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?
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!'
'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'd better not have missed any cases,' 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.'
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
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
excitement when she picked up.

'Debbie! Hi! Um, it's Sherlock. I was just wondering if you're free at all for that coffee, or
whatever. I know a little place on Chiltern Street-’ not one of his usual haunts, naturally '-that I
think you'd like.'

'Hi. Sure, why not. I'll be out of work around half five today, if you're free…?'

'Yeah, that'd be great. Can I meet you outside?'

'\textit{That sounds nice. I'll see you then.}'

'Great. Bye.'

Appearance was important for the façade, of course – the persona he was playing would be keen,
if not desperate, to make a good impression. Hence the non-chain café, slightly upmarket but not
intimidatingly so, close enough to walk to so it was clear he was a local lad, just hipster enough
for dork-Sherlock be a believable regular. This time the shirt was an ironed one, shoes cleaned to
be if anything a little too shiny, face freshly scrubbed and shaved, watch placed studiously on the
wrist against timekeeping difficulties.

He seated himself on a bench outside the Little Elves school – \textit{what an absurd name} – at quarter
past five, which was a good balance between the persona's slightly excessive keenness and
common sense timekeeping. She emerged a little after half past, and he saw her immediately
because dork-Sherlock was fidgeting and glancing at the door worriedly on a regular basis as if
expecting to be stood up.

'Hello, Sherlock.'

Spring to feet, blush, beaming smile.

'Hi.' \textit{Blue skater dress, long sleeves, modest neckline, wool tights, boots cut just below the knee
but without any heels. Practical dresser but enjoys making a little more of an effort. Still no
makeup, and only stud earrings, so she's had those on all day, but this time they're cubic zirconia
rather than plain silver so they were chosen specifically.}

\textit{The dress suits her figure.}

Sherlock mentally shook himself.

\textit{Irrelevant!}

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

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

'Ooh, 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 went 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 CANT!' 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 gesticulated wildly '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.'

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.'

'Oh, good.' A pause. 'My god, she's nothing. Nobody. Positively tedious.'

'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. 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_
'Don't you just tell her how you feel?'

'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 improbably 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?
Nearly A Murder

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.

'Ooh, 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.'

'Ooh, 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.
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 heart rate 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.'

'Ah.' 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*
requirements of science, brother mine.

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 falteringly 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.
The Sensible Sort

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?'

'Sticky 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.'
He's Very Lucky

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 foolscap 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…'

He glared at her around a mouthful of cheese, which elicited a laugh. Then she reached out with one hand and ruffled his hair, which nearly made him choke as his throat momentarily forgot how
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...*
Sensory Data

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 made 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.'
Squealing Cacophony

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 wagged 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.
It's An Experiment

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 tell I 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
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, thoroughly 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 Caffè 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
hadn't happened, I wouldn't have your wonderful insanity in my life, and what's even worse is I wouldn't even know what I was missing out on.'

'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.
'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 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-

'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.
Sherlock found himself inordinately relieved when he opened the door to the flat to be greeted by the smells and sounds of Debbie having breakfast in the kitchen. Hanging up his coat and scarf, he went in and almost immediately felt at least some of the anxious weight lift from his mind when she glanced up and smiled a greeting around a mouthful of toast.

Interesting. Merely being in her presence seemed to have a remarkable effect on his mood.

'I suppose you've been out all night?' Debbie leaned back to flip the kettle on. 'Know you won't eat on cases but let me make you a cuppa at least...god, Sherlock, what is it?'

Sherlock, unexpectedly distracted by the sliver of bare stomach between vest and pyjama trousers that her motion had briefly revealed, hastily snapped his attention back.

'What?'

'You look...I don't know. Freaked out. Upset, even.' Standing, she came over and took his hands in hers. 'I thought you'd be ecstatic with a weird new case to work on.' Tilting her head back, she met his gaze searchingly. 'You're worried, aren't you? Is it the connection to Moriarty?'

'Yes,' he said. No point denying it. 'A connection I've had irrevocably confirmed. It raises a lot of questions and I have no way to answer them yet.'

'Oh.' Her face dropped and she chewed at her lower lip for a moment, then let go of his hands and put her arms around him in a tight embrace. Again feeling oddly better just at the contact, Sherlock hugged her back and turned his cheek to rest on the top of her head. The scent of mango and passionfruit, with a trace of coconut, flooded his senses and triggered what he suspected was an increasingly conditioned response of calmness.

'You will be careful, won't you?' Debbie murmured against his chest.

'Careful?' he echoed, a trifle confused at the intimation. He was always careful. Meticulous, even.

'Just...the last time this Moriarty chap showed up you ended up hurling yourself off the roof of the hospital and vanishing for two years.' She gave him a squeeze. 'I worry about you.'
'I'm notoriously difficult to permanently eradicate,' he assured her. 'There's no need for concern.'

'Tough. I'll worry anyway.'

That seemed like a strange verdict to Sherlock but he decided not to argue with it. The case seemed to stall after that anyway, gallingly, with no further evidence showing up and no logical or useful insights to be derived from what little there already was. A week later, frustrated and weary, he stabbed the photograph of the scene at Paddington violently into the mantelpiece and collapsed into his chair with an infuriated snarl.

'Not enough data!'

'Oh dear,' Debbie said, coming out of the kitchen and crossing the room to his side. 'Do you want some tea?'

'Tea won't help,' he grumbled. 'Some wretched, tedious groupie managed to clean his tracks sufficiently to halt my investigation…'

'Think how much sooner Greg would've given up without you.'

'Probably still be puzzling over the spray paint. *Generic brand and common colour, easy to obtain, impossible to trace.* 'Wouldn't have thought of the bag, I suppose.'

'And of course John wouldn't have checked the blog if you hadn't noticed all the similarities to *A Study In Pink*…'

Sherlock made a vaguely affirmative noise, finding himself now far more interested in the way she was kneading her hands over his shoulders and the base of his neck. It was a gentle but firm manipulation, loosening the tension in the tendons there and sending pleasurable waves of soothing warmth rippling down his back.

'What are you doing?' he asked, after realising he'd been enjoying it in silence for several seconds.

'I'm giving you a massage,' she said laughingly. 'You're all tensed up from being so cross about this case, you're tied up in knots. Don't you like it?'

'I didn't say that.' He tried – and failed – not to roll his shoulders back against her hands in evidence of that. She had remarkably strong and dextrous fingers – *of course, she plays the piano and spends lots of time doing arts and crafts for five year-olds* – that felt impossibly good on his muscles. Against all common sense, he found his mind wandering idly to other places her fingers had gone – or could yet go – and suddenly found his frustrations shifting away from the blasted case in an increasingly familiar and corporal direction.

'You're all but purring again, you big pusscat,' Debbie said teasingly, giving him a quick kiss and then moving back into the kitchen. 'I'll be out until late this evening, by the way. Karin's finally decided to have something like a hen party with the rest of the girls from work and I've got to at least show my face or I'll never hear the last of it. Didn't know if you'd notice, with the case and all, but since you've parked it – well, stabbed it, anyway…'

'Fine,' he said dimly, ruthlessly banishing the small surge of resentment at the notion of her spending time outside of Baker Street without him.

'Wait. Missed something. "A hen party?"

'Yes. You know, like a stag party but for girls.' She grinned. 'I agreed to go and have a few drinks but I'm drawing the line at wearing silly headbands and angel wings. Some of them'll probably try it on but it's amazing how few teachers want anything to do with glitter outside of work hours.'
Frowning, Sherlock dredged his mind palace for his limited knowledge of pre-marital customs. He'd done some research before arranging John's bachelor outing, of course, and dismissed a lot of it as inappropriate or – after consultation with Mary – grounds for pre-emptive divorce proceedings, but presumably similar principles could be applied at least in terms of the options available.

Jealousy reared its head loudly and pointedly at that mental review.

'What sort of hen party?' he asked.

'I don't know the details, Joyce is the maid of honour. Something about sushi and tequila shots and a club, I think.'

'What kind of club?'

'God only knows. There'll probably be strippers, knowing Joyce, any excuse to see some nice lad in the altogether…plus Karin did say she wanted the full experience. It was all the rest of us could do to talk her out of going to Las Vegas for the weekend.'

'Strippers?' Sherlock was outright alarmed, now, at the thought of Debbie – of his Debbie – around some kind of gyrating and scantily-clad adult industry worker.

'I know!' Intent on whatever she was cooking, she didn't seem to have properly registered his discomfiture with the entire concept. 'Cheesy and embarrassing for a twenty something, let alone at our age. But it's Karin's party, I suppose. I'll just have to grin and bear it. There, dinner's ready whenever you want it, I'll turn the oven on low.'

'When will you be back?' he asked as she sat on the couch to put her shoes on, aware it came out on a slightly plaintive note and not really caring. 'How late?'

'Probably after midnight but not too much, if I can help it. Don't stare at me like that, how often do you go gallivanting off at all hours of the day and night?'

'On cases,' he complained. 'And not with- strippers.'

Debbie laughed at him.

'I'm not going to run away with a stripper. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?'

When she gave him a fleeting peck on the cheek he caught her arm and pulled her back for a more thorough kiss. With the case effectively closed – at least for now – he didn't like the idea of her leaving Baker Street at all, and especially not for such frivolous means. Not when she could be staying in and stroking his hair or giving him kisses.

'Sherlock-' she broke off and grinned, patting his cheek with one hand '-you are adorable when you're jealous. Why would I care about some silly dancer when I have you to come home to, hmm?'

He finally – though still reluctantly – let her go, and spent the rest of the evening alternating between reading, shouting at the television and sulking on the couch. It was frustrating to realise how dependent he'd become on Debbie's company to lighten his moods in between the exhilaration of cases. If only he had some cigarettes left somewhere…

After grumpily retiring to bed and sleeping restlessly at best, he rose a little after nine to find the kitchen empty. No morning tea already brewing, and no breakfast-type smells. No Debbie. He hadn't heard her come in last night. Perhaps he'd been asleep? But she wasn't upstairs either, and
her bed had clearly not been slept in. In fact she had obviously not come back at all.

A pang of alarm made itself known and Sherlock hurriedly dug out his phone.

**Where are you? I doubt the party is still going on. Reply immediately please. – SH**

After several minutes with no response he called her instead. It rang out to voicemail. Thirty seconds later, a text arrived from Debbie’s number but a flood of relief was almost immediately replaced with Sherlock’s first experience of something like genuine panic.

**Ladies and gentlemen, from the distant, moonlit shores of NW1, we present for your pleasure…Sherlock Holmes' pretty companion in a death defying act.**
Sherlock texted John with fingers that shook – the ignominy of it! – while taking a cab to the old Kingsway tunnel. It took twenty six agonising minutes to get there and another seven to scramble down to the right part of the subway.

It was empty.

Empty?

On the third attempt he managed to operate the button on his pocket torch and began anxiously scanning the walls, inwardly cursing at the way the beam quivered in his trembling hands. There! A splash of yellow…predictable, but he didn't much care about that at the moment and racked his mind palace for the memory of the numeral system.

'Sherlock?'

Two torch spots tore his attention away from the graffiti cypher to reveal John and Mary with larger flashlights, hastening down the tramway towards him.

'I've found the code,' he said by way of explanation, unaccountably relieved that his panic didn't reveal itself in his voice. Have to find her. Hair trigger…crossbow on a timer. Even now he could envision it in painful detail – the sand trickling down, the weight gradually lowering, Debbie tied up and terrified and he wasn't there to save her...

'Same one, presumably,' John said, getting something out of his coat. Oh, a London A-Z. In his haste Sherlock had completely forgotten about that.

'Do you remember the numbers, Sherlock?' Mary asked.

'I'm trying to.'

'Trying to?' John echoed. 'With everything in that bloody mind palace surely-

'Surely.' Sherlock snapped. 'John, the woman I love has been abducted and is facing almost certain death, and it turns out that is not conducive to intense mnemonic recall!'

John fell silent, which was fine by Sherlock as he clapped his hands to his temples in increasingly
frantic recollection.

'Just breathe, Sherlock,' Mary said, her voice mercifully calm and level. 'Just breathe, and think.'

'Hang Zhou numerals,' he muttered, something useful finally surfacing through the infuriating miasma of dread. 'Only used by traders.'

'There's no bloody signal down here.' There was a click and the flash of a camera phone, then someone was tugging at him.

'Wait, I need to-

'We've got it,' John said, taking his other arm as between them the Watsons as good as frogmarched him back towards the tunnel exit. 'Let's get somewhere with mobile signal and we can crack it.'

Their car was parked outside but Sherlock found that he could barely concentrate on the symbols, which seemed to be swimming in front of his eyes on John's phone screen.

_This isn't right. Have I been drugged?_

Mary ended up doing most of the decrypting, and John all but manhandled Sherlock into the back of the car as they drove off towards Hessel Street in Whitechapel.

Would Debbie be crying? She didn't really frighten easily – not about conventional things, at least, like when he'd thrown angry ravings about a lack of cigarettes – but she wasn't exactly used to being abducted and tied up opposite an enormous crossbow. So she probably _was_ crying, and terrified, and wondering where he was and why he hadn't worked it out and come to save her already and maybe it was because he didn't really care…

'Sherlock, we're here.' At some point the car had stopped and he had apparently got out of it, because he was staring blankly at the front of an extremely derelict old building that looked like it was about to fall down at any moment. 'Sherlock?' The voice was Mary, halfway between anxious and frustrated. 'Are you in there?'

'Sherlock.' That was John, calm and firm, stepping in front of him and grabbing him by the upper arms. 'You need to _focus_. Debbie's in there somewhere and she needs you. I know you aren't used to this, but for _her_ sake you have to _focus_, all right?'

He blinked, twice, and the fog abruptly cleared. _Invaluable, inestimable John!_

'Ground floor or cellar. Anywhere else in a building that dilapidated would be too unstable for the trigger mechanism to be reliable.'

'Right.' John glanced at his wife. 'Mary, wait with the car?'

'In your dreams.'

'…fair enough.'

Sherlock hastened towards the entrance, picking over piles of bricks and other debris from various collapses in the condemned structure's past. The front door was long since rotted away but the first intact inner one he tried was both solid and firmly locked.

_Floorboards still usable. Stable platform. Recent footsteps – two, male, carrying something. A distinctly unpleasant flash visualisation of Debbie being manhandled into the building by two_
thugs surfaced and he shook his head, ruthlessly banishing it. Focus. Door sealed with considerable care from the outside. Contact marks and notches at top and bottom as well as around the handle.

Oh.

'Don't!' he barked when John reached out. 'The door is connected to the trigger mechanism. If it's disturbed the crossbow will fire.'

'No go on the door, then.' Mary stepped around her husband and carefully put an ear to the wood before raising her voice. 'Debbie, are you in there?'

In the near-silent building the muffled whimper from within the room was painfully audible. Gagged, upright, tied up, uncomfortable to the point of pain but not in a way that suggests serious injury. Has been crying, recently.

Terrified.

Again his mind produced, unbidden, an accurate visualisation of Debbie's tear-streaked face with a rough gag in her mouth, her eyes wide and damp with fear. Again he banished it.

'We need another way in. The trigger is likely still on a slow timer as well as connected to the door.'

'Could try up the stairs,' John suggested. 'Place is enough of a wreck we might find a way around.'

'Debbie, it's Mary,' Mary said to the door. 'We're here, all right? The boys are just finding a way to get to you. Can't use the door, Sherlock says it's wired up. Just hang on, okay?'

More grateful than ever before at his friend's unwitting choice of spouse – giving Debbie a voice to focus on would stop her from panicking further and doing something foolish that might set the crossbow off prematurely – Sherlock took the nearby stairs two at a time, skirting around the holes and more obvious crumbling spots. Then he paused and thrust out an arm to catch John as the other man stepped on a section that promptly gave way, and would have fallen.

'Bugger – thanks.'

'For god's sake John,' Mary shouted up at them, 'Put your feet where he does!'

'Yeah, thank you dear,' he shot back, but Sherlock was already resuming his investigation of the upper hallway. It didn't take long to get to directly above the room where Debbie was trapped, and he cast about for a way down.

'Oh, it would be the one bloody room with a completely intact ceiling,' John muttered.

'Not completely intact,' Sherlock said, half to himself. There, weak boards and rotten wood. There, a joist about to give way. And there...he went to the third spot and pressed down with his left foot, smiling grimly when the board splintered. Damp and woodworm. Outstanding combination for rotting timber in old houses. Now he had a way down.

'Woah-' John caught his arm '-are you sure you won't land on top of her? Or something else?'

'Yes.' Sherlock shook him off and then jumped straight up, bringing the full weight of his body to bear on the disintegrating wood. It gave and cracked, then the ceiling beneath the cavity split with a loud snap and he was falling, surrounded by a cloudy mass of plaster and wood and aging masonry, to land in a somewhat ungainly heap on the floor of the room beneath.
He got to his feet, coughing, and rubbed a hand through his hair to dislodge some of the debris. As John landed beside him – with a low curse at the impact – the dust went all over again, but Sherlock had already identified the soft sounds of distress and hastened towards them.

Debbie was in the same clothes she'd been wearing from the night before at the accursed hen night, but her tights were ripped and one shoulder of her dress was torn, too. Boots gone, no bag, large bruise forming on the right cheek – Sherlock set his jaw at that observation – tied to the chair with chains, not rope, and the chair bolted to the floor. Crossbow placed as expected, mechanism linked to door and a weight on a mechanical timed descent towards the trigger as well. Carefully arranged and calculated to last the night and the time it would take this morning for me to realise, investigate and decipher the location.

Except I'd probably still be panicking in the underpass tunnel if John and Mary hadn't shown up.

Not wanting to interfere with the trigger mechanism, especially given how close the weight was to setting it off, he hurriedly pulled out his toolkit for the lockpicks and made his way over to Debbie, crouching to find the padlock securing her to the chair.

Thank god, the lock was a simple one and John had the sense to keep quiet while he worked. It took a painful minute before it clicked off and Sherlock started hefting chains off, careless of where they fell. Finally Debbie was free of the chair – though not the handcuffs on her wrists – and he pulled her away, clearly out of line of sight of the crossbow.

'Good god,' John muttered, leaning down on his knees for a moment.

Ignoring him, Sherlock tugged the scarf gag – Chinese silk, of course – off over Debbie's head and threw it away, then examined the shackles on her wrists as she sank down to her knees. The metal was tight – too tight – and there was some red where they'd cut into her skin.

A loud thump heralded the crossbow firing. The large bolt went straight through the solid back of the chair. Debbie made a small sound of distress and pressed her lips tightly together, avoiding looking at it.

'All right, you're all right,' John said, taking it upon himself to try and soothe her somewhat while Sherlock worked on the cuffs. 'Oh – god –' he hastened to the door and after a few attempts and a kick got it open '–Mary, can you get the first aid kit?'

Good old John. Always focusing on obvious practicalities. Sherlock finally got the hateful cuffs undone and let them fall to the floor. Debbie was trembling violently and her cheeks were wet. Oh, her wrists were a mess. The restraints had left angry grooves on her skin and drawn blood in several spots. The sight of it was beyond infuriating and he pulled her into an embrace on some unknown impulse, battling to keep his rage under control.

She sagged against his chest, crying openly now in big, heaving sobs. His shirt was getting damp but he didn't care. Warring with the anger at finding her in such a state was a bizarrely delighted sense of utter relief that she was alive and there.

'We should get her to a hospital.' John's voice, low and grim, made Sherlock look up at him. The intimation was clear and sent a fresh torrent of rage welling up. He fought it down in order to keep his tone level.

'Debbie, what did they do? Did they-' for some reason his throat closed up on the words '–did they hurt you?' Inaccurate euphemism. Stupid. But the mere concept…

Thank god, she was shaking her head and finally spoke, a tremulous whisper into his jacket.
'T-they slapped me about a bit. That's all.'

John audibly exhaled, which was when Sherlock realised that Mary was trying to peel his arms off from where they were locked around Debbie.

'Let's check those wrists, all right?'

Not wanting to let go of her altogether, Sherlock loosened his grip enough for Mary to coax Debbie vaguely upright and deal with her more obvious injuries.

'You're going to have a magnificent black eye,' John said to her with somewhat forced cheerfulness. 'Why the bloody hell did they do that?'

She sniffed, then winced as Mary put something antiseptic-smelling onto the wounds on her wrists.

'I kicked one of them in the balls.'

'Good for you,' Mary said quietly.

Fully aware that medical care was not his milieu, Sherlock settled for holding Debbie half on his lap and running one hand over her hair as his friends went about their business. He didn't even move when a commotion outside heralded the arrive of the police, evidently called by Mary earlier as a contingency. When one of the female officers tried to prise Debbie away from him for a statement he barked at her to piss off, at which point Lestrade hurriedly intervened, and finally they got back to Baker Street while Anderson and his colleagues went over the house. It dimly occurred to Sherlock that he ought to supervise the forensics team, as they'd doubtless miss almost everything of importance, but the consideration seemed a distant and minor one compared to getting Debbie safely home.
I managed to somehow cock up the posting order because I am a giant derpasaurus, but this has been fixed now - apologies everyone, and thank you @carveus for the spot! Clearly my own observation skills are nowhere NEAR Sherlock-esque levels... #facepalm

Mrs Hudson went into a bluster of fussing before Debbie very quietly announced that she wanted a shower, and went to do so without further debate. While the others tended to trivia like making tea and fetching a towel from upstairs, Sherlock drifted to the window and stared down into the street below for a long moment. He was still processing – sensations, sentiments, situation.

*Sherlock Holmes' pretty companion*...

Whoever was doing this was doing it because of *him*. How *dare* they involve Debbie at all, let alone threaten her and abduct her and *hurt* her!

*Enjoy not being involved.* Mycroft’s words drifted back. Of course. Sentiment. *Attachment.*

'She could have died,' he heard himself murmur. 'Because of me.'

'You what?' John said.

'She could have *died*,' Sherlock repeated. 'Simply because she's acquainted with me. Doesn't that make me…culpable?'

'Oh, no.' John rounded on him and pointed angrily, for some reason lowering his tone so Mary and Mrs Hudson, busy in the kitchen, couldn't hear. 'Don't you dare. Don't you *dare* make this about you, and don't you *dare* use it as some *excuse* to reject how you feel about her.'

'How I *feel*?' Sherlock echoed. 'An experiment in sentiment is hardly cause for-'
'Bollocks,' John snapped. 'The woman I love – that's what you said, Sherlock, your own bloody words, don't try and deny it now.'

'What?' Sherlock was genuinely shocked. 'I said no such–'

- the woman I love has been abducted –

He stopped and blinked rapidly several times, shaken by the recollection.

Oh.

'One more deduction than you were expecting?' John said to him in a milder tone.

*The woman I love.* The words seemed to echo around Sherlock’s head at a frightening volume. He hadn't even registered them as he’d said them. But he had said them. He couldn't unsay them.

'Sherlock.' That was Mary, holding out a cup of tea to him with a look on her face that somehow contrived to be kind and intense at the same time. 'It's all right to be afraid. The first time you realise you care about someone that much, after being by yourself so long…'

Taking the tea on autopilot, he managed to focus on her. Of course. She understood. In her… previous life, they hadn't been entirely dissimilar. *It's all right to be afraid.* Was fear the right term? He did feel exceptionally unsettled at the entire concept. But he'd been afraid…yes, very afraid, earlier. The thought of Debbie injured, trapped, *dead*, had genuinely terrified him. Not being able to see her smile, hear her voice, touch her ever again…the notion was beyond excruciating.

Was that what love meant?

'What do I do?' he whispered, brokenly, half to himself.

'Just be here, Sherlock,' Mary said gently. 'Don't analyse, don't dissect, don't deduce, just be here.'

'No…thank you, Mrs Hudson, I'm all right, really…I know it's silly, you know, but all I really want right now is to go to sleep…' Debbie's voice drifted in from the hallway.

'You've hardly had a restful night,' John said reassuringly as she came in, wearing her pyjamas and towelling her still-damp hair. 'A bit of sleep'll probably do you the world of good.'

'You're sure you don't want something to eat, dear?' Mrs Hudson pressed, fluttering in behind her. 'A sandwich, or anything?'

'No, thank you, really I just-' Debbie actually yawned '-oh, I'm sorry – does anyone mind if I just doze on the couch? It's really quiet upstairs in my room and-' she faltered '-it was so quiet…you know…in there, just the creaks of that horrible thing…'

Sherlock took a hurried sip of tea and forced his brain back into something resembling functional mode by sheer force of will. Of course. A form of sedatephobia, most likely temporary but still understandable, invoking memories of what had doubtless been a very long night with nothing but the sound of the crossbow and the weight on the timed mechanism.

'Use my bed,' he said, putting the cup down. 'You can leave the door ajar and it shouldn't be quiet enough to provoke unsettling memories.'

'Oh.' She looked enthused about the idea for a moment, then hesitance returned. 'But it's…yours. I mean, I don't want to–'
'It's fine,' he said briskly, taking her elbow to steer her carefully but firmly back down the hallway towards his room. She sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed, looking like she expected it to explode – or, more likely, for him to renege his offer – and looked about curiously.

Of course – she'd never been in his room before. She bustled about and cleaned and tidied every other area of the flat but she never touched things that were solely his, like his chemistry equipment, and she'd never come into his bedroom. It was one of those small but important considerations that he realised endeared her to him to such a degree. He'd never had to ask her not to invade those particular things…she just never had.

Dismissing the rumination as irrelevant – at least for the moment – Sherlock went to draw the curtains.

'You might find it more comfortable under the covers,' he pointed out when he turned back.

To his surprise, Debbie smiled at him.

'Sherlock Holmes, are you trying to get me into your bed?'

He rolled his eyes at the innuendo but she did untuck the sheets and settle down on her side, facing him and the door. Good. So now he should leave.

Why was the sight of her hair spread out on the pillow – on his pillow – and the shape of her body under the sheets – his sheets – so oddly compelling? Now was surely not the time to be thinking of…of prurient concepts…

'Sleep as long as you like,' he made himself say, and went to the door. 'We'll be just outside.'

After shooing a still-clucking Mrs Hudson downstairs, he spent some time reviewing the information Anderson had already emailed from the scene with input of varying degrees of helpfulness from John and Mary.

'I don't get it though,' John said. 'If this – whoever they are – were fans of Moriarty, why reference a case that was nothing to do with him? The Blind Banker was all the Tong, wasn't it?'

'Potentially not,' Sherlock pointed out. 'Moriarty had numerous connections to various cartels and similar organisations around the world. I found that out while dismantling his network. It's far from impossible that he had some kind of affiliation to the Black Lotus, especially given his admirer's…recent homage.'

'So he's working his way through some kind of weird tribute to Moriarty's Greatest Hits,' Mary said with a grimace. 'Don't suppose that means we can take a guess at what he's likely to do next?'

'Start planting bombs on people,' John muttered. 'There's a happy thought.'

'The various tribute murders – attempted murders-' Sherlock hurriedly corrected himself '-have certain theming elements but are also erratic enough to be impossible to directly predict and thus to pre-empt. Exceptionally clever.' Somehow, despite the challenge of the situation, he couldn't quite work up much enthusiasm for it. Stimulating mysteries were one thing, but not if they put Debbie in danger.

_The woman I love._

He shook his head to clear it.

'Well, we'd better pick up Rosie from Molly and get home,' Mary said with a sigh. 'Give us a ring
if anything useful turns up, Sherlock.'

'And take care of Debbie,' John added pointedly on the way to the door.

Sherlock didn't dignify that with a response, intent on the forensics report again. The next time he looked up from the laptop it was nearly midnight, and he realised that he too was exhausted after the day's events. Odd. He hadn't really done much, not by his standards. Panicking and worrying were apparently quite arduous activities.

Debbie was sound asleep when he went into his bedroom. Rather than rearranging the pillows to lay in the middle – as the Woman had when she'd turned up there uninvited – she was still tidily tucked up on the side nearest the door. The glow of the street lamp outside peaked through a narrow gap in the curtains to shine a slim beam of gold on her face, which even in sleep seemed to be wearing a little frown.

Hmm. He didn't want to wake her – she clearly needed the rest – but he did want to go to bed. The prospect of the couch or, god forbid, going upstairs to her bed did not appeal. Yet there seemed something oddly salacious about getting into the bed with her.

Ridiculous. You're just going to sleep in it.

After a moment's more indecision he finally retrieved his pyjamas and went into the bathroom to change, then very carefully walked to the far side of the bed and inserted himself under the covers alongside her. She didn't even stir, which was something of a relief, so he lay on his back and stared blankly at the ceiling for a moment, mind still whirring despite his tiredness.

The woman I love.

What a ludicrous concept. Why had he said that? Sherlock Holmes didn't bother with mindless sentimentality and definitely did not fall in love.

He turned his head, his gaze falling inexorably on the slim outline of Debbie's body next to him. The dim slither of light from the window played over the white sheet and highlighted the softness of her form, the dark splay of her curls on the pillow. Why did he feel an almost uncontrollable urge to touch her, to run his hands over her curves and through her hair?

Shifting to his side so he faced her back, he wrestled with himself for long moments before succumbing to the outlandish impulse and reaching out tentatively with one hand. His palm came to rest on her hip and she stirred ever so slightly with a soft little noise, but showed no signs of waking up. There. It was fine. The contact was...tantalising, somehow, making him want to roll closer to her and expand it, but it also felt oddly reassuring. She was here, and she was safe, and he would never permit such a thing to happen to her again.

The woman I love…
Sherlock didn't recall falling asleep, but woke alone in the bed and for a moment was genuinely befuddled. The space where Debbie had been lying was cool to touch, so she'd been out of the bed for at least ten minutes. The door was more widely ajar than he'd left it, and there were sounds of activity from the kitchen.

Levering himself up on one elbow, he was rubbing somewhat blearily at his eyes when Debbie came back in with a cup of tea in each hand.

'Hi,' she said to him with a smile that held a touch of odd reservation. Shyness? Ah. Of course, she hadn't expected to wake up with him in the bed with her. 'I made us some tea.'

Sherlock frowned slightly. The idea that she might find waking up next to him disconcerting hadn't actually occurred to him when mentally debating the idea last night. Then he abruptly noticed the blue robe she had on over her pyjamas.

'…you're wearing my dressing gown.' Oh. The Woman did that.

Stop thinking about HER.

'Sorry. It was a bit chilly. I'll take it off if you want.'

'It's all right,' he said, sitting up properly to take the tea. 'I just wasn’t expecting you to be wearing it.'

'It's comfortable,' she said with a small smile. 'And it smells of you.'

