Summary

There’s not much that can rattle the world’s only Consulting Detective, but then a bump in the street results in an accidental phone swap and throws an innocent nursery school teacher into Sherlock’s life. She’s so very...normal. So why exactly does he find himself so inexplicably interested in her?
’…telling you John, there's absolutely no need to oompf’

’Sorry, sorry, sorry! Oh god, I'm so sorry.’

It was distinctly unlike Sherlock Holmes not to notice every detail of his surroundings – certainly to the level that was required in order for someone to barge headlong into him – but John supposed that his unusual friend was presently much more focused on the case in hand than he was on minor things like other people on the street.

’You all right?’ Leaving Sherlock to get himself up, John quickly stooped to assist the young lady who'd been bowled over. The box she'd been carrying had sent papers flying all over along with her phone, Sherlock's phone and the envelope he'd been gesticulating with.

’Oh, yes, I'm so sorry–’ still apologising to the world at large, she hurriedly scooped everything back into the box ’–oh, your friend's phone–’

’And the envelope,’ Sherlock said. ’Which happens to be of vital importance to a case and considerably more useful than–’ here he turned over one of the large cards she'd dropped ’–a large cartoon picture of a feline with the word cat written underneath. What on earth is the point of such a thing? Why do people always insist on labelling things with their obvious identities? You see it all the time. Hospital. Ambulance. Oh, thank you, and here I thought it was a fire truck. I mean–’

’There you go.’ Leaving the other man to prattle on, John helped the woman back to her feet and accepted both phone and envelope from her. ’Thank you, and don't worry, really, quite all right, no harm done.’ He snatched the card out of Sherlock's hand and dropped it into the box with the rest, risking a shot at a charming smile to soften the blow of his associate's rudeness.

Unfortunately she seemed as oblivious to his efforts as she was to Sherlock's ranting, burbling thanks and further apologies before scuttling away up some nearby steps. John sighed and started walking again, dimly aware that his companion was still talking.

’It's a nursery school, Sherlock, that's why the picture of the cat was labelled cat!’

At any rate they got the envelope and its critical contents delivered to Amelia Wyatt without further incident, and John was just about hoping for a quieter afternoon when Sherlock took out his phone in the taxi and said, in an eminently disgruntled tone
'This isn't my phone.'

'You what?'

'This isn't my phone.'

'Oh…is it not? Must have got mixed up with that woman's when she bumped into us and everything fell on the kerb.' John found himself perversely pleased at that – served Sherlock right for not paying attention to other people, as usual. Now he'd have to hope the nice woman rang back and was of the sort of disposition to meet up and exchange…

…except of course Sherlock had already dialled his own number into the other phone. Because of course he had.

'You picked up the wrong phone. Yes. 221B Baker Street. Bring it back. I need it.' He hung up with an exaggerated sigh.

'So, going for the polite request then,' John said dryly. 'I'd almost expected you to accuse her of working for Mycroft and trying to deliberately swap phones to spy on you.'

'Yes, John, but if that was the case I think Mycroft would have had his agent make at least an effort to produce an acceptable simulacrum.'

'It looks the same to me.'

'Perhaps on the outside, John, but there's one vital difference.' Sherlock held the screen up with a weary look. 'My phone doesn't have a picture of a class of five year-olds on it.'

It was early evening when the doorbell rang, and John hastened downstairs to answer it. If nothing else, Sherlock was likely to simply switch phones on the step and then close the door in the poor woman's face, and that wouldn't do at all.

She was cute, he couldn't help noticing, in an offbeat sort of way, and the almost ludicrously outsized duffel coat she was wearing only heightened the effect.

'Hello. I'm so sorry – again – I think I have your friend's phone, and he has mine…?'

'Oh, yes, come in.'

'I would have come sooner but I just finished clearing up at work,' she said as they went upstairs. 'I hope it hasn't been too much of a pain.'

'No worries at all, do have a seat…'

'For god's sake John, just get the phone and get rid of her, she's not a client and she hasn't got a case, she's just got my phone,' Sherlock said from the sofa.

'There's such a thing as politeness, Sherlock, she did come out of her way to bring it back,' John ground out. 'Where's hers, anyway?'

'On the table. I cleaned out the more pointless apps, updated the security settings and deleted all the contacts with no activity for more than eighteen months.'

'Um. Okay.' The woman made the exchange with John and rubbed slowly at the side of her nose as she looked down at the screen.

'I'm sorry, he's always like this.'
'I'm sorry, he's always like this.' Sherlock muttered, snatching his own phone back and immediately starting to fiddle with it.

'Cup of tea?' John asked, ignoring the roll of his friend's eyes.

'Oh, that's very nice of you but I should really be off. Sorry again,' she added, backing towards the door with an understandable level of eagerness. Sherlock's eyes flicked up from his phone and narrowed – apparently he'd deigned to give the unfortunate woman some bare fraction of his attention after all.

'Really, no problem.' John walked her back downstairs but couldn't seem to find the opening to ask for her name. Then she was gone, and all he could do was stomp back to the flat.

'Debbie Connors, aged twenty-nine, lives in a studio flat on Enford Street, early years teacher, graduate in childhood studies, works at the Little Elves Montessori Nursery School for far more hours than she gets paid. Single at present but actively looking for a relationship.'

John sighed.

'You took most of that off her phone, didn't you?'

'Only the boring bits.'

That seemed to be that, and John wrote the entire thing off as just another mad chapter of Life With Sherlock. At least until he came round for lunch the following day and found a rather elaborate collage on the wall above the sofa – maps, printed photos, scraps of paper and other such miscellanea – with a prone Sherlock laying beneath, fingers steepled and eyes closed. Of course this wasn't exactly unusual, so John put the kettle on before he went to inspect the wall.

'…that's her.'

'Yes.' Sherlock's eyes opened. 'At least the public her.'

John squinted down at him.

'Public – what?'

'She's…interesting.' Sherlock sprang to his feet and clambered onto the couch. 'But she isn't interesting. Which means there's something else going on.'

'She's interesting except she isn't,' John echoed, trying to decipher that. 'Nope, no idea. What are you on about?'

'Logic, John! The most basic tenet of deduction! I don't like being bored. She's boring, ordinary, utterly mundane and tedious and yet I find her interesting – interesting enough that I spent the entire night investigating and analysing every part of her mind-numbingly predictable life – which means she can't be what she appears.'

'Uh. Okay.' John tried to mentally realign to his friend's thinking – he was rather out of practice – and wished Mary was within earshot. She'd already proven remarkably good at translating Sherlock into something more closely resembling English.

'She's not one of Mycroft's. Not his style. Far too subtle.' Sherlock was running his hands all over the collage of notes now. 'There must be something…'
'Like what?'

'Some hint, some clue, something missed…' Sherlock frowned '…I need to observe her more.'

'Uh, Sherlock-

'I'll just wait outside the school. Or her flat. Maybe both. Depends what I can deduce.'

'Sherlock, for god's sake, she works at a nursery school. You can't just lurk around the gates!'

'Why not? Lots of people do.'

'Not people – mothers. Parents. Picking up their children? Not some lone weirdo in a big coat! You'll just get yourself arrested!'

'Ah.' Sherlock's brows furrowed in irritation. 'I see what you mean. Well, I'll just make sure I'm not spotted, then.'

'Sherlock-

'It'll be fine. Covert ops.'

'Outside a nursery?'

'Why not?'

'I'm not coming with you.'

'Probably best if you don't.'

'I wash my hands of it.'

'See you later, then.'

'Oh, god…'

'Maybe he just fancies her,' was Mary's laughing verdict when John related this to her at home.

'Ah, no. Sherlock doesn't…well, he just doesn't.'

'Don't write it off. Two years alone, traipsing around Europe undercover…maybe he's looking for a little companionship. Female companionship, I mean.'

'He doesn't-.' John tried to scrub that mental image from his brain as fast as it appeared '-no. This is Sherlock Holmes. Just no.'
Reconnaissance

It was remarkably easy for Sherlock to insinuate himself into the huddle of parents around the gate of the Little Elves Montessori Nursery School. As long as he kept a cheery smile on his face and acted the part of a proud new father already scouting potential educational institutions for his own offspring, everyone was quite happy to talk, coo over the baby pictures (which he had acquired and arranged in a spare wallet earlier for practical purposes) and answer more or less anything he cared to ask.

Of course arguably the best sources of information were the children, aged between three and five and thus pleasantly devoid of any of the filters of adulthood. Miss Connors was in the Green Room, she liked strawberry cupcakes and chocolate digestive biscuits, she was very nice, she wore ladybird earrings, she read lots of books, she played the piano.

He even managed to slip in through the doors to the building proper and have enough of a nose around to find the Green Room in question. In a pleasing level of common sense, the rooms were indeed painted the colours of their names while the corridors were all plain magnolia – well, apart from the endless acres of glitter-encrusted children's artwork and other decorative endeavours.

Lurking discreetly just outside the doorway, Sherlock watched Miss Debbie Connors tidying up her classroom. Being able to monitor her unobserved and in a familiar environment allowed him to almost immediately add a slew of additional deductions to the growing list in his mind palace. She was neat, well-organised but not to the point of compulsion, had a good sense of colour coordination, a moderate preference for spatial symmetry, and was very emotionally attached to her job and the children under her care, to the point of – oh. She had no children of her own, but she wanted them. Desperately. Much too desperately for it to simply be a matter of lacking a partner for the appropriate physiological requirements. Infertile, then, most likely some innocuous medical reason. Past miscarriages? Possible, but he'd need more data to confirm.

Sherlock swung away and dodged behind a cupboard as she came out of the room. Hastening back outside, he located the staff door and discreetly followed her back to her flat – within walking distance, which was unusual but not that remarkable – noting the slight disrepair of the building, confirming the approximate rent range, but the very clean and ordered interior briefly visible before the curtains were pulled shut.

Lots of additional data, he mused, turning to make his way back to Baker Street. Next to cross-reference with existing information from online searches, social media profiles and the like, build the profile out further. There was something. There had to be.
Sherlock Holmes did not get this interested in people who were nothing but ordinary.

* 

When John and Mary swung by Baker Street a week later they were met in the hall by a very flustered Mrs Hudson.

'Just so you know, he's in one of his moods,' she said. 'A terrible one, too. I tried making him a cup of tea and he threw it at me!'

'I hope you threw it back,' Mary said with a grin, but John was already on the stairs.

Sherlock was pacing, plucking tunelessly at the strings of his violin with one hand, while the collage above the couch had expanded to cover most of that wall and some of the window adjacent to it. The rest of the flat was even more of a mess than usual, with papers and laptops strewn across every surface, including the floor. The kitchen, perversely, was relatively tidy, so whatever else Sherlock had been doing recently it apparently didn't include any of his usual experiments.

'Out!' Sherlock roared as the door opened, then immediately subsided. 'Oh, John. Hello.'

'Hi Sherlock,' Mary said cheerily from behind.

'I see you've been…busy,' John said, carefully picking his way into the room. 'And scaring Mrs Hudson more than usual.'

'Is that her?' Mary was peering at the nearest photograph. 'Oh, she looks nice.'

'Nice. Nice! Sherlock slammed his violin back onto its stand and then threw himself into his armchair in a clear fit of vexation. 'She's nice, yes, she's pleasant, she's normal, ordinary, conventional, routine, common, average, boring, boring, BORING!' At this last exclamation he sprang to his feet again and stalked over the coffee table to stand on the sofa, plucking a few notes at random and tossing them into the air. 'BORING!'

John picked up one of the notes from the floor. It was a lime green post-it with the word ladybirds scrawled on it in Sherlock's most frenzied hand. He tried another. Coffee cake. Interesting.

'Are these yours?' Mary had wandered over to the stack of paperbacks on the desk. 'Didn't think they'd be your kind of thing. Harry Potter, the Dresden Files, Lord of the Rings…my god, is that The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe?'

'I've read them. They're rubbish.' Sherlock collapsed into a slouch on the sofa again.

'…and you've watched these DVDs too?' Mary had moved piles and held one case up to John with an expression of bewildered amusement. 'Even…Toy Story?'

'Yes. Utterly inane. That one especially.'

'Sherlock-' John cleared a small space on the coffee table and sat down on front of it so he was on eye level with his friend '…what have you been doing?'

'Deducing.'

'With fantasy novels and cartoons?

'They're hers-' Sherlock waved his arm at the collage '…her favourites. At least according to all her
social profiles, the shelves in her flat, the testimony of her class and their parents and a simple extrapolation based on existing tastes in underlying message, narrative style and genre.'

'Did you get your homeless network to take these?' Mary asked, brandishing a handful of obviously candid photographs of Debbie Connors walking along the street.

'I've been monitoring her. But she doesn't do anything. She never does anything. Nothing even remotely out of character, nothing but boring, boring routine!'

'So you've followed her home, taken sneaky pictures of her and plastered the walls with them, read all her favourite books, watched all her favourite films and TV shows…' Mary trailed off with a grin when John raised his eyebrows at her '…my god, Sherlock, you've got it bad.'

'Got it?' Sherlock echoed. 'Got what?'

'She's just a person, Sherlock,' John said loudly. 'A normal, ordinary person trying to live her life and you're — you're stalking this poor woman! My god, she should get a restraining order!'

'She's nothing of the sort,' Sherlock snapped. 'And if I am stalking her, it's on the basis of a perfectly sound and reasonable suspicion—'

'—crush,' Mary interjected.

'—and she is merely highly, dare I say exceptionally, skilled at obfuscating her true nature. What d'you mean, a crush?'

'You've got a crush on her.' Mary chuckled. 'It's cute. In a creepy sort of way.'

'I do not get—' Sherlock made a face '-crushes. She's up to something. I just need to figure out what.'

'Sherlock, she's a nursery school teacher,' John exclaimed. 'Haven't you got cases — real cases — to work on right now?'

'This is more important.'

'More important?'

'Infinitely.' Sherlock scowled at the ceiling. 'I may even need to involve Mycroft. For additional resources. She's good — very good — which means she's working for someone. He's probably already monitoring her, in fact.'

'Or,' Mary said pointedly, 'You could put your Big Boy Boots on and go talk to her.'

'Talk to her?'

'Yes. You know, like people do when they're curious about another person.'

'Hmm. I suppose a direct interrogation could yield some worthwhile information.' Sherlock appeared to consider the idea for a moment. 'Last classes leave the nursery in half an hour. Should be more than enough time.'

'Maybe don't let on about the stalking. Tends to put women off,' Mary said helpfully as John hustled her towards the door, muttering about lunatic detectives and obsessive paranoia.

Sherlock let them go, already striding to his room to dress. A suitable persona for the target…shy, a little nervous, in need of a maternal touch. Not an ironed shirt, but an effort at neatness. Usual
shoes would be fine. Very slight stutter. Bashful but eager little smile – he tried it a couple of times in the mirror to be sure – and a trusting sort of hopeful expression. No gloves, but his usual coat and scarf…
Infiltration

Twenty minutes later Sherlock was lurking outside the nursery school on the opposite side of the street, sitting on a bench with a nervous sort of twitch on one leg and his hands in his pockets. Nibble on the lower lip, crane neck as if anxious to see someone. Now *leap* upright, walk into car – apologise profusely over the bonnet – and come to a vaguely embarrassed stop by the steps while blushingly avoiding the looks of the nearby parents who'd observed his faltering progress with amusement.

It was almost *too* easy.

'…if only he'd stop *picking* at it, but you know little boys and scabs…'

Shuffle through the crowd, apologetic with every step, *sorry, oh, excuse me*, turn around to *accidentally* bump her elbow…

'Oh! I'm so sorry – oh!' Simple to affect startled surprise and hastily-concealed delight at finding that he just *happened* to bump into the person he was looking for.

'That's all right – oh, hello.' There, as he'd expected, was the flicker of recognition. Working with classes of children, a new one every year, of *course* she was good with faces.


*Irrelevant.*

'Hi-' Sherlock broke into a sunny smile ‘-oh, god, this is so awkward…um, I was actually hoping to run into you, and I saw the time the school emptied and – oh, god, now you think I'm some weird stalker, don't you…’

It worked like a charm.

'That's all right.' She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear self-consciously. *Dark brown/black, naturally curly, soft-looking.*

*Irrelevant!*

'So, what can I do for you?'
'Actually-' Sherlock hurriedly got back into character '-I was sort of hoping to apologise. You know, for being a total git'- another nervous grin '-and say thank you for, um, bringing back my phone, I know it was out of your way and I was ghastly' drop eyes, self-deprecating chuckle '-one of those days, you know, not much sleep and too much to do and-' 

'I know that feeling.' Her face softened with a smile. 'It's all right, really. Everyone has bad days.' 

*Dimples. Lines by her eyes. Smiles a lot. Likes laughing.*

*Stop it! Irrelevant!* 

'Oh, you're a saint. But still, I'm so sorry I was so rude – and thank you, again – maybe we could start over?' Hastily extract hand from pocket and extend with another big, dumb smile. 'Hi. I'm Sherlock.' 

Of course he'd already discarded the idea of an alias – aside from the fact the woman had been in possession of his phone for most of a day, John had mentioned his name in the flat and a school teacher would have a practiced knack for names as well as faces. It was a gamble that she didn't recognise him from the dratted papers, admittedly, but he was confident after analysing her reading and browsing habits that she wouldn't be interested in the crime-solving escapades of the world's only consulting detective who until last month had been declared dead. 

'Well then hello, Sherlock. I'm Debbie,' she replied – confirming that deduction through the lack of recognition at the name – with a laugh. *Bubbly, cheerful, generous, unrestrained. Slightly crooked eye teeth – teenage dental correction, incomplete. Still a nice smile though. Warm and kind.*

*INCREDIBLY irrelevant!* 

Sherlock barely avoided gritting his teeth and wrestled himself back into character. 

'Debbie. Hi. Um.' Drop hand after very brief shake, shuffle feet, look back up hopefully. 'This is a massive long shot and all but – um – could I take you for a coffee sometime? Or – um – or tea. Whatever.' Grin like an idiot but with a level of apprehension, just waiting to get shot down…

'That…would be nice.' She blushed a little, fetchingly. 'So, I suppose I should give you my number?' 

'Oh! Yes, please.' Fumble, nearly drop phone, nervous chuckle, finally hand it over on the New Contacts screen. Hover while she puts her details in. *Nails trimmed and neat but not manicured. A pen callus on the right hand second finger. No rings.* 

'There you go.' She handed the phone back. 'So…let me know.' 

'Great. Thank you.' Just a bit breathless, can't-quite-believe-it, incredulous but happy little smile. 'So I guess I'll – um – I'll be in touch.' 

'Okay, then.' She started to make her way back up the steps but with more than one quick glance back. Catch her eye on the first with another small grin, turn around to leave, discreetly – but not too discreetly – punch the air in delight when she thinks you think she's not looking, set off back down the street with a spring in the step. 

Easy. 

He waited a couple of days before calling her, of course – the shy, dorkish persona would need that time to shore up his courage – but made sure that he still sounded suitably out of breath with
The dress suits her figure.

Sherlock mentally shook himself.

Irrelevant!

'Hi,' he said again, hastily getting back on track. 'You look – um – nice.'

'Thank you.' She slung her handbag – *capacious, leather tote, non-designer, functional rather than decorative accessory* – over her shoulder. 'So, where are we going?'

'Oh, it's this way.'

It took a barely a fraction of Sherlock’s attention to make idiot small talk in character for the short walk to Chiltern Street, but the rest of his mental capacity was winding itself into steadily tighter knots of frustration at the continued lack of helpful or interesting observations.

Watching Debbie drink a cup of tea yielded no other information of use either, and to make matters worse he found himself continuing to silently catalogue entirely superfluous and extraneous information like the fact that she used lip balm regularly to keep her lips soft and moist,
and that she had worn her hair up a lot today from the ripples and kinks in the natural curls, and
even the scent of her shampoo and soap – mango and passionfruit with a hint of coconut. It all
got pouring into his mind palace, filling his head up with trite and futile trivia despite his best
efforts to stop it.

He would have to do a lot of deleting later on.

After an hour – an impressive amount of time to spend over a pot of tea, even for two English
people – frustration finally won out over discretion. He'd skilfully and thoroughly extracted
enough truths about her life from her to fill the world's most pointless encyclopaedia, and there
was nothing.

'…thought was quite funny, though. Sherlock, are you all right?'

'Boring.' He dropped the act entirely, sitting back in the chair with a huff of irritation.

'I'm…sorry?'


She was giving him much the same look that John did when he shouted in public places. There
was the same hint of puzzlement around the brows, although her eyes spoke of more baffled
confusion than growing annoyance.

'Waste of time.' Sherlock stood up, now thoroughly irate, shrugged his coat back on and reached
for his scarf. 'Fool's errand. Boring. God, boring!'

He stalked out of the café without further comment, leaving nothing but bewilderment in his
wake.
'Yes, I'm worried, why the hell else would I be calling you?'

'Forgive my lack of alarm, John, but both sulking and screaming are hardly new items in my dear brother's repertoire. I'm sure once a new case comes along he'll make a miraculous recovery.'

'But that's the point, Mycroft-' John set his jaw '-there have been cases. Tons of them. People are beating the door down. Lestrade called up with a triple homicide where all three victims seemed to have been stabbed at the same instant with knitting needles. He didn't even respond, I had to text back and say he was unavailable.'

'I see.' There was a pause. 'That does seem a trifle...unusual. And has he been-

'Nothing but nicotine patches. Yes, I'm sure.'

'Hmm. I shall reflect. Keep me posted, John.'

Of course the insufferable git hung up without further comment. John resisted the urge to hurl the phone across the room and sat down hard on the sofa.

'You're really worried about him, aren't you?' Mary said, glancing up from the pile of colour swatches she was leafing through. 'Think it's something to do with this Debbie woman? He's still got that collage up. Last time we were there I saw him muttering at it.'

'Yeah.' John reached a decision and stood up. Three weeks of Sherlock acting like a sulky child was more than enough. 'I'm going to Baker Street.'

'I'll come with you, then.'

'Really?'

'What, I'm not allowed to be worried too?'

As expected, Sherlock was still stomping about the place in his pyjamas and dressing gown when they arrived. A rather hushed Mrs Hudson brought a tea tray up and then lurked in the kitchen with Mary while John attempted a man to man talk which failed miserably. Sherlock didn't want to look at any prospective clients, snorted loudly and derisively at anything from Lestrade and just made a childish scowling face even when John mentioned that he'd called Mycroft.
'For god's sake, Sherlock-' John finally snapped, grabbed one of the photographs of Debbie and brandished it at his irksome friend '—either get rid of this stuff and move on or go and bloody ask her out like a normal person!' 

'She's boring.' 

'Then why are you still analysing her? There's at least six new bits of paper up there since last time I was here.' 

'Very observant, John, you're improving.' 

'And if you don't want to keep analysing her then just delete her! That's what you normally do, isn't it? Delete useless or irrelevant information from your mental hard drive?'

'I CAN'T!' Sherlock sprang to his feet with a roar that seemed to encompass frustration and mania in equal measures. 'God, John, don't you think I've tried? Every time I think I've cleared her out she comes— she squirming in again, and suddenly it all floods back. She's squatting in my mind palace, John, and no matter what I try I can't seem to evict her.'

'Oh dear me,' Mrs Hudson murmured from the kitchen. 

'Closure,' Mary said loudly. 'That's what you need.'

'You what?' John exclaimed, somewhat nonplussed at the interruption. 

'Closure. You know.' Utterly composed, she took a sip of tea. 'Just go down to the nursery and find her and tell her the whole truth and— oh, I don't know, maybe apologise for calling her boring in the middle of a café if you're feeling really wild— and that'll be that. Closure.'

'Closure,' Sherlock repeated slowly, frowning as though he was trying to mentally dissect the word. 

'John and I can come with you if you like. Moral support.'

'We can?' Then John saw his fiancé's expression. 'We can. Yes, of course we can.'

'Go on.' Then, to everyone's lasting astonishment, Mary actually pulled Sherlock upright by one arm and sort of threw him towards his bedroom. 'Put some clothes on and we can go now, the timing should be about right.'

To everyone's further bewilderment— including his own— Sherlock closed the bedroom door and went about getting dressed as instructed. 

'You're— you're amazing,' John said to Mary. 

'I know, love. Come on, drink your tea before we go.'

'It was hard not to feel like a parent, John mused, standing outside the damned nursery with Mary on his arm and Sherlock brooding nearby. A parent to a fickle toddler of a man with the emotional intelligence of a spoon, but a parent nonetheless.

Once the gaggle of real children and their associated caregivers thinned out, Debbie seemed to spot the unlikely trio and actually came over to them without prompting. 

'Hello again. John, wasn't it?' 
'Yes. This is Mary. And...you've met Sherlock.'

'Hmm.' She looked at Exhibit A with a dimly amused expression. 'Come to tell me how boring I am again? I got the gist of it in the tea shop.'

'It's hardly my fault that you're insufferably ordinary,' Sherlock replied, unrepentant.

'He's got a crush on you,' Mary said, which nearly made John choke. 'He just doesn't know how to deal with it, so he's been obsessing over you a bit - well, a lot, actually - and it seemed like this was long overdue clearing up.'

'I do not have a crush!' Sherlock began indignantly, but was cut off when Mary continued.

'Have you heard of Sherlock Holmes? Famous detective genius, funny hat? Believed dead until a couple of months ago? Might have seen it mentioned somewhere...'

Debbie blinked and stared at Sherlock as though she'd never seen him before.

'You're that Sherlock?'

'That Sherlock?' John blurted. 'It's not exactly a common name!'

'I work for a private Montessori nursery, so I try not to judge. But yes, I remember hearing about Sherlock Holmes. I thought you'd be taller.'

'Everyone says that,' Mary said, which nearly covered up Sherlock's muttered epithet about the mainstream press. 'Now, Sherlock, say you're sorry for creeping on the nice lady.'

'It wasn't creeping, it was a perfectly reasonable investigation, and I will not apologise for it.'

'Investigating me?' Debbie looked from Sherlock to Mary and back. 'What for?'

'He found you interesting,' John supplied. 'And so naturally assumed you were some sort of international criminal mastermind.'

There was a moment's pause, and then Debbie burst out laughing.

'An international criminal mastermind? I supervise a class of five year-olds!'

That gave Mary the giggles, of course, and John couldn't help but chuckle too while Sherlock just stood there with his jaw locked, glaring at an indeterminate point in the middle distance.

'Well you see-' Mary clearly felt some further explanation was owed, in between giggles - 'of course the great Sherlock Holmes doesn't find ordinary people interesting. So anyone he found interesting must by definition be someone who wasn't ordinary, all evidence to the contrary...'

'...and since the only thing he finds interesting is criminal masterminds, that naturally led to the assumption that I had to be one.' Debbie shook her head, still laughing. 'Brilliant. A perfect loop of logic to get tripped up in.'

'Yup. That's about right,' Mary said dryly.

'I don't see what's so funny,' Sherlock said nastily. 'It was a perfectly reasonable deduction and-'

'Oh, give it up, Sherlock,' John said to him. 'It isn't like this is the first case you haven't been able to solve. Well, not that it was a case.'
'You should put it on that old blog,' Mary suggested with a wicked grin. 'You could call it the Case Of Sherlock Being A Daft Sod.'

'It wasn't a case, just an investigation,' Sherlock snapped.

'You ridiculous man,' Debbie said to him, and then sobered slightly. 'You look positively awful. How long has this – um – investigation been going on?'

'Most of a month,' John supplied when Sherlock just glared.

'And I'm guessing not eating properly or sleeping much?'

'Nope,' Mary confirmed.

'All right.' She regarded Sherlock for a long moment and then seemed to reach a decision. 'All right then, mister undead hat detective, give me ten minutes to clean up my room and then we'll go for a cuppa. I'll choose where this time, so at least if you start shouting at me again it'll be somewhere familiar. Your chaperones can come too.'

'What?' Sherlock exclaimed. 'Go for a cuppa? And they're not chaperones.'

He did, however, stand there and wait while grumbling under his breath. Debbie came back out of the school with her coat on and took them all to a Caffè Nero on nearby Edgeware Road. She returned from the till with tea for everyone, and one tuna sandwich, which she took out of the box and arranged on a plate before parking it in front of Sherlock.

'You can ask me any question,' she said to him, 'No matter how inappropriate or rude, and I promise I'll answer truthfully. But for every question you ask, you have to eat a bite of this sandwich and take a sip of tea while I answer you.'

Mary barely stifled another giggle but John found himself grinning. Petulant toddler tactics. Perfect.

'Any question?' Sherlock asked, narrowing his eyes.

'Anything. Of course some things I might not know the answer to. But I'm sure the famous Sherlock Holmes can tell if I'm lying or not. Agreed?'

She actually held a hand out, and although he regarded it for a moment as though it might explode he did finally reach across the table to shake.

'Fine. Are you infertile?'

John spat his mouthful of tea out, narrowly missing Mary.

'Christ, Sherlock, you can't just-

'No, it's all right.' A moment of distress flitted over Debbie's face but was gone quickly as she schooled her expression back to neutrality. 'I did say any question. Go on then,' she added to Sherlock. 'Sandwich. A proper bite, mind you, not a nibble.'

Looking oddly cheerful, he obeyed and sat there chewing unenthusiastically.

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm infertile. Unknown genetic factors. Lots of technical terms I can't quite remember, but the gist of it is I have an inhospitable uterus. Even with IVF or something, the chances of me carrying successfully to term are slim to none.'
'My god,' Mary muttered, hurriedly retrieving napkins to clean up their side of the table. John grimaced in agreement. The woman worked in a nursery, clearly nuts about kids, and couldn't have any of her own…

Sherlock finished the mouthful and took a sip of tea.

'Have you miscarried in the past?'

'Sherlock-' Mary hissed, appalled.

'No,' Debbie said once he'd had another bite of sandwich. 'I've never been pregnant.'

Another swallow and sip.

'Has it cost you relationships?'

'Chew your food properly. And yes. Most blokes claim they're all about the stud life but actually when they find out there's literally zero chance of a family they run a mile.'

'How many?'

'Four. Two serious. I was engaged to one of them.'

'My god, that's awful,' Mary said. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Why?' Sherlock asked. 'It isn't your fault.' He looked back at Debbie. 'So. You struggle to maintain a long term relationship, but work at a nursery surrounded constantly by reminders of your physiological incapability. You really like children.'

'That's not a question, but yes, I do.'

'Why? What do you find so compelling about them?'

'I find them interesting. Young children look at the universe entirely devoid of prejudices or preconceptions. To them world's still brand new, fresh out of the box with the shine on. They're practically incapable of lying, and they ask endless questions about things that most adults take for granted. Every single one of them is like a…like a bright-eyed young scientist, or maybe an enthusiastic detective-' this with a smile '-always wanting to know why, why, why, and I find most adults shockingly dull by comparison. And that was technically two questions, so you owe me another bite and a drink of tea.'

'It was one question.'

'Nope. A why and a what. That's two interrogative adverbs. Two questions.'

He huffed.

'Linguistic semantics.'

'An agreement is an agreement.'

John wanted to cheer when Sherlock rather sullenly took another bite of the sandwich. Mary caught his eye and winked.

'Why are you so obsessed with fantasy books?' Sherlock asked.

'Because there's enough misery and awfulness in the world that most of the time I prefer reading
something that takes me out of it to somewhere happier where the bad guys don't win. Helps me to stay cheerful.'

'Hmm. I'm going to assume your frankly childish taste in other recreational media has a similarly banal explanation.'

'That's 'cos you're a Muggle,' Debbie said, deadpan.

'A fact made abundantly manifest in the fact that we are not having this conversation in The Leaky Cauldron or some other such fictional location,' Sherlock replied in a similar vein. 'If you couldn't be a nursery teacher, what would you want to do with yourself?'

'Hmm. Maybe a social worker, or a nurse. Paediatrics, of course.'

'Of course. Do you like dogs?'

'You've had your last bit of sandwich,' she pointed out. 'So you've run out of questions. Unless you want a slice of cake as well.'

'Fine. Never mind.' Sherlock seemed caught somewhere between confused and embarrassed at that, as though the bit about dogs had sort of snuck out while he wasn't paying attention.

'I actually love animals,' Debbie said to him with a grin. 'Anything fuzzy. Dogs, cats, hamsters. We've got a hamster in my room at the nursery. The kids called him Spongebob.'

'That's a good name for a hamster,' Mary said solemnly, and nudged John's knee under the table with a pointed glance at the door.

'Although it'd surely work better for a fish or something? Anyway.' Taking the hint, John stood and reached for his coat. 'Well, thank you for the tea, Debbie, and it was lovely to meet you, but Mary and I have to – uh – get going.'

'Why?' Sherlock immediately demanded, looking frankly alarmed at the prospect. 'You've got no plans for tonight.'

'I think they're going for a polite departure so you can pepper me with more questions without embarrassing them on your behalf any further,' Debbie said. 'Although asking anything else is going to need something edible.'

'Have fun!' Mary said with a grin, and steered John out before anyone else could protest or comment further.

This left Sherlock staring ambivalently at Debbie, feeling rather adrift. Alarm bells were going off all over his head. Why on earth had he asked her about her feelings on dogs? Stupid, moronic, irrelevant question. Why had he agreed to play this ridiculous sandwich game anyway? Why, in fact, had he not walked away outside the nursery – or, indeed, just refused to come at all when Mary had suggested the concept of closure?

Above all else, for the love of god, why was he not right this minute getting up, putting on his coat and leaving this dreadful coffee shop? Debbie was sipping her drink again with her eyes settled on him and dancing in…what was that, some sort of amused indulgence?

'Your tea's cold,' he said. 'Don't drink it.'

'I don’t mind cold tea.'
'You should. It's disgusting. Don't move.'

It was perfectly rational to get more tea. Cold tea was disgusting. He couldn't sit there and watch someone drink cold tea.

