heels.

“What if Mummy had come back early? What if I’d cut off my thumb in a food processing accident? What if—”

“This is lovely, Sherlock,” John said. On the table Sherlock had laid out crisp linen tablecloth in aubergine. The torte, gorgeous, smooth, and symmetrical, was centred on a piece of fine china. Slices of strawberry and drizzles of condensed milk were arranged artfully on the torte and the plate, and a single white birthday candle marked the centre.

“Yes, well. You were no help.” Sherlock crossed his arms, mouth forming a perfect arch of displeasure.

“Needed a moment,” John said apologetically. He gestured at the display. “And look at this — you were better off. Surely if I’d have been here we’d have a lopsided pudding half on fire.”

“No,” Sherlock said.

“No?”

“No.”

“Right.” John scratched behind one ear and shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again. Sherlock just stared at him, not blinking. “Sherlock, listen, I…”

“I made the whipped cream,” Sherlock blurted, too loud. John’s mouth clicked shut. “It’s in the fridge. And Mycroft should be bringing takeaway, which Mummy will insist we eat before torte because she is so boring sometimes. Mummy dislikes amateur singing, so we will not subject her to some kind of horrid, dissonant spectacle. There will also be no gifts, unless you brought her something. Did you bring her something?”

“Er, no,” John said. He felt a bit of an arse for not doing so, because before he met her he couldn’t imagine what someone who had given life to Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes might like. He still didn’t know, in fact. Whatever it was, he was sure it was something he could not afford. Up until now he had planned to give her a belated gift once they were back in London by picking a photograph from the trip and having it touched up and framed.

“Excellent, you would have picked something common.”

“Sherlock.” John used his Captain Watson voice, which always seemed to do something to Sherlock. Sure enough, Sherlock’s lips parted and his tongue darted out to wet them.

“This trip was her gift, John,” Sherlock said. He straightened, gaze wandering off to somewhere in the vicinity of John’s left ear. “Now go get changed into something less…” He waved a hand around and pursed his lips. “Oatmeal.”

John trudged up the stairs castigating himself. Sherlock had taken one look at him and known. Had known, and stopped the verbal incontinence, and sent him upstairs to spare him the humiliation. It was nice of him, in a Sherlocky sort of way. What did John think was going to happen? That he’d declare himself to Sherlock and Sherlock would swoon into his arms and then what, they could go off to bed where John would miraculously know what to do when confronted with the male anatomy and off they’d go into their very own blood and intrigue-laden happily ever after?
shook his head. Lewis and the stones and the broch and the sea air had made him romantic and fanciful, had made him mistake Sherlock for someone else entirely. John was almost forty years old, and the fairies were never coming for him.

How thick did he have to be?

He changed into a fresh pair of dark-wash jeans, a navy dress shirt (from Marks & Sparks, thank you very much) and a casual waistcoat in grey. In the loo, he made sure his hair didn’t look like he’d just lost a fight to a rabid Hebridean sheepdog, then he dropped his arms to his sides, stood up straight and tall, squared his shoulders and looked himself in the eye.

“Enough now,” he said. “Get a hold of yourself.”

When he came back downstairs, he found Sherlock curled up small on the sofa reading one of the books from the shelves.

“How good?” he asked. He sat in a cushy chair to Sherlock’s left.

“This preposterous collection is mostly made up of hideous Mills & Boon books. There’s not even a birdwatching guide, John, really!”

John snorted. “So, what’s that then?”

Sherlock flipped it over and laid it on his chest so John could see the title. Island, by Alastair MacLeod. He’d read MacLeod before — his work was stark and creeping, its impact like a gentle tide: unnoted until it swept you away.

“Fiction,” Sherlock said with a scoff. “Short Canadian fiction, not even about this particular island, what’s the use? Fiction.”

“Oh, I don’t know, intellectual stimulation through exposure to great literature in the English language, a sense that human beings are connected no matter the time, place, class or creed, the knowledge that even as fiction obscures fact it tells truth?”

Sherlock clapped the book shut with one hand, eyes never wavering from John’s face.

“Aha,” he said. “This is your writerly ambition coming out to nip at my ankles, isn’t it? Tedious.”

John pressed his lips together and raised one shoulder in a shrug.

“Well, I’ll spare you the suspense, John,” Sherlock said, eyes going flinty and small. “You’re not a fiction writer. You’re barely a writer at all. You write mediocre nonfiction in a blog about someone else’s brilliance. Congratulations.”

John flattered himself that he didn’t twitch a single muscle and give away how much that hurt.

He forced a note of levity into his voice. “Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the craft,” he said. He held his hand out, and Sherlock set the book in his palm. “Someday I’ll be able to answer a pressing question about Prince Edward Island while you’re scrolling madly through your phone for the same.”

Sherlock had opened his mouth, no doubt to say something scathing for no reason, when they both heard Mycroft and Mummy coming up the path through the garden. They were up and on their feet in an instant.
“Should we yell surprise?” John whispered.

“God, John, why would anyone do that?”

“Well, I just—”

“Stop fidgeting! Just — look pleasant, or something.”

The door opened and Mummy stepped over the threshold. Her face lit up.

“Oh, boys!” She turned to look up at Mycroft, who smiled at her.

“Happy birthday, Mummy,” he said. She threw her arms around him and he stumbled, looking startled. His arms, full of Indian take-away, came up stiffly around her. John grinned as Mycroft grew more shellshocked the more Mummy kissed his face. Sherlock sent John a smug, sidelong look.

“My good boys,” Mummy said, and released Mycroft only to give Sherlock and John a turn. Mycroft disappeared into the kitchen, and there was the clink and clatter of him getting out the table settings. Finally Mummy eased back and took a seat before the torte, only to slide it off to the side of the table. “Come on then,” she said. “They promised this vindaloo would melt my face off, and I’m quite looking forward to it.”

They ate their dinners, complete with face-melting and the Indian beer to offset it. Sherlock sipped at his fussily until John put it out of its misery and took it away from him. Mummy told them about what she’d seen at Tiumpan Head, and what it was like as a child during the war, and how she used to put ribbons in Sherlock’s hair because it was so lovely. John was delighted and asked for pictures; Mycroft wasn’t even bothering to rein in his smirk; Sherlock looked sullen.

“It grieved me to cut his hair, John,” Mummy said, laying a hand over her heart. “Deeply.”

“He went around looking like a feral girl child half the time,” Mycroft said. “The things he’d get caught in it, John, you can’t imagine.”

“Mycroft is just jealous,” Sherlock said, “because I have things to be vain about whilst all he has is —” Sherlock’s mouth puckered sourly as he fluttered his hand in Mycroft’s direction. “That.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes. “Please,” he said. “Vanity is the preoccupation of lower minds.”

Sherlock leaned in and stage whispered into John’s ear. “Spoken just like a homely man.”

“All right, that’s enough,” Mummy said sharply. “It’s my birthday, and I don’t intend to spend it wishing I got two different sons in the genetic lottery. Or, better yet, daughters.”

Sherlock and Mycroft fell silent, and Mummy continued.

“I should like to take pudding on the porch,” she said. “Last night was pleasant, wasn’t it? And John, you simply must tell us some embarrassing tidbits about your childhood. Sherlock and Mycroft are about to expire of humiliation and you should be chivalrous and even the score.”