He cocked his head with a small frown. Olfactory conditioning. Curious. It hadn't crossed his mind that someone like Debbie – who was far from the most observant person of his acquaintance – would experience such a thing from a comparatively subtle personal aroma, since his limited array of grooming products were generally unscented.

'That's a…good thing?' he hazarded, aware she was waiting for him to say something.

'Yes.' Another smile – again oddly restrained, not reaching her eyes – and she sat down on the bed next to him. 'It makes me feel…safe, I suppose.'
He stared at her for a long moment.

_Somewhat ironic._ That dry inner tone was all Mycroft. _Considering how much your acquaintance has compromised her safety of late._

'You should have woken me when you wanted to sleep,' Debbie added. 'I would have gone back upstairs. Seems rude, having to share your own bed…not that I minded-' nibbling her bottom lip '-' that is, I mean, you're better than a hot water bottle to wake up next to. And it was – I don't know – it was nice.'

_Nice._ Sherlock turned the word over in his mind. _Pleasant. Likeable. Agreeable._ He'd never shared a bed with anyone – well, discounting that one deeply unpleasant trip to Reims when he and Mycroft were children – and had only ever really considered it as an arrangement for logistical reasons, but Debbie seemed to be thinking of it as something rather more significant.

'I would have rolled over and given you a cuddle,' she added with what seemed like a rather forced kind of cheerfulness, 'But I wasn't sure how you'd react and I didn't want to end up in a headlock or something.'

That made him regard her in mild alarm.

'You think I would have _attacked_ you?'

He expected her to laugh, but instead she seemed to become even more sombre and reached out to catch his hand in hers.

'Sherlock.'

'Yes?'

Her fingers squeezed his.

'Thank you.'

'For what? It's just a bed. Hardly-'

'Not just this. For finding me. For…for rescuing me.'

He dropped his gaze, the unwelcome feeling of shame welling up.

'Mostly it was John and Mary. I-' _oh, this is dreadful_ '-I panicked. Was barely coherent.'

Her brows creased.

'You…panicked?'

'Yes.' Sherlock put the tea aside, finding his appetite for it waning. 'You were…gone, and in danger, and I couldn't – I was finding it very difficult to concentrate on finding you because you weren't there.' He stopped, suddenly aware that his words weren't making a great deal of sense, and swallowed hard. 'My mind…wouldn't work. Not like it's supposed to. It was…slow… jumbled…nothing joined up properly. Too much noise.' Scrubbing his hands through his hair in renewed frustration, he shook his head. 'Too many…_feelings._ Sentiments. Clogging up reason. The last time I was anywhere near so irrational on a case-' then he stopped, because the last time sentiment had invaded a case to such an extent he'd ended up shooting Charles Augustus Magnussen in the head, and he didn't really want to bring that up because he wasn't entirely sure how Debbie would react to it.
'I'm – I'm so sorry, Sherlock.' She started to reach for him again, then seemed to think better of it and withdrew her hands to her lap. 'Do…do you want me to go?'

'Go?' He abruptly refocused in alarm. 'No. No. Of course not.' The notion sent another pang of genuine fright through him and he sort of *lunged* at her without conscious decision, pulling her into his arms and a tight embrace. The scent of mango and passionfruit, with a hint of coconut, flooded his senses. Dopamine seeped in to gradually replace adrenalin. He tipped his head onto one side to bury his nose in Debbie's hair and finally permitted himself to exhale.

Oh. She was clinging to him tightly now, her face tucked into the crook of his neck. Her eyes were damp. She was upset. Why was she upset? Was she still thinking about being abducted and held at crossbow-point? Or was it what he had said?

*Don't analyse, don't dissect, don't deduce, just be here.* Mary's words drifted back and he forced himself to set aside other considerations, lifting one hand from its death grip on Debbie's shoulder to stroke the back of her head.

'Are you sure it wouldn't be better if I did?' she asked in a very small voice. 'I don't want to be – I don't want to be the reason you – you relapse.'

'What?' he exclaimed, drawing back to stare at her. 'What d'you mean, *relapse*?' Sniffing, she chewed at her lower lip.

'Just…something Mycroft said.'

'What?' Anxiety was instantly replaced with furious anger. 'When?'

'This morning, he rang me while I was making us some tea and—'

Suddenly her earlier reticence had an explanation. Sherlock battled to keep his voice level.

'What did he say?'

'He – he said he was concerned about your…attachment to me. He told me about after John and Mary's wedding, when you started – um – using again, and how it was because you felt like you'd lost John and…' she trailed off, presumably because she'd registered the murderous look that Sherlock knew was dawning on his face.

*Mycroft, you unmitigatedly calculating bastard.*

He let go of Debbie, stood up and found his phone, dialling and holding it to his ear while barely resisting the urge to grind his teeth.

'Good morning, brother mine. Recovered from your little jaunt through the ceiling?'

'You had no right to call Debbie this morning,' Sherlock snapped without preamble.

'I was merely making sure she was aware of all the facts, Sherlock.' Mycroft was of course entirely unmoved by his brother's tone. *After all, we all remember the unfortunate little tumble you took after the wedding in mourning for John Watson.*'

'That was for a *case* and you *know* it.' Beyond furious and still accelerating, Sherlock stalked to the window. 'What did you *tell* her?'

'Oh, *nothing but the facts.* Your particular and troubled history with recreational substances, and
how an excess of sentiment can cause you to revert. She wasn’t particularly shocked. I suspect John may have filled her in already, to his credit.

‘What else?’

‘I told her’ Mycroft’s tone took on an almost mocking edge, as though he were explaining elementary mathematics to a simpleton ‘that if she cared for your wellbeing at all, she should give serious consideration to putting some distance between you.’

‘What?’

‘-and that I would be quite happy to facilitate her accommodation arrangements to that effect, since I’m aware she has a dislike of not being within walking distance of her workplace.’

Sherlock suddenly found himself in the distinctly unnerving position of being so blindingly furious that he couldn’t even articulate it. He wanted to punch his brother. Actually, he wanted to murder – no, to obliterate him. What possible right did Mycroft think he had to interfere with-

-the woman I love-

-with Debbie, to try and scare or guilt her into leaving and abandoning their relationship? Of course Mycroft could be extremely persuasive and convincing when he needed to be. Playing on Debbie’s emotions, already heightened and raw from her recent ordeal, wouldn’t have even required much in the way of work.

He glanced back to where Debbie was now standing in the bedroom door, hands twisting worriedly and a pained expression of acute distress on her face. He read her effortlessly – guilty, ashamed, anxious, convinced the entire altercation was somehow her fault – and set his jaw.

‘Mycro, if you ever contact Debbie directly again then I shall make it my business to ensure that for the rest of your natural life, your every plan and scheme will be disastrously thwarted.’

Then he hung up, tossed the phone onto the bed and strode to the door to pull Debbie into a hug.

‘I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have done that. If he calls you again, just hang up.’ Wrapping his arms around her shoulders, he held her close. ‘And please, don’t go. It would be the most completely illogical thing to do. I was panicking while looking for you because the thought of not having you around was so intolerable. So if you left, it would really be the opposite of a solution.

To his lasting relief, she tilted her chin up to kiss him and then smiled at him although her eyes were still damp.

‘Thank you, Sherlock. I was…I was being silly, just the thought of being the reason you started hurting yourself that way…I mean, I already knew you had…John told me, ages ago. Oh…you aren’t cross about that, are you?’

‘Not at all,’ he said calmly. ‘Very conscientious of him. Typical John.’ He should have figured that out earlier, of course. But still, that Debbie knew of his numerous past…issues in that regard and hadn’t so much as brought it up, let alone judged him for it in that manner most people did…in fact even now she was looking at him with nothing but affection and concern in her gaze.

The woman I love, he thought, and felt a warm and buoyant sensation fill his chest.

‘You’re smiling,’ she said, seeming slightly quizzical about it. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing,’ he said quickly. ‘I’m just…glad you’re here. Despite the best efforts of James Moriarty’s
lunatic fan and my brother.’

She smiled back – a proper smile this time, his smile – and kissed him again. He leaned into it, suspending everything else just to focus on the feeling of her lips and her closeness, pressed up against him. Oh, now his body was reacting in a way that wasn't particularly helpful. Stupid physiology.

'T'll put the kettle on,' she said into his ear. 'Your tea will be cold by now. Just let me nip up and get dressed so you can have your dressing gown back.'
Hardly Something Scandalous

The day improved considerably after that and Debbie didn't put up even a token resistance when Sherlock insisted on accompanying her down to Scotland Yard so Lestrade and Donovan could take an account of the abduction. He listened, trying to keep his expression business-like and impassive when all he wanted to really do was fly into a rage.

'Nothing on the local CCTV, no other witnesses...’ Lestrade's face was grim as he summed up the situation '...I hate to say it, Sherlock, but we've got nothing to go on for this. Forensics came up clean – don’t make that face, Anderson was thorough – and the buggers kept their faces covered so she can't even give us a description.' A low huff. 'Any ideas?'

'The two men who abducted her were hired thugs,' Sherlock said. How did the supposed detective inspector not see it? 'They're irrelevant. And no, to answer your next question, they couldn't tell us who hired them because there will be so many layers of proxies and middle-men that the original employer is as good as untraceable.'

'Just like-

'Moriarty. Yes. His methods exactly. Never did like to get his hands dirty in person.' Except when he shot himself in the head right in front of me on the roof of Bart's. 'I'll be in touch if anything comes up. Send me the forensics reports.'

He left it there, because Debbie was lurking by the office door now and waiting for him. While on the way back to Baker Street he stole a glance at her and felt an odd ache in his chest. The bruise on her eye and cheek was full-blown now, an ugly and hateful thing, and the knowledge that it had been done to her in violence only made it somehow seem even worse.

Once they were home he went to check his emails, but paused at the sight of Debbie standing in the kitchen staring somewhat blankly at the wall above the kettle, which she'd just put on to boil. A strange impulse to be close to her seized him, and he tossed his phone aside to indulge it.

Hmm. She normally registered his presence nearby but her mind seemed to be elsewhere. Oh. Of course, she was likely relieving unpleasant memories of the abduction since she'd just had to describe it in excruciating detail to the police. Sherlock stepped up close behind her and reached up with one hand to brush her hair out of the way, exposing the elegant column of her neck and absently wondering why the sight fascinated him so. When she stirred and made to turn he
stopped her with a gentle grip on her shoulders, then surrendered to temptation and dipped his head to plant a kiss on the side of her throat.

Her pulse spiked under his lips – somewhat gratifyingly – and this time he let her turn towards him so he could trail his mouth up her chin and cheek to press carefully around her eye, as though his kisses could somehow eradicate the horrible bruise. *What a ridiculous notion.* But she was leaning into his chest and making soft little sounds of enjoyment, so the gesture was at least having something like the desired effect of making her feel better.

Finally, she tilted her chin up and their lips met. Sherlock felt himself sigh and slid his arms down to encircle her waist, drawing her even closer against him. The scent of her, the *feel* of her body so closely pressed up to his, made his head swim. He kissed her again, and again, slanting his mouth over hers at a slightly different angle each time. Then he abruptly noticed that each contact was getting steadily more forceful and wondered dimly why that was.

Well, the way Debbie was clutching at the lapel of his jacket with one hand while the other splayed on his back between his shoulder blades might have something to do with it. She was hanging onto him like she was drowning and he was some sort of buoyancy aid. Then she gave the tiniest, softest little whimper when their lips parted for a moment and Sherlock realised that – once again due simply to physical proximity with her – he had an erection. This one was being unusually insistent about it, too. He was really quite uncomfortable, but also very sure he didn't want to stop kissing.

Proving that television got at least some comedically awful timing for such things correct, there was a loud knock at the door and the cheery sounds of what was undoubtedly John and Mary – and probably Rosie – in the hall outside. Resisting the urge to curse loudly, Sherlock reluctantly broke the most recent kiss and drew back a little. Debbie's pupils were blown wide, her cheeks were flushed and a general air of breathlessness hung about her.

Oh, that wasn't helping the situation in his trousers at *all*.

'I'll get the door,' she said, giving him a softer kiss on the cheek and then leaving the kitchen. In a desperate attempt to occupy his mind elsewhere, Sherlock busied himself with making a pot of tea and arranging some of Debbie’s homemade scones on a plate.

'*looks bloody awful, is it very sore?' John's voice drifted in.*

'Not too bad. I took some painkillers this morning.' Debbie, doing an admirable impression of someone who'd been engaged in nothing more interesting than washing up until that moment. 'I swear she gets bigger every time I see her!'

'Yeah, I swear she gets heavier every time I pick her up. Have you spoken to the police yet?'

'Sherlock went in with me this morning. Greg was...very nice. Well, as nice as he could be, given what we were talking about.'

'I'm sure Sherlock will have an inspired breakthrough at any second.' Mary, halfway between cheerful and droll.

Finally able to get his body and its persistently contrary wishes under control, Sherlock made the tea and carried the tray through.

'Look at that, you've practically got him domesticated,' John said, giving Debbie a playful nudge that prompted a laugh.

'Oh, he's not *so* bad. I've known much worse!'
The conversation settled into utterly tedious and banal trivialities – *small talk* – after that so Sherlock just sat in his chair and checked his emails. The forensics was a dead end, as he'd expected, but it did raise the question of what Moriarty's mysterious fan would do next. Something to do with explosives, presumably. He was confident that the theft of the Reichenbach had not been one of the consulting criminal's enterprises – *reasonably* confident, anyway – and the various other relatively minor cases that had followed it were unlikely candidates for impersonation.

Of course *something to do with explosives* was an ambiguous brief at best, so Sherlock spent the next couple of weeks studiously ignoring Mycroft's snippily-worded requests for updates. Instead he focused most of his energy on the few incidental cases that came his way, along with some discreet – and unrelated – arrangements he had finally decided to make.

When a very bewildered Molly returned the paperwork – clearly *itching* to ask him about it – he checked everything over thoroughly and tried to ignore the way his pulse skyrocketed at the mere thought of what it meant. *Why* was the notion so bizarrely intriguing? He'd spent most of his life completely disinterested in such…such *activities*, but now here he was practically shaking with excitement at the thought of them with Debbie.

*The woman I love.*

The thought intruded randomly into his head, as it had developed a habit of doing, but instead of hurriedly pushing it aside Sherlock took a moment to examine it. He turned it carefully over in his mind to view it from all angles, but still couldn't nail down a proper analysis. Affection, fondness, tenderness…*ardour*…even the definitions of the feeling didn't really lend much insight. But nonetheless it was there; an impenetrable, inexplicable *fact* that had formed the centre of the Debbie-orientated part of his universe. To Sherlock it was still a rather alien presence. One shouldn't *feel* facts – facts were *known*, or perhaps deduced from other facts.

His musing was interrupted by the usual sounds of Debbie arriving home from work. She'd insisted on not taking any time off from the nursery, which had resulted in the Story Of Miss Connors' Kidnapping becoming something of an unexpected folk tale at the Little Elves School – although clearly a somewhat exaggerated version judging by the way the children in her class cheered at Sherlock whenever they laid eyes on him.

Dismissing the idea of being seen as heroic by the group of five year olds in Debbie's care, he hastened out of the kitchen to greet her.

'Hello, you,' she said, pecking him quickly on the cheek with a big smile as she took off her coat. 'Any good cases today?'

'Nothing interesting, no.'

'Oh, poor lamb. I'll have to cheer you up, then!' With a little wink, she kissed him properly and then began bustling about with her usual just-got-home routine.

Watching her, Sherlock reflected on how immensely glad he was that the ordeal with the crossbow didn't seem to have had any lasting psychological effects. Admittedly she was still quite reluctant to go out after dark, especially alone, but after that first night she had seemed comfortable enough in her own bedroom. Her sleep pattern was only minimally disturbed and had returned more or less to normal within a few days. Either she was a more resilient personality than her sunny nature seemed to indicate, or that same nature led her to just push past the unpleasant memories as a form of aversion. John had made tutting noises about it until Mary rather acidly pointed out that therapy didn't work for *everyone* and since Debbie hadn't developed any unhealthy coping mechanisms – with a wry glance at Sherlock as she'd said this – they should
leave her alone to deal with things her own way.

She was in the kitchen now, slicing tomatoes for something to do with dinner. Sherlock frowned at his own reticence. He’d already firmly established his own unwitting predisposition towards the subject at hand as well as, judging by Debbie’s responses, being firmly confident that she reciprocated his interest. It was hardly something scandalous to propose to-

-the woman I love.

Shaking his head, he ruffled his hands back through his hair and took a breath. Ridiculous. He was attributing far too much gravity to a simple physical interaction.

'Are you all right, Sherlock?' Debbie asked, glancing back with a quick smile. 'You look like something’s eating you alive.'

'Oh.' Then he had to clear his throat as his voice unexpectedly cracked. 'No. I – ah – I just wanted to ask you about something.'

'All right.' She returned her attention to the tomatoes. 'What is it?'

'Sex.'

The knife froze in mid-air and Sherlock panicked. Had he misjudged? No, he was certain in his observations and deductions. He’d spent a long time studying her reactions to their kissing and physical contact in order to be sure. So why…

'Sex,' Debbie repeated blankly, then put the knife down and turned around. She was biting her lower lip, but her eyes were bright. 'What about sex, Sherlock?'

'With you. Me. I mean-‘ this was mortifying, he thought with vague horror ‘-I mean that I would like to have sex with you.’ That sounded dreadful. 'Um. Please.'

His inner John, always committed to being helpful, was doubled over in hysterical laughter at this point, which was nearly as irritating as the Mycroft phantom’s painfully rolled eyes.

'Okay…' Debbie was now clearly struggling not to break into a broad grin, which Sherlock found vaguely hurtful. Was the notion of having sex with him funny somehow?

'Oh!' He suddenly remembered the two folders and went into the other room to find them, presenting them to Debbie with a small flourish. 'Blood tests. For both of us. All clear, naturally, but especially as you’re aware of my past drug use I thought it would be polite to confirm. Most of the tests are straightforward enough, but if you needed to check anything then I'm sure John or Mary would be happy to explain-'

He stopped when she opened the topmost folder and scanned down it with rather less amusement and more discomfiture.

'Who did these?'

'Molly Hooper. Don't let her job at the morgue put you off, she's really a very competent physician and more than capable of-'

'How did you get a sample of my blood?' Debbie looked up at him with genuine – and unsettled – befuddlement. 'I mean, I donated last month but unless you stole it from the-'

'Oh, no, I put something into your cup of tea before you went to bed one night to ensure you
would stay asleep while I drew a vial. Don't worry, I'm good at it. Well, obviously I am since you
didn't notice when you woke up the following morning. You have very prominent veins,
incidentally, which made it easier, but then your diet is generally good and you get plenty of
exercise so—'

'You roofied me and took some of my blood while I was out?' she echoed in dismay.

'-yes?' Sherlock caught up with himself and hurriedly reprocessed. Ah. 'That was…oh, you think
that was wrong. Invasive. Rude.'

'I was going to go with vampiric actually…but yes.' She closed the folder and held it out to him
with a little frown. 'Have you…drugged me before?'

'No. No. Of course not. I would never-' Sherlock hurriedly changed tack '-I mean, I only did it this
time so I could surprise you. I've been doing a lot of research,' he added, laying the folders to one
side, 'And ensuring that one's partner feels physically safe seems to be a recurring theme—'

Her face softened and she covered her mouth with one hand in a not-entirely-successful attempt to
hide a smile.

'-although I've been investigating the expertise as well as the logistics of sexual intercourse,
naturally, things like erogenous zones and various techniques for stimulating—'

'Sherlock—'

'-although a lot of recommendations involve extensive personalisation, fortunately I have excellent
observation skills, so—' he stopped when she actually laid her finger over his lips, which made his
pulse spike. She was grinning openly now, and the expression held a distinctly playful edge to it
that he wasn't familiar with.

'And when exactly did you plan for this extremely well researched sexual intercourse to take
place, hmm?' Her fingertip trailed down over his bottom lip to his chin and then dropped to his
chest, drawing an idle pattern on his shirt that seemed to light a fiery trail underneath it on his skin.

'Oh. Well. Whenever was…convenient.' He blinked rapidly, battling to keep his mind focused,
which became immeasurably more difficult when she stepped up closer to him and started planting
soft, open-mouthed kisses on the underside of his chin. 'I wouldn't anticipate an extended period
of time being required – I mean, whenever you have a spare fifteen minutes should more than
suffice for—'

She laughed against his throat and slid her hands down to rest on his waist.

'I tell you what—' tilting her head back to meet his eyes with a wink that made his stomach turn an
unlikely somersault '—this Friday, instead of going to Nero I'll come straight home, make us
something nice for dinner and then…well, we can see where the evening takes us…'

That seemed unnecessarily complex to Sherlock – surely she had a quarter of an hour to spare
tonight, even if it meant a slightly later dinner – and then he realised something else.

'But today is Tuesday.'

'Yes?'

'Friday is three days away.'

She rolled her eyes.
'Most of your life you've been completely disinterested, and now you can't wait three days?'

'Well I-' Sherlock swallowed hard '-I was rather hoping to just, you know, get it over with, really, and perhaps-’ he stopped when she half collapsed against his chest, shaking with laughter ’-what?’

'Oh, Sherlock.' She hugged him tightly. 'How I adore you.'

That declaration – made so casually, but with such obvious substance behind it – made Sherlock’s mind short circuit altogether. How I adore you. To adore: to admire, cherish, delight in, dote on, be smitten with…to love? Except she hadn't used that word exactly. Was being adored more or less than being loved? He had absolutely no frame of reference to use as the basis for drawing a comparison.

'Now, I'm going to get back to dinner,' Debbie said, giving him a quick kiss. 'But trust me, Sherlock, this isn’t something to rush through in fifteen minutes!'
That gave Sherlock something else to ponder over the next three days – as if being adored wasn't enough – but he continued his research regardless. For some reason, as Friday evening approached, he found himself going back to recheck his mental notes for things he was already quite certain of. It was like studying for an exam where he'd only read through the material once, and extremely unsettling. When the door went downstairs he actually started and got to his feet, which clearly looked as ridiculous as he suspected because when Debbie came in and saw him making a pathetic attempt at nonchalance in front of his chair she broke into a grin.

'Expecting someone?'

'No-' damn it all, his voice cracked like a teenager '-no. How was your day?'

'Fine, thank you.' She pecked him on the cheek after taking off her coat. 'Two ticks, I'm just going to nip up and change. We were doing animal collages today and I've got craft feathers in places you wouldn't believe.'

That statement probably wasn't meant to be suggestive but Sherlock barely managed a nod in response, as all sorts of inappropriate scenarios involving feathers and places on Debbie abruptly sprang into his mind without so much as a by-your-leave.

He sat down again and fiddled idly with the buttons on his cuffs. Maybe it would have been better to go to the café as normal earlier. Established routine. Less of a bizarre sense of…occasion about the entire thing. Ridiculous. What was taking Debbie so long? When she got changed after work it normally took less than a minute, but she'd been upstairs for-

The thought died mid-formation as she came back in and bustled straight through to the kitchen.

*Definitely a...sense of occasion.*

She was barefoot, as she normally was around the flat, but the body-conforming dress she was wearing was unfamiliar, which was surprising because he had the entirety of her wardrobe memorised. Something new, then? How strange, to purchase clothing specifically for an act that was generally conducted with clothes off.

It suited her, though. Sherlock tilted his head on one side to observe as she moved about. The dress highlighted her curves to good effect but not tightly enough to be tasteless. It was cut simply around the neck, exposing a modest but noticeable amount of cleavage, and stopped just short of
the top of her knees. She'd put her hair up, too, which left her neck exposed. He swallowed hard at the again unexpected urge to kiss that column of bare skin.

Dinner was simple but filling and Debbie nudged him into talking about the cases he'd looked at during the day as if it were any other night. They even did the washing up as usual, but this time when Sherlock hung the tea towel back on its peg and turned around he was rather startled to find her sitting – lounging, almost – in his chair by the fireplace.

She giggled, presumably at the confused look on his face, then got up and came to stand in front of him, giving him a soft kiss on the cheek.

'I wanted to try it out. Hmm.' Trailing a finger down his chin to the topmost button of his collar, she flashed an approving smile. 'I think this is my favourite shirt, you know.'

Now thoroughly bewildered, Sherlock glanced down at himself. He'd put the burgundy one on this morning without really thinking about it. Perhaps some subconscious deduction based on an intuitive observation of Debbie's reactions? He found himself pleased, regardless, as she was now running both flattened palms down his chest and his body was registering definite approval of both the contact and her general proximity.

When she started kissing him – light, feathery, quick little kisses that were almost ticklish on his mouth and jaw – he absorbed the new sensation with interest for a bit and then dipped his head to catch her lips properly in his, wanting more. She yielded with a soft sigh, going completely pliant against him as he claimed her mouth, and a bolt of lightning hit his stomach at the sound and feel of her.

The kisses were getting insistent again, and really quite forceful now, and when exactly had he pushed her up against the wall by the hallway door? He didn't recall doing that but her back was now flat on the surface, arms twining around his neck while he pushed against her, almost crushing her into the wallpaper. He ought to stop that, he realised dimly, hastily propping his hands on the wall either side of her head to lever himself back a bit.

As he tried to adjust his position she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him back to her, apparently in disagreement with his decision to withdraw. Well, he didn't really mind that. It was far more enjoyable with his body pressed fully up against hers, although he was still a little worried about hurting her. He'd never considered himself bulky or excessively large, but she was still very small and slight in comparison.

When she suddenly and breathlessly broke off he flinched back in alarm, peering at her face for any signs of distress. Oh. She looked worried.

'Are you all right?' she asked him. 'Is this…too fast?'

Ah. She'd misinterpreted his hesitance.

'I don't want to squash you,' he said, marvelling at how breathy his own voice sounded. Thank goodness, she was smiling again.

'I'm not made of glass, Sherlock.' Then, as if to prove the point, she pulled him towards her for another, even deeper, kiss that made his stomach twist pleasantly. When their lips parted she tilted her head up to whisper directly into his ear, but he could barely concentrate on the words with the way her breath warmed his neck and her hands slid up and down his back.

'Tell me if it…gets too much, all right?'

Too much? The notion seemed absurd. At the moment all he could imagine wanting was to
somehow get **even closer** to her, even though he was pinning her thoroughly to the wall now, as though it were possible to somehow climb inside her skin…

Now she was kissing around his throat and up the side of his jaw to his left earlobe before closing her mouth around it with the merest hint of teeth. If he pressed against her any harder he was going to push her into the wall, but his body's demand for more sensation was starting to override his higher functions. Instead of trying to re-evaluate their position he found that he was just kissing her back, trailing his mouth down to lick at the hollow of her throat and then softly biting at the pulse point.

She wriggled against him – provoking all sorts of delightful spots of friction where their bodies were in direct contact – and made a soft sound of obvious approval before sliding her hands up to tangle in his hair and pull his lips back to hers.

It occurred to Sherlock that if someone called his phone or knocked on the door right now he would gladly pass on **any** case in favour of continuing like this. *Oh, god.* Debbie had dropped one arm and flattened her palm in the small of his back, pressing in so that their hips came into direct contact. Fireworks exploded through his awareness and he actually gasped, swallowing the sound by reclaiming her mouth with his but completely powerless to stop his treacherous body's grinding motions against hers.

'Not too much,' he managed to mumble in between kisses. 'Not…not **enough**.'

A silvery laugh was the only answer he got before she abruptly ducked out from beneath him to move into the hallway, holding out one hand. He took it and pulled her back to him for more kisses, stumbling a little as they somehow managed to progress towards his bedroom door despite remaining wrapped around one another.

Debbie let him get into the room ahead of her and then closed the door firmly, leaning her back on it to feel for the lock. Her chest was heaving in a manner that Sherlock found thoroughly distracting – although it was gratifying to know that she was as short of breath as he was – and quite a bit of her hair had come free under his grasping hands. Combined with her flushed cheeks and heavily dilated eyes, the entire effect added up to somehow wonderfully dishevelled and he took a moment to rake his eyes over her form to appreciate it.

'Okay?' she asked with a small smile that held a trace of nervousness.

Why on earth was she nervous? She'd done this sort of thing before. If anyone ought to be nervous it should be **him,** Sherlock thought, trying to ignore the fact that his stomach felt uncannily like it was home to most of an apiary at present.

When Debbie pulled the rest of her hair down so it tumbled around her shoulders, he gave in to the instant impulse and half dove at her, tangling his hands through the loose locks and pulling her face back to his for another kiss. *Oh,* why were the little sounds she made so very appealing? His pulse had sped up to a mad hammering now, as though he was sprinting over London rooftops rather than standing in his own bedroom.

Her fingers were combing through his own hair, too, stroking the back of his neck and around his shoulders. His shirt suddenly felt like it was thick wool rather than light cotton, stifling and oppressive and **far** too warm…he broke the kiss and reached up to fumble at the collar with hands that were inexplicably all thumbs.

'Here.' Debbie reached up herself, gently batting his clumsy grasp away, and began to undo the buttons for him. Not sure where to look – **entirely** unaccustomed to being undressed by another in any capacity – Sherlock dropped his gaze awkwardly as she worked nimibly downwards before
carefully untucking the shirt from his trousers so it hung open on his lean frame.

'Cuffs,' she murmured, and he dumbly held them up. Once they were unfastened she reached to cradle his face in her hands and kissed him softly, as if in reassurance. He leaned into her, letting his mouth drag down to the crook of her neck and inhaling deeply of the comforting and familiar scent of her.

'Okay?' she asked again in a whisper. He hummed an affirmative, which seemed to be enough for her to reach back, peeling the shirt down his arms and off. Although ordinarily fastidious about his clothing, Sherlock found that he didn't care in the slightest where it had fallen because the feel of Debbie's hands – and lips, oh god – roaming the bare skin of his chest made all other considerations seem trifling in comparison.

When her motions faltered he nudged at her, following her mouth to try and resume kissing and frowning a little when she looked down. What was wrong? Oh, she'd found one of the scars from his incarceration in Serbia. Or was that one from the gang in Paris? He'd deleted the acquisition of each blemish, deeming them unimportant details, and now couldn't remember.

'Who did this to you?' she asked, sounding somewhere between upset and fierce. Protective. The notion made him smile without realising it.

'Moriarty's network,' he answered calmly, feeling his skin shiver as her touch dragged lightly across each mark on his back before sliding around to the front of his chest, tracing the thin line remaining from the surgery to save his life when Mary had shot him in Charles Magnusson's office. 'That one was from…something else.'