'You want to keep talking, then?' she asked with a smile when he sat back down, sweeping the cold cup from her hands and replacing it with a fresh, steaming hot one.

In the name of continuing the conversation – no – the investigation, the brownie made sense too.

*There's nothing to investigate. She's BORING.*

'Yes. Well. I still haven't finished questioning you.'

Debbie laughed, then picked up a knife and cut the brownie in half. He frowned in dismay as she picked one up and took a bite out of it.

'That's reducing the number of questions.'

'All right.' She put the rest of the half down. 'How about this then – we'll take it in turns, but if I ask you something you don't want to answer, you have a bite of brownie instead. So, since you've asked me lots, I guess I'll start. How did you meet John and Mary?'

'I met John through a mutual acquaintance several years ago when I was looking for a flatmate. I met Mary through John three months ago.'

'All right.' She cupped her hands around the mug. 'Your turn.'

*Except you don't have anything left to ask, because there's nothing of interest ABOUT her.* Sherlock could practically hear Mycroft's disdainful tones in his left ear.

*Shut up, Mycroft.*

'Why did you want to come here and cajole me into eating a wholly unremarkable sandwich?'

'Because you looked like you were about to faint from hunger, and your friends had clearly given up on trying to make you eat. And I was…curious. Never met a detective before. Especially a famous one.'

'Except you didn't recognise me.'

'Not by first name or face, no. I'm not much of a media junkie, I'm afraid. Any brothers or sisters?'

'One brother. Older. Mycroft.'

'Goodness me. Your parents must have had fun at the christenings.'

'Why this coffee shop? You're obviously a regular because you knew exactly what table you wanted and the baristas all know you. There are dozens of places in the area and most of them aren't big mainstream brands. So either your taste in coffee is painfully banal or you wanted to be somewhere familiar and therefore safe-'

'I like the cappuccino cake, and I have a loyalty card. Don't drink coffee, and the tea here is perfectly fine. Girlfriend – or boyfriend?'

*Your pulse just increased on the basis of that question.* Inner Mycroft sounded fed up. *No doubt your pupils are dilating. Now we're getting to the root of the issue, aren't we?*
'No.'

'…just no?'

'That's another question. It's my go. Why do you live alone? You're not socially inept enough for your organisational and cleanliness preferences to be that prohibitive to co-habitation, and most women your age would gladly put up with a flatmate in order to afford a more genial living space.'

'I don't get on with most women socially, and finding a bloke who just wants to be a flatmate narrows the field to serial killers and general weird perverts.' She gave him a long look. 'How did you fake your death…what was it, two years ago?'

Sherlock actually found himself considering – however briefly – the notion of explaining the entire operation to her. The real version, not the hackneyed pile of drivel he'd fed Anderson. Then, very deliberately, he picked up the untouched half of the brownie and took a bite.

So you do still have SOME part of your brain being powered by your intellect then, brother mine.

Debbie giggled.

'I suppose I should have expected that.'

'Probably. Why do you not get on with…most women?'

'Most women are backstabbing and bitchy and love to undermine each other. At least if a bloke has a problem with you, he'll usually just say it to your face. Except the ones who completely fake everything because they think you're a criminal mastermind, of course.' She propped her chin up on one hand. 'Ever had a girlfriend – or boyfriend?'

'No. Favourite colour?'

Oh, what a CRITICAL piece of information that is, little brother.

'Moss green. Asexual?'

That made him blink rapidly for a moment. It wasn't a definition that had ever occurred to him, insofar as anything to do with sex in the context of himself had ever crossed his mind.

Your pulse is definitely elevated, and from the warm feeling spreading up your neck…oh dear, brother mine, are you BLUSHING? I think that's all the answer we need, isn't it?

'Possibly,' he said, taking a sip of tea and battling inwardly for control over irrational physiological responses. Sherlock Holmes did not blush. 'Favourite animal?'

'Cats. Wow, you're really scraping the bottom of the barrel now, aren't you?'

'Hardly worth putting effort into an exercise that has already confirmed itself as completely worthless, since you very evidently are not a criminal personage of any sort.'

'But,' she said with a slow grin, 'You're still sitting here. If I'm so boring, why don't you just leave?'

'I'm- damn it all, he actually stuttered '-I'm finishing this cup of tea.'

She sat back in the chair with a peal of laughter. Genuine and intense amusement. No, not just amusement. Something else. Entertainment? Enjoyment?
Attraction?

'You’re a funny one, Sherlock Holmes. I mean, you're clearly *terribly* clever and you can probably tell me my life story just from my shoes, but you're sitting there pretending you're just drinking your tea, all the while asking daft things like my favourite colour. Maybe your friend Mary was right.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he scoffed. 'It was an error in judgement, that's all. A misattributed probability based on incomplete information. A trifle embarrassing, perhaps, but hardly conclusive to some sort of irrational – where are you going?'

'Home,' she said calmly, putting her coat on. 'I've been at work all day and I have an appointment with my sofa, some fish and chips, a Disney movie and a stack of day planners for next week. But I actually come in here most Friday evenings for a cuppa and a read to clear my head after work anyway, so if you fancy doing this again – for investigative purposes, or *whatever* – you're welcome to join me next week.'

'You can't go yet. You still owe me an answer.'

'No I don't. You asked where I was going, and I told you.' Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she flashed a grin. 'Incidentally, the *real* Sherlock is a lot more interesting than that weird, nervous, hipster-boy thing you were pretending to be. Just so's you know. Bye then.'
"Sir? That surveillance report you requested."


"Yes, sir."

"Why in god's name is he interested in her?"

"Not really clear, sir. Did...did you want the surveillance continued?"

"Yes, I think so. Keep me appraised. Especially on any further interactions with my little brother."

* 

It came about entirely by accident, which wasn't something that normally happened to Sherlock Holmes. A week of frustrated deletion attempts and pointless clients trying to waste his time with the most mediocre of non-cases left him desperately bored, exasperated and in dire need of a cigarette...or something stronger. The nicotine patches barely took the edge off, and John was being exceptionally insufferable about the entire thing, simply giving a knowing sort of grin before marching out of Baker Street.

But how exactly Sherlock had gone from pacing the flat in irritation to sitting in a Caffé Nero with two cups of tea and a slice of cappuccino cake in front of him wasn't...entirely clear. It seemed to have just sort of happened. He found himself staring at the steam curling up from the cup in front of him with a mildly befuddled air.

"...hello again."

*There goes your pulse. Good lord, brother mine, you haven't even laid eyes on her yet and the sound of her voice is inducing a minor cardiac event.*

Sherlock looked up blankly at Debbie for a moment – *slight hint of blue on one cheek, poster paint, cleaned off but only with cold water* – and then wordlessly pushed the other cup of tea and the slice of cake towards the far side of the table he was sitting at. She broke into a sunny smile of pure delight and sat down with a little laugh.
'Oh, you didn't. That's very sweet, Sherlock.'

'You're still boring,' he muttered reproachfully. 'Utterly boring.'

'Then why'd you come back? Needed a little boredom?' She picked up the fork, stabbed a piece of the cake and devoured it with every sign of deep satisfaction. 'I love this stuff. Do you want to try some?'

'No.'

'Have you eaten today?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'You have to eat something, Sherlock. No wonder you're grumpy. You're a classic nervivore, aren't you?'

'A what?'

'Nervivore. Live on your nerves.'

He rolled his eyes.

'Have a bit, go on. Sometimes if you don't think you're hungry but you have a little bit of something your appetite catches up.' She speared another piece of cake and lifted it with a wink. 'Do you want me to make airplane noises?'

'Oh, for god's sake-' but the rest of the complaint was cut off by the unexpected arrival of the eating implement in his mouth. Annoyance battled with surprise but he found himself accepting the mouthful of cake – it was good, the bitterness of the cappuccino nicely offsetting the sweet icing – and chewing slowly while contemplating an odd stirring low in his stomach.

'There we go,' she said with a grin. 'The look on your face! Anyone would think you'd never been force-fed cake before.'

Hurriedly swallowing, Sherlock reached for the increasingly tattered remains of his self-possession and straightened his spine.

'Well, it isn't exactly a habit.'

'You still haven't answered my question, either.'

'About why I'm here.'

'Exactly. Not that I don't appreciate the cake. Or the company.'

'I don't know why I'm here,' he ground out. 'There, I said it. Does that satisfy you?'

She put the fork down and took a long, thoughtful sip of tea.

'The great Sherlock Holmes is sitting in a café and doesn't know why? That seems rather out of character with the man who wrote an exhaustive essay on two hundred and forty different types of tobacco.'
'Two hundred and forty three.' But he was surprised again – this time pleasantly – that she had mentioned that rather than John's wretched blog. *Probably trying to shock me.* 'And you don't need to pretend you didn't read John Watson's blog, either.'

'I found it, but I didn't read it. Murder mysteries aren't my favourite style of literature, and besides, I'd really prefer to hear those stories from the horse's mouth. Unless you just want to sit here grumping at me or play the question-answer game again.'

'Fine.' Against all rationality, Sherlock was gratified with that. Talking about cases. Of course. He thought better when he vocalised. That was why John was so useful. Maybe he could talk about one of the unsolved ones, the ones where the solution was on the proverbial tip of the tongue, and the afternoon wouldn't be completely wasted after all.

*

That was how it began, anyway. Re-treading old ground soon became tedious, of course, and Sherlock found himself taking on new cases – even painfully obvious ones – just so he had something new to talk about with Debbie. She was a much better listener than John, sitting in rapt attention and delightfully disinclined to interrupt with trite observations or exclamations as he talked. When he paused with expectation of a reaction she would smile and encourage him to go on with a compliment about his brilliance or superior perception.

'You know there's a word for when two people of the opposite sex get together on a weekly basis and eat and drink together while talking,' John said to him dryly one day. 'In fact, Mary and I tend to call it *date night.***'

At the time Sherlock had scoffed at him, but now – sitting in the usual spot at the usual table by the window with two cups of tea and a slice of cake, which he always had ready for Debbie’s arrival despite her laughing protests that he was spoiling her – it for some reason preyed on his mind. A *date*? He didn't do *dates*. He didn't do anything of the sort. Now, why was he musing on something so pointless?

*She's late.* That was it. More than ten minutes, which was distinctly unlike her. She was normally prompt to a fault – one of the reasons she preferred to keep the various pieces of her life within walking distance, so as to not be at the mercy of traffic or public transport.

'Sherlock, I'm so sorry! I got talking with someone, so rude of me. Thank you for waiting.'

'It was only ten minutes,' he said dismissively, trying to ignore the flare of suspicion and annoyance that explanation of her tardiness inexplicably provoked.

Jealously, brother mine. As obvious as it is embarrassing. Go on, you know you want to ask her who she was talking to that kept her from your sight.

Irrelevant, Sherlock told himself sharply. **Entirely superfluous information.**

Of course. Why did his internal monologue insist on so exactly mimicking Mycroft's bored drawl? Just like her favourite colour, her preference for coffee cake and all the other heaping miscellanea squatting in your mind palace like flies on a rubbish tip.

She could be lying. Trying to elicit a reaction.

Now you're grasping at straws, little brother. "Talking to someone?" Lies have detail. She would volunteer more than that if she was trying to mislead.
Of course. Stupid. 

'So, any new cases this week?' Debbie asked him.

'Yes. Three. Who were you talking to?'

'Oh, just a parent.'

'Which one?'

'...why are you interested?'

'Why are you being evasive?'

'I'm back to being interrogated, am I?' She rolled her eyes. 'Danielle Merkins' dad, Philip. He's a nice chap, and she's not in my class so I don't see him that often.'

*Philip Merkins.* The name positively burned itself into Sherlock's mind palace.

'What did you talk about?'

'For god's sake, Sherlock!' Debbie sat back and folded her arms – a defensive gesture – with a loud huff. 'We chatted. About things. Normal things. He asked me out, I said yes. We're going to dinner next Friday evening while Danielle's at her mum's. So I won't be here next week. All right?'

The silence in his own head was positively deafening. It felt like there ought to be alarms and sirens going off, but instead it was as if every thought process had frozen, hanging there mid-conception like so many stalactites. *He asked me out, I said yes.* Debbie was going on...a date. So this – tea, and talking about cases – was categorically not a date. People didn't go on dates with different people at the same time. Well, some people did, but Debbie wasn't one of them.

*Good,* he told himself. *No ambiguity. She isn't getting any mistaken impressions or ideas.*

*Oh, she won't be here next week.*

*Fine. Why would that be a problem? Could be a good chance to break this ridiculous routine before it becomes a habit.*

'Now then,' Debbie said to him, restored to her usual good-humoured composure while he was still arguing heatedly with himself, 'Tell me about these cases.'

That should have been the end of it. Of course it should. A disruption sufficient to produce a change in behaviour patterns. Finally forget this silly, irrational little fixation and get back to work...

'Oh, look at you, laying there pining,' Mrs Hudson said as she came up on one of the meaningless errands that often brought her into the flat at odd times of day. 'Your lady friend not about tonight?'

'She has-' Sherlock tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle the distaste in his tone '-a date.'

'Oh, no, that's a shame.'

'And I am not pining.'

'Sulking, then?' The infernal old woman chuckled at him. 'Sherlock, you silly thing, why *ever*
'Because I don't feel anything,' Sherlock snapped, and blocked out anything further by jumping to his feet and seizing his violin, striking up a particularly loud and obnoxious melody. Mrs Hudson flapped her hands, rolled her eyes and departed, most likely still wittering about nonsense but he didn't care about that.

Why were there no worthwhile cases? Couldn't Lestrade call him? People surely got murdered on Friday evenings, didn't they? Under suspicious circumstances?

Sherlock abruptly paused with his bow in mid-flourish.

*Philip Merkins.*
Setting his violin aside, Sherlock plopped into the desk chair and opened his laptop. Career profile, social media...laden with pictures of a small girl, of course...ah-ha. It took him less than six minutes to deduce what was going on and pull out his phone.

Using date with nurturing mother-type figure as proof to ex-wife of new-found family dedication. Not interested in you. Suggest departure. – SH

Ten minutes crawled by with no response.

I could be telling you about the hallucinogens in Dorset. Much better use of both our time. – SH

Are you receiving these? Surely your phone isn't turned off. What if there was an emergency? – SH

I should probably also mention that he wants to have sex. But that must be obvious even to you. – SH

I can make a phone call to explain the situation if you would rather but it seems like that would be unnecessarily disruptive. – SH

As he stomped to the kitchen to put the kettle on, the text alert beeped a response. Finally!

What on earth are you on about Sherlock? Stop texting me! Don't you have cases to work on?

Groaning in frustration, he rapidly typed out a summary of the online presence of Philip Merkins including the continued frequent contact with his ex-wife, Danielle's mother, the jocular but not-quite-joking tweets about getting back together, her similarly toned replies about his dedication to his career rather than his family, and so on. Then he quickly looked up how to add image attachments and put some screen captures of the relevant conversations in as well. Then he pressed send and waited for his cup of tea to brew.

You need a new hobby.
Furious, he hurled the teaspoon into the sink and grabbed his coat, slinging it on over his dressing gown and finding a pair of shoes to stamp his feet into. It took mere moments to locate the restaurant they were at – the sort John would have called *cheap but cheerful*, ideal for a man who wanted to *show* he was on a date without actually investing much in it – and Sherlock stormed inside straight out of the cab, casting about for the right table.

He actually paused for a moment when he did, because Debbie had her hair up in a way he hadn't seen before. It exposed a lot of her bare neck which seemed absurdly distracting. She was wearing stockings and high heels, and a modestly cut but still impossibly attractive little black dress. Her bag was a small clutch on her lap, rather than her usual functional handbag.

*And how, brother mine, is any of this in any way relevant to your purpose in being here? Oh, wait, I quite forgot…your purpose in being here is as trite and pathetic as your current observations.*

Shaking his head to dispel the phantom Mycroft, Sherlock re-focused on the person sitting opposite Debbie. Everything in him wanted to grab the man by the lapels and throw him forcibly out of the building, possibly with a few kicks to the gut for good measure. He settled for striding up to the table and fixing *Philip Merkins* with an imperious glare.

'Sherlock?' Debbie exclaimed. 'What are you – how did you even-

'Mr Merkins has been live-tweeting most of the meal, probably from under the table. Wasn't hard to identify it from the menu and the fact he had his location settings on. Probably making sure the ex-wife got a good digital view of the evening, or so I'd assume by the frankly saccharine wording and repeated use of the *family life* hashtag.' Indicating the offending figure, Sherlock cocked his head for a brief observation. 'Middling suit, wearing a tie – to a restaurant like this – and minor nicks while shaving point to an absentminded preparation at best. Hardly the act of a man smitten. He's been tweeting at a rate of about once every five minutes for the last two hours without mentioning his dinner companion once, which clearly shows his lack of interest in her i.e. you. He's paid the cheque because he's trying to show he's a chivalrous type, but he's left the receipt clearly visible on the table which again suggests considerable inattention. That is of course because he's more focused on thinking about how he can describe this date to the former Mrs Merkins in a manner that places him in a good, gentlemanly and above all *family-focused* light, rather than on the date itself.'

'Who the bloody hell are you?' Merkins demanded.

'Note how he's not even starting to get up from his chair to attempt to intimidate the intruder interrupting the end of the evening,' Sherlock said to Debbie. 'Now that his main purpose in arranging the entire encounter has been successfully realised he's even willing to forgo the chance of a casual sexual encounter in favour of going home to call his ex-wife and describe in excruciating detail how he left his date with a beautiful schoolteacher early because he's never going to really *get over her* and has come to understand just *how badly* he wants them to be *a family again*.'

'Oi!' Merkins *had* stood up now, clearly more objectionable to the insultingly derisive tone than the actual substance of Sherlock's remarks.

'Excessive aggression. Common sign of a correct deduction.' Sherlock stepped back and grinned broadly at the man.

'Oh my god.' Debbie was standing up too, and hurriedly putting on her coat. 'I'm so sorry, Phil – I'll see you later.'
'Very unlikely, given the – what are you doing?' Sherlock demanded when she grabbed his arm and towed him towards the door.

'What am I doing?' she exclaimed as they got outside. 'How about what are you doing?'

'I'm helping you, of course.'

'Helping me? By barging in on my date and treating it like some kind of murder case investigation?'

'Yes.' Sherlock couldn't really blame her for not understanding immediately. She was only *normal*, after all. 'He was wasting your time. He had no intention to pursue a relationship with you and was only using your presence as a mean towards his own eventual ends, namely of reconciliation with his ex-wife. Well, that and potentially having sex with you. At least my intervention saved you further inconvenience on that front.' He beamed, rather pleased with himself for that rather succinct explanation. 'The café is closed at this hour but you can come back to Baker Street for a cup of tea, and there are probably some biscuits somewhere, no substitute for coffee cake I'll admit but at least it'll salvage the rest of the evening. Where are you going?'

'Home.'

'Why? Oh! You have coffee cake at your flat. I should have realised how critical it was to–'

'No, Sherlock, I don't have bloody coffee cake at my flat, I just can't look at you right now.'

'Why not?' Smugness evaporated into confusion. 'I solved the problem of Philip Merkins' intentions and saved you the trouble of having to waste any more time in his presence.'

'Piss off!'

Sherlock was even more perplexed when he attempted to explain the situation to John and Mary the following day and they both burst out laughing at him.

'I don't see what's so funny. I helped her and she's angry with me.'

'Molly, Sherlock,' John said, battling to straighten his face. 'Remember what happens every time you tear one of Molly's boyfriends to bits because you've deduced that he's being unfaithful or has erectile dysfunction or – or is gay…'

'That one doesn't count, it was James Moriarty pretending to – oh.' Sherlock abruptly remembered the hurt, mortified expression on Molly Hooper's face. It wasn't exactly something he was unaccustomed to seeing, but still…

*That wasn't KIND, Sherlock.*

'Oh.' He slowly put down the pile of fabric swatches he was holding – Mary was being particularly tiresome when it came to choosing the colour of the dresses for her bridesmaids – and idly straightened them. 'I upset her. She wasn't angry about my accuracy, she was angry that I was there at all.'

'Ooh, well done.' Mary grinned. 'Gold star. Well, that and the fact you got attacked by the green-eyed monster about the whole thing even though all you ever do is talk at her.'

Sherlock barely heard her, getting to his feet and reaching for his coat and scarf.

'I need to apologise.'
'Now?' John exclaimed. 'At three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon? Shouldn't you – oh, god, he's gone. Of course he has.'

Mary grinned and reached for the fabric swatches.

'You know, I'm really feeling this lilac, John. What d'you think?'

While John Watson desperately tried to form anything even close to a genuine opinion on different pastel shades, Sherlock found himself standing outside a florist with a wizened old lady in a green apron giving him a somewhat owlish look.

*This, brother mine, has got to be a new low.*

Truthfully he had no idea why it was so desperately important that Debbie not be upset with him. It was absurd. Sherlock Holmes didn't care about upsetting people. Especially ordinary people. So why did the memory of Debbie Connors shouting at him and storming off invoke such a bizarre combination of hot-faced embarrassment and other...*feelings?*

'Can I help you, dear?' the florist asked him.

'Sorry,' he muttered.

'What was that, love?'

'Sorry,' he repeated, louder. 'How do I say sorry?'

'Ooh.' The wrinkled face creased in a smile. 'To a lady?'

'Yes, I suppose.' Odd how one found deductive skills – or blanket assumptions – in random places.

'Red and white roses,' she said promptly.

'Fine. Quickly.'

Of course he knew perfectly well where Debbie's apartment was, but it was only after he rang her doorbell that he realised that she had never told him, and was in all probability going to become more irrationally upset and angry with him for finding her. If he'd been thinking straight this would have probably occurred to him much earlier.

Before he could compose any sort of pre-emptive response, however, the door opened.

'Sherlock? What in god's name are you...' Debbie spotted the roses '...doing here?'

'Apologising.' He thrust the bouquet at her. 'With these. Oh, and this.' He cleared his throat. 'I'm very sorry I upset you.'

'That's not-' she ran a hand through her hair '-of course you know where my flat is, you're Sherlock bloody Holmes, aren't you?'

'...yes?' He wasn't sure how else to respond to that somewhat superfluous remark.

Her face softened and he tried to ignore the feeling of relief in his chest when the hints of a smile turned up the corners of her mouth.

'You'd better come in.'
The flat was tiny to the point of being uncomfortably cramped but Sherlock's eyes flicked over every detail. Few real personal items, mostly photographs of nursery school classes, cards and pictures, all from students, not from parents. Something was missing, but what? Personal pictures. No friends or family. Nothing but other people's children.

His mind palace, creaking as it was under the weight of all the data it held on Debbie Connors, promptly offered up additional information.

No siblings. Parents, Abigail and Stephen Connors. Retired to Almeria, Spain, ten years ago. Minimal contact, perfunctory only over social media. Estranged? No, but close to it.

'Do you want to deduce anything else from the room, or would you like a cup of tea?'

He blinked.

'I. Uh. Yes. Tea. Please.' He abruptly realised that he was still holding the flowers and brandished them at her. 'Oh, and these are for you. In case that wasn't clear.'

'I know.' She sighed, but that indulgent smile was back on her face when she turned back from putting the kettle on. 'Thank you. I suppose.' Taking them out of his hands, she ran her fingers over the petals and then set them down. 'Do you even know why you're apologising?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Of course. For deducing inappropriate – if accurate – conclusions about your date.'

'…close, but no cigar.'

'What?' That threw him for a loop.

'It wasn't what you said, Sherlock, it was that you turned up shouting in a jealous fit and-'

'Jealous? I wasn't jealous. I was simply pointing out that-'

'-you didn't want me having dinner with Phil when I could have been sitting in Caffé Nero with you?'

'Yes.' Sherlock hastily tried to mentally regroup. 'No. No. Of course not. I merely wanted to stop you from wasting your time with someone who had no real interest in you.'

'As opposed to wasting my time with someone who does.'

'Yes. No. What?'

'Forget it. Thank you for the roses. They're lovely.'

He frowned, trying to re-process.

'But you said-'

'If you'd told me about your theory the next time you saw me, or if you'd texted me earlier in the afternoon, I'd have probably laughed it off and it would have been fine,' she went on. 'But you didn't – you sat in your blessed Baker Street and grumped and groused and deduced and then stormed into the restaurant and made an enormous scene just to show off. You didn't care what happened after that as long as you got to be the centre of attention for long enough that everyone could coo over how brilliant you are.' A finger wagged at his nose although her tone remained remarkably level, more mildly scolding than truly angry. 'Well, I'm not cooing, because it was a nasty thing to do and you had no right to do it. If that's the sort of thing you do to your friends
then I've got no interest in being one.'

With that, she went back to the kitchenette to pour the tea. Sherlock floundered for a moment, completely taken aback by the unexpected surge of blind panic that accompanied her final pronouncement.

*So much for breaking the ridiculous routine before it becomes a habit.* He could just picture the disdainful sneer on Mycroft's face.

'I'm sorry,' he blurted.

She glanced back with a small frown.

'Pardon?'

'I said I'm sorry.' His voice broke and he hurriedly cleared his throat, dropping his eyes rather than facing her stare. 'I'm sorry that I interfered, and showed off, and most of all I'm sorry that I upset you because…' Damn, now what was he going to say? *Because for some reason you being upset disturbs me and I don't like it and I can't explain it and I want it to stop.*

'Because?' she prompted gently, holding out one of the cups of tea.

'Because-' he took it and swallowed hard, finally daring to look back up at her '-because I'm not used to this. To these-' a barely-concealed grimace '-feelings. I made a perfectly legitimate set of deductions but-' then he stopped short, because she'd reached up to lay a finger over his lips and for some utterly nonsensical reason it made his heart rate soar.

'It's all right, Sherlock.' She patted his hand. 'Really, it's all right. And you can sit down, if you're staying to drink your tea.'

'Oh.' Putting the cup down, he quickly took off his scarf and coat to do so. She took the other end of the couch, which was narrow enough that their legs touched, and Sherlock found himself sitting bolt upright as though the barely-there-contact of clothed limb on clothed limb was enough to set an electric shock off through his entire body. *Ridiculous.*

'So.' Debbie shuffled about so she was facing him, tucking her legs up a little and draping her arm over the back of the sofa. 'Tell me how you figured Phil out.'

'Well, it was simple, really…'

About forty minutes later, Sherlock was feeling sufficiently better that finding his cup of tea empty was rather disappointing. Debbie had listened to him patiently and attentively just as she did in the coffee shop, smiling or nodding to encourage him to go on as he explained the rather tedious but exacting details of investigating Philip Merkins. Just like it was any other case, and everything was fine, and as if he'd never upset her at all.

'Nobody's ever brought me roses before,' she said as he finished, getting up to retrieve them and finding something to put them in. 'That's really very sweet, Sherlock.'

'Yes. Well. I asked the florist, and-' he stopped, standing to put his coat back on with a sudden flurry of mild panic. He needed to leave…to get outside, and to *think*…

'It's still sweet.' She took the two steps to the threshold with him. 'And I accept the apology, by the way, in case that wasn't clear.'

'Oh. Good.' Slipping his scarf on, he edged closer to the door so he could open it to shuffle hastily
outside. 'So. Bye, then.'

'I'll see you on Friday.' Debbie leaned up and kissed him softly on the side of the mouth, then stepped back and closed the door.

It took several long moments for Sherlock's mind to reboot enough for him to actually start walking away, but he was still in something approximating a mild daze by the time he got back to Baker Street. Operating the front door proved unexpectedly difficult and it took him three attempts to get back into the flat.

John and Mary were gone, the heap of wedding planning detritus on the desk tidied into some semblance of order. A lilac taffeta swatch was on top of one pile. Ah, so Mary had finally selected her bridesmaids' colours. A good thing he'd already anticipated the choice and placed the relevant orders for her.

Now, to business. Why had Debbie kissing him – no, pecking him on the cheek – well no, but close, hardly a kiss at all really, certainly nothing to remark on, definitely nothing worth dwelling on, but he could feel the memory seeping into his mind palace, the input of every one of his senses becoming enshrined, frozen in that particular and madly glorious moment.

Sherlock frowned.

…what had he been about to think about?
Weeks wore on as the wedding approached, and cases seemed few and far between. Sherlock found himself talking more about the wedding planning than anything else to Debbie, but she didn't seem to mind. In fact she actually offered a few opinions on the workings of the female mind that proved rather invaluable to dealing with what Mary referred to as *pre-wedding nerves*.

'So are you bringing her?' John asked casually, three days beforehand.

'Who?'

'Debbie. To the wedding. You RSVPed with a plus one, so…'

'I did no such thing,' Sherlock scrambled for the guest list and frowned. Next to his own name was a small notation…clearly in Mary Morstan's hand. 'I didn't write this.'

'Best you invite her then.' John, idly reading the newspaper, seemed to be paying even less attention than usual. 'Otherwise you'll have to spend the night dancing with bridesmaids.'

'I *didn't write this*, John!' 

Further recrimination was forestalled by the beep of a text alert. Hoping against hope that Mycroft had changed his mind and would be deigning to show up for the evening do, at least, Sherlock grabbed his phone.

**That sounds lovely but I'm doing an open evening for the nursery on Saturday so I wouldn't be able to get there in time. I'm sure you'll have fun without me. Love to Mary and John.**

It was from Debbie…a response to a text *he* had never sent, the phone's records to the contrary.

'You invited her from *my* phone?' he exclaimed at John, who grinned unrepentantly.

'Well, god knows someone had to. And better her than bloody Mycroft.'

As always, John's trite comments sparked exceptional brilliance in Sherlock's own brain. Thinking rapidly, he started to compose a response to Debbie that essentially begged her to come whenever
she could so he wasn’t left alone with the bridesmaids. Then he realised he’d unconsciously slipped into the charming-dork persona he’d first used to get her to go out for coffee with him, and deleted the damned thing.

**Please come. Whenever you can. Nobody will mind. – SH**

A few minutes later a reply arrived.

**I'll try but can't promise anything, sorry!**

Of course on the day of the wedding itself he was happily rather distracted from thinking about Debbie by the murderous substitute wedding photographer. Later, after finding the surprisingly less than entirely onerous company of Janine, the maid of honour, fully occupied with one of the male guests he’d identified for her, Sherlock was somewhat at a loss. Everywhere in the room people were laughing, dancing...chatting about whatever rubbish it was people talked about just to hear the sound of each other's voices. It was unbearable.

He went to get his coat from the lobby. Better to just…be somewhere else for now.

'Sherlock?'

That voice stopped him in his tracks.

**Black dress. Different one, knee length. Professional. Flat shoes, been on her feet a lot. Hair up, not tidy, hurriedly adjusted in the cab.**

He left his coat on the hook.

'I thought-'

'I snuck out early,' Debbie said. 'Karin owned me a favour. Sorry I missed most of it. It's a lovely place, though – that garden! And you look very handsome.'

'Oh.' He tried, without success, to ignore the entirely unexpected and absurd flutter in his stomach at her smile. 'Well. Good. Thank you, I mean. Did you want to-’ indicating the door back to the reception room.

'Yes, of course! I suppose they've done pressies by now but I did get them something if there's somewhere to put it…’

Sherlock showed her to the gift table, then offered her his arm and tried not to pay attention to the feel of his cheeks colouring when she took it with a little laugh. The action brought her very close to his side as they went back into the reception.

**This is getting beyond embarrassing, brother mine.**

'Oh, Mary looks lovely. Did you play that waltz for them, the one you were writing?'

'Yes. And solved a murder.'

'At a wedding?'

'Well, nearly a murder. Nobody actually died.'

'You'll have to tell me about that!' She grinned. 'Maybe outside...good music but DJs always have things so loud. I'm sorry I missed the waltz, though. I was looking forward to hearing you play.'
'My god, I don't believe it…' that was John, from behind them ’…hello, Debbie.'

'John! Hi!' She gave him a quick embrace and a kiss on the cheek – Sherlock felt himself grind his jaw and wondered at it – with a broad, beaming smile. 'Don't you look *dashing*.'

'Oh, well, one tries…'

'Hands off, he's taken.' Laughing, Mary gave Debbie a quick hug too. 'I thought we'd missed you.'

'I'm so sorry, I got away as soon as I could.'

'Don't be daft, it's nice to see you again. Keep him out of mischief for the evening, eh?' Mary jerked her head at Sherlock with a grin. 'Oh, have you eaten? I think there's some cake left.'

'God, no thank you, I filled up on orange squash and dubious sandwiches at work.'

After a small eternity of meaningless platitudes and well-wishing, Sherlock was giving strong consideration to fleeing the room again when the music changed and for some reason Mrs Hudson's screech-owl laugh echoed across the room.

'Oh *god*, who requested that?' John exclaimed as Mary collapsed into laughter.

'What's wrong with it?' Sherlock cocked an ear. 'It doesn't seem any more or less offensive than-

'Gerry Rafferty,' Debbie said to him. 'The song's called *Baker Street*.'

’…ah.’ Some sort of attempted musical *bon mot* from another guest, presumably, unless the DJ was taking artistic liberties with the playlist. For some reason Debbie's giggle reminded Sherlock of how close she was standing to him and he took a step away, holding out his arms in the appropriate positions of invitation.

'Would you like to…?'

Debbie beamed at him and – eliciting the kind of delight he normally only felt at the sight of a particularly baffling triple homicide – took one of his hands while putting the other on her waist.

'If I can't dance to *this* song at *this* wedding then what would be the point?'

So for four minutes and ten seconds Sherlock actually got to dance, giddy as a schoolboy and briefly not caring one iota. Debbie had a fair sense of rhythm and let him lead, anticipating his steps as a good dance partner was supposed to. Once, he turned a little fast and had to pull her with him, which made her hand on his shoulder tighten just enough that his stomach flipped pleasantly, but then the song was ending…

'You cut quite a rug,' Debbie said to him as the opening chords of *Black Velvet* replaced the saxophone notes. 'Breather, or keep going? I don't think we can waltz to this though – not in the conventional sense, anyway.'

