**The Elaborate Truth**

by OpalSkyLoveDivine

**Summary**

Sherlock Holmes is certain that in this world truth is rarely pure, and never simple. But when he learns Michael Hooper’s secret, he realizes that the truth can also be dangerous...in more ways than one.

**Notes**

Hello again, all you wonderful people! Well, I'm quite excited about this one and to be honest, was more than a little intimidated about doing a Victorian AU, but the idea just wouldn't leave me alone! So with the encouragement and extraordinary beta reading powers of Writingwife83(Thanks again, hun!), I bring you this humble offering of period Sherlolly goodness. Your feedback is always appreciated! Many thanks for that in advance! So without further adieu...

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Her long skirts rustled as she walked across the empty office to lay the carefully written report on the coroner’s desk. But just as the papers touched the surface, still in hand, she froze.

It took 2 seconds for her to register the familiarity of the voice she heard echoing down the hallway behind her. Confusion paralyzed her body; her addled brain slowly reconciling the fact that she just heard Sherlock Holmes’ baritone and it was getting closer.

“After a 4 hour journey from London, gentlemen and as the hour is well into the generally accepted work day, I can not comprehend why the coroner is not here. I sent a wire yesterday informing him that I was due in at this time and I fully expect to familiarize myself with the facts, one way or another.”

At that very moment Doctor Molly Hooper realized her time had just run out.

When making his acquaintance almost 3 years ago, she knew the days of her exhausting double life were numbered and there was a small part of her that was glad of it.

Molly had always assumed the man would finally see through her disguise one day, either because of the failure of the fake mustache or perhaps from some feminine clue as a result of letting her guard slip. Even if it were but for a brief moment, Dr Hooper knew him well enough to never underestimate his talents. She was incredibly fortunate to have lasted this long undetected.

That being said however, she wasn’t going to give up without a fight.

Living this fiction for so very long made it almost a reality. All the complexities, from the family lineage, history and lifestyle of herself, plus that of her counterpart were wearing her thin.

Yet she would marvel from time to time at how her father and uncle were able to pull it off.

Even with the 1876 legislation prohibited the exclusion of women from universities and medical schools, they both knew Molly would be denied in most opportunities and areas of practice, particularly in the sciences where she flourished.
But did they ever have a full understanding of what she’d have to endure in maintaining such a charade? If they had lived long enough to see the whole reality of the ‘opportunity’, would they have thought it all worth the price?

Truly, only she could be the one to say so. But she did wonder.

As she heard the detective’s footsteps enter the small room, she, in that split second of frozen time and summoning all her acting abilities, resumed the action of laying her report on the desk.

Not expecting to see the back of a woman, his quick stride was cut short, bringing him to an abrupt stop.

Relinquishing the papers, she turned to look right into the face she knew so well. Not as the petite man he knew as Doctor Michael Hooper, but ironically, for the very first time, as herself.

Only she had to somehow appear as if she’d never laid eyes on him before.

The moment his eyes met hers, she knew he saw someone familiar, yet somehow also a stranger.

The incongruity reflected in his sudden disorientation. It was now up to her to pull off the seemingly impossible…to fool Sherlock Holmes.

“Oh…good morning, sir. Forgive me, I’m done here…just delivering my report for Doctor Warren. I’ll be on my way,” she said, stepping forward as if to take her leave from the office.

The detective stood motionless, his eyes glued to the small woman, whose good-natured expression soon morphed into one of mild confusion.

Blinking twice before glancing about the room briefly, a weak smile appeared on her lips.

“Sir?”
After another moment her forehead wrinkled slightly and her smile disappeared.

Slowly his intense stare gave way to rapid blinking and a furrowed brow, while remaining immobile, effectively barring her only means of escape.

All futile hopes of making a speedy exit were dashed as he asked, “Do I know you, madam?”

Masterfully her expression became open and curious. Her brown eyes searched his chiseled features before giving a small smile and shake-of-the-head in certitude.

“Indeed, no. I am quite sure I’d recall making your acquaintance, Mister…?”

As the petite woman shyly extended her gloved hand, he quickly glanced down at it before reaching out to firmly clasp it in a handshake.

“Sherlock Holmes.”

At once she was all realization and amusement.

“Ahhh…I think I understand now.” Molly grinned, seemingly at her own deduction. “I think I heard you say you were up from London?”

He nodded, still holding the ladies hand.

“Well, you must know my cousin, sir; for he surely knows you! He’s often written about you and the many interesting cases you encounter in that ghastly city.”

It took but a moment before the detective made the connection, replacing all manner of bewilderment with a look of pure shock.

Her grin widened into a bright smile as she gave his hand a slight squeeze, which roused him from his stupor.
“Your cousin is Michael Hooper,” he stated flatly, but his face was filled with astonishment as the realization settled in.

“Yes, he is! And I am Doctor Molly Hooper. It’s lovely to meet you…an amazing coincidence considering we’re quite removed here. I have not seen even Michael since he stopped from Canada on his way to Edinburgh. And that was over 12 years ago! How very remarkable!”

“Certainly a singular coincidence…it’s doctor, you said?” the detective inquired, as he slowly released her hand,

“Yes, doctor of the medical sciences, plus a speciality in materia medica and toxinology, which is why I was consulted in this particular case.”

“Ah, yes…the bees, which incidentally is the reason for my interest. The London criminal has been 
exasperatedly well-behaved as of late. I was fortunate enough to receive Dr. Warren’s communication about the peculiarities of this man’s death.”

“I was not even aware that you were acquainted.”

“There was a rather brutal double murder a number of years ago near Leeds. Your coroner and a handful of other examiners were brought in…oh, and one consulting detective,” he added with a small but proud smile.

“I seem to recall reading about Dr Warren’s involvement with some business in Leeds, but I don’t remember any mention of Sherlock Holmes,” she grinned with a slight tilt of her head.

“No, I often decline any mention, especially outside of London. It’s much gentler on the fragile egos of the constabulary and my main gratification comes from the work itself.”

“I see.” Looking up through her lashes. Her grin widened, having first-hand experience with those egos; she understood.

The two stared at each other for a moment before the man looked down and cleared his throat,
“Tell me, did you know the deceased? Probability would indicate that you did, since he was a local resident and advanced in years.”

“We were acquainted, rather indirectly. My father, who was the doctor here when he was alive, knew him quite well. As a child my contact with him was limited and later my time was split between my studies. I don’t recall our paths ever crossing, although I am saddened by his death. I’m somewhat baffled as to how he died, however.”

There was a sudden twinkle in the detective's eyes. “Indeed?”

“Yes, the levels of bee venom in his blood were definitely lethal, but from Dr. Warren’s examination, there were no indications of more than one puncture wound on his body. It’s all very odd.”

“Hmmm, curious.” His gaze migrated over to the coroner’s desk as he walked over to it, opening the 2 folders marked “Birlstone”; he began looking through them.

*Michael* Hooper was fully acquainted with Holmes’ audacity, but Molly Hooper was not. And she needed to react accordingly.

“Um, sir. I must warn you, I am certain that the doctor would rather be present during your investigation. He can be quite strict on proper procedures.”

He looked up briefly at her comment before returning his attention back to the files, with a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“I thank you, madam for your cautions…but I’m also sure that he would not wish to detain me considering my promptness on his request. I did send a wire.”

“Yes, though he would not have received that wire until this morning and he has a standing appointment with Sir Henry Ingilby every Friday morning for a round of golf on his estate. So you see Mr. Holmes…,” she said with sparkling eyes, “…he is completely ignorant of your presence here.”

He paused once more as he considered her statement, seemingly uncertain whether or not he should
be irritated by her interference. He raised his eyes slowly to connect with hers, seeing only genuine concern and a quiet nerve, and so he responded in returned measure.

“Please do not burden yourself, Dr Hooper. I will bare full responsibility for my actions. If it would ease his mind however, I could mention our chance meeting and discussion over the facts of the case.”

“You are free to do so, of course, but I’m not convinced that it would aid your cause.”

Sherlock’s brow crinkled slightly at her remark. “Was I mistaken to assume that there is a professional consideration between you?”

Molly weighed her response.