'Oh.' Debbie abruptly put her arms around him and pressed close. 'Sometimes I forget how dangerous your cases can be.'

'I'm notoriously difficult to eradicate,' he said, attempting to sound flippant and not quite succeeding because her dismay had rather thrown off his mood.

'But not to hurt,' she mumbled against his chest, then planted a kiss on the same spot. 'My brave, dauntless Sherlock…'

That sentiment made him smile despite himself. He'd never really thought of himself as brave, exactly, and certainly not dauntless, but hearing those sorts of words from Debbie rendered them the highest possible praise.

My Sherlock. Why did the possessive intimation make his chest swell with elation? Wanting to get back to kissing – and other things – Sherlock dipped his head and nosed at Debbie's cheek.

'My Debbie,' he said quietly, feeling that same thrill again at the words, and repeated them more firmly, half to himself. 'My Debbie.'

'All yours, Sherlock,' she sighed, stretching up to kiss him some more. The affirmation made his stomach clench and he settled his hands possessively on her hips as their mouths slanted over one another. After a few more seconds Debbie suddenly broke off and flashed a grin.

'This seems rather unfair, doesn't it?'

'Unfair?'

'Hmm. Would you…?'

Oh. Oh. She was presenting her back to him. The back of her dress. Where the zip was. The zip
to undo her dress. Sherlock's mind took a brief but highly diverting whistle-stop tour of everything he had stored about her bare skin, from the slither of stomach when her pyjama top rode up to the tantalising glimpse of an awful lot more when he'd seen her coming out of the shower in nothing but a towel.

He gingerly reached out for the zipper and pulled it down by inches, trying to calm his heart rate and wondering why his mouth had gone dry. It was at the bottom now, just below the line of her waist, and with a little wriggle of her hips – one that made him blink rapidly for reasons he couldn't quite fathom – she nudged the cloth over them so it slid down her legs. Then she stepped out of it and nudged it aside.

_Bra._ Sherlock's observational skills were on autopilot, which was fortunate because his conscious mind was having some kind of seizure. _Knickers. Lace. Colour contrasts with her skin. Not everyday garments. Worn for the occasion…for confidence._

That consideration rather startled him. Of course he was passingly familiar with the concept of lingerie, as both an incitement to lust and a confidence boost for the wearer, but the realisation that Debbie was in some way apprehensive about the entire enterprise was rather concerning.

Why was the sight of her cleavage so _immensely_ distracting?

He lifted a hand on reflex, then thought better of it, then remembered – thank god – who he was dealing with, and how well she understood the way his mind worked.

'May I…?'

Debbie giggled.

'You may.'

Sherlock laid his palm around the curve of her left breast, testing the weight and form of it and wondering at how _good_ it felt in his hand.

_Primitive sexual reproductive instincts, brother mine. Ample breasts for ample feeding of potential offspring. All really quite elementary evolutionary genetic behaviour._

It took all of his self-control not to grit his teeth.

_Get out of my head, Mycroft!_

Debbie was chewing at her bottom lip now, looking a little anxious. Oh! She was concerned that he wouldn't find her physically attractive. How absurd. He'd already deduced every single aspect of her measurements and appearance – completely correctly, at least so far – and found nothing disagreeable about any of them.

Of course, seeing – and _feeling_ – those deductions, in the flesh, as it were, was a very different and altogether more engrossing experience.

He took a step closer and settled his free hand on her hip, gingerly moving his fingers up and around her breast, and feeling a sharp spike of what he was now quite sure was arousal when the nipple peaked under his thumb. _Oh._ Her pupils were extremely dilated. She was aroused, too, which was good because it would hopefully lessen her anxiety. Sherlock dipped his head, kissing down from her collarbone to the swell of her other breast and then, very tentatively, mouthing at the nipple through the material of her bra.

She made a little noise – a pleased one – and suddenly her hands were in his hair. He shifted a
little, wanting to continue but finding himself now rather uncomfortable. The erection he'd had for
the last ten minutes was almost painfully hard now, and his trousers weren't very accommodating
of it.

'Do you want to…?' Debbie dropped a hand to the top of his trousers. He lifted his head, feeling a
sharp pulse of excitement spike in his gut when she caught his gaze. Her fingers were trailing idle
patterns on the bare skin of his stomach which was extremely distracting, but he summoned
enough motor control to manage a nod.

Two quick movements and she had the buttons and zip undone, and was helping his still-clumsy
hands to ease the trousers down. He kicked them backwards off his legs, impatience registering,
keeping one hand on Debbie's hip while the other slid around to her back, feeling for the clasp of
her bra and snapping it open.

She giggled again and tossed it behind her, stepping closer to him so their bodies touched. The
feeling of her bare breasts pressed onto his chest was impossibly delectable and Sherlock held
onto her more tightly to prevent her moving back.

'Now where exactly did you learn to do that?' she asked, directly into his ear, before kissing his
neck just beneath it.

'It's hardly a complex mechanism,' he said, a trifle confused at the question.

'Hmm. I forget sometimes just how clever you are.' Then she captured his lips with hers again and
all thoughts of fastenings fled entirely from his mind under the barrage of kisses that ensued. They
took a few faltering steps together, nearly toppling twice, until Sherlock bumped into his bookcase
and made the cabinet next to it rattle.

'Oops.' Debbie said, more than a tad breathlessly. 'Steady, now. The earth isn't supposed to move
just yet.'

A chuckle escaped Sherlock before he could censor it, which made her grin, and suddenly they
were both almost doubled over laughing. Debbie hugged him tightly and then looked up with the
warm, special smile that he knew was just for him.

'God, I love your laugh,' she murmured, and then resumed kissing along his jawline with rather
more urgency. Mirth already forgotten, he drew her close again and slid his hands down the small
of her back, burying his face in her neck. She made another small noise, lightly stroking his sides,
so he let his palms drop to her buttocks and felt a bolt of lightning flash through his belly when
that provoked an outright moan from her.

Oh, she was toying with the top hem of his boxers now. Wanting distinctly to get out of them –
they were barely more comfortable for his erection than his trousers – he caught hold of the sides
of her knickers and started tugging them down. Thank goodness, she took the hint, and in another
heartbeat they were both completely naked.

Sherlock lifted his head in mild alarm when Debbie let go of him and backed off a few paces, a
shy but eager little smile on her face. Aware that her gaze was flicking over him – all of him – he
ignored the colour rising irrevocably in his cheeks to regard her in turn, feeling his erection get
somehow even harder as he catalogued the expanse of her skin, the swell of her breasts, the curve
of her hips, the tangle of hair at the apex of her thighs…

When she sat down on the end of the bed he surrendered to impulse and in two strides was
perched beside her, leaning in for another kiss. They sat like that for a bit, mouths and tongues
meeting with gentle, sensuous touches, until she began to trail a finger down the centre of his chest
to the light dusting of hair at his navel. Sherlock was sure that he felt himself twitch when he realised the path she was taking southwards.

'May I?' she asked softly.

He attempted to vocalise a reply but his throat seemed to have forgotten how it functioned, so he had to settle for a rather edgy nod instead. She smiled gently and stroked her other hand up through his hair.

'Tell me if it's too much, all right?'

Barely, he managed another nod, but then her fingers brushed the top of his erection – whisper soft, torturously brief – before slipping down to wrap around it. Sherlock inhaled sharply, as shocked at his own reaction as he was at the physical sensation. Although all logic and common sense told him that it ought to feel much the same, this was nothing like masturbating. When Debbie's hand tugged oh-so-lightly up and back down, a violent spasm of pleasure shot through him and he gasped loudly, arms flying out on reflex to start pushing her away. He caught them just in time before touching her, but she'd already registered his distress and snatched her hand back.

'Oh, Sherlock. Sssh.' Stroking his face, she kissed his cheek. 'Too fast? I'm sorry...'

'No,' he somehow managed to articulate, although the tone came out distinctly strangled. 'It's all right, it – it was just...more than I expected.'

'Do you want to stop?' she asked anxiously.

Ah, well that he definitely knew the answer to.

'Oh, god, no.'

That made her giggle.

'All right, then.' Leaning in to kiss him, she put her hand back where it had been and began to stroke delicately up and down in time with the contacts of their lips.

For a few moments Sherlock entertained the thought that it might actually be possible to die from sensory overload. Debbie turned her head to speak into his ear, her breath a tantalising whisper against his skin.

'Sherlock, I told you...I'm not made of glass.' Then, to his lasting astonishment, she dropped her mouth to his throat and sucked, hard, the little frisson of pain sending another spike of arousal through his entire body. He heard himself moan – a surprisingly wanton sound – and leaned into her to prolong the contact, which sent them toppling down onto the bed together.

Oh, but the feel of her naked body pressed up completely against his was utterly delightful, and before he could properly register what he was doing he had rolled onto her, clamping his mouth hungrily to hers while his hands unashamedly roamed her curves. She gave a little gasp of her own when his fingers brushed at her left nipple and he started to pull back in alarm, fighting through the fog of arousal, only for his retreat to be sharply arrested by her hooking one leg up and around his waist. The movement shifted them both so his hips were cradled between her thighs and he swallowed hard, suddenly very aware of the proximity of his unflagging erection to the cleft between her legs that he knew – knew – had a perfectly mundane anatomical function, but for some reason now seemed charged with the promise of so much more.

Debbie caressed his cheeks again, eyes heavy-lidded but fixed on his face, locking instantly with
his own when he dared to raise his gaze.

'It's all right,' she murmured, one hand arriving on the small of his back and pressing lightly down in encouragement. 'If you want to…go on.'

And oh, he did want to, more than he'd ever expected to want something so corporal, so much that his mind was empty except for a deafening roar of yes, now, please that would brook no argument from any higher functions. Sherlock reached down to guide himself in and drove forwards, hearing another moan escape him – a low, long, primitive sound – as he was enveloped in impossibly tight, insanely blissful warmth. Dimly he heard Debbie sigh, felt her stroking his shoulders and back soothingly, but such minor external considerations seemed to be fading out into nothingness in favour of the feeling, the raw and unbridled sensation that flooded his awareness and yet was somehow still not enough…

Without conscious decision he began to rock his hips, the back and forth motions coming from some deep instinct he'd never realised he possessed. Dropping his forehead to the pillow, he braced himself on his forearms on either side of Debbie and just moved, letting tremor after tremor of delicious friction shudder through him. He couldn't analyse, couldn't think, could barely even breathe, every ounce of his consciousness focused on the impossibly amazing feeling where their bodies joined.

A recognisable and yet utterly foreign sensation was building in his loins now, and in desperation he increased the pace, thrusting in again and again, faster and faster. Squeezing his eyes shut, not even registering the give of the pillowcase he was leaning on, he felt himself panting as the fire in his belly built to a steady roar before it exploded out of him all at once.

Sherlock cried out, utterly lost to the euphoria of it, clenching and unclenching his hands while the snap of his hips stuttered and slowed. A wonderful, beatific silence descended on his mind as the ecstasy ebbed away, leaving nothing but calm and quiet in its wake.

He was unsure just how long he lay like that, breathing heavily, until something vaguely resembling conscious thought flickered back to life.

Oh. Of course, he was still on top of Debbie. She was stroking her hands up his back and through his hair, showing no indications of discomfort but surely feeling rather squashed by now with him on top of her. Carefully he withdrew to settle alongside her, barely suppressing another gasp as their bodies parted with a shivery echo of sensation.

Why was she moving? Was she leaving? Bewildered, confused, still not entirely all there, he half sat up and reached for her with a small noise of protest. No, she was in the bathroom. Not for long. Oh, he couldn't stop that sharp breath at the unexpected contact between his legs. Cleaning up, of course. Logistics. Yes. That felt better. When she came back to the bed and pulled the sheet up over them both he shuffled up against her, enjoying the feeling of her warm and pliant form tucked against his when she nestled into his chest without hesitation.

Sherlock inhaled deeply, concentrating on embedding the whole experience deeply into his mind palace. It was hard to properly recall much of it though – he kept mentally stumbling over blank moments where his higher functions had been thoroughly overridden by the raw sensations coursing through him. He ought to find it frustrating but couldn't really bring himself to care about cataloguing things while traces of euphoria were still echoing in his body.

'Analysing?' Debbie asked with a hint of amusement, her breath warm on the bare skin of his chest.

He made an affirmative noise and slipped his arms around her, dropping his nose into her hair.
with a small sigh of satisfaction. Anyone else might have taken his quiet for something inappropriate but not Debbie, not his Debbie, not-

\textit{the woman I love}-

-blast it, there was that damned word again, inserting itself into his mind at every opportunity as a reminder of his own unwitting deduction under stress. Should he tell her? John would insist that women liked to be told that sort of thing, but Sherlock hadn't the slightest idea how to even begin broaching such a subject. That one, short, single syllable didn't seem sufficient, somehow, to explain or even summarise how irrevocably pivotal Debbie had become to his world.

Then an observation finally registered itself and he shifted back in alarm to look down at her.

'You didn't have an orgasm.'

Stupid. \textit{Stupid}. All that effort and research and he'd been so wrapped up in his own sensations that he'd barely paid even a modicum of attention to her! He felt ashamed, and more than a little mortified. All his lines of enquiry had indicated that being deemed successful at sex – well, being deemed a \textit{good lover} – relied on the satisfaction one brought to one's partner rather than oneself. And here he was, the great and brilliant Sherlock Holmes, and he'd only just \textit{noticed} his failure in that regard. How humiliating.

Debbie seemed to find his chagrined expression amusing and giggled a bit before pressing close and kissing him gently.

'It's all right. Tonight was for you.'

Embarrassment giving way rapidly to indignation at her indulgence, Sherlock shifted them so she was on her back and he was on top of her again, then kissed her deeply in unspoken apology for his carelessness. Now. Erogenous zones. He'd researched this. First some more kisses to the mouth, then move down…chin, throat, collarbone…

Debbie giggled again and stroked her hands through his hair.

'Sherlock, it's really okay. You don't need t- \textit{oooh}!'

He grinned to himself against her skin and then flicked his tongue over her other nipple. Interesting, the alternating motions of licking and sucking seemed to elicit the most pronounced response. Now, if he could just get her to open her thighs again – \textit{ah, there we are} – and \textit{oh}, the heat and moisture under his probing fingers was remarkably slick, and the noises she was making were starting him back on the road to arousal himself.

One finger slid inside her – he felt himself grin again at her gasp – while the thumb worked elsewhere, looking for that spot…\textit{ah, there} it was, easy to identify from her little noises and the wriggles of her hips. He sucked her left nipple into his mouth again, oddly fascinated with the feel of the pebbled skin under his tongue, then kissed across her chest to give the other the same treatment. She was squirming now, hands laced through his hair to hold him to her, all thoughts of protest apparently long forgotten.

Good. Now, add a second finger – Sherlock had to rather ruthlessly suppress the unexpected surge of memory this provoked, of that wet tightness around other parts of his body – and crook up slightly, a come-hither sort of gesture, without ceasing the movements of his thumb…

'Oh god…' Debbie exclaimed in a breathless whisper.

And again…oh, she was biting her lip. Although the sight was far from disagreeable, if she didn't
say anything then how could he be sure she was – oh. Head thrown back, hips arched up, one hand clenched on his back while the other was twisting the sheets around her fingers. Of course he didn’t need vocalisation to interpret her. Stupid. Stupid.

'Sherloooock…'

With his name a drawn-out moan on her lips, he felt her come apart under his efforts. It was remarkable – and really quite arousing, curiously enough – to watch, and he wondered what it would feel like to have her body clenching so tightly around something other than his fingers.

She was still breathing quite heavily when he came back from the bathroom with a damp flannel to reciprocate her earlier courtesy. Once that was done he climbed back into the bed, tugged the sheets straight over them and pulled her back into his arms. Immediately she tucked her head under his chin, but he could feel her smiling into his chest.

'Was that…all right?' he asked, confident in the answer but wanting to be sure.

'So much better than just all right,' she said, sliding one hand down his arm to lace their fingers together. 'Either you're not as new at this as you claim or…'

'I did do a lot of research,' he said, unable to help feeling smug at that verdict. 'And I am extremely observant. It wasn't particularly challenging to- ' when she giggled again he frowned '-oh, was that not the right thing to say?'

'It's just the sort of thing I'd expect you to say, Sherlock.' Tilting her head, she kissed him with obvious affection. 'And that makes it perfect.' Then she yawned. 'Oh, goodness, now I'm really sleepy. Do you mind if I stay here, or shall I go upstairs?'

'Stay,' he said immediately. 'Please.'

That elicited a contented hum so he rolled away quickly to check the lights and then settled back onto the pillow, unable to stifle a smile when she immediately cuddled up next to him and draped an arm over his stomach, giving him a kiss on the cheek before settling down at his side.

'Good night, Sherlock.'

'Good night, Debbie.'

The woman I love, he thought in drowsy contentment, and then closed his eyes.
Waking up in bed completely nude and next to Debbie – and her also nude form – was another new experience that Sherlock eagerly filed away for future review. She was delightfully warm, and the contrast between the feel of her skin and the feel of the bedsheets elicited pleasing sensory memories from the previous night's activities. He stretched until his joints popped, noting idly that from the light filtering through the curtains it was still absurdly early, and then rolled over to curl around her spine and sleep some more.

When he next drifted back to consciousness it was at the smell of tea brewing, and he dragged himself blearily upright just as Debbie came back into the bedroom with a cup in each hand. She was wearing his second best dressing gown; interesting, she must have picked up on something of his dismay at seeing her in the other one. Then he realised that all she was wearing was his second best dressing gown, and to his lasting astonishment felt the beginnings of an erection that was to do with far more than vasodilation from the time of day stir to life.

'Morning,' she said with a smile, handing him one cup and then perching on the bed next to him to sip at her own. 'Sleep well?'

'Extremely.' The robe was too big for her, of course, and gaped at the neck where she'd tied it loosely around herself, revealing a remarkably tantalising glimpse of her bare bosom. It was slipping down off one shoulder, too, and the way it fell over her legs meant that the right one was exposed almost to the top of her thigh.

'Deducing, or just looking?' she asked playfully. Ah. As normal, he'd been unsubtle with his scrutiny.

'Looking,' he said, affecting nonchalance.

'Was last night…okay, then?'

'Yes. Very okay.' Aware he was blushing now, Sherlock looked down at the cup of tea. 'I think I see what – ah – what all the fuss is about. And I'm glad – I mean – it was a good thought, waiting until Friday. Having to watch you go to work now would be extremely tedious.'

That provoked a giggle.
'Well, I'm glad you weren't disappointed. And *I'm* glad – very glad – you were so diligent with your research.' There was a new warmth in her eyes now, an extra dimension to the usual affection when she looked at him. It made his chest swell with fondness…and satisfaction. She'd had sex with several people – at least five, he knew for certain – but something in her voice and gaze seemed to imply that sex with *him* had been something of particular note.

'So am I,' he said, then averted his glance. 'Please accept my apologies for…forgetting about you until afterwards.'

'Sherlock, every other bloke I've been with would *forget about me* as soon as he got off and would never even *think* unless I mentioned it.' Setting her tea down on the nightstand, she shuffled up the bed so she was sitting beside him properly and gave him a long, deep kiss. 'That you even *thought* – let alone – well, and especially as you'd never…before…it was *amazing*.'

'Oh. Good.'

They finished the tea in bed together and then she went upstairs to get dressed. Sherlock sorted out his clothes from the night before – Debbie must have retrieved them earlier and folded them over the back of a chair – and then attired himself suitably for the day. He was just making some more tea when she came down, detoured quickly into his bedroom to hang up the dressing gown and then came into the kitchen to put her arms around his waist from behind, laying her cheek onto his back with a happy little sound.

She was noticeably more tactile for the rest of the day – which was fine by him, as it meant plenty of kisses – and kept shooting him furtive little glances when she thought he wouldn't notice. That was mainly confusing, so he timed a look up from his laptop to meet her gaze and raised his eyebrows questioningly. When she dissolved into chuckles that didn't exactly clarify the matter.

'What?'

'Nothing. I just like watching you work.'

'It's only emails. Boring, really, but for lack of any *good* cases…'

'Still. I enjoy watching you *concentrate.*'

That made him frown. What an odd sentiment. Fortunately he was saved from further contemplation of it by a knock. Oh, it was Mycroft. Bugger. Standing to get it before Debbie could, he flung the door wide and glared at the visitor.

'What do you want?'

'I can't simply stop by to see you, brother mine?'

'No. So what do you want?' Sherlock was even less inclined than usual to be tolerable towards Mycroft, given how recently his brother had interfered and caused Debbie unnecessary upset. He really ought to have found a way to mention that to their mother, who would be able to exact far more fitting retribution than Sherlock himself ever could.

'I have information pertaining to the case.' Mycroft held out a folder. 'You do *recall* the case you're supposed to be solving, preferably before anyone else dies?'

Sherlock scowled. Oh, *good,* a legitimate reason to stop by, since his brother didn't trust couriers at all and the general post even less. He snatched the folder and stalked back to the window to open it, dimly aware that Debbie was bustling about in the kitchen as she normally did whenever anyone set foot inside the flat.
Hmm. Explosives materials. Noticeably increased transactions across a variety of suppliers known to operate in Britain, and payments wired from various international accounts. A broad scattershot approach, with high volume.

Someone was trying to take the white noise approach to covering their tracks. Someone rather exceptionally stupid and short sighted, because anyone who had previously dealt with Sherlock would know that his ability to deduce patterns and connections from apparently random data points was second to none.

'Six shipments of identical size and appropriate remote triggering mechanisms have all been sent to London. Distributed around ten – no, eleven – different locations. Fallbacks, or perhaps failsafes in the event of partial discovery.' He glanced back as Debbie came in with a tea tray.

'Obviously,' Mycroft said. 'However all those locations are now empty with no trail to follow, suggesting the explosives have been put… wherever they are going to be put. Thank you,' he added absently when Debbie passed him a cup of tea.

'Six bombs,' Sherlock murmured, frowning. Six people?

*Debbie, John, Mary, Mrs Hudson, Molly, Lestrade.* The thought sent a chill through him. What about Rosie? He was technically her godfather, although he found it hard to form any meaningful opinions about her since she had little in the way of a personality yet.

'Yes, but which six? The last...bomber used random strangers as hostages, so that's hardly anything useful to act on.' Mycroft sighed wearily. 'Get any good texts lately?'

'No.' Sherlock went to add the locations to the collage above the sofa, pinning the relevant papers from the folder next to the map. Still nothing conclusive. Not enough *data.*

He was distracted thoroughly from that consideration when Mycroft took a sip of tea and then emitted a sound halfway between a gag and a squawk, holding the rest of the cup away from himself in disgust.

'Good lord, what in the world-

'Vinegar,' Debbie said blithely. 'That's for interfering with your brother's relationship.'

Then she went upstairs, leaving Sherlock struggling to hold in a grin at Mycroft's thoroughly affronted expression of dismay.

'Well.' Putting the cup and saucer down with exaggerated care, his brother shot him a thin smile of displeasure. 'How charming your new goldfish is. John Watson never poisoned my tea.'

'I'm sure you'll survive,' Sherlock said dryly, rolling his eyes and returning his attention to the various papers and notes. 'There has to be *something*…'

'Do try and focus, brother mine.' Turning, Mycroft made to leave but paused in the doorway. 'And even if you have found a brand new hobby, try not to get your brains completely *shagged out* before you solve this case.'

He was gone before Sherlock could summon something suitably scathing in recrimination, which was even more irritating. Debbie came back down and peeked in, her arms full of odds and ends of lesson planning materials.

'Oh, is he gone?' A wink. 'Maybe to wash his mouth out with soap?'
'That's not all of him that needs washing out,' Sherlock said as she settled back down at the living room table. 'Well done. A blend aromatic enough to mask the scent, and of course only a small amount of vinegar needed to taint the cup.'

'He's going to have to brush his teeth or he'll be tasting it all day. If I'd known he was coming over I'd have baked something horrid into a scone, too.'

That rather vindictive note made him beam at her in absurd pride – his Debbie getting one over on high-and-mighty Mycroft Holmes. Definitely a moment to cherish.

'Don't grin at me just because I ruined your brother's cup of tea,' she said laughingly. 'It sends entirely the wrong sort of message.'

'I enjoy watching him suffer, so feel free to poison him as often as you like.'

'Well, it won't work if I do it all the time, he'll just stop eating or drinking anything I offer him.'

'Hmm. True. Keep it to an occasional indulgence, then.' Now considerably cheered up, the wretched case be damned, Sherlock hunkered down next to her chair. 'Kiss, please.'

Still laughing, she obliged, and they spent the rest of the day in relative peace and quiet despite Mrs Hudson's later brief intrusion with the post. After dinner they sat down on the couch, ostensibly to watch a film, but Sherlock didn't care in the slightest for dragons and other fantasy nonsense when he had the ready option of Debbie's pliable form to hold his interest. She didn't seem to mind that he was entirely ignoring the screen, either, cuddling freely up to his side when he put his arms around her to kiss her neck.

'Sherlock,' she said after a few minutes, clearly struggling to hold in a laugh, 'If you don't want to watch this I can turn it off.'

'It's fine,' he murmured, trailing his nose up behind her ear and then kissing the same spot. The feel and taste of her skin was extremely diverting, and after a bit longer he put one hand on her upper thigh while barely resisting the urge to slide it up to cradle her breast.

'All right, I give up.' Giggling now, she flipped the television off and turned to face him. He broke into a grin, pleased at the change of activity, and pulled her in for a kiss. It was deep and sweet, and turned rapidly into two kisses, then three, then four, and the next thing Sherlock knew he was stretched full-length on top of her on the couch while their lips met over and over.

Oh, he had an erection. Only it wasn't embarrassing, this time. Would Debbie mind having sex again? She'd seemed pleased enough with last night's exertions. Hoping she'd get the idea, he reached up and started to undo her blouse. She was wearing a different bra – not a lacy one – but he didn't care in the least, dropping his mouth to alternate kissing and licking at the swell of her breasts while trying to get one hand under her back to undo the wretched garment.

'Bedroom,' she said suddenly, pushing at his shoulders. He scrambled upright and all but dragged her along with him down the hall, throwing the door shut before pulling her back against him. More kisses – fervent, hungry kisses – followed, with only the briefest of separations between each one to shed clothing. It took only moments this time but somehow seemed longer, and Sherlock sighed in delighted relief when they finally sank down onto the sheets together, bare skin to bare skin.

Now, this time he was going to do this properly. However much his body was demanding that he just give in and rut shamelessly and exclusively for his own satisfaction.
Debbie let out a little surprised squeak when his fingers arrived between her legs, but when he found the right spot she rapidly turned breathless, writhing under his touch so that her breasts shook in the most interesting manner. Enjoying the thought of pleasing her to the point that his own arousal was becoming nearly uncontainable, he moved his hand just enough to guide his erection in – warm, wet, tight, delicious – and then had to pause for a moment because the feeling was just as overwhelming as it had been the first time.

'Sherlock,' Debbie murmured, running her hands through his hair and rapidly kissing his face. 'God, you feel so good.'

That low proclamation almost undid him right then and there, but he dragged his concentration back by sheer force of will and braced himself on his forearms so he could see her face. Now, in theory it was just a case of getting the right angle, and perhaps some additional external stimulus to the right points – ah-ha – her gasp and the sudden arch of her back gave him all the data he needed in that regard. Grinning at the success, he snaked one hand back down between their bodies and timed the motion of his fingers to align with his hips as he drew slowly out and then pressed back in. Oooh, he'd forgotten – how could he have forgotten already? – just how utterly exquisite that tortuous friction was.

When Debbie panted his name and clutched at him like she was drowning, he quickened the pace with his fingers as well as the rest of his body. Their hips met over and over, the soft slap of skin on skin and mutually laboured breathing the only sounds in the room. The fire in Sherlock's veins was threatening to boil over again, that wonderful stirring building up low in his belly, and then Debbie cried out, her muscles clenching – oh, divine pressure! – and he surrendered to the sensation, dropping his head to her shoulder and thrusting in complete abandon until it burst from him, too.

This time they lay entangled together for a little longer before reluctantly parting, and after everything was cleaned up they lay facing each other, exchanging lazy kisses. Finally Debbie rolled over and Sherlock curled up around her back as he had the previous night, planting one last kiss on her neck before burying his nose into her soft hair. His mind was still ticking over quietly, unhurried and blissfully peaceful.

'Sherlock.' Debbie's murmur made him drag himself back into cognisance.

'What is it?'

'Just…so you know. I know you'd want to know…'

'What?' he asked, a little alarmed now, and started to sit up.

'It's nothing bad,' she said. 'I just…god…that was the best sex I've ever had. Ever.'

Delighted pride flooded through him at that pronouncement, but he battled to keep his voice level.

'I see.'

She giggled.

'Don't act all nonchalant, I can just picture the smug grin on your face right now. We both know how competitive you are about…well…everything.'

'At least it wasn't just beginner's luck,' he said dryly, settling back down and unable to help smiling to himself at her churl before she flipped over and nestled into his chest again to go to sleep.
Sunday morning was spent taking a long time to get out of bed and have a breakfast that was more like lunch. Sherlock found it remarkable how fascinated he was with exploring every aspect of Debbie’s body now that he had entirely unrestricted access. It was rather like learning a completely new set of geography, but for some reason her physical form was more intriguing to him even than the whole of London with all its vagaries and eccentricities.

While lying on the couch with her, making an extensive tactile study of her shoulders and upper back, he mentioned the comparison and prompted a laugh.

‘I don’t know about geography. It feels more like…being an instrument. Like being your violin, in your hands being masterfully played.’ Her voice dropped at the last part of the sentence and he broke into a broad grin when she kissed him.

’It occurs to me that John once mentioned how most women are reluctant to share their particular thoughts on…sexual prowess, or indeed emotional engagement…’

’Well, most women haven’t deflowered Sherlock Holmes, have they?’

’Deflowered?’ he echoed in amusement while she laughed. ‘What an absurd expression.’

Their mirth was interrupted by a knock at the door, which then immediately opened – typical – to admit John and Mary, with Rosie in her carrier.

’Oh!’ John took in the scene – Sherlock full length on the couch in his dressing gown, with Debbie sprawled on top of him – and blinked in surprise. ’Did we – uh – interrupt something?’

’No, John, but you might want to consider waiting the next time you knock,’ Sherlock said pointedly, which got a laugh from Mary as Debbie rose, making straight for the kitchen.

’You two seem wide awake,’ she called over the noises of filling the kettle. ’Is she sleeping better?’