'No, I think this is more quadruple than triple time…'

'The principle's the same I suppose. C'mere.'

Sherlock tried to focus on his feet but it proved far more difficult than it should have, especially when Debbie moved up closer to his chest, ending up at a proximity better suited to a tango than a waltz, and then tilted her head up so their eyes met.
'One-two? You're still supposed to lead, Sherlock.'

'Oh. Yes.'
A month later, after he regained consciousness in the hospital room the second time, Sherlock found himself thinking about the wedding again. The recent scene between John and Mary certainly warranted a brief reconsideration of it.

Of course having a murder to solve in the middle of the day had rather livened things up, but he found his mind more often wandered back to dancing with Debbie in the evening. The feel of her so close, their hands loosely joined, then later when she'd leaned on him...he'd been trying to put her out of his mind recently, he knew, making excuses to not see her on Fridays as had become usual, not wanting to risk entangling her in his pursuit of Magnusson.

His conscious mind, anyway. In his subconscious she still dominated his mind palace, overloaded it with pointless trivia and a seemingly endless stream of sensory memories. He couldn't seem to stop cataloguing and reviewing every time they'd met, trapped in a perpetual re-examination of the most inane minutiae. Debbie wasn't just in his mind palace. She haunted it.

'Oh my god!'

Sherlock snapped back to reality and opened his eyes. His chest ached furiously but he didn't dare increase the morphine drip again. Needed to think, to plan his next move against Magnusson… why was Debbie in the room with him? More importantly, how had she-

'John rang me.' She perched on the side of the bed, closer to him than Janine had, and leaned up to touch his face briefly before running her fingers quickly through his hair. 'I came as soon as I could. What happened, Sherlock? Were you on a case, or-

'Yes,' he said. Well, it was the truth. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't matter? You're in hospital!'

'Not dead, though,' he pointed out.

'Sherlock!' Sitting up, she looked away. Frowning, he craned his neck slightly to see her face. 'You're crying. Why are you crying? Are you upset?'
'Of course I'm upset, you wally.' She half-laughed, wiping at her eyes as she turned back towards him. 'Someone I care about got shot and nearly died!'

'Someone you – oh.' He fell silent. Care about? That was new. He'd been baffled enough to find out that John considered him his best friend. But Debbie… cared about him? In what capacity? She had lots of colleagues that she called friends. Perhaps she cared for all of them, too. She certainly cared about all the children she looked after, however briefly they knew her. She seemed to care about John and Mary and she'd only met them twice.

'Sherlock.]

'Hmm?' He hurriedly refocused on her face.

'Listen-' she picked up his nearest hand in both of hers '-I don't know what this is, exactly. This, um… well, whatever, it is, with us.'

Us? The way she said the word fascinated Sherlock. Us, like the plural definition could somehow become a singular entity all its own in the context of a particular set of individuals. Sherlock and Debbie. Us.

He was surprised to find that he liked it.

Oh, she was still talking.

'…just some funny crush, or maybe you don't even know, but I do care about you. I've missed you. After the reception I thought-‘ she shook her head with a rueful little laugh ‘-I don't even know what I thought. I had fun. With you. I just wish I'd known about this-‘ indicating his general condition ‘-sooner. So I could have been here for you more. You know, bringing grapes and things like that. Oh, that reminds me…’

'I don't particularly like grapes,' Sherlock said when she took a bunch out of her bag and plopped it onto the bedside table.

'You're in hospital. It's traditional. Besides, they're good for you.' Smiling in that indulgent, infinitely kind way that made his stomach do anatomically unlikely things, she pulled one off the bunch and held it to his lips. 'Go on, for me. Please?'

A trifle uncertainly, Sherlock opened his mouth and allowed her to feed him. The feel of her fingertips brushing his lips was something he would probably revisit later, most likely in great depth, in his mind palace. The fruit was actually quite pleasant – cool and crisp, without the sickly sweetness of the grapes that Mrs Hudson kept in her fruit bowl downstairs at Baker Street.

'There, that wasn't so bad, was it?' Debbie grinned and patted his hand. 'I know you don't like anything too sweet. Another?'

He made a noncommittal noise but she ended up feeding him most of the bunch anyway. She didn't talk while she did it, either, just sat and quietly plucked grapes from the stem or stroked his hand while he chewed and swallowed. It was an immense relief from the noisome stream of angry ramblings that had been John's last visit; striding about the room ranting about Mary and murders and him being unable to have anything in his life that was normal, regardless of anything Sherlock had tried to say to him.

When the grapes were all gone Debbie just sat and stroked his hand some more.

'I'll come and see you again tomorrow. I'll bring more grapes, if you like.' She smiled. 'I don't suppose you're eating the food here, are you?'
'It's loathsome.' Sherlock considered and then dismissed asking her not to come back. Another potential *pressure point* for Augustus Magnussen was hardly something he was keen to offer the despicable man, but it was too late now. Everything was already in motion, and she had doubtless been observed coming into his room, not to mention staying for well over an hour.

'You need to eat, Sherlock,' Debbie said. 'You'll never get better if you don't.'

'I'll improve faster on no food than what they call food here.'

'You are a wally.' She leaned over and kissed him softly on the side of the mouth as she had when he'd apologised to her with roses at her flat. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Debbie was gone by the time Sherlock recovered his ability to speak – why did her doing that have such an effect on him? – but she came to see him every day after that, squarely at five thirty. As well as grapes she brought him proper food, too – small portions of things like pasta or risotto in a Tupperware container – and fed that to him even when he was more than sufficiently recovered to feed himself.

'But this way,' she said with a grin when he pointed this out, 'I can be sure you're actually eating all of it.'

He was out of the hospital by mid-December, anyway, and had the inestimable pleasure of rendering Mycroft speechless by acquiescing almost immediately to their mother's demand that her boys come home for Christmas. Of course his brother couldn't refuse when Sherlock himself had already agreed, so that was a minor triumph. He also invited Mary and John, as well as Billy, firstly because he needed John's presence as much as Billy's for his final play with Magnusson, and also on the basis that witnessing the inexplicably persistent marriage of his parents might go some way towards reconciling his friend with his new wife.

That left one final invitation, and he tried unsuccessfully to ignore the completely irrational sense of apprehension making itself known as he rang Debbie's doorbell.
'Sherlock!' Debbie beamed at the sight of him and then her brows creased in a frown. 'What're you doing here? You're supposed to be taking it easy!'

'It's hardly a laborious ten minute walk,' he pointed out.

'But it's cold outside – come in, you silly thing.'

'I'm wearing a coat. And scarf.'

'I'll make some tea. Sit down. No, there, by the radiator.'

For some reason Debbie's fussing was infinitely less irksome than that of Mrs Hudson – Sherlock suspected it was because she kept to short, functional vocalisations rather than wittering on interminably about nothing – so he sat as instructed, permitted her to make him a cup of tea, and ate the gingernut biscuit she gave him.

'You'd better not have been working on cases this week. Has John been checking up on you?'

'Frequently.' He decided not to mention the three missing persons reports and the double homicide, all of which he'd solved within half a dozen emails. 'As well as Mrs Hudson, Mary, Lestrade, Molly Hooper and most of the rest of the northern hemisphere.'

'Sherlock. You can't blame people for caring, you know.' She sat down next to him with a grin. 'So what's this visit, then? Escaping your many nursemaids?'

'Would you like to spend Christmas with my parents in Surrey?'

'...what?'

'I'll be there too, of course. And John and Mary. And Billy Wiggins, but he's... not really relevant. Oh, and my brother. Mycroft.' Why was she gawking at him like that? 'Your parents are in Spain, as good as estranged, I still haven't entirely worked out why although I have three – well, four – working theories, you haven't got any close friends or any other family outside of the five year olds in your class and in fact judging by the complete lack of Christmas décor in here you were planning to largely bypass the festive season as you do most years. So there's really nothing to stop you.'

'You want me-' she seemed to be struggling with the concept '-to meet your parents?'
'Well, that would be a rather unavoidable part of spending Christmas with them, yes. They're both incredibly tiresome, I'm afraid, but my mother is an acceptable cook. What is it?' he added, confused, when she scrubbed a hand over her face with an oddly distressed noise.

'I don't know what to say!'

'Oh. That's easy. Say yes.'

She stared at him for a moment and then burst into laughter.

'What? Why's that funny?' he demanded.

'Just…you! You impossible man.' Shaking her head, she patted his knee. 'Of course yes. I'd love to come. Thank you.'

That seemed to resolve that, and although she made his mind short-circuit again with another goodbye kiss as he left, he noticed that he was able to recover back to functioning thought levels a little faster this time.

The journey into Surrey was oddly peaceful, the stony silence between Mary and John notwithstanding. Billy spent most of the time fiddling with his phone, while Debbie sat next to Sherlock and actually dozed off to sleep on his shoulder, which made him not want to get up even when they'd arrived. He could for some reason have quite happily spent whole days just sitting in the car with Debbie leaning on him. She smelled of passionfruit and coconut, and her hair was even softer than he'd surmised.

'Oh for god's sake, Sherlock.' Mycroft was clearly flabbergasted at the company his brother was keeping and so naturally exhibited it with a particularly scathing tone. 'The nursery teacher?'

Their mother was of course beyond delighted and made a tremendous fuss of a blushing Debbie for the entire day.

'I never thought I'd see the day one of my boys brought home a lady friend – oooh, we should have put some mistletoe up!'

'God save us all,' Mycroft muttered.

'Mycroft! Be nice!'

By mid-afternoon the entire thing had become interminable, although if it had one redeeming feature then Mycroft's obvious misery was certainly enjoyable to witness. Sherlock glanced at his watch – not long now – and then went to find Debbie. She was sitting with his father in the main living room, both of them chuckling about something.

'I'll give you two a moment, then…oh, she's a dear, Sherlock,' his father added sotto voce on the way to the kitchen.

Sherlock sat down next to Debbie on the couch and noted her empty glass of punch. Good. With everything about to happen, he'd decided that the best and safest place for her was exactly where she was. Mummy liked her, so Mycroft would be obligated to protect her if something went wrong at Appledore.

'It's lovely here,' Debbie said to him. 'Your parents are so…nice. Normal. Not what I was expecting.'
'A cross I have to bear.'

'Mycroft's something else though.' She giggled. 'Is he always so grumpy?'

'Only around other people.'

'Hmm. Reminds me of someone I know.'

Sherlock drew himself up.

'I am nothing like Mycroft.'

'You're a lot cuter.' She gave his arm a squeeze. 'Thank you again for inviting me. I can't remember the last time I had a proper Christmas.'

Sherlock was still trying to fathom the concept of being cuter than Mycroft, whatever in the world that meant, when Debbie collapsed onto his lap. Oops.

'Oi. I didn't agree to nuffin' like that, Shezza,' Billy said, wandering into the room. 'Don' believe in that kind of fing. Ain't right.'

'For god's sake, she just fell asleep like that.' Sherlock hurriedly stood up and lifted Debbie's legs so she was curled up along the couch. Then he pulled the throw on the back down over her – ridiculous, the fire's right there – and tried not to let his hand linger on the softness of her hair.

'Mary?' John's voice drifted in from the other room. 'Mary, can you hear me?'

'Don't drink Mary's tea,' Sherlock said to him. 'Oh, or the punch.'

*'

'They'll be here in a moment,' Mycroft said, holding out the phone. 'For the goodbyes. I suggest you make this one brief.'

John and Mary. Of course. Sherlock took the phone and dialled. There wasn't much to say. But he knew, selfishly, that he couldn't leave England without hearing Debbie's voice one more time. In the end, standing outside Appledore, that had been the final push. Not the case, not the victory, not the anger that Magnussen had beaten him, not Mary, not even John…it was the sixteen second phone video of Debbie outside the nursery that had done it. The little smile from Magnussen.

An unexpected extra pressure point, Mr Holmes?

He still had no idea why Debbie elicited such reactions in him. Her continued overshadowing, undeletable presence in his mind palace, his inexplicable fascination with someone so utterly ordinary, the way her gentle goodbye kiss on the side of his mouth made his mind short-circuit…it all added up to the biggest mystery he'd ever encountered.

Now, standing on an airfield reflecting over the last twenty four hours, Sherlock found himself almost…saddened at the realisation that it was something he would never get to solve.

'Sherlock? Are you all right? My god, I was so worried, after.'

'I don't have long.' He considered for a moment. 'I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make our Friday appointments any more. Or, in fact, any other day. At all.'

A pause.
'What's happening, Sherlock?'

'I'm...going away.' Such a ridiculous euphemism for *I'm going on a foreign espionage mission into eastern Europe with a maximum life expectancy of six months.* 'I don't know when I'll be back.'

Another pause.

'Okay.'

'I don't know what else to say.'

'You could say..."I'll miss you." Or "I wish I didn't have to go." Or...or "I won't forget you."' She sounded like she was on the verge of crying now. He hated it.

'Yes. I suppose so.' Sherlock wondered how to go about saying what he *actually* wanted to say. *I wish I knew why you interest me even though there isn't really anything interesting about you.*

'Goodbye, Sherlock.' Oh, she was crying now, but doing her best to hide it. *I'll miss you. So much. I wish you didn't have to go wherever you're going. And I'll never, NEVER forget you.*

'Goodbye, Debbie.'

He hung up quickly and handed the phone back, ignoring Mycroft's deeply scornful look as John and Mary's car trundled into view across the airfield.

Now for the hard part.
A Late Christmas Present

With one thing and another after the completely unexpected reprieve, Sherlock didn't actually get back to Baker Street until forty eight hours later. Most of it was spent in the interminable company of his older brother, of course, but when he finally got himself turned loose and batted away the numerous startled exclamations of his landlady it was nearly three o'clock.

'You're going out again?' Mrs Hudson was being particularly irksome for some reason. 'You only just got back!'

'I have to see someone.' Sherlock closed the front door on her and pulled up his coat collar, setting off westward at a brisk pace. The steps of the Little Elves Nursery were blessedly empty at this time of day, with nearly forty-five minutes until the children were unburdened back onto their parents and guardians, and nobody stopped him when he marched straight up to the door to go inside.

The glitter-adorned wall décor had changed, if hardly improved, since his last visit in person, but it was still easy enough to take the right direction to the Green Room.

'Excuse me?' He was intercepted as he turned a corner by a slight, bony-faced woman in a bright rainbow sweater – class of two year-olds, afternoon nap time, stealing a quick fag outside and hoping none of them wake up – and obliged to stop.

'It's fine. I'm going to the Green Room.'

'Are you a parent?'

'No. I'm here to see Debbie Connors.'

'Oh.' The woman blinked and looked him up and down. 'Are you…are you Sherlock?'

If this was how abysmally easy it was to walk into a supposedly secure private childcare facility then Sherlock made a mental note to suggest to John and Mary that they not install their own offspring in any such location. A good thing he was in fact who this woman had assumed her was…although that in turn raised further questions. Debbie had mentioned him to her co-workers by name? And not by full name, or someone would have asked about the hat by now. In what context? Friend, acquaintance, incidental stalker…or something else?
'Yes, actually.' He quickly summoned up the dork-hipster persona for a brainless grin. 'I just wanted to…surprise her.'

'Oh, aren't you sweet. It's just down there, second on the left.'

Baffled anew at the implicit trust, Sherlock hastened away from the woman and found the right door, where he paused. It was slightly ajar but more importantly he could see Debbie through the glass panel. She looked...normal. Like she always did. He tried not to be dismayed by that.

_How would you rather have found her, brother mine? Weeping and wailing like a grieving widow?_

Currently she was listening to a small child's enthusiastic rantings on a piece of paper covered in crayon. He waited until the child had been dispatched back to its table – how bizarre, all the furniture being sized for five year-olds, like some Lilliputian fantasy – and then gave a couple of knocks before opening the door.

Twenty-six small faces craned in his direction but he barely noticed them. Debbie looked up and froze for a moment, then quickly put down the book she was holding and came over to him. Her eyes were shining with something that made Sherlock's heartrate speed up. She was glad to see him. _More_ than glad. Happy. No. Overjoyed.

'What are you _doing_ here?' she asked him. 'What happened to…going away?'

'Unexpected change of plans.' He felt the smile on his own face and didn't try to repress it. There was a comfortably warm, pleasant feeling in the knowledge he could now continue to explore the inexplicably interesting normality of Debbie Connors. 'I just wanted to let you know. And you don't check your phone during the day when you have a class, so…'

She hugged him. Right there, in front of more than two dozen gaping children. Sherlock wasn't quite sure what to make of this – he was hardly accustomed to being embraced – but he carefully lifted his arms to encircle her in return as it seemed appropriate. He felt his heart rate speed up as her hands clenched in the fabric of his coat and the scent of her surrounded him. Oh. This was a new reaction. Closer proximity…the closest yet, in fact.

Unfortunately she drew back before he could finish properly cataloguing his responses. Frustrating.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I know you're not tactile. I just-'

'It's all right.' Interesting. How had she arrived at that conclusion? Admittedly he wasn't usually particularly demonstrative but somehow the notion that she felt inhibited from touching him was not an enjoyable one, and he made a mental note to correct her assumption at a more appropriate sort of time.

Abruptly seeming to remember the goggle-eyed audience, Debbie glanced back at the tables of children with a smile that held a hint of playfulness.

'Sorry, everyone. This is my friend, Sherlock.'

_And why, little brother, when you were so moved by John's declaration of friendship, does hers only elicit feelings of disappointment?_

'Hello, Sherlock,' the children chorused, which was a trifle unsettling. Debbie grinned, seeming to find the discomfited look on Sherlock's face amusing.
'Uh, hello,' he said. He'd never been good at children, especially in large groups.

'Are you Miss Connors' boyfriend?' That was a skinny little girl with blonde hair in two bunches, sitting at the nearest of the three tables. Debbie hastily stifled a giggle.

'Sorry, Karin's fiancé dropped flowers off for her last Thursday and they've all been very interested in the whole business ever since…'

'Are you going to marry her?' This even more alarming question was from a rather intent-looking small boy covered in freckles.

'Um.' Sherlock blinked rapidly and tried to formulate a response.

This shouldn't be hard, brother mine. You are not her boyfriend and have no intention of marrying her, after all.

'Sherlock's my friend, Sally, that isn't the same as a boyfriend,' Debbie chided gently.

'And we're not getting married,' Sherlock added quickly.

'Why not?' the boy who'd voiced that enquiry asked, sounding vaguely offended at the response for some reason. 'Don't you think she's pretty?'

'People don't just get married because they think of each other as pretty, Ted,' Debbie said to him with a little laugh.

'You should marry Mr Thompson,' another of the girls said. 'He's taller.'

Now utterly at sea and having to consciously fight the urge to flee the room at a run, Sherlock looked desperately at Debbie.

'I'll certainly bear that in mind, Tina,' she said lightly, taking Sherlock's arm and steering him back towards the door.

'Who's Mr Thompson?' he asked, battling to keep his voice level.

Ah, jealousy rearing its ugly and irrational head once more…

'He teaches another class. He'd also be more likely to marry you, if you catch my drift.'

'Ahh.' Was that…relief?

'I'm sorry, Sherlock, I can't really…not right now…I'll be out and off home in about an hour but…who let you in, anyway?'

'The front was unlocked.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake.' She frowned crossly. 'Those reception girls are so lazy – they don't like having to keep getting up for deliveries and things, that's what it is.'

'I'll wait for you outside.'

'Don't be silly, it's cold.' Opening the door, she leaned out and gestured down the passageway. 'The blue door at the end is the staff room. Help yourself to tea. I'll be along later.'

That seemed to be that, and truth be told he was rather glad to get away from all those small, vaguely accusing eyes. Young children in groups could be unexpectedly intimidating.
The staff room was nicely furnished – in the appropriate scale – with the entire inside wall given over to an enormous noticeboard layered with schedules, notes, photographs, memos, notices and all kinds of other administrative miscellanea. The tiny adjacent kitchenette was clean but not devoid of more paper, and there were child-sized paintbrushes soaking in the sink.

He made a cup of tea, for the novelty of it, and selected one of the lounge chairs with a high back so he could adjust its angle to avoid being noticed sitting in it. After fifty two minutes – and four more trivial cases solved by email – other people started passing through the room. None of them were looking for or expecting anyone present, and so none of them noticed him. After sixty nine minutes, Debbie came in and seemed not to notice him either.

Damn, Sherlock thought. At this rate he was going to have to make himself known and then deal with a bludgeoning plethora of introductions to her boring co-workers.

…or not, as the room emptied steadily into silence over the next quarter of an hour.

'They're gone,' Debbie said quietly.

Relieved, he stood up. She was struggling not to laugh.

'Something funny?'

'You. Hiding like that. Nobody was going to *eat* you.'

'I simply had no desire to be introduced to any of your tedious colleagues.' He went to rinse out the cup he'd used. 'The children were bad enough.'

'Hmm, they're not *tedious*, though, and the questions they were asking did make you go a rather charming shade of pink.'

'Do you want to go to the café? I believe I owe you a slice of cappuccino cake, since I wasn't able to meet you last Friday.'

'I should really get home. Walk and talk?'

'All right.'

They started to make their way back towards her flat in silence.

'Your…change of plans,' Debbie said after a minute. 'Was it something to do with that man who came on the telly everywhere?'

'James Moriarty. Yes.'

'Oh.'

'He's dead.'

'Everyone seems to think so, but if you say so then I actually believe it.' She flashed a small smile. 'So is someone just…playing silly buggers, then?'

'Don't know yet. Only got back properly this morning.'

'Oh. Shouldn't you have been…investigating, rather than seeing me?'

'No.' Then, realising further explanation was probably called, for, he added, 'Often when there's
little to act on, waiting for the next move can be the best plan.'

'I see.' They were at her door now. 'Do you want another cuppa? I haven't packed the kettle yet.'

'Packed?' he echoed, alarmed, and quickly scanned her up and down. What had he missed? A holiday? No, she seemed weary, so something inconvenient…

'Late Christmas present from the landlord.' Opening the door to reveal the flat now devoid of any personal touches, with a trio of boxes and an open suitcase in one corner, she sighed. 'Decided it was time to bump up the rent. Such lovely timing. I'm halfway through my months' notice and still can't find anywhere local. Might end up having to get a bus or something…'

Sherlock's mind drew an obvious conclusion from the available data and decided to vocalise it without his conscious decision.

'There's space at Baker Street.'
'What?' Debbie exclaimed.

'Baker Street.' Sherlock hurriedly regrouped. 'John's old room. Upstairs. Empty. You could use it.'

'You mean-' she made a sceptical sort of face '-move in with you?'

'I've had a flatmate before. You said yourself that you don't get on with most women socially. I'm not a woman. I'm also not a serial killer – although admittedly I do on occasion pursue them – and I'm fairly sure I'm not a pervert, either.'

'Fairly sure?' Her tone turned teasing.

'Very sure.' He allowed the correction. 'It would certainly be a lot more comfortable than this, and is within easy walking distance of both the nursery and the café, as I can personally attest.'

'Well, I-' she brushed some hair needlessly behind her ear — self-conscious, unsure how to respond — and then shook her head '-I can't even remember what it's like, I mean I only saw it briefly and-

'Then come and see it properly. Oddly enough, I have a key. Mrs Hudson will be in. You can make the arrangements with her.'

'What, now?'

'Why not? You just said you're halfway through your notice period.'

'Well, I…' then she shrugged '…all right, why not. I suppose it can't hurt to look, if you're sure you don't mind.'

'I wouldn't have suggested it if I did.'

It took less than five minutes at a brisk pace to get back to Baker Street and Sherlock led Debbie straight upstairs, opening the door into the main room with a small flourish. He felt inordinately pleased with himself for the entire idea. It was the perfect opportunity to see her every day, to study her and continue his self-analysis with a minimum of inconvenience.

_Naturally you're trying to attribute this sudden and unnecessary idea of cohabitation to the_
Of course he was. What else was it? He was quite content by himself in the flat – Mrs Hudson's irksome intrusions aside – and he certainly had no other reason for desiring Debbie's continued presence.

This is reaching the point of genuine delusion, Sherlock. Are you REALLY going to persist with it?

Ignoring internal Mycroft, who was as irritating as the real version, Sherlock took off his scarf and coat and moved towards the kitchen.

'Tea?'

'Oh. Yes, please…gosh, is that-' then she went suddenly silent.

He put the kettle on and went back out to see why she'd cut herself off. Oh.

Oh.

She was staring – horrified – at the wall above the sofa. With one thing and another he'd never taken down the collage of surveillance material and notes. The wedding planning had been briefly overlaid on top of them, but of course that was all long gone.

'Ah. That. Yes.' He paused awkwardly as she reached out – hesitantly, like she was expecting something to bite her – and plucked one of the photos off the wall.

'Is this…who took this?'

'My homeless network.' At her aghast look he hurriedly went on. 'I use them to look for things, monitor places and people, anyone of particular interest that I'm investigating…'

'And you were investigating me.'

'Yes.'

'Because you thought I was some sort of criminal mastermind.'

'Yes. Or a spy.'

'Or a spy,' she echoed. 'Because…because you found me interesting even though I'm actually not interesting at all.'

'Yes.' Why was she repeating things she already knew out loud?

'That was months ago. Why is this still here?'

'I didn't get around to taking it down. And then there was the wedding. And then-'

'Will you take it down now, please?' She was battling to keep her voice level. Oh. He'd upset her somehow. What was the term Mary used? Freaked her out. Or frightened her, perhaps.

'Yes. Of course.' He hopped up onto the sofa and tore the whole lot down off the wall in a few big handfuls. It wasn't like he didn't have every scrap of data memorised anyway. It could have been thrown away a long time ago.

'Don't you think maybe you should shred that?' Debbie asked.
'Why?'

'It's basically my life on paper, Sherlock…'

'Oh.' What was she concerned about? Who in the world would try to steal her life, when it was so utterly banal? He did, however, quickly rip the more formal document copies up into strips before bundling them back into the bin. 'There. Sorry.'

'Okay,' she said faintly.

The kettle clicked off and he went to make the tea. When he came back she appeared to have composed herself and was looking around the room. Her eyes lingered on his violin – *I was looking forward to hearing you play* – the spray paint and bullet holes in the wallpaper, the skull on the mantelpiece, the bookshelf, the fireplace, and finally came back to rest on him.

'It's very…characterful,' she said with a smile as he passed her one mug. 'Thank you.'

'The kitchen's just here.' He moved to encourage her to look, and only then remembered that he'd been reviewing some samples from Bart's which were currently all over the table. 'I can – ah – move some of this-'

'Oh my goodness.' But she wasn't looking at the beakers. 'Is that a proper gas cooker?'

'…yes?' Then his mind palace helpfully offered up the relevant data – Debbie liked cooking, baking especially, but despised electric ovens and in particular the tiny one in her current flat because it didn't heat up evenly.

'Lovely tiles.'

'Bathroom.' Sherlock remembered what he was supposed to be doing and hastily made his way into the corridor. 'That's my room. John's – um – the spare one – is upstairs.'

'Oh my god. I can't remember the last time I had an actual bath…sorry, yes. Upstairs?'

The room was clean, neat, and completely bare of anything personal. Of course John had very thoroughly collected his belongings at whatever point during Sherlock's two year absence he had moved in with Mary.

He wasn't sure what made it remarkable enough to warrant the gasp from Debbie. Unless it was the level of dust. Mrs Hudson had neglected cleaning since the room wasn't being used.

'My god, this is bigger than my entire flat!' She went to look out of the window and ran one hand idly over the surface of the desk beneath with a little sigh. 'It's marvellous, Sherlock, but I really don't think I'll be able to-

'Of course you will. Come back down and we can sort it out. Mrs Hudson!' he added at a shout in the general direction of the passageway.

It took nearly a whole exasperating minute for the landlady to finish whatever trivial thing she'd been doing and get upstairs, but whatever irritating protest she'd been about to voice thankfully died on her lips to be replaced by a broad smile at the sight of Debbie standing by the window.

'Oh hello – you must be Debbie! You know, I've been wondering when he'd finally-

'Debbie's going to take John's old room upstairs, Mrs Hudson,' Sherlock said, before the woman could go off on another of her tiresome rambles. 'She likes the bath, the kitchen tiles and the
cooker in particular, although I doubt that's relevant.'

'I really don’t think I can-' Debbie began again, but Mrs Hudson clapped her hands in delight.

'Oh, lovely! Let me go and find the paperwork, just a tick…'

'Sherlock, I really doubt-' Debbie was still desperately attempting to convey her budgetary expectations but he dismissed it, already knowing full well that it wouldn't be a problem once she actually saw the rent rather than assuming the rate based on the flat and its location.

'It'll be fine. More tea?'

'Sherlock, listen to me-'

'Here you are, dear.' Mrs Hudson shoved the envelope of papers into Debbie's hands and then beamed at Sherlock. 'Oh, this'll be so lovely. Having another girl about the place.' She gave Debbie's arm a playful little nudge. 'Never thought I'd see the day Sherlock had a young lady, but you're just right for him. I can tell, you know, at my time of life.'

'That's very – um – kind but I really don't oh my god.' Her jaw visibly dropped. 'That's less than I pay for my current place! Is that a typo?'

'Oh, no, dear, bless you. Sherlock helped me out a while back when my husband was on death row in Florida-'

'Oh my goodness.'

'-he made sure the conviction went through and got the nasty bugger executed. Well, the room's vacant now although I daresay it needs a good clean, so when were you thinking of moving in?'

Sherlock beamed in satisfaction as Debbie somewhat falteringingly confirmed the arrangement, signed the papers and then tried to stop Mrs Hudson from going into a cleaning frenzy on the upstairs room, rather fruitlessly as the landlady scurried off in an eager bustle to find her duster.

Debbie sat down rather hard on the sofa with the papers clutched in her hand for a moment, then looked up with a funny expression.

'Your landlady gives you a deal on the rent because you helped get her husband executed in Florida? Is anything about you even remotely normal?'

'God, I hope not. And in fairness he did commit a double homicide.'

She laughed, shaking her head, and stood up.

'You are…something else, Sherlock. If you're not careful I might have to hug you again.'

'You can if you like,' he said. Ideal time to dispel that odd and incorrect assumption. 'I'm not non-tactile, as such. I just don't normally. But I don't mind. If you want to. Hug me, that is.'

Oh, VERY articulate, brother mine.

'You may regret saying that.' She smiled and put her arms around him again. He'd expected to be better prepared this time but without his coat in the way the feel of her embrace was noticeably different. Warmer. Somehow softer. Why did her hair smell so appealing? He'd have to analyse her shampoo. That would be a lot easier now she was going to be living in Baker Street. Oh, his heart rate had rocketed again. Why did that keep happening?
'I'd better ring a man with a van,' she said, pulling back with a grin. 'Thank you, Sherlock. I just… I can't thank you enough for this. I'll have to ask John for some tips on how to be a good flatmate! At least the upstairs is big enough that I can keep all my nursery bits up there out of your way. I doubt glitter glue and animal alphabet flashcards would add much to the detective mystique.'

'I think you'd be surprised, actually.' Now, why did he feel disappointed? Of course she wasn't going to be around all the time and sit in John's chair and get involved with cases. 'And please don't feel like you have to…keep out of the way.' Why had he said that? No, it made perfect sense – if he wanted to continue to study her and the effects that her presence had on him, it was only logical to maximise his exposure to her company.

'I'm sure we'll work it out. Guess I'll see you tomorrow evening then. Roomie.' She flashed a bright smile and kissed his cheek. Interesting. Although it was anatomically impossible for his stomach to flip over, it distinctly felt like it had…and then she was gone.
Unfortunately a somewhat promising homicide took Sherlock's attention the following day and he didn't get back to Baker Street until rather late. The moment he walked into the sitting room, however, he knew something was wrong.

Quickly flickering his gaze over all the furnishings, he isolated the problem. Nothing had been relocated but *everything* had been moved. Someone had dusted. *Everything.* What was that smell coming from the kitchen? Oh, not quite everything – his chemistry equipment was exactly where he'd left it on the table, but the entire room surrounding it had been cleaned and tidied up and that delicious odour was a lamb casserole bubbling in the oven. No, not all of it. Something else too, something baked…

'Oh, there you are. I didn’t know when you'd be back so I made something that could simmer. Is everything all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.'

Sherlock blinked rapidly several times and changed mental gears. Debbie. He'd forgotten. She was barefoot, in pyjama bottoms. She had nice feet. He'd never seen her feet before.

'I had a bit of a clean but I didn't touch any of the laboratory,' she said. 'Hungry? If not it'll keep, but I left it on the heat just in case.' A slightly apologetic grin. 'It's been so long since I've had access to a proper kitchen, I just couldn't resist. Hope you don't mind. Mrs Hudson stole a muffin but there's plenty left.'

*Ah. American muffins. Of course. Fresh cake. Chocolate chips. What else? Rosemary, red wine, garlic, thyme.* He hadn't eaten all day. The case had been too interesting.

'I found these, by the way, for some reason they were under the coal scuttle.' She brandished a bundle of cigarettes with a frown. 'Are they yours?'

'No,' he said quickly. For some reason he didn't like the idea of her knowing about his smoking. 'They must be John's.'

'Really? Him a doctor, you'd think he'd know better! Silly man. Does Mary know?'

'Probably.'
'Well I'm going to throw them away. Honestly, and he struck me as the sensible sort. Anyway, did you want some dinner?'

'Yes. Please.' He adjusted his gaze to her face. 'Casserole. Smells…good.'

'All right.' That seemed to please her. 'I'll dish up, then.'

They ate at the table in the living room. He had two platefuls, a chocolate muffin and a cup of tea while he told her about the case. She made a face at his clinical description of the evisceration but chuckled at his explanation of Lestrade's bumbling attempts at deduction. He was rather dismayed when she stood up.

'Where are you going?'

'To bed! It's nearly midnight, and I've got work tomorrow. Night, Sherlock.' She pecked him on the cheek, at which point he was too busy mentally short-circuiting to properly notice as she went up the stairs.