“You are not necessarily mistaken, Mr. Holmes. But in light of his propensity for the traditional social norms, I wouldn’t hesitate in believing that if there was a male counterpart with my credentials nearby, I would not be standing in this office now.”

Blinking quickly, his troubled gaze shifted to the ground, as he clasped his hands behind him.

She was inwardly surprised at his abashed reaction to her words, not having the opinion that Sherlock Holmes had any sympathies toward gender equality. Yet there he was, seemingly displeased.

The unexpected sympathy, albeit unspoken, caused such a sudden reflex, her next words were said without any forethought.

“Would you take a late morning tea with me, Mr Holmes? Doctor Warren usually returns no later than 2 o’clock. Meanwhile, you could see the microscopic evidence in my laboratory firsthand.”

Their eyes met once more and she could see mild surprise at her rather bold invitation. But in a moment it was gone, replaced by something she’d best describe as curiosity.
As they emerged into the morning sunshine he observed a black tilbury rig and trotter with bright eyes waiting to the right of the front entrance. The small carriage was light and compact; built for speed and short trips...roomy for one, but cozy for two.

“The day was so fine I didn’t bother with the hood this morning. You don’t mind the fresh-air after your long train ride, surely. It is only a short ride to my cottage.”

“No, doctor, I don’t mind,” he said with a half-grin, lifting his face to the sun.

Sitting in companionable silence, she couldn’t help but marvel at the unexpected turn of events. Never would she have guessed her morning trip to the constable station would have resulted in tea with Sherlock Holmes!

Minutes later they arrived at her beloved country home. The detective disembarked first and turned to proffer his hand, which Molly took with a slight smile.

“Oh, and If we don’t linger with our tea, I do believe we’d have just enough time to see my apiary,” she said proudly as she stepped down and walked to her front door.

Realizing her statement brought the detective to a standstill; she turned to see an astonished look on the man’s face.

“Beehives?”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his reaction and just nodded in response.

“How utterly remarkable, ” he said to himself, obviously unaware it had been stated aloud, as he followed her quite eagerly into the house.
The English countryside rushed past the train window at varying speeds. The lush patchwork of Lincolnshire farms gave way to the gray of the coal fields, then through shading canopies.

All this was lost on the detective however, as he sat ruminating with his second pipe.

Reviewing the days events, he found most of his thoughts were focused on the female doctor. Something about her intrigued him. She was uncommon, that was for certain, but there was something else… something he was missing. The word Extraordinary even came to mind, but somehow that label made him uneasy. The hours they spent together, he’d admit it, were quite engaging. The sit-down for tea lasted only a couple of minutes before they migrated to her late father’s consulting room-turned-laboratory and he was silently impressed by what he saw.

Her research regarding the mysterious death of Douglas Birlstone was methodical and thorough, reflecting a surprising depth of knowledge and expertise.

The lab, in general exhibited a lifelong interest in science. From her studies of plant life and small animals to human physiology- their physical structure, chemical processes, and molecular interactions. There were even several collections from when she was a child.

But out of all her scholarly pursuits, the one that captured his imagination the most were her beehives. He even found himself rather envious. At any rate, the glimpse into her sheltered world served to ward off the unrelenting boredom that constantly haunted him. He was contented with the outcome of the journey; proving that it was not a waste of his time.

And there was still a possible murder to be solved.

Sherlock’s meeting with the coroner later that afternoon basically served to express the detective’s recommended course of action in light of the surprising toxicology report.

Dr. Hooper’s research proved, at least to his mind, that there was indeed foul play.

But just how did the man get an equivalent of one thousand bee stings in his blood-stream with no more than one puncture wound evident? Especially since the body lay on the sitting room floor.

The butler insisted that Mr. Birlstone wouldn’t have ventured outdoors after sundown. According to his previous statement, Wednesday nights had always been his night off, so he was ignorant of his
employer’s death until the following morning.

The constabulary needed to widen their net; a thorough investigation into the deceased habits and a closer look into his known associations. Were there any recent deviations from the norm? Had the town folk seen anything unusual?

Unfortunately, he’d have to wait until these new enquiries were done by the local constables, as his offer to assist was declined.

He would have to possess himself in patience until he received word from chief inspector Greyson… a lamentable ordeal to be sure, but nonetheless, unavoidable. This meant for the time being he needed to turn his imagination to all the possible causes, however unlikely; he considered them all.

Through the growing cloud of tobacco smoke, he observed he had at least 3 more hours until London. So he lit a third pipe and settled back into his cushioned seat. Eyes heavy-lidded and arms crossed, he let the trains hypnotic sway lull him into the realm of his mind-palace.

All the while, in a seat two carriages back, sat a rather petite man in a bowler hat, with auburn hair and mustache, reading the London evening edition.
Chapter Notes

Hello again!
First, thank you for all the great commentary! It helps to know what you're thinking and that I'm on the right track!
Second, thank you Writingwife83 for your beta work, you're simply awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After receiving word from Chief Inspector Lestrade, Holmes sent Billy, one of the Baker Street 'irregulars,' to inform Doctor Watson to meet him at the morgue.

“Ah, there you are, Watson. I trust you left Mrs. Watson and Rosamond well this morning?”

The retired army doctor had just exited the hansom and started towards St. Barts when he heard the detective’s voice behind him. Making an about-face, he gave a weak smile and a quick nod.

“My apologies, Watson. There’s a rather unusual John Doe, who’s met with a suspicious end. Your assistance will be most appreciated,” he said, passing him with a quick stride before he could receive an answer.

John sighed as he followed the man’s fluttering cape into the recesses of the cold chambers, his eyes adjusting to the relative dark.

Michael Hooper was busy with paperwork as they burst through the heavy wood and iron doors. She met Sherlock’s steady gaze as they crossed the long cavernous room, closing in on where she sat.

“Holmes,” addressing him laconically, schooling her voice to indifference. She had been preparing herself all morning for his arrival after the chief inspector’s visit, hoping to give no indication other than business-as-usual between them.

“Hooper,” he returned, “I believe you have an unidentified man for me to examine?”
“Yes,” she confirmed while rounding her desk and proceeded to walk towards where the bodies were kept, the pair following closely behind. “He was found near the corner of Lyme and Georgiana, though he did not die in that location. There’s evidence he dragged himself across Camden Rd, even as far as St. Martin’s Garden.”

Dr. Hooper walked past the lines of covered bodies without any indication of slowing, continuing along a corridor that inclined quite steeply, causing the duo to cast questioning glances at each other.

“Um, why are we going to the deep storage depository?” Watson asked behind her.

Michael’s small smirk was mostly concealed by the mustache. “All will be revealed, Doctor,’ she said, “…momentarily.”

Passing another set of heavy doors they entered a low ceilinged room that had a number of lockers lining both sides of the chamber. Walking to the far end, they stopped at a niche labeled “Unidentified” with the date scribed on an attached slate.

As Doctor Hooper opened the large drawer, a terrible stench was released causing both men to react.

“Cor! What the hell is that stink! That’s not from decay.” John grimaced, covering his mouth with his pocket handkerchief.

“Of course not, Watson. Time of death was well within 12 hours, was it not, Doctor Hooper?”

“Indeed. Death is placed during the pre-dawn hours, between 12:00 and 4:00 this morning. He was brought in only an hour ago and I wasn’t about to allow such foul air to permeate my rooms, if I can help it,” she responded, crossing her arms in front of her.

Watson grinned in silent agreement as the detective took a closer look at the body that lay in front of him.

“Apparent cause of death from this rather vicious head wound?” Holmes asked as his eyes continued to scan the rest of the man’s body.
“Yes, obviously,” she muttered in her lower register, “I’m actually surprised he wasn’t killed immediately from the blow.”

“Clothing?” he asked just as he spotted the crate at the foot of the deceased and began sorting through it before she had the chance to reply.

“Hm…” he took out his glass when examining what looked to be trousers. “Yes, this all supports my premise,” he stated under his breath.

“What premise?” Watson asked in an even tone, trying to hide his curiosity.

“This man was a tosher,” Holmes asserted, returning the glass to the confines of his jacket.

Both doctors stared at him in silence. Watson’s brow immediately furrowed, while Hooper struggled to keep her expression neutral.

Meeting his friend’s eyes and seeing only confusion, the detective let out a dramatic sigh before clapping his hands behind his back.