’Actually, she is. Finally!’ John plopped Rosie’s carrier into his old chair and tapped her affectionately on the nose with his index finger. ’Straight through until six last night.’

’Thank god,’ Mary said with real feeling, now regarding the latest amendments to the collage.
above the couch with interest. 'Bloody hell. Explosives, Sherlock?'

'Six devices,' he confirmed, getting up to stand alongside her. 'Lots of other transactions from the usual people as well, of course.'

'Hmm. Obfuscation by volume.'

'Naturally.'

'Ooh, are those blueberry muffins?'

'What? Oh.' Sherlock rolled his eyes – Debbie's obsessive compulsion to feed anyone who ventured into the flat for more than thirty seconds was manifesting again – but regarded her with what he couldn't deny was very real affection as she bustled about, cooing over Rosie and chuckling with Mary about something unimportant.

'Bloody hell,' John said in an undertone to him.

'What?'

'You got some, didn't you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I'm your best friend, Sherlock, and I'm a bloke, and you bloody got some last night.' John was grinning broadly now – and somewhat smugly, too. 'Don't try to deny it.'

'I hardly see if it's any cause for denial or any other form of commentary.'

'Aaaand…your face has gone a nice shade of pink.'

'Shit up, John.'

'Plus you've got an enormous hickey on your neck,' Mary added with a wink. 'Although I suppose in fairness you could have got that anywhere.'

'What?' Mortified, Sherlock hurried across to the mirror over the mantel and twisted about. How had he not noticed it? Oh, god, of course Mycroft had noticed it…but when had Debbie…?…I'm not made of glass…the memory surfaced abruptly and he coughed to hide a gulp at the unanticipated spike of arousal that resulted.

'I don't think I've ever seen him blush before,' Mary remarked as Debbie came back in with a tea tray. 'That's a first.'

'I'm not blushing,' Sherlock snapped, although he could feel the colour in his cheeks.

'You're blushing quite spectacularly, Sherlock,' Debbie said to him, flashing a grin and then coming over to kiss the mark she'd left just under his right ear. 'My Sherlock,' she added in a whisper for only him to hear, and somehow the covetous hint to the phrase only made his face redden further as various other sensory memories helpfully began to offer themselves up to his conscious mind.

He had to take a few moments to get his brain's disgorging of information under control before it resulted in engorging problems in other parts of his anatomy, and by the time he deemed himself back under control he realised that Mary was asking Debbie how she was coping. With what? Oh, she meant since the abduction.
'…not turning cartwheels about going out at night, or walking in the dark generally, but I can get to work and back in broad daylight with minimal spooking and sightings of imaginary big men around every corner. I suppose that's a normal stress reaction, or something.

'A post-traumatic stress reaction,' John said, frowning. 'Are you sure you don't want to talk to anyone? The woman I used to use was really—'

'No, thank you.' That came out positively abrupt. 'I'm fine, John. Really. I'm just…I'm not good with the whole talking therapy thing. It just doesn't work for me.'

'Well, how will you know until you try?'

'I have.' Then she stood up and took the teapot into the kitchen to refill it, effectively ending that line of conversation. Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment and summoned the relevant data – yes, Debbie had been in therapy before, briefly, not long after finding out about her infertility and being dumped by that moron Tony Winslow. Her anger – yes, it was anger, though firmly bottled – at John's persistence with that angle was clearly the result of a poor experience with a therapist at that particular time in her life.

He made a mental note to find out more details at the earliest possible opportunity. Something that was a source of distress for Debbie was not something he could afford to be ignorant about.

'Drop it,' Mary said to John in an undertone. He made a face but nodded reluctantly, bouncing Rosie on his knee to stop her from grabbing at the papers on the desk.

Debbie came back in with more tea, looking mildly guilty for what was, by her standards, something of an outburst, so Sherlock moved to stand behind her chair and brought his hand to rest on her shoulder. It was something she often did when he was pensive or irritated, like a gentle reminder that he wasn't alone in the room and that she'd noticed him, and it often made him calmer so he hoped that mirroring the gesture would have a similar effect on her.

When she reached up to cover his hand with one of hers and shot him a warm little smile, he knew he'd done the correct thing and felt rather proud of himself for it.

Mary started talking about the case, deftly ending the awkwardness and engaging them all in fresh conversation the way she'd been doing more or less since the day Sherlock had first met her at the aborted engagement dinner. Unfortunately the completely unhelpful nature of the clues so far – not that they were really useful enough to be called clues – still led to a complete lack of inspiration on the part of the world's only consulting detective. By the time the Watsons left, late in the afternoon, he and John had torn the entire case to pieces and put it back together in at least three completely new ways but to no avail. There just wasn't enough data.

After dinner and the washing up, Debbie went to change into her pyjamas. When she came back down and leaned over the desk to reach for the television remote, Sherlock felt an increasingly familiar stirring low in his stomach as her top rode up to show the bottom of her spine.

He stepped up close behind her to hold her hips, pulling her gently back against his chest and starting to kiss her neck. Her head lolled to one side, giving him easier access, but her sigh held a hint of irritation.

'Sherlock, I have work tomorrow.'

'It's not that late,' he said in between kisses. Why did the soft curves of her feel so good under his hands? Giving into the temptation, he slipped one palm up to her breast and smiled into her hair when the nipple peaked instantly through the thin fabric covering it.
'Sherlock…' the irritation was all but gone now, replaced with a note of entreaty '…please don't take this the wrong way but I'm really not – ooh – really not feeling like-'

'John's perseverance upset you because it brought back thoughts of the abduction and previous unsavoury memories from a therapist that failed to help you in the past. So you're unhappy.' Sherlock nipped at her ear gently. 'I don't want you to be unhappy. I want to make you feel better.'

'Hmm.' A note of dry amusement entered her tone. 'Make me feel better, or-

'Yes.' He suddenly recalled a rather notable segment of his coital research he'd been as-yet unable to utilise. The notion was strangely exciting and his pulse quickened. 'Please.'

She turned, twining her arms around his neck and touching her nose to his with a wry little smile before kissing him lightly.

'I can hardly say no when you ask so nicely, can I?'

'Good.' Without further ado, Sherlock picked her up – ignoring her burst of surprised laughter – and strode down the hall, depositing her on the bed and then whirling to close the curtains. She was still giggling. Presumably something about his haste was amusing.

He shed his dressing gown and unbuttoned his cuffs to roll his sleeves up to his elbows, then got rid of shoes and socks so he could clamber onto the sheets beside her and start peeling her nightclothes off in between kisses. Better to leave the rest of his clothes on for now. The last thing he wanted was for an excess of skin to skin contact to bypass conscious intent and bring that wretched, traitorous hindbrain to the fore.

Batting Debbie's hands away when she reached for his shirt buttons, he dropped his head to kiss down her body. Her giggling faded with gratifying rapidity, replaced just as swiftly with a series of soft little gasps and pleased noises as his mouth moved steadily southwards to her stomach, then her hipbone, then the inside of her right thigh.

'Sherlock!' she exclaimed when he turned his face to nose at the nest of curls between her legs. The alarm in her tone checked him and he levered himself up on his elbows to see her face.

'What's wrong?'

'What are you doing?'

He frowned. Was it not obvious? His research had led him to believe the practice was relatively commonplace…why did she look so aghast?

'I was about to begin administering cunnilingus,' he explained helpfully, 'But if you'd prefer to-

'Oh my god.' She clapped both hands over her face, shaking in silent laughter. 'Sherlock, you really don't have to worry about – um – expanding your repertoire so soo-oooooh!'

The protest was cut off in a loud exclamation when, dismissing her concern as some sort of apprehension on his behalf, which was entirely superfluous, Sherlock rolled his eyes and dropped his head back to what he'd been doing. She tasted odd – salty, musky, like nothing comparable he could identify – but not unpleasant, and after a few moments he had to put a hand on each of her thighs in an effort to stop her wriggling so much. To his lasting surprise, and delight, an act he'd fully expected to be entirely for her benefit was provoking definite signs of pleasure and arousal in his own body as well. A burgeoning erection was tenting his trousers and something about the way she undulated under his lips and tongue surfaced some very evocative sensory memories.
Of course it was hardly a difficult task to get her from merely squirming to openly gasping and arching against his mouth – not with his observational skills – but when he was rewarded with a surge of moisture and a long wail of his name, Sherlock grinned to himself in satisfaction. Another thorough investigation well worth the conclusion.

Hmm. Except now he was distinctly uncomfortable and wanted very much to have sex with her, which seemed somewhat inappropriate given his earlier reassurance that he wanted to make her feel better. Perhaps she wouldn't mind, now she'd had an orgasm? Or maybe he should just nip into the bathroom and-

The thought cut itself off when Debbie hauled him up the bed, flipped him onto his back – with surprising ease, considering their comparative sizes – and started tearing at his shirt buttons. Their hands clashed a few times when he started trying to assist her, but between them he was out of all of his clothes in relatively short order. Then she all but pounced on him, settling a leg either side of his hips and leaning over to kiss him deeply.

Dimly he noted that the lingering taste of her on his lips didn't seem to inhibit the kiss, which was a good thing, but then she had one hand around his erection and oh, she'd guided him into her, and all other considerations fled from his mind. The feel of her sitting astride him was glorious, giving a first class view of her body as she rocked her hips into his and made crackles of lightning shoot along his veins. He settled one hand onto her lower back and reached up to cradle a breast in the other, unable to help a sharp spasm of excitement at the feel of the pebbled nipple under his thumb.

Trying to arch up into her wasn't entirely satisfactory, and Sherlock was torn between wanting to enjoy the sight of her riding him and the urge to reach his own peak. He indulged the former for as long as he could bear it and then gave in, sitting up to manhandle her underneath him before driving back into her with a grunt. With the last dregs of his remaining self-control he took a moment to adjust the angle of his thrusts until she cried out and clutched at him – there we go – and then gave himself utterly over to the sensations coursing mercilessly through his frame.

Moments later Debbie gasped and shuddered, her body clenching tightly around his, and with a moan he barely recognised as his own Sherlock snapped his hips down faster into her, dropping his forehead to her shoulder as the pinnacle finally washed over him. For a few moments there was nothing but the sound of mutually laboured breathing, then he remembered to roll off her.

Cleaning up this time was a stumbling, drowsy sort of affair that ended with them both collapsing back into the bed and exchanging only a single lethargic kiss before Sherlock groped for the light switch. Darkness enveloped the room and he sank down into it gratefully, feeling Debbie cuddling up against his back before welcome sleep claimed them both.
Sherlock's near-infallible internal chronometer woke him at the usual time for a Monday morning, which was about ten minutes before Debbie's alarm normally went off. Feeling himself smile broadly at the feel of her next to him, he slipped his arms around her waist and began kissing her neck. In less than ten seconds she stretched with a little grumbling noise and rolled over, tucking her head under his chin with a sigh.

He held her like that for a moment and gave serious consideration to going back to sleep…but no, she'd be angry if she was late for work. After enjoying the softness of her against him for a little longer he began kissing her again, shifting down until he could capture her lips in what turned out to be a rather prolonged contact as their tongues met and glided against one another. Ah, she was already awake, then.

'Hmm. That's a much nicer way to wake up than a blaring alarm,' Debbie said softly when they finally parted. 'Thank you.'

Sherlock wanted to touch her some more but restrained himself to admiring the silhouette of her body as she got up and put her nightclothes back on to go upstairs. From then on – aside from occasional lingering kisses – it was a normal sort of Monday morning, but when he put his coat and scarf on to wait by the door for her Debbie gave him a quizzical look.

'You're going out?'

'I'm going to walk you to work.'

His heart soared at the affection in her smile.

'You don't need to do that.'

'I know. I'd...like to.'

After a few moments outside she took his hand. It occurred to him that the old Sherlock Holmes – the pre-Debbie Sherlock Holmes – would have rolled his eyes and pulled away, indeed would not be anywhere even close to this position in the first place. But now he was walking down the street hand in hand with-
-and he saw no point at all in denying that he liked it. He liked it immensely.

The nursery steps were still empty so Sherlock took the opportunity to pull Debbie into his arms and kiss her for a bit until she batted at him laughingly.

'I really should get in, you know.'

'There aren't any children here,' he pointed out.

'I need to sort my room out before the horde descends! I'll see you later, Sherlock.'

Of course he returned promptly a little after half past five, navigating his way deftly through the throngs of parents and small children on the steps and ducking past the receptionists – who were as usual more interested in gossiping with each other than actually paying attention to the comings and goings on the door – to find Debbie.

She was in her room but not tidying or bustling about as he normally saw her there; instead she was picking out a tune on the piano in the corner. Perhaps something with her class? No, he recognised it - Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, The Flight Of The Bumblebee. Oh, she was rather good. He'd never actually seen – or heard – her play before.

After a few minutes she seemed to register that she wasn't alone and paused, glancing back and then breaking into a smile at the sight of him.

'What are you doing here, Sherlock?'

'I've come to walk you home,' he said, striding across and idly running his fingers over a few keys to pick out a chord. 'You told Mary and John you were still experiencing some concern over being out by yourself. It seemed an easy problem to remedy, so here I am.'

'Oh, Sherlock.' Debbie turned her head to kiss him firmly. 'You didn't need to…I mean…that's so sweet.' Leaning against him lightly, she gave a little sigh. 'Whatever did I do to deserve you?'

'Deserve?' he echoed, confused. She was implying he was some sort of reward for something she'd done, or perhaps not done? What an odd notion. 'You didn't do anything. I'm just…here.'

That got a giggle and then she stood up, reaching for her bag and coat.

'Well then, let's go home, shall we?'

Unfortunately when they got back to Baker Street it turned out Lestrade had been waiting for Sherlock for at least ten minutes with regards to an unusual hanging in Mayfair, but nonetheless escorting Debbie to and from work rapidly became a normal routine, at least when there weren't any cases to be concerned with. She also took to sleeping in his bedroom – even when they didn't have sex – and only nipping upstairs to her own when she needed to change clothes or fetch something. This was fine by Sherlock, because waking up to her cuddled up to him or, when work kept him out late, climbing into an already-warmed bed to cuddle up to her, turned out to be a far more pleasant experience than just collapsing into the sheets as he usually did.

'Non single life treating you well, then?' John said dryly one day as they left Scotland Yard. 'You've got that idiot half grin on your face again which means Debbie just texted you.'

'I don't know what you mean.'
'God, you're an ass. Just admit it!'

'Admit what?'

'You like having a girlfriend.'

'That infantile term has nothing to do with it, John,' Sherlock said primly. 'Although I'm not going to deny that being in a relationship with-

-the woman I love-

'-with Debbie is unaccountably satisfying, yes.' Damn, why did that keep tripping him up?

'Unaccountably satisfying,' John repeated, openly sardonic now. 'And they say romance is dead.'

Sherlock declined to dignify that with a response, but a few minutes into the cab ride back to Baker Street his friend shifted slightly and, with a dreadfully unconvincing air of affected innocence, said

'So, you planning anything for her birthday? It is in two weeks, you know.'

'I'm fully aware of that, John.' As if his Debbie-laden mind palace somehow didn't have the date permanently etched onto the walls! 'Besides, she has already assured me that she isn't in the habit of celebrating or even noting her birthdays.'

'Oh, all women say that but god help you if you take it at face value.'

Debbie found this conclusion highly amusing when he related it to her later.

'Typical John, painting every female with one brush. Don't make that face, you know he does. As a matter of fact I was going to ask if you'd mind if some of the girls from work came over that Friday for a bit. I've never really lived anywhere with the space for…well, visitors, or parties and things, but I'm technically about five years in debt for cheese and wine night at this point.'

The look of unmitigated horror on his face at the idea of being subjected to such a gathering must have been obvious, because she burst out laughing.

'You don't have to join in, Sherlock. Good lord, I'd never try and subject you to an evening with the girls. Besides-' dropping her voice and coming over to the table to run her hands through his hair '-I am planning to have you to myself once they're gone so I can't afford to wear you out…'

Dinner ended up being rather late that night but he didn't really mind. She was particularly tactile when he escorted her to the nursery the following day, looping her arm through his and walking very close to his side. The closeness of her filled his head with extremely distracting thoughts, and the goodbye kiss in her classroom – he'd taken to going inside with her after an early arrival of a trio of mothers and children had provoked some unnecessary excitement at the sight of Miss Connors in flagrante with her beau on the steps, which took him half an hour to escape – ended up a good deal more involved than was perhaps prudent in a semi-public space.

'Sherlock, even for you I'm not going to defile a stationery cupboard,' she said to him. He grinned back at her shamelessly – even the dimming memory of his previous inhibitions with regards to physical demonstrativeness seemed ridiculous with hindsight – and was about to embrace her again when his phone beeped loudly.

'There. You'd better deal with that.' Debbie gave him a last peck on the cheek. 'I'll see you later.'
Reluctantly he departed, reaching for his phone, but hadn't taken more than three steps down the corridor before he stopped short in alarm.

The alert was one he'd set up for the comment thread on John's blog from Rev2213 – a new reply had just been posted.

Tick tock.

Oh. *Bombs.* Wherever they were planted…whoever they were targeting…now they were definitely there, and armed. How long? Twelve hours? The first of Moriarty's *games* had given him that long to solve the Carl Powers case. Twelve hours to find six bombs. He felt his adrenalin spike even as his blood ran cold and one overpoweringly imperative priority made itself known.

*Debbie.*
Whirling, Sherlock hastened back to the classroom where Debbie was laying out papers on the miniature desks. She straightened and turned, but her smile died the moment she saw his face.

'What's wrong?'

'Have there been any workmen in here recently? Anywhere in the building?'

'Um. No. Not since the chap who came to check the boiler, but that was ages ago-'

'Show me.'

'The boiler room?'

'Quickly!'

The cramped basement closet seemed fine at first glance, but once Sherlock got out his tool kit and carefully pried off some panels he found himself eye to eye with a rather neatly rigged set of explosives and an electronic timer which had only fifty-four minutes on it.

'Oh my god.' Debbie gasped, eyes going wide with horror. 'Is that – is that a bomb?'

'Yes.' Pulling out his torch, Sherlock began investigating the wiring. 'Probably been here for weeks waiting on the remote trigger to start the countdown.'

'Oh god. I need to tell Sarah so we can-'

'No!' His voice checked her sharply as she began to turn. 'No, when Moriarty rigged explosives to people if they said or did anything to give away their location he killed them.' Mind racing, he thought for a moment. 'Don't tell anyone else. The fewer people who know, the fewer people can panic and do something to give it away…it'll detonate before the time's up if the bomber suspects that anyone is onto it.'

Debbie put a hand to her mouth, trembling.

'But what do we do? Can…can you defuse it?'
'No.' Sherlock frowned. This was a custom made setup. No simple off switch, no John Watson to prank with supposed-defeat...oh god, there were five more bombs and John was almost certainly in proximity to one of them. 'We need a bomb squad.'

'But surely if the bomber sees them coming into the building it'll be pretty obvious that-'

'I know,' he snapped, and she fell silent. 'Visitors. Parents- a glance at his watch '-the earliest will be arriving in fifteen minutes.'

'That's not nearly enough time to ring round and tell them not to-'

'No, not what I meant.' He reached for his phone. Relying on Mycroft's resources – and people – was hardly a personal preference, but it was also the most logical port of call in this particular storm.

'Wait, Sherlock-' Debbie actually laid a hand on his arm '-if the bomber is monitoring to check things are...you know, as normal...he'll be watching for you leaving the building. You're never here more than ten minutes once you drop me off…'

'Yes.' A horrible sense of dread flooded Sherlock at the thought of leaving her. But if he remained he'd only endanger her further. It was the only rational thing to do. So why was he so stupidly reluctant to do it?

'You should go. Go.' She kissed him – deeply, almost frantically – and actually pushed him towards the stairs out of the basement. 'I won't tell anyone else. Just – just find a way to fix it, all right?'

Half in a daze, mostly on autopilot, Sherlock left the nursery – barely stifling the urge to glance back anxiously, as though it might explode behind him right then and there – and reached for his phone, summoning every one of his deceptive faculties to mask panic as he composed a text to Mycroft in his pocket.

It buzzed a response a little over four minutes later. *Getting slow, Mycroft.* He forced himself not to check it until he was back in Baker Street.

**Twelve minutes. – MH**

Twelve minutes at least gave a decent margin to get the disguised agents into the building. That just left the matter of the other five bombs. Were they on the same timer?

Damn.

He called Mycroft.

*I already have personnel en route to Bart's, Finchley Surgery, Scotland Yard and- a barely-detectable pause '-Billi Currie Salon on Chiltern Street. Any additional suggestions?*

Taking a brief and rare moment to appreciate the ways in which his brother's genius equalled his own, Sherlock furrowed his brow. That still left one set of explosives unaccounted for. John and Mary's flat, perhaps? No, Mary wouldn't permit anyone to rummage around any part of her home unsupervised. Mrs Hudson was currently having her hair done but within half an hour would be heading to Waitrose and then back to Baker Street via the dry cleaners on the corner of Kenrick Place…

He gave Mycroft those locations as well and then paced restlessly. Some of the children would be in the classroom by now, innocently bouncing about and asking the usual pointless and
exasperating questions they usually beleaguered Debbie with the moment one of them laid eyes on her. Would she betray her anxiety to any of them? He'd learned the hard way that young children could be surprisingly perceptive.

Scrubbing his hands through his hair, Sherlock went to make some tea more for something to do than because he wanted a cup. A completely irrational and pointless impulse was screaming at him to go back to Debbie and be at her side, holding her, comforting her somehow…god, it had been nearly half an hour already. Less than that left on the bomb countdown now. His eye fell on one of her cardigans, slung across the back of her chair by the fireplace, and before conscious thought registered he was running his hands over it. Soft, fine, merino wool. The result of a post-baby shopping trip with Mary, a spur of the moment indulgence encouraged by the other woman.

Debbie ought to have lots of nice things, he thought dimly. The wool wasn't as soft as her hair. Would anything be? Cashmere, perhaps? Her birthday was coming up. He'd never bought a gift for anyone in his life, but despite her assurances to the contrary he felt like he ought to get her something. No, not ought to…he wanted to…what an odd concept, the notion of desiring to give a material item in the hope of eliciting pleasure in another person.

When his phone rang he nearly jumped out of his skin. It was Mycroft.

'What?'

'It's done. Devices found and disarmed at the nursery, surgery, hospital, Scotland Yard car park and the dry cleaner's. Nobody the wiser, or so I'd assume since nothing has exploded. However I can't help noticing we're still missing a package.'

'I don't suppose you've bothered to check your offices?' Sherlock said, sardonic on autopilot when all he wanted to do was run back to the nursery and find Debbie.

'What a swell of familial affection, brother mine,' Mycroft replied in a similar vein. 'But I'm afraid the relevant sweeps of my own regular haunts have come up clear. Baker Street?'

'Unlikely.' Sherlock checked his watch. 'They were all on the same timer so it would have detonated by now. Besides, I doubt this fan of Moriarty's would want to blow me up before he – or she – has had ample chance to gloat in the game.'

'Marvellous. So that still leaves one rather significant bomb at large in the city.'

'I'll figure it out.'

'Please do.'

Deeming further conversation with his irksome brother to be rather superfluous, Sherlock hung up and then found a map in the hope that something would spark inspiration. He was so intent on it that he barely noticed when Mrs Hudson brought him a cup of tea, or put a sandwich beside him which he didn't eat, or turned on the lights as afternoon wore into evening.

'Sherlock?'

He started and glanced around, then felt euphoria swell his chest at the sight of Debbie standing in the doorway, just taking off her coat. In two quick movements he was up from the table and across the room, wrapping his arms around her and inhaling deeply, breathing her in.

Guilt abruptly manifested. Oh! He'd been so involved in trying to work out the location of the final bomb that he'd lost track of time and not gone to the nursery to escort her back to Baker Street at the end of her working day. That seemed particularly remiss of him under the
circumstances.

'I'm sorry,' he blurted, pressing a kiss to her hair. 'I should have come back so I could walk you home.'

'It's all right.' She was squeezing him right back, her head tucked under his chin. 'One of the chaps popped his head into my room on the way out and said it was "fixed" so…well, I had to sit down, right in the middle of Circle Time…'

For some reason that made him chuckle, an utterly irrational sense of relief and mirth at having her safe bubbling up from somewhere he couldn't quite define. Holding her close, he nosed at her neck and began kissing her, amusement somehow transmogrifying into a now-familiar hunger.

The sound of people at the door downstairs, and someone – John – shouting Sherlock's name fortunately broke the spell before his bodily desires took over his higher functions. Mary was just behind, looking only marginally less annoyed.
'A bomb!' John shouted at Sherlock without preamble. 'A bomb in the bloody surgery and you didn't so much as text?'

'Mycroft's people let me know on the way out,' Mary supplied when Sherlock glanced at her.

'Remind me again why you waited until the end of the bloody day to tell me?' John yelled.

'So you didn't do this when there were patients around, John.'

'Right.' That seemed to distract him for a moment but he soon rallied and pointed an accusing finger at Sherlock's nose. 'But that doesn't explain why you—'

By the time John had calmed down enough to understand, if not appreciate, his friend's explanation of why it was safest for everyone involved to not be aware of the explosive in case someone accidentally did something to alert the bomber and cause a pre-emptive detonation, the four of them had gone through two cups of tea each and it was getting dark outside.

'But we're missing a bomb,' Mary said at length, after perusing the map on the wall for a little. 'There's nothing on the news about anything exploding, so it can't have—'

She was cut off by the alert on Sherlock's phone.

'Another blog comment from the bomber?' John rose and came to his side to peer at the screen.

'No more excitement. Just me and Mr Eliot,' Sherlock read aloud.

'What does that mean?' Debbie asked.

'I have no idea.' He frowned. He hated not having any ideas.

'What was his screen name, again?' Mary had her phone out too, and was fiddling with it.

'Rev2213,' John supplied. 'Weird. A vicar?'

'Could be someone with biblical inclinations, certainly. Revelations, chapter and verse? You got a bible—' she stopped, seeing Sherlock's expression '-right, you know what, I'll Google it…'
'Bible verses? That's a bit…dramatic, isn't it?' Debbie exclaimed.

'Says the woman who lives with Sherlock Holmes,' John said dryly.

'Don't be mean, John,' she shot back with a small grin, going into the kitchen to make another pot of tea.

'Got it.' Mary held up her screen. 'Revelations…*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*'

'Pretentious little prick,' John muttered. 'Who has something like that as a screen name? Talk about a god complex.'

'That doesn't explain who the hell Mr Eliot is though.'

'That spelling of the name…' Sherlock closed his eyes, retreating into his mind palace '…I've seen it before, somewhere…'

He heard Debbie set the tray down and then she gently took his phone out of his hand.

'Eliot, like TS Eliot? The poet?'

'A bible verse and a poetry reference?' John said doubtfully.

'Well, if we're going with – um – dramatic,' Debbie went on, 'Revelations, and the end of the world, and all that sort of thing. *This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.* Lots of people quote that one. It's the only line most people know.'

Sherlock's eyes flew open. *So close…*

'Say that again?'

'What?'

'The line, the line from the poem!'

'Um…*this is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.*'

'Not with a bang,' he echoed in a murmur, mostly to himself, 'But a whimper…'

Suddenly it clicked. *Oh, god.*

'Mary, where did you say Rosie was?'

'I didn't. She's at home with a sitter.' Mary's eyes narrowed. 'Why-

'No she isn't. But I think I know where she is.' He slung on his coat. 'John, do you have your gun?'

'Sherlock, what the hell?'

He whirled at the door. How could none of them see it?

'The bomber has Rosie. That's where the final set of explosives is. Attached to her. The place…is where the world ends. Where *Moriarty* ended. Or…where his end began.'

'The roof of Bart's,' Mary said flatly.
'If someone was on the roof of Bart's with a baby and—' John swallowed hard, barely getting through the sentence ‘—and a bomb, someone would surely have noticed by now.'

'He isn't on the roof of Bart's,' Sherlock said. 'He's in the swimming pool where Carl Powers died, where we first met Moriarty, where…where it all began. And where it'll all end.'

'Car's downstairs.' Mary went out without further comment, her face utterly expressionless. John's, by comparison, seemed torn between rage and terror, both clearly threatening to consume him.

Sherlock went to the locked drawer and put his gun into his pocket. Sentiment. Only this time it was John Watson's world that was about to come tumbling down, unless Sherlock himself could somehow find a way to stop it.

He did not expect Debbie to get into the back seat of the car beside him.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm coming with you.'

Mary started the engine and drove off down Baker Street before Sherlock could even formulate a coherent protest.

'Why?' he managed after a moment.

'Because I care about Rosie too and this person tried to blow up my nursery and I want to help even if I'm not sure how.' She shot him a glance that was heavily loaded with fear and yet still inexplicably fierce. It reminded him of the way she'd looked the first time she'd felt his scars…that same bizarre combination of intensity and tenderness that made him want to embrace her and never let go. He settled for holding her hand tightly, lacing his fingers through hers. She squeezed back.

In the early evening traffic it took twenty agonising minutes to get to the swimming pool, but finally the car came to a halt outside the building.

'Mary, you wait here,' John said tightly, getting out.

'In your bloody dreams,' she snapped.

'Mary—' he actually stepped around the hood and held her by the shoulders ‘—if something—' a hard swallow ‘—if something goes wrong, she's going to need one of us to be okay.'

Sherlock paused, not wanting to wait to go inside but reasonably sure that pressing the matter between the pair would only cause further delay. He glanced at Debbie as she emerged from the car and slowly closed the door behind herself.

'You should stay here.' Then, when whatever odd silent argument the Watsons had been having ended with John marching firmly to his side, he added, 'With Mary.' Catching the other woman's eye, he set his jaw and willed her to understand. I'll look after John. You look after Debbie.

A barely perceptible nod confirmed that the message had been understood, so without further comment he spun and headed for the door with John hot on his heels.
Sherlock had to admit being rather surprised at what greeted them at the poolside. A slender, athleticism-built man in his early thirties with narrow features and lightly curled auburn hair was sitting on the ladder that led down into the deep end of the pool. His feet were bare and expensive suit trousers rolled up above his ankles. In his arms was Rosie Watson, to all appearances entirely unhurt, and currently engaged in animatedly splashing about, turning wet droplets into transparent spots on his white shirt. He glanced up, entirely unalarmed, as John and Sherlock entered.

*Above average intelligence, bilingual, regular international traveller, affluent now but from a modest background, mathematically talented, devoted lover – all the observations piled up effortlessly but none of them really explained who the man was.*

'Get your bloody hands off my daughter,' John said in a low tone, both fists clenched.