John chuckled. “I’ve a veritable goldmine of embarrassing tidbits,” he said. He met Sherlock’s eyes and smiled at the mutiny he saw there. “Don’t worry.”

They retired to the porch to watch the sky’s evening orange deepen again. John put his storytelling face on and, with comedy in mind, told the Holmeses about riding Harry’s hand me down pink
bicycle and walloping any neighbourhood boys who dared to mock him for it. He told them about being caught with lingerie adverts under his bed and having to do both his chores and Harry’s for a week, but still never telling their mum that the incriminating materials had been Harry’s, not his. He told them about Harry depantsing him in front of his entire class when he was thirteen and a little behind in the development department. He didn’t tell them about how his father, unemployed through the Thatcher years, would come home drunk and spend hours berating John, Harry, their mother, just to feel a little bit less powerless. He didn’t tell them about how Harry was found with one hand up the skirt of one of her schoolmates, and their father slapped her over and over until she was on the ground, where he kicked her, and how, at fifteen, that was the end of Harry ever living in the Watson house. He didn’t tell them anything he couldn’t spin to elicit laughs. Seeing the way Sherlock and Mycroft looked at him in the settling twilight, however, he wondered if he hadn’t given the game up anyway.

When it was time for bed, John sat on the edge of the mattress to take his shoes off. Sherlock was behind him unbuttoning his shirt.

“I could go sleep in the bunk bed room,” Sherlock said. John twisted round and gaped at him.

“What? Why?”

“Mummy doesn’t come up here,” he said. “And the beds are longer anyway. We don’t have to play at this any more than we already are.” He was bare-chested now, folding up his shirt and not looking at John.

“I made you uncomfortable earlier,” John said. “I’m sorry.”

Sherlock scoffed. “Hardly, John.”

“If you want to sleep in the bunk bed room, it’s fine. And if Mummy finds out, we’ll just tell her we had a bit of a domestic.”

Sherlock nodded and took his belt off. John turned back around before his eyes did anything insane like linger on the modest curve of Sherlock’s bum. Sherlock came around the bed to get to the door, and John, staring at the floor, couldn’t help but see that Sherlock was barefoot and absolutely riddled with blisters.

“Oi, Sherlock, what did I tell you about those shoes? We’re practically hiking, for God’s sake. Italian leather indeed.”

Sherlock paused and peered down at his feet. He flexed the bony toes upward. John sighed.

“Sit down and let me take care of them,” he said. He stood and fetched the first aid kit from the loo. He pulled a chair up to the bed and gestured for Sherlock to place a foot in his lap. “Do they hurt?” he asked.

“It’s better with the shoes off,” Sherlock said.

“Translation: ‘Yes John, they’re like flaming hot lances through my flesh, I only managed not to hobble all day long through pride and sheer bloody-mindedness.’”

Sherlock huffed and crossed his arms.

“I was fine!”
“Your feet are pulp, this is hideous.”

“Then don’t look at them!”

“Oh shut it.” John flushed the wounds on the left foot — one big oozing sore that overtook Sherlock’s achilles, and another smaller one just on the outside of the littlest toe — and then dabbed them with antiseptic cream. He put a bit of gauze over them and fixed it in place with surgical tape. He repeated the process on the right foot — four wounds at the achilles, little toe, first knuckle of the big toe, and up on the crest of the arch. When he was done, he gave the bony foot in his lap a pat to indicate he was done, and Sherlock drew it away. “All right?” John asked.

Sherlock met his eyes for the first time since dinner and gave a short nod. John decided to take it as Sherlock’s thanks.

“You won’t wear those tomorrow,” John said. “We’re mostly driving anyway, and there will be beaches, so just wear your sandals and bandages and you won’t do terrible things to yourself.”

Sherlock heaved out a great sigh and rolled his eyes. He got up and moved to the doorway, where he paused.

“Good night, John,” he said.

“Night, Sherlock.”

Sherlock shut the door behind him quietly. John felt like all the warmth in the room left with him. He grabbed a bunch of bandages and stuffed them into his case. He shucked his clothes and turned the light off. The smell of Sherlock lingered in the space beside him. He buried his face there and tried to get to sleep.
In the morning, Sherlock pitched a fit upon discovering that on the way down to the southerly tip of the Isle of Harris, they would not be taking a detour to the west of Lewis and a small dot marked “beehive dwellings.”

“Sherlock, look at the map,” Mummy said. “There aren’t even roads to it, and there’s nothing else around there we might like to see anyway.”

“Don’t you want to see what a perfect society looks like?” Sherlock said.

“Rest assured, Sherlock Holmes, there are bees where I live in Oxfordshire,” Mummy said, consonants crisp, and that sounded final. Sherlock slouched in the backseat, legs bent, knees up around the passenger’s seat headrest. John fastened his seat belt to keep from patting Sherlock on the knee.

“The drive from Lewis to Harris is supposed to be one of the most spectacular examples of natural beauty in the United Kingdom,” Mycroft said as he strapped himself into the driver’s seat. “And you’re going to miss it because you’re in a sulk.”

“It’s all natural beauty, and it’s all the same,” Sherlock said with a moan. “I’m going to die of a nature overdose.”

John didn’t stop himself this time — he reached over and gave Sherlock a squeeze right on his common fibular nerve, just above the knee. Sherlock yelped and sat up. He scowled at John and John scowled right back.

“You will find a way to carry on,” John said. Sherlock laid his head against the window with a thunk and they were on their way.

The islands were small, and the drive did not take long, though they meandered to see this or that, to marvel at the juxtaposition of mountains and coast, to take pictures, and to stop at shops where women sat fashioning hats and suit coats and handbags from gorgeous Harris tweed. One of the shops even had deerstalkers, and John waved one at Sherlock, who rolled his eyes. But John saw the little smile peeking out from the corner of his mouth nonetheless.

“Llama trekking,” Sherlock said in the car after Mummy was done singlehandedly paying the Tweed shop’s yearly mortgage. She’d bought several cashmere scarves in various tartans and no tweed to speak of. Before they got back in the car, she wrapped a navy and forest green one around John’s neck.

“Oh, Mummy, I couldn’t possibly,” John said, and she shushed him.

“Now this is a Watson tartan, John, though I’m sure you knew that. Oh, you look so handsome. Sherlock, isn’t he handsome?”

“Llama trekking, Mummy,” Sherlock said, and pointed to a star on the map not far from their current position. Mummy produced another scarf, this time a more delicate tartan in baby blue, beige and cream, and arranged it around Sherlock’s neck.

“We are not of the Scottish contingent of Holmeses, and they had no Holmes tartans in there anyway, but this is a Stewart and it quite suits your colouring, my dear.”
“Mummy—”

“No llama trekking, darling. I had Mycroft investigate it before our departure. It seems not to exist anymore — the map’s a bit out of date.”

“Oh.”

Mummy moved on to Mycroft and presented him with a bold green tartan striped with yellow.

“MacArthur,” he said, rubbing his thumb in the fringe. “Thank you, Mummy.” She reached up and cupped his cheek. John got into the backseat.