“Come now, Watson. Surely you’ve heard the term.”

The good doctor’s eyebrows disappeared under his gray bowler hat, warning Holmes of his waning patience.

“A sewer hunter…he scavenged the subterranean world for his living.”

“Or perhaps a mudlark,” Dr Hooper interjected before Watson could respond.

The detective’s gaze, suddenly shifting to the pathologist in reaction to her comment, stepped into her personal space; his confident air turning first to brief irritation, then to mild surprise while he considered her words.
“Was there anything to show for his labors last night?” he inquired tersely, his eyes searching her brown ones.

“No, all pockets were empty,” she answered in a low even voice, betraying nothing of her growing nervousness. She could almost see the flash of turbulent thought in his penetrating stare.

“Were there any tools found in relative proximity to the crime scene?”

“No, not one.”

The lack of such evidence caused him to ruminate further; his brow creased as he thought aloud.

“Admittedly, it is true that many of the indicators of a tosher can also be applied to the similar occupation of a mudlark, such as the coat with the ridiculously large pockets, as well as the dirty canvas trousers. And yes, the telltale signs of the dark lantern he strapped to his chest could indicate either one, but if you would observe the various wounds on his legs,” he asserted, “many are old, others more recent, these are undoubtedly the work of the ferocious sewer rat, which are well documented to attack in hoards when inadvertently cornered and is not as often encountered on the shores of the Thames. Furthermore, I propose that this distinguishing roguish odor is particular to the depths of the London sewers and not its muddy shorelines, as noxious as that may be. What’s more, the shape and size of the fatal wound corresponds to the elongated iron hoe-attached to a pole of approximately 2 meters, specialized to the challenges and dangers of the sewers, typically used by the tosher. Its blade had a broken corner, which could prove conclusive in matching the particular murder weapon.”

Doctor Watson watched and listened in silence at the exchange, clearly trying to glean some understanding, while the other doctor marveled less obviously at the workings of Sherlock Holmes’ brilliant mind.

“Point taken,” she conceded, breaking their gaze as she turned to close the drawer. “During the autopsy I’ll look for any signs of infectious diseases associated with microorganisms found in that kind of miasmic environment.”

“Excellent, doctor,” he said as they made their way back to the receiving area. “Meanwhile, I will inform Lestrade of my conclusions and suggest an investigation into this shadowy world, which will prove difficult considering the illegal nature of their association. Another support to the probability of a tosher -his earnings typically produces items of higher value, such as coins, silver, and gold, sometimes earning as much as 6 shillings a day. A mudlark’s yieldings consists more often of coal, wood, or rope, certainly less of a motivation for murder and betrayal. I believe we’re looking for a
confederate, as they usually scavenge in gangs of 3 or 4.”

“Understood. And I’ll send word detailing my findings…whether or not they corroborate your theory,” Doctor Hooper said before adding, “I will also suggest to the inspector that he look into the mudlark gangs, since their circles frequently intersect.”

Holmes watched with a small smile as she ensconced herself at the desk once more. He followed Watson who was making his way to the front door, but stopped midway just as the doctor reached the entrance.

“Oh, I almost forgot, Doctor Hooper,” Sherlock announced, wheeling back towards the pathologist, causing Watson to look over his shoulder.

Micheal Hooper noticed the detective pull something out from under his coat as he returned to where she sat. With an odd, almost smug expression on his face he placed a small parcel wrapped in wax paper on the table.

It wasn’t until the doctor opened it to reveal a piece of honeycomb did he say, “A present from your lovely cousin.”

He observed her eyes go wide before abruptly turning once again to exit the morgue, a smirk spreading across his lips.

John held the door open, scowling with confusion just before Holmes crossed the threshold, calling out behind him, “She sends her regards.”

Before the doors shut she could hear John say, “Cousin? Who the hell is this now? Holmes…!”

Hooper’s stunned face slowly changed; a half smile lifted a corner of her mouth as she lowered her eyes to the sweet package in front of her.

Anna and Gideon Ames were her secret keepers. They were, of course much more than that, but as the only ones still alive that knew of her double-life, it was a significant fact.
The devotion started years ago with the needs of a grieving doctor and a lost little girl. It grew in complexity until they found themselves indispensable to the fragile world of that girl, now all grown up. She was no less than a daughter to the childless couple and one who they would die for, if the need arose.

Molly knew this very well and went to great lengths to do what she could to make their precarious position easier. When her schedule would allow, she would travel back to Spilsby, as far as Firsby station, to insure that her comings-and-goings were not observed too often by acquaintances, typically during off-hours, and drove the 6.4 kms back. Gideon would meet her in the small brougham, sometimes emerging as Michael from the East Lincolnshire train, but always arriving at her home as Molly Hooper. For she knew, in as much as the road to Bolingbroke was not a busy one, it would take only a single sighting of cousin Micheal to get the townsfolk talking.

Their extra precautions served them well, for the Ames never heard a suspicious word spoken of the Hooper family, either in the village or the market town of Spilsby.

Over the years they took full advantage of Molly’s reputation as a peculiar spinster; daily life of a female was typically quiet and domestic, but her ‘studious’ endeavors would keep her more solitary than most. Nonetheless, the couple would make regular visits to town during extended absences, on their mistresses ‘errands’, for one thing or another. Many of which were quite legitimate, as to fulfill a request from one of her weekly letters.

Michael’s London life was consumed with morgue responsibilities, while Molly’s life was arranged to be more contemplative and academic, giving her time to experiment, particularly in the natural sciences. She did her best to experience what she could, with the help of the Ames’. And they had become quite good at it.

This most recent event, however, left them utterly gobsmacked when their mistress returned with not only a stranger to them, but apparently someone closely acquainted with Michael Hooper! It was all they could do to keep a straight face and resume their duties as usual.

This peculiar happening seemed to give rise to a general uneasiness in Anna, and in turn began to worry Gideon, who had learned to take his wife’s intuition very seriously. But it wasn’t until 2 days later that Gideon truly began to understand the scope of his wife’s trepidations.

He was out tending the vegetable garden and orchard that morning, weeding and gathering with the help of Toby, a strong but simple young man he had hired some years back when he was unable to do the heavier work on the estate.
“Gideon…”

He looked up to see Anna standing about 10 meters away, with a haunted look on her face.

“Toby, continue on with the potatoes and then start on the apples. The Pippins first and then the Bramleys,” he instructed. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“Yes, sir,” Toby agreed as the older man joined his wife. He briefly watched them speak in hushed tones as they walked to the house before returning to his duties.

In the kitchen the couple sat in silence as Anna’s words began to sink in.

The now shaken woman had heard an unanticipated knock at the front door and opened it to reveal a grim looking Inspector Greyson standing in the threshold. He’d come to see the mistress on an urgent matter, he said. Anna told him that no, Miss was not at home and was uncertain of her return, doing her best to remain calm. She explained that the doctor often took trips, sometimes unexpectedly, for a day or even a week at a time. She explained that since they were related to her work, they were never privy to the details, including the exact return date.

To say the outcome of this interview didn’t please the Inspector would be quite an understatement and he “requested” the couple’s presence at the station in Spilsby within the hour for further questioning.

At this point they needed to make a decision. Do they take the ‘wait and see’ approach or should they presume the worst?

Settling on the later, they told Toby to go home for the rest of the day, but to return by 8:00 that evening. And with that, they set off to the station house, feeling like in spite of all they’ve done to the contrary, they were about to bring Molly Hooper’s world crashing down.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so a little cliffy, but no apologies for my shameless attempt to keep you coming back!
That being said, chapter 3 is mostly written, so don't be too angry with me. ;)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold. –Tolstoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The detective sat meditatively in his chair as dawn broke London’s pitch-black skies with ghostly veils of yellowish pink, the creeping fog slowly casting its ominous spell.

His closed eyes snapped open at the sound of an unexpected knock on the downstairs door and listened motionlessly as Mrs. Hudson answered the early caller. Only after hearing the approaching steps on the stairs and muffled voices did he stir, slowly rising to his feet.

Following another brief knock the landlady partially-entered the dim room and spoke in a hushed voice. “Mr. Holmes, you have a Dr. Michael Hooper here to see you regarding a matter quite serious, he says.”