* * *

It was Mary who suggested, on the way back from Lamaze class, that they stop in at Baker Street to check up on Sherlock. In the week since his unexpected reprieve from exile things had been unfairly hectic and John realised rather guiltily that he hadn't actually seen his friend – not so much as exchanged a text – since the airfield.

'What's that smell?' John wondered aloud as they went up the stairs.

'Smells like…' Mary sniffed deeply '…ooh, it smells like ginger. And…baking.'

'Why in the world would-' John stopped himself short as he opened the door to be confronted with the cheery face of Debbie Connors. 'Debbie. Hi.'

'John, hello! Nice timing, the kettle just boiled.'

'Um…' he wandered in as she drifted to the kitchen. Good lord. The flat was clean…cleaner than he'd ever seen it even after Mrs Hudson's best efforts.

'Someone dusted,' Mary said, levering herself down onto the couch and wiping a finger over a nearby surface. 'I thought he went bananas if anyone touched his dust?'

'I have no idea…'

'Oh my god, Mary!' Debbie had come back in and clapped one hand to her mouth. 'I had no idea – oh, congratulations! You look wonderful…you're glowing! No, no, sit down, I'll make you a cup of tea. Would you like some ginger cake? It's just about ready to cut.'

John was still trying to formulate some coherent line of enquiry when Sherlock finally came out of his room – it was apparently a pyjamas and dressing gown day, so presumably no cases, but he looked surprisingly put-together given that conclusion – and made a beeline for the kitchen.

'I swear to god, if this is like that thing with Janine, I'm going to sit on him,' Mary growled.

'Why are you cutting the cake? You said it needed to cool down first.' Sherlock's voice, vaguely miffed, drifted in from the other room.

'It's cool enough. Stop lurking, and go and say hello to John and Mary. Why on earth didn't you
tell me they were expecting a baby?' Debbie's tone was halfway between amused and scolding.

'I assumed when you saw them it would be fairly obvious. Hello, John.'

'Sherlock.' John took a breath. 'What's – ah – this, then?'

'Stickly stem ginger cake,' he replied calmly, as though reciting words from a script. 'Hello, Mary.'

'I meant…this.' John indicated Debbie as she breezed through into the living room to put a laden tray of tea and cake slices on the coffee table. 'Debbie. Here.'

'Oh. That. Well-

'My landlord decided to bump up my rent just after Christmas,' Debbie supplied. 'Sherlock sort of rescued me from potential bedsit or bus travel hell. I'm in your old room upstairs.'

'Really.' John accepted a slice of cake and cup of tea before sitting down next to Mary on the couch. He was studiously avoiding his wife's gaze, aware that she was right on the edge of erupting into raucous laughter.

'I found some of your old fags while I was cleaning, too, but I threw them out. Honestly, you're a doctor, you should know better. I do hope you're not smoking anywhere near Mary!'

'What?' John nearly choked on his tea. 'Smoke? I've never smoked in my bloody life!' Sherlock had sat down in his armchair and was making an unusually studious perusal of the newspaper.

'I found a packet of cigarettes hidden under the coal scuttle…'

'John doesn't smoke, Debbie,' Mary said, somehow keeping a straight face. 'Never has. As you say, he is a doctor.'

Debbie whirled towards the fireplace.

'William Sherlock Scott Holmes, you fibber!'

The tone was an almost precise mimicry of the one John had heard Mrs Holmes use over Christmas on Mycroft, which was presumably also where Debbie had learned Sherlock's full name. She strode right over to the armchair and snatched the paper out of his hands, swiftly folding it up and – to John's lasting gratification – swatting the detective over the head with it.

'It's just for when I need to think,' Sherlock said dismissively, scrubbing a hand back through his hair with measured reproach.

'Or are bored,' Mary corrected.

'You smoke when you're bored?' Debbie exclaimed. 'What kind of mad non-reason is that? I thought you were supposed to be a genius, Sherlock!'

'I fail to see what bearing my intellect has on-

'Filling your lungs up with tar and god-only-knows what else?'

'John,' Mary said in a low voice, amusement apparently gone. 'I think we might have to have a little…talk with Debbie.'
'Yeah.' John watched the woman exasperatedly haranguing Sherlock – probably in much the same way she did a recalcitrant five year-old – and realised he'd somewhat lost sight of the funny side of it as well. 'I think so.'
It took a little arranging and some furtive messaging via Mrs Hudson but John finally managed to arrange to take Debbie to lunch the following week. Mary unfortunately ended up incapacitated by a particularly trying set of back spasms but gave her blessing – loudly – for him to go along anyway as it was important. So, leaving his heavily pregnant wife lying on her back on the floor with her phone and a cup of tea in arm's reach, this being the only position she claimed could relieve the ache in her spine, John sat down with Debbie and some sandwiches in a little café just around the corner from the nursery.

'All very cloak and dagger,' she said with a small smile. 'Is something wrong? You don't – um – mind that I'm in your old room, do you?'

'No, no, nothing like that.' John sighed. 'It's Sherlock. I just thought given the change in…well, the living arrangements, there are some things you ought to know.'

She listened carefully, going rather pale but not saying anything, until he was done.

'So. Um.' John had honestly expected something more than a long swallow of tea and a deep breath in terms of a reaction. 'Sorry. Not trying to scare you, or anything, but Mary and I both thought that you really ought to know what you were…well, getting into. Living with Sherlock is…well, it's sort of a full time job. Oh, and don't,' he added when she looked like she was about to speak, 'Please don't get any half-baked notions about fixing him or anything.'

'I know,' she said, quiet but firm. 'I did a course on…well, it was for at-risk children, but the principles doubtless hold much the same. You can't cure addicts.'

'Yeah. Although Sherlock always insists he's a user, not an addict.' John dug into his pocket for the pair of lists he'd scribbled down on the bus – one of symptoms, one of hiding spots in the flat – and the card with Mycroft's mobile number on it. 'If you decide to stay – and I do mean if, because nobody in their right mind would blame you if you ran a mile – these might be useful. You can always call me, or Mary, and Mrs Hudson knows as well, but if it – I mean if he really goes off on one, give Mycroft a ring. He has…procedures in place.'

'Okay,' she said faintly, but he noticed that she put all three bits of paper carefully into her purse next to her driver's license. 'He hasn't had…therapy, or anything like that, has he?'

The short, mirthless laugh escaped John before he could censor it.
'Can you imagine a therapist on the planet equipped to deal with Sherlock Holmes?'

'I suppose.' She sighed. 'All right then. It just seems like such...such a waste. This beautiful, brilliant nutbar of a man and he's...'

'Yeah. I know.' Brilliant nutbar was one of the more succinct – not to mention polite – descriptions of Sherlock that John had ever heard. He wasn't sure about the beautiful part, though. 'Look, Debbie, I don't know what it is with you and Sherlock – or Sherlock and you – or whatever – but I don't think I've ever seen him actually ashamed, of his smoking at least, to anyone else. Just-' he wasn't even sure quite what he was trying to say, now '-just be careful, all right? You'd hardly be the first heart he's broken.'

'I should think not.' She gave him a tight little smile. 'Thank you, John. Really. I'd rather have found out this way than...well.'

'Think you'll stay? Because really, nobody would-'

'Yes, I'll stay. It's a nice flat. Lovely gas cooker. Handy for work. Besides-' dropping her eyes under the guise of putting her purse carefully back into her bag '-I've been given up on for much less. I don't like the idea of being someone who'd...abandon a friend in need.'

'Well then.' John was desperately curious about that but, unlike Sherlock, knew when not to pry further. 'I think Sherlock's very lucky to have found you.'

She smiled again, more warmly.

'I'd say he's very lucky to have found both of us.'

* *

It was only a few days after this that DI Lestrade happened to come by Baker Street with a case file and bumped into Debbie Connors in the passageway. John found them still chatting a few minutes later and barely stifled a grin when a very disgruntled Sherlock stuck his head out of the living room door to glare at the hallway in general.

'Do you have a case, Lestrade, or are you just wasting everyone's time as usual?'

'Sherlock!' Debbie scolded. 'Be nice. Greg's brought you a nice murder to solve.'

'Who?'

'He's a bit extra-cranky today,' Debbie added with a knowing glance at John. 'He tried to sneak a ciggie out of the evidence bag in the toilet cistern but some thoughtless person had made a hole in it and the whole pack was soaked through.'

'Oh, dear,' John said in a similar vein.

'Just you two go in and I'll put the kettle on.'

While Sherlock flicked through the case file and made dismissive noises, John tried terribly hard not to notice Lestrade's extremely unsubtle attempts to flirt with Debbie. In fairness she was hardly discouraging the man, but it was still rather amusing. It became even more so when Sherlock stopped huffing at the CSU report long enough to notice the interaction between the policeman and his new flatmate. John saw his friend's eyes narrow over the top of the foolscape folder and put his cup of tea down, mentally bracing himself.
'What are you doing?' Ah, there it was.

'Eh?' Lestrade frowned at him. 'Well, other than waiting for you to give me a theory—'

'You're clearly attempting to seduce Debbie. Stop it. He's divorced,' Sherlock added casually in her direction. 'Wife was a serial adulterer. Ex-wife, I should say. Series of brief and unsuccessful relationships since, the most recent with a forensics officer named Jillian who found him tedious company because all he talked about was the job. Slightly better choice than Philip Merkins perhaps, at least on a character level, but distinctly unlikely to progress any further so I'd recommend bypassing the entire thing to save on awkward encounters in the hallway…'

'Bloody hell, Sherlock!' Lestrade protested.

'I just finished filling that Victoria sponge,' Debbie said calmly. 'Did you want a slice? You-' she added pointedly when Sherlock perked up slightly '—can drink your tea and solve that murder and be quiet.'

'That, by the way,' John said quietly to Lestrade once they both had a slice of cake, Debbie had retired to the desk and Sherlock was sulkily perusing the file again, 'Was Sherlock being jealous.'

'Good god.'

'I know.'
Ridiculous Little Ceremony

After two weeks of sharing Baker Street with his new flatmate, Sherlock found himself getting increasingly frustrated. Debbie kept the flat immaculately clean and tidy – even Mrs Hudson commented how nice it looked, on more than one occasion – she cooked and baked prolifically enough that in between cases he'd taken to investigating the fridge just to see what was in it, and every day she short-circuited his thought processes at least once by giving him a little kiss goodbye or good night.

He actually found himself rising earlier on weekdays so he was about as she departed for the nursery, just so he could receive the quick peck of goodbye that she unfailingly gave him on her way out. If he went out and she was in – rare, but it happened on weekends – she always got up from whatever she was doing and did the same thing once he'd put his coat on. The odd fizzlingly blank sensation in his brain that always followed the contact became something he found himself thinking on repeatedly, replaying over and over in his mind palace, even craving in its absence.

What baffled and aggravated him was his growing fixation with this ridiculous little ceremony. There was no logical reason for it. It wasn't even a real kiss. His other shortcomings on the practical side of interpersonal relationships aside, Sherlock knew perfectly well how kissing worked. Both pairs of lips were supposed to be involved, at the very least. But Debbie never kissed him on the lips – it was always the same spot, just to the left of his mouth and below his cheek.

On the third Saturday after John and Mary's visit, Sherlock got a text from Lestrade and was rather delighted to have a fairly boring early afternoon interrupted by a promising strangulation. As he sprang to his feet to get his coat, however, his gaze fell on Debbie sitting at the living room table and a superb idea landed in his mind. She was intent on what she was doing – the preparation of some sort of counting exercise for her classes – and barely paying attention to him.

'Strangulation in Pimlico,' he said, but refrained from mentioning Lestrade. He didn't like the DI's interest in Debbie, even if nothing had come of it.

'Mmm-hmm?' She glanced at him with a small smile. 'Have fun.' Then, as he'd known she would, she hopped up from the chair to give him the little goodbye kiss. 'See you later.'

He got halfway down the stairs before allowing himself to remember that he hadn't actually put his coat on. This of course meant that he had to go back up to retrieve it. Once he'd shrugged it on he wandered past the desk again and – as he'd known she would – Debbie hopped up to repeat
the goodbye ritual.

Gratified that the idea had worked, he set off back down the stairs. This time he let himself get almost to the bottom before remembering that he'd left his scarf behind. Back up to the flat, put it on, past the desk again on the way to the door...

He frowned. She hadn't stood up or even seemed to register his return.

'Forgot my scarf,' he said quickly, and leaned down towards her slightly. 'So. Off to Pimlico.'

'All right.' Debbie glanced at him, then gave a little smile. 'Have fun.'

'Bye then.' Why did he feel disappointed? Was he so attached to this ridiculous little routine? Then she stretched up and kissed him softly, exactly as she was supposed to, and everything was all right again. Now thoroughly pleased with himself, he ambled back downstairs, opened the front door, put one foot onto the step and...oh, dear...he'd forgotten something else, as well.

Better make this the last one today. She may be normal but she's not a moron.

He opened the door fully planning to breeze through again but was stopped short by Debbie standing right there and blocking his path.

'Gloves. Wallet. Toolkit. Phone. Anything else? You seem to be very forgetful today.' Oh. Had he annoyed her? No, she was amused. Amused? Why? Did she find the idea of him having memory problems humorous?

'No. Thank you.' He pocketed everything while hurriedly reviewing. Clearly she'd been paying more attention than he'd thought. How could he not have noticed? Stupid, stupid. He'd been so intent on his own supposed-brilliance at a way to increase the volume of sensory data-

Because of COURSE that was the foremost thought in your mind, little brother.

-that he hadn't actually been monitoring Debbie's responses properly. Foolish, idiotic mistake.

'Sherlock,' she said as he returned to the stairs, making him glance back. 'If you want a kiss, you don't need to wait until one of us is leaving. You can just ask.'

Then, with a smile that inexplicably made his cheeks tingle, she closed the door and left him standing in utter perplexity in the hallway.

If you want a kiss...

It was just sensory data, Sherlock told himself. Continued collection for review. He was still investigating, trying to understand why she had the effect on him that she did. That was all. Wasn't it?

Confused, irritated, face hot, Sherlock hastened away to find a cab. To make the day complete in its irksomeness, the strangulation was painfully obvious and barely kept his attention for ten minutes, which gave him the entire return trip to brood his way back into angry boredom. He stomped straight into the flat, shedding coat and scarf, and collapsed into his chair with a huff.

He desperately needed a cigarette. Or something stronger...

'I thought we had an elephant visiting.' Oh, Debbie had come back down from her room. 'How was Pimlico, then?'
'Boring. Obvious.'

'Oh dear. I'll put the kettle on, shall I?'

'A cup of tea isn't going to help.' He slouched lower in the chair and considered taking his shoes off to throw at the wall.

'Hmm. I suppose you decided in the cab to be a Grumpasaurus, did you?'

'…what?'

'Make that a Grumpasaurus Rex, then.'

'A what?'

'Don't tell me you didn't go through a dinosaur phase, Sherlock. Every little boy goes through a dinosaur phase.'

'Oh. Those.' He let his head fall back and his eyes closed. 'I suspect I deleted it. Not important.'


*Come on Redbeard, we've got to find the treasure!*

'Deleted it,' he lied quickly.

'No wonder you're cranky. Oosa gwumpy Sherlock den?'

At that last, fearing she'd all of a sudden had a stroke, he opened his eyes to find a plush cartoon feline bouncing around in his line of vision. Oh, it was a hand puppet of some sort.

Debbie giggled.

'We're going to the zoo next week so I thought I'd get some practice in for the animal theatre afterwards. Sort of a tradition.'

'What in the world is that supposed to be?'

'It's a grumpy tiger. Specifically with a toothache. I was going to model him on you.'

'I don't have a toothache.'

'No, you're just acting like it.' She grinned and went into the kitchen, bustling about a bit and then returning with a tray that had a cup of tea and a plate with a sandwich on it.

'Here. You haven't eaten anything today which won't be helping. Don't argue, it's only one round of a sandwich and it's that nice sharp cheddar I know you like.'

'John never nagged me to eat all the time,' Sherlock grumbled. 'How are talking animals supposed to be educational, anyway?'

'Stimulates the imagination, encourages exploration and self-engagement with the environment, stops cute little curly-haired boys turning into grumpy recluses who only come out when there are murders to solve…'
to swallow properly.

*New tactile input, entirely unexpected. That's all.*

*That's ALL.*

Debbie retired to the sofa with a book – she never sat in John's chair – so after grudgingly finishing the sandwich and tea Sherlock stomped out to have a bath. At the very least that minor task would occupy him briefly.

Now in pyjamas and his blue robe, he went to the smaller fridge to see if there was anything worth doing in there. Debbie had insisted on getting a second one for his experiments after finding a bag of thumbs in the vegetable crisper. She'd even stencilled the words *Sherlock's Lab Fridge* with a skull and crossbones on the door in dark blue poster paint, which Mrs Hudson found inexplicably hilarious.

There wasn't much useful he could think of to do with the thoracic organs sitting in their bag, so he went to collapse onto the sofa. Except of course Debbie was curled up on the end nearest the door, so he couldn't.

'What?' she asked after he'd stared blankly at her for a moment while trying to decide on his next course of action.

'Nothing.' He paced a little, picked up his violin, then put it down again. For some reason his half-formed plan to stretch out on the couch and read something seemed to be consuming him all the more because he couldn't immediately do so.

'Sherlock-'

'*God,* I need a cigarette.'

'No you don't. Come here.' She put the book aside and adjusted the way her legs were tucked under her. 'Come on. Sit-' pulling him down onto the seat beside her 'and *down.*'

He rocked bolt upright again in alarm when she pressed gently on his shoulder. She wanted him to lie on the sofa *while* she was on it?

'You're sitting there.'

'So? You can either put your head on my lap, or your feet. Your choice.' A grin. 'Hmm, make it feet, actually. I can see if you're ticklish.'

Sherlock didn't much like that idea – he'd never been tickled in his life, at least that he could remember – but after a fleeting consideration he cautiously stretched his legs out and leaned down so the back of his head was pillowed on her thighs. What a strange angle to view her face from.

'Chicken,' she said with a wink.

'I'm not *ticklish,*' he said with as much dignity as he could muster.

'I bet you are. The most ticklish people always deny it the most.' Then she dropped both her hands to her lap, starting to run her fingers across his temples and comb gently back through his hair.

Then, in a mental voice that didn't sound like himself at all, he found himself thinking *this is nice.*

Debbie moved one of her hands while the other kept stroking softly through his hair. She'd picked her book back up and was reading again, but without ceasing the motion of her fingers.

*This is very nice.* Sherlock let his eyes slide closed. *Calming. Like a cigarette. Maybe even better...*
When Sherlock blinked his eyes open again it was dark outside and the lamp was on. He'd…napped, and through a fair chunk of the early evening. Debbie was no longer playing with his hair, but one of her hands was laid on the top of his chest, now and then idly stroking back and forth on his t-shirt.

'Nice little doze?' she said, glancing down at him with a small smile. 'For a while there I thought you were going to start purring.'

'I'm not a cat,' he groused, but nonetheless found himself very disinclined to move. He was immensely comfortable, and perhaps if he stayed put she'd start stroking again.

'And yet.' Her other hand appeared and brushed a lock of hair back from his forehead. Which felt nice too, but Sherlock battled to focus.

'You were reading. You've stopped.'

'I finished the book.' A soft laugh. 'I couldn't bring myself to disturb you, you looked so peaceful.'

'I was unconscious.' He sat up – aware of his own reluctance but ruthlessly pushing it aside – and cast about for something to occupy himself.

'You were dozing, Sherlock, and for the record you looked adorable. Mrs Hudson thought so too.'

'Mrs Hudson?' The notion that the landlady had entered the flat, presumably made some kind of comment and then left again while he was asleep on the couch was frankly alarming.

'She came up for those Eccles cakes I promised her. Speaking of, how about some dinner? It's getting on but I can throw some pasta together if you want.'

'Fine.' Sherlock barely noticed as she got up and went into the kitchen. Surely he'd had some kind of sensory input. He couldn't have been that deeply asleep. He was never so deeply asleep that he couldn't maintain at least a peripheral awareness of his immediate surroundings, especially after two dangerous years dismantling Moriarty's criminal network, effectively on the run and surrounded by potential enemies at all times.

Relaxation, dear brother. The abatement or relief from bodily or mental work and effort. Reduction in dopamine, adrenalin, and cortisol levels. Increase in serotonin, phenethylamine, and endorphins, leading to feelings of pleasure and comfort, and in turn to self-sedation.
Bloody Mycroft. Sherlock scrubbed his hands back through his hair in irritation.

'What's wrong?' Debbie asked from the kitchen doorway. 'Headache? I sometimes get a headache after I nap. Drink of water usually helps.'

'I don't nap,' he spat back, standing up and stalking across to glare out of the window. 'Never have.'

'Well, you must have needed it, then.' She came over and laid one hand on his back, rubbing slow circles between his shoulder blades while the other stroked his upper arm.

More new sensory data. This was insane.

'You keep touching me,' he said stiffly, then wished he hadn't when she dropped her hands.

'Sorry. I'll stop.'

'No, I didn't mean - but what DID I mean? '-it's all right. I'm just not used to it. 'What you said earlier. About the - the way you say goodbye to me. It isn't what you think. I've been collating sensory data, that's all, and-'

'You don't have to explain yourself, Sherlock. It's fine.' She smiled in that warm, kind way that caused odd, inexplicable stirrings low in his belly. 'I just don't want you to be uncomfortable, or feel like you have to…pretend around me.'

'I don't,' he replied. What an odd concept. Most people reacted infinitely better to him when he donned one of his concealing personas. 'And I'm not.'

'Good. But if I ever do…you know, get too tactile, or whatever, please tell me? Don't just…well…Sherlock it away for deletion, or something. I want to know.'

'All right.' If only he could delete her - any of her – from his mind. It was positively creaking under the weight of memories and factoids and experiences, from her repertoire of baked goods recipes to the smell of her hair, the touch of her hands, the feel of her lips…

'You said I should ask,' he said, which checked her as she started to walk back to the kitchen. 'If I wanted – you know.'

'Additional sensory data?' she asked with a small grin.

'Yes. That.' Perhaps sticking to the appropriate terminology would make things easier, although he was fully aware that her adoption of it was mainly teasing. 'Did you mean it?'

'I wouldn't have said it if I didn't.'

'Well. How should I-' he gestured idly '-ask?'

'However you like.' She was trying hard not to laugh. 'We can agree on a special, secret signal if you want. A code word. A special sequence of blinks or finger tapping.'

He frowned.

'That seems awfully complicated – oh.' Naturally she was teasing him again. 'Fine.' Steeling himself, he turned to face her and laced his fingers together behind his back. It would be best to keep things simple. 'Kiss, please.'
She broke into a broad smile that make the corners of her eyes crinkle and dimples appear on her cheeks. For some reason Sherlock felt his breath catch, but then she stretched up on tiptoes and planted a little kiss in the usual spot and he exhaled all at once with a small gasp. Fascinating. Even with the direct request, the combined anticipation and impact of the contact was no less.

'There. See?' Debbie chuckled at him. 'Now, I'd better see to dinner.'

The new arrangement turned out to be extremely satisfactory over the next few days. Sherlock was delighted that there was a way around the awkward interpersonal dynamic. It was no different to collecting a sample from Bart's, really. Just put the request in and wait. Often not very long, but the principle was the same and if anything more convenient.

'…you can't arrest a jellyfish, though, can you? Oh, hello Debbie.'

'Hello, you two. Good case?'

'Different, certainly.'

Sherlock checked his phone while John and Debbie exchanged brief small talk in the hallway. The most recent case had been rather interesting – fascinating, even – but now it was over, solved, and sadly boredom beckoned anew.

'Heading out?' John asked.

'Just to the shop quickly,' Debbie said. 'I was thinking of getting some chips on the way back. Did you want anything, Sherlock? There's still that rhubarb pie in the fridge, don't forget. You help yourself too, John,' she added with a grin.

'That does sound tempting.'

'Not hungry,' Sherlock said, putting his phone back into his pocket. 'Kiss, please.' He dipped his head a little so she could do so without stretching. Even right by the door with John staring in outright astonishment, the fizzing mental short-circuit still stalled his brain for six fascinating seconds.

'Be back in a sec.'

Once Debbie had gone, shutting the front door behind her, Sherlock noticed that John was all but gaping at him.

'What?'

'What d'you mean, what?' John flapped his arms in that exasperating way that meant he was aghast about something he deemed obvious. 'Kiss, please? Like you'd ask for a cuppa? Not that you usually say please when you ask for a cuppa, mind.'

'For god's sake, John, it was simply a request for direct sensory stimulus. It's a new arrangement to facilitate my investigation.'

'Your investigation.'

'Yes.'

'Of... Debbie kissing you.'

'Of Debbie's inexplicable capability to remain firmly and resoundingly resident in my mind palace
despite all my deletion attempts.'

'Oh.' John affected comprehension. 'So this is all in the name of science, is it?'

'Exactly.'

'Nothing to do with the fact that you're madly in love with her.'

Sherlock scoffed and rolled his eyes.

'Please, John. You know I'm not one to be the victim of idle sentiment.'

'I didn't say it was idle anything…' John trailed off abruptly, looking at his own phone. 'Oh, god. Fifty nine missed calls from Mary.'

Sherlock stopped taking his coat off and hurriedly re-fastened his scarf.

'I think we may be in a lot of trouble.'
Three days later, of course, Sherlock was dragged to the Watson's flat by Mrs Hudson so she could coo over the baby. Considering that Mary had lightly concussed him in the car en route to the hospital, he thought he was being rather generously spirited by deigning to visit at all, especially when the baby was one of the most singularly uninteresting things he'd ever witnessed. All it – she – did was sit there goggle-eyed when propped up, and occasionally scream.

Molly Hooper was there too, for some reason, and the sequence of noises she and Mrs Hudson were making between them was enough to make Sherlock want to pull his jacket over his head. The baby's crying would have been preferable to that…squealing cacophony. At least he had some cases to solve by email to keep him occupied.

John was trying to tell Sherlock something about godparents and cake – he wasn't really listening – when the doorbell went.

'Oh, that'll be Debbie,' Mary said. 'Put the kettle back on after you let her in, John.'

Sherlock lowered his phone and felt himself perk up when Debbie came into the room. She'd come straight from work – he could see the crayon marks on her fingers, so she'd rushed – and although she dissolved into just as many figurative puddles as Mrs Hudson and Molly, she at least had the good manners to do so comparatively quietly.

'I may have swung by Hamley's…' Debbie produced a small, plush rabbit from her bag and waggled it at the baby '…every little girl needs a Mr Bunny.'

This produced a bit more cacophony from the other women before the toy was put aside, by which time John had re-emerged from the kitchen with a cup of tea for the newest visitor and Mrs Hudson had resumed trying to take photographs.

'So,' Molly said quietly and with a certain level of forced amicability. 'You're Debbie. Hello.'

Now, who had mentioned Debbie to Molly? Probably John, or perhaps Lestrade. It occurred to Sherlock that he ought to intervene in that conversation but he'd just had a reply from the victim on the weathervane case that really needed acting on immediately.

'Yes. Hello.' Debbie blinked. 'Sorry, I don't think-'
'Molly. Molly Hooper. I work at Bart's. In the morgue.'

'Oh! You're Molly! The body parts supplier?'

'Um. Yes. I suppose.' Molly didn't seem happy about that. 'And you're the – um – the new flatmate.'

'Sherlock rescued me when my landlord decided to up the rent on my old place, yes.'

'Oh. How…nice of him.'

Having now solved the weathervane case, and unable to do much else until he got a reply from Lestrade on the matter of the dentist's address, Sherlock turned his attention to Debbie.

'Who invited you, Mary or John?'

'John sent me a text.'

'Hmm.' Sherlock speculated on that for a moment. Was John genuinely interested in Debbie's opinion on the baby, or just trying to encourage her continued proximity to Sherlock himself? It seemed a pointless exercise given that they lived in the same flat, but then John was not always the most rational of creatures.

'She's gorgeous, isn't she?' Molly said, presumably to keep herself involved in the dialogue. For a moment Sherlock blinked in surprise, then realised – of course – she was referring to the baby.

'She is,' Debbie agreed. 'Absolutely lovely.'

'Don't you think, Sherlock?' Molly added.

'She's a baby,' he pointed out. 'She looks like a baby. The aesthetics are hardly of any consequence.'

Molly rolled her eyes and huffed but Debbie just caught his gaze and flashed him one of her indulgent little smiles. He caught himself almost returning it – the interaction was oddly pleasing, like the sharing of some sort of private joke – but then the baby gave a loud gurgling cry and Mary hastily stood up.

'Oops, someone's hungry. Go and grab the blanket, would you John?'

'I take it you've been solving cases rather than taking photos,' Debbie said to Sherlock in an undertone. 'Just don't try and analyse the baby yet, hmm?'

'Babies aren't particularly interesting. And yes. Couple of good ones, actually.'

'Tell me at dinner? I was going to do that risotto unless you experimented on the onion again.'

'Fine.' Sherlock politely averted his eyes as Mary settled down to feed the baby. It was hardly a prurient sight, but Mrs Hudson's slap to the side of his head earlier had made the societal expectation of the only unrelated male in the room quite clear. The floor was dusty. Presumably John and Mary had been less meticulous with their housework as the due date approached. Now he was bored, and Lestrade still hadn't emailed back.

He looked at Debbie.

'Kiss, please.'
She obliged, as she always did, but it was only after the six second reboot period had ended that he noticed Molly's open-mouthed stare and Mary's barely-concealed giggle.

'Don't ask,' Mrs Hudson said with a sigh. 'I have no idea.' Of course the landlady had seen the exchange happen plenty of times in Baker Street but seemed to have come to the conclusion – after a twittering, low-voiced conversation with Debbie had Sherlock hadn't bothered to listen to – that it was just one of those things and not worth remarking further on.

'Aww, I think it's sweet,' Mary said with a grin. 'How'd you train him to do that, Debbie?'

'Train?' Sherlock exclaimed in dismay.

'Oh, no, it's just a request for-' Debbie's tone was level but he could hear the laugh behind it 'sensory input data.'

'Sensory input data,' Molly repeated blankly as Mary chortled. 'All he ever asks me for is body parts.'
Sherlock actually gave Molly's unhappy comment more consideration than it was perhaps due – in the name of scientific rigour, perhaps he should be obtaining comparative sensory data from other sources. The thought was somehow unappealing; much as he trusted and even liked Molly, he had no desire for her to kiss him and the idea of her doing so didn't elicit so much as a single fizzled neuron. No, a wider sample group wasn't necessary since it didn't produce similar effects. He couldn't think of any other women of his acquaintance – even the Woman – who produced the same sort of effect on his mind at the concept of receiving a kiss. So later, back at Baker Street while the risotto was cooking, he was rather taken aback when Debbie brought up the subject.

'Molly seems nice. Absolutely besotted with you, too.'

'Yes.' There was little point in denying the existence of Molly Hooper's inexplicably persistent romantic interest in him.

'Maybe she had a point. About the…ah…sensory input.'

'Not really. The results aren't comparable.'

'Results?' She wrinkled her nose in amusement. With a sigh, Sherlock resigned himself to trying to convey an explanation.

'When you make contact with me in that way-'

'When I kiss you.'

'-yes, fine, when you kiss me, my mind…' he gestured, struggling to describe the effect '…temporarily freezes, and then reboots. It takes about six seconds. When I think about you kissing me – or when you're immediately about to – there's a similar, if less pronounced, sort of effect, like a mental stutter, which generally lasts less than a second but is still noticeable.'

She was looking at him curiously now with a funny little smile, while still stirring the pot on the stove.

'By comparison,' he went on reasonably, 'The thought of Molly kissing me – or anyone else – produces no effect whatsoever. Certainly nothing even remotely equivalent. That leads to the obvious conclusion that a wider sample won't actually provide any useful additional data, and therefore there would be no point in it. Do you see?'
'I do.' Debbie was grinning now. 'Of course. Perfectly logical.'

'Yes.' Pleased, Sherlock dropped his hands. 'Good.'

They had dinner and he told her about the cases he'd solved while at Mary and John's. After the washing up was done, he collapsed into his chair with his phone to check emails while Debbie sat on the couch.

'So when I…kiss you, like that, on the cheek, your brain really…short circuits?'

'Reboots,' he corrected without taking his eyes off the screen. 'And it isn't really on the cheek so much as the side of-'

'But it really…affects you?'

'Yes. For six seconds. Sometimes slightly less.'

When she chuckled he looked up at her.

'What?'

'Nothing. I just wonder…if that's what a little peck on the cheek-'

'Side of the mouth.'

'-all right, the side of the mouth – does to you, what on earth would happen if I kissed you somewhere else?'

Sherlock put his phone down. Interesting. Expanded sampling scope rather than a simple increase in $n$ for sample size. Perhaps he could make a chart. Where exactly did people normally put kisses on each other? Other than the lips…

'Sherlock?' Debbie's amused tone made him look up again. 'I think you just…rebooted again.'

He frowned for a moment and then brightened. New data! Simply thinking about Debbie kissing him on the lips had caused a similar effect to her actual kiss on the side of his mouth. Less prolonged, though. Three, maybe four seconds? He'd need to monitor that.

'Yes. Sorry.' He looked over at her hopefully. 'A broader range of input could be potentially useful.'

Debbie laughed, then got up and crossed the room to kneel up by the arm of his chair.

'All right then. Any ideas?'

'Cheeks, of course.' He tilted his head on one side, drawing up a mental checklist. 'Forehead, I suppose. Lips, chin…nose, perhaps…'

Smiling broadly now, she shifted a little and leaned in towards him.

'Both cheeks?'

'…yes?'

'Okay. Left…and right.' She planted a soft kiss on each of his cheekbones.

'Forehead.' Debbie brushed some of his hair out of the way to kiss there.

Heart rate steady...more fluctuation at the hand motion than the kiss. Interesting. Sense memory of the lethargic effect from the unexpected nap on the couch?