After lunch, they went back up to the main road, the A859, and took it south down the western coast to get to Leverburgh, where they had another cottage waiting for them on the outskirts of town. This one was more modest, a bit shabby even, but it had a westerly view of both ocean and mountain and John thought catching the sunset from this porch might actually make him weep.

“Not a single complaint, do you hear me?” John said when he and Sherlock got to their room. The paint job was decades old and chipping, the entire room was off-kilter, and the bed was short again and a standard double rather than a king. Mummy and Mycroft were in the room across the hall, where there were two standard single beds, and there was a tiny bathroom between the bedrooms. Downstairs was a single space comprised of a kitchen and a living room. Much of the living room was taken up by the wood burning stove in the middle of it. On either side of the wood burning stove there were a pair of collapsing sofas in burnt orange and a battered coffee table between them. The house was probably built a hundred years ago or more. John found it charming.

“I didn’t say a word,” Sherlock said. He shoved his case under the bed and then collapsed onto the mattress, which gave a great creek.

“Oh God, I hope that thing can handle two grown men,” John said. Sherlock bounced a little; the bed squeaked.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, and winked. “Just no ravishing me in the night.”

John’s face burned. It wouldn’t have done if John hadn’t been having Inappropriate Thoughts in exactly that direction, and knowing Sherlock would surely deduce as much only made it worse.

“Har har,” he said, and kicked his duffle under the bed too. He took a seat in the pink floral lady’s chair that stood off in the corner.

“So what’s the plan now?” he asked.

“There were some beaches with rocks,” Sherlock said. “I will go conquer them.”

John took out the map and unfolded it. There was not as much to see in Harris in comparison to Lewis, just a lot of beaches and the occasional standing stone. Maybe Mummy would want to go see this church on the southern tip. But beaches with rocks sounded good. God help him, watching Sherlock clamber up rocks sounded good.

“And—” John nodded at the bed.

Sherlock lost the contented look of a man dreaming of rocks and sat up.

“I can sleep on the floor, if—”
“Hey, no. No. If you’re not uncomfortable sharing a bed again, I’m not either. I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

Sherlock ran his hand through his hair. “You’ll be — yes. So will I.”

They shared a small, regretful smile. John was the first to look away.

“Okay.” He slapped his thighs and stood up. The top of his head almost reached the ceiling in here — Sherlock probably felt oppressed. “Well. I’m going to walk around the bay across the street a bit.” And then, before he could help himself, “Join me?”

Sherlock smiled, that funny, crooked, sincere thing, nodded, and slid into his sandals.

After changing and telling Mycroft and Mummy where they were going, Sherlock and John walked up the beach until there were no houses left dotting the coast. Sherlock was lecturing on the kinds of rock and sand one could find on Lewis and Harris, and the migration patterns of various birds that lived in the Hebrides, and how John should consider tailoring his clothes. He spoke expressively, sometimes using his hands to illustrate a point or emphasise something, and John walked along beside him, content simply to watch him in motion.

Eventually they reached a rocky alcove trimmed with a soft white beach. There was a huge outcropping of rock a metre or so into the water, and upon catching sight of it, Sherlock was off like a shot, clothes flying off and discarded in the sand.

“Come on, John!”

“You have to give me a second while I’m cleaning up after you!” John bent to gather Sherlock’s shirt, and then a few feet away his trousers, and then his sandals. He set them far from the line where water hit sand before divesting himself of his own clothes and placing them beside Sherlock’s. When he turned back around to head over, Sherlock was halfway up the rock and considering his next move. John waded in and scaled up behind Sherlock, ignoring the way the stone bit at his soles, his knees, his palms. At the top, they were two meters from the water, and before them stretched miles of pristine beach set against dark grey cliff faces and lush green grass. The water was blue-green and glittering under the late afternoon sun.

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John said.

“I know,” Sherlock said.

“What happened to ‘I’m going to overdose from nature?’”

“Doesn’t count if it’s the sea,” Sherlock said.

John looked up at him. His eyes matched the place where ocean met sky.

“You really did want to be a pirate, didn’t you?”

Sherlock’s mouth twisted in a sort of half smile, half grimace.

“Mycroft has been telling tales again,” he said.

“I liked the thought of it,” John said, turning back to the view. “Tiny Sherlock in a tricorne hat and eyepatch. Taking prisoners, finding treasure. It made you seem… sweet, before I knew you were capable of it.”
“I wanted to see everything,” Sherlock said. “In all my books, that’s how you did it — by earning your sea legs. By chasing knowledge and adventure no matter the obstacle. How could I not admire that, stuck in study after study with bloody **Mycroft** while Mummy was off lecturing on Physics? She took us with her every time she moved, but it was nothing like what Stevenson wrote, leaving behind everything you knew and discovering worlds you never dreamed of. It was just… a different study, in a different university town.”

The reality of Sherlock’s early life shifted askew and then righted itself in John’s mind. Not boarding school since age seven, as he might have imagined just a week ago, but a plummy education with personal tutors at the helm and only his brother, seven years older and unknowable, for company. It seemed… empty, in the most literal sense. Not like John and Harry living in each other’s armpits, coming out each other’s ears. A chill traveled up John’s spine at the thought of just how long Sherlock had been alone.

“I taught myself how to sail using only encyclopaedias,” Sherlock said. “I have never had the opportunity to try it on a real vessel.”

“I don’t really think that’s something you can do properly without actually having experienced it,” John said. He stepped closer to the very edge of the rock and peered north. “I think there are lessons on the Thames, though. For small boats, of course.”

“The Thames is not the sea, John,” Sherlock said. “It’s not the same. And ugh, the **Thames**.”

“Sherlock?”

“Hm.”

“Look over there, what’s that?”

Sherlock stepped up beside him and leaned over to look north. He squinted. He gasped.

“Caves, John,” he said. “Caves! We have to go in!”

“They look a bit blocked off,” John said. “And the water must be hip-high.”

“Psh. If one’s hip is where one’s knee should be.”

“Yes, all right, I’m short, I know. Give it a rest, you’re getting lazy.”

Sherlock smirked at him before climbing down the rock and darting up the beach. John sighed, climbed down gingerly, and picked up their things before following Sherlock towards the caves.

He did indeed have to climb over a series of rocks to get to the caves, which were narrow but deep and not actually connected to one another. He had peered into three of them before he found Sherlock again, sitting on a small ledge in the dark dangling his legs in the water. He looked up as John approached.

“There are all sorts of periwinkles,” he said, and John made sure to step lightly. “I suppose at high tide these fill up, and at low tide you might not get wet coming in at all.”

“They’re nice,” John said. He took a seat next to Sherlock, their sides pressed together in the cramped space. “If you’re not claustrophobic.”

“Nice,” Sherlock said. “What a damning adjective. No, John, these are… perfect.” He glanced at John before looking away again. “Look,” he said. “The water’s so clear I can count the hair on
your toes. And the sand is white and silky, and the gneiss has been smoothed by millions of years of erosion, and the periwinkles go about their business so quietly, and the sunlight comes in just so, and one can sit here and listen to the waves lap against the cliffs and never be seen by anyone else if one so wished. One can be alone with just one’s thoughts.” Sherlock bent to trail his fingers over the surface of the tranquil water. “And the company one wishes to keep.”

John’s heart was clattering wildly against his ribs. Sherlock was half-shrouded in shadows, a study in angles and luminosity.