He was surprised, for the pathologist had never been to 221B prior and would be the least likely visitor, especially at this time.

“Indeed?” He responded in subdued curiosity. “Please send him in.”

Opening the door fully she moved aside to reveal the shadowed figure who stood behind her.

As the doctor stepped forward into the muted light Sherlock knew without a doubt that there was a matter most grave.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. I believe perhaps a spot of strong tea would be beneficial.”

“Of course,” she replied with an understanding smile before closing the door behind her.
Michael Hooper seemed rooted to the spot as the detective packed and lit his morning pipe. Taking his first draw he observed his unexpected guest more closely - the downcast gaze, ashen pallor, slight tremor that was increasing by the second and the somewhat crumpled paper that was clasped tightly in the doctor’s hand.

Within seconds Holmes’ brow furrowed as his deductions took shape. He removed the pipe from his mouth just as their eyes met and there was a sudden drop in his stomach that he didn’t quite understand.

“Your cousin?” he asked flatly.

Suddenly Doctor Hooper’s face screwed into an expression of anguish and began to shake rather violently. This prompted Sherlock to direct her to the chair in front of the fire and to retrieve a glass of brandy, which he pressed into her quivering grasp.

“Take a moment to compose yourself, doctor, and then tell me everything from the smallest detail. Something of minor consequence to you can mean a great deal to me. And I will try to be of service if you, in turn constrain your emotions, for the matter could require expedient action.”

She took a large gulp of bandy before nodding slightly, and drew a deep, tremulous breath. Just as the detective sat in the adjacent chair she thrust the paper into his hand without a word and turned her attention to the flickering hearth.

Sherlock scanned the communication quickly and learned that it was not from the cousin, but from the faithful servant Anna. The hastily scrawled note was bereft of detail, simply stating the dire circumstances.

Inspector Greyson was looking for Molly Hooper in connection with the Birlstone murder. Anna was released after being questioned, but Gideon was still held for possible collusion, presumably until Molly is found or she surrenders herself.

The last sentence read: *I strongly advise you see Sherlock Holmes. I believe he can be trusted.*

He looked up to find the doctor’s panic-stricken, almost manic energy gone and she now seemed weary and demoralized.
“So it appears,” the detective pointed out, “that your cousin is still at large. This hopefully will give us the time we need.”

“She didn’t do this,” Hooper whispered in a low rasp. “How could they actually think that…”

“I will do my utmost in the matter, doctor…but you must know this…I require absolute honesty on all levels, if we are to clear your cousin’s name. I demand nothing less.”

He could see a war of conflict in the doctor’s eyes as she considered his words, both locked in a stare that was proving to be a battle of wills. Somehow he knew there was something of great significance that was being withheld.

Michael’s forehead creased from inner-struggle, while her mouth briefly opened before closing in a hard line. Suddenly breaking the connection, she squeezed her eyes shut as if to exert one last ditch effort to hide.

It took a moment and he waited with uncharacteristic patience, but when she met Sherlock’s eyes this time, they were different. Her gaze was strong and unreserved, lacking all of the previous resistance and conflict he once saw.

But instead of speaking, Michael Hooper carefully placed the glass of brandy on the side-table, then turned back to the man and raised a hand to her mouth. Sherlock’s brow crinkled as he watched the doctor slowly peel the mustache off, while the other hand slid the healthy stock of auburn hair off a head of pulled back tresses.

They sat across from each other, stock-still; she was totally vulnerable, while he was utterly dumbfounded. He blinked rapidly at the moment of the reveal, but as seconds passed he became expressionless, which caused Molly to worry that she made a fatal mistake.

But just as the fear set in the detective spoke in his deep baritone. “How…” he breathed, his demeanor shifting with his words. “...did I not see it before? Undeniably and inexcusably blind.”

Continuing to reproach himself, Sherlock slowly leaned forward as if to discover some deeper meaning that aluddled him, at the same time reconciling the fact that Michael Hooper had veritably vanished and Molly, the principal suspect to a murder had suddenly appeared. His mind was reeling from the implications. Their association, albeit not of a social nature, had been years in the making.
Resignedly she remained fixed in her seat as the man processed her long-held, most damning secret, all the while captivated by his crystalline eyes.

“Obvious…how did I not see it?” he repeated. “...completely indefensible.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Holmes…” she interjected in an instantly softer tone, “...it’s as you’ve said before. You see but you don’t observe.” Her now feminine mouth curled slightly in the corners.

His eyes widened at her remark and he considered this woman, now entirely unguarded and in obvious jeopardy; a person who just moments ago was someone he thought he knew. He found she was indeed, totally correct.

Among other things... it was all a bit humbling.

Just then the door opened causing them both to jump up in alarm, face to face with Mrs. Hudson and her laden tray.

For an instant they stood quite stunned, though the older woman was the first to react after putting two and two together.

“Forgive the interruption,” she said with a gentle smile. “But I’d say this is a perfect time for a nice spot of tea. This must be that lady doctor you spoke of a couple of days ago...with the same name, Dr. Molly Hooper, isn’t it?”

The sudden precariousness of sharing her secret with yet another person must have shown on the pathologist’s face.

“Not to worry, doctor,” Sherlock insisted, moving to relieve his landlady of her burden. “Mrs. Hudson is the very soul of discretion.”

Grunting her assent, she busied herself with arranging the china in their settings and glanced with twinkling eyes at the young woman, who wrapped her arms around her stomach nervously.

“Come, dear,” she intoned in a motherly way. “Have a hot cuppa. It will calm your nerves.”
With a deep shaky breath she approached slowly, the tension in her neck and shoulders easing a bit. Molly could feel the detective’s following gaze as she sat, her flaccid hands settling in her lap. She watched as the older lady poured their tea before calmly taking her leave without another word.

Joining her at the table, he leisurely stirred two sugars into his tea before observing his guest encircle her hands around her cup and bring it’s steamy warmth to her face. After remaining this way for a long while he concluded that the doctor must be in a mild state of shock. “Drink, doctor...the tea would be more beneficial inside your body than in the cup.”

This comment seemed to rouse her and she drew long sips until returning it empty to it’s saucer.

“Right...down to the matter at hand?” he asked after observing a bit of color in her pale cheeks.

“I will attempt to limit my many questions...and they are many... to the case in question. Are you equal to it?” he challenged with a penetrating stare.

Maintaining a determined front, she lifted her chin, straightened her spine and nodded as she set her mouth in a hard line.

“Where were you at the time of the murder?”

“London.”

“At the morgue? The time of death was set between eight and eleven that evening.”

“No…” she recalled, “I was at home by that time....alone,” her eyes lowering to her folded hands.

“When did you leave the morgue?”

Her troubled eyes meet his once more as she tried to recount last weeks activity. “My shift ended at seven Wednesday night,” she confirmed.
“Then it would have been impossible for you to catch the Lincolnshire Special to Spilsby at 6:00pm to murder Birlstone;” he inferred with an arched eyebrow. “It seems you will avoid the gallows at any rate,” adding with a tight smile. His demeanor turned somber, however as he continued to deliberate the broader implications. “Who delivered the note?”

“He’s a boy...well, young man –who helps Gideon with the heavy work on the grounds. His name is Toby.”

“Does he...know your secret?”

“No,” she said pinching the bridge of her nose, “he knows what everyone else knows. I have a cousin named Michael who lives in London...that’s all.”

“And fortunately, that’s exactly who he found early this morning?” he asked in a brisk tone.

She confirmed with a weary nod and began rubbing her temples in apparent fatigue when Holmes suddenly stood up. “I need facts,” he said, glancing to the mantle clock. “if I leave now I should catch the next train to Lincolnshire.”

Watching his energized form exchange the maroon dressing gown for a black frock coat, she slowly rose to her feet, her eyes following the detective as he called downstairs to Mrs. Hudson, then as he hurried into his bedroom to retrieve a ready-packed carpet bag. The landlady appeared just as he rounded back, meeting the two at the threshold.

“Your responsibilities at Bart’s?” He asked abruptly, tugging on his leather gloves and top hat.

“I informed Stamford I was ill before I came to you.”