'Nose.' The peck right on the end of his nose raised barely a flicker. 'Chin…'

She gave him a series of featherlight kisses along his jawline to his chin. Notably pronounced response. But is that the location, or the nature of the more sequential touches?

'And…'

Debbie’s lips only touched his very briefly in a restrained and chaste little kiss, but Sherlock felt his heart rate skyrocket and an oddly pleasant clench low in his stomach. Oh. The feel of her breath on his mouth as she drew back was impossibly distracting. He immediately wanted her to do that again. For longer. What did she taste like? The brief contact wasn't enough to leave anything other than the slightest, maddening tantalising hint of her on his lips.

He blinked.

That had been a lot more than six seconds.

She was hunkered down on the floor next to his chair, watching his face with a small smile. That made his attention drift to her mouth again. She smiled so often, but her different smiles could be teasing or playful or kind or – his favourite – that warm, generous and understanding one that she turned on him when everyone else was rolling their eyes or making exasperated noises. The one that told him it was all right, somehow, and he wasn't by himself in the room.

'That was definitely a reboot,' she said laughingly when he managed to refocus on the whole of her face. 'And I think maybe a short circuit as well.'

'Seventeen seconds.' He frowned. That was beyond absurd. Why had that tiny, insignificant contact had such an enormous effect? He needed to-

'Wait, where are you going?'

'To bed. I've got work tomorrow, remember?' Debbie leaned down and kissed him softly on the lips again – a little more lingeringly this time. 'Good night, Sherlock.' She'd barely backed off at all before speaking and he felt her lips move against his as the words formed.

By the time he rebooted completely from that, he was alone in the room.
Given the startling impact of Debbie's proximity to his lips, Sherlock decided to keep his everyday request for kisses to the usual goodbye peck, although he found himself unexpectedly keen to repeat the more thorough experiment. Of course it *had* yielded an awful lot of new data which needed repetition in order to analyse thoroughly.

*And that is of COURSE your only motivation, brother mine, and not the indulgence in the sensations for themselves.*

Of course not, he thought crossly. Stupid internal Mycroft.

The chance arose that weekend when a distinct lack of cases and a coming bank holiday Monday left Debbie as unoccupied as Sherlock was. He was sitting in the kitchen reviewing some tissue samples for saltwater and freshwater decay differences when he noticed that she was lounging full-length on the couch in leggings and an oversized hoodie with a book in her hands.

Quickly replacing the samples in his fridge, he turned off his microscope and went into the living room. Debbie glanced up with a small smile. She always did that, not just with him, acknowledging someone who came into a room, somehow making them feel noticed and welcome regardless of the setting. He assumed it was something to do with dealing with small children all the time.

'I thought you were looking at those samples you got from Molly,' she said.

'Yes. I was.' He wondered how to broach the subject. Last time it had just sort of…happened. Perhaps a direct approach would be best. 'If you're not busy, I wondered if you'd be willing to assist with some more…sensory data.'

Her smile broadened, but she closed the book.

'What did you have in mind?'

'Well, maybe some more – uh – kisses.' Sherlock knew he was blushing furiously and wondered at it even as he cursed his lack of metabolic control.

'All right.' Putting the book aside, Debbie stood and crossed the room to stand in front of him. She was playful, but not mocking, which helped him regain a small fraction of his self-possession.
'Well.' He flicked his gaze rapidly over her face. 'Um. The same sort of order would be-

'Cheeks, forehead, nose, chin, lips?'

'Yes.' Adjusting his shirt at his waist, he straightened his spine. 'Please.'

The soft kiss on each cheek produced the same very minor effects, although he noted with growing fascination the focus on the action of her hand brushing away his hair from his forehead rather than the kiss on it. The peck on the end of his nose was again rather pointless, but his pulse sped up anyway in anticipation of the sequence of kisses along his jaw and chin. There was that odd ripple low in his belly again, and this time it intensified when she pressed her lips to his. Why did it feel so strangely pleasant? Sherlock found himself actually leaning down a bit, following Debbie as she pulled back so as to prolong the contact.

When she reached up to hold his shoulders to stop herself overbalancing, he for some reason put his arms around her without conscious decision. She felt soft and warm, yielding gently against him, but now he had to take his mouth away from hers in order to refill his lungs.

'I lost count of how long that was,' she said, a trifle breathlessly. 'Sorry.'

'Well.' Embarrassed, Sherlock hurriedly let go of her and consulted his mental clock. 'Twenty two seconds. Interesting,' he added, feeling that something else was called for.

Debbie smiled, then reached down and took one of his hands in both of hers with a thoughtful sort of expression.

'May I?' she asked.

Baffled, Sherlock managed a small noise of assent as she lifted his hand up to her lips and kissed softly along his knuckles. He stood stock-still, frozen in place with a bizarre combination of fascination and alarm, as she softly kissed down each of his fingers. For some reason her eyes flicked up as she pressed her lips to the pad of his thumb, and it felt like a bolt of lightning had just slammed into his guts. Except a bolt of lightning would probably have hurt, and this didn't hurt at all. It felt… It felt wonderful.

His mind was in complete shutdown now, gloriously blank save for the sparks of sensation embedding themselves in his awareness. Battling for cognizance, he recognised his elevated heart rate, the catch in his breath, the flush on his skin, and although he couldn't tear his eyes away from Debbie at that moment, as she turned his hand over it over and placed a lingering kiss into his palm, he was absolutely sure that his pupils were extremely dilated.

'Coo-ee!'

Mrs Hudson's voice on the stairs broke the spell. Debbie just smiled, gave his hand a squeeze and then let go of it.

'I'll pop the kettle on.'

Sherlock didn't respond, trying to summon back control over his faculties. After a few moments he realised that Mrs Hudson had entered the room and was in fact speaking to him.

'…next Sunday, don't ask me how, but I suppose she needs a name sooner rather than later. Are you all right, Sherlock? You're just…sort of…staring…'
'Next Sunday,' he parroted, on autopilot. 'Fine. Wait – what?'

'The christening, Sherlock!'

'Oh. That.'

Rolling her eyes, the landlady bustled off again. After a couple of attempts, he got his legs operating again and managed to sit down in his armchair. Debbie brought him a cup of tea.

'Here you go. Sorry, Sherlock. I didn't mean-' she seemed genuinely upset '-are you all right?'

'Thinking,' he managed, faintly.

'But you're okay?'

'Yes.' He took a sip of tea, which revived him somewhat. 'Yes, I'm fine. It was…unexpected additional data. That's all.'

'Good.' She seemed relieved. 'Still, I'm sorry. I won't do that again. I just…' she gestured uncertainly, looking guilty '…you have very lovely hands.'

He stared at her. *Lovely hands?* What an odd concept. Of course he was accustomed to women paying him attention for his appearance – most seemed to find him unaccountably attractive despite his comprehensive lack of interest – and some of them were quite insistent with their compliments. Even the Woman had been quite brash in that regard…about his cheekbones, as he seemed to recall. But his *hands?*
Lovely Hands

The concept of lovely hands preyed on Sherlock's mind for some reason and he found himself idly studying his own limbs in puzzlement over the next few days. Long, narrow fingers, lightly callused from the violin, a few thin, old scars from various nicks and scrapes over the years, the slightly abnormal bend in the right index and middle fingers where they'd been forcibly broken in Turkey during his pursuit of Moriarty's network. Nothing particularly remarkable. But the way Debbie had touched his hand – stroked it, and kissed it – like it was something precious and beautiful…

Sentiment. Irrational, impractical, illogical sentiment.

So he tried to tell himself, anyway, but his mind palace kept resurrecting the memories at odd and unexpected times. Such as now, the night after the impressively tedious christening day for the newly-named Rosamund Watson, while he was lying in bed waiting to fall asleep.

Debbie had been there in the church – she wasn't going to be a godparent but John and Mary had invited her anyway – and she'd stood right at Sherlock's side while the vicar did all the business with the water and the silly promises about god.

He remembered being preoccupied by her proximity because it had been rather crowded with everyone up at the front and she'd ended up pressed quite closely against his side. He'd had to fight an utterly mad urge to put his arm around her, and had no idea where on earth that had come from. She was so warm and soft and had felt nice when he'd sort of accidentally embraced her previously…

They'd gone to a nearby pub afterwards for Sunday lunch, which seemed an extremely pointless exercise to Sherlock as it wasn't as though Rosie could even eat solids yet. But he'd gone anyway and sat next to Debbie and tried not to enjoy the feeling of her leg pressed against his because it was a bit of a squeeze to get everyone around the table. She badgered him into sharing a piece of sticky toffee pudding with her, which Mrs Hudson seemed to find terribly amusing, but he found himself oddly fascinated with the way Debbie licked custard off the back of her spoon and so barely noticed the landlady's chortling.

All right, yes, there had been the slightly awkward incident at the bar when she'd gone up for a glass of water and been waylaid by one of the other patrons who seemed determined to try and get her phone number. But Sherlock didn't think he'd been that rude to the man, not by his standards
anyway, and Debbie just seemed to find his deductions about the idiot more amusing than anything else. She'd even put her hand on his knee under the table when he'd become sullen at being scolded for intervening by John.

Ah, there it was. *That* was the thought that drew his mind. Debbie's hand reaching for his, lacing their fingers together with a little pressure of comfort, even reassurance. Then she'd let go and put her palm on his knee with another little squeeze. It was meant to calm him, to let him know that she wasn't upset, but instead the contact sent tendrils of electricity up his leg to set off sparks in places he generally never thought about.

His mind was conjuring up a surprisingly wide variety of images and scenarios, many unexpectedly salacious in nature. Most involved Debbie's touches, her lips, his hands in her hair, and other concepts that were — were *supposed* to be — decidedly outside his field of interest. So *why* was he dwelling on these things? *Delete them. They're not relevant.* How were her lips so soft? Why did he want them to kiss him, again and again, feel her breath on his face, his cheeks?

Sherlock blinked, suddenly aware of a strange tightness in his pyjama trousers. He moved the bedsheets and looked down, astonished and rather appalled at himself. *An erection? Really?* He wasn't a fourteen year-old boy suffering from an excess of pubescent hormones!

Putting the sheet back, he settled into the pillows and stared firmly at the ceiling. This was beyond ridiculous. *Think about something else and it'll stop.* Cases! Except he didn't have any. There were no leads whatsoever on Moriarty's nationwide media appearance, the rest of the criminal classes were being unaccountably tedious and the only thing consistently occupying his thoughts was still Debbie...her smile, her voice, her touches...

*Oh, for GOD's sake.*

Getting up, he stomped into the bathroom. Hadn't had to take care of a problem like this in quite literally *years,* but it wasn't exactly hard. Or rather, it *was,* but not in the sense of being particularly challenging. And Debbie was right in the forefront of his mind then, too, turning what ought to have been a tedious physical requirement into something that sent shocking bolts of pleasure shooting unexpectedly through his body.

He was almost *angry* by the time he cleaned himself up and collapsed back into the bed, intellectual frustration warring violently with a completely foreign sense of self-gratification. The conflict was so exasperating that he found himself being rather short with Debbie for the next few days, as if she was somehow deliberately causing the alien intrusion into his psyche.

Which of course was completely unacceptable.
Of course Debbie seemed to take Sherlock's borderline verbal abuse with her usual gentle good humour. She still let him talk about cases over dinner. She still cooked and baked and cleaned the flat and impassively listened to him rant, when he did so out loud. He stopped asking her for kisses, and although he found a request on the tip of his tongue a dozen times a day he managed to self-correct it, to replace it with an observation of some sort about Debbie's appearance or current mood.

Mrs Hudson clucked her tongue at him and John had some very pointed words to say – words like cruel and harsh and heartless bastard – but Sherlock firmly ignored them both. It felt like he was finally on the verge of refocusing his energy back to something appropriate, to being himself again after so many months in some kind of bizarre, sentiment-induced daze.

The day after solving a triple murder in the middle of Pentonville – one of Lestrade's more interesting offerings of late – Sherlock found himself unexpectedly alone in the morning. His irksome habit of getting up earlier had unfortunately held, but Debbie seemed to not be in the kitchen having breakfast as she normally was at this time of day. The shower was running, and the kettle wasn't even on. He crossed the room and peered out of the window thoughtfully for a moment.

'You're late!' Of course. It was distinctly unlike Debbie, usually so punctual and careful, but explained the situation easily enough. The shower went off and he turned as the door opened. 'Why are you late? You're never la-

He didn't get any further because the sight of Debbie entirely naked but for a towel wrapped around her threw his entire body and brain into some kind of paroxysm. It barely covered her decently – in fact it barely covered her indecently – and he somehow couldn't stop his eyes from raking all over her like a searchlight. She wasn't skinny, he already knew that, but having his speculations – his irrational, idle and pointless speculations – on the proportions of her figure so definitively confirmed for some reason made his mind go into a confusing fizzle of bewildered and nonsensical appreciation for what he was seeing.

'I know, I know,' she said hurriedly, 'I overslept and I'm in a total tizzwozz and-

'Kiss, please.' The words were out of his mouth before he could censor them.
'Not now, Sherlock-'

He moved to block the door, stopping her from getting back upstairs.

'Sherlock, what are you-

'Please.' He fiddled with the loop on his dressing gown. 'I've been horrible to you. I'm sorry. Something happened – something I didn't expect – and I didn't mean to. I'm really, very sorry, and please forgive me. Kiss. Please. So I know that you do.'

Her face softened and her shoulders dropped. Oh. There it was. The smile that sent his heartbeat skyrocketing and made all that irrationality and frustration just evaporate, like fresh snowflakes in bright sunshine…

'You've had a bad week, Sherlock,' she said gently, lifting her hand to lay an open palm onto his cheek. 'It's all right.'

Now he was leaning into her touch! Actually inclining his head towards her, barely resisting the urge to turn so he could kiss her hand as she'd kissed his. What was that? He'd never wanted to kiss her, that wasn't part of the dataset, was absolutely irrelevant to-

His mind rebooted as her lips touched the corner of his.

'I'll make us something nice when I get back, all right? But I have to go, Sherlock, my blessed alarm clock battery ran out.' Another quick peck on the cheek and she was gone.

Suddenly everything was all right again. Calm flooded him. He stood there in the doorway as she crashed about in her room before storming downstairs and out at double her usual speed. She'd probably run most of the way to the nursery. Really she'd be barely five minutes late, if that. Of course, even without a clock she was so accustomed to rising at a certain time that she woke up within a marginal variation of her usual alarm anyway, even on weekends.

Too much irrational diversion over one minor physiological inconvenience. Foolish. Idiotic. Could have ruined everything, just as he had the perfect situation set up for optimal data collection for his continual investigation of Debbie's effect on him.

At least now he had something to do for today.

After a vigorous shower he went out and found a proper alarm clock that ran off the mains rather than a battery, and got a piece of coffee cake in a box from Caffé Nero. He tidied his lab equipment away – well, mostly away – and spent some time on the internet finding an appropriate recipe. Cooking was just a matter of chemistry, after all, and if the average idiot could do it then surely he could manage.

'What in the world is that?' Mrs Hudson exclaimed, much later, when she came upstairs to find a pan simmering on the stove and Sherlock busy with this violin. 'Isn't Debbie at work?'

'Yes.' Sherlock paused to make a notation. 'And that would be a beef ragu on a slow simmer.'

'No.' Of course the damnable woman went to investigate. 'Oh, Sherlock. That smells lovely. Since when do you cook?'

'It's an experiment.'

'And you're composing something?'
'Evidently.'

'Ooh.' A little titter, and then she departed. 'Lucky girl.'

Sherlock wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but continued working nonetheless. He finished the piece, played it through twice to be sure he was satisfied with it, then returned to the kitchen.

The roux sauce presented no real difficulties, and he was pleased to get the entire assembly into the oven without any mishaps. Of course he'd timed it perfectly, so was unable to prevent the smug expression on his face when Debbie came in and sniffed at the air.

'What in the world – is that lasagne?'
Debbie made a tremendous fuss of him over dinner and prodded him into solving three cases from the website while they ate. While these were all simplistic to the point of being trivial, talking her through his deductions as he made them was rather entertaining and seemed to greatly impress her. Then, when he produced the slice of coffee cake alongside the new alarm clock, she burst out laughing and kissed him firmly on the lips with a little hug – he felt himself blush at that – before giving one of his hands a squeeze.

'What is all this for? You've positively spoiled me. Come clean, now, who the devil are you and what have you done with my Sherlock?'

*My Sherlock.*

That made his stomach turn unlikely somersaults. What an odd concept. Why did that possessive intimation sound so pleasing? *My Sherlock,* as though he wasn't his own – or was perhaps no longer just his own – much as his mother referred to *my boys* or Mary sometimes said *my John*…

'I'm still yours,' he said, realising she was expecting a response. Then his brain caught up, having been unusually outpaced by his mouth. 'Myself, I mean. I'm still myself.'

She smiled.

'I know you've had a rotten week, but you've been *so* good. Not a whisper about cigarettes – not even so much as a nicotine patch – and now this!'

That hadn't actually occurred to him, but he found that he was rather pleased that she'd noticed.

'So come on-' she patted his hand '-what's the occasion? Because I have to say, if you plan to do this every time I oversleep…'

'It's an apology. For-' he dropped his eyes '-for being rude. This week.'

'Oh, Sherlock.' She stood up, came around the table and hugged him. As he was still sitting down this meant that the side of his head got sort of squashed into her midriff, but he found that he didn't mind, especially when she tousled his hair with one hand.
'Is it all right?' he asked, for some reason anxious to hear her confirm that she was not, in fact, upset with his behaviour of late. 'Do you forgive me?'

'Of course I do. Not that there's anything to forgive. Everyone has a grump, now and then. Now, I'm going to make a cuppa and then go enjoy this cake on the sofa.' She leaned down and planted a kiss on his forehead before going to the kettle.

Sherlock fiddled with his violin a little in the living room, not entirely sure how to broach the subject of the music he'd spent the afternoon writing. He checked the pegs again but it was quite definitely still tuned.

'Are you going to play something?' Debbie asked with a smile as she curled up onto the couch. 'I still haven't heard you properly, you know. Just bits and pieces here and there.'

He glanced at her.

'Would...you like me to?'

'Very much. If you don't mind, that is.'

'All right.' That seemed like a relatively painless sort of introduction so he lifted his bow to get on with it. He hardly needed to glance at the sheet – the composition was etched firmly into his memory, joining the plethora of other Debbie-related information crowded within his mind palace.

By the time the last notes died away he realised that her tea and the cake were forgotten on the coffee table. She was sitting with her head tilted onto one side, watching him raptly with a happy little smile on her face.

'Sherlock, thank you. That was lovely. I don't know the piece, though. What's it called?'

'Ah. It – uh – it doesn't really have a name.' He grimaced – naming compositions was not his strong suit. 'I haven't thought of one yet. I only wrote it for you this afternoon, and-'

'What?'

'Well I was more focused on the composition itself than-'

'No – you said –' she stood up and came over to him '-you said you wrote it for me?'

'This afternoon. Yes.' He saw that her eyes were brimming as she covered her mouth with one hand, and felt panic rising. 'Was that wrong? Are you all right?'

'Of course I am!' She wiped at her eyes with a funny little laugh. 'You silly, sweet man. Put that down so I can hug you properly.'

'Ah.' He set violin and bow carefully aside, permitting her to embrace him. Oh...she felt so nice. Why was he suddenly thinking of her in the towel as she'd been that morning? It wasn't as though the details of her anatomy would differ enormously from that of any other woman. Just...skin and bone and muscle and...

...and soft, pliant curves pressed against him, the smell of her hair filling his nose, her hands curling around his shoulder blades where the thin fabric of shirt and robe seemed suddenly far too thick and stifling...

Sherlock's eyes flew open in alarm – he didn't even recall closing them – at a this time all-too familiar tightness below his waist. He definitely did not want Debbie to witness such a major
embarrassment as this grossly corporal situation. What would she think of him? He didn't even know what to think of himself, other than to be rather horrified at the involuntary reactions of his own traitorous body.

Thank goodness, she was letting go of him and stepping back. Her eyes flicked down briefly before fixing on his face, and he felt himself colour violently at the realisation that she was fully aware of his current biological predicament. Mortified now, and utterly lost for words, he avoided her gaze.

'Sherlock,' she said softly in that gentle, kind tone that she used to tell him things were all right, 'I'd like to – to try something. An… experiment. If you don't like it then you can tell me, and I promise I'll never do it again, but may I…?'

He looked back at her face and felt himself swallow hard at the odd combination of kindness and intensity he saw there. What did she mean? What was she going to do? He was caught between anticipation and concern, his heart hammering and breathing barely controlled. Somehow he managed to nod assent, and a strangely buoyant feeling filled his chest at her smile.

Debbie lay both her hands onto his chest and tilted her head up, touching her lips to his softly. Oh, just a kiss. That was hardly cause for-

Sherlock cut off his own thought when he felt her tongue gently nudge at his bottom lip. Oh. When he parted his lips she slid her tongue between them, and suddenly it was a real kiss, lips and tongues meeting and tangling with slick, velvet touches. Her hands came up to cup his cheeks and he reached up on blind reflex to cover them with his own as he leaned into her, mind blissfully blank of everything except the sensation of contact.

He didn't recall closing his eyes, but by the time he'd fully rebooted and opened them she had let go of him and taken at least two steps back. She was blushing furiously.

'I'm sorry, Sherlock, that was a little…more than I expected, I didn't mean to-

This time he leaned in to kiss her, and barely had time to register his own surprise at himself before his mind shut down again. It went on a little longer, and when they had to break for air it was only for a couple of breaths before the next kiss, and then the next, and the next, and Sherlock had never kissed anyone like this although people had tried to kiss him like this before, and he wanted to stop and analyse what was going on but at the same time never wanted it to end because the feeling of it, the raw sensation flooding his awareness, was extremely agreeable while also being quite unlike anything he'd ever experienced…

When his phone rang, he didn't even reach for it. Given the circumstances, it didn't seem particularly important. Debbie broke the most recent kiss – was it the seventh, or eighth? He'd lost count somewhere – and when he tried to initiate another she tapped her index finger on his lips to stop him.

'You should get that, shouldn't you?'

Sherlock's mind gradually rebooted – it took nearly twenty seconds for his higher functions to fizzle back to life – and properly registered the phone. Whoever it was calling him was being uncommonly persistent, apparently not accepting the voicemail prompt. Must be John, then.

Oh. John. Yes, he should get that.

Stepping back and straightening, trying to recall some semblance of self-possession despite what had to be a painfully obvious tent in his trousers, he grabbed his phone to answer it.
‘What is it, John?’ That came out reproachful. Why did it come out reproachful? It wasn’t as though the doctor had interrupted anything important.

‘What the bloody hell took you so long?’

‘I was…busy. With…an experiment.’

‘Oh, for god’s sake…look, you need to fulfil one of your godfatherly duties and babysit for us, Sherlock. We tried Molly, and Mrs Hudson, and—

‘Babysit?’ he exclaimed, horrified at the prospect. ‘What on earth am I going to do with a baby?’

‘We need SLEEP, Sherlock! One afternoon won't kill you!’ There was some muffled conversation in the background, most likely with Mary. ‘Wait, is Debbie about?’

‘Why would she be?’ Sherlock asked, rather hotly. ‘I do have other experiments, John.’

‘Because it's a Saturday, you idiot. Put her on, would you?’

‘You rang me…’ but Sherlock passed his phone across to a bemused Debbie.

‘Hello, John. No, he's just being Sherlock. Oh goodness, you sound half dead. Of course bring her over, it's no trouble. Don't worry, I won't let him put her in the fridge or anything.’

‘I wouldn't put a baby in the fridge!’ Sherlock exclaimed, rather put out at the intimation. He wasn't a psychopath and besides, his fridge was full of large intestine from Bart's.

‘All right, we'll see you in a bit.’ Hanging up, Debbie passed the phone back. ‘John and Mary are bringing Rosie over. She's being a bit of a horror, won't sleep through, and they're both on the verge of collapsing, poor things. Don't make that face, I'll handle her.’

He didn't much like that idea, not least because he was battling a rather strong urge to kiss her again and would much rather have spent the rest of the afternoon investigating that new and extremely compelling sensory data, but there didn't seem to be much point in protesting.

‘Are you all right?’ Debbie added, more apprehensively. ‘I'm so sorry, Sherlock, I really didn't mean for things to get that – um – involved. I thought just one kiss, you know, one proper kiss, just to see if it was…well…okay, but then…’

‘Okay?’ he echoed.

‘Are you all right?’ she said again. As though she'd hurt him. As though she thought she'd frightened him, somehow.

‘I'm fine.’ He groped for the appropriate words. ‘I'm…everything's fine. I…it was fine. Good. It was good. Very good. Very…interesting.’

‘I didn't want to overwhelm you is all.’

‘You didn’t.’ Actually she rather had – even now his mind palace was building out new rooms to house all the additional sensory input and associated feelings – but he found that he didn't mind in the slightest. ‘Did you want to…to do it again?’

A relieved smile broke onto her face.

‘Maybe later. After babysitting?’
'Oh. Okay.'
John and Mary had definitely not been getting anything close to a full night's sleep, judging by their weary and frankly dishevelled appearances at the door. Sherlock just stayed out of the way while Debbie bundled them in, clucking her tongue in disapproval and deftly relieving Mary of the baby carrier with Rosie in it.

'There we go, now. No, John, you shouldn't drive like this – why don't you both go upstairs to my room and put your heads down for a bit. Go on, better mine than Sherlock's…'

Once the two exhausted parents – almost weeping in gratitude – stumbled up the stairs to collapse on her bed, Debbie scooped Rosie out of the carrier and held the goggle-eyed baby up to eye level for a moment.

'You, missy, are being a pickle and a nuisance. Uncle Sherlock and I are going to have to see if we can wear you out a bit, hmm?'

'I'm not her uncle,' Sherlock protested.

'Rubbish. By the time she can talk I can bet anything you like you'll be Uncle Sherlock for the rest of your days.' Debbie grinned at him, swinging Rosie down to balance her expertly on one hip. 'Right then, madam, let's see what you make of dinosaurs,'

After a few minutes Sherlock found himself watching in rather rapt fascination at Debbie's handling of John and Mary's offspring. He was even impressed, after the manner of one professional observing another in their element. Of course he'd observed Debbie with her classes at the nursery dozens of times, but seeing her expertly distracting, entertaining and somehow engaging meaningfully with a much younger child that could barely sit up was, he had to admit, something of an education.

There definitely looked to be a knack to it – a skill, even – which he couldn't quite dissect even with direct scrutiny. It seemed to be part attention to detail, part raw creativity and part intuition of a sort he'd never really witnessed before. Debbie could read every wrinkle of the baby's face, every motion of the chubby little arms, every nonsensical gurgling noise, as clearly and fluently as Sherlock himself could read an eyewitness or suspect on a murder investigation.

He tried to busy himself at his laptop but monitoring Debbie's interactions with Rosie Watson was a distracting enterprise worthy of full-time occupation, so after the first half hour he just sat in his armchair and watched. This led, inevitably, to him being drawn into one of the strange
amusements that Debbie devised to keep the baby absorbed enough to stay awake. It seemed to mainly involve waving colourful things that made noises, so hardly diverted him from the main bent of his observations.

When Debbie mercifully took Rosie into the kitchen and closed the doors to change her, Sherlock picked up his violin and absentmindedly plucked at a few strings. Babysitting was not as irritating as he'd expected, giving as it did the opportunity to study Debbie in a new light. He certainly felt that he'd gained a new appreciation of her expertise in the field of childcare. If any interactions with children came up on future cases, he wouldn't hesitate to ask for her assistance. Contrary to what John clearly thought, Sherlock was quite capable of acknowledging the capabilities of others in specialist subjects, even if the subjects themselves were rarely of particular interest to him personally.

'You could play something,' Debbie said, coming back in with a now rather sweeter-smelling Rosie in her arms. 'She might like it.'

'I doubt a three month old baby will have much appreciation for music.'

'You'd be amazed what impressions they form this early on.' She smiled and then sat down – in John's chair, he noticed, and wondered why that observation pleased him – rearranging the baby on her lap. 'Please?'

Well, he could hardly refuse the direct request, but Sherlock wondered what in his musical repertoire would be appropriate for a small child. Lifting his bow, he idly ran down a scale and then stopped in alarm at Debbie's delighted laugh.

Rosie was staring right at him from her perch on Debbie's lap, but he failed to see how that was cause for amusement since the baby tended to gawk at anything that moved near her.

'Do it again,' Debbie encouraged.

Dubious, he did so, and this time was facing the right way to see Rosie's head bob and arms wave in time with the sounds. How odd for a three month old child to have a sense of tempo. He tried a few more notes, varying the cadence of his strokes, and had to admit that Rosie's main problem was not in her awareness of rhythm but simply the ability of her fledgling motor control to keep up with it.

After a little experimentation he managed to find a pace that she seemed able to follow and, finding it close enough to triple time as made little difference, played the baby the waltz he'd written for her parents' wedding. She bobbed and gesticulated along with it, then as he finished actually burst into a peal of what was undeniably laughter.

'Well!' Debbie chuckled and looked up at Sherlock. 'I think you have a fan.'

'I daresay she'd respond to discordant screeching in much the same manner.'

'Let's not try that, shall we? A mistuned violin is enough to set a normal person howling, let alone someone only twelve weeks old.'

'I suppose so.'

'Another, then?' She winked at him. 'Two dedicated groupies, and girls at that…most musicians who haven't done a public concert yet would kill for that kind of audience.'

For some reason that made him smile, and he obliged her with some Brahms, then Tchaikovsky, and finally a bit of Mozart to round off. After that Debbie declared that Rosie needed to be fed,
and busied herself with the arcane rituals of a milk bottle. Sherlock played some Chopin, mostly for himself, and then decided to check his emails just in case Lestrade had managed to uncover any interesting murders while he'd been busy entertaining Rosie Watson.

When John and Mary came back downstairs in the early evening – bleary-eyed but still seeming immeasurably better for the prolonged nap – Sherlock found that he was inordinately keen for them to take Rosie and go so he could resume the far more enjoyable pastime of investigating his reactions to Debbie's kisses. Unfortunately everyone else seemed to have other ideas.

'You're a bloody lifesaver, Debs,' Mary said when Debbie somehow managed to juggle keeping Rosie on her hip with making tea for everyone. 'God, I'm her mother and you're better with her than I am.'

'Limited exposure, less fatigue and ample practice,' Debbie said cheerfully, tickling Rosie on the nose with obvious affection. 'She's a saucy one though, even I was running out of ideas to keep her occupied. Fortunately she's fallen deeply in love with Uncle Sherlock – or, rather, with Uncle Sherlock's violin…'

'You're kidding,' Mary said, as John echoed Uncle Sherlock with a level of dismay that rather mimicked Sherlock's own at the moniker.

'No, she loves it. Sherlock, do a scale again so they can see.'

Grudgingly, he stood and picked up the instrument so Rosie could demonstrate her remarkably insignificant talent at bobbing and waving in tempo.

'Oh my god, that is so cute.' Mary was clearly delighted, so Sherlock launched into a rendition of some Corelli, at half speed, which had more of the desired effect.

'Is that what you've been doing with her all afternoon, then?' John asked laughingly.

'Most of it, yes.' Debbie grinned. 'Maybe she'll be a musical sort when she's older. You'll have to get her some Beethoven to listen to. Oops…I think we've worn her out, though,' she added when Rosie made a distinctly grumpy noise and started sucking her own fist.

'Thank god.' Mary took the baby and settled her back into her carrier. 'Who knows, she might even sleep for a bit tonight.'

'Let's get her home then.' John downed the last of his tea and stood. 'Thanks again, Debbie.'

'Any time,' Debbie said. 'It's a good excuse to get this one- playing music rather than grumping over the lack of grisly murders to solve.'

'Yes. Well.' John regarded his friend with clear amusement. 'Thank you, Sherlock. Don't suppose you do home visits?'

Sherlock rolled his eyes, not wanting to dignify that with a response, but that just caused more laughter as the trio of Watsons finally made their exit. He could clearly overhear the not-so-muted conversation on the doorstep, too, in between the repeated professions of gratitude.

'I was half expecting to come down and find her duct taped to the wall or something.' That was Mary, still mostly joking.

'He's not that bad, Mary.' Debbie, apparently defending him. 'In fact he was rather good with her once we'd established that ranting about blood splatter patterns wasn't really appropriate. And she did love the violin.'
'What on earth gave you that idea?' John, incredulous. 'Babies and classical music…I thought they were supposed to listen to it in the womb or something.'

'Babies appreciate sounds too, John. Rosie *definitely* liked Sherlock's playing.'

'Hmm. *Uncle Sherlock.*' Mary, barely stifling another laugh.

'Don't be mean, he's a straight-talker and most children like that.' Debbie's voice softened. 'Ignore your mum and dad being sarcastic, Rosie. I'm sure you'll love your Uncle Sherlock almost as much as I do once you're old enough to appreciate him properly.'

Sherlock didn't overhear the rest of the conversation as the unexpected sound of blood thundering in his ears rather blocked it out. He put his violin down – it was that or risk dropping it – and sat in his chair, trying to regulate this breathing.

...*you'll love your Uncle Sherlock almost as much as I do...*
...you'll love your Uncle Sherlock almost as much as I do...

Had Debbie just been...chatting? Playing, teasing, making jokes for Mary and John's benefit? No, he knew that softness in her voice well and it was not a tone she used when being flippant. So she'd meant it, then. She...loved him?

He blinked a few times, trying to snap his mind back into logical analysis. Love was a variable word, perfectly innocuous really. Hadn't John said he loved Sherlock – not in so many words, but the intimation was clear enough – when he'd requested his services as best man for the wedding? So love could be just an expression of friendship, acknowledgement and appreciation of a connection between people. That was all. And Debbie had said love, not in love which was more the accepted idiom for the romantic attachment. Although she had been talking to a baby – well, talking at a baby – at the time. Though earlier she'd used that phrasing – deeply in love – admittedly to describe Rosie's apparent appreciation of Sherlock's violin playing, but the use of the terminology suggested a certain mental or even emotional association. So was Debbie...in love with him?