'Gladly. If you'd like her to sink.' The man's voice was clipped, classic English, light and melodic but not without an edge of seriousness. 'You see, she doesn't much mind the weights tied to her feet but I assure you she will drop like a stone if I let go of her.' A sunny smile of very white, even teeth, and the man briefly lifted Rosie up to reveal two heavy blocks of explosives and wiring fastened to each of the little girl's legs with zip ties.

'Oh my god.' John went white and actually took a step back in raw horror.

'Don't get me wrong,' the man went on amiably, lowering Rosie so her bottom half was immersed again, 'She is going to die. It's just a matter of how. Of course, that's for your associate to choose.'

'What?'

'What do you want?' Sherlock asked levelly, keeping his gaze fixed on the man. 'Who are you?'

'The invisible man.' A giggle, unsettlingly high-pitched and reminiscent of Moriarty himself. 'Always there but never seen. Behind the scenes. A shadow.'

'You're part of Moriarty's network.'

'Not officially. Not...detectably.' Another disarming grin. 'Benjamin Garvey. Delighted to finally meet you in person, Mr Holmes.'
'Sherlock-' John began in a low, desperate tone.

'Remarkable level of... undetectability to have eluded my efforts,' Sherlock said, cutting him off with a slight frown. How?

'Oh, it was all set up,' Garvey said nonchalantly. 'All arranged. James did it, of course. Always had a fallback plan for me. To ensure I'd disappear. That I'd be safe. He was- a pause, and a slight catch in the throat -'he was so considerate, that way. Thought of everything. Not that it was enough in the end, of course. Thanks to you.' That last was delivered with such pure, unmitigated hatred that Sherlock blinked in shock.

*Bitterness is a paralytic,* his own words floated back to him. *Love is a much more vicious motivator.*

'You were his lover,' he said.

'I was his love,' Garvey snarled, his entire face distorting with abhorrence. *Was. Until you came along with your stupid police cases and your big, dark coat and your science of deduction and stole him from me.*

'Oh, dear god,' John muttered.

'He was obsessed with you,' Garvey went on, still intent on Sherlock. 'He adored you, and he loathed you. You were everything he wanted to have, to be, to own, the only one he thought of as his equal, and you destroyed him!'

'Moriarty killed himself on the rooftop of Bart's hospital,' Sherlock said, battling to keep his voice even and not wanting to risk going for his gun just yet. 'He shot himself. I didn't-'

'But you did. You existed, god damn you, and he knew he'd never have you because you were on the side of the angels. You broke him, ruined him. Ruined us!' Tears were actually streaking Garvey's cheeks now. 'He was everything to me and you took him away!'

'What does this have to do with my bloody daughter?' John shouted.

'Oh, everything, Doctor Watson.' Garvey looked down at Rosie and absently petted her hair. 'I couldn't just kill Sherlock Holmes. Then he'd be with James and I'd still be stuck here, alone. So I'm going to do something much better.' He looked up, eyes still damp but now alight with vicious pleasure as they settled on Sherlock. 'I'm going to burn you, Mr Holmes. Rosie Watson is going to die, and you are going to be responsible. The blood of her tiny, innocent life will be on your hands and none of them- a brief, wild cackle of laughter -none of them will ever forgive you. Not John, not Mary, not Lestrade or Molly, not even your pretty little companion.' He rose, hefting the baby into his arms, to stand on the edge of the pool. 'And don't bother pointing out the high likelihood of my own demise. I've been dead for years, ever since my poor James ate that bullet on the rooftop…'

'You're insane,' John muttered. 'You're – you're bloody insane!'

'Probably,' Garvey agreed with surprising equanimity. 'Losing the love of one's life has that sort of effect, I'm told. Oh and don't,' he added when Sherlock's hand moved a fraction towards his coat pocket, 'Please, please don't do anything silly like trying to shoot me. You see I may not have James's remarkable flair or imagination but I do know his methods, and the snipers up on the balcony will kill both of you, my other employees will shoot your lady friends outside and I'll still detonate little Miss Watson here if you try anything naughty.'
Sherlock froze.

The woman I love.

Suddenly he found himself flooded with a completely unexpected wave of understanding – though not sympathy, as such – for Benjamin Garvey. Everything of the man screamed the kind of grief that ate through all reason, sense and self-preservation.

If Debbie had died in that derelict house would I be like this?

Disturbingly, it wasn't that hard to imagine.

'It's really a simple, logistical choice, Mr Holmes,’ Garvey said. 'Five lives, including your own and your beloved little schoolteacher's, or one. I mean, she's barely six months old. Surely not long enough to have got so attached to this…being alive thing. So choose.' He reached into a back pocket of his trousers and pulled out a trigger mechanism which was obviously armed, settling his thumb comfortably onto the switch. 'A bang? Or-' holding Rosie away from himself on his other arm with the clear intimation of dropping her into the pool ‘-or a whimper?’

'Oh god,' John whispered, hands clenching and unclenching, clearly itching to just charge headlong at Garvey and wrestle his daughter away from the man but paralysed by fear and indecision at the dual threats. Sherlock flicked his gaze sideways and effortlessly spotted the trio of red laser sights on the back of his friend's head – the promised snipers.

Then one of them vanished.

It took every ounce of his self-control not to glance back at the balcony.

A second dot vanished. Sherlock battled desperately not to grin, but the soft sploosh of a bundle of training floats landing in the pool from the far side drew his attention.

'What?' With surprisingly agility Garvey shifted the trigger to his other hand while keeping Rosie on his hip, and pulled a gun from the back of his trousers. 'Who-' He was cut off by the sharp retort of a gunshot. It was perfectly, surgically precise, straight into the hand that held the detonator. Blood spurted, the device fell – and so did Rosie Watson, landing with a loud shriek in the middle of the floats.

Sherlock dove an instant before John did, and with his longer strokes reached Rosie first, clasping her tightly and whirling on reflex so his back was between her and Garvey. Another shot rang out, much louder and closer, and then a second one from the balcony.

Rosie screamed and burst into tears – not unreasonably under the circumstances, he couldn't help thinking – which was when the sharp pain in the back of his left shoulderblade registered. Ah. Garvey had got a shot off then, probably hoping to hit Rosie. A good thing Sherlock Holmes had been in the way.

Ow. He'd been shot before, of course, in fact by the mother of the child he was now protecting, but while that one had been considerably more life threatening it felt, bizarrely, like this less fatal one was more painful. Of course, the chlorinated water probably wasn't helping matters.

'Sherlock!'

That was Debbie's voice. Alarmed, he tried to look for her but John was dragging him out of the pool and it was cold and he was wet which made it look like there was twice as much blood as
there ought to be. He dimly registered multiple pairs of running feet. Another gunshot, and a howl of mingled rage and pain that clearly originated from Garvey.

'You so much as look at my daughter again,' Mary snarled. 'And I'll show you all the other non-fatal places I can put bullets, since we're out of kneecaps.'

'Give her here.' That was Debbie again, carefully extracting a still-screaming Rosie from the death grip Sherlock had on her.

'I've got her-' John began.

'John, I can hold a baby but I can't cover a man with a rifle or tend a gunshot wound, will you please check him?'

Sherlock half closed his eyes, suddenly feeling very tired. His shoulder was alternating between a throbbing ache and a fiery, lancing pain which abruptly intensified when pressure was put on it, making him grit his teeth against crying out.

'God, this thing's bloody sodden.' John again, peeling the drenched coat off. 'Hang on, Sherlock, I'm just going to turn you over.'

'I've got two arms, and this bugger isn't going anywhere. Here, let me take her.' Mary, in the background, and Rosie's screaming altered pitch slightly as she was passed from one woman to the other. Sherlock winced as John lifted and rolled him to get a look at the entry wound on the back of his left shoulder.

'Sherlock?' Debbie was kneeling beside him now, brushing his hair back from his forehead and cradling his face in her hands. 'Sherlock…oh god, please be okay.'

'It's only…the shoulder,' he ground out. 'Had…much worse. Just…another scar.'

'Oh, Sherlock.'

'He'll be all right,' John said gruffly. 'It's the blood loss worries me…the bullet's still inside but I'm sure as heck not getting it out here.'

'Ambulance is on the way,' Mary said. 'I called Mycroft before we came in.'

'Before you came in?' John glanced back at her with what was could only be described as incredulous fury. 'You took on a bunch of snipers equipped with a nursery teacher!'  

'And if I hadn't?'

'That's not the bloody point!'  

'Mary's…very…broadly skilled,' Sherlock managed, locking his gaze with Debbie's. She looked worried. About him. He was more concerned about the danger she'd been in, scuttling around the swimming pool after Mary and throwing floats at a murderous lunatic.

'Sherlock, I may not be the world's only consulting detective but I'm not a moron and it's pretty obvious to me that Mary hasn't always been a nurse.' Debbie gave him a small, anxious smile.

'I love you,' he said. Oh, bugger. Not the time. How did that slip out?

'What?' she exclaimed.

'I love you. You are-' for some reason his pain-addled mind seemed to think that conveying this
information was desperately important 'you are the woman I love.'

'Sherlock!' Dropping down so she was almost laying on the water and blood soaked tiles, she hugged him to her tightly. Funny, his head was swimming although the rest of him no longer was.

'Don't you dare pass out.' John's firm voice dragged Sherlock back to something resembling consciousness. 'Anyway, they're here.'

'Who?'

'The ambulance, you cock, and your bloody brother.'

'Bloody would seem to be the word.'

Oh, that was Mycroft. Sherlock braced himself on his uninjured side and tried to sit up. No way in hell was he going to pass out in front of Mycroft. He'd never hear the end of it. No, he'd just get up and walk to the ambulance and then – and then maybe sit down again.

'Oh for god's sake. Mycroft, take his other side.'

'I've got him, John.' Debbie, tucked under his right arm. 'It's okay, I'm stronger than I look.'

'Right, let's get him outside.'

At least walking didn't make his shoulder hurt any more, Sherlock reflected. The localised injury definitely had advantages over the shot to the centre of his chest. He very much wanted to lie down, nonetheless.

'Excuse me, miss, you might want to-

'Do whatever you need to do and I'll stay out of the way but I'm not leaving him.' The fierceness in Debbie's snap back at the paramedic made Sherlock smile dimly, and he squeezed back as tightly as he could when she took his hand.

From the low-voiced comments and mutters he was able to establish that John, Mary and Rosie were in the ambulance as well, although Garvey had presumably been taken elsewhere. The paramedics gave him some blood and some morphine – oh, blessed morphine – and he was being jabbed with things and having a mask put on and he could vaguely hear John shouting at someone about when was the last time you took a bloody bullet out. Then Debbie kissed him on the forehead, her lips warm and soft, whispering I'll be here when you wake up. With a sigh of something like relief, he let blessed quiet envelop him.
Sherlock woke to the surprisingly welcome sound of Rosie giggling, and groggily opened his eyes. It was bright, midmorning at least, and directly in line of sight at the end of the hospital bed were John and Mary. Rosie was on John's lap, gurgling in delight as he made faces at her.

With what felt like a herculean effort, he turned his head and saw Debbie curled up in another chair, evidently asleep in sheer exhaustion. What looked suspiciously like his coat – now dry and clean – was tucked around her.

'She hasn’t moved from the moment you came out of surgery,' Mary said quietly. 'Mycroft brought that back earlier this morning.'

'He's going soft in his old age,' Sherlock shot back. 'How's Rosie?'

'Swallowed a bit of water, but she's fine,' John supplied, then cleared his throat and glanced about the room a trifle awkwardly before his gaze met Sherlock's again. 'That was a – a very – um – godfatherly thing you did, Sherlock. Diving in like that and – and shielding her. I mean you – you took a bullet for my daughter. That's – that's just-

'What he's trying to say-' Mary stepped up to the other side of the bed and stooped to kiss Sherlock on the cheek '–is thank you.' Then she glanced up as the coat-wrapped bundle on the other chair stirred. 'He's awake.'

'What?' Debbie unfolded herself and then seemed to register what was going on. 'Sherlock!' She immediately scrambled to her feet and came to him. He got a brief glimpse of the relieved, adoring smile on her face before she leaned in to give him a long, sweet kiss.

'Hello,' he murmured when they broke for air.

'You must be starving, Deb,' John said suddenly. 'Why don't we nip out and get you something from the canteen?'

'Thank you, John…'

'And a cup of tea,' Mary added, hefting Rosie and following her husband.
'They got the bullet out,' Debbie said needlessly, stroking Sherlock's cheek. 'Said you'll be fine in a few weeks.'

'In time for your birthday,' he pointed out.

'You'd better be fine by then,' she shot back, and kissed him again. 'God, Sherlock. I love you. I can't believe I've never said it before. But I do, you know. I love you.'

He felt an enormous, beaming smile surface on his face without conscious decision. A buoyant feeling of delightful warmth surged in his chest. How strange. He'd deduced that she reciprocated his sentiments some time ago but hearing it confirmed, unequivocally verified, filled him with the most wonderful sensation…it actually took him a moment to properly identify it.

Happiness.

'I love you too,' he said, lifting his good arm so he could stroke her cheek. 'I'm sorry I chose such an…inopportune moment to say so.'

'You're forgiven.' Pulling the chair across so she could sit close to him, she plopped back down into it and covered his hand in hers. 'My brave Sherlock.'

That made him smile again.

'Do you want anything?' she added.

'I could murder a cup of tea.'

'…I'll text John.'

'So,' he said as she tapped at her phone. 'Swimming floats. Your idea, of course.'

'Most people naturally grab out when falling. Babies especially, and they can be surprisingly water-savvy. I mean, if she'd actually gone under she'd probably have known to hold her breath. It's only when people get older they lose that natural aquatic instinct.'

'Hmm.'

Pocketing her phone again, she leaned over onto the side of the bed and started to idly stroke one hand through his hair. After a few moments he let his eyes slide closed, luxuriating in the caress and the silence in the room. Somehow even his mind was calm and quiet.

'I wonder what will happen to Garvey,' she said softly.

'A long and unpleasant interrogation, I suspect,' he said without opening his eyes, 'Followed by an indefinite detainment at Her Majesty's pleasure. At least that's how Mycroft would put it.'

'I suppose so.' Debbie sighed. 'Poor man.'

Sherlock blinked and looked at her.

'He wasn't…right in the head,' she said with a small shrug. 'Grief, or loss, or…I don't know…something just wasn't right. I'm not saying he doesn't need to be locked up, I'm just-'

'Empathising with the psychotic mind,' Sherlock finished for her. 'I wouldn't mention that around John or Mary. They'll think I'm rubbing off on you.'

'There's a frightening thought.' She grinned and resumed stroking his hair. 'Although while we're
on the subject…what led the great and stoic Sherlock Holmes to declare his love while bleeding on the side of a swimming pool? Don't tell me I'm rubbing off on you as well.'

'I didn't mean to,' he said. 'It just…sort of happened.'

That provoked a small giggle.

'It was an unexpected deduction,' he went on, feeling that more explanation was called for. 'I just…didn't vocalise it until then.'

'Really.' Her eyes danced. 'And how long have you been not vocalising it for?'

'Since-' then he stopped as gurgling noises and general commotion heralded the return of the Watsons. He didn't really want to get into the details with John in the room, let alone Mary and Rosie, but Debbie's smile told him it was all right, and they could talk about it later when they were alone.

What with the terse, if informative, visit from Mycroft and the various medical personnel bustling about, the conversation rather slipped from Sherlock's mind. Debbie remained almost constantly at his side until he cajoled John into taking her home, and then she just began bringing him food every day as she had after he'd been shot in pursuit of Magnussen. This time, though, she also kissed him and cuddled him – well, as much as it was possible to cuddle with one party in a hospital bed, which wasn't much – and, to his lasting relief, fielded phone calls from his irksome mother along with anyone else who felt obliged to check up on him remotely.

After a few days he was finally permitted to go home, and Debbie even managed to successfully shoo away a fussing Mrs Hudson by invoking something she laughingly referred to as a woman's prerogative. It seemed to be something vaguely territorial about him, but he wasn't bothered by the details since she was a considerably less tiresome caretaker than the landlady would have been. She did, however, continue to insist on him wearing the arm sling that the hospital had given him to avoid him over-exerting the damaged shoulder. When he kept deliberately mislaying it she lightly suggested that he could either wear the damned thing or be handcuffed to his own belt on that side.

He opted to wear the sling.

On their fifth night back in Baker Street Debbie was sitting next to him in bed reading when the previously terminated discussion floated back to him.

'Since you were kidnapped.'

'Hmm?' she glanced over at him. 'Since what?'

'Since you were kidnapped. That's…when I deduced that I was in love with you. Unexpectedly.'

Closing her book, she put it aside.

'I see.'

'Bit cliché, really,' he added with a small smile. 'Not knowing the nature of missing something until it's already gone – well, potentially, anyway.'

'Hmm.' Turning over, she slid down so she was lying next to him on her stomach. 'I'm not going to say I'm glad I got kidnapped, Sherlock…'

'Of course not!' he exclaimed, shocked at the idea. 'But you wanted to know, and-'
'I know now.' She gave him a kiss. 'And you know I love you. I have for the longest time...I don't think I could even pin down when I realised.'

'That's because you don't pay attention.'

Her chuckle echoed his and the second kiss became somewhat more heated. Feeling the familiar stirring below his waist, Sherlock started to lean over onto her. Then his still-healing shoulder gave way and he had to hurriedly prop himself up with his other arm, grimacing and unable to suppress a low hiss of pain.

'Ssh...lay down.' Debbie gently nudged him onto his back and kissed him again. 'You stay there and let me do the work, hmm?'

Sherlock struggled to hide a frown. Much as he enjoyed having Debbie riding him, it was generally less satisfactory for both of them than when he could control the pace and angle of – oh, god – the thought cut itself off when she began to trail her mouth down his chest, skirting to his left hipbone and then the top of his thigh. Oh. He had to admit, he was curious about the idea of being fellated but it had always seemed rather impolite to ask since the act was entirely one-sided...

'I do owe you one,' Debbie said, glancing back up at him with a wink that made his stomach do unlikely acrobatics. 'If you want me to stop, just say.'

He managed a nod and a vague noise of assent before the feel of her mouth encasing his erection blotted out all conscious thought. The warmth...the wetness...her tongue...oh, and the pressure when she gently sucked, the friction as she moved up and down, the all-encompassing deliciousness of the sensations from where she was consuming him to the way her hands stroked up and down his legs and sides...

It didn't take long before he was bucking his hips up against her mouth and tangling his hands in her hair, helpless to control his own body. She started – good god – she actually started humming, low in the back of her throat. The vibration of it somehow sent him spiralling to even dizzier heights and he clutched at her frantically as he arched up from the bed, hearing himself gasp.

Low echoes of sensation, like delightful aftershocks, rippled up and down his spine as she swallowed – once, twice, three times – before sitting up alongside him. Sherlock summoned the energy to glance up at her to find that she was grinning broadly.

'At least the cleanup's easier,' she said with a wink. 'Let me just get a drink of water.'

When she came back to bed he rolled over as best as he could without putting weight on the injured shoulder and started kissing her. She giggled and pushed him onto his back again before snuggling into his side.

'Thank you,' he murmured, feeling like he ought to say something.

'You're welcome.' Another giggle. She lay a hand on his stomach and started to rub gently in slow circles, which had an almost immediately soporific effect. Sherlock took a brief moment to wonder if he ought to be irked at her ability to manipulate his responses so effortlessly, but then the blissful silence in his mind joined in with her relaxing contact on his skin, and he let himself go to sleep.
As luck would have it Sherlock was pronounced more or less fine, if still not yet able to use his injured shoulder as fully as before just yet, a few days before Debbie's birthday. Deferring for once to John's advice – and in no small amount to his own curiosity at Debbie's potential reactions – he sought something to give her on the day itself, which was a Wednesday, and settled on a small pair of silver earrings suitable for wearing to the nursery. Admittedly this required taking Mary with him to somewhere called Tiffany's for her input, which was not an experience he'd care to repeat within the decade, but Debbie was so genuinely delighted when he gave her the gift that he decided it had been worth the tiresome hour and a half.

When the dreaded party itself rolled around Sherlock made sure to vacate the living room in good time. Unfortunately no worthwhile cases had materialised to occupy his interest or necessitate him being elsewhere, but with a large thermos of tea – in order to avoid needing to revisit the kitchen – his laptop and a small pile of books, he was confident that he could survive the evening. He hadn't also counted on the incidental entertainment offered by overhearing the less-than-discreet comments made by Debbie's colleagues. They seemed under the impression that he wasn't in the building, and to her lasting credit Debbie made no effort to correct them, knowing that their idiotic observations would be something he found amusing to listen to.

'Oh my god, is that a skull?'

'Are…are those bullet holes in the wall?'

'Yeuw, who keeps a dead bat on a mantelpiece?'

'I told you, he's…colourful.' Debbie, clearly laughing at their reactions. 'And yes, those are bullet holes, and yes it's a real skull. Leave the bat alone, it's not doing you any harm. Who wants wine?'

Sherlock smiled to himself at her blithe assertions regarding the more eccentric elements of the flat, and then was thoroughly distracted for a while by an email from someone whose grandmother appeared to have been brutally decapitated by her home visit nurse.

When he tuned in again, some hour and a half later – it had been the husband of the person who'd contacted him, not the home visit nurse, which he expected would lead to a certain level of awkwardness in the marriage – the visiting women appeared to have drunk enough wine to start comparing notes on their significant others.
…told him it'd take a heck of a lot more than that to make it up to me.’

Laughter.

'Come on, Deb, you've been dodging it all evening – we're spilling the funny here and you haven't given us anything about the famous Sherlock Holmes.'

Sherlock actually paused what he was doing and cocked an ear curiously.

'You all read the papers,' Debbie said lightly. 'Even those awful tabloids – don't look at me like that, Jess, we've all seen you with News Of The World.'

'Oh, bugger the papers – what about the good stuff?' Some more laughter. 'Is he any fun? What's he like in bed? You know, the details.'

'I don't see how that's any of your business, and which of you is wearing a wire?'

'Don't be boring! Come on, we all saw that dodgy headline – what was it – seven times a night in Baker Street?'

'I see Jess isn't the only one who reads tabloid rubbish.'

'You're avoiding the question!'

'Of course I'm avoiding the bloody question!' 'Oh come oooon…cheekbones like that and a nice tight arse…'

'I'll thank you not to comment on his physical attributes, Grace. Don't look like that, why do I have to spend my birthday being interrogated about my man?'

Sherlock had to smile again at that, feeling a tiny surge of unexpected arousal at the possessive intimation. My man. He rather liked that. Why was his phone buzzing? He picked it up and looked at the newly received text. It was from Debbie.

Help me!

The smile became a grin.

I'm not here, remember? – SH

'We're not interrogating you, but you can't blame someone for being curious. I mean, he spent years living with a man and then survived throwing himself off a rooftop and vanished and-

'And so naturally you're all riled up and jealous because Sherlock is a mysterious, sexy genius and you're all stuck with ordinary blokes?'

This provoked outright howls of mirth from the other women.

'Well,' Debbie went on, 'You can all jolly well carry on being riled up and curious – and jealous – because anything your collective filthy imaginations can conjure will be only the palest imitations of reality. Now, are we opening that bottle or not?'

That seemed to put paid to the discussion – continued playful needling aside – and Sherlock tuned out again in favour of an abduction in Basingstoke. It proved unexpectedly diverting and the client was keen to chat over Skype rather than fiddle with emails around the details, so by the time he’d
solved that one it was close to midnight. Some of the women seemed to have left already and the few remaining were clearly preparing to depart imminently.

'...still think it's a bit odd. I mean, I know you're not big on throw cushions and whatever but if I didn't know otherwise I wouldn't even guess you lived here.' That voice he recognised as Karin, as he'd had the dubious pleasure of running into her twice at the nursery while escorting Debbie to and from work.

'It hasn't come up, really,' Debbie was saying. 'I suppose I still think of it as Sherlock's flat.'

'But you live here too!'

'My cardigan's on the back of the door!'

'If it wasn't for the fact it's so clean...oh, never mind. At least he isn't the sort to put girly calendars up all over his bachelor pad.'

'I think the closest he gets is blood splatter charts.'

The conversation moved downstairs as Debbie escorted the last of her guests out but Sherlock frowned, inexplicably troubled by the commentary. He'd never really given much consideration to the general state of Baker Street – it was just sort of there, like the roads and the sky and everything else in the world – but the notion that Debbie didn't think of it as her home as well was both puzzling and upsetting.

Confident that the place was now empty, he got up and went into the living room to apply his considerable observation skills to the issue. Ignoring the smattering of wine glasses, the cheese board and the empty box of chocolates on the coffee table from the night's visitors, there was nothing of Debbie's in the room. Well, the cleanliness, of course. The lack of dust. But those weren't really personal touches. Not the way John had left books and magazines and cups scattered about while absentmindedly bumbling around on his own errands. Sherlock never had to move anything of Debbie's aside or rummage through any mess other than his own to get to something.

Somehow that seemed...wrong, now that he reflected on it.

'Hello, you.' Her voice and a kiss on his cheek brought him back to reality in time to see her start bustling about clearing up the minor detritus of the gathering.

'Leave it,' he said, seized by a sudden and almost panicked urge for her to put her mark on the flat somehow, even if only temporarily. 'It can wait until tomorrow.'

'Don't be silly, it won't take a moment. And by the way-' she added playfully, shooting him an impish grin '-that text would have been a perfect moment for you to pop in and boil the kettle for a fresh cuppa or something, which would have shut them up.'

'Yes, I imagine it would have,' he agreed. 'Although you seemed to manage fine by yourself. Why are people so curious about such things? Their lives must be dreadfully dull.'

Debbie laughed and came to loop her arms around his neck.

'I imagine in comparison to your life most people's would seem horribly boring, Sherlock. This is why I try not to socialise with them too much. Not when I could be spending time around my own mysterious, sexy genius...'

When they finally broke off from the long kiss that ensued, Sherlock decided to put the
consideration of personal spatial clutter aside and settled his hands on her hips instead.

'I love you.'

'Nice answer.' She kissed him again. 'I love you too. How's your shoulder feeling today?'

He dropped his mouth to her throat.

'Good enough.'

They had to pause in the bedroom long enough for him to move his laptop but after that his burgeoning erection would tolerate no further delay. He made sure to bring her to orgasm first – it was her birthday, after all – but when she panted his name and locked her legs around his waist all pretence of self-control flew out of his mind in the pursuit of that exquisite peak of sensation.

Over the next few days he paid special attention to Debbie's movements around Baker Street and came to the dual conclusions that her friend Karin's commentary had been simultaneously correct and deeply flawed. Yes, there was nothing of Debbie's in the living room, or even the kitchen, that would constitute some sort of personality imprint. But she was a tidy person – living in small spaces and working with young children had made it a habit – so he doubted she would ever reach the point where she would be leaving odd items and things all over the place as John had.

Correction: as John did, even now. One of his sweaters was thrown over the back of a chair.

When Sherlock's gaze fell idly onto his music stand, a sudden burst of spatial realisation erupted in his mind. He took some quick mental measurements, grinned to himself in delight when his flash-approximations were proven correct, and then made two phone calls.

Meaningless clutter wasn't the only way of making someone feel like a part of a space, after all.

When it arrived he rearranged the room as meticulously as he would have analysed a crime scene, shifting the lamp and bookcase over to beneath the other window and pushing the sofa up a little closer to the door. There was ample room, of course, and although the new layout was marginally less efficient – requiring as it did for one to step around the back of his chair by the fireplace to reach the contents of the second bookcase – the new addition more than made up for it.

He went to collect Debbie from the nursery as usual that afternoon, holding her hand as they walked back and trying not to let his excitement show. Odd. Why was he excited? Admittedly the prospect of her reaction was an interesting one – seeing her happy always made him happy, which John insisted was irrevocable proof that his friend was utterly smitten, whatever that meant – but it seemed like more than that, somehow. Like some kind of formalisation of their relationship. Debbie was part of his life, and now something intrinsically hers was part of the flat. Their flat.

When he hurried ahead of her up the stairs she started laughing.

'What are you doing, Sherlock?'
Beaming in anticipation, Sherlock whirled and extended an arm, showman-style, to the amended corner of the living room. It was a refurbished Cramer, perfectly tuned – he'd seen to that himself – and a deep, polished walnut, with a matching stool. The cushion on the stool was, of course, moss green.

Debbie covered her mouth with her hand. Oh. She looked about to – no, she was, in fact, crying. Sherlock panicked for a moment until she flung her arms around him.

'Oh my god. Sherlock! How did – when did you – I mean – why did you…?'

Ah. Of course. The needless association of gift giving with some notable occasion. He'd forgotten about that. Should he try to pass it off as a belated proper birthday present, or something? No, she'd see through that.

'You…like it?' he asked, confident in the answer but wanting, as usual, to hear her confirm it.

'I've always wanted to have one at home but I've never – I mean I could never- ' shaking her head, she kissed him. 'But what on earth made you go and get a piano?'

Sherlock frowned. The matter of homeliness and other such minor observations aside, that was actually a fair question. Why had he gone and got a piano for her?

*Don't analyse,* Mary's voice drifted back. *Don't dissect, don't deduce…*

'I thought it would make you happy,' he said, trying and not entirely succeeding in suppressing a small frown. 'Doesn't it?'

'Well-' she wiped at her eyes and stared at him 'yes, of course, it's wonderful, but-'

'I love you,' he said, feeling as though he was explaining his observations on a case to a particularly obtuse-minded forensics officer. 'And I wanted to do something that would make you happy. Is that…not right?'

She laughed – it was an unusually free, joyous sound even by her standards – and embraced him again with a long, sweet kiss.

'Sherlock, thank you. I love you so much sometimes I feel like I could burst.'

That made him frown again as he tried to scrutinise her sentence.

'As in, you love me and sometimes feel like you could burst, or you only sometimes love me enough to- ' he stopped as his phone rang, and hastily answered it while she chuckled '-Mycroft, what do you want?'

He did not expect Debbie to lunge out and snatch the device from his grasp to speak into it herself.

'Mycroft, you'll have to ring him back later. I'm about to turn this off.'

'Why in god's name- ' his brother's indignant tone was clearly audible through the speaker.