“Sherlock,” John whispered. Sherlock raised his head to face him, and he was close enough that John could feel his breath on his lips.

“If you don’t want this, leave me in this cave right now.” The low timbre of Sherlock’s voice lit a fire around the base of John’s spine. John could only swallow.

Even though the cave was cool and a chill had raised the gooseflesh on John’s arms, all he felt when Sherlock pressed their mouths together was the spark of electricity, a gathering heat at the back of his neck. Sherlock’s lips were soft and full as vine-ripe fruit, and more succulent than John had let himself imagine. He nudged John’s mouth open and swept the tip of his tongue along John’s lower lip before catching it between his own. John let out a groan and cupped the back of Sherlock’s head to pull him closer. The kiss deepened, Sherlock yielding to John’s hunger with a tiny moan. At the touch of John’s tongue against Sherlock’s, Sherlock’s hands came up to frame John’s neck. John tangled his hands in Sherlock’s hair. Sherlock tasted like the ocean.

They lost time in the cave, in the push and pull of the kiss, in the rush of the ocean just outside. When they finally broke apart, John was hard and Sherlock was panting, but Sherlock stood shakily and said, “Come on. We’d better go. Water’s up over the ledge now.” John looked down to find his erection obscured by the way the water swelled his swim shorts. He’d been so caught up he hadn’t even noticed the rising of the tide.

“Jesus,” he muttered. Sherlock looked him over once — the usual sweep of his eyes from head to toe — before pressing John against the cave wall and taking his mouth again. John whimpered against the onslaught, cock rising helplessly against Sherlock’s thigh. He gripped Sherlock’s hair and kissed back as good as he got.

Sherlock tore himself away and pulled John out of the cave by his wrist. They climbed over the barricade of rocks as the water crested white with more frequency and force than it had before. Once they were on the beach, John ran to rescue their clothes from the approaching tide. He gave Sherlock’s back and shook his own out. He pulled his t-shirt and jacket on, but left off the jeans. Sherlock reclothed looked askew and waterlogged, hair a vertical tangle on one side of his head. John chuckled at the sight, and Sherlock, true to form, scowled. Too used to being the object of laughter instead of joy.

“What?”

“Nothing. You’re bloody adorable. I want to kiss you for hours.”

Sherlock’s expression transformed into something young and sheepish and pleased.

“I made the wrong deduction,” he said. “Back in Stornoway. Added up all your tells to the wrong sum. Stupid.”

“Hey, no.” John was hyperaware of the fact that they weren’t in a cave anymore, that, despite the isolation of this alcove, they were in fact out in the open. “You’re not stupid, how ridiculous.”
“I thought you were indicating to me that you found my advances repulsive. I thought you were —
disgusted. Angry.”

John stepped up into his space and tipped his head up to meet his eyes.

“Aren’t you glad your deductions led you wrong this time, then?”

Sherlock cracked a rueful smile.

“Miracles do happen,” he said. “Alert the press.”

John smiled up at him and wondered if he’d ever known what bone-deep happiness was before this
moment.

“I thought I was the one who’d offended you, you know,” he said.

“A pair of slack-jawed idiots,” Sherlock said. “I suppose we’re just like everyone else after all.”

“I don’t think so,” John said.

They took their time walking back down the beach, letting their hands brush along the way.

—

When they got back to the cottage, Mycroft was sitting alone on the porch with a glass of Scotch. He took one look at them and said, “I see congratulations are in order for the successful removal of your heads from your rears.”

“We’ll pass along the name of our surgeon so you can have a consultation,” Sherlock said, and John pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. Sherlock strode up the stairs to the front door, but Mycroft shot a hand out and stilled him.

“Mummy’s thinking,” he said. Sherlock stepped away from the door and turned his back to it. He exhaled, long and slow.

“Ah.”

Mycroft leaned over and produced two more glasses and a bottle of single malt John had never seen before called Abhainn Dearg.

“It’s local,” Mycroft said at the arch of Sherlock’s brow. “Made on Lewis.” He poured two fingers and gave the glass to John, and then a splash, which he gave to Sherlock.

“Oh, honestly!”

Mycroft sighed hard enough to blow leaves off trees and gave him a finger more. John took the seat next to Mycroft, and Sherlock the seat next to John. For a long while John just contemplated each sip of his whiskey. He counted the rare car that passed. Three in twenty minutes.

“So,” he said into the tension. “What does your mother think about?”

“The universe,” Sherlock and Mycroft said at the same time. John slouched back in his chair, feeling all the elation of the past hours evaporate.

After a while, Sherlock opened his mouth and took a breath.
“In the broadest sense,” he said. “Her work is in applied physics, of course, but she’s very
sensitive, and an unwilling atheist. The question theists order their lives around — how does one
act as a force of goodness in a world filled with arbitrary evil? — dogs her, John. It comes upon her
with no warning. Her mind spins with it, over and over, enough to make anyone sick. Enough to
make her disappear even as she stands before you, or to lose herself in a rage. Theists turn to God,
Mummy turns to science. It — it doesn’t help.”

“Funny, that neither should come up with satisfying answers,” Mycroft said.

“Neither is big enough on its own to encompass the breadth of the universe and the human
suffering within it,” Sherlock said, as if reciting something by rote.

“Mummy says that,” Mycroft said. “Science may show us the ways in which the universe orders
itself but it cannot explain the whys of it. And Mummy cannot find the face of God, though she
wishes she could.”

“The Holmeses were staunchly C of E all the way back to Elizabeth,” Sherlock says. “She was
alone.”

“Until us,” Mycroft said.

“Until us,” Sherlock said.

Mycroft drained his glass and stood.

“Come on,” he said. “You look…” He screwed his face into a funny little twist that recalled
nothing so much as Sherlock in a strop. “Passable. We’ll find dinner in town and bring Herself
back a take-away in case she’s eating tonight.”

They found a restaurant on the very dock they would be leaving from to go to St. Kilda tomorrow.
The Anchorage had a view of the bay and boasted fresh seafood caught in the Sound of Harris.
John ordered scallops only to find that there were two of them the size of his head and he could
barely finish his meal. Sherlock picked at a bit of fish and stole the chips off Mycroft’s plate of
scampi. John couldn’t believe they weren’t sniping at each other. It was an altogether pleasant
evening, if a little stilted.

After Mycroft ordered a steak and Guinness pie to take back to the cottage for Mummy, John
reached for the cheque. “Let me pay,” he said.

“John—”

“You’ve paid for this whole thing every step of the way, Mycroft,” John said. “Let me have this
and salvage the smallest measure of my dignity.”

Mycroft looked pained, as if trying to appear stoic as John shoved bamboo shoots under his
fingernails, but he let John have the cheque anyway.

“Come off it,” John said, and slid his credit card into the booklet.

“Thank you, John,” Mycroft said primly. He sent Sherlock a pointed look.

“I’ll thank him later,” Sherlock said with a sly curl of his lips. Mycroft’s expression curdled and
John saw Sherlock relish it.

“You’re vile,” he told Sherlock, letting a grin temper the words.
“It’s part of my charm,” Sherlock said.

“It’s really not,” Mycroft said.