Frustrated at this entirely futile train of thought, Sherlock scrubbed his hands back through his hair and reached for his phone as Debbie came back into the room.

'Are you all right? You did splendidly, Sherlock, and not just at the peek-a-boo. The music was wonderful, and she was so cute dancing to it.'

'I hardly think that barely-controlled gesticulation could constitute dancing,' he shot back, trying to refocus attention on his emails with very limited success.

'Well, give her a little time to learn how her arms and legs work. Anyway, I think you deserve a treat for being such a good babysitting assistant.' Debbie laughed at him when he gave her a deeply sceptical look. 'Since I can't cook up a murder mystery, how does chilli sound?'

'Fine,' he said, although he was particularly partial to her chilli when not on a case and they both knew it. Although why did the term treat cast his mind back again to her kisses – correction, to kissing her – earlier before John had called? Could kisses be a treat? What a ludicrous notion. It was only sensory data.
But it was getting increasingly hard to deny that he wanted more of it.

While she cooked he solved a few trivial cases by email and then, frustrated with the lack of truly interesting ones, did a quick internet search for Moriarty to see if there was any new chatter on that front. There wasn't, of course, but then fresh dialogue about a man who'd been dead for over three years was notoriously hard to come by.

Debbie came back into the living room once the pot was on a low simmer, sinking down onto the couch and reaching for her current book. Tossing his phone onto the desk, Sherlock glanced over at her. She was a very familiar sight by now, but for some reason one that still caused his heart rate to pick up and a strange feeling of warmth to spread through his body. Even just standing there, he was having to fight the urge to reach out and touch her.

*Dear god, Sherlock, are you THAT dim?* That mental voice sounded a lot more like a rather ticked-off John than a scornful Mycroft. *You just basically heard her say that she loves you, and you're standing there arguing with yourself over whether or not to kiss her!*

'Could we-' he had to stop and clear his throat, ignoring the guffaw of hilarity from the inner John at his discomfiture '-now that the baby is gone, perhaps-

Her eyes flicked up and a smile came onto her face that made his stomach do interesting flip-flops.

'Chilli not enough of a treat, is it?'

'Hardly.' Sherlock drew himself up with an attempt at gravity, pointedly ignoring the fact that the inner John was now howling with laughter. 'I have been almost entirely devoid of any interesting sensory stimulus for the last few hours. Rosie Watson isn't exactly the most diverting of entities.'

Debbie put her book aside and stood up.

'I see. Well, if you want a kiss then come over here and get one.'

That was an interesting new requirement. Usually when he asked her for a kiss she would come to wherever he was and deliver it. Still, three steps to the other side of the coffee table wasn't exactly an arduous journey. He dipped his head and felt a completely unanticipated well of disappointment when she pressed her lips chastely to his. Should he have been more specific in the request? How in the world did one go about phrasing that?

A giggle from Debbie made him blink in puzzlement.

'The look on your face! You are a wally sometimes. C'mere.'

Tilting her chin up, she kissed him again, but this time *properly*, as she had earlier, lips and tongues sliding together while deafening silence echoed around his head. After a moment she put her arms up around his neck and his breath caught at the unexpected extra contact as the movement pressed their bodies together.

Some sort of minor fireworks display seemed to be going on in his stomach and he found himself slipping his own arms around her waist, pulling her closer so they were crowded thoroughly against one another. When a break for air became necessary he kept it as brief as possible before capturing her lips again. The intensity of the sequential kisses seemed to somehow escalate even though each one was not dissimilar to the last. Debbie's fingers were now combing through his hair, and the dual sensation was nothing short of outright intoxicating. Once again he lost count of how many times their mouths slanted over one another, utterly lost in the taste and feel of the moment, aware and yet completely uncaring of the growing tightness below his waist.
The knock at the door broke the spell in an instant. Sherlock let go of Debbie and backed off in a hurry, struggling to reboot his brain back to normal functioning levels. She turned around and opened the door a crack to peek out, and he dimly recognised Mrs Hudson’s voice at an uncharacteristically discreet volume.

Then he caught sight of himself in the mirror over the mantel and stared at the reflection with baffled curiosity. Flushed, breathless, hair a tousled mess, shirt askew, pupils blown wide, mouth reddened and lips positively bruised from kissing. He’d never seem himself in such a state before. It was strangely fascinating.

'No, no, don’t worry – yes, next time I’ll have to try and film it on my phone or something! All right then. Goodnight, Mrs Hudson.' Debbie closed the door and turned back with a small smile, then went towards the kitchen. 'I'd better check on dinner.'

Sherlock attempted to ruffle his hair back into some semblance of its usual shape and grabbed for his phone, forcing himself to reply to several emails as a distraction. A rather obvious but grisly murder in Sheffield had the desired effect and he was finally able to get his breathing and heart rate back into the normal range.

'Normally Mrs Hudson just barges in after she knocks,' he remarked, realising what had been amiss in the last interaction. 'Since you moved in she's been considerably less intrusive.'

Debbie shrugged as she came back out of the kitchen.

'I would make some droll remark about the female of the species, but actually she mentioned the other day that she was staying out so as not to intrude on her tenant and his young lady.'

'Mrs Hudson thinks we're in a relationship?'

You just spent the last five minutes snogging her, you ass, his internal John pointed out acidly.

Oh. That was a good point. Sherlock blinked. Oh. This could be a problem. Better check.

'Are we in a relationship?'

Not good, Sherlock. Inner John was facepalming now. Really, not good.

Debbie grinned at him.

'Every human that meets another human is in a relationship of some sort, Sherlock.'

'Well, yes, in the broadest definition I suppose, but...’ he groped for words ‘...I don't really do relationships. Not the...his young lady sort. Not much of the other sort either, admittedly. I mean yes, John and Mary, and maybe Lestrade, and Molly, and few others, but definitely not – oh, well, there was Janine I suppose but that wasn't real, it was just for a case...although she thought it was real for a bit, so maybe it counts...?' Then he trailed off, because Debbie was clearly struggling not to burst out laughing at him. 'What?'

'You. Mister analyst. I know about the Janine thing, Mary and John told me, and no, I'm fairly sure that doesn't count as it was for a case and not something you wanted to do.'

'Janine's the only person I've ever done-’ he grimaced ‘-relationship things with. Going out to dinner and the cinema and sending flowers and...things. It was essential to the case, otherwise I'd never have been able to break into Magnussen's office.'

Debbie folded her arms and leaned against the kitchen doorframe with a funny little smile.
'That's what you think relationship things is? Dinners out and the cinema and flowers?'

'Well, yes.' Sherlock frowned, rummaging about intensely in his mind palace for the appropriate evidence. 'We've never been to dinner or the cinema, although we do go to the café a lot I suppose, and I did bring you flowers once but that was as an apology, and-

'It's John, isn't it?'

'What?' That abrupt change of topic threw him for a loop. 'John?'

'John Watson.' She shook her head. 'John bloody Watson. Because what he calls a relationship – being a boyfriend, having a girlfriend, whatever – is all dates and dinner and flowers and chocolates and what-have-you. So you've based everything you think you know about what makes a relationship on him and the way he and Mary are. And all his previous girlfriends, of which I bet there have been plenty because he's very charming when he turns it up and the whole soldier-doctor thing is pretty sexy, if you're into that sort of thing anyway.'

That calm, almost absentminded, pronouncement had Sherlock scrambling to reorganise his thoughts amidst a completely unexpected surge of resentment.

'You're…sexually attracted to John?'

She laughed.

'The ability to recognise a man's appeal doesn't necessarily mean falling into a swoon at his feet, Sherlock. Let's say I can see what Mary sees in him.'

'Oh.' Just like that, the resentment vanished. 'I don't.'

Yes you do, you cock. You just don’t see how the sex angle comes into it. Sherlock had to actually give his head a quick little shake to dispel that distinctly odd verdict from his internal John.

'Well I've got a growing compilation of evidence that says you're straight, so let's park that discussion for now.' Debbie chuckled. 'What I mean is that the only person you've really studied – you know, prolonged and up close, as it were – who has had girlfriends is John Watson, so he's your standard for what it means to be a boyfriend. It'd be like a tourist who came to England but only ever visited one bit of London and assumed the entire country was like Oxford Circus.'

'I've had plenty of exposure to people in relationships. Mrs Hudson-

'Was married to a drug dealer who was executed for double homicide. She's an outlier – don't look like that, you're always going on about data so you know perfectly well what an outlier is.'

'Fine.' He conceded that – Mrs Hudson's marital background definitely fell into the unusual. 'But I've still seen plenty of relationships apart from John's various girlfriends and Mary. Lestrade's continual attempts to date after his divorce, for example. Molly Hooper's usually got a boyfriend of some sort, and she was engaged once, too. My own parents, who seem to have been in something approximating a relationship for many years.'

'Okay, and what do they do?'

'Something about visiting pubs or going to the cinema or the theatre. The usual. Honestly, I don't listen that closely. Or at all, if I can help it.'

'That's what I mean!' She gestured wildly, suddenly impassioned. 'You've got such a limited sample size and such a narrow criteria for what a successful relationship looks like – which is
basically John and Mary, if you'll only admit it – that you think being John Watson, the boyfriend, is the only way to go about it. Like you did with Janine.'

'It worked.'

'On her, maybe. But Sherlock, some people don't want to go out to dinner or the cinema or the pub or get given flowers and chocolates. Some people would rather cook dinner at home and eat in peace, or just lounge about on the couch and talk, or play board games, or sit together and read or do nothing or anything if it means they get to do it with the person they care about.' Her shoulders slumped a little at his bewildered gaze. 'Don't you see? There are lots more ways to be in a relationship than trying to be John Watson two-point-oh. Just like there are lots of different ways to…to dance a waltz, or bake a cake, or – or solve a murder!'

Perplexed, trying to process, Sherlock frowned.

'So does that mean we…are in a…relationship?'

Debbie scrubbed her face with one hand with a resigned little laugh.

'It means that you get to decide, Sherlock. You get to decide what being in a relationship means to you. And the only person who can dispute it is the person who might be in it with you. Nobody else has a say.'
The idea of deciding about relationships was an interesting concept. In fact it was so interesting that Sherlock devoted the next few minutes to thoroughly turn it over in his mind and investigate the idea from all angles. It was true that he'd always assumed that particular conditions were required in order for romantic relationships to qualify as such. The rest of the world seemed to agree with him, and he'd never had an interest on a personal level, so he'd never really revisited or examined the criteria themselves. It was also true that his most consistent and studied exposure to attempts to engage romantically with other people were John's various girlfriends over the years.

But even the Woman had constantly gone on about dinner, and she was definitely not conventional. Then again, she took her clothes off to shock people and was a dangerous, if undeniably brilliant, criminal, so he probably ought to consider her another outlier. Debbie was certainly nothing like her.

*That is by far and away the most ridiculous comparison you could POSSIBLY make, Sherlock.* The voice of his inner John seemed to be getting somehow more aggravated over time. *Irene Adler was a bloody lunatic who held the government hostage. Debbie's a nursery school teacher who's perfectly rational and sane and normal except in her ability to put up with YOU.*

Debbie was ordinary. He'd even seen her on a date – a very *usual* date – at a restaurant. In fact he'd taken her – albeit under false pretences and a fake persona – on a sort-of-date for coffee himself in an attempt to interrogate her. Then there was the inexplicable persistence with which he'd continued to seek out her company in the Caffè Nero. In fact he still did that – even though they were both residing at Baker Street, he still met her in the same wretched shop every Friday when she was done with work at the nursery. Why *did* he do that, especially now they lived in the same flat?

*You know there's a word for when two people of the opposite sex get together on a weekly basis and eat and drink together while talking. John's earlier mocking words drifted back. Mary and I tend to call it date night.*

'Do *you* think we are?'

'We are what?' Debbie asked.

Oh. She was sitting opposite him at the table in the living room and he had a half-eaten bowl of chilli in front of him. He didn't recall that happening although there was a spoonful of it on the way to his mouth on a sort of auto-pilot.
...when did we start eating?

'About ten minutes ago. I think you tuned out, there. Haven't seen you do it for that long before, although John did warn me when you're thinking...' she paused and closed her eyes with a small smile '...you meant did I think we're in a relationship, didn't you?'

Sherlock was actually rather impressed at that. John never seemed to remember where his half of the conversation had been when his friend had to pause to deliberate something.

'Yes. I did. So. Do you?'

'I try not to assume anything when it comes to you, Sherlock.'

'I wasn't asking for an assumption, just an opinion.'

'You need to ask? I thought the great Mr Holmes could read people like an open book.'

'Well.' He toyed with his spoon, embarrassed but not wanting to admit it. 'Whenever I try to deduce you I get...distracted.'

'By what?' she asked with a chuckle.

'By...trivial and irrelevant details.' Uncomfortably self-conscious, Sherlock kept his gaze firmly on the eating utensil. 'The way your hair falls, or the scent of your skin, or the way your lips move when you find something funny but don't want to show it, or- he shook his head '-anyway, that's not the point, I just want to know your opinion as you consciously see it.'

Debbie seemed to be trying very hard not to break into a grin.

'Well...the last three blokes who asked me out, I said no thank you...that I had someone.'

It felt uncannily like he was having a severe incident of atrial fibrillation when she said that, but Sherlock ignored it because he was puzzled at her vagueness.

'Someone. Meaning...me?'

'Meaning I don't want to be in a relationship, as you'd put it, with anyone...else.'

'Else,' he echoed. 'So you do think that-

'I can't be in a relationship with you by myself, Sherlock,' she said lightly, standing and picking up the now-empty bowls. 'I don't think of you as my boyfriend, if that's what you mean. I don't really know what I think of you as.'

'We are friends, aren't we?' he said, a little alarmed at the notion that her identification of him when he'd visited the nursery had changed, and then relieved when she glanced back with a little smile.

'Of course we're friends, Sherlock.'

'Well, then.' He stood up and followed her into the kitchen. 'We're friends who share a flat. That's hardly unusual.'

'Hmm. You and John are friends who used to share a flat but I'm fairly confident that you never got sensory data off John that made you...um...'

'Yes, of course.' He cleared his throat and then frowned. 'So we're friends who...kiss.' That didn't
seem quite right. 'Friends with…benefits. Is that the term?'

Debbie laughed so hard she practically doubled over into the sink.

'Friends with benefits? That generally means sex, Sherlock. And I'm reasonably sure we're not having sex. One of us would have noticed.'

'Oh.' He wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. 'Well, yes, I do have an international reputation for my observational skills so I'm quite certain I would have detected if we were…having sex.'

How would you know? Mycroft's dry sneer from the sitting room in Buckingham Palace surfaced unpleasantly, like a journalist at a crime scene.

'That's very comforting.' Debbie flashed him a grin and then giggled. 'If you notice that we do start having sex, please be sure to let me know, won't you?'

He rolled his eyes.

'This isn't particularly helpful.'

'Why the sudden keenness for a definition?' Finishing the washing up, she pulled the plug out of the sink and turned around to lean against it with her arms folded. 'We're friends. We share a flat – quite harmoniously, I'm told by eyewitnesses – and we eat together. We talk a lot, except when we sit in silence. I cook for you and you…you study me. Does it all need a label to validate it, or something?'

'No.' He abruptly realised that he was upsetting her. 'Not at all.' Then, trying to regain something of his usual poise, he constructed a shrug. 'I just wanted to be sure that you hadn't made any inaccurate assumptions.'

'I see.' Her face softened. 'I'm sure if I ever do, you'll tell me.'

'Of course.' Sherlock thrust his hands into his robe's pockets. 'Well. Good. Glad that's all sorted out, then.' He turned away and wandered over to the window, wondering at the sudden and inexplicable hollow ache in his chest. It felt like he'd just slammed a door closed on a fascinating triple homicide instead of going to the scene to look at the bodies.

So fix it now, you idiot, and for god's sake get some better metaphors. That was internal John again, with that oddly fierce combination of amusement and seriousness that he wore when he wasn't sure whether to laugh in Sherlock's face or punch him on the nose.

'Debbie-

'Yes, Sherlock?' She was standing right behind him, as though she'd been waiting for him to turn back into the room. The light from the street lamp outside the window cast an oddly attractive dappled pattern on her hair. Her eyes were shining, but she looked more pensive than distressed, and the merest hint of a smile curved her lips. There seemed to be nothing but warmth in her regard for him – warmth and reassurance that despite being, well, himself, he hadn't done anything wrong and she was still there.

She's beautiful.

The thought popped into Sherlock's head out of thin air.

Beauty is a construct based entirely on childhood impressions, influences, and role models. He could practically hear the scorn in Mycroft's tone.
Doesn't change the fact you think she is, though. John, more quietly.

Sherlock rallied valiantly to try again.

'Debbie-'

'Do you want a kiss?' she asked softly.

He stared at her for a moment.

'Yes, please.'

It started as a gentle, modest contact but the feel of Debbie's lips this time seemed to barrel straight through reason and into something else altogether. Sherlock leaned in to deepen the kiss, feeling lightning pulse through his stomach when her fingers curled into the lapels of his robe as they broke for air. Her eyes were damp and he felt a pang of alarm at the notion that he'd somehow made her cry.

'What is it? What's wrong?'

Debbie chewed at her lower lip for a moment.

'Am I really just an experiment, Sherlock? A dataset? Just more…facts and figures to go into a room in your mind palace?'

He frowned.

'You don't have a room in my mind palace.'

'Oh.' Her face fell and she dropped her gaze. 'I see.'

'You have a wing,' he said, feeling that more explanation was called for. 'Dozens of rooms. Hundreds even. I can't get rid of them. Every time I try to forget anything it just…comes back. You're…you're undeletable. I clear out so much useless and extraneous information every minute of every day, it drives John mad, but I remember everything about you.'

'Everything?' she echoed, looking up at him again with an expression halfway between completely baffled and deeply touched. 'Like…what? There isn't that much to know about me!'

'No, there really is,' he corrected. 'There's…everything. The way one corner of your mouth turns up ever-so-slightly when you're trying not to laugh, compared to how it twitches when you're about to start laughing, for instance. The smell of your hair when you've just left the shower or been caught out in the rain. The way your hands feel when you pass me something like a cup of tea and how much softer they seem when you—when you just…touch me, like at the hospital or when we were on the couch. Or—'

'You really remember…everything? Every…every insanely minute little detail?'

'Yes. I can't not.' He hesitated, feeling like something was right on the tip of his tongue.

*Oh just say it, you stupid bastard!* His internal John was actually shouting at him, now.

'Can't?' Debbie echoed, sounding a little sad.

'Can't,' he agreed. 'And I…I don't think I'd want to not remember.' *Oh.* 'I mean, it's been long
enough now that most of my mind palace would end up demolished even if I was somehow able to-’

She cut him off with a kiss — deep and intense but at the same time indescribably tender — taking his face in her hands as she did. It lasted nine inexplicably wonderful seconds before she drew back and dropped her hands to idly smooth down the front of his robe.

’You…don’t mind?’ he found himself saying.

’Mind? Why on earth would I mind?’ Debbie giggled. ’Better in your mind palace than up on the wall above the couch, you preposterous man.’ She gave him another, briefer, kiss and then patted his cheek fondly. ’I’m going to bed. Don’t sit up too late, now.’

’Good night, Debbie.’

She glanced back at the door with a smile that warmed him all the way down to his toes.

’Good night, Sherlock.’
By a stroke of good luck the next few days brought a flurry of prospective clients, keeping Sherlock in a busy haze of intensive thought that left little energy spare for contemplation of the discussion with Debbie. She seemed disinclined to bring the subject up herself, sticking to the usual topics of dinner and listening to him formulate theories on cases. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or dismayed about that.

'…but your grandfather definitely didn't own a dog? And hadn't in the last five years?'

'Nah, I mean he loved dogs but he kept saying he were too old to get one now, didnae have the energy for it.'

Sherlock sighed as John nodded understandingly. The ex-ferryman found mauled to death in his home by an unknown animal with no signs of break-in had seemed so promising at first. In fact it was painfully obvious that the neighbour who had access to his house key had found out about being written into his will, become tired of running errands and performing the other favours for him that had resulted in that effect, bought a semi-rabid collie dog from a nearby gypsy camp and let it in to savage the old man. The only remaining detail he wasn't entirely sure of was what had happened to the unfortunate collie afterwards.

The door to the flat opened with a rustle to admit Debbie, who froze for a moment and then broke into an apologetic grimace.

'Oh, sorry, don't mind me…'

She scuttled through into the kitchen, hastily slid the doors closed and then got on with whatever she was doing.

'So, tell us more about- John glanced at his notepad -Mrs Thompson, next door.'

'Who's that?'

'The…next door neighbour, you said-

'I meant her.' The client jerked his head at the kitchen door. 'Didn't know Sherlock 'olmes had a missus! Bit of all right, ain't she?'

Sherlock had a sudden and irrational urge to strike the moron.
'She's my flatmate,' he snapped.

'Oh.' The client appeared to think on this. 'So...that mean she's single?'

'Mrs Thompson next door?' John prompted, shooting Sherlock a look halfway between amusement and frustration. 'You were saying?'

'Oh. Yeah. Right.'

Once Sherlock had established that the collie had been retrieved by the shocked neighbour – who had expected the rabid dog to frighten the unfortunate pensioner to death, not maul him to it – he realised that the enterprising Mrs Thompson had turned the beast loose in a nearby field. Its body was recovered on the side of a nearby motorway a few days later. After explaining at length how the grandfather had died and why, it was he could do to bundle the odious client out of the door and down the stairs. The man even had the cheek to ask so could I get 'er number, d'you think? before the front door was firmly closed in his face.

'My god, what a tosser. Shame about his granddad, though.' John came back up and collapsed in his chair. 'Not to mention that poor dog.'

'Is he gone?' Debbie opened the kitchen door a crack and peeked out. A delicious smell drifted out along with the sound of the kettle boiling. 'I didn't want to risk interrupting again so I threw a batch of cookies together. Sorry, you don't usually have clients this late so-

'Don't worry about it,' John said. 'He wanted your number, by the way.'

'He did?'

'Yeah. I shut the door on him.'

'Serial adulterer, obsessed with his mother and with an unhealthy machismo complex,' Sherlock added, nudging his shoes off so he could flex his toes.

'Actually I just thought he was a bit of a dick, but fair enough.' John grinned at Debbie. 'You really just made cookies?'

'It isn't like they take long. Cuppa?'

'Amazing. Thanks.'

'How're Mary and Rosie getting on?'

'Good, good. Well, okay. Rosie's still being a terror, won't sleep through the night without screaming bloody murder around four in the morning...'

Sherlock tuned out the meaningless small talk, rapidly reviewed the case in his mind to mentally close and delete the file on it, then wondered what the angry, hot sort of feeling that was lurking in his chest was.

'Drink your tea, Sherlock, or it'll get cold.' Debbie's voice snapped him out of that contemplation and he absentmindedly accepted the cup she passed him. 'I don't suppose you've eaten anything today, have you?'

'Busy,' he said vaguely. Bit of all right. What in the world was that supposed to mean?

'You can have a cookie, then.'
'What?' He shot her a mild glare when she brandished the plate at him.

'Grab one and I'll take the rest down to Mrs Hudson.'

'I don't want one.'

'You need to eat something, dinner won't be for a bit. There.' She actually picked one of the cookies up and half-jammed it into his mouth when he started to protest. 'Now eat it quickly and maybe John won't get a picture of you like that.'

He retrieved the remainder of the cookie with as much dignity as he could muster – admittedly not a great deal, under the circumstances – before chewing and swallowing the forced mouthful. Debbie flashed him a grin, tousled his hair with one hand and then gave him a peck on the side of the forehead before getting up to take the rest of the plate downstairs.

Sherlock sulkily finished the cookie and avoided John's wry look for as long as he could.

'Flatmate, eh?'

'Yes, John, you may have noticed by the fact that she lives here.'

'And kisses you, and feeds you, and- barely keeping a straight face '-ruffles your hair, which I don't think I've seen anyone else do, up to and including your mother, and she's just your flatmate.' John worked his jaw thoughtfully for a moment. 'I was your flatmate, Sherlock. Debbie clearly thinks of you as a hell of a lot more than that and- he cut himself off as she came back into the room.

'Any good ones today?'

'Not really,' Sherlock said disconsolately, finishing the rest of the cookie and sipping his tea. 'All tedious and predictable.'

'Oh, that's a shame.' She gave him a small smile – the warm, indulgent and somehow reassuring one that he found himself thinking of as his smile, as though it was possible to own a claim to another person's facial expressions – and then looked at John. 'I'm glad I caught you actually, John. My friend Tonya works at one of the local primary schools and they're looking for guests to come in on a little careers day thing they're doing. I've got a cover to go myself and I wondered if you or Mary would be free to join in? You know, talk about working in medicine and that sort of thing. I'm sure the kids would love it. It's year six, the ten year-olds, so they might even have some semi-intelligent questions.'

'Oh, yeah.' John seemed quite enthused at the prospect. 'One of us, sure. When is it?'

'Next Tuesday morning, ten to midday. It's a really short thing, ten minutes each tops, but it would be so good to have a doctor – or a nurse – to talk.'

'Sounds doable. I'll let you know…tomorrow okay?'

'Super. Thank you.'

'You should get him along,' John added, jerking his head at Sherlock with a grin. 'Talk to the kids about being a detective.'

Debbie laughed.

'It's supposed to be a careers day, John, and since Consulting Detective isn't something you'd find
on a job spec anywhere other than on Sherlock's desk…oh!' She brightened. 'I wonder if Greg
would be free.'

'Who? Sherlock asked.

'Greg Lestrade. He's a real detective and I bet the kids would—'

'I'm a real detective!' Sherlock was beyond indignant – and, though he would never have admitted
it out loud – rather hurt at the intimation.

'Maybe you could invite Mycroft to talk about the civil service,' John said to Debbie with a wry
grin and a wink. 'Oh, what about Anderson? Greg can put you onto him, he's a forensics—'

'Anderson?' Sherlock looked from John to Debbie and back in mild horror.

'That might be interesting.' Debbie seemed oblivious to his outbursts. 'Oh! I could ask Molly!
Working in the morgue, that'd definitely be something different.'

'Good for the girls, too – seeing a lady in a position of power. She does a lot of work with the
police too, of course, so—'

'Molly?' Sherlock stood up, practically beside himself by now. 'All she does is perform autopsies
and make sad faces at the cause of death paperwork! Lestrade can barely navigate any case more
complex than someone standing over a body with a bloodied knife saying I told the bastard I'd do
it and Anderson still thinks fingerprinting is the be-all and end-all of crime scene investigation!

'Sherlock, it's a careers day for a primary school,' Debbie said to him. 'There's no need to get
yourself into a tizzwozz over it.'

'I'm not getting into a tizzwozz,' he retorted, drawing himself up. 'And I am a real detective.' Then,
throughly disgusted with the entire conversation, he stalked over to the couch and threw himself
down on it, turning his back to the room. He even tried hard not to listen to the ensuing low-
voiced murmuring and laughter as John left. They were mocking him. It was hardly his fault that
the criminal classes hadn't deigned to do anything worth his time for weeks.

God, he wanted a cigarette.

The couch shifted a little as Debbie sat down on the floor by his head and leaned back onto the
seat cushions.

'So are you going to sulk for the rest of the day or shall I think about dinner?' she asked after a few
moments.

Sherlock huffed.

'Would you like to come to the careers day?' she asked laughingly. 'Because I'm sure they'd
absolutely love to have you, even if your career isn't exactly…usual.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he scoffed. 'I have much better things to do with my time than talk to
children about the science of deduction.'

'Then why are you sulking? Oh, is it because I said Greg was a real detective? He does work for
Scotland Yard, you know. And you're a…freelancer.'

'I'm a consultant!' He rolled over so he could glare at her, and narrowed his eyes at her obvious
mirth. 'You're teasing me.'
'Maybe a bit. You're adorable when you're wounded.' Shuffling back a little more, she turned her head so their faces were very close together, giving him a smile that held more warmth and less mockery. 'Of course you're a real detective, Sherlock. I was only joking. Don't pout.'

'Hmph.' But he did uncurl slightly, cheering up as an idea occurred to him. 'So you're sorry.'

She giggled.

'Yes, I'm sorry that I teased you and implied you weren't a proper detective. Friends?'

'Maybe.' It was for some reason becoming difficult to keep up his frown. In fact he was struggling not to let himself smile. 'Will you give me a kiss?'

Another giggle.

'I think I can manage that.'
Sherlock flipped onto his stomach so he was at the right angle as Debbie leaned back. The kiss started off soft and fleeting but when she made to draw away he caught her bottom lip between both of his and smiled against her when she permitted him to deepen it.

By the time his mind rebooted back to something like normal functioning, he was upright on the couch and she was sitting next to him. They were inclined bodily towards each other, hands tangled in each other's hair, mouths meeting over and over so that each deep and enthusiastic kiss seemed to flow almost seamlessly into the next.

*Oh sure, JUST a flatmate. Because all flatmates regularly spend ten minutes making out on the couch like a pair of horny teenagers.* The inner John voice was almost at the point of abusing sarcasm, now.

*Ten minutes?*

Startled at that insight from his internal chronometer, Sherlock broke off. Debbie gave a quiet chuckle, stroking her hands through his hair once more before letting go of him and sitting back.

'Reboot? And don't give me that innocent puppy stare – *you* started that!'

He blinked a few times, hurriedly straightened his shirt and glanced about, trying to regain his immediate bearings.

'When did you get up and sit here?'

'It was that or you'd have landed on top of me on the floor,' she said, but seemed a little upset by the question. 'Did you really...tune that out, Sherlock?'

'Didn't have a say in it,' he replied faintly. 'Too much...sensory input.' The clock and his watch both confirmed the time frame. 'I'll review later. In my mind palace.'

Her giggle made him look at her. At least she didn't seem offended.

'You look like part of the universe just turned upside down,' she said. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes.' He shifted uncomfortably, registering the increasingly familiar tightness below his waist. 'I
think so. That effect is…rather disconcerting.'

'Hmm.' She sat up as he did, and leaned in to prop her chin on his shoulder. 'Well, as I said you started that one so I'm definitely not apologising.'

Sherlock frowned. But yes, she was right, he realised, as his mind replayed the memory. He'd asked her for a kiss – not waited for her to offer one! – and he had deepened it from a gentle brush of lips into something more involved.

_Because you wanted a snog and just the idea of admitting it is freaking you out._ Internal John was now grinning broadly like the proverbial cat. _In fact we might as well face it now, hadn't we, that you want a hell of a lot more than just a snog._

It took every remaining inch of Sherlock's frayed self-control not to look down at himself for visual verification of what his own body had already made abundantly clear. The notion shocked him. In all his life – with the exception of a few highly bewildering and inconvenient months during his fourteenth year – he had _never_ thought of himself as having any carnal impulses. Sex was...well, it was something that happened to other people. It just wasn't something he'd considered as ever being part of his personal sphere of experience. Even the Woman, with all her intrigue and fascinating allure, had provoked only the most dim and insubstantial echo of the urges that were now coursing quite insistently through his awareness.

Debbie was sitting _very_ close to him. Where her chin was propped on his shoulder he could feel her breath on his cheek and the side of his neck, and the softness of her breasts against his arm. A new and entirely foreign impulse was screaming at him to turn back and kiss her, to _consume_ her, push her down onto the couch beneath him and-

He stood up and fled to his bedroom, only half-hearing Debbie's concerned exclamation behind him. Slamming the door more from haste than direct intent, he slung the lock across before starting to pace back and forth in furious perplexity, scrubbing his hands through his hair. His fingers and nails felt rough against his own scalp, so unlike Debbie's gentle and relaxing caresses…

Incensed and frustrated with himself, Sherlock kicked uselessly at the wall and hurled himself onto the bed. Then he registered that it was uncomfortable to lay on his stomach and flipped over with an aggravated noise. Stupid, idiotic, distracting _physiology._

'Sherlock?' Debbie was right by his door, tapping on it. 'Are you all right?'

'Do _I_ seem all right?' he shouted.

'What's wrong? Is it...did I do something?' She sounded acutely distressed. 'I'm so sorry, Sherlock, I never meant to -- I shouldn't have -- say _something_, please.' There was a brief pause and then a soft thump; she'd leaned against the door and then slid down to sit on the floor. 'I'm...I'm just going to wait here, all right? Unless you want me to go. Do...do you want me to go? It's all right if you do, I promise. Just say so.'

Sherlock didn't respond, staring up blankly at the ceiling and contemplating the situation of needing to masturbate while the cause of the problem was sitting right outside his bedroom door. The predicament struck him as vaguely funny, but he couldn't really indulge the amusement given the...insistent nature of his current circumstances.

Groaning in resignation, he decided to take care of it quickly. _Ridiculous._ The effect Debbie had on him was turning him into some kind of hedonistic maniac. It wasn't as though he even had any real frame of reference for the subject. Of course he knew how everything worked – the mechanics, as it were – but that hardly gave confirmation to the prospect of the act itself…
'Sherlock?' Debbie's worried voice drifted in from beyond the door. Now deep in the throes of pure sensation, Sherlock's brain managed to rewrite her anxious tone into something else altogether. The notion of her calling his name at the height of what he was envisioning, along with the actual sound reaching his ears, somehow combined in his head to something unexpectedly and utterly delectable. He heard himself cry out as his mind went gloriously, spectacularly blank, and his back actually arched up off the bed as the feel of it drowned out all his other senses.

When he finally opened his eyes again it was all he could do not to recoil in disgust at himself – at the realisation of just how deeply he'd permitted himself to be drawn into his own mental fantasy, and the untidy physical evidence that had resulted.