'Because I'm about to tear all his clothes off. Try tomorrow.'
Debbie ended the call and did indeed turn the phone off, throwing it onto the sofa before grabbing Sherlock's hands to tow him down to the bedroom. He was still trying to battle down his mix of confusion at her actions and mirth at Mycroft's dismay when she all but yanked his coat and suit jacket off and hurled them aside, already at work on his shirt buttons. Rather intrigued at this newly aggressive side of her, he abandoned his initial plan of passivity when her fingers brushed his erection. A spasm of excitement surged up in his stomach and he grasped at her without thinking, pushing her back against the wall while capturing her lips in a demanding and hungry kiss. Her hands laced up through his hair with almost painful tightness, pulling him closer, and something about the ferocity of the grip seemed to shatter his self-control.

Groaning – in fact all but growling, a sound he'd never heard himself make before – Sherlock pulled her clothes off with rapid clumsiness and then thrust in, trapping her up against the windowsill. She gave a little squeak of surprise and wrapped her legs around his waist when he began rocking his hips. The feel of her clutching helplessly at him, coupled with the delicious friction where they joined, spurred the intoxication of sensation to new heights. He fastened his mouth over the pulse point on her throat and sucked, hard, knowing it would leave a mark and not caring one jot. Mad, raw elation, an insane high with not an injected chemical in sight, had a firm grip on his mind to the exclusion of all other thought processes or considerations.

'Omgod – Sherlock-!'

Debbie cried out and as he felt her body clench tightly around his own Sherlock increased his pace, chasing the peak with increasing desperation. She suddenly dropped her head and kissed him deeply.

'I love you,' she whispered against his lips, and for some reason that was what undid him. Crying out, his hips spasming helplessly against hers, Sherlock staggered backwards and then they collapsed onto the bed together, both gasping for breath.

'I think I can hear my phone ringing in the other room,' Debbie said after a moment. 'Mycroft must really want to get hold of you.'

'Yes.' Sherlock closed his eyes and grinned. 'Bugger Mycroft. He can wait.'

They cleaned up and then – continuing to ignore the periodic ringing in the other room – curled up together in the bed to exchange more kisses and caresses. Sherlock moved so he was on top of Debbie and pillowed her head under his forearm to make her head tilt back, exposing her throat to his mouth. He found himself wanting to taste as much of her skin as possible, but he'd barely reached the top of her breasts before her reciprocal touches proved to be far too much of a distraction. Rolling onto his back, he let himself go slack against the pillow as she moved over him with the same sort of care and attention with which he'd examine a crime scene. Her lips trailed back up to his jaw and cheek and he caught them in his own, lost in the hopelessly enthralling feel of their tongues meeting and twisting together in one slow, lazy kiss after another.

After a while like that he realised that he'd actually lost track of the time somehow, and more importantly that another erection was making its presence firmly known. Shifting back on top of Debbie, Sherlock settled his hips between hers and pressed forward so he could slip inside her, feeling a groan of unmitigated pleasure escape as that warm pressure enveloped him once more.

Although it felt a little odd, copulating again so soon after satiation, he found himself rather enjoying the leisurely pace and lack of urgency in his loins. It allowed for much easier and more studied review of every sensation; the slow, tortuously delicious friction of each thrust, the little sounds Debbie made as she ran her hands through his hair and over his back, even the feel of her
legs wrapped around his waist or the way her breasts pushed against his chest with every motion.

God, he loved her. The thought seemed as exotic as it was familiar in that moment. Curious. The gratification of the sexual act had never before seemed so closely tied to that buoyant, fierce affection he felt for Debbie whenever he so much as thought of her.

*Love is a chemical defect found in the losing side.* His own words taunted him, like the mocking of a past incarnation of himself, but he found that he didn't care. Let him lose, then, let him lose forever, and still he'd call it a more than fair trade…

The now-familiar heat was building slowly but definitively in his belly so he forced his attention back and adjusted the angle of his movements, snaking one hand down between their bodies to lavish attention where Debbie needed it most. She gasped, her grip on him tightening as her fingers spasmodically clenched and unclenched around his upper arms. Feeling the crescendo about to hit him, powerless to stop it, Sherlock quickened his manipulations and dropped his head to kiss her, swallowing up her cry, drinking in her peak even as he hit his own.

He rolled off but kept her cradled close to his chest, aware of the ridiculous possessiveness of the motion and not really caring. She tucked her head under his chin and he felt himself sigh contentedly as her hands roamed his back and shoulders with tantalising, featherlight touches.

After another few minutes they finally got up – Mycroft had apparently decided to give up on phoning although there were sixteen missed calls on Debbie's phone and four on Sherlock's, when he turned it back on – and after a brief, almost perfunctory dinner wound up perched together on the piano stool. Debbie picked out a few odds and ends of tunes to get a feel for the instrument before launching into *Für Elise.*

Sherlock looped one arm around her waist and watched her for a moment before getting to his feet and reaching for his violin. Her playing was more than good enough for him to improvise around and before long she was embellishing in return, both of them exchanging lingering smiles as the melody rose in complexity around them.

The completely unexpected sound of someone clapping made him glance up in alarm on the final bow stroke but it was only Mrs Hudson, standing in the doorway with an enraptured smile.

'Oooh, that was lovely! You two should go on stage! Debbie, I had no idea you were so musical…'

Irritated at the landlady's interruption – it had never before occurred to him that he would so thoroughly enjoy playing a duet with anyone – Sherlock decided to focus on Debbie instead. She'd clearly enjoyed the activity just as much; her cheeks were flushed and a smile still turned the corners of her mouth.

'Well normally it's nursery rhymes for my classes, but that seemed a little ignominious for a beautiful thing like this,' she said, running one hand almost reverently along the key bed. 'I'll have to get some music books and up my repertoire, I think.'

Sherlock snorted and quickly sawed out the opening bars of *Mary Had A Little Lamb,* which made both women laugh at him.

'Oh, we'll have to have a proper sing song this Christmas,' Mrs Hudson said. 'Especially after missing it last year. Carols at Baker Street! Maybe you can convince him to wear the reindeer ears,' she added to Debbie in a faux-whisper of conspiracy.

'A Santa hat maybe…I'm not a miracle worker.'
'You could try-' apparently remembering the reason for her intrusion, Mrs Hudson made one of her nonsensical little hand gestures at Sherlock ‘oh, your brother rang me, for some reason, trying to get hold of you. He was in a right old sulk, too.'

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

'I'll deal with Mycroft tomorrow. Good night, Mrs Hudson.'

'Oh, fine…' she ambled off, still muttering, although whether to herself or anyone else was unclear.

'You should be nicer to her,' Debbie said, getting up to close the door properly. 'She dotes on you.'

'She's endlessly irritating,' he replied, absently plucking out a chord. 'Not to mention talkative.'

'Don't be silly – John and Mary and I are talkative.'

'You are not nowhere near as tediously loquacious,' he shot back. 'The way Mrs Hudson goes on all the time, I wonder sometimes if she's concerned her mouth will heal over if she stops.'

She giggled.

'That's a mean thing to say…'

'Accurate, though.' He put his violin back on its stand and then, already bored with discussing their landlady's behavioural habits, crossed the room to put his arms around Debbie.

'It's past midnight, Sherlock,' she murmured, but didn't resist when he started kissing her neck. 'Well, unless you wanted to ring your brother…I daresay he doesn't sleep much.'

'I said I'll deal with Mycroft tomorrow.'

'Then you can do that, while I'm at work,' she said pointedly, but still smiled when he drew back and leaned his forehead onto hers. 'Do you want me to sleep upstairs?'

'No.' He nosed at her cheek for a moment and then reluctantly drew back. 'I'll be in shortly.'

'All right.'

Once she was in the bedroom Sherlock texted Mycroft because he knew it would annoy him.

*I presume this is something to do with Garvey? – SH*

After forty seconds a reply came through, also in text, which made him grin. Mycroft hated texting but presumably didn't want his brother to be waylaid again.

*Naturally. I'll send a car for you tomorrow. – MH*

Well, that was a rather intriguing response. *Shortly* turned into *nearly three hours later* when Sherlock idly began looking up what he could find on Benjamin Garvey. It was an interesting exercise, given that the man seemed to not exist at all after the age of twenty-two. He'd just *vanished* clean off the face of the planet. Presumably when he'd met James Moriarty and they'd… become involved.

What a strange concept, James Moriarty having a lover for so many years. Of course his bizarre fascination had been more than apparent whenever they met face to face, but it had never really crossed Sherlock's mind that there might be a romantic or even sexual component to it.
We're just alike, you and I.

He frowned then, remembering the comment about the live in one. Of course that had just been misdirection. Not that comparing Benjamin Garvey and John Watson was really very much of a worthwhile exercise.

You’re not ordinary. No. You’re me. You’re me.

Curious. Moriarty had been lunatic enough to shoot himself on the rooftop of Bart's but somehow he’d still had the foresight to arrange for Garvey to completely disappear. Sherlock hadn’t found so much as a whisper of the man during his extensive two year dismantling of the global network. That suggested the personal attention to detail of the consulting criminal himself. More than that, it suggested care.

For some reason that made Sherlock glance at the hallway. He closed his laptop and turned off the lights, then silently made his way into the bedroom to shed his clothes and climb into the bed alongside Debbie. She was asleep of course, but the feel of his weight dipping the mattress seemed to register somewhere in her awareness and she rolled over lazily to curl up against his side with a small, contented sort of noise.

He lifted one arm up so he could drape it around her and absently covered her hand with his where it had come to rest on his stomach. Had Moriarty loved Garvey? No, surely if he had then blowing his own brains out on the roof wouldn't have been part of his plan. It seemed like it would be rather selfish, to get oneself killed and leave the person you loved behind to suffer. But Garvey had loved Moriarty. No doubt about that.

Love is a far more vicious motivator.

Sherlock unconsciously tightened his grip on Debbie a little, remembering the horrible, furious helplessness he'd felt when she'd been abducted. The thought that someone had hurt and frightened her was bad enough. The idea of her dying was…it was beyond unbearable.

When she mumbled something he hurriedly relaxed his arms, realising he'd held her a little too tightly and woken her up.

'Sherlock?' Propping herself up on one elbow, she peered sleepily at his face. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' he assured her quickly. 'It's fine.'

Even in the dim twilight he could see her little frown.

'I was just thinking.' Rolling onto his side, he pulled her down so she was tucked up against him with her back to his chest. 'Go back to sleep.' Then he started stroking her hair, which always had a soporific effect on her, and in moments she went still with one of her hands loosely holding his.

Sighing, pushing the considerations of Moriarty and Benjamin Garvey back into their designated room in his mind palace for later review, Sherlock lay back down and let his eyes drift closed.
When Sherlock got back from walking Debbie to the nursery the following day there was a familiar-looking black car waiting outside. Typical Mycroft. He was rather pleasantly surprised, however, when the side door opened to reveal a rather impatient John Watson.

'There you are. Still walking Debbie to work?'

'Evidently.' Sherlock got in beside him. As usual, without any prompting the driver started to move them off to wherever they were going.

'She really should talk to someone,' John said offhandedly, rubbing one hand idly through his hair. 'I know she says she doesn't want to but—'

'She's perfectly capable of walking to and from the nursery herself, John. I just like to go with her.'

'Really.'

'Yes. When did they pick you up?' Sherlock added, deciding it was probably best to divert the conversation away from his friend's mild obsession with Debbie's emotional health.

'Just as I got to the surgery. Least I still got my bike ride in. Don't suppose you have any idea what Mycroft bloody wants this time?'

'Something to do with Garvey. I suspect his interrogation has turned up something unexpected that necessitates additional fieldwork.'

'Oh, lovely…'

Of course Sherlock had previously been to the underground complex beneath Vauxhall Cross that served as Mycroft's office and base of operations for whatever particular branch of the government he was pretending to be working for on any given day. John, however, seemed rather impressed by all the concrete and gratings and security checkpoints.

'Ah, Sherlock.' Mycroft was waiting just past the final barrier. 'So nice of you to deign to rejoin us on Planet Earth after your sexcapades.'

'After what?' John exclaimed, giving Sherlock a look of utter astonishment.
'Never mind that,' Sherlock said, rolling his eyes. 'What do you want, Mycroft?'

'I wanted your views – both of your views – on an unusual output from Mr Garvey's…debriefing.'

'Oh?'

'His instability necessitated psychological evaluation-

'No shit,' John muttered.

'quite, and the results are…interesting to say the least.' Mycroft held a folder out and Sherlock took it, flipping it open to thumb through the papers within.

'Dissociative identity disorder?'

'What, multiple personalities? John exclaimed.

'Three distinct and quite clearly identifiable personas,' Mycroft confirmed. 'The first is the one you met at the swimming pool who seems to have been running the show for at least the last year, potentially longer. Devious, clever – though not exactly inspired – and more than a tad psychopathic. The second is extremely tiresome. Does very little other than weep and wail over the loss of his beloved Jim. The third, however…'

'James Moriarty,' Sherlock finished, having found the page.

'What?' John snatched the folder and began scanning it with a critical eye. 'He's…he's internalised his dead boyfriend?'

'Not the intellect, of course, but a great deal of the underlying personality and character traits,' Mycroft confirmed coolly. 'An undeniably fascinating example of PTSD manifesting as aggravation of an existing condition. Although interestingly enough a lot of what we've been able to glean from Ben – that's the weepy one – suggests that Moriarty may have exhibited some signs of the condition himself, particularly in terms of their interactions.'

'He was so different when he wasn't working a case.' John was reading now, with a small frown. 'I loved him always but all the more like that, he was so gentle and funny and…my god, the pair of them were utterly insane.'

'Insane is a comparative term, John,' Mycroft said mildly. 'As a doctor really should know.'

Sherlock thrust his hands into his pockets.

'Diverting as this is, Mycroft, I assume you called me here to do something other than exchange psychological trivia.'

'The last time the Moriarty persona surfaced, he mentioned something of interest. A little black book.'

'Uh.' John made a face. 'Moriarty had a record of his – um – previous-

'I suspect in this context it relates more to the remnants of his criminal contacts,' Sherlock said, but had to admit that his interest was piqued.

'And the remains of the network you supposedly dismantled,' Mycroft added, with studied scorn and a thin-lipped smile.
'The network yes,' Sherlock shot back, 'But I hardly eradicated every last bastion of organised criminality in the world, Mycroft. And-’ he blinked rapidly as his thought processes sped up ‘of course Moriarty would have made any arrangements to keep Garvey safe through alternative channels, to ensure that in the event his network was compromised he could still secure his lover. Meaning there’s a whole other layer to his contacts that we never suspected even existed…’

‘Oh, god.’ John snapped the folder closed. ‘So we need this – uh – book. Presumably. I mean, he must have basically put instructions in it for Garvey, right? Go here, talk to this chap, tell him this and he’ll get you here…’

‘A handbook of exactly how to vanish into thin air,’ Sherlock agreed, grinning. ‘Brilliant! Only instead of just using it to get himself safely lost, Garvey repurposed it to leverage everything Moriarty left to protect him into a way to strike back, to get revenge…’

‘For three years?’

‘Garvey is nowhere near as bright as Moriarty,’ Mycroft pointed out dryly. ‘Naturally it would take him far longer to concoct anything like a workable plan, let alone make the arrangements to carry it out.’

Sherlock nodded, half to himself, and reached a decision.

‘I need to speak to him.’

‘Well, he – or rather the Moriarty persona – has been asking for you quite persistently.’

‘Fine. Let’s go.’

Garvey was in one of the isolated holding cells much deeper within the facility, of course. As they stepped through the main door into the narrow visitation area – it was not unlike seeing an animal in a zoo – Sherlock swept his gaze around the space, taking a thorough inventory.

The cell was bare of anything but the most basic necessities, and Garvey was wearing the shapeless once-white garments typical of one of Mycroft’s detainees of interest. He was sitting in the far left corner, hunched over his knees with his face buried in his arms, completely silent and still. There was no tension visible in his shoulders. In fact he seemed entirely relaxed, current pose aside.

‘Careful,’ John said in a low voice as Sherlock stepped up to the glass.

Garvey’s head snapped up and turned towards them instantly. A slow, insolent smile slid onto his face and Sherlock’s blood ran cold. There was nothing of Benjamin Garvey in that grin. It was – all of it, every malicious inch of teeth – entirely James Moriarty.

‘Hello, Sherlock! Long time no see. Sorry for the absence. Bit busy being dead, you know? Oh, of course you do.’

‘My god,’ John muttered. ‘Even the accent…that’s just bloody wrong.’

‘Remarkable, isn’t it?’ Mycroft agreed in an undertone.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, ignoring them and hunkering down at the edge of the glass so he was on eye level with Garvey – well, with Moriarty. ‘But you’re still here anyway.’

‘Oh, being dead’s no fun. You know that, too, don’t you? And how’s your lovely little friend…the school teacher? Really, Sherlock, I’d hoped for better from you. What poor taste. So boring, so
mundane, so…ordinary.'

'As opposed to an undergraduate arts history student?' Sherlock replied.

'Ooh. You've been looking into my Benny, have you? Bless him, not the brightest spoon in the drawer but he was so passionate when the mood took him.' The face twisted into a lewd expression, but was still all Moriarty despite the features behind it. 'God knows I appreciate enthusiasm, Sherlock, not like your laconic investigative practicality. Are you that boring with her, too? When you shag her do you spend all your time analysing and documenting?' A wild laugh. 'Poor girl!'

'Christ,' John muttered, and actually looked away with a shudder.

Sherlock cocked his head. Interesting. Although purely from a mannerisms point of view the persona was perfect, the reasoning was definitely not the original Moriarty. Although undoubtedly insane, he had valued intellect and creativity above such mundane considerations as passion or enthusiasm. Some flawed perception or supposition from Garvey's other self – or selves – then, an idealised personification of the James Moriarty he'd loved, with broadly similar attitudes but key differences in each particular nuance, if only he could leverage that…

'You're in a cell, again,' he said deliberately. 'This wasn't part of your plan. The plan was to burn me, wasn't it? But I'm out here and you're in there, and Rosie Watson is alive and well.'

'Was it?' Garvey-Moriarty giggled, and it was even the same unsettlingly high pitch. 'There's more than one way to burn a cat, isn't there?'

'I'm not a cat.' Sherlock narrowed his eyes. Something wasn't quite right. Something in the tone, the timbre of the voice. Some unexpected edge, a tiny hint, what was it…?

'I can still win, you know, and I still will win, and you can't stop me!'

Desperation. Sherlock barely suppressed a smirk. However good the vocal intonations and body language, however many subtle cues were so nicely played on, this was not James Moriarty he was speaking with but Benjamin Garvey. No escape plan, no backup, nothing but the retreat into the persona of his dead lover in the forlorn and frantic hope that Moriarty would somehow still find a way to save him. Except in the most bizarre way it was almost as though the Moriarty persona somehow knew it had lost and was all but begging to be cut loose…but how to use it?

'Where's the little black book, Benjamin?' he asked after a prolonged silence, pitching his own voice at firmly commanding, the tone he used to cut through the wittering objections of particularly obnoxious uniformed police officers at crime scenes. 'James isn't here. He can't help you.' Another silence, prolonged, draw it out a little, then drop a little deeper and add the merest hint of vindictive menace. 'He's abandoned you. Just like he did on the rooftop. He's gone.'

'NO!'

It took every inch of his self-control not to rock back on his heels when Garvey threw himself at the glass panel with a loud thump. All traces of Moriarty were gone now.

'He'd never leave me, he'd never abandon me, he loves me and he'll save me!'

'No,' Sherlock said softly. 'He won't.'

'STOP SAYING THAT!'

'He's dead, Ben,' John said suddenly, crouching down at Sherlock's side so they were both eye to
eye with the now-raving figure on the other side of the glass. 'He's dead, he's gone, he's not coming back, and he left you. You're alone.'

The scream of denial from Garvey came out as more of a caterwauling howl and he started banging his fists against the glass.

'I'm not sure what you think provoking him is going to achieve,' Mycroft said, having to raise his voice considerably over the racket.

'He abandoned you, Ben,' John said firmly, in a rather nasty tone of voice that Sherlock was a little surprised to hear from his friend's mouth. 'He abandoned you and he's sold you out so why in god's name are you even bothering with trying to protect him?'

Hands flattening to slide down the panel, Garvey collapsed into a weeping heap on the ground in front of them.

'No. He'd never…he arranged everything…he loves me…'

Sherlock leaned up close to the glass.

'If he loved you, he wouldn't have killed himself,' he said in the gentlest voice he could summon. 'But he did. He pulled the trigger, and he left you without a second thought.' Then, in an unexpectedly real surge of pity for the man, he added, 'I'm sorry, Benjamin. He's gone.'

'Gone,' Garvey muttered, slowly lifting his gaze to meet Sherlock's. Tears were streaming down his face openly now. 'He's gone. My…my James is gone.'

'But he left you something, didn't he?' Sherlock encouraged, keeping his tone barely above a calming whisper. 'One last thing, just in case…for a rainy day…'

'The book.' Garvey slumped against the glass wearily. 'He could always remember everything without needing to write it down, but I never can. So he wrote it down for me.'

Sherlock waited. This persona – the mourning lover – was more than ready to talk, to spill everything, but needed silence to tease him into vocalisation.

'A little black book,' Garvey went on, as if to himself. 'Full of his notes. Such lovely writing…he always wrote so beautifully. I kept it close. Right in my pocket. Until the pool…'

John shifted but Sherlock motioned quickly for him to remain quiet.

'I put it in a locker,' Garvey murmured, his eyes sliding closed. 'In his jacket, the last one of his I kept…the grey Westwood blazer…he always looked so handsome in that one, it was my favourite, but he'll never wear it again, now, and I couldn't burn you like he wanted, I couldn't win for him…'

'It's all right,' Sherlock said to him quietly, and stood up. Garvey slid the rest of the way to the floor and curled into a foetal position with his back to the glass, sobbing uncontrollably.

'Poor bastard,' John muttered in an undertone.

'…good. Bring it in immediately, straight to my hands if you please.' Mycroft hung up as they both turned back. 'Well. Remarkable, brother mine. Not to mention an…unexpected role change for the traditional good cop, bad cop routine.'

'What's going to happen to him?' John asked, glancing back at the prone figure.
'I know a secure institution that will be able to...do what they can for him.' Mycroft pocketed his phone with a small sigh. 'Such a waste, really. He wasn't a genius to Moriarty's level of course, but the potential...'

'Yes. Well.' Sherlock rolled his eyes. 'I assume you already have the book?'

'It will be in my hands within the next half an hour.'

'Marvellous. Time for a cuppa, then.'

They retired to Mycroft's office, since the one thing that could be consistently said about his seemingly endless parade of assistants was that they invariably brewed impeccable pots of tea. It was a little over twenty-three minutes later when there was a polite knock at the door, and then a palm-sized black leather notebook in an evidence bag was placed onto the desk.

Sherlock picked it up without preamble, tipped the notebook out and opened it up. It was indeed crammed with Moriarty's surprisingly elegant handwriting. There was a small note on the front cover, as well.

Unless this miracle have might, that in black ink my love may still shine bright. – JM

'My god,' John said, reading over his shoulder. 'Poetry, from Moriarty.'

'Sonnet sixty-five, Shakespeare,' Sherlock confirmed, smiling slightly at Mycroft's raised eyebrows. 'A classical romantic, then. When the mood – or personality – took him.'

'Remarkable. Almost a shame he's dead,' Mycroft said dryly. 'Almost.'

'It's all here.' Sherlock flicked through some pages and then passed the book across. 'Plenty of bedtime reading material.'

'Delightful.' Mycroft opened it and glanced idly at the first page before shooting him a marginally suspicious look. 'You don't want it?'

'I'm sure you have plenty of people who can read, Mycroft,' Sherlock chided, tossing back the last of his tea and standing up to leave. 'Let me know if they find anything interesting.'

'Very well.'

'Oh, and you're welcome,' John added pointedly before closing the door behind them. 'Cock.'
'Impressive work, John,' Sherlock said to him once they were safely out of the building and in a cab back to Baker Street. 'Wouldn't like to be on the wrong end of you during an interrogation.'

'Yeah, well.' John shifted, clearly rather uncomfortable with the whole idea. 'He did try to drown and-or blow up my daughter.' He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. 'Never thought I'd say this but…god, I almost felt sorry for – I mean, Moriarty did a number on him, didn't he?'

'Expertly widened the cracks in what I suspect was an already at least partially damaged psyche,' Sherlock agreed. 'Something else he kept around for when he was bored, I expect.'

'Good god.' Then John shot him a brief stare of outright alarm. 'Is that why you aren't encouraging Debbie to go to therapy for-

'Oh for god's sake, John, she's had talking therapy in the past and the experience alienated her successfully to the whole idea. Pressuring her into attending would do her no real good and would harm our relationship.' Sherlock tried his best to sound irritated in order to mask the rather hurt feeling of dismay that John's intimation provoked.

'Right. Of course.' To his credit, John actually sounded contrite. 'Sorry, I just – it was bloody weird, basically hearing that lunatic again. You're not him. I know you'd never do anything to hurt Debbie, no matter how bored you were.'

'No. Thank you.' Sherlock laced his hands together and glanced out of the window, affecting nonchalance as best he could.

'I suppose these days if you do get bored and Debbie's around, you have other things to keep you occupied,' John went on casually. 'Like those…sexcapades Mycroft mentioned.'

Sherlock set his jaw, annoyed when he felt his cheeks colour regardless. Bloody Mycroft.

'Good to see you've developed some healthier coping mechanisms. Explains why Mrs Hudson's a bit more careful about knocking first these days.' John idly leaned his elbow on the window. 'I'm just amazed Debbie's still able to walk to work after-

'John!'
Then, of course, he had to listen to his friend's insufferable snickering for the rest of the cab ride, but thankfully John was distracted when they got back because Mary and Rosie were sitting in the living room waiting for them.

While John filled his wife in on their somewhat unusual morning, Sherlock made some tea and then checked his emails. A few things from the website, but nothing that immediately drew his interest…although, hmm, Lestrade had sent him a body washed up near Blackfriars that might be promising. No identification, no shoes and with the word *liar* carved into the flesh of the back.

He called Scotland Yard for the details, grimaced when it was painfully obvious, lectured Donovan at length on *why* it was so obvious and then hung up before she could start shouting at him.

'Another day ending in y, then,' Mary said with a grin as he put his phone down. 'Where're you off to?'

'It's nearly quarter past five,' he pointed out, shrugging his coat on. 'Debbie will be out of work soon.'

'And you still meet her and walk her home. Every day.'

'Unless I'm on a case, yes. And stop looking at me like that,' he added acidly when she raised her eyebrows in obvious amusement.

The Watsons elected to go home, not without exchanging conspiratorial chuckles and grins on the way to their car, although he pointedly ignored them. At the nursery, Sherlock dodged the few lingering parents and children on the steps with the ease of much practice and hastened down to the Green Room. Debbie was just finishing her tidying up for the day, so he lurked by the door to watch her. The attention she gave to even the most minor things, like straightening a chair or adjusting the curtains, always fascinated him. It wasn't OCD – she wasn't Mycroft, thank god – but just some kind of natural meticulousness, an inbuilt need to show particular care over anything she deemed important. Perfectionism, but very selectively so.

It was, he abruptly realised, one of the things he loved about her.

Suddenly unwilling to be apart from her even the width of the room, he strode inside and nosed at the back of her neck. She whirled and made a little noise of pleased surprise but he silenced it with a kiss, smiling against her mouth when she immediately went pliant against him.

'Hello to you, too,' she said when they parted, running her fingers up through his hair. 'Did you find out what Mycroft wanted?'

'Just some assistance with Garvey's interrogation. Nothing unpleasant,' he added quickly when she started to grimace. 'But you were right about him being…wrong in the head.'

'Oh.' She sighed and leaned against him. 'That must have been awful.' Giving him a quick kiss, she idly smoothed down the lapel of his coat. 'Shall we go home?'

He told her about Garvey over dinner and the washing up, as much to clear up the interaction in his own mind as to satisfy her curiosity.

'Well, I think it's dreadful,' she said in that oddly fierce little tone she had. 'That horrible man – Moriarty, I mean – *using* Garvey like that, and…well, it's just horrid. As if what he did – tried to do – to you wasn't bad enough!' Then, frowning, she wound the dishcloth around her hands with an unmistakeable air of worry. 'This little book thing…it isn't going to cause trouble for you, is it?'
'Mycroft's people will handle it,' he assured her. 'International espionage isn't exactly my milieu.'

'Oh, so those two years you spent traipsing around the world hunting down Moriarty's people were what then, a sabbatical?' Her tone was meant to sound teasing, but he could hear the strained concern behind it and put his arms around her. She was troubled, he realised, not just by concerns of his welfare but at the idea that he would leave her and disappear. As Moriarty had done to Garvey. As, in fact, Sherlock himself had done to John Watson some four years ago.

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled into his dressing gown. 'I'm being silly. I just…I really don't know what I'd do if I lost you.'

That made him smile slightly and he ran one hand up through her hair, leaning in to rest his chin on the top of her head. Even back on the roof of Bart's he had been more reluctant than he expected to leave London – and John – behind, even given the fatal alternative to his friends, but now…the idea of vanishing, faked death or otherwise, and not being able to see Debbie at all…

'I'm not planning on throwing myself off any more buildings,' he said, kissing her gently on the forehead. 'Mycroft can do his own field work.'

'I hope you told him that,' she said with a small chuckle, but did let go of him to amble over to the piano and sit down to start picking out what sounded remarkably like Moonlight Sonata. Sherlock listened for a moment before going to his violin to join her, picking up the bass line and improvising a little around her triplets. He'd never really considered playing duet with anyone, let alone a pianist, but it was remarkably effortless to play with her.

In fact remarkably effortless was a fair summation of their relationship, at least from his own perspective. It had never before occurred to him that a romantic entanglement could be anything other than a distraction and inconvenience that would take far more effort to sustain than it could possibly offer in reward. But being with Debbie was like breathing and, like breathing, the idea of stopping was…well, it was unthinkable. The thought of leaving her was almost as unbearable as the notion of her death. He couldn't even begin to process the logistics, let alone the sentiments, of such an exercise. John and Mary would be supportive, of course, but they had Rosie to think about, and Mycroft would find some excuse to be as minimally involved as possible unless there was some sort of pressure from Mummy. Plus, in the unlikely event that he really died, Debbie would be rather bereft in Baker Street with only the dubious company of Mrs Hudson, and she might not be able to carry on living there. He had plenty of money these days – people kept inexplicably giving it to him for solving cases, as though he needed payment, and even with the share he'd insisted John take it kept mounting up – but wasn't there some sort of legal requirement to give it to someone else? A will, or something like that? Something about next of kin…

A solution suddenly occurred to him and he actually stopped short, lowering his bow. Of course. So obvious. Stupid, stupid. How had he not thought of it earlier? He'd been too distracted by his own processing of the situation, and then all the business with Garvey. Idiot.