“Very good...then I recommend sending further word...you’ve taken a turn for the worse and will be convalescing with a friend. Returning to your lodgings is too great a risk and this will hopefully give us more time, if and when the long nose of the law turns to London. I trust Watson’s old room will accommodate and Mrs. Hudson will help with all other...needs –if they arise.”

As Holmes’ rapid-fire directives sunk in, Molly’s already agitated expression mixed with confusion as her eyes darted between the two souls in front of her. “Wait...I’m to stay here?”
“Obviously,” he stated before turning to the older lady. “If communication is essential, Mrs. Hudson will send your wire to the Firsby station. Otherwise, try your best to be as unobtrusive as possible, while it should go without saying that both Doctors Michael and Molly Hooper will remain invisible... until my return.” He inclined his head with a tip of his hat, as well as a mischievous smirk and he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the thoughtful commentary guys! I love every one!
Also another big thank you to the wonderful Writingwife83 for the beta reading.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hello again! \o/

First a big thank you to the Sherlolly Queen, Writingwife83 for her beta reading. Long live the queen!

Next a HUGE shout-out to Cassonade, whose comments inspired parts of this chapter. I love getting your thoughts, people. It's amazing how some of them get stuck in my brain!

Thanks again for all your comments and kudos! They keep me going!

OK, I'm done...Read on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock returned to 221B well past eleven that night. No light illuminated his rooms, save the dwindling flicker of the hearth and the unearthly cast from the full moon. The stillness was preserved by virtue of his natural cat-like efficacy; his coat, hat and bag were deposited with minimal movement or sound.

His active mind, preoccupied with the days events, took no notice of the form curled up on the settee. After pouring a sherry the detective turned to find a sleeping Molly Hooper.

Wrapped in his purple dressing gown, she lay with a copy of the Strand on her stomach. He deduced from the cover that it contained Dr. Watson’s erroneous, if not sympathetic account of his premature death four years prior.

Slowly moving in her direction, he took note of the simple cotton nightgown, borrowed from Mrs. Hudson, under the slightly open dressing gown. Realizing she must have preferred his over his landlady’s overly-frilled and high collared ones, the corner of his mouth twitched slightly. Her long hair had been loosened and brushed smooth, the many pins, over a dozen in all, were placed in a dish on the small table beside her.

Totally distracted now by this slumbering woman, he put the glass of sherry down and continued in his observations. She appeared to be in a deep peaceful sleep, in spite of the precarious circumstance that she found herself in; a fact that he couldn’t help but be a bit envious of, considering the constant battle to slow his whirling brain.
Perceiving a dark ink stain on the inside of her right thumb, he realized she must have been writing earlier that night. Furthermore he noticed various gray smudges on her left sleeve which caused Holmes’ brow to draw down in thought.

Glancing to his corner laboratory where the flasks, test tube racks, curved retort and burner sat in silhouette, he quietly walked over to the stained desk. Surveying the organized chaos he recognized a particular disturbance on the shelf of archived slides and labeled jars. With piqued curiosity he lit a candle stub and found with a strange pang of delight that the good doctor had been conducting her own research. The open samples, use of the microscope and the sheets of neatly cataloged notations rather obviously presented her own study of tobacco ash, a subject he had commented on a number of years ago.

He turned back to gaze at this Molly Hooper, who looked so vulnerable and small, yet he knew her to be a woman of exceptional inner strength and depth. A woman who was a new acquaintance—at the same time, an old one. Sherlock hadn’t reconciled this paradox, thus far, in the face of her immediate crisis. In this very moment, however, in the hush and tranquility of the room and if he’d dare admit, at the ethereal sight of this enigma of a woman, he wanted to know more.

Just then Molly opened her eyes with a start and gasped at the shadowy figure who was backlit from candlelight.

“Who–?” she demanded in a hushed tone, still sluggish from sleep.

“It’s Holmes –no fear, doctor; you are quite safe,” said he, his voice uncommonly soft to his own ears.

Stepping past her as she sat up, he reclaimed the glass of sherry and settled himself in his chair in front of the fire.

“What time is it?” she asked, clearly dazed and rather embarrassed to be found sleeping in his rooms. Wrapping the gown tightly around her body, Molly walked over to the other chair, likely suddenly remembering whose gown she was wearing. It was obvious she never dreamed the man would ever see her in it. Her face colored a rosey pink as she sat down opposite the detective who removed his watch from his waistcoat.

“It is precisely 11:35pm,” he replied, returning the timepiece to its pocket and taking a sip of sherry. “Forgive me; would you like a glass yourself?”
“Thank you, no,” she muttered, unable to maintain their gaze she looked instead to the hearth, the diminished flame little more than embers.

“I didn’t expect you back tonight,” she admitted. Her abashed expression giving way to a mixture of anxiety and hope.

Realizing they both were sitting in relative darkness, Holmes lit a small oil lamp that sat between them and leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts. There was no sense in staying since the only possible person to shed any additional light on the problem was in repose on my couch,” he remarked coldly, but his eyes possessed a certain glint that softened the edge of his tonality.

“I see,” she countered, setting her mouth in a hard line, her own troubled eyes brewed with a look of confusion which contradicted her words.

Aware of her growing bewilderment Sherlock began recounting his journey to see Inspector Greyson, who although surprised, did not question the detective’s presence, due presumably to the man’s often inscrutable actions. And truth be told, he was internally relieved to have his help. He took no great pleasure at the prospect of arresting Molly Hooper, for he had been acquainted with her household for many a year and without a whisper of a disparaging word, apart from the occasional criticism regarding her unusual pursuits, which he himself had been guilty of. No, if there was a possibility of her innocence, he would do what he could to get to the bottom of it and the objectivity of this London specialist would fit the bill nicely.

Greyson although aware of the peculiarity of the agent used in Birlstone’s death, never seriously considered the connection between Hooper’s scientific endeavors and the murder, especially without any witnesses to put her at the scene.

That all changed however when the Spilsby constabulary was visited by Cecil James Barker.

According to his damning testimony, he actually saw Miss Hooper at the manor, as he had the weekly custom of a game of cards with the elderly gentleman, every Wednesday evening for the past two years. Surprised to see a tilbury rig outside the rear entrance, which was his usual approach when visiting; he admitted himself, which was also normal due to the lack of his butler that particular night. As he drew near, he said he heard voices coming from the large drawing room. The door being slightly ajar, he saw Doctor Molly Hooper engaged in what appeared to be a heated conversation. He was unable to discern what was said because she had suddenly closed their
proximity and had lowered her voice accordingly, but perceived their discourse to be rather belligerent. He took his leave without a word as to not intrude upon them. Barker also mentioned seeing a number of ‘poisons’ at the Bolingbrook home some years ago, many having been derived from bee venom.

From the start of this narrative, Holmes noted a very distinct reaction to the name of this so-called witness. Originally one of shock, it had quickly transformed into fiery anger which gradually increased over the length of the account, resulting in her jumping to her feet, knuckles white from tightly clenched fists. By the time he had finished she had begun to pace in front of him. As the detective arose, she stopped and met his eyes, her nostrils almost flaring from controlled rage.

Abruptly he placed both his hands firmly on her shoulders. Whether it was out of a need to comfort or to restore her sense in order to extract the information he required, she didn’t know, but it did wonders to focus her attention.

“Gather yourself, doctor,” he said, dropping his voice. “It is obvious that there is a story to tell. You will need to steady your nerves and reel in your temper. I will not lie, the circumstances seem very black against you, but with your help I will do my best to uncover the truth and get to the bottom of whatever nefarious motives this Mr. Barker has for wanting to see you hang.”

Looking up into his shadowed face, her eyes were wide as he spoke. Their dim surroundings limited her visual perception, but his words resonated with a conviction such as she had never heard from the man before.

“Would you be seated once more?” He encouraged, motioning to the chairs.

With a small nod she did as he asked, while he stoked the embers with another log before joining her again. The pathologist pressed her hands to her cheeks as she took a deep breath, clearly trying to organize her thoughts into a narration that was concise yet abundant in the small details the detective had often considered the most important. She wisely started with what she knew was the burning and predominant question in his mind.