Torn between embarrassment and outright self-loathing – a distinctly alien feeling – Sherlock slunk into the shower and changed his clothes, relieved that Debbie seemed to have vacated the immediate vicinity. He paced a little more in his room, angry and confused and perishing for a cigarette – or something stronger – before daring to venture back into the rest of the flat. Familiar cooking smells registered and he warily went to the kitchen door.

'Hey.' Debbie shot him a smile that was if anything a little too bright, and a fresh wave of shame rolled over him. Of course she knew what he'd done. She wasn't the world's only consulting detective, but she also wasn't a moron.

He managed a nod as a neutral sort of greeting, not entirely trusting his voice just yet.

'Dinner's on. Just a casserole, so good to go whenever you want.' She gave him a long look and then seemed to reach a decision, taking a cautious step towards him as though she expected him to flee like a startled rabbit.

'Sherlock, it's…it's all right. You do know that, don't you?' When he just stared at her she wrung her hands briefly before pressing on. 'These…feelings, and thoughts. Whatever. They're okay. You don't have to feel ashamed of them.'

'I'm not,' he lied quickly. 'Why…why would I be?'

HA! But you're not denying HAVING said feelings and thoughts. Internal John cackled with glee. It certainly took you bloody long enough.

Debbie chewed at her lower lip for a moment.

'You just seem-' then she shook her head with a little laugh, presumably deciding not to pursue that angle '-of course not. You're a grown man, after all!'

'Yes. I am.' He was slightly befuddled by that verdict. Had she been attributing childlike qualities to him? What a strange concept.

'Sorry,' she added, apparently feeling that some explanation was called for. 'You just look a bit…well, a bit like the proverbial little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.'

That's definitely not where your hand was just now. The internal John voice seemed to have decided that flippant innuendo was somehow going to be constructive. Sherlock barely resisted the urge to slap his own forehead to make it shut up.

'I'm just not accustomed to this sort of…' he groped for the right term '…sensory input. That's all.'

'Okay.' She nodded, then seemed to properly register what he'd said. Astonishment, with a fair helping of disbelief, dawned on her face. 'You can't mean – oh, god – Sherlock, you have…um…you have been with someone before, haven't you?'
Have you had anyone? The Woman’s taunting tone drifted back. And when I mean “have” I’m… being indelicate.

Why in the world did the human race insist on defining itself in this abstract binary state? To have had or not to have had, as though a base physical act was somehow transformative to one’s entire psychological condition…

‘Sherlock?’ Debbie prompted, seeming deeply anxious now.

‘No,’ he said finally. ‘I haven’t.’

‘You haven’t,’ she repeated, as though he’d just cited a particularly unlikely explanation for a triple homicide. ‘You – really?’

He sighed.

‘I really don’t understand this obsessive need to delve into the-’

‘But…nobody? Janine? That – that Irene woman?’

‘No.’ Of course the Woman had practically tried to tear his clothes off after he’d rescued her in Pakistan but that was hardly out of character for her. And Janine had certainly been exceedingly keen on the idea, especially once he’d “confided” to her that he’d been "hurt in the past." She’d been quite obsessed with the idea of "fixing" him, whatever that meant.

‘Well.’ Debbie folded her arms, half hugging herself and seeming rather at a loss. ‘I’m…astonished, honestly, but-’

‘Why? What’s so astonishing about it?’

‘Well you just-’ she motioned idly at him with one hand ‘-you know.’

‘…no?’

‘God. Look at yourself, Sherlock!’

He glanced down at himself and then back up at her incredulous expression. Oh.

‘You’re referring to my physical appearance.’

‘Yes!’ For some reason she seemed to find his puzzlement hilarious. ‘You’re just...you’re gorgeous, Sherlock, really you are. I just can't believe someone hasn't snapped you up. Although-‘ with a small giggle ‘-I suspect it might not be for lack of trying on other people's parts, hmm?’

‘People do try to have sex with me,’ he said with a shrug, which for some reason sent her into paroxysms of laughter. ‘What?’

‘Nothing. So people – and don’t think I’m not missing the gender neutrality of that term – try it on, but you what…just ignore them?’

‘It isn’t difficult. Once I start talking most of them lose interest anyway.’ For some reason he found himself grinning along with her at that. It reminded him of a comment John had once made about how once you open your mouth, Sherlock, it always seems to go downhill from there.

‘You’ve never wanted to?’
'I've never had the occasion. Or the urge. Before.'

_Ah._ That last word had sort of slipped out without conscious control. Inner John was crowing in triumphant victory but Sherlock did his best to ignore that, somewhat startled at his own inadvertent admission. _Never had the urge…before._

It was true, though. However he tried to disguise it as an investigation or data acquisition exercise, he _liked_ kissing Debbie, and touching Debbie, and was becoming almost desperately curious to explore what other kinds of interactions were available. His hormonal and other physiological responses were increasingly impossible to deny. His predilection for her company, even in the most minor capacities, was also largely irrefutable by this point, and the painfully irrational surges of jealousy – _yes, jealousy_ – he felt when seeing her the object of someone else’s devoted attention were verging on the ridiculous.

>You know what the case is. You've got more than enough evidence. So solve it.

'Debbie-' he began, then stopped because he had no earthly idea how to continue.

'It's okay.' She smiled at him – warm, reassuring, the smile he thought of as _his_ – then abruptly stepped forward and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, turning her head so her cheek rested against his chest. Uncertain to the point of wariness, he gingerly lifted his own arms to enclose her and return the embrace.

It felt…nice.

Still guarded, he tipped his head on one side so his cheek came to rest against her hair. She made a soft, pleased little noise and shuffled a bit closer to him, sliding her hands up his back.

_Mango._ _Passionfruit._ _Coconut._ _Softness._ _Warmth._ _Debbie._ Sherlock actually closed his eyes to better assimilate the various inputs. His mind had slowed to a pleasantly unhurried tick rather than its usual runaway sprint, but nothing was fizzling out or rebooting. It just seemed…quiet.

That felt nice, too.

It was a long few minutes before Debbie stirred and looked up at him, their relative positions putting their faces very close together.

'First proper cuddle, hmm?' She smiled and then tilted her head back to kiss the tip of his nose. 'Much as I'd love to keep standing here, time's getting on and we really ought to see about dinner.'

Sherlock privately thought dinner could go hang, as whatever a _proper cuddle_ was seemed to him a much more enjoyable way to pass the time, but kept the notion to himself as she gave him a quick squeeze and then stepped away.

'I'll dish up, then you can tell me about that case I interrupted.'

'It was boring.'

'Tell me anyway.'

So he filled her in on the prospective clients he and John had seen that day – with all their various degrees of tedious problems – and ate casserole, then helped her do the washing up because she hated to leave dirty plates out overnight.

'What would you like to do now?' she asked, folding the tea towel over the oven door handle. 'Shout at some rubbish telly? Have a read? Thrash me at Jenga again?'
Sherlock glanced at the curve of her lips, swallowed once, and then ambled over to the couch to sit down on it in what he hoped was a casual sort of manner.

'I don't know.' He laced his fingers together in his lap. 'What would you like to do?'

They ended up reading on the couch, which wasn't unusual, except that Debbie was curled up at one end again and Sherlock had stretched out with his head in her lap. She was just as comfortable as the cushions he'd ordinarily prop himself up with, and she'd occasionally stroke his head or toy absently with his hair. Even the latest edition of *Knight's Forensic Pathology* was struggling to hold his interest when in competition with that.

'I have to go to bed or I'm going to doze off here and fall over on you.' After a couple of hours Debbie ruffled his hair and gave him a little nudge. He reluctantly moved, and grudgingly adjusted the cushions to re-prop himself in the absence of her legs.

'It's not *that* late.'

'It's nearly midnight, and I've got work tomorrow.'

'Kiss, please.'

Smiling, she stooped to peck him on the lips. He frowned as she straightened.

'Um.' Now, how to phrase this… *Proper* kiss? Please?'

She seemed to find that amusing.

'Expanding the menu, are we?'

'What?'

'Never mind.' When she did as he asked he felt his eyes slide closed almost on reflex – odd, now why exactly *was* that? – although he opened them again immediately as she drew back, and craned his neck around to watch her as she went to the door.

'Good night, Debbie.'

'Good night, Sherlock,' she said laughingly, and then was gone. He closed his eyes again to focus on the sounds of her going upstairs, getting changed, settling into the bed. So different from John's evening routine noises – he could draw the comparison effortlessly even after so long – which had always seemed to involve a lot more tossing and turning to get comfortable. Debbie was so much more restful, like the gentle soporific of a hot bath.

Disinclined to read any more, and not unaware that he was smiling to himself at his own contemplations, Sherlock turned off the lights and went to bed.
The next few days brought a flurry of minor cases although none were particularly interesting until Lestrade called him to look into a dead body found stripped naked and covered in bizarre markings written in some unusual form of black ink. Molly was on duty at Bart's, making the investigation of the corpse less tiresome than it would otherwise have been, and after getting a few samples of the pigment Sherlock was so deeply involved with picking it to pieces in the lab that he entirely lost track of the time.

That is, he did until some internal alarm he didn't recall setting went off in his head, prompting him to pull back from the microscope with a frown.

'Found something?' Molly asked.

'No.' He looked away and ran through a mental checklist. Another case, perhaps? Some sort of deadline or time limit he'd filed away as a precaution? Something to do with-

Oh.

It was a Friday, and perilously close to twenty to six, which meant he shouldn't be at Bart's at all. He should be sitting in Caffé Nero with two cups of tea and a slice of coffee cake, waiting for Debbie to arrive from the nursery.

Should be? That dry tone was typical Mycroft. What a strange obligation. What, pray, are you expecting to happen if you're absent? Perhaps for some other consulting detective genius to march in and sweep her away from you?

Or for the barista who fancies her to finally make a move when he sees her by herself. And that was John, wryly but pointedly voicing a suspicion based on an earlier observation.

'Sherlock?' Molly's voice pulled him back into the room. 'You all right? You look a bit…worried.'

'Yes. Fine.' He found his phone and hastily composed a text. Assuming she hadn't been delayed by a parent, she'd just be turning the corner from Crawford Place into Edgware Road. Then he deleted the text and rewrote it, turning the dork-boyfriend persona off because this was Debbie and thank god, he didn't need to pretend.
At Bart's. Interesting case. Sorry. – SH

There. Everything was all right. He tried to extinguish the mental picture of the barista in question ambling over to the table on the pretence of cleaning something nearby. Hiya...oh, by yourself today? Shame on him, I say...

Focus. The pigment. Nothing modern, or conventional. He'd checked it against the molecular structure of the most common commercial black inks for pens and paints. It was something simpler – amorphous carbon and protein colloids – rather than mass produced. Old ink. Traditional in some cultures, especially in the Far East...

Why didn't she text back? Even just to say it was okay? Unless it wasn't okay. But it was only one Friday and it wasn't as though the tradition – habit – whatever-it-was had ever been formally declared an appointment. Besides, he had a case.

Soot and animal glue! Of course. Stupid. India ink! That explained the acetic acid. The cadaver's skin had been treated like a tissue specimen, a mordant applied so it wouldn't track. Whoever had painted the corpse had been very keen that the symbols be kept legible. Some kind of medical or scientific background then, possibly even a pathologist by trade. But that didn't explain the borneol camphor also present in the sample.

If he left now and managed to catch a cab quickly...no, the traffic would be terrible, anywhere up to forty five minutes or more. The Tube then, from Barbican, a reliable twenty-two minutes even at peak travel times. What time was it now?

A knock at the lab door made him glance up again and he blinked in surprise when Molly opened it to admit Debbie carrying a cardboard take-out tray with three cups in it that he recognised dimly as from Beppe's Café opposite the hospital.

'Hi, Molly. I couldn't remember tea or coffee or how you took it so I got you some hot chocolate.'

'...you did?' Molly was clearly rather taken aback at that casual pronouncement. 'Thank you. How did you, um-

'I said I was looking for Mr Holmes and they practically shoved me into the lift.' Debbie grinned. 'I could have name-dropped Doctor Hooper, I suppose, but I didn't want to presume.'

'Oh, right...'

'Hi, Sherlock.' Debbie passed him another cup. 'Black, two sugars, and don't make a face because I know you like the coffee at Beppe's.'

'I wasn't making a face!' He glanced at Molly for help. 'Was I making a face?'

She shook her head violently but seemed to be trying hard not to laugh.

'There. I wasn't making a face.'

'All right, but you were about to.' Debbie grinned and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'I thought I'd bring you something but there's no point trying to make you eat when you're on a case. Must be a good one if you forgot what time it was. You don't mind, do you?'

'No.' Sherlock was rather gratified at that blithe assertion from her. 'Of course not.'

*Hmm, knows your habits, knows your coffee preferences, brings you something when you're working and gives you a kiss, but doesn't scold you for forgetting to meet her. Internal John rolled*
his eyes violently. You know what that sounds like, Sherlock? It sounds like a GIRLFRIEND, and a bloody good one at that!

'I did text John but poor Rosie's colicky and the whole lot of them seem to be on the verge of outright collapse. I'm going to go over tomorrow and babysit so he and Mary can have a bit of a rest.'

'Oh.' Well, that explained why John was ignoring Sherlock's texts at least. 'Fine.'

'What've you got, then?' she asked, settling onto a nearby stool and sipping her own drink. 'Must be something unusual or you'd be moaning about how boring it was by now.'

'Young male, nineteen years old, found dead by strangulation, entirely naked and covered with esoteric patterns drawn directly onto the skin with india ink and treated with acetic acid to preserve the pattern. Traces of borneol camphor in the pigment-' saying it out loud made something click in his mind '-which is a compound commonly used in incense, meaning the ink in question came from an inkstone made using traditional methods from East Asia – oh!'

He scrabbled for his phone, typing rapidly, and crowed in triumph when the query confirmed the origin of the ink patterns.

'Taoist Sorcery. Brilliant! Gong tau hexes.' He constructed a text to Lestrade. 'Nineteen year old boy, rowdy sort, hangs around with other unemployed youngsters in his neighbourhood, earns the ire of a mildly homicidal Taoist with occult leanings – minor property damage, judging by his recent ASBO – who murders him and leaves his body covered in traditional curses. Molly, the cause of strangulation was-

'Fabric. Like a scarf, or-

'It was a scarf. A silk scarf.' Sherlock's phone rang. 'Lestrade! What did young Mr Jenkins damage when he got his ASBO?'

'What the – uh, it was an ornament thing on a neighbour's balcony. Some kind of shrine.'

'Yes, a Taoist shrine. Like the hexes written all over him in traditional india ink.'

'Except the neighbour in question is a seventy-two year-old retired postman from Croydon, Sherlock, and definitely NOT a Taoist.'

'Of course not!' Sherlock wanted to bang his head on the table. How could people not see these things? 'But he has a regular visitor – close friend, or maybe a family member – who is deeply Taoist, gave him the shrine as a gift and viewed its destruction as a spiritual affront, sufficient to warrant an act of public retribution.'

'To do what, exactly? Warn the other kids off? Who in god's name recognises East Asian hex marks?'

'No, the hex marks are there as a punishment for the spirit of the late Mr Jenkins, ensuring that he'll find no peace even after death as justice for his crime. Not a warning, a sentence, a sentence that extends beyond death – very poetic, and not out of character for someone who'd be upset enough about a Taoist shrine being damaged to commit murder.'

'Bloody hell.' There was a sound of shuffling paper. 'The old bloke did say the shrine was a gift from an old friend…and he used to deliver routine post to the Chinese embassy. Right. All we need is a name off him and this one's in the bag…'
'And John has no idea so can't write it up on the blog,' Sherlock added cheerfully. 'Please feel free to take all the credit. I'll email you the details.'

'Some bugger'll probably find out regardless, but thanks anyway. I'll let you know when we've made the arrest.'

Sherlock hung up, grinning broadly.

'Well, that seemed…conclusive,' Molly said, raising her eyebrows.

'It was!' Delighted at the solution, Sherlock spun around on the stool before jumping up to hug Debbie and give her a firm kiss that went on for a few more seconds longer than he'd initially intended. 'Best one in ages! God, for a case like that every week…'

Debbie laughed at him.

'Dear me, I came down here expecting to see complex forensics and investigation in action and instead I get you shouting at Greg on the phone and bouncing around like a giddy schoolboy, you great loon. Is he always like this on cases?' she asked Molly.

'Only at the start and then right at the end. In the middle it's mainly lots of silence and crankiness and glaring at things.'

'Ah. The grumpy science of deduction.'

Aware they were making fun of him, but not caring in the least, Sherlock turned the microscope off and grabbed his coat.

'Let's get some food. I don't think Beppe's do coffee cake but there must be something—'

'…and now the post-deduction munchies.' Debbie grinned at Molly, who was biting her lip in an effort not to laugh. 'Do you want to come?'

'No, thank you, I've got things to do, but thanks for the hot chocolate.'

'Debbie!' Sherlock had kicked the door open and was already striding down the corridor, his stomach protesting its emptiness now that his mind wasn't otherwise occupied. 'Come on!'
Sherlock dimly heard Debbie apologising to Molly before she scuttled after him, barely making it before the lift doors slid closed. Taking a brief second to confirm that they were alone in the elevator, still in the throes of the post-solution high, he swept her up into an embrace and then pinned her against the wall so he could kiss her properly for a bit. Giggling against his mouth, she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

'Good god!'

Sherlock broke off when the shocked voice of Mike Stamford registered.

'...SHERLOCK?'

'Hello, Mike. Have you met Debbie? Debbie, Mike Stamford. Come on, I'm hungry.' Catching her hand in his, Sherlock half-dragged her past the reception desk and outside.

About fifteen minutes later, halfway through a plate of greasy but rather excellent chips in Beppe's, he started to regain his equilibrium. Interesting…the presence of Debbie at the moment of conclusion, and kissing her so recklessly in the lift afterwards, seemed to have prolonged the high of solving the case by at least nine minutes over its usual duration.

She had her chin propped in one hand and was watching him eat with a smile halfway between warm affection and outright wonderment. Why was she looking at him like that?

'Do you want some chips?' he asked, indicating the now nearly-empty plate in front of him.

'No, thank you.' She was amused now.

'What is it?' Concerned now, Sherlock narrowed his eyes slightly. 'What did I do?'

'Nothing.' The smile broadened. 'I was just contemplating how glad I am that I knocked you over in the street and got our phones mixed up.'

'Glad?'

'Yes, glad.' She brought her other hand up so her chin was resting in both palms. 'Because if that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have your wonderful insanity in my life, and what's even worse is I
'Wonderful insanity?' he echoed, rather dismayed at that. 'That seems like a somewhat oxymoronic phrase, doesn't it?'

'I don't think so. You are insane – completely crazy, totally mad – for all you're a genius, and at the same time you're utterly wonderful.'

Sherlock picked at the remainder of his chips, unsure how to respond to that. He'd been called plenty of things over the years – few of them complimentary – but wonderful had definitely never been one of them. Wonderful. Someone who caused wonder. What a strange term to use.

'Is it because I kissed you in the lift? I'm sorry about that. I was-' he gestured helplessly '-high, on solving the case. It's a behavioural eccentricity but-

Clearly trying not to grin, she chewed at her bottom lip.

'If you hadn't just solved the case, would you have not wanted to kiss me?'

He considered. That was actually a good question. The answer was also surprisingly straightforward.

'No. I don't think so. I mean, I probably wouldn't have just-' he motioned to illustrate '-grabbed you and – well…'

Debbie giggled.

'I'm not adverse to a little manhandling. Didn't expect it, but don't mind. Well, unless you have a habit of snogging women in the lift at Bart's when you solve a murder.'

'I don't – no, no, definitely not. I've never done that before.' In fact doing that to anyone, anywhere, wasn't really his milieu. Which was why, of course, Mike Stamford had been so gobsmacked when the lift door opened in front of him to reveal Sherlock Holmes snogging someone.

'That's all right then.' She winked. 'If you were doing that to anyone else I would, of course, be honour bound to declare war on her – or him – which would get very nasty. I'm a hair-puller.'

That casual assertion made him blink, as much from genuine surprise as from the recognition of its mirror in himself. He had, if he was being honest with himself, become increasingly…covetous of Debbie's company and her regard for him, even going so far as to become upset at her comments about John, of all people, and of course his distraction about the barista had delayed him actively solving the case until her presence had assuaged his concerns. But the notion of her feeling the same way – of the postulation of jealousy in the event of his attitude towards her being turned on another – had never really occurred to him before.

The realisation that he actually quite liked the concept, and its reciprocation even more, was similarly astounding.

Do you have anything to say in your defence? His own words to the unfortunate would-be usher at Mary and John's wedding drifted back, and he astonished himself by feeling a brief, retroactive pang of sympathy for the man's predicament at the time.

He took a sip of tea.

Guilty as charged.
He put the cup down.

*Oh, bugger.*

'We are in a relationship, aren't we?'

Debbie gave another giggle.

'You sound like someone just gave you a death sentence. I told you, Sherlock, you have to decide that sort of thing. It isn't a state that just happens, like...getting hungry, or something.'

'I see.'

'Do you want to be?' she asked.

'I don't know;' he admitted. A flat no would be a lie to the point of self-delusion, at this point.

'Well, what do you want?'

'Want?'

'For...us.'

'I-' he stopped short, not having the slightest clue how to continue.

'And don't say more chips;' she added playfully. 'I was going to do cauliflower cheese tonight.'

'Fine.' It was starting to get dark outside, so he stood. 'Shall we get back?'

'Okay.'

When she put her hand on his knee in the cab, Sherlock covered it with one of his own and didn't resist when she laced her fingers up through his.

Was this what a relationship could be? Not dates and dinner, just talking and chips and kisses and the inexplicable enjoyment of another person's company? His heart rate was elevating just thinking about it.

What do you want for us?

For...us. The singular entity of two individuals somehow considered as one. She'd used that term before and it had made him curious, but now he found himself dwelling on it with something almost approaching fascination.

Once they were back in Baker Street he was still no closer to an answer, though. While Debbie bustled about in the kitchen he got changed into his nightclothes and robe, then sat in his chair with his fingers steepled thoughtfully in front of his face.

You have to decide...

'That's deep contemplation;' Debbie said, ambling in and perching on the edge of the table nearest to him. 'I'd say penny for your thoughts, but that might not be enough.'

'Just...considering.' Sherlock glanced at her with a small frown. 'Why is it that you don't sit in John's chair? You did when looking after Rosie but that's the only time...'

'You said it. It's John's chair.'
'You live here. He doesn't. Why shouldn't you use it?'

'It's... John's chair. The chair he sits in when you solve crimes together.' She shrugged. 'It wouldn't feel right, that's all.'

'It's really quite comfortable.'

'I'm sure it is. But it's John's chair.' She smiled at his puzzlement, pulling out one of the dining chairs and sitting on that instead. 'Have you decided what you want, yet?'

'No.' He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. 'In fact I'm still trying to decipher the question.'

'Oh dear. Well, let me know how you get on.'

Over dinner he diverted his attention by telling her all about the india ink case, then helped her to do the washing up. She liked to keep the flat tidy – at least of conventional mess, though she never touched any of his chemistry equipment – and standing at the sink together with one washing and the other drying had become a useful way to extend the conversation over dinner. Often when she passed him things their fingers would brush, prompting a ridiculous little tremor of stimulus through his skin from the point of contact.

'You could try starting to answer with the words I want,' she said to him as they went back into the living room. 'Sometimes saying that prompts the next thing...'

'A leading statement.'

'Exactly.' Sitting back on the same chair, she cocked her head at him with a smile. 'Give it a try?'

Sherlock wrinkled his nose. A two-bit psychological trick seemed unlikely to yield any useful results for someone of his intellect, but it wouldn't be detrimental to make the attempt.

'All right.' He took a breath. 'I want...'

'You're supposed to say something.'

'I know. I'm still thinking what.'

'Don't think, then. Just say it. I want and then don't even pause. Whatever comes into your head at that instant. Anything at all. Even if it's completely unrelated and totally ridiculous. Just... see what comes out.'

'Why?'

'Just try it.'

Huffing a little, he drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair.

'I want- anything at all? '-I want you to sit in that chair. You live here now and you have every bit as much right to sit in it as John does. Only clients and visitors sit on the couch or the desk chairs all the time. You're not a client, or a visitor. You're- he dropped his gaze awkwardly '-you're far more than that.'

When he looked at her again she was smiling at him with unbridled affection. Then, very deliberately, she got up, pushed the other chair back and crossed to sit down in the armchair, making a small show of settling comfortably before tucking her legs up under herself.
'Is this better?'

'Yes.' Then, feeling that something else was called for, he added 'Thank you.'

Another smile.

'Good start, then. Try another?'

'I'm thinking.'

'I told you, don't think!'

'Fine.' Sherlock took a breath. *Just…see what comes out.* 'I want you to keep living here.' That wasn't too shocking, at least. 'I want…to be able to kiss you whenever I feel like it, and touch you, and – um – cuddle you, and lay on your lap while you stroke my hair and–' he cut himself off, finding that he had to close his mouth rather firmly to stop that unexpected verbal outpouring.

'And?' Debbie prompted gently.

'And I want you to keep spending time with me but not to go on dates with people – with other people – because it makes me think that someone else will take you away and I won't be able to see you again, or kiss you, or talk to you, and I want…' He trailed off then, not because he wasn't sure what he wanted to say – in fact he found that he was astonishingly positive about what he wanted to say – but because he wasn't sure quite how to phrase it. *Try again.*

'I want to be your–'

*Suitor? Boyfriend? Companion? Lover?*

Then he abruptly remembered what she'd said to him the night he made her dinner, and it fell into place in a way that was entirely devoid of logic or reason and yet made utter and complete sense.

'I want to be…your…Sherlock.'

She lifted a hand to her mouth and looked like she was about to cry. Not the reaction he'd anticipated. Oh, she was crying…well, a bit. He panicked.

'Was that wrong? Did I say it wrong?'

'No, Sherlock, it–' she wiped at her eyes and then got up, closing the short distance between them to kneel up in front of him '–it wasn’t wrong at all. It was perfect.' Propping her hands on his knees, she leaned in and kissed him deeply.

'So…good crying?' he asked when she broke off, still rather concerned.

'Yes. Good crying. Oh, come here, you.' Standing up, she caught his hands and pulled him to his feet before throwing her arms around his waist. Somewhat pleased with this – it was more the reaction he'd expected – Sherlock embraced her tightly and let his eyes slide closed as the scent and feel of her enveloped him.

They stood like that for a little while. After a few moments he experimentally moved one of his hands up to tangle through her hair. It was so soft and nice to touch that he found himself enjoying running his fingers through it, but when she stirred against his chest he paused, anxious that he'd disturbed her.

'I have a condition,' she said suddenly, looking up and cupping his cheeks with both palms. 'I
should have said that sooner."

'A condition?' he echoed, rather alarmed at the idea. 'What sort of condition?'

'If you're going to be- ' she kissed him gently on the lips '-my Sherlock, then I get to be- ' another kiss, a little firmer '-your Debbie. Does that sound all right?'

He felt himself smile and made no attempt to stop it. So strange, the way a possessive pronoun could indicate a change in a relationship. But he liked the sound of that, too. My Debbie.

'That sounds…good.'

'Good.' She giggled, which made his smile broaden.

'Kiss, please.'

He felt a chuckle escape as she obliged, luxuriating unashamedly in the feel of her lips and tongue against his. She was so soft and pliant against his chest, and he could feel interest registering in other parts of his body too. For some reason the idea sent a vague thrill shooting through his belly and he held her a little tighter, one hand still in her hair while the other slid daringly down her body to settle on her left hip.

'Sherlock,' she sighed. 'I have to go to bed. I'm babysitting tomorrow, remember?'

'We can both go to bed, he found himself thinking, but forced the rationalisation that this would in all likelihood not lead to much in the way of sleeping.

'All right.' Kissing her once more, lingeringly, he made himself step away. 'Good night, then.'

Her smile only made him want to hold her again as she lifted one hand to gently caress the side of his face.

'Good night, Sherlock. Don't sit up too late, now.'

He gave it ten minutes after she had settled in upstairs, then stomped into his own bedroom with a groan of resignation to take care of the problem in his trousers. The audio memory of her sighing his name came in very useful.
Morning brought Debbie's usual weekend bustle of breakfast and cleaning, and as usual Sherlock strategically stayed out of her way sufficiently to get himself showered and dressed. He was dismayed, however, to emerge from his room to find her putting on her coat. Today was their first day officially as a – a couple, and she was going out without him?

'Good morning,' he tried.

'Hey.' She gave him a peck on the cheek. 'I'll probably be back early evening, but if it'll be later I'll text you, okay?'

Oh, of course. Babysitting. Damn. He reached for his own coat and scarf.

'What are you doing, Sherlock?'

'I'm coming with you. Oh! Violin.'

She watched, bemused, as he packed it carefully into its case.

'I didn't think you'd be so enthusiastic about the idea of babysitting Rosie…'

'I'm not.' He picked the case up and floundered for a moment, deeply unaccustomed to the impulse driving his current actions and even more unused to the idea of indulging it, let alone confessing it. 'But I want…to spend today with you. So.'

She broke into a grin and gave a sunny laugh, grabbing his lapels and hauling him into a deep kiss that made him briefly hope that maybe babysitting had been abandoned.

'You're impossible,' she said. 'Come on, the cab's downstairs.'

The ride to John and Mary's in theory gave Sherlock plenty of time to mull over that rather hyperbolic declaration, but when Debbie snuggled against his side in the back of the taxi he found it rather difficult to concentrate. After a moment he took off his gloves and pocketed them so he could hold her hand and feel her skin. It was strangely comfortable, sitting there with her head tucked onto his shoulder and her fingers entwined with his on her knee. He could have quite contentedly sat like that for hours.

'…you brought Sherlock?' A very weary-looking Mary blinked in surprise when the door opened.
'And his violin,' Debbie said with a grin. 'To soothe the restless beast.'

'Oh my god, don't even…come in, both of you. Kettle's just boiled. John! They're here.'

'They?' John looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards. 'Sherlock?'

Any reply he might have made was cut off by a babyish shriek. Debbie immediately shed her coat and bag to stride into the living room.

'Why in god's name are you here?' John asked Sherlock in an undertone.

'To play violin for your offspring, John.'

'Oh, right. Debbie's idea, then?'

'No, my idea.' Sherlock tried not to look too smug at his friend's startled expression. 'I wanted to spend the day with Debbie and since she was coming here, I needed a reason to join her. This seemed like the obvious solution.'

'…you wanted to spend the day with Debbie?' John squinted at him. 'Who are you, exactly, and what have you done with Sherlock Holmes?'

'Oh, we discussed it yesterday.' Sherlock for some reason wanted John to register his approval of the situation. 'We're…a couple.'

'A couple,' John repeated flatly. 'You…and Debbie. Officially. Finally. In a relationship.'

'Yes.' Sherlock beamed, inordinately proud of himself with the verdict, however weary a tone it was delivered in.

'And this isn't like that thing with Janine?'

'No!' Aghast that his friend would bring that up, Sherlock shook his head violently. 'No – no, not at all, definitely not. No case. Real. Very, categorically real.'

'That's…amazing, but I'll think about it when I've had more than twenty minutes of sleep.' John patted him absently on the shoulder as Mary and Debbie came back into the room. Debbie had a red-faced Rosie in her arms.

'I've got her, John, now for god's sake you two hit the hay, you look half dead!'

'Why didn't we make her a godmother?' Mary muttered as the two dragged themselves up the stairs, but John's reply was lost in the slam of the bedroom door.

'She's had her breakfast and been changed,' Debbie said, hefting Rosie up onto her hip. 'Being a fusspot the whole time, of course. I think a bit of a play first, and then you can break out the serenading. Now, where is Mister Bunny…?'

Sherlock settled onto the couch to observe but didn't mind too much when she coaxed him into holding and wiggling various toys and rattles to distract Rosie's attention. The baby seemed to have reached an excessively enterprising state that involved trying to grasp at everything she laid her eyes on. At one point her tiny hands got a death grip on the undone topmost button of his shirt and he froze in panic while Debbie laughingly pried her off.

'At least you don't wear ties. Like a red rag to a bull at this grabby stage!'

'That's why you aren't wearing earrings,' he observed.
'That's why you aren't wearing earrings,' he observed.

'Yup. Shiny things are always too tempting.'

After Rosie lost interest in her various toys Debbie kept her occupied with some sort of elaborate tapping and waving game for a bit, but the baby soon decided that wasn't any fun either and announced her displeasure with a loud noise halfway between a yell and a scream.

'I think that's your cue, Sherlock,' Debbie said to him with a grin.

Fortunately just the action of getting his violin out of its case proved enough of a diversion to silence further protests from Rosie, and Sherlock quickly struck up the music he'd written for Debbie. It was about the right tempo anyway, and sure enough within a couple of bars Rosie was swaying and waving, enraptured by the sound.

'That really is a lovely tune,' Debbie remarked as he finished. 'Does it have a name yet?'

'No. I'm not much good with names.' Sherlock switched to some Mozart to avoid Rosie's wrath. Of course he was quite accustomed to playing the violin for prolonged periods – hours on end, during some particularly taxing cases – but having a willing audience captivated for so long was a new experience for him. After finishing the piece he improvised for a while, but stopped when he realised Rosie had to all appearances nodded off.

'Well, that'll do her good,' Debbie whispered, carefully gathering the baby up and putting her into her day cot. Rosie made a small noise and kicked her legs, but didn't wake. 'Right, shoes off for safety and then let's sneak into the kitchen and have a cuppa.'

He was unsure how taking shoes off was supposed to contribute when the much more obvious sounds of tea making didn't disturb the baby, but at any rate the kitchen chairs were rather uncomfortable so they ended up going back to the living room and sitting on the couch together instead. Sherlock didn't mind this because it meant being able to sit in close proximity to Debbie, and he couldn't quite stifle his smile when she leaned against his side again.