John wanted to know if they’d be exiled all night if they got back to the cottage and Mummy were still having one of her episodes, but there was no politic way to ask that. Instead, he attempted to stem the toff slap-fight that was brewing and said, “So! Shall we get this meal to Mummy and then venture out again? I saw there’s an historic church at the southern tip of the island, if anyone’s interested in that.”

Two pairs of judging eyes turned on him. Well. At least they weren’t about to have their version of a public brawl anymore.

“We don’t visit churches, John,” Mycroft said.

“Unless it’s for a case,” Sherlock added.

“Ah. Sorry.”

“Mummy can’t abide them unless it’s for a funeral,” Mycroft said.

“Mummy likes funerals.”

“It soothes her to know there is an end.”

“Oh my God, stop,” John said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He barely caught himself before telling them they’d never seemed more like brothers than just now. Twin brothers, even. “All right, no churches, got it. We’ll just… watch the sunset.”

—

Back at the cottage, Mummy was finished thinking, as Mycroft and Sherlock called it, though she was more subdued than John was used to. She accepted the steak and Guinness pie with a kiss to John’s cheek, though she did nothing more than poke at it idly while she curled up in the corner of one of those broken couches and read a book. She did join them for the sunset, but tonight they took it in silence. When the sky turned colours so did its reflection in the water, and when the stars came out they sparkled twice over.

“Early morning tomorrow,” Mummy said when the sun was gone. She dropped a kiss to each of their crowns before retiring inside. “Do get some sleep, my dears.”

A chorus of well-wishes followed at her back. When the door was shut and the light in her bedroom came on, Mycroft stood to join her.

“Just… be quiet,” he said, preemptive exasperation colouring his voice.

“You be quiet in the bathroom,” Sherlock said, and Mycroft went back into the cottage with a roll of his eyes.

“I know your secret, Sherlock Holmes,” John said when they were alone.

Sherlock’s eyes glinted. “Oh do you?”

“Yep.”

“Well, don’t be shy, John.”
“You love your awful brother.”

Sherlock gaped.

“And he loves you,” John said.

“Take that back!”

John just laughed and laughed.

“I’m reconsidering my entire plan to debauch you tonight,” Sherlock said.

“Shush,” John said, and leaned over to kiss him. Sherlock hummed into John’s mouth and dragged John’s chair closer. Laughter bubbled up in John’s throat as their chairs collided, but Sherlock stole John’s breath and swept the tip of his tongue into his mouth. Sherlock drew away just as John’s lips closed over the perfect dip of his philtrum.

“Can you be quiet, John?” Sherlock whispered.

“God, yes,” John said.

Upstairs, Sherlock wanted to keep the table lamp on. “To see you properly,” he said. Kissing led to divesting led to Sherlock standing back and scrutinising John’s nudity like one of his crime scenes. John was not, as a rule, given to insecurity, but he was keenly aware of the sunburst scar on his shoulder, the lack of definition in his chest, the podgy bits that padded his belly and hips, his stumpy legs. Sherlock, on the other hand, was lean and angular all over. Sherlock like this seemed unreal, as if freed from marble by Michelangelo himself, while John was a lowly thing not fit to touch him. John swallowed and stood up tall — it was just Sherlock. Sherlock, who had singed his eyebrows in an experiment last week. Sherlock, who occasionally had the grace of a newborn fawn. Sherlock, who wanted John’s attention, all the time.

Sherlock’s his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

“Exquisite,” he said. John shuddered and reached out to wrap his hands around the jut of Sherlock’s hips. He tilted his head for another kiss and Sherlock obliged him, running his hands down his back until they rested on the swell of John’s arse. They were pressed close, John’s cock insistent on the whipcord muscle of Sherlock’s thigh. And while he was dimly aware that there were no breasts to touch, he felt as if he could be closer to Sherlock this way, as if there was nothing between them but pulse and desire. The hot length of Sherlock’s prick warmed the skin of John’s abdomen where it was trapped between them. It should have been strange. It should have sparked a touch of panic. John found it only pleasing — the sensation of it, of course, but also what it meant that he got to feel it — that Sherlock was with him in this moment, open and vulnerable and wanting him. John spread his legs to steady himself and pressed closer, kissed deeper.

“Sherlock—”

“Shhh. I’ve got you. Quiet, now.”

Sherlock bore John down onto the bed and laid himself half on top of him. He started at the bony orbit of John’s eye, mapping it with his lips. He moved his mouth over John’s forehead, down his nose, over each mandible and ear and down his neck. John stifled a moan at the touch of his lips to John’s pulse point, his suprasternal notch, his collarbones. He tried not to laugh at Sherlock’s interest in his armpits and elbows. He sighed at the attention paid his nipples, the tender inside of his wrists, his bellybutton. By the time Sherlock reached his prick, it was livid and aching, slicking John’s belly with pre-ejaculate fluid.
“Shh,” Sherlock said again. He took hold of John by the base of his cock and gave the exposed glans a firm lick. Sherlock choked off a groan of his own, eyelashes sweeping downward as his eyes closed, and then John’s cock was enveloped in a hot wet suction. He bobbed up and down with expert precision, tonguing John’s frenulum and pumping his shaft all the while. John’s breath went ragged and his eyes fluttered shut, but he forced them open again because he’d be damned if he was missing a moment of this.

John looked down to find Sherlock’s eyes blazing green and steady on his own. John’s mouth parted and he began to pant. He laid his hands lightly in Sherlock’s hair, fondled the curls, trailed his fingers down the sides of his face, traced his thumbs over sharp cheekbones. Sherlock’s gaze never wavered as he took John deeper. John felt the moment Sherlock’s throat contracted around the head of his prick. He swallowed back a shout and Sherlock increased his pace. John’s bollocks tightened along with the hot pressure at the base of his spine. John wanted to tell Sherlock he’d never seen anything so beautiful as Sherlock’s mouth round his prick, had never seen anything as beautiful as Sherlock full stop. He wanted to tell him how he looked in the sunlight on a rock, how he looked in shadow in a cave, how he looked when he was deducing clues rapid fire at an impossible crime scene. Wanted to tell him he was coming, coming, coming but all he did was gasp and clutch at Sherlock’s shoulders as Sherlock eased him through the aftershocks with steady hand and gentle mouth.

John came back to himself to find Sherlock pressing kisses into the chub at his stomach and wanking himself lazily.


Sherlock’s mouth tilted up in half a smile and he obliged, stretching himself out alongside John, legs tangled. John kissed him open-mouthed and deep, licked away the musk of himself where it lingered on Sherlock’s tongue. He drew his left hand down Sherlock’s chest, pausing to pass the pad of his thumb over a delicate pink nipple. Finally, he took hold of Sherlock’s cock, wet, flushed and long, filling his hand, and began to pump it with the long, firm strokes he favoured for himself. It was a bit strange from the other side, and his rhythm wasn’t quite the thing, but Sherlock’s breath shuddered out and his mouth dropped open anyway. John took it as an opportunity to kiss him again.

Long minutes passed like this, John feeling as if he could subsist on kisses alone, but his arm was growing tired. Eventually Sherlock’s mouth grew slack, and his eyes opened to meet John’s, half-lidded. John stilled his hand on Sherlock’s prick.

“This isn’t working for you,” he whispered against kiss-swollen lips. His heart felt as if it were deflating.