“My family had been acquainted with the Barkers since my mother’s death. Cecil Barker, who was a couple of years my senior, left Lincolnshire for boarding school when I was very young, so I have no memory of him in those days.” She paused, glancing down at her fingers as they slowly twisted the end of the dressing gown belt. “It wasn’t until years later –after returning home with his medical degree, did he try to renew any sort of association with us. I had already received my various degrees and was deeply involved in my toxicology research when he started visiting my father regularly. Before I knew it he had ...well, ingratiated himself.”
Looking up to see Sherlock sitting with his legs crossed at the knee; his chin resting on the thumb of his right hand, fingers curled over his upper lip and across his cheekbone, totally absorbed; she pressed on.

“‘You must understand that, while my uncle had an established chair at Cambridge University, my father was the trusted physician of the magnates from the surrounding districts, including Sir Ingilby and Lord Massingberd...a circle of influence that apparently drove Dr Barker to seek my hand in marriage but to also persuade my father into retirement herein transferring the practice to himself.”

The glow of the burgeoning flames dancing across her features somehow enhanced the foreboding impression of her words.

“I had always made it plain that I would never marry for anything other than love,” she said tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “So when I made it clear that I did not love this man, the matter was closed in my father’s eyes. But not to Dr Cecil Barker. Instead of letting it go, he doubled his efforts by sending a continuous stream of letters, tokens, flowers –that sort of thing. It was only after threatening him with the exposure of harassment did he stop.”

Throughout the account his eyes never once left her tense face, but remained expressionless. At her pause he rose to retrieve some tobacco from a persian slipper that sat on the mantle and after filling his old brier-root pipe, he drew long inhalations as he lit it. Throwing the match into the fire he turned once more to face her, the blue smoke curling around him.

After a moment of what she could easily interpret as a critical appraisal of her story, a line appeared between her brows and she lowered her gaze. “There was no understanding between us, Mr. Holmes. ...no promise broken that he should expect—”

“No, I’m sure there was not,” he suddenly interjected. “Even if you had, doctor, that is no reason to bullyrag you into something or in this case, someone you didn’t want.”

Lifting her troubled eyes to his, he raised a quizzical eyebrow at her, with crossed arms and dangling pipe, causing Molly’s demeanor to change considerably.

“Thank you for saying so, Mr. Holmes”, she responded, a faint smile gracing the corners of her mouth, easing her strained countenance. “It was during this time that we perceived a definite hardening towards the idea of my ever taking on my father's duties. Whether it was due to any acrimonious influence on Dr. Barker’s part, we could never say for sure, but it soon became very clear that, as a woman I would never be able to practice medicine without impediment by virtue of my sex alone. It was then that both my father and uncle set their minds on creating for me a double
“Quite so,” he said, seating himself once more, leaning forward, pipe in hand and elbows on his knees. “Furthermore we can be unquestionably sure that Cecil James Barker knows nothing of this life, or he would have certainly ruined you long ago.”

“It is just...beyond words. To be so...consumed,” her voice sank almost to a whisper.

“Well, this injury, as he considers it, had festered in his scheming brain and he hungered for vengeance. I have known individuals to kill for considerably less.”

Suddenly there was a haunted look in her eyes, one that stirred something deep in his chest and he reacted as a man called to action, springing to his feet, he bounded over to his cluttered desk and proceeded to hastily scrawl some communication. “I see that you’ve been following your own analysis,” he asserted over his shoulder, to the woman behind him.

“O-oh, yes! Sorry, I um…” Realizing at once what he was alluding to, she attempted to stammer out some explanation.

“Let’s dispense with the elucidation, doctor. My comment is not a criticism. I understand that you are essentially a prisoner here, without any of the usual mental stimulus you are accustomed to.”

Finishing his note he abruptly turned and loomed over her, his eyes intense with meaning as he spoke. “I know what stagnation and idleness can do to an active mind. You may feel free to use my home as it is your own.”

He circled around her to throw on his coat and made for the door before turning back to the petite pathologist who was looking slightly dazed.

“Although, I do have it on good authority that dear Mrs. Hudson frowns upon discharging a firearm indoors,” he said with a small enigmatic smile, his eyes glinting in the moonlight before taking his leave once more that night.

Chapter End Notes
Don't despise the Sherlolly lite chapter, I'm with you! I'm SOoo ready for some Sherlolly feels...real soon! LOL

Thanks for reading my lovelies and don't be shy!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

First, I want to shout a BIG THHHANK YOUUUU to the amazing and the fabulous Writingwife83 for all her awesome suggestions, help and direction…particularly with my wild and wooly POV digressions! She’s got the patience of a saint, that one!

Second, this is shorter than usual, but I'm hoping the distinctively higher feels factor will make up for its brevity. Our Sherlolly train is starting to pick up a little speed and there’s no turning back now or slowing down for that matter! So sit back and enjoy the ride!

And don’t forget to comment, if you can. They keep the ol’ engine stoked!

Mycroft was needed and the matter required immediate action.

If Sherlock’s letter was personally delivered, it’s urgency would be presumed and he’d have data on Barker by morning’s light.

London skies were clear and the chilled nocturnal air worked to untangle the jumbled assault that invaded his mind palace. He needed to think. After handing off his communication to his brother’s man, Sherlock walked from Smith Square to Victoria Embankment, then back to Baker Street with a slight detour through Regent Park, taking almost 2 hours, during which he calculated his next move.

He knew Molly had retired to her room the moment he closed the door behind him. It was probably for the best, considering the late hour. His body had begun to betray him with a wave of fatigue as he removed his coat and hat. But inasmuch as he was physically weary, his mind was still racing with all the complexity of the problem.

He knew the potential disaster for Doctor Hooper if he failed to prove her innocence. The necessity to reveal her double identity would end her career; no doubt.

He was also quite aware of the injury to his own profession. He had silently considered her skills second to none. They had developed over the past 3 years a type of consonance between them, which was rare. While John was more of a conductor of light, Molly was illuminous in her own unique fashion. It would be a loss.
The idea needled him in a way that left him uneasy. But not in necessarily the same manner that a devious puzzle could or worse, the commonplace, featureless crimes which were by far the most difficult to analyze. The prospect of this failure provoked a disturbance so alien, so strange that he promptly took up his violin and lost himself in chords that were both expressive and melancholy.

She tossed and turned in the unfamiliar bed from the very moment she laid her head upon it. The room was more than adequate in providing for her comforts, but her state of mind had preempted any sort of lasting restfulness.

She relit her lamp, surrendering all hope of sleep, when suddenly there was the noise of Holmes’ return downstairs. For a moment she sat up, perfectly still, listening for anything further. At hearing only silence she slid herself back under the confines of the blankets along with a borrowed book.

A second later, out of the stillness, she heard low, mesmerizing strains of a violin that sent shivers down her spine. Her eyes grew large as the sound came to her in waves of tenderness and agony.

Almost instinctively she left her bed and padded to the door, opening it without a sound. She stood entranced, listening as the music flowed up to caress her soul. Indifferent to the chill of the hallway air, she found herself moving down the stairs, as if pulled by a magnetic force.

In an instant she was poised in the doorway, transfixed by what she saw. At that late hour the moon had shifted, so it shone directly into the flat. There was the back of Holmes, facing the warmth of the fire, his face hidden, but as he played there was such gripping vulnerability that she felt as if she were seeing him for the first time—a stirring eloquence of deep yearning...a side he had always considered detrimental to pure reason. The defect which he called sentiment could be unmistakably identified in the chords that filled the shadowed room.

Early in their acquaintance, when she realized her feelings for this infuriating genius, she entombed them so deep that they had no hope of ever flourishing into anything more than a professional regard…she wouldn’t let it go further. It was just one more of life’s paths not followed.

But now…as she beheld the man, in this private moment of total exposure and unveiling, all barriers fell to dust. And inasmuch as the alarms of self-preservation were sounding in her head she couldn’t bring herself to turn around or back away.
Instead...she took another step.

As the bow moved across strings, all the tumultuous thoughts began to moderate as he gave himself over to the affect of the music. While his relentless brain slowed he felt the release of something that had been chained long ago, something inside him that slept undetected and unmoved until this very moment. The legato grew with fervent intensity then melted softly into the expressivity of smoldering embers –causing a frisson of pleasure that was unexpected and foreign to him–mind and body alike.