'Would you like to get married?' he asked.

The chord she was playing turned into a cacophonous mess as her hands faltered, and she looked over at him in obvious astonishment.

'Would I – what?'

'Like to get married,' he repeated. 'To me, I mean, specifically. Not just in general.'

She was gaping openly at him now.
'Oh, I forgot – sorry-' Sherlock hastily stowed his violin and knelt down next to her '-this is how you're supposed to do it, isn't it? Oh!' He remembered something else and grimaced. 'Damn. I don't have a ring. I know you need a-

Anything further was cut off when she slid off the stool into his lap. Taking his face in her hands, she kissed him deeply and then threw her arms around his neck with a joyous laugh.

'Oh, I – oh, I'd love to – I never thought you'd want-

'I assume that means yes?' Sherlock managed in between the rain of kisses she was planting all over his cheeks and lips.

'Of course it means yes!' She hugged him tightly for a moment and then drew back, face falling ever so slightly. 'This is…because of Garvey, isn't it?'

'Partially.' Splaying one palm on her lower back to steady her, Sherlock lifted his other hand to stroke her cheek. 'As I said, I'm not planning on getting myself killed but, well, accidents can happen, and there are certain legal and practical considerations that would be greatly simplified-' he stopped and hurriedly changed tack at the dawning aghast expression on her face '-and besides, I certainly don't intend to tolerate you entering into a relationship with anyone else. That is rather the whole point, isn't it?'

Debbie pressed her lips tightly together and for a moment he was honestly unsure if she was about to kiss him again or slap him. Fortunately it turned out to be neither, as she just leaned into him and burrowed her nose into his neck with a long, deep inhale.

'I love you so, so much, Sherlock,' she said quietly. 'I don't care about getting down on one knee, or some silly jewellery. If you want to get married – you want to marry me – then I'm the luckiest woman in the whole world, and that's more than enough.'

He felt a broad, probably rather idiotic grin break out on his face and slipped his arms around her properly so he could hold her closer. The feel of her cradled against his chest with her breath on the skin of his neck was awakening decidedly less wholesome urges, and he couldn't really help himself when one hand dropped to grip the top of her left thigh. Their lips met in a lazy kiss that intensified rather rapidly, and Sherlock carefully half-lifted Debbie up so he could lay her down onto the carpet and lever himself up over her. Roaming touches and caresses kindled a spark in his belly and he started peeling her clothes away as she fiddled with his shirt buttons.

A brisk knock at the door to the flat made him glance up in alarm, but before he could get the appropriate parts of his brain firing again Mrs Hudson had opened the door.

'…thought I'd bring up some oh my goodness!' SLAM.

That was a surprisingly efficient way to get rid of her, he thought cheerfully.

'Oh, I forgot it wasn't locked,' Debbie murmured, but her grin was as mischievous as his own when their gazes met. Sherlock stood, a trifle awkwardly thanks to the tent in his trousers, and offered a hand to help her get to her feet.

'Bedroom?'

'Bedroom,' she agreed with a chuckle, already starting down the hall and pulling him along with her by one hand. This time they did lock the door, and Sherlock used all his observational skills to make up for the distinctly inelegant proposal in the best way he knew how.
'I'll take her some muffins later,' Debbie said afterwards, cuddled up at Sherlock's side with her head on his chest. 'Poor Mrs Hudson.'

'One day she'll remember how knocking works,' Sherlock replied, not really too bothered with the landlady's predilection for low key home invasions while his mind was revelling in blissful post-coital quietness. Debbie giggled at him.

'Still, at her time of life…maybe we should get a latch bolt put in so we don't need to remember to lock it…although I suppose that would be far too inconvenient for clients coming in and out.'

'It would stop them coming in before they're invited. Not to mention saving Mrs Hudson from a potential coronary incident.'

'Maybe I'll just have a chat with her. Woman to woman, as it were.' Debbie leaned up to kiss him with a smile. 'I've already had to invoke female territoriality once when you got out of hospital…and to think I expected to be beating off legions of young ladies, and maybe the occasional horny policewoman, to keep you to myself. Wouldn't have expected to be contending more with an ex-army doctor and an elderly landlady!'

Sherlock chuckled at that but a warm feeling flooded him at the sentiment. He still wasn't used to the feeling of being coveted by someone. By anyone. Tolerated, yes, even occasionally accepted, but not wanted so consistently. Then again, he'd never expected to be so possessive of another person as he found himself of her.

Shifting onto his side, he nuzzled at her hair when she rolled over and then shuffled up so her back was pressed to his chest. Mango. Passionfruit. Coconut. Debbie.

'Oh-' that for some reason made something occur to him '-I suppose we'd better start making lists. Guests and things. That's how Mary said you start planning a wedding.'

Debbie giggled.

'God, can you imagine? Mycroft scowling in the corner while John gives some silly speech making fun of how we first met when you thought I was a criminal mastermind…'
Sherlock grinned.

'Mrs Hudson in one of her hats. Lestrade cradling his fifth scotch.'

'Poor Molly, bawling her eyes out.'

'My mother, endlessly fussing over everything.'

'My mother, complaining about the food and the weather non-stop.'

'Rosie screaming at everything and trying to eat the flowers.'

'Mary facepalming and rolling her eyes at every other word John says.'

They both chortled at that but Sherlock couldn't help the sigh that slipped out. Aside from the happy timing of the attempted murder, and dancing with Debbie after her late arrival, John and Mary's wedding had been the most unaccountably tedious day of his life. The bit in the church especially, with all the talking and the dewy-eyed looks and cooing guests…there had been more people at that wedding than Sherlock even knew. Some of them he was fairly sure neither John nor Mary knew, either, with the distant relatives and friends-of-friends and all that nonsense. Not to mention the homicidal photographer.

Then he remembered something else and perked up.

'Do we get a sex holiday?'

Debbie burst into laughter.

'I told you, Sherlock, the term is honeymoon, and yes, if you want one then of course we can.'

'I suppose that might make up for the wedding.' Pulling her closer, he trailed his fingers down her side and over her hip. 'Does it have to have beaches and things though? Mary kept going on about sunbathing and a swimming pool. I don't much care for sunbathing. Or swimming pools.'

'Given your track record that's hardly surprising,' she teased.

'I'll need to find some way to stop John dragging me to a series of pubs for that stag do thing,' Sherlock added, musing on the other needless and irritating things he'd need to avoid. 'Oh, and please don't let Karin take you to Las Vegas for a weekend or do anything involving strippers.'

'Let's skip it.'

'The strippers?'

'The lot of it.' Debbie sat up and turned to face him. 'The hen night, the stag do, the wedding, the reception, cake and dresses and speeches and…all of it. Let's just skip it.'

Sherlock frowned.

'I thought you wanted to get married.'

'I want to be married, Sherlock, not just have a wedding!'

'Oh.' Sitting up beside her, he blinked in confusion. 'I thought you had to have a wedding in order to get married.'

'Well, yes, but it doesn't have to be a huge, fancy one.' Taking one of his hands in both of hers,
she kissed his knuckles. 'The nursery term is over in a few weeks. We can just...just go somewhere. Tell everyone...I don't know, that you're on a case or something and I'm keeping you company because you can't ask John to leave Mary and Rosie. Sort it out quietly, just a simple, private little civil ceremony, then come back married and skip the whole silly nonsense.'

Sherlock stared at her in astonishment.

'...we can do that?'

'Of course we can. Lots of people do.'

'Then-' he could feel a smile that was half relieved and half delighted sneaking onto his face '-then yes, please, let's do that. You – you don't mind?'

She snorted.

'I hate big weddings. Planning the one with Tony was absolute hell, and that was before he broke it off and dumped me with less than a fortnight to go. You don't want a big, fussy wedding, do you?'

'Good god, no.' Sherlock felt oddly buoyant to the point of being lightheaded, and broke into a broad grin at the same time she did. Of course his Debbie wouldn't want to do something tedious like John and Mary's wedding. How he loved her – the thought intruded without conscious decision – and why, why had he not thought of marrying her sooner?

He didn't even realise he'd spoken aloud until she gave him a long, deep kiss that sent warm tingles all the way down to his toes. Brushing her hair away from her face, he pulled her onto his lap and gasped in surprise when the movement brushed over another erection that he didn't recall getting.

Pushing the sheets away behind her, Debbie leaned into him and let her hands trail from his cheeks to his collarbones, then further down to his chest. Sherlock made to touch her but couldn't stop his head falling back against the wall with a low gasp when she reached down to manoeuvre him inside herself and sank down with a soft sound of pleasure. He settled his hands on her hips as she began to rock them, and took in the sight of her for a few long moments before permitting his eyes to slide closed. As so often happened without sight, the rest of his senses seemed to heighten every perception to razor sharpness, from the softness of her flesh beneath his hands to the sound of her breathing, the soft slap of skin on skin, and the deliciously building pressure where their bodies joined.

'Sherlock,' she murmured suddenly, cupping his left cheek with one hand, 'Look at me. Please,'

Too lost in sensation to really contemplate the oddness of that request, Sherlock opened his eyes again and let her catch his gaze. Her eyes were dark, blown wide, but something intense and strangely unfathomable seemed to communicate itself through them. It was so forceful that he actually found himself concentrating, the effort drowning out even the haze of sensation to hold his attention like a vice. How was she doing that? Was she even doing it deliberately? How had he never before properly noticed all the intricate details of her eyes, from the sweep of the lashes to the rich, deep colour that swallowed him up even as he tried to properly catalogue it...

When she gasped and ground down against him, pupils dilating fully so her irises were barely even visible, he abruptly registered the feel of her body convulsing around his as she hit her peak. Now once more focused entirely on that exquisite friction, he arched up, craving more of it and suddenly, desperately, needing his own release.
Debbie leaned against him so their foreheads touched and let him control the pace with his hands on her hips. It took only moments before Sherlock was groaning, pulling her closer to him so he could bury his face into her neck to stifle a cry as the delicious pinnacle ripped through him. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close as their mutual gasps settled, then finally sat up again to comb his sweat-dampened curls away from his face.

Once his breathing was more even, Sherlock gave her a kiss and nosed at her cheek. An important thought occurred to him.

'Even if we aren't having a big wedding…can we still have a sex holiday afterwards?'
Once they'd established some basic parameters – including Debbie’s laughing confirmation that yes, a sex holiday was still very much an option – Sherlock insisted on taking care of all the logistical arrangements himself. It gave him something to do in between cases, and more importantly meant he could ensure that Mycroft didn't get wind of anything. After a judicious amount of research, and taking into account Debbie's stated preference for somewhere "quiet and pretty in the countryside,” he settled on a small village in Somerset a few hours' drive out of Bath. The city's registry office was surprisingly easy to book – he didn't even need to argue with anyone – and so was the little out of the way cottage in the Cotswold hills. It apparently had a resident cat, but he didn't really mind that and knew Debbie would quite like it.

'Are you really getting that many cases by email these days, Sherlock?' John asked him one day as they exited a scene past a scowling Donovan. 'That one must be at least an eight, judging by the way you're smirking at it.'

'Maybe a generous seven,' Sherlock lied smoothly, quickly pocketing his phone. Damn John's burgeoning observation skills. Although some strange, dizzy part of him wanted more and more insistently to grab his friend by the arms and loudly announce what was going on, he continued to suppress it. Of course it was hardly the first secret he'd kept from John Watson – and he doubted it would be the last – but the idea of being married to Debbie had shifted with surprising alacrity from something entirely practically-minded to a concept that for some reason engendered a fluttering sort of excitement all on its own. Which was absurd, since it wouldn't really change anything in terms of their relationship.

Marriage changes you as a person. What a ridiculous concept. Anyway, Mrs Hudson was one to talk, given her choice of homicidal drug baron husband. He could only imagine her reaction to this, though. It would probably involve some kind of screech-owl impression.

The weeks to the end of the nursery term positively crawled by. Sherlock found his energy levels even more bizarrely high than usual, and when he went to meet Debbie on the Friday to walk to the café with her it was all he could do not to drag her into an alleyway and do something distinctly untoward that would have raised more than Mycroft's eyebrows.

'You're fidgeting, Sherlock,’ she said after dinner, coming back out of the kitchen with a cup of tea for each of them. 'If I didn't know better I'd think you were excited about something.'
'Hardly. Just...impatient.' He took a sip and made a face at her giggle. 'If you'd agreed to go to the train station straight from the nursery today rather than waiting until Tuesday next week…'

'That wouldn't really have matched up with this devious case-based cover story you've made up for John and Mary though, would it?'

'No, but John wouldn't have worked that out until we were on the train.'

'Perhaps, but he does have both our mobiles and I'd rather not get incessantly pestered…unless where we're going has no signal?'

Sherlock smirked and winked at her, which elicited another laugh. She'd been trying to extract their destination from him for the last five days, without success, although he'd rather enjoyed dropping cryptic hints and watching her try to fathom them.

'It isn't abroad, is it?' she said suddenly. 'I don't think my passport's valid…'

'It is. I renewed it for you last week.' Then, when her eyes nearly popped, he grinned. 'But yes, it is in England.'

'Well, that's progress!' Putting her now-empty cup aside, she nibbled at her bottom lip for a moment and then stood up. 'So, since I'm apparently wearing you down…'

'You're not *wearing me down* – confirming that we're getting married in England is hardly a particularly revelatory disclosure, not least given the legalities involved in the action.'

'Getting *married* in England…so does that imply we're going somewhere else afterwards?' she asked impishly, going to the door and flipping the latch closed. 'You know, I read your article about the science of deduction during interrogations. Some of the facial cues you talked about were really *very* interesting.'

That made him chuckle. Debbie had read quite a lot of his website – vastly more than she had of John's blog, in fact – because she claimed that reading things he had written from his own point of view was a *fascinating insight* into how his mind worked.

'I see,' he said, putting his tea aside. 'Does that mean you're planning to interrogate me, then?'

'Maybe.' She came back to the fireplace and knelt down in front of him, running her hands up his legs. 'I suppose it depends on if you're going to give anything up freely.'

'You could just wait,' he said dryly, but had to admit he was both intrigued and getting rather aroused by the way her fingers were creeping up his thighs, kneading and squeezing softly into his flesh as they went.

Bugger, now he had an erection.

'That'd be no fun though,' she said, and popped the button on his trousers. Before he could properly catch up to what she was doing, never mind voice any kind of comment or objection, she had bent over him and pulled aside enough layers of cloth to take him into her mouth.

Sherlock gasped at the glorious pressure and warmth unexpectedly enveloping him, and his hands flew down to tangle in her hair. She couldn't do this *here*. This was…this was the living room. Where he saw clients. Where he solved *cases*. Good god, *John* had been sitting in the chair opposite, less than two strides away, that very afternoon!
When Debbie took him in further, and pushed her hands down to grip underneath his thighs, the thought fled from his mind as quickly as it had arrived and he let his head fall back with a groan. His hips were undulating of their own accord, all conscious processes drowned in the deafening roar of sensation coursing through him.

Her tongue did something truly remarkable that made his entire body jerk and he straightened his neck to look down at her. Oh, why did the sight of her like that send such a violent surge of exquisite heat through his belly? She'd done this before – several times now, in fact – but something about seeing her on her knees between his legs, glancing up coyly from beneath lowered lashes...

He climaxed suddenly and without the usual forewarning feeling of tightening in his limbs, which made him cry out as much in surprise for the abruptness as in pleasure at the feeling. Then he realised he'd inadvertently been holding Debbie's head down and hastily removed his hands with a flush of remorse.

'...sorry.'

Sitting up, she giggled and then leaned up to give him a kiss. She tasted salty and a little bitter – oh, that was what he tasted like. The thought made him blush for some reason, which was completely irrational given the obvious biological components of semen.

Debbie went to the bathroom for a flannel so he could sort himself and his clothes out again. After rinsing it out she perched on the arm of his chair and cuddled into his side when he put his arms around her.

Curious. He'd sat like this with Janine once, during their false dalliance, but at the time he'd been too focused on dissembling to notice much about it. In fact it felt nice – with Debbie – and he gave her a tug so she was sitting properly on his lap, helping her to arrange her legs so they draped over the opposite arm of the chair.

'Good to know I can surprise you,' she said, kissing him softly on the cheek. 'So, will you tell me where we're going, now?'

'No,' he said, laying one hand over her knee. 'And you do quite often, in fact. Surprise me, I mean.'

'Really?' She tangled her fingers through his curls. 'I didn't think I was that unpredictable.'

'You aren't at all. I just get…distracted whenever I try to deduce you.'

'Sherlock Holmes!' she exclaimed with faux horror. 'Are you telling me that you're letting yourself be ruled by some part of your anatomy other than your brain when you look at your fiancé?'

That exclamation made him chuckle, but it was the words your fiancé that caused his smile to inexplicably linger. Then Debbie made a pleased little noise that made him look at her.

'What?'

'You have the most beautiful smile, Sherlock.' She trailed her fingers down from his brow to the corner of his mouth. 'I love seeing it. Seem to have been seeing it more often, lately.'

'I don't really keep track of my own facial expressions.'

'I do.' Leaning closer, she kissed him and nosed gently at his jaw. 'And you've definitely been smiling more. Even when there isn't a pile of dead bodies to investigate.'
You're in a relationship, a real one, and you're ENJOYING it, aren't you? John's words, from what seemed like years ago rather than a mere handful of months, drifted back. Sherlock turned his head to catch Debbie's gaze.

'If I'm smiling more than I used to then it must be your fault.'

'Well, if that is the case then I'll gladly plead guilty for it,' she said, and kissed him again. He smiled against her lips and wrapped one arm around her waist to pull her closer, sliding his other hand up to her thigh.

'I love you,' she sighed, and let her head fall onto his shoulder.

'I know.' He gave her a small squeeze. 'I love you, too. Wouldn't be much point in the whole engagement business otherwise, would there?'

She giggled.

'Ever pragmatic – oh, I'm buzzing.' Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she grimaced at the caller ID on the screen. 'Oh. It's Mum. I'd better take it.' Then, with almost painfully false cheerfulness, she tapped accept. 'Hi, Mum! How are you?'

Sherlock cocked an ear so he could hear both sides of the call, and when Debbie made to stand up – she often paced while on the phone with her parents – he kept his arms around her so she was obliged to remain sitting with him.

Most of the conversation was the usual trivial banalities which didn't interest him in the slightest, so he started nuzzling at her neck and smelling her hair. She'd been using his soap again – overlaid with the mango and passionfruit of her shampoo was a hint of cool peppermint rather than her usual coconut. The scents complemented each other unexpectedly well. Debbie's mother was ranting about some sort of IVF treatment. Ah. That confirmed his primary working theory about her estrangement with her parents.

No need to pay any more attention. He started kissing up her neck and behind her ear, which seemed to distract her somewhat. Her answers to her mother's tirade became even more noncommittal, and she was squirming a little in his lap.

'Sherlock,' she hissed, but with more playfulness than real irritation, covering her phone quickly with one hand. 'Behave yourself.'

'Why? Your mother isn't behaving herself. In fact she's saying a lot of distinctly unflattering and unnecessary things. Why do you even answer her calls?'

'She's my mother.'

'So? She's practically insulting you.'

'I'm used to it. She means well.'

'Highly debatable.' Now rather annoyed at Debbie's insistence on taking her mother's borderline abuse with her usual gentle good humour, he held out his hand. 'Give me the phone.'

'You'll be rude to her.'

'No, I won't. I don't need to be.'

'Don't need to be?' she echoed, clearly confused.
'Please?' he tried.

Debbie hesitated, so he used the opportunity to snatch the handset from her grasp and put it to his ear, ignoring her protests.

'…could at least TRY, it isn't like you're getting any younger and no man is ever going to want-'

'Hello, Abigail,' he said calmly, which earned a brief silence.

'Who is this? Where's Debbie?'

'She's right here, but I don't think she needs to hear any more of your emotional mistreatment directly so I've taken her phone.'

'Who ARE you?'

'I'm her fiancé. And yes,' he added quickly at the sound of an intake of breath, 'To answer your next question, I am fully aware of her inability to have children. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. I'm not sure why so many people of Debbie's acquaintance seem to place so little value on her company that they only see her as some kind of walking uterus, but-’ he had to pause briefly, amusement registering as Debbie half-collapsed against his chest, racked with mostly-silent laughter ‘-well, at any rate, we're getting married quite soon and since that makes me responsible for a significant proportion of her happiness I suggest you terminate these sorts of calls and keep to the perfunctory greetings and sharing of photographs over social media.’

'WHAT? How DARE you forbid me from speaking to my own daughter, you horrible man – who ARE you, anyway?’

'My name is Sherlock Holmes.’ He waited a moment, having anticipated the hasty muttering and not-so-discreet exclamations in the background. Despite them having retired to Spain, he knew Debbie’s parents still monitored things like the BBC and London headlines so there was little doubt in his mind that they would recognise his name.

There was a beep, and the ambient background noise increased in volume.

'Oh, I'm on speaker phone.’ Sherlock flipped Debbie's phone around and pressed the button to do the same, stretching his arm out to the left so she couldn't snatch it back.
'You NEVER are!'

'Mum-' Debbie seemed torn between the urge to bury her face in her hands or burst out laughing again '-he is. Sherlock Holmes. Baker Street, all that. I'd send you a picture only he's- ' with another attempted swipe '-he's got my phone and he has long arms!'

Sherlock grinned at her.

'Really?' That was a man's voice, a bit more tremulous. 'Oh, how exciting! Are you really the chap who found the Reichenbach painting? Why in the world do you want to marry our Debbie?'

In an instant Sherlock's grin vanished, replaced by a frown and an unexpectedly potent flare of anger. He was more than familiar with the absentminded idiocy of most normal people but was he really the only person on the planet who actually saw Debbie Connors? Still, he wasn't particularly inclined to start educating this moron on his daughter's numerous and varied strengths as a person and a romantic partner. Oh, of course, there was a shortcut – he'd quite forgotten.

'Because I love her. Obviously.'

'When's the wedding then?' The mother again, excited now. 'We haven't had our invitation yet – Debbie, you did get the address right, didn't you?'

'You aren't invited,' Sherlock said to her. 'Actually, nobody is, we're eloping, but feel free to take it personally if you like.'

'Deborah Louise Connors, if you think you're getting married without your mother being there-'

'To do what, Mum?' Debbie snapped suddenly, all mirth vanishing. 'Act so supportive like you did with Tony?' Then she got up off Sherlock's lap and stalked into the kitchen, putting a hand up to cover her face.

Dismayed, and more than a trifle alarmed, Sherlock hung up the phone and tossed it aside – it immediately began buzzing again – to pursue her. She was crying. Oh. This had gone dreadfully wrong. He'd intended to shock her parents and make her laugh at their confused responses, not upset her.
'Debbie?' He pulled her against himself and wrapped his arms around her tightly, even more concerned when she buried her face in his shirt and gave a heaving sort of sob.

_You just made your soon-to-be wife cry, you cock._ Internal John was back, rolling his eyes. _You'd better bloody fix this, and be quick about it!_

'I'm sorry,' Sherlock said quickly, kissing her forehead. 'I didn't mean – I just thought it would be funny, to shock them and-

'It's not you, Sherlock.' She sniffed and finally looked up at him. 'I just – I'm sorry, I just snapped, remembering what happened…'

'I'm not going to leave you at the altar,' he said firmly. 'Well, at the office. There won't actually be an altar, as such, but-

'No, not that. Not Tony. What they – what she said-' another sniffle and an obviously-stifled sob, which made him frown in concern. This was new information. He needed to extract it, but doing so would distress her further. Still…she had clearly suppressed this, whatever it was, and was actively suppressing it, and he'd been subjected to enough of John Watson's pseudo-psychological babble over the years that he was aware of the dubious healthiness of such a situation.

Change approach, then.

'What is it?' he asked, gentling his tone while starting to stroke her hair.

She shook her head, but did not uncurl from his chest.

'I don't want to bore you with it, Sherlock. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-

'It won't bore me. Clearly it is something important that I've managed to overlook and can't deduce from existing information…' kissing the side of her forehead absenty, he thought for a moment '…I assume it relates to some way in which your parents, specifically your mother, reacted to Tony Winslow's desertion of you two weeks before your wedding? Presumably said reaction was not as supportive as could be expected?

Debbie looked up at him through tear-stained eyes and he frowned, lifting one hand to wipe the trails from her cheeks.

'You really want to know?'

'Of course,' he said. 'You know how I hate having gaps in my mind palace. Especially about something vital.'

'Something _vital_?'

'You are vital.' He tried a small smile. 'You're the woman I love.'

She sniffed a bit and then stepped away from him, wiping at her eyes.

'It's so silly. I mean, it was years ago…'

'Timeframe seems to be irrelevant in this case.'

Debbie sighed.

'I…it was just after Tony told me he couldn't go through with it. I ran out of the flat crying,
absolutely devastated, and I ended up going to the hotel where they were staying. My parents, I mean. They'd come over for the wedding. They sat me down and I told them everything. The test results, the diagnosis, Tony freaking out and calling it off, and they said-' she stopped and swallowed hard, staring blankly at the kitchen window for a moment.

Sherlock cocked his head, absolutely certain that he was going to be angry with the confession but still desperately needing to hear the details.

'They said-' Debbie folded her arms, then unfolded them and turned back to him '-well, Mum said…she said I shouldn't blame him. That it was perfectly understandable, really. Dad just nodded along with her, like he always does. They said maybe if I looked at treatment, a better prognosis, Tony would reconsider.' Then dropping into a bitter falsetto impression of her mother's voice, she added, 'After all, dear, you can't expect a nice man to want to be with anyone who can't give him a family, can you?'

When she buried her face back in her hands, shaking now more from lingering rage and frustration than sadness, Sherlock felt his jaw lock.


He was angry. No, much more than that.

He was bloody furious.

In two strides he was back in the living room and had snatched up Debbie's phone – still buzzing – from the table where he'd dropped it. The caller ID confirmed that it was still her mother trying to reach her.

Accepting the call, Sherlock spoke briefly into the handset and then hung up. It was not the sort of sentence he was commonly known for uttering – in fact it was much more of a John Watson sort of thing to say – but it had started with you, ended with off and contained several colourful expletives that would have made Mrs Hudson exclaim in protest and flap her hands.

Then he blocked the number and made several other small but important amendments to the phone before throwing it back down on the table a lot harder than he meant to. It bounced twice before sliding to a stop between his closed laptop and a tube of Debbie's glitter glue. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he forced a long exhale and only then looked back at the kitchen.

Debbie was standing there gaping at him – her eyes were damp and wide but she was no longer crying – with her mouth slightly open.

'Sorry,' he said. 'That – ah – made me rather angry.'

'What did you do?' she asked in a very small voice.

'I expressed my sentiments on their behaviour to your parents – admittedly without context, but I'm sure they'll work it out eventually – and then blocked their ability to contact you or leave messages for you by phone, email or on Facebook. You can – um – well, you can unblock them again if you want to later, but…' he trailed off at the look on her face.

'It was years ago, Sherlock.'

'Their sentiments clearly haven't changed,' he pointed out. 'And I may not be entirely fluent in – well – that sort of thing, but even I know what an inappropriate and horrible response that was to what you told them. I thought parents were supposed to be, you know-' he gestured absently at
nothing in particular '-'encouraging, and magnanimous about such things.' Another thought occurred to him and made him wrinkle his nose in distaste. 'My parents were more supportive about faking my suicide on the roof of Bart's. And that was for something important.'

Debbie bit her bottom lip, looking torn between smiling and bursting into fresh tears.

'You really mean that, don't you?'

'Well, they were. Admittedly they didn't come to the funeral, but that was Mycroft's idea as he was sure they wouldn't be suitably convincing.'

'I meant about it not being important.'

'What?'

'My…problem.'

'Your infertility.' When she nodded he made a face. 'It isn't important, though. It doesn't affect your ability to be caring or interesting or kind or intelligent. It doesn't have any effect at all on the way I feel about you. I don't see why it should.'

'You do mean it.' She crossed to him and took his hands in hers, kissing over his knuckles before looking up at him again, eyes bright. 'It doesn't even…really register for you, does it? It's just there, just another thing, like the colour of my hair or the tone of my voice. Just another fact.'

'Yes.' He was confused now. 'Is that…wrong?'

'No. No, it isn't. Sherlock, do you realise how long I spent thinking of…well, thinking of myself as broken, as somehow wrong, for not being able to have children? It was like it defined me as a person. The only thing anyone really saw about me. Everyone either looks at me like I'm some poor, defective wreck or tip-toes around it and pities me instead. Even John and Mary! But you…you've never made me feel like I'm pathetic or damaged or…or anything but me. You just accept it, like you accept my constant baking and obsession with puppets and love of Disney films. It's just…' taking a step closer, she reached up to lay her hands on his cheeks '…you're the only person in the world who never looks at me like I'm missing something. I never thought I'd find anyone who could make me feel like that. And I love you so much, sometimes I pinch myself just to make sure I'm not dreaming and this is actually real. That you're real.'

Sherlock felt a flush rise in his cheeks at the same time that an impossibly joyful warmth filled his chest until it seemed to sort of leak out onto his face in a broad smile. She laughed and kissed him, lifting her arms to drape around his neck.

'In just a couple more days I'm going to be marrying the best and most wonderful man in the entire world. Nuts to my stupid parents. I don't want to think about anything for the next few weeks except you and how much I love you. Especially for just seeing me when you look at me.'

'To be fair,' Sherlock felt obliged to point out, 'I did spend most of a month investigating you on the assumption that you were some sort of international criminal mastermind.'

That got another laugh, which broadened his smile.

'Did you ever work out why you find me so strangely interesting even though I'm-' the corner of her mouth quirked '-what was it? Dull. Ordinary. Normal. Boring?'

'No,' he said with a small shrug. ' Haven't the foggiest.'
'Really.' Her eyebrows rose.

'Yup.' He let the *p* pop and his smile turn impish. 'But-' remembering his thoughts on the airfield '-I am honestly looking forward to spending the rest of both our lives trying to work it out.'

Debbie broke into a grin and kissed him, hard and long enough that he was rather out of breath by the time she released him.