'Tell me if I'm being too tactile,' she said to him quietly.

'No. I mean, you're not. It's fine.' To prove the point, he lifted one arm and carefully put it around her shoulders. 'Is this all right?'

'Very all right.' Putting her tea down, she nestled closely against him and tilted her head up to give him a kiss. Pleased, he shuffled slightly sideways to make the angle easier and caught her lips in his again when she drew back.

It had never before occurred to Sherlock that kissing – just kissing, over and over – could be such an agreeable act. He'd always assumed that it was one of those things people just inexplicably did, like wear odd socks or watch television, rather than something to be enjoyed for its own sake. But sitting there on John and Mary's couch, sliding his lips across Debbie's over and over… it undeniably sent his endorphin levels skyrocketing. Something to do with the moist softness of her mouth, the gentle touch of her tongue, the way she pressed up against him in a way that managed to be both fierce and tender at the same time…it all somehow added up to something hopelessly addicting.

Rosie suddenly woke with a loud gurgle, and Debbie broke off to go to her immediately. Sherlock reached for the remains of his tea but it had gone cold. Yuck.

'Well now you have a choice, Sherlock.' Debbie shot him a grin. 'You can experience the art of changing a nappy, or you can go and make us some fresh tea.'
He stared at her for a beat and then grabbed both mugs to flee to the kitchen, pointedly ignoring the peals of laughter that followed him.

At any rate Rosie seemed to be in a more cooperative mood after her nap, however brief it had been, so after a bit of rummaging Debbie found an apparently suitable DVD in the cupboard and put it on, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor with the baby on her lap. Sherlock recognised the film at once – his Debbie-overloaded mind palace did, anyway – as *Finding Nemo*, a particularly irksome story about talking fish. The bright colours and motion seemed to keep Rosie's attention, at least, and by the time it finished she was asleep again.

Once the baby was back in the cot, Sherlock took the opportunity to pull Debbie into his arms and kiss her some more, which made her laugh. They settled back onto the sofa again and after a bit more kissing he stretched himself out with his head on her lap – John and Mary's couch was not as comfortable as the one at Baker Street, but with Debbie as a pillow it would do – and pulled out his phone to check some emails.

When there was nothing interesting to follow up, and Debbie started running her hands through his hair, he put his phone aside and let his eyes slide closed. Just for a moment. It was so calming…
'Oh my god.' Mary's soft exclamation woke Sherlock – some time later, his internal clock informed him helpfully – but he kept his eyes closed. Debbie was still stroking his hair.

'Ssh.' Debbie was clearly smiling, he could hear it in her voice. 'You'll wake them.'

'But you got her – my god, she's asleep! John, d'you hear that?'

A yawn accompanied John's apparent descent downstairs.

'Hear what?'

'Exactly!'

'Oh…both flat out I see.' That was with undeniable amusement. 'I suppose playing violin lullabies is terribly exhausting.'

'I'm not asleep,' Sherlock said pointedly, without opening his eyes. 'I'm just…resting.'

'You were dozing a minute ago,' Debbie teased.

'I'm putting the kettle on,' John said. 'Who's for tea?'

Rosie woke while they were drinking it but instead of shrieking just rolled over and gurgled until Mary picked her up.

'Look at you, eh? All calm and not screaming. Be honest, this isn't actually Rosie, is it…'

'The magical powers of Uncle Sherlock's violin and Finding Nemo.' Debbie grinned. 'You should get a copy of Fantasia for her.'

'You…' John glanced at Sherlock disbelievingly '…you watched Finding Nemo.'

'Well, Rosie and I did,' Debbie said. 'Sherlock mostly made inappropriate comments about the reproductive habits of clown fish.'

'Thank god. For a moment I was seriously worried.'
Mary and Debbie took Rosie into the kitchen with them to make some tea – quite why the baby was required wasn't entirely clear – so Sherlock sat up and idly checked his phone again for a few moments until he registered that John was staring at him with something approaching smugness.

'So. You and Debbie. Cuddling on the couch. *Asleep* in her *lap*.'

'Yes?'

'Just-' John didn't seem sure what he wanted to say, and shook his head '-I mean, it's good. She's good. For you.'

'Yes, she is.' Sherlock smiled at his friend's obvious discomfiture with that straightforward admission.

'You're *sure* this isn't like the thing with J-

'For god's sake, John, will you *stop* bringing that up? That was for a case. This…isn't.'

He didn't expect John to break into a grin every bit as broad.

'I *knew* it. Thank god she bumped into us and picked up the wrong phone. *You* -pointing, very definitely smug now- '-you are in a *relationship*, a *real* one, and you're *enjoying* it, aren't you?'

'It's been less than twenty four hours, John.'

'What?'

'Since we agreed to- ' Sherlock shrugged '-be a couple.'

'Oh, right the *official* talk.' Another grin. 'You've been in a *relationship* with Debbie for *months*, Sherlock, you just weren't willing to admit it.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Yes you *bloody* well do, you just don’t want to admit you're being wilfully ignorant because that would mean admitting you were *wrong*.'

'About what?'

'About being madly in love with her all this time.'

'Don’t be ridiculous. This may be a- ' Sherlock had to think for a moment to formulate an appropriate phrase '-an experiment in sentiment, but-'

'Oh my god…'

'What?'

'*Experiment in sentiment?* Do you even *hear* yourself, Sherlock? You care about her, and she cares about you – god only knows why – and you're still trying to convince everyone this is all part of some scientific exercise?'

'What scientific exercise?' Debbie asked, coming back in with a tea tray. Mary was just behind her carrying a now-beaming and happily gurgling Rosie. Sherlock hastily shuffled along on the couch to make room, expecting John to drop the matter.

His friend genuinely surprised him by turning his half-smug, half-frustrated expression directly on
Debbie as she sat down.

'Oh he is, apparently. An experiment in sentiment. With you. Isn't that the term you used, Sherlock?'

'Keep your voice down, John,' Mary said mildly.

'Sorry, sorry, I'm only operating on a few hours of sleep – a lot better than a few minutes, I'll grant – but hearing him talk about…'

'Oh! Did we interrupt a man to man?' Debbie giggled and grabbed Sherlock's hand to give it a squeeze. 'I wasn't going to make a thing of it, and I didn't expect you to…'

'Aww, it's finally official then, is it?' Mary chuckled. 'Took you long enough. What happened? What did you do to him?' she added, directly at Debbie. 'Or do I not want to know?'

'You can rein your filthy mind in, Mrs Watson, I just took him coffee when he was at Bart's yesterday working on a case and we got…talking…and I managed to convince him to start expressing himself in short and declarative sentences.'

'You what?' John asked, incredulous.

'I want,' Sherlock said, loudly enough that they all looked at him. 'Starting statements with I want and then not pausing before filling in the rest. That's all. Simple psychology really, although I never would have expected it to work so effectively on someone of my intellect.'

'Modesty is just so attractive in a man,' Mary commented, deadpan, and laughed when he rolled his eyes at her.

'So you said what, you wanted to perform some more experiments on her?' John was unrepentant.

'We went home and he said he wanted me to sit in your chair—' Debbie began

'The other chair,' Sherlock corrected.

'—all right, the other chair, and then we sort of progressed from there.'

'To you agreeing to be some sort of test subject?'

'I said,' Sherlock put in pointedly, hoping to get his friend to shut up. 'That I wanted to be…hers. As in, to be…her…Sherlock.' He frowned. Although the turn of phrase had seemed to make perfect sense at the time, it sounded ridiculous when uttered out of context.

John, however, had folded his arms and now wore the odd little half smile that meant he approved of something to the point of being rather touched by it.

'You really said that?'

'Yes.'

'He did,' Debbie confirmed, giving Sherlock's hand another squeeze. He glanced at her as she smiled – the gentle, special one that was his – and then, feeling the urge to kiss her, he leaned over and did so.

'My god.' John still seemed amazed, but was beaming broadly now. 'Look at that.'

'Let's go get a late lunch,' Mary said, breaking the slightly awkward silence that followed. 'Find a
'pub, or something. Least we can do after all the babysitting and violin playing.'

'Yeah.' John nodded. 'Good plan. I'm starving, anyway, and since Rosie's in a good mood for a change...be nice to get out.'

'Old Lion?'

'Bit close to the tube. Joiners Arms was nicer, plus they're less snotty about children...'

'We don't have to go,' Debbie said to Sherlock in an undertone while John and Mary weighed up the pros and cons of the various pubs in immediate reachable distance around Finchley. 'If you don't want to. We can just go home.'

He smiled, unable to stop the feeling of warmth that swelled up. Of course she had no objection to a pub lunch with Mary and John – and Rosie – but she was genuinely willing, happy even, to bypass it in favour of his comfort. It was a new and entirely unexpected feeling, but he found himself keen to surprise her.

'It's fine. This is what...couples are supposed to do, isn't it?'

'Sherlock. I keep telling you that's not how it works! Now we can go if you want to or not if you don't, and that's the only decision.'

'I do,' he said. 'Want to. With you. And John and Mary. It'll be-’ he groped for a suitable word ’-it'll be interesting. No. It'll be...um...fun?'

She giggled.

'Come on then. Shoes.'

They ended up in John's car as the apparently selected pub was far enough away to make walking impractical. Mary climbed into the back with Debbie, putting Rosie in her car seat between the two of them, so Sherlock took the passenger seat in the front.

'All right back there, ladies?' John asked with a grin at the rear view mirror.

'All good, although the one in the middle's a bit wriggly,' Mary said with a laugh.

The pub seemed to be relatively quiet and snug, with a fireplace instead of a television blaring some sports event, and the music was in the background rather than obnoxiously loud. A rarity amongst public houses in this day and age, and Sherlock filed the location in his mind palace against possible future need.

'Déjà vu,' Debbie said as they sat down. 'I could have sworn I've been here before.'

'If you have then you'll remember they do a decent ploughman's,' Mary said cheerfully, helping John to settle Rosie into the booth in her carrier.

'Sounds good to me.' She nudged Sherlock lightly. 'You haven't eaten yet today. At least have some crisps or something.'

He made a noise of approximate assent, eyes flicking busily around the room. There was something relevant here, something he'd filed away...

'Good lord, that looks like enough for a brigade,' John commented as a staff member went past with some dishes.
'I seem to recall they're generous with the portions.' Debbie nudged Sherlock again. 'We can split something, if you'd prefer?'

'Fine.' He left her to the menu, still scanning the room with mounting unease. Interesting. Whatever factoid he had stored about this place…and Debbie's association with it…seemed to be prompting an emotional response.

A trio of men near the bar seemed a little too merry for two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in Finchley, but other than their occasional outbursts and the two elderly men playing chess quietly over their pints in the far corner the place was more or less empty. Certainly it was devoid of anything remotely like a threat.

'Right, I'll nip up and order then – put that away Deb, your money's no good here.' John was in full Domestic Manliness mode, bustling about with menus and being atypically high-handed with everyone. He'd been the same at the lunch after the christening.

'Bit far gone for this time of day, aren't they?' Mary said dryly. Of course she'd noticed the trio in the corner, probably at the same time Sherlock had.

'There's one in every pub,' Debbie shot back with a grin. 'Well, three, in this instance.'

The trio burst into a loud cheer, apparently at something they were observing on one of their phones, prompting dirty looks from the chess players and a mild glare from John at the bar.

'Hey, 'scuse me lads, keep it down, would you? We've got a little'un and it is only two in the afternoon,' he said pointedly.

'He's adorable in paternal mode,' Debbie said sotto voce to Mary, who laughed.

'Yeah. All kinds of sexy, too.'

'Down girl, we're in a public place!

'Sorry mate, sorry, don't mind us-' one of the trio was waving in the excessively apologetic manner of the intoxicated, but his attitude transformed instantly when his gaze fell on the table '-is that you, Deb? Debbie! Hey, Dave, Mike, it's Deb!'

'Oh my god.' Debbie's mirth vanished instantly and she put a hand to her forehead. 'That's why I remember this bloody pub.'

'Regular haunt of an ex-boyfriend,' Sherlock supplied, skimming through his mind palace for additional data. 'In fact an ex-'

'Ex fiancé, yes, and I don't want to know how you found that out.'

Despite John's polite efforts to dissuade him, the man wandered over and grinned at them all in general before his eyes settled on Debbie.

'My god. Debbie Connors. 'S been years, ain't it?'

'Ten years, Tony, yes.' Still cringing, Debbie somehow summoned a bright smile. 'I see you're as keen on the booze as ever. Although two in the afternoon is new.'

'Eh, I'm a grown man, can have a drink when I want.' Seeming to suddenly register Sherlock's presence, the man – Tony Winslow, that was it – gave him a long look. 'You the new man, then?' Then, without waiting for a response, he grimaced. 'Don't I know you from somewhere? Yeah,
yeah – I recognise you from the papers!

'Remarkable, considering your current blood alcohol levels,' Sherlock said to him. Now, why had he lifted one hand to rest it casually on the back of Debbie's chair? Fascinating. A reflexive and entirely unconscious protective instinct. Of course it was obvious that the man's odiously drunken presence was making her uncomfortable, but the chances of physical violence towards her were miniscule at best. So why did he feel the urge to shield her?

'I know 'im, Tony!' one of the others interjected. 'That's Sherlock 'olmes, that detective genius bloke.'

'Yeah!' Tony wagged a finger. 'You're Sherlock 'olmes, you are!'

'I'm perfectly aware of my own identity,' Sherlock replied levelly.

'Go away, Tony,' Debbie said, with a note of pleading. 'You know you're an obnoxious sod when you're drunk.'

'Shackin' up with a famous detective, eh?' Tony waved a hand at her dismissively and then leaned down towards Sherlock as though about to share something of vital secrecy. 'If you're after any genius kiddos mate, forget it, she's barren, might as well cut your losses now and-'

'Oi!' John exclaimed before Mary could, but the drunk didn't seem to notice him.

'Dint tell me 'til two weeks 'fore the wedding, she dint – broke my mam's heart – you take my advice mate, run a mile now-'

'I'm fully aware of Debbie's infertility,' Sherlock snapped, torn between basic irritation at the man's statements and anger at Debbie's growing upset. 'It doesn't bother me in the slightest, most likely because I place considerably more value on her companionship than her use as a potential brood mare. You, on the other hand, never really actively considered children until over a year of attempting to become pregnant prompted Debbie to seek medical advice. Of course it was a convenient excuse for pre-wedding second thoughts to manifest and prompt you to call off the engagement, and your mother's attachment to the idea of grandchildren only acted as a self-serving reinforcement to the same end. Now here you are, over a decade later with a string of girlfriends, none of them serious because you're keenly aware, in your increasingly rare moments of honest introspection, that Debbie was the one for you and you should never have used such a trivial factor as an excuse to walk away from her. That, combined with the fact that you are – quite rightly – convinced that you can never get her back even if you reinitiated contact, your mother's advancing age compounding her desire to see you settled, and the successful marriages of your two older brothers, and I think it is actually quite clear why you're this heavily intoxicated in a pub in Finchley at half past two on a Saturday afternoon.'

There was a small, loaded silence punctuated only by Mary struggling not to snicker. Tony's mouth opened and closed several times.

'You – you knob!'

The swing was pathetically obvious and Sherlock ducked it effortlessly. The man staggered clumsily and then half-collapsed against a nearby table before doing the one thing nobody, even Sherlock Holmes, would have expected him to do.

He burst into tears.

'Oh my god,' Debbie whispered.
Tony's two companions hurriedly came to his aid, hefting him up between them and walking him to the door with many mutterings of reassurance, apologies to the room and dark glares back in Sherlock's direction.

Rosie Watson broke the ensuing quiet with a squeal of excitement as the barman came over with the expected food.

'Two ploughman's and two pots of tea. Anything else you want, desserts or whatever, on the 'ouse,' he added, and gave Sherlock a rather meaty clap on the shoulder. 'Nice bloody change to see a fella standing up for his young lady.'

Sherlock stared at the man as he withdrew, rather baffled at the verdict. Then Debbie flung her arms around him in a tight embrace.

'I don't understand, ' he said with a frown. 'It was a comparatively simple deduction. Especially given the alcohol consumption.' Looking at John in appeal, he raised his eyebrows. 'Not good?'

'No, Sherlock,' John said with a broad grin. 'Good. Very good.'

'It wasn't how you did it, it was that you did it at all.' Debbie leaned in and kissed him firmly. 'See, this is what I was talking about yesterday. Wonderful.'

'Oh.' Relieved, though still confused, Sherlock switched attention to the teapot instead. The lunch portions were indeed very generous but he found that he didn't mind when Debbie badgered him to eat half of it. They had some more tea – which the barman wouldn't let them pay for – and finally, as Rosie's head started to nod, left the pub a little after four.

'Need a lift back in?' John asked.

'We can get a cab from here,' Debbie said. 'Better get madam home before she goes off again.'

'I need to learn to play the violin, clearly. Thanks again for sitting.' John caught Sherlock's eye with a small smile. 'We'll leave you to it, then.'

Finding a cab fortunately didn't take long but Sherlock was rather surprised when Debbie snuggled into his side on the way back, as she had on the Watsons' couch. Not that he objected. In fact he hastily moved his violin case to the floor so she didn't have to lean over it.

She took his hand as they went into Baker Street. He didn't mind that, either. And he definitely didn't mind the way she rounded on him once the flat door closed to cover his cheeks and lips with kisses.

'You're…pleased that I deduced all those things about Tony Winslow?' he managed when she finally paused for breath.

'Sherlock, you leapt gallantly to my defence and made him look every inch the twat I always thought he was. It was sweet. Of course I'm pleased.'

'Oh. Good.' He took his scarf off and fidgeted with it for a moment. 'It only just occurred to me that deducing his regret and continued feelings for you might have been a mistake.'

She giggled.

'In case I what? Threw myself into his lager-soaked arms?'

'You were engaged to him.'
'Years ago. People change. I grew up. He…apparently didn't. Now, take your coat off so I can kiss you some more after I put the kettle on.'
The following day brought little of excitement, and neither did the week after that, but in between a few marginally interesting case emails Sherlock found himself reflecting quite contentedly on his newly confirmed *relationship* with Debbie. It changed little in terms of day to day routine but there seemed to be a newer depth to even the most simple of their interactions.

Aside from the kissing – a lot more of it, although he was able to admit that he didn’t mind that in the least – Debbie was notably more demonstrative. He liked holding her hand; gloved or not, the feel of her fingers laced through his was inexplicably pleasant. Admittedly he was still getting used to her casual touches, especially the way she sometimes lingeringly drifted her hands along the base of his neck, but he came to enjoy the way she cuddled up against him on the couch or in the back of a taxi.

She took the other armchair by the fireplace whenever he sat in his chair, now. More than once he caught himself thinking of it as *Debbie’s chair*, despite the fact that John Watson still spent on average vastly more time in it during cases and client interviews.

’You’ve still not really taken her on a *date*, though, have you?’ John said to him one day. ’A proper one, I mean, not lunch in a pub after babysitting duty.’

’Why? We spend lots of time together. Just not in restaurants or cinemas or…whatever.’

’You could at least *offer*, Sherlock!’

Debbie found this exchange immensely amusing when he relayed it to her later that evening.

’What did I tell you? John *bloody* Watson and his narrow portfolio for pitching woo. We've been on *loads* of what I'd call dates.’

’We have?’ Sherlock was utterly baffled by this. It had never occurred to him that it was possible to be on a date and not realise it.

’What about when we went for that walk along the Thames and had chips?’

’That…was just chips.’
'It was nice, though. How about when you were staking out that warehouse and I brought you a thermos of tea?'

'That was a case, though.'

'Hmm. Or when we put that collage up and you spotted the missing lightbulbs in every one that led to catching the man killing all those janitors?'

'Those were crime scene photographs, and it was another case!'

'So?' She grinned and patted his cheek. 'We still did those things together, and had fun doing them together…didn't we?'

'Yes, but cases-' Sherlock stopped, rather stumped. 'Cases can't be dates, surely?'

'Why not? You have fun solving them and I have fun watching you.' Laughing, she shook her head at his discomfiture. 'If you want to go out to dinner or something then we can. But I told you, Sherlock, the only people who get to decide what counts as a date are the people in the relationship in question. So if John gets on his high horse about it you tell him where to stick it, and if he does it in my hearing then I'll tell him, too.'

Two days later, to complete the package, Mycroft called up to lecture Sherlock on what he called his excessive experimentation with Debbie.

'I'll only have to clean up the mess once you're done, little brother. Better to cut it out now and save everyone the trouble, don't you agree?'

That pedantic, ill-informed assumption stoked Sherlock's temper even more fiercely than Tony Winslow's unwanted intrusion in the Joiner's Arms.

'You haven't dragged her off to a warehouse somewhere to bribe her to spy on me yet, then? You must be slipping in your old age, Mycroft.'

'I would gladly intervene but I am under strict instructions to steer clear of her. From a-' the disgust in his tone was evident '-a higher power.'

Sherlock grinned.

'I thought Mummy rather liked her. Best you keep on steering clear, then, or perhaps I should mention this phone call to her…'

Mycroft had hung up on that, which was a victory of a sort, but Sherlock decided not to relay that particular conversation to Debbie. It might upset her to know that Mycroft disapproved – as if his brother's opinion mattered to him one whit – and he found himself increasingly reluctant to bring up anything that might make her even slightly unhappy. Not that this was irrational, of course; when she was in a good mood she was far more inclined to be tactile and give him kisses, even if he didn't ask for them. So it was only logical to preserve and pursue her contentment.

That weekend, however, when Lestrade called up with a rather juicy murder at Paddington station, Sherlock found himself genuinely torn between wanting to stay put on the couch with his head in Debbie's lap and the urge to attend the scene. Habit won out in the end but he could feel his own reluctance as he sat up and went to get properly dressed.

'Paddington's on the news,' Debbie said, scrolling through her phone as he came back into the living room for his coat. 'Poor Greg. Police baffled. Says the woman was found spray painted completely and face down on the floor. How awful.'
'And why the paint?' Sherlock mused out loud, putting on his scarf. 'Very promising.'

'I'm sure it'll take you whole minutes to figure it all out,' she said with a smile, getting up to give him a kiss goodbye. 'Just try not to shout at the journalists outside this time, all right?'

'They were in my way,' he grumbled, turning for the door and then whirling back as an idea hit him like a thunderclap. *Of course!* How had he not thought of his before?

'Don't tell me you've just solved it,' Debbie said, laughing.

'Would you like to come?'

'To a crime scene at Paddington?'

'Yes. John's with Rosie, which means Mary's napping, and Lestrade won't mind.' Not in the sort of capacity he couldn't easily ignore, at any rate.

She broke into a grin.

'All right. Give me two minutes.'

In the cab, Sherlock indulged shamelessly in feeling rather pleased with himself for a little while. On the way to an intriguing murder, and Debbie cuddled against him in the back of the taxi. *How* had he not thought of this sooner? Admittedly intriguing cases of any sort, let alone murders, had been rather short on supply recently, but that didn't matter now. The game was *on*, and with John off being tediously paternal elsewhere…

Debbie's giggle made him look at her.

'What's funny?'

'You. You're like a little boy on Christmas morning who just got a glimpse under the tree.' She kissed him on the cheek. 'It's very cute, is all.'

'Cute is good?'

'Cute is very good.'

'Oh. Well. Good, then.'

* Greg Lestrade was quite accustomed to the sarcastic remarks and general disturbance from the uniforms when someone unexpected turned up at a crime scene, but when he heard an all-out shout from Sergeant Donovan he stomped out to the tape line to demand an explanation.

'What the bloody hell-' then he cut himself off because while he was expecting Sherlock Holmes, he was definitely *not* expecting to see the strange man's pretty new roommate.

'I told you we were invited,' Sherlock said dryly.

'You, freak, not-' Donovan began.

'All right, all right, shut it. Afternoon, Debbie,' Greg added.

'Hi, Greg. Don’t mind me.'
'What's she doing here?' he asked Sherlock, baffled as to why the man would have brought a nursery school teacher to a murder investigation.

'She's with me.'

'I can see that, I meant why is she with you?'

'Oh.' Then Sherlock drew himself up with a rather self-satisfied smirk. 'We're on a date.'

'A date?' Greg echoed, trying to ignore Donovan's snickering. 'Oh, hell, Sherlock, you could have said something when I called you-

'No, Greg, you don't understand,' Debbie said, shooting Sherlock a warm smile that was inexplicably loaded with affection. 'This- indicating the scene in general '-is the date.'

He stared at her for a beat and then glanced at Sherlock, who was still wearing that insufferably smug look on his face.

'…you brought her to a murder scene on a date?' This was going to go around Scotland Yard at slightly above the speed of light, if Donovan's expression was any judge.

'I know I can't go in,' Debbie added, apparently trying to be helpful. 'But I can wait out here, since I suspect it won't take long.'

'Of course you can go in,' Sherlock said, seeming rather miffed at that plan. 'Why shouldn't you?'

'It's a bloody crime scene, Sherlock!' Greg exclaimed. This was a whole new level of weird for the oddball detective. 'You can't just bring a plus one like a bloody party invite!'

'Greg is absolutely right, Sherlock,' Debbie said. 'Special dispensation for a consulting detective is one thing but if he lets me in then he'll have to let the press in, and think how noisy it'll be with photographers and journalists trampling everywhere.'

That seemed to do it. Sherlock made a face of utter disgust and then ducked under the tape line, leaving Debbie with a now thoroughly entertained Donovan. Wondering, and not for the first time, if the world was playing some kind of prank on him, Greg started back into the station but couldn't resist pausing at his sergeant's droll remark.

'So you're really his…girlfriend?'

'He doesn't like that word, he thinks it's juvenile.' A light laugh. 'I'm his Debbie.'

Shaking his head in disbelief, Greg hastened after Sherlock towards the body. Of course the other man was already down on hands and knees peering at and smelling everything like the unfortunate corpse was some kind of scratch and sniff card.

'No signs of struggle here. Immobilised, likely a drug of some sort, and then…arranged.' Sherlock stood up and frowned. 'Spray painted entirely. Death by suffocation.'

'Nasty bit of work,' Greg agreed. 'We haven't IDed her yet…given the situation, but the question in my mind is why?'

'Why.' Sherlock wrinkled his nose. 'And who.' He flicked his gaze around the area. 'Where's her bag?'

'Bag?'
'Yes. There has to be a bag. A purse, a handbag, something.' Raising his voice, he barked at the nearest uniform. 'Did anyone find her bag?'

'Sherlock, wait-' Greg held a hand out '-why does there have to be a bag?'

'Because she wasn't just spray painted, you moron. She was spray painted pink.'
Let's Play

While Lestrade's people scrambled in circles, Sherlock marched back out of the scene with a spring in his step. At last! Of course as first moves went it was ambiguous at best, but a messy murder with obvious tribute-style shout-outs to what John's blog called *A Study In Pink* simply had to be related to the appearance of Moriarty…

'You look happy,' Debbie said to him. 'Was it an interesting one?'

'Very.' Beyond delighted, he ducked under the tape and kissed her. 'We need to look through all the bins and skips around here.'

'…bins and skips?'

'Yes. For a bag. A pink bag. Possibly pink itself, possibly spray painted pink. I'm not sure yet.'

'…okay…'

It took less than forty minutes to find it – a salmon pink leather tote bag, filled with the usual miscellanea of a London commuter. Sherlock noted with interest that the colour of the bag was its original, and from the contents of the – also pink – purse inside the victim was not from Cardiff.

An while later, back at Baker Street, he covered the wall above the sofa with photographs of both the Paddington scene and the original, the bag and all of its contents before becoming suddenly aware that Debbie was standing beside him and at some point he'd absently looped his arm around her waist.

'That was a long processing pause, Sherlock, even by your standards.' She gave him a peck on the cheek. 'You really think that this is something to do with Moriarty?'

'It has to be. Tribute, imitation, homage…'

'Like a copycat murder? Although I suppose less copied and more…inspired by.'

'Obviously.' Frowning, Sherlock reviewed the original case in his mind palace. 'The positioning of the corpse's limbs – under the paint – is identical, but this victim didn't attempt to scratch anything into the floor at Paddington. Native Londoner rather than a visitor from Cardiff, and her name was Rachel rather than it being the name of a stillborn child. Recent transactions on her Oyster card show that she took the Tube to get to the station, not a taxi…'

John's voice from the front door made him glance around with a blink of surprise as his friend came up the stairs.
'Debbie texted, said you needed me,' John said by way of greeting, then glanced at the collage on the wall. 'God, that's a lot of pink…'

'I'll put the kettle on,' Debbie said brightly, giving Sherlock another kiss and then moving off towards the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, John had sat down in Debbie's chair – in the other chair – while Debbie herself perched on Sherlock's.

'So, are we expecting another homicidal taxi driver?'

'Possibly.' Sherlock scrubbed a hand back through his hair, irritated at the lack of cohesive evidence. 'There are enough similarities to be noticeable, but enough differences that- ' he cut himself off as the doorbell went '-oh, for god's sake…'

It was Mary, with Rosie in her arms.

'John said you had a head-scratcher,' she said by way of explanation, and listened carefully while the case was explained to her. 'Certainly sounds like a tribute killing, but…messier.'

'How in the world does a nurse get so familiar with such horrible ideas?' Debbie exclaimed, coming out of the kitchen with another cup of tea.

'Oh, I'm a sucker for mystery books,' Mary lied smoothly with a grin. 'Plus, you know, I am married to John Watson, aren't I?'

Ordinarily Sherlock would have been rather fascinated to observe Mary's expert dissembling and Debbie's reactions, but he couldn't bring himself to look away from the wall of photographs. There had to be something…some pattern, some clue, some scrap of data he'd overlooked…

He blinked rapidly several times when a soft kiss on the palm of his right hand abruptly registered. It was dark outside, and John and Mary were gone.

'You were data crunching,' Debbie said to him, giving his hand a squeeze in both of hers. 'Sorry, you hadn't moved a muscle for a while and I was honestly getting a bit worried.'

'Oh.'

'I've eaten, was just about to go to bed. Do you want anything?'

'No,' he said absently. The photographs weren't enough. The bag. He needed to look at the bag again, smell it, see it in his own hands…

'All right then. Good night.' She pecked him on the cheek. 'You'll solve it, Sherlock. It'll be hours or days of staring and thinking and then you'll just get a feeling and boom, it'll all come together. You are brilliant, you know.'

Something about that prompted some intuition, a hint of a deduction not yet consciously made, but when he finally got a grip on it he was alone in the room.

'A feeling?'

Of course the staff at Scotland Yard were used to him showing up at all hours of the day and night, but it still took a bit of arguing and shouting to get the tote brought out of the evidence lockers. He cast aside the contents in favour of the bag itself. Salmon pink with a designer label, Ellen Tracy, and a pale pink lining. He ran his hands carefully over the entire thing, inside and
out, and gave a bark of triumph when a shape came up against his questing fingers. It was an easy matter to cut a hole in the lining with his pocket knife, and there it was. A card for a local taxi firm.

He called the number immediately.

'Where you want to go, mate?'

Giving the address of the night school from the original case was obvious of course, but after careful evaluation during the journey Sherlock was confident that in this one the driver was no more or less than what he appeared, just an innocent cabbie on a night shift.

*You're playing someone else's game.* Dispassionate and evaluating, his internal Mycroft's tone remained implacably calm. *Nothing to do but play until you work out the rules.*

The same building, the same room, the same *table*…with two bottles on it. He never had found out if he'd been right or not about the one he'd chosen. Cautiously, Sherlock scanned the rest of the room but it was entirely empty. Just him and the two bottles.

He checked them thoroughly from all angles before picking one up. Both bottles and the pills they contained were exactly identical to those from the case. *Why? What was the point? Was someone just trying to taunt him? Frighten him, perhaps? Try and make him doubt the incontrovertible fact that Moriarty was dead?*

If anything, this only further proved the point. Many things James Moriarty had been, but never so blatantly *obvious*. The entire setup had more the air of an impersonator, a *fan*, someone trying to show off by repeatedly referencing the original case, but not clever enough to do it well. The bigger question was *why?* Some admirer of Moriarty's, bitter at the death of their idol, for some reason now choosing to start provoking Sherlock Holmes with a *tribute* murder?

*Bitterness is a paralytic. Love is a much more vicious motivator.*

Hmm. He took the bottles to Bart's and spent the rest of the night analysing their contents, revealing one to be completely inert and the other a potent paralytic poison that would induce death in a matter of a few short minutes. As expected.

His phone buzzed – it was now a little after seven in the morning – with a text from John.

**Had a hunch, checked the old blog. New comment. Worth a look?**

Oh, blessed, invaluable John! Even from a flat in Finchley with a wife and baby he was still helping to steer Sherlock's genius in the right direction.

The comment on *A Study In Pink* had been made yesterday at eleven forty in the morning, which was around the time of death of the unfortunate spray-painted victim. The username was Rev2213, which Sherlock filed away for future rumination – it would hardly be the first priest he'd got convicted for murder. The comment itself, however, just said *Well, hello* which was a ridiculous thing to post on a blog of any sort, but in this case…

Logging in to the old comment account he'd used to offer additional insights into John's rendition of cases – usually provoking additional confusion from idiot readers – Sherlock clicked *reply* and, after a moment's thought, typed in *You have my attention*. That was what Moriarty had kept ranting about…perhaps his fan or would-be successor would recognise the prompt.

A response arrived in minutes from the same username.
Good. Let's play.

Against all logic and reason, the wording sent a chill through Sherlock’s spine. That particular choice of words was a direct reference to what Moriarty had said at the swimming pool.

* I've cut loose all those people, all those little problems, even thirty million quid... just to get you to come out and play. * 

* I like watching you dance... * 

Reaching a sudden decision, Sherlock hastened for the lab door and found a cab to take him back to Baker Street. The lab – the same lab where *Jim from IT* had appeared – just wasn't where he wanted, or needed, to be at this particular moment.

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