Sherlock gave a minute shrug. He got to his knees beside the bed and rummaged around in his case before sliding back in beside John, ginger in deference to the way the bed frame groaned. He handed John a black tube.

“You brought lube?” John whispered, a bit aghast.

“And condoms,” Sherlock whispered back.

“But… why?”

“Are you complaining?”

“Well, no, but it’s not as if I planned any of this. Did you—”
Sherlock shook his head and hushed him again, thumb brushing back and forth over his lips.

“Mummy snoops,” he said. “I told you that.”

“Oh.”

“Now could you please use that on me before my prick falls off?”

John punished his tone by scraping his teeth against Sherlock’s collarbones and eliciting a quavering breath. He squirted a bit of lube out into his hand and wrapped it around Sherlock’s penis. Sherlock stilled and eased it away.

“Oh, no,” he said, and John was saved from death by humiliation only by the way Sherlock’s expression seemed so hopeful and embarrassed at the same time. He let Sherlock guide his hand lower, until his fingertips rested behind his balls. Sherlock pulled one leg up to sling over John’s hip. “Okay?” he asked. John only nodded, pressed soft kisses to Sherlock’s mouth. An arse wasn’t so different, after all.

John trailed light fingertips up Sherlock’s perineum until he found the hot pucker of Sherlock’s hole, and Sherlock’s entire body shuddered at the first touch. Sherlock clutched at his hips and when the next kiss came, it came with the hard edge of Sherlock’s teeth. John rubbed Sherlock’s anus more firmly. Sherlock was practically buzzing in his arms, and when he began to rock back into John’s hand, John slipped the tip of his middle finger inside. Sherlock stilled, then shuddered and bore down until his arsehole sucked the rest of John’s finger into his body.

“Fuck,” John hissed, and Sherlock smothered a whimper in John’s chest. He was tight, so tight and hot around just one of John’s fingers. John’s prick made a valiant attempt at rejoining the proceedings, but John ignored it in favour of pushing his finger in and out of the smooth sleeve of Sherlock’s arse. Sherlock began to undulate and thrust, driving his prick against John’s stomach even as he drove John’s finger deeper inside himself. His breath on John’s chest was humid and quick, sometimes punctuated by teeth on his collarbone, tongue on his nipple.

When Sherlock’s squirming turned more desperate, John extricated himself and rolled them over so Sherlock was on his back and John was knelt between his legs. Sherlock looked up at him through sooty lashes, colour high and mouth abraded. He looked like something that belonged to John Watson.

John added more lube to his fingers, slung one of Sherlock’s knees over his shoulder, and pushed two fingers inside. Sherlock issued a choked off gasp and pulled his other knee up to expose himself further. Sherlock issued a choked off gasp and pulled his other knee up to expose himself further.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” John let himself say, as low as possible. Sherlock’s eyes rolled back and his jaw hung open. John began to fuck him in earnest, two fingers pistoning in and out too fast to see. Sherlock put his free hand over the head of his cock and began to yank, not gentle in the least. His bollocks were high and tight beneath his prick. Sherlock ground down hard into his hand, and when his whole torso flushed and he began to thrash, John deliberately hooked his fingers against Sherlock’s prostate over and over. Sherlock’s jaw came open impossibly further and he arched up, anus spasming around John’s fingers, just before a spurt of semen arced high into the air and splattered Sherlock’s own chest and face.

John eased him down as he went boneless. He kept up a slow stroke inside Sherlock’s hole, avoiding his prostate until finally Sherlock’s prick stopped twitching and his legs lay awkwardly akimbo. John pulled his fingers from Sherlock’s body slowly, and Sherlock sighed. Reached for him.
“Just let me clean up for a second,” John whispered. Sherlock made a small whining sound, and John shut him up with a kiss. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

He pulled on the only readily available garment — his swim shorts — and cracked open the door to make sure the corridor was free of any rogue brothers or mothers. It was, and he washed his hands in the loo. He looked himself in the eye. There was the face of a man who’d had sex with another man and enjoyed himself immensely. He grinned and winked at his reflection before returning to Sherlock with a wet washcloth in hand.

He wiped away the semen from Sherlock’s front, and then dabbed gently at the lube around his arse.

“All right?” he asked, and for his troubles he received a hum of satisfaction and an easy, cat-in-the-sun smile. John dropped the washcloth to the floor, turned out the light, and tumbled back into bed. The frame protested loudly, and they laughed. They quieted themselves with kissing.
Among the Puffins

The boat ride to St. Kilda was three hours long, private, and catered. Of course. Mummy sat out on the deck bundled up so thoroughly she looked like nothing but a puff of lambswool knitwear with a patrician nose. John had bullied Sherlock into a hat and gloves, and at his protests John simply said, “Just be glad I didn’t put a deerstalker on your head.”

When the boat finally approached the archipelago, Mummy stood at the railing rapt at the sight of sheer cliff faces rising out of the water, taller than anything else they’d seen on this trip and tipped by green.

“That’s a sea stack made of volcanic rock,” she said. “Stac Levenish, if I’m not mistaken.” She snapped picture after picture. “Did you know the only island to be inhabited was Hirta, and the highest its population ever got was one hundred and eighty? I used to read about it as a girl. I wanted to go tend sheep with them. Once, I made it all the way to Inverness by train before my nanny found me and told me no one lived on St. Kilda anymore. As if that were a deterrent.”

“You got to Inverness by yourself?” John asked. “How old were you?”

“It was a few years after the war,” Mummy said. “So, eight? Nine? Something like that.” She waved a hand. “It was so long ago, who can remember?”

“Mummy probably remembers the exact date and all her train times,” Mycroft said.

Mummy smiled, an enigmatic little quirk of the lips, and might have shrugged beneath all her layers.

“Papa terminated that nanny’s employment as soon as she delivered me home,” Mummy said. “A pity. She was so easy to slip away from.”

First on the itinerary was a by-sea tour of the sea stacks and the island of Boreray. Sherlock, John, and Mycroft joined Mummy at the railing. John tried to admire how Sherlock looked when gaping and struck dumb by disbelief as unobtrusively as he could manage, but he didn’t hold out much hope of not being rumbled with the company he kept. Mycroft wrested Mummy’s camera from her when it became obvious that she might experience the entire thing through its narrow lens.

“Just enjoy seeing them, Mummy,” he said quietly. “I’ll get the proper photographs.” The camera passed hands and John caught a glimpse of a grateful smile before she turned back to face the landscape she’d been dreaming of for seventy years.

Of course, she had a bit of trivia for each site.

“If one looks at Stac Levenish just so, one can make out the profile of a man’s face, do you see?” Stac Levenish was over sixty metres tall and did indeed look like the profile of a dour Englishman. It was impressive until the next sea stack came into view.

“Stac an Armin is over four hundred metres and the St. Kildans used to scale it to hunt seabirds and steal their eggs. They used gannet necks to fashion shoes for themselves. The last great auk ever to be seen in Britain was seen here.” It rose diagonally from the water, huge and majestic. John felt about the size of a thimble. Countless gannets circled lazily overhead.

“Stac Lee is white due to the droppings of 12,000 gannets.” Stac Lee was, in fact, white, and at some hundred and seventy metres, it looked like the stubby little brother of its immediate
neighbour, Stac an Armin. John felt a bit bad for it.