'The next time John says you don't have a romantic bone in your body, I'm going to *slap* him.' Then, dropping her arms and stepping around him, she flicked off the lights before taking one of his hands to pull him towards the bedroom. 'And I hope you're ready for another *interrogation*, Sherlock Holmes, because if you think you're getting off easy after *that* you've got another thing coming.'
Well, Sherlock could hardly object to that idea, but Debbie still didn't get any information out of him on the destination for their wedding or the ensuing honeymoon. Not that it didn't stop her trying for the next few days, of course, but finally they were on the platform at Paddington with an overnight bag each – she packed almost as lightly as he did – and all that he had to do was smirk knowingly whenever she read a destination off the departure board with a hopeful sort of air.

Once they were on the train she took her phone out and called John – after a little discussion they'd decided that it would be more believable for her to let him know that she was being whisked out of town on a case than for Sherlock himself to inform his friend.

'…naturally doesn't have the common bloody courtesy to even text me,' John was saying grumpily, quite audible even without being on speakerphone. 'Well, have fun, I suppose. Oh, and don't drink ANYTHING he gives you.'

'Don't drink anything?'

'Trust me on this.'

'…fair enough. Bye for now then. Love to Mary and Rosie.'

Sherlock beamed at Debbie as she hung up. He hadn't realised she was such a good dissembler, but her casual explanation of "some case or other, you know Sherlock when he gets going" had been perfect.

'What?' she asked, seeing his expression.

'That was just extremely convincing. Might even have fooled me, if I wasn't paying much attention at the time. Lestrade would certainly have bought it.'

She laughed.

'I have ears, Sherlock. Only lies have detail, isn't that right?'

'Very,' he said, oddly delighted at her teasing tone, and put an arm around her. 'The look on his face should be extremely entertaining.'
'Are you sure he won't be upset?'

'Maybe a little. But he'll get over it quickly.'

'If you say so.' She turned slightly to snuggle up against him. 'Will you tell me where we're going now?'

'You'll see when we reach the station and get off.'

'Ooh…fine, I'll wait then.'

The journey was not as monotonous as Sherlock had feared, especially with Debbie cuddled up to his side for the duration. They had a cup of truly appalling tea and a lacklustre sandwich each as lunchtime passed, and dozed intermittently while leaning on each other until his mind registered their destination coming up and forced him back to wakefulness.

She exclaimed in delight the moment she saw the station, then pulled him into a rather prolonged kiss that got some amused looks from the staff and other passengers. For some reason being out on the street in the swirl of people in an unfamiliar city made him keep a tight grip on her hand but she didn't seem to mind.

'I've always wanted to visit Bath,' she said later, glancing back at him playfully after admiring the view from the hotel room window for a moment. 'I suppose you deduced that from some offhand comment I made, did you?'

'Not really,' he said, absently checking his emails for the rental car reservation. 'I heard you mention it to Mrs Hudson when she was talking about her sister moving to Trowbridge.'

'Cheat.'

'Not cheating, just listening.' Pocketing his phone, he jangled the room key at her. 'Stay in, or do you want to go exploring?'

'At street level?'

'Of course.' He smiled – she seemed to find his penchant for clambering all over London via its rooftops endlessly amusing – and jerked his head towards the door. 'Tourists today, registry office tomorrow morning, then head off for our s-‘ he saw her look and hurriedly amended ‘–honeymoon after that.'

'Sounds perfect.'

So they want to the Roman baths and then looked around the medieval abbey, where some tiresome woman on the tower tour kept babbling to Debbie about something called the Jane Austen Museum and how she shouldn't let her young man keep her from seeing it. Sherlock gritted his teeth and steeled himself for an even more boring end of the afternoon but in fact once they were out of sight and earshot Debbie's eager smile turned into a mocking grimace.

'Good lord, she just wouldn't shut up, would she? You can exhale, Sherlock, I wouldn't dream of dragging you to such a place!'

They look a long walk down the river instead, much as they often did in London, and had dinner at a small restaurant on Pulteney Bridge – for some reason there was live jazz music playing, but it was otherwise fairly tolerable – before returning to the hotel room.

'It's so beautiful.' Debbie tweaked the curtains aside to peer out at the city. 'Not that London isn't,
of course, but still…'

Sherlock came to join her by the window and rested one hand on the small of her back. She’d just showered and had only a towel wrapped around herself, but after spending an entire prolonged day at her side he was positively *itching* to touch her bare skin. The way she was leaning over the broad window ledge beautifully highlighted the silhouette of her figure, pleasingly unbroken by clothing, and the city lights outside made her eyes sparkle like fireflies.

An idea occurred to him and he let his hand slide down, over her buttocks to the bottom edge of the towel, then up again beneath it to the inside of her thigh.

She giggled and shifted her hips, glancing back at him playfully.

'Can't a girl admire a scenic view in peace?'

'Admire away,' he said with a smirk. 'I'm not stopping you.'

That got another giggle but she did turn back to the window, so he resumed his progress under the towel until he felt the warmth at the apex of her thighs. She squirmed a little when he began to trail his fingertips in a lazy pattern, barely grazing the most sensitive part of her core.

'Sherlock…'

'Hush.' Leaning over her slightly without stopping his motions, Sherlock kissed around the back of her neck and up behind one ear. She made a little noise of pleasure, confirmed by the moisture around his probing touch, so he pressed a little closer and slipped a finger inside her. It took only a little effort to crook it appropriately to find the right place. Her hands clenched on the windowsill and she gave a soft gasp, pressing back against him.

He could feel a familiar tightness below his own waist now but ignored it, slowly adding a second finger before drawing them both back out and then back in. Debbie gave a soft little whimper, now rocking her hips in time with his motions. He watched her for a few moments and then reached up to untuck the towel so it fell from her body onto the floor, permitting him to cup one of her breasts with his free hand. Moaning again, she arched into his touch and looked back over her shoulder at him, pupils blown wide and lips slightly apart.

'Sherlock…' this time his name came out on a breathy moan, but she was staring at him in obvious entreaty now. Combining her beseeching stare with his own by now very insistent erection left only one possible course. He shrugged his robe off, letting go of her long enough to shed his pyjamas before adjusting his position behind her so he could sink down into the gloriously tight warmth that awaited him.

*Oh,* the change in angle lent new pressure and friction in unexpected places and he groaned, gripping her waist for better leverage. She’d somehow had the presence of mind to close the curtains fully but was still bracing herself against the windowsill, pushing back against his thrusts with little gasps. The sight of her back curved in front of him was absolutely delicious, and he let his hands roam over her spine for a minute before snaking one down between her legs so his fingers could brush against the most sensitive spot.

She cried out and bucked against him moments later, letting her head fall down onto her arms as he rode her through it, quickening the pace to chase his own climax. It finally burst from him and his hips stuttered, his entire body jerking as blind ecstasy swamped all of his senses.

After hurriedly cleaning up they collapsed into the bed together and Sherlock pulled Debbie close to kiss her properly. She ran her fingers up through his hair as their lips parted and then gave a
happy little laugh, tucking her head under his chin.

'Well, that was different.'

'It's entirely your fault for bending over that way,' he said drowsily. 'I can't be held responsible for my libido if you do that.'

'Your *libido*?' She chuckled and hugged him. 'I've created a monster.'

'Very possibly.' He kissed her forehead. 'Now go to sleep.'
They made it to the registry office on time the following morning, largely thanks to Sherlock's infallible internal chronometer, only to have to sit and wait for nearly twenty minutes before they could get on with it. Sherlock wondered why the receptionist kept scowling at him until Debbie leaned over to shoot a glare back and loudly said

'It was my idea, actually.'

The woman looked away, blushing furiously, and Debbie rolled her eyes. Sherlock, however, broke into an irresistible grin. Of course, the receptionist had assumed that he had dragged his bride here for the minimum possible ceremony when it was only natural for her to want some enormous, showy wedding and a big flouncy gown. Debbie was wearing a simple cream-coloured shift dress that reached just to her knees, and he thought she looked wonderful.

He was just in one of his usual suits, of course, but in deference to Debbie's fondness for it he'd worn the burgundy shirt.

Eventually they were ushered upstairs to the office where the registrar, a painfully tedious middle-aged woman with a receding hairline and six false teeth, fusssed and dawdled over the minimum required ceremony for the introduction to the two witnesses – supplied by the office itself – and the necessary spoken vows.

Sherlock corrected her four times before she remembered to use the modern, purely secular wording he'd supplied, which Debbie seemed to find greatly amusing. By the time they actually got through all the business about respecting and cherishing, the registrar was scowling at them with such clear reproof that they both started giggling. When he got the rings out of his breast pocket it took several attempts to get them onto each other's fingers, and their signatures on the certificate were rather wobblier than they probably should have been.

Finally – and with obvious disapproval – the registrar pronounced them man and wife, at which point they both burst into laughter and kissed each other. It was clearly all the woman could do not to chase them out of the building with a broomstick, and the receptionist stared at them in evident astonishment as they hastened out onto the street to return to the hotel.

'Oh, that woman reminded me far too much of Mycroft,' Debbie said breathlessly. 'I almost wondered if he'd somehow disguised himself and snuck in to replace the real registrar…'
'I think Mycroft would have come up with a better fake hairline,' Sherlock shot back, which set them both chuckling again.

The car was waiting for them at the hotel and Debbie watched with mild surprise as Sherlock folded himself into the driver's seat to start the engine.

'I didn't know you even could drive,' she said, putting their bags into the back and then settling down beside him.

'I actually quite like driving,' he admitted. 'Just not in London.'

'Well, nobody likes driving in London. Too much traffic.' She nudged her shoes off and tucked her legs up under herself. 'Will you tell me where we're going?'

'Nope.'

'…fair enough.'

Sherlock was relieved to get out of the bustling city centre onto the countryside roads – even if Bath's traffic was nowhere near as hectic as London's – and found himself unconsciously relaxing. It reminded him pleasantly of the case in Dartmoor that he and John had tackled…was it really already so many years ago? Odd how a comparatively harrowing experience and deeply taxing mystery could become such an agreeable memory.

They stopped at a small village called Monkton Farleigh and had a leisurely lunch in an extremely quiet pub, then returned to the road. After another peaceful hour Sherlock realised that Debbie had turned slightly on her side and was staring at him rather intently with one hand under her chin.

'I'm not really concentrating,' he said mildly, 'It isn't that taxing an exercise.'

'I know.' She smiled. 'I just…I can't believe we're married. We really did it. We eloped to Somerset and now you're whisking me off into the countryside…I feel like I ought to pinch myself.'

'I hope you weren't daydreaming when you signed your name on the certificate. I'm fairly sure it constitutes a legally binding document.'

'No regrets or second thoughts, then?'

He glanced at her long enough to verify the tease and then smiled himself.

'Not in the slightest.'

'Good. Me neither.' She sighed thoughtfully. 'When the new term starts it's going to take a bit of getting used to, being Mrs Holmes rather than Miss Connors.'

'You don't have to take the name,' he pointed out. 'This is hardly the eighteen-hundreds.'

'I want to, though. I know it's old-fashioned but I like it. Makes me feel…yours.'

That made him smile again. It was strange, the sense of satisfaction and contentment he felt at the implied ownership of her. How very eighteen-hundreds. Still, she seemed to like it too, and it wasn't as though he really thought of her as his property, or something similarly mad. There was just a certain gratification in the permissive selfishness of it. His Debbie. Her Sherlock. Their marriage.
The thought was warm to the touch, like the lingering spark of a hot coal, and sent a pleasant shiver through him when he contemplated it.

Debbie dozed off for a bit but stirred to wakefulness just as he turned them off the main road down the rather more uneven track that led to the cottage. It was a brisk fifteen minute walk from the nearby village, close enough for convenience but far enough to still feel isolated, and not much bigger than the main floor of Baker Street.

'It's *perfect*, Sherlock,' she said to him as they got out. 'Look at that view!'

The key was, as promised, underneath an upturned flowerpot by the front step, but Sherlock had only just got the door open when something wound itself around his legs and then sauntered over towards Debbie, making her exclaim in surprise.

'They said there was a cat;' he said, glancing back in amusement at the sight of the enormous tabby tom flopping around at her feet. 'I didn't think you'd mind.'

'Oh, he's *gorgeous!*' Debbie stooped to pet the animal, which promptly began emitting purrs at the volume of a buzzsaw. She looked up at him and grinned. 'I thought you preferred dogs.'

'I don't mind cats. They tend to keep to themselves.'

'That's true. I had one growing up, in theory, but it was more like a mostly-absent housemate than a normal pet.' She gave the furry head a scratch. 'Hmm, no collar. I don't know if you have a name, Mister Puss, but for some reason I'm inclined to call you John.'

Sherlock chuckled at that idea as they went inside, where she exclaimed anew at the little sitting room with its wood fire, the beautiful old-fashioned kitchen and the tiny overgrown patio at the back. The bedroom was upstairs, an ample four poster in the centre of it, and he was just investigating the latches on the windows when Debbie squealed in delight at the claw-footed tub in the bathroom.

'Oh, this is *heavenly*,' she said, coming in and collapsing onto her back on the bed. 'However did you find it?'

'It's me,' he pointed out wryly.

'Hmm. Yes, it is.' Levering herself partially upright on her elbows, she caught his eye with an obviously suggestive wink. 'Why don't you run us a bath and I'll see if there's anything to eat.'

Once she was gone Sherlock took a moment to reboot from the unexpectedly salacious images that had flooded his mind at the notion of bathing together. Of course, he reflected as he turned the taps on, sex in the bath was out of the question. The risk of slipping, not to mention the logistical issues presented by the combination of water and natural lubrication…
'You get in,' Debbie called from downstairs. 'I'll bring it up.'

Eating while bathing? That seemed absurd to Sherlock, but he stepped back into the bedroom to undress anyway. The tub was impressive; only a little bigger than the one at Baker Street but considerably deeper. Peering at the mysterious array of bottles lined up on the shelf nearby, he settled for a small blob of something lime scented which promptly exploded into bubbles. It was all he could do to sit up and extricate himself from them when he heard Debbie on the stairs.

'Oh my goodness. Here, hold this while I get undressed.'

'Cheese and biscuits in the bath?' he said, bemused, when she passed him the plate. 'That's rather decadent, isn't it?'

'We're on our honeymoon, Sherlock. A little decadence is perfectly allowed.'

She insisted on feeding him, as though he were incapable of doing it himself, which confused him until he hesitantly decided to reciprocate. Ah. The lingering way her tongue trailed over his fingertips even though there were quite definitely no remaining crumbs was hardly conducive purely to the act of eating. He moved the plate to the floor once it was empty and pulled her into his arms for a series of lengthy kisses.

'You really want to defile this lovely bathtub, Sherlock?' she asked teasingly. He shrugged, more intent on the tactile examination he was making of her breasts, which were slick with moisture and several puffs of bubbles.

'Not a very good idea.' Interesting, despite the warmth of the bath her nipples were already peaked under his hands. She made a little noise of pleasure when he tugged at one with thumb and forefinger. 'Although the water is…pleasant, I suppose.'

Debbie laughed and turned, leaning into him with her back on his chest. He put his arms around her again and adjusted his legs to the outside of hers, nosing at her now-damp hair. The proximity of their slippery bodies was definitely having an arousing effect, but cuddling in the bath was also unexpectedly comfortable and he found himself mildly annoyed at his erection trying to hurry things along in a carnal direction.
'Stop that,' he said, although it came out in a rather lower tone than he'd meant it to, when Debbie ground her hips back into his.

'Hmm.' She trailed one finger up the length of his left leg from his calf to the top of his thigh. 'What if I don't want to? What if-' craning her neck back to speak into his ear '-what if my new husband is so very sexy that I can't keep my hands off him?'

For some reason that manner of identification sent a bolt of delectable lightning right into Sherlock's belly and he felt himself twitch. Fascinating. Nuptial modes of address as an aid to physical arousal.

'We are not,' he said firmly, 'Going to attempt to have sex in this bath tub. There are numerous aspects of both safety and practicality that-

'God, you're hot when you're all coldly rational.' She span around so fast that some of the water slopped out onto the floor, taking his face in her hands and pulling him into a deep kiss before he could think of any suitable response to that rather strange statement. The kiss turned into a more lengthy exploration of his throat, then the rest of his neck and shoulders, and after a minute of this Sherlock decided that surrendering to his traitorous physiology wouldn't be such an enormous loss on this particular occasion.

'Not in the tub,' he said resolutely, taking hold of Debbie's upper arms to manhandle her away from his lap. The outright mischievous grin she shot him in response sent off more unexpected sparks in various pieces of his anatomy, but by sheer force of will he managed to level a more sceptical – and pointed – look at her in return. She burst into giggles but seemed to finally acquiesce, stepping out to pull two of the enormously fluffy towels from a nearby railing.

When Sherlock extricated himself from the water as well she immediately wrapped one of the towels around him and stood up on tiptoe for another kiss. Odd, the way she was patting him dry at the same time was bizarrely arousing. Even the vigorous rubbing that left his hair standing out at absurd angles from his head felt strangely good. He returned the favour, being careful not to pull too hard on her longer curls, but the ensuing more leisurely exploration of the curves and valleys of her body made his thoughts rapidly turn back in a more salacious direction.

He wasn't entirely sure how they ended up on the floor, with Debbie laying on the towels and him on top of her. Then she lifted her legs around his waist, locking her ankles together in the small of his back to pull him closer, and all other considerations fled from his mind as he sank down into her. She was warm and tight and oh, the way her flesh yielded softly to his was so delectable…

why was it that he could never properly catalogue the sensation accurately enough that the raw pleasure of it always took him by surprise?

With a sigh Sherlock relaxed into his body and let it lead, his hips shifting as if of their own accord to stoke the rising flame in his belly to ever-greater heights. He caught Debbie's lips in a lazy but deep kiss, leaning on his right forearm for leverage while slipping his other hand down to lightly stroke at the core of her. It didn't take long before she was arching and writhing against him with soft cries but he kept his touch teasing, holding her there at the brink for a few long moments before drawing the climax out of her, driving himself down into her once, twice, three times more as heavenly pressure enveloped him. He came with a gasp, pulling her close as he did, and let his neck go slack until he felt the chill of the floor tiles on his forehead.

After a few minutes the combination of cooling skin and air in the room registered as uncomfortable, so they finished drying off properly and then retired to the bedroom. The four poster was, as Sherlock had surmised when first seeing it, hardly as comfortable as his bed in Baker Street, but when Debbie slid naked into the covers beside him he decided he could tolerate it. They lay there in a tangle of limbs, exchanging kisses and caresses until mutual drowsiness
became too much to deny, after which a brief hunt for the bedside light switch rewarded them with deep countryside darkness, and sleep.

The rest of the holiday – no, the *honeymoon* – went by without particular incident; a rare event in Sherlock's general experience, but not an unwelcome one. They walked down into the village a few times to make use of the small shop or the surprisingly cozy pub, but otherwise hardly left the cottage except to sit on the patio at the back. Sherlock had initially feared that boredom would set in very quickly, but in fact he found that twenty-four-seven unfettered access to Debbie seemed to elevate his carnal appetites to the point that he actually turned his phone off on the fourth day when it beeped to herald the arrival of an email.

Exploring and examining every inch of Debbie's skin, every lock of her hair, every gasp or squeak or cry of ecstasy that he could coax from her, was an unexpectedly all-consuming pastime. John and Mary could keep their silly swimming pools and sandy beaches. A quiet sex holiday with Debbie in a countryside cottage was *infinitely* more satisfying than whatever strange rituals the Watsons had christened their new marriage with.

In fact, when they were on the train back from Bath and only an hour out of London, Sherlock found himself actually rather regretting that the interval was over. Not just for the copious amounts of sexual intercourse – although that was a factor, of course – but because he realised he would rather miss the sense of isolation, of being alone with Debbie as though nobody else in the world really existed apart from the two of them. What an idiotically sentimental notion, he mused, idly running a hand through her hair before pausing, as he had many times since the registry office, to take in the sight of the unadorned gold band on his left ring finger. He was *married*. To Debbie.

To *his* Debbie.

It was late evening by the time they caught a cab back to Baker Street, and on autopilot they hastened upstairs past the clucking greetings of Mrs Hudson to retire. The flat for some reason felt oddly unfamiliar, although it hadn't changed one iota in their absence, and Sherlock found himself cuddling up to Debbie in bed as much as for some obscure form of comfort as to enjoy the feeling of her bare skin against his.

'It's all right, Sherlock,' she murmured, stroking his hand where it rested on her stomach. 'We can figure out how to tell everyone later.'

Of course. Stupid. *Stupid.* He'd made himself uneasy with consideration of the impending confrontation about their elopement. Oh, John and Mary would be easy enough to handle as their excitement at the situation would override any other considerations, and Mycroft's disdainful scorn was a minor irritant at best, but he was most definitely not looking forward to the astonished screeches of Mrs Hudson or, worse, the inevitable phone call to his mother…

The following morning he did, however, turn his phone back on. There were six messages from Lestrade about minor cases, none particularly taxing or interesting, and rather more from John offering needless pieces of advice on *looking after Debbie* while on the case. Chuckling to himself in anticipation of the eventual reaction, Sherlock tapped out a reply to the most recent one.

*We're back, and both fine. Poor signal.* - SH

The latter was an outright falsehood of course, but he couldn't help feeling that John Watson would be somehow more content with the lie than the reality that his friend had been so busy indulging in carnal sensations that he'd thrown his phone into the bottom of his suitcase and largely forgotten about it for the rest of the trip.

'You're smirking,' Debbie said, putting a cup of tea down beside him. 'Please don't tell me you just
spilled the beans to John over a text message.'

'And miss the look on his face? Of course not.' Sherlock put his phone aside and picked up his tea, aware that he was still grinning and not much caring.

'Well, good, because Mary just texted me to ask if they can drop by with Rosie, and I said yes, so you can work on wiping that smug look off your face while I bake some scones.'
That instruction proved to be rather difficult, as unfortunately whenever Sherlock attempted to compose himself his mind helpfully reminded him that he was married to Debbie and, furthermore, that John Watson had no idea about it, which set him grinning again. He hid it with a cough and an attempt at briskness when the knock at the door came, and then Debbie was too busy cooing over how much Rosie had grown – as if even an infant could show any kind of noticeable change in less than a month – to notice his poorly-concealed smirk.

'Good case, then?' John asked, of course incorrectly attributing his friend's pleasant mood to the recent supposed mystery in Somerset. 'You look like a cat that got the cream, so I assume several people died?'

'Nobody died, in fact.'

'Oh. Right. Well, that's…good, then.' That elicited a vaguely quizzical expression. 'What was it then?'

'An abduction,' Sherlock said happily. 'Brilliantly executed. Nobody even realised what had happened afterwards. Apart from me, obviously.'

'Good god. Who got…kidnapped, then?'

'A woman.'

'But you got her back all right?'

'Yes, yes, she's absolutely fine.'

'John,' Mary said suddenly, tugging at her husband's sleeve and pulling him closer to speak into his ear when he gave her a baffled look.

'Here we go, everyone, only out of the oven ten minutes ago,' Debbie said, coming in with a tray of cups and the promised scones. 'I made some of those fruit rusks for Rosie, too…'

'Oh, you're a mercy,' Mary said, accepting one of the hard biscuits on the side of her plate. 'She won't touch the blooming shop-bought ones now. Here we go.'
While Rosie gnawed contently and made mumbling noises to herself, Sherlock noticed the wry line of Mary's mouth when she caught his eye. He carefully folded his hands behind his back.

'Too late, you bugger,' she said laughingly. 'We've both seen them.'

Ah. That at least explained why John's mouth was currently open.

'Seen what?' Debbie asked, coming back in with the teapot and milk jug.

'The wedding rings on both your fingers,' Mary supplied, deadpan, and raised her eyebrows pointedly when – of course – Debbie glanced at her own on reflex before bursting into giggles.

'Oh my god,' John finally managed. 'You—' he brandished a finger at Sherlock '—you cock! An abduction in Somerset? Oh, you — you utter cock!'

'In fairness, John,' Debbie intervened, looping an arm around Sherlock's waist and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek in between giggles, 'The eloping idea was all me. The mastermind here just arranged the logistics of everything else.'

'You got married!' John barely seemed to hear her, still gaping at Sherlock and looking like he was torn between hugging him or punching him on the nose. 'I don't bloody believe it! You— you really…you really married Debbie?'

'She married me back,' Sherlock pointed out, which for some reason cracked Mary's composure and she all but doubled over laughing. 'What?'

'What is all this noise about — oh, hello!' Right on cue, Mrs Hudson appeared in the doorway.

'Hello, Mrs Hudson,' Debbie said. 'Would you like some tea and a scone?'

'Oh, that'd be lovely, thank you dear. What's so funny?'

'Sherlock didn't tell you either?' John demanded, all but rounding on her.

'What, that they were getting married?' Then, at Sherlock's vaguely shocked look, the old landlady cackled in amusement. 'I spotted the rings the moment the two of you got home, you big lump. As if I'd miss a thing like that! Your brother's downstairs, by the way, but he was being very strangely polite and said he wouldn't come up until he was invited, for some reason.'

'Oh, good.' Sherlock sighed. He'd hoped to avoid Mycroft's scrutiny for the immediately foreseeable future. 'Well, he might as well. MYCROFT!'

'Good thing I put the kettle back on,' Debbie said. 'Don't worry, I won't…flavour his tea this time.' She smiled sweetly at him. 'You see, Sherlock, the problem is that anyone who spends any time with you picks up on your habit of noticing everything and it's very hard to stop doing that once you've started!' She held up her left hand to indicate the gold band and the matching little diamond solitaire that Sherlock had insisted on getting her so she didn't lack an engagement ring. 'Yes, we're married. Well spotted. Like I said, the eloping was my idea…I hope nobody's upset, it's just I rather lost my appetite for showy weddings after, well…'

'Of course nobody's upset,' Mrs Hudson said, scoffing and grabbing her hand to examine the rings with careful scrutiny. 'Silly girl, you get married however you want to get married, and poo to anyone who complains, I say.'

'Amen to that.' John seemed to have calmed down now, and was beaming. He stuck out a hand and, a trifle puzzled at the nonsensical gesture, Sherlock accepted it to shake. 'Congratulations,
Sherlock. You're a bloody lunatic, and I don't know how she puts up with you, but the I'm hardly one to talk when it comes to wives…'

'Damn right you aren't,' Mary said with a grin, but anything else she might have added was cut off by Mycroft's arrival.

'Oh, I see I've arrived in the midst of the felicitations. How charming.' His withering tone indicated that he found the scene anything but. 'Perhaps I may have a quick word with the recent groom?'

Sherlock glanced quickly at Debbie but she was laughing at him.

'Of course he'd find out somehow. Go on, deal with him and then I'll ring your mum, if you like.' The prospect of not having to deal with the odious task of informing his mother brightened Sherlock considerably, so he kissed her on the cheek and then stepped into the kitchen for a semblance of privacy in the discussion.

'Well, well, brother mine.' Mycroft regarded him with wry amusement. 'So much for this passing eccentricity and experiment with relationships.'

'Debbie isn't an experiment,' Sherlock shot back. 'She's- ' he managed not to skip a beat as vocalising the fact to his brother made his heart jump '-my wife.'

'Clearly. You're welcome, by the way.'

'For what?'

'Firstly for noticing your little scheme and pretending ignorance so that you could have your little sex holiday in isolated bliss-

'Oh, please.'

'-and secondly for a very minor favour from the Home Office. It turns out that a certain- ' Mycroft paused briefly to consult his ever-present notepad '-Abigail and Stephen Connors attempted to arrive via Gatwick Airport a fortnight ago, supposedly to stop their daughter from committing the worst mistake of her life. Unfortunately there was a mix-up with their passports and they were sent back to Almeria, unable to return to the United Kingdom for at least another month. Terrible thing, when paperwork gets in such a mess, isn't it?

Sherlock blinked, genuinely taken aback by that and for once not adverse to showing it.

'Why?'

'Why not?' his brother responded with one of those irritatingly sanguine half-smiles. 'They do seem like rather unpleasant people. And shock you though it may, I do happen to have a passing interest in your happiness, little brother. Unusual enough for it to be found somewhere other than at a crime scene that the situation seemed worth preserving, for the minor effort it took.'

'I see.'

'Now, to business.' Mycroft extracted a file from his coat and held it out. 'The contents of James Moriarty's little black book. Some extremely interesting leads, nuggets and titbits, all of which will need careful evaluation and investigation to tease out into anything meaningful of course.'

'Naturally.' More grateful for the change of tack than he cared to admit, Sherlock flipped the file
open and leafed through it. Shanghai. Astana. Jaipur. Kabul. Izmir. All known locations where he'd dismantled the majority of the consulting criminal's web, but now each one sprouting a tantalising new lead, a chance to fill in another tiny gap or barely-perceived irregularity…

*I really don't know what I'd do if I lost you.*

The audio memory of Debbie's voice, anxious and distressed, intruded before he could censor it and Sherlock found himself snapping the folder closed as if on reflex. Mycroft did have the good grace to at least affect surprise at the implicit refusal.

'Lost your appetite for globe-trotting, brother mine? It would certainly forestall *boredom*…'

'I'm sure you have plenty of minions at your disposal to go running after bits and pieces of possible leads all over the world,' Sherlock said to him, handing the folder back. 'If you need help collating their findings into a coherent picture, of course, you know where to find me.'

'And they say marriage doesn't change a man,' Mycroft said dryly, but whether in approval, amusement or something else altogether wasn't entirely clear.

'I'm the same person I always was,' Sherlock retorted. 'I've simply…adjusted my priorities. A perfectly reasonable action in light of…supporting data.'

'How romantic.'

Hmm. A barely-there quirk of the brow, a hint of a not-quite-grimace on the left side of the mouth, the forcibly clipped tone. It all added up to one inescapable deduction.

'You're jealous,' Sherlock informed him. Mycroft immediately scoffed. Too immediately.

'Jealous. Please. If I wanted a life with mundanity there's hardly a shortage.'

'But that the mundane can cause happiness. That notion still eludes you.' For a brief, giddy instant Sherlock almost pitied his brother. Fortunately the moment passed rapidly. 'Perhaps you should try a local midwife, Mycroft. It took a nursery school teacher to keep up with me, so I dare say you'll have better luck with someone used to an entirely uncommunicative form of companionship.'

'What a quaint idea.'

'Never say never.'

Then, leaving his brother to chuckle quietly and take his top secret nonsense away, Sherlock went back into the living room. Debbie turned as soon as she heard his step, breaking out into the sunny smile she always used to greet him, whether he'd been gone for ten days or just ten minutes. He even found himself returning it, settling beside her and putting an arm around her, unexpectedly revelling in the utterly normal, banal feeling of a wife – *his* wife – cuddling against his side.

And there, with his closest friends and the woman he loved, suddenly *ordinary* became *perfect.*

*fin*

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