Suddenly he was aware of a presence; whether he had actually heard someone, he was unsure; but just past the threshold stood Molly, a vision of unearthly loveliness, her long nightdress glowing white in the moonlight. When he turned to see this sight, so beautiful and unexpected, it quite literally took his breath away.

The air between them electrified as their eyes locked together. Slowly lowering his arms to his sides they remained stock-still for what seemed to be an eternity. Her unfeigned gaze had enveloped him and he became aware that it was the very reflection of his own. The realization was so startling that he abruptly whirled around, his back to her once more, with his eyes squeezed shut.

“I- I apologize, Mr. Holmes,” she whispered, her voice small and colored with what sounded like shame, causing Sherlock to turn his head in profile. “Forgive my intrusion at this late…”

“You have not done so,” he broke in with a deep rumble, facing her once more as he took a step closer. “You have nothing to...you’ve done nothing wrong,” he added in a gentler tone, his blinking downcast eyes and shadowy face angled towards the moonlit window.

In relief she exhaled the shaky breath that she’d obviously been holding, which brought his eyes back to hers again for a split second. This created a sudden spark- a pull so unsettling, it prompted him to fully turn toward the window once more, relinquishing violin and bow to the table beside him.

He stood there, floundering, unsure whether he should silently stay as he was, which would likely result in her retreat, or whether he should face her, speak to her...move closer to her. If he did, he was almost certain she would stay. In fact, something deep and instinctive told him that’s exactly what she wanted. The thought triggered a tightening in his stomach and he felt his heart rate rise slightly. Frowning at this very obvious physical reaction, his mind had to finally surrender to the fact that this woman mattered to him and in a way that was different from any of his other associations.
As this truth impressed upon his consciousness, his thoughts began to race. *She should stay... just for a bit longer. Perhaps with an offering of a glass of wine, or...*

“I will leave you now, Mr. Holmes,” he heard her say in a soft voice, interrupting his musings. “I only wished to find the source of the beautiful music...now I know.”

She stood by his side; her warm brown eyes contrasted in silver radiance as she looked up in earnest; her words and proximity catching him off-guard.

The crinkle on his forehead deepened as his gaze dropped to her face and wandered over it. “Of course, the hour is very late,” he responded, blinking several times before continuing. “By morning I will have a report from my brother Mycroft concerning our Mr Cecil Barker. It is my hope that a little prodding into his affairs will shed some much needed light and the villain will be revealed.”

“I see,” she said, before her expression clouded in sudden concern. “Mr. Holmes, would it be within your power to persuade Inspector Greyson to release poor Gideon? Inasmuch as he would never admit to any hardship, I know this all must be destructive to his health and I’m sure Anna’s sick with worry.”

As he considered what she asked he inwardly marveled at her concern for others in the face of such personal crisis.

“Let the weight of the matter rest with me now, and do not dwell upon it. I’ll do my best to persuade the inspector of his innocence. Meanwhile you must remain here and occupy yourself the best you can. Trust me when I say that the truth will be revealed and justice will be served, one way or another.”

Her eyes glowed as she listened to his words of comfort.

“I am quite in your hands, Mr Holmes,” she said sincerely; turning languidly with a gentle smile and a nod, she left the room, closing the door behind her.
Her back to the door, she stood for a moment in the chill of the dim hallway, warmed by their astonishing and completely unexpected encounter. As she ascended to her room her mind began to consider all that had just happened.

By the time she was back underneath the blankets however, she wondered if perhaps she had _imagined_ those intangible impressions she was sure of an instant before; they being in such opposition to the man’s exaltation of all that was pure reason. Apart from the fact that she had _only_ been allowed to see that singular side of him, thus far. Yes, he had shown considerable mercy and understanding upon learning her secret and if she ever questioned the depths of Holmes’ loyalty as a friend, she should wonder no longer, for indeed, there is no doubt he was giving his best to help her…to save her.

But hadn’t she felt something more?

His music _alone_ attested to a fervent honesty of emotion that stirred her soul to its core. It was in fact, the very thing that drew her downstairs without a moment’s hesitation. She’s witnessed a profoundly _deeper_ side to the detective, one she never dreamed could have existed.

It was this very fact she pondered in her heart, along with a hopeful prospect that perhaps _more_ such surprises were to come. It was with these thoughts and the vivid memory of the hauntingly intimate strains of his violin that she faded into a deep sleep.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Writingwife83 for hanging in there with me. I found this one a bit tricky! Hope you all enjoy and please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two men rose from their seats and shook hands in agreement.

“I’ll be taking you at your word, Mr. Holmes and trusting you won’t have me regretting that decision. Gideon Ames is free to go, but must remain confined to his home. I didn’t much relish keeping the ol’ man here –him being a bit fragile and all. Produce this new evidence, sir, and we’ll be ready to make the arrest.”

The detective was careful to keep any connection between he and ‘the doctors Hooper’ from the discussion, revealing only the dubious validity of the witness testimony and the equally questionable character of said witness, all of which came to light with a little digging.

Upon hearing this, the Inspector’s brows drew up in surprise with a touch of chagrin, since the official investigation did not probe Barker’s claims, nor did they make inquiries regarding the man’s rectitude, a point that was not referred to by either party. Wisely so.

Instead Holmes left Spilsby with Gideon in a borrowed horse and trap, his promise to the petite pathologist discharged, as he had secured the elder Ames’ freedom. The fact seemed to warm him with a certain satisfaction that he promptly detached himself from.

Anna had flung open the door and ran out to meet them, her hands over her mouth, presumably overcome with emotion as Sherlock pulled the horse to a stop. The homecoming was joyous, but brief as they immediately sat in the kitchen and talked only of the case, as the couple had not been informed of the details regarding Cecil Barker. Not unnaturally, they were quite affected and added some disturbing details to Molly’s somewhat vague account of his attentions turned harassment, all which did nothing to improve the detective’s opinion of the man.

“I do my best, Mr. Holmes to live peaceably with all folk, to keep my tongue from mischief ‘n strife. But this man brought out such ire in my bones that I feared I’d do something I’d live to regret,” the old man admitted, dragging his large rough hand over his face.
Meanwhile, Toby had been hovering in the background, having stopped his work upon Gideon’s return and was moved almost to tears at the sight of him. He listened, standing quietly with a hot mug of tea.

Although not having much dealings with Molly directly, she was always very pleasant when they crossed paths. Mr. Ames had always spoken of her with great love and respect, in almost a fatherly way. The young man seemed confused at the idea of this Cecil Barker accusing his mistress of such a heinous crime.

But it wasn’t until Holmes mentioned the bee venom, the actual agent of death, did Toby’s heart began to race.

“E-excuse me sir,” he interrupted in halting trepidation, his mouth suddenly dry as three pairs of eyes fixed on his troubled face, Sherlock immediately walking over to him expectedly, sensing he had something important to say.

“It's just that I noticed the door yesterday...the door that’s never used…”

Gideon and Anna both rose from their seats and joined the detective’s side, the three staring at the flustered lad.

“–Where the Miss keeps all her medicines ‘n such.” Toby looked to Gideon beseechingly before the old man let out a cry of alarm as he grasped his meaning.

Turning abruptly and motioning for all to follow, he explained as they walked toward the west wing of the house, that in the years of her father's active practice his office and consulting room had its own vestibule, admitting his patients off the road and acted as a small waiting room.

When Molly turned this area into her laboratory, the vestibule was fitted floor-to-ceiling with shelves and became storage for all her archived experiments, specimens and medicines, a type of large walk-in apothecary cabinet, lined with jars, boxes and draws, all labeled and organized. The door had been locked and forgotten about. Outside, the Ivy and roses had been allowed to partially overgrow the entry, almost obscuring it from view.

And it was yesterday afternoon Toby noticed while weeding, that this very door had been breached, the lock broken away.
Sherlock rushed over, grabbing an oil lamp from the table and continued to inspect the area thoroughly, giving not-so-subtle indications that he was onto something.

“YES, yes! Very good!” He grinned, his eyes glittering with excitement, whirling around to face his stunned audience. “There is a distinct possibility that evidence may still be found, as with certain egomaniacal personalities, the idea of exposure is hardly imaginable. I think we advance, but the goal is nevertheless afar and there is much work yet to do.”

“Can I help you, Mr Holmes?” asked Toby, his eyes wide and eager.