“Boreray is the smallest Scottish island to have a summit of over three hundred metres.” The island was indeed tiny, but it was verdant and dotted with sheep.

When they approached the dock at Hirta, Mummy began to speak but stopped abruptly, pressed a hand to her mouth, and then there were tears streaming down her cheeks. Mycroft and Sherlock averted their gazes. John stood there, feeling awkward. He wanted to take her into his arms, to berate her horrible sons, but he couldn’t be sure such a display wouldn’t be worse than the illusion of privacy they were giving her. In the end he simply stood closer to her and the four of them were silent as the boat docked.

Sherlock disembarked from the boat with long strides, not waiting as John and Mycroft picked up the prepared meals they’d have for lunch.

“I’ll handle these, John,” Mycroft said. He took the two containers from John’s grip and put them in a messenger bag. He wanted to stop and ask if Mycroft Holmes had ever deigned to carry a messenger bag before, but he supposed that was just Sherlock rubbing off on him. He jogged to catch up to the coattails flapping about up the road.

Sherlock didn’t slow his pace when John joined him, even to inspect all the ancient-looking stone structures, or row upon row of crumbling blackhouses. John’s slow jog was no match for Sherlock’s quick walk.

“Sherlock, stop. Sherlock!”

Sherlock did, then, and John almost smacked into him. He whirled around, cheeks blazing, eyes bright.

“What!” he snarled.

John’s mouth snapped shut. “I just don’t understand you,” he said after a moment’s pause.

Sherlock sneered. “I suggest you stop trying, John, you’ll strain something.” He tore his hat off, wrapped his coat tighter round himself and began to trudge along again, slowing his pace enough to let John walk beside him just when he didn’t want to anymore.

“You complete arse,” John said. “Who could put up with you?”

“No one’s asking you to!”

John felt a chill trickle down his spine that had little to do with the weather. He could see it so clearly: a holiday affair, tucked away and forgotten — deleted — by one participant back in London while haunting the other. This wasn’t real life, it was an island fling. In real life were cases and ordering John about and massive sulks. This was a dream, a fantasy, a moment suspended from time. John felt so bloody foolish, inserting himself not only into Sherlock’s bed, literally, but into a family he could never hope to compare to. They were a complete unit, odd as it was, and there was no room for him in it. They understood each other; John understood nothing.

John had never, in his civilian life or his military one, felt such a strong urge to flee. Where would he go, he wondered? Hirta was the size of his baby finger. Back to the boat, and the book he had been reading? It was probably locked up, its crew taking a respite on the island.

“I’ll be with your mother, then, since you obviously can’t stand to be around either of us.”
Sherlock whipped around and hauled John up by the collar of his jacket.

“Don’t you dare!” he said.

“Hey!” John shoved Sherlock away hard enough to make him stumble.

“Don’t you see, John? How she’s manipulating you?”

“For God’s sake, Sherlock, no one’s manipulating me! Oh, except you of course, but you’d see nothing wrong with that.”

“I’m manipulating you?” Sherlock’s tone had gone sharp and dangerous. “I? I don’t cry all over you to get you to give me a cuddle, but what do I expect from a man so susceptible to feminine wiles?”

“A cuddle? For fuck’s sake, if you think that was—” John clenched his jaw, his fists. He took a deep breath and let it out slow and controlled. “No. No, you don’t do that. You just drug me, terrorise me in a lab, and then make me watch you commit suicide.”

It wasn’t silent — how could it be, with hundreds of thousands of birds out over the water, with the ocean and the wind and the thunder of his own heart in his ears? But the moment that stretched between them felt heavy as silence, and John could not break away from the laser focus of Sherlock’s gaze, stricken and wide.

“When are you going to forgive me that, John?” Sherlock said. “It’s been a year. I’ve apologised. What more do you want from me?”

John was horrified to feel a stinging behind his eyes. He willed it away.

“It’s not — it’s not like that.”

“Be precise, John,” Sherlock snapped. “What is not like ‘that?’ And, pray tell, what is ‘that?’ Spare me the abstraction of modern expression, I cannot fathom it.”

“It’s not something that’s forgiven!” John shouted. The sound of it carried and echoed. It surprised him, and even Sherlock looked taken aback. Breathing hard, John quieted himself. “There are things people do to each other that go beyond concepts like that,” he said, tone modulated. “It’s not that I don’t forgive you, Sherlock, it’s that it was never something on a scale that can be balanced like that.”

“So that’s it,” Sherlock said. “You’ll always be bringing it up for as long as you deign to allow me to be a part of your life, and then one day when you’ve had enough of the difficult bloke with the pesky deducing habit, you’ll cut me loose with a ‘good riddance, at least I’ll never have to watch him save my life again.’”

Sherlock turned back around and stalked away from John. John’s mandibles were sore from grinding his teeth together. He flexed his hands and followed, pace quick. But Sherlock, with those damnable legs of his, could be quicker than John without even breaking into a jog. He followed without catching up all the way to another shoreline, only to find Sherlock stopped at the edge of a rocky promontory, surrounded by dozens of puffins and craning his neck to see them soaring all around him.

John came to a halt. All he had was the camera on his phone, but it would have to do. He took shot after shot. The puffins were gorgeous, graceful and full-bellied, their bills so bright against the stark black and white of their bodies, the grey of the volcanic rock. Shot after shot of puffins in the
perfect grace of flight, of Sherlock’s back and, occasionally, his profile. He wished he could see Sherlock’s face.

After long minutes just keeping the company of the puffins, John cleared his throat, but before he could say anything, Sherlock’s voice came, low and rumbly.

“I’ve never seen puffins before,” he said. “They’re too northerly, and they only come ashore to reproduce and tend their young. The season for it is prohibitively short. There’ll be eggs. Or pufflings already, perhaps.”

“We’re lucky they’re not attacking us, I suppose.”

“They wouldn’t. They won’t.”

John waited another short interval before he said, “I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t explain it right, and I’m sorry.”

Sherlock didn’t respond. He watched the puffins circle and dive, circle and dive. One landed beside him, and Sherlock went still and tense, hands clasped behind his back. He looked like an excited little boy trying not to spook a rabbit. John’s heart swelled. He took a picture.

“I said—”

“I heard what you said,” Sherlock said. His public school accent came out in full force. “One would think this would be the point at which one might explain oneself, instead of simply reiterating that one hadn’t done before.”

“Christ,” John muttered. Sherlock never made it easy. “What I meant was that it wasn’t something that required forgiveness. It was — it was a well-done thing, Sherlock. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt me so badly I thought I might never recover. You’re right though. I can’t keep throwing it in your face. I’ll try not to, from now on. But… but likewise, you can’t behave as if your coming back negated everything I went through. It still happened. It still hurt beyond the telling of it. It still affects me — and you.” Under the heading of Things They Did Not Discuss was the fact that Sherlock had new scars all over his body. That Sherlock spooked at loud noises, once in a while. That Sherlock slept more and ate more, but he was still thinner than John had ever known him to be. That Sherlock watched John more than he ever had before the fall, as if afraid that without a watchful eye, John might simply disappear. John had never heard the full story of what Sherlock had done to dismantle Moriarty’s network, but Sherlock wasn’t telling and John wasn’t sure he wanted to know anyway.

John wished Sherlock would say something. The puffin at his side had taken off, and he was back to staring out at the sea.

“There are almost three hundred thousand puffins in St. Kilda,” he said, and that wasn’t what John wanted to hear at all. “Mostly on the Isle of Dùn. There are more puffins here than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.”

“Sherlock.”

“I couldn’t bear it if you left, John.”

John’s heart was pounding. “You and me…”

“Please finish your sentences, John, really.”
John huffed. He came up closer to Sherlock and tugged on his arm. Sherlock seemed to have to force himself to meet John’s eyes.

“I need to know some things,” John said. “First, if… sleeping with me was some kind of means of getting me to stay with you. Second, if that’s not the case, is it something you want to continue like a normal relationship when we’re back in London, or if, you know, this was an… aberration for you.”

“I don’t sleep with people to get them do what I want, John.”

John raked his fingers through his hair and made a frustrated sound.

“No that’s— that’s not what I meant. I just meant, do you want me, in a romantic, sexual sense, or not? And beyond that, will you want me when we get back to London?”

Sherlock broke eye contact. More puffins were milling about in the grass some two metres away.

“I always want you,” he said after a long moment, smoky voice rumbling through John’s gut. “I try not to, John, but the sentiment you inspire resists all deterrents.”

John clutched at the fabric of Sherlock’s coat at the small of his back. He felt a relief so profound he thought he might swoon.

“It’s not the same for you,” Sherlock went on, eyes fixed on the horizon. “You see me like this, on best behaviour, in good lighting and the dramatic landscape with no women around but Mummy, and you think you can make a go of it with me. But you mistake this. You’re the one who won’t want me come tomorrow and London.”

“No,” John blurted, before he could even think of it. “I changed everything for you, Sherlock. Not just… not just last night. My whole life was something else, something dreary and lonely and bleak, and then you came in all flapping coat and seeing me and it was like everything was suddenly in colour. Maybe the nature of the whole thing just got through my thick skull these last few days, but it’s… it’s not new, Sherlock.” Upon uttering the words, John’s entire perception of the last few years shifted, and he knew. “You want to know why all my dates fail? It’s not the bloody websites.”

Sherlock huffed out a long-suffering sigh. “Please, regale me with tales about how I ruin everything, it’s been so long since I’ve heard any.”

“No, Sherlock,” he said. “It’s me, and the way I feel about you. I take these girls out and treat them how I treat you. How I — how I would treat you if I were ever to take you on a proper date. Deductions and vile stories and telling them how amazing my flatmate is. God, I can’t believe so many made it all the way to pudding.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

“No, you sod.”

Sherlock risked a sidelong glance at him. “I shan’t hold your hand at crime scenes,” he said.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“No twee pet names, and you are not my ‘boyfriend.’”

“Of course not.”
“And when we are old and have retired to keep bees at the seaside, we will not be hyphenating our names or adopting any stray cats unless one is a Siamese, or a Persian with one of those faces.”

“No Siamese or Persians, either.”

“Why not?”

“I’m allergic to cats, and besides, I find them hateful. If I wanted to come home to something that takes vengeful shits in my bed and treats me like rubbish, I’d go live with my mother.”

Sherlock snorted. “Allergies! I always miss something.”

John stepped closer and put his arms round Sherlock’s waist. He shoved his cold nose into Sherlock’s neck where his scarf didn’t cover him and breathed him deep. The scent of him, and the steady timekeeping of his pulse, soothed a knot that had locked up John’s diaphragm.

“Stop that,” Sherlock said, and manoeuvred John around so his back was pressed into Sherlock’s front. He pulled his coat together to envelop John up to the nose and squeezed him tight. Puffins pitched and circled before them, occasionally alighting on the grass nearby.

“Your mum was just happy, you know,” John said after a while. “I don’t know if this somehow escaped your staggering powers of observation, but the purpose of this entire trip was to come here. She sat out on the freezing, miserable deck waiting for these islands to come into view for three hours. She’s been waiting for this for a very long time, and she wanted to share it with you. You could try to be more generous. Your family may be eccentric, but at least they — care. You’re lucky.”

John rose and fell with the intake and expulsion of Sherlock’s breath.

“You don’t know her really, John,” he said.

“I suppose not.”

“She is not a harmless old lady.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Never forget that Mycroft emerged from her loins.”

“Yes, all right, thank you, I get it.”

“And this ‘eccentric’ menagerie is yours now too, so you can stop thinking about your abusive, layabout father and the mother who never lifted a finger to help.”

There was only one logical reaction: John laughed. He tried not to disturb the birds, but the ones standing about preening themselves scattered and flew up into the sky like doves from a cage.

—

They found Mummy and Mycroft sitting on cleits, which were small stone domes the St. Kildans had used for storage. There were hundreds of them overgrown with grass and peat as far as John could see on this side of the island. Sherlock shooed away some Soay sheep, sat beside Mummy, kissed her on the cheek and said, “Hello, Mummy. We saw the puffins.”

She gasped and clapped her hands together once. Some wrens flew out of the cleits around them at the sound.
“Were they just enchanting, darling?” she asked.

“Yes, Mummy,” Sherlock said, and looked at John with a big cockeyed smile. John stood over him and ran a hand through his curls, stiff though they were with the salt in the air. Mummy turned to him and her lips spread in her own peculiar little smile.

Mycroft stood and wiped the dirt from the seat of his trousers.

“Come on then,” he said. “Let’s take Mummy to see them.”

Mummy slid off the cleit she was perched on and waved Sherlock away. She took John’s arm and he led her through the minefield of rocks.

“Thank you for putting my son out of his misery, John,” she said when Sherlock and Mycroft were out of earshot.

John furrowed his brow. “I — what?”

“I knew you’d come round to my way of thinking.”

“Mummy…”

“You’re good for him, you know. You make him want to be better. And he’s good for you, yes?”

John floundered for a suitable response.

“Of course he is,” Mummy said, patting his arm where it linked with hers. “You come alive when you look at him.”

Up ahead, Sherlock was gesticulating wildly, and John needed very little imagination to fill in the long-suffering look on Mycroft’s face.

“Yes,” John said. “Yes, I do.”

Tomorrow, they would wake up in Leverburgh and laugh over Mycroft trying to make a full English. They would take a leisurely drive back up to Stornoway and explore the town in a way they hadn’t while they were busy seeing what else was on Lewis. They’d catch their evening flight back to London and say goodbye to Mummy with final well-wishes for her birthday, and when they got back to Baker Street, they’d give Mrs. Hudson a gift and accept her kisses on their cheeks. John would put the kettle on, Sherlock would get his violin and favourite dressing gown, and maybe there would be a case from Lestrade that couldn’t possibly wait ’til morning. There they would be, in the full blood-and-guts glory of real life, together.

But for now, there were puffins to see.

End Notes

First, thanks so much to ghoulkitten, who won my services at the AO3 Fundraiser Auction. You are so generous and fun and easy-going, and I’ve had such a good time talking with you these last few weeks. I was so pleased for the opportunity to write something fun for you and your friends. So, to ghoulkitten, to peevee, and to ohgodyescake, it was a blast
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Now available in Chinese! Thanks to shanzhu for the translation XD

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