The corner of Sherlock’s mouth quirked a bit before answering. “Your discovery has helped already – saving me precious time, but I must venture alone.”

“Regardless of that, sir –you will have a warm bed, if you find yourself in need,” Anna said with a soft, but firm motherly tone.

“Thank you,” he nodded in agreement. “Later I may find myself requiring that very thing.”

He started back to the front of the house, talking over his shoulder, the trio following at his heels.

“I will, however, from this moment on, disclaim that you’ve had any knowledge of my future actions, for your own protection. We do not wish to give the inspector any reason to come looking for you again.”

Before reaching the door the detective quickly turned to Gideon and spoke in a lower tone. “Currently my attire is not enabling me to... blend into my country surroundings. The availability of your wardrobe, sir, would aid me considerably.”

The late afternoon light deepened into amber hues as the detective rode along the country lane bringing him closer to the Barker residence. Still smartly dressed in city clothes, his planned disguise bundled under the trap’s seat, he grew increasingly impatient with the length of his travels and urged the horse into a quicker trot.
Originally from Parney village, just north of Spilsby, Molly’s old acquaintance had moved to the small hamlet of Bag Enderby, 6 miles westward, presumably to be more centrally located to the great houses of Harrington and Somersby, where he did manage to secure an assistant position with the aging physician of these old family seats until gaining the practice some 6 years ago.

Since then, according to Mycroft’s information, Barker had been deeply embroiled for years in high-stakes gambling with Lincolnshire’s aristocratic oligarchy, which went far in explaining his rather extravagant lifestyle on the comparatively humble salary of a country doctor. His brother also provided some little-known ‘goings-on’ among Barker’s peers of varied social composition, which gave the detective a particular angle of approach in putting the man at ease.

He pulled up in front of what was called Ferndale Manor, a moderately sized house, at least three hundred years old, with two extensions, one of which had been fairly recent, larger than Hooper’s Bolinbroke cottage, but was lacking all the warmth.

Before he knew it, after being announced, he found himself sitting across from Cecil James Barker in an overly ornate drawing room.

He was average and forgettable in physical appearance as any man he had ever met, but with an air of pretentiousness about him that impressed, establishing in Holmes’ mind of his considerable talents as a flimflammer.

Introduced as William Scott, barrister, advocate and friend to nobility and gentry alike; he was doing his bit, coming in from London to sort out the loose ends, since Birlstone was formerly an attorney and a member of the House of Commons back in his day.

Explaining further that Sir Inglby and others were hoping for a conscientious, but swift resolution to the case, insisting the matter needed special care.

‘Scott’ also made it clear that he was highly sympathetic upon hearing the appalling circumstances involved with his death.

“We were all quite shocked when word came from Dr. Warren,” he said in a slightly bombastic manner. “The very idea of a man like Douglas Birlstone associating with this Hooper person...a woman of questionable pursuits to say the very least, I’m sure.”
Barker’s increasingly haughty expression told Sherlock that he succeeded in disarming him. Then Holmes began lavishing him with compliments about the Manor, which resulted in the man enthusiastically showing him all the recent improvements and talking about it’s history.

As they walked he was finding it increasingly difficult to stomach Barker’s condescension and snobbery as he shamelessly venerated the elite while disparaging the plebeians among them.

The detective inquired after his work as a doctor, even as far as suggesting a referral to a wealthy acquaintance, just to steer the man towards locations of possible incrimination.

After what seemed to be the longest 20 minutes of his life, they found themselves outside, finishing up a quick tour of the grounds. In the process, they walked past various workers, never a word passing between them and their master. But within the brief side-glances there emanated a level of resentment that was palpable, at least in Sherlock’s view, communicating that this was not a happy household.

With his horse and trap coming into view as they strolled, he was quite satisfied that he’d learned all he could under the circumstances; he’d begun to tune out the doctor’s endless twaddle until he heard the name – Molly Hooper.

Initially Holmes was pleased by his good fortune – a suspect talking on his own accord, possibly saying something that he could use against him.

This view, however, quickly evaporated as his blather took on an explicitly derogatory tone.

…”of course, I say these things not from any personal interaction with the woman, but rather from her sordid reputation which has long been established.”

Unconsciously Sherlock’s jaw clenched as he listened in silence to his lies. He knew from all his recent inquiries, and certainly from his own personal experiences with Doctor Hooper, Micheal or Molly; the truth was to the contrary.

But Mr Barker did not stop there.

“I had often wondered,” he alleged, “–to Douglas and to others, how this woman could have acquired such a marked position professionally. Well... to my amazement he insinuated some rather
vulgar reasons, so indelicate, I blush to repeat them. I will, however, in the cause of justice, be willing to expose her for my poor friend’s sake.”

At this last statement, Holmes stopped short, just yards away from his carriage; his face carefully passive and devoid of all expression.

This caused Barker to stop also, a couple of paces in front of him; turning to see him mute and staring blankly, he took it as a sign of interest. The man continued, stepping back into his personal space and speaking in a low, conniving manner that made the detective’s skin crawl.

“Apparently, years ago Birlstone found himself in, let us say...a compromised position. The little whore persuaded him to use his influence to open doors, like the Spilsby constabulary for instance and who knows how many other favors enabled her to be taken seriously. He told me that he had enough. She had become increasingly demanding of him and he planned to bring the whole affair to light, thus breaking her hold over him. It was then she must have concocted this plan to kill him, using the poisons…”

Without warning Sherlock grabbed Barker’s foppish coat by the lapels, and pulled him nose to nose; his eyes flashed menacingly at a suddenly stunned and cringing man.

But Holmes recovered himself, instantly adjusting to the situation with an air of lofty reproach.

“I must take you to task, my man. Regardless of the so-called hear-say surrounding this lady doctor...she is still a lady. A true gentleman would mind his tongue,” he rebuked in a quick and measured tone. Releasing him immediately, he walked back to his carriage, yanking at the edge of his gloves with indignation.

Barker blinked at him rapidly, clearly humbled..“Y-yes, of course,” he stuttered, following at his heels. “I apologize. I was carried away by my feelings…”

He glanced back with a distinctly appeased expression before climbing into his trap and taking the horse’s reins from the waiting groom.

“I too apologize for my outburst. This whole affair has been very trying, to say the least. I look forward to calling on your hospitality again...under more pleasant circumstances,” he added with a tight smile.
This had the desired effect and Mr Cecil Barker almost breathed a literal sigh of relief before bidding him farewell.

The golden light had deepened into a dusky purple as the sun disappeared behind a grove of fir-trees. Traveling back toward the village, he was oblivious to the beauty of his surroundings, totally preoccupied with the emotional outburst while he was incognito; a rare blunder indeed.

Did this Molly Hooper matter so very much to him? Even if this lapse was for a brief moment, It was still cause to ask the question: what exactly was going on between he and the petite pathologist?

Facing a long night ahead before he could take action, he’d have time to sort things out...to make sure he was clear-minded and in complete control.

Passing a thicket that skirted the lane he veered off and dismounted his rig, leading the horse toward a peaceful clearing that was both obscured from the road and the house. He quickly changed into his workman disguise and settled down to wait for the cover of darkness.

Examining all data with the most dispassionate and scientific analysis he was capable of, he came up with these conclusions:

*She was more than a client, more than an acquaintance, more than a friend.*

It was this last conclusion that caused his pulse to quicken and a strange nervousness to invade his stomach.

As he considered his situation, he realized that proving her innocence weighed heavier on him now than it had since that very morning. The urgency to save her from this man’s vengeful schemes only mounted after their meeting and the thought that he would be the one to do it both motivated and grounded him, bringing him to a place of quiet determination as he sat...and waited.

Chapter End Notes

I’m thinking there will only be about 2 more chapters left, so the Sherlolly feels will start coming together very soon!
Oh, and I'm now on tumblr! Come say hello!

End Notes

I pay homage to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle by borrowing a couple of names and places, but they bear no connection to his actual characters/story plots. I've also used some historical names and places, while others are totally fictional. Costume drama and historical fiction are my favorite type of entertainment, so if I had any silly thoughts of minimal research I was totally fooling myself! Much of my inspiration coming from the research, but here lies the time challenge for me. So I beg your patience regarding how often I post. Hope you find it's worth the wait! ;)

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