

ALL ROADS LEAD
TO
WHITECHAPEL



MICHELLE BIRKBY

A BAKER STREET INQUIRY

Prologue

It started with champagne and promises on a sunny afternoon. It was an adventure, a dare, to while away the hours, to prove ourselves just as good as them. It started in laughter and hope and joy. It is ending here in blood and pain and fire, in the darkness.

I am afraid, so very afraid, and I am tempted to run, to get help, to scream for rescue, but I won't. She is there, tied to a chair at the point of a gun, half-unconscious, bleeding, having suffered worse than me, but she won't call for help either. We made a pact – we would do this ourselves, without help from the men upstairs. It was a lightly taken oath, half in jest, but now the reality was deadly serious.

'Who's there?' the vile creature calls, and I draw back into the blackness even further. My place is in the shadows, off the page, silent behind the clever and the good. I am the watcher, the listener, the minor player in the game. To be here, now, in this situation, in danger, is not my role.

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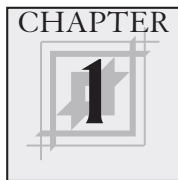
Yet my role has changed.

'Holmes? I know you're there!' he calls. His voice rings with triumph. It is the cue for my entrance.

'Mr Holmes has no idea who you are,' I tell him, and although my hand shakes, my voice is firm, and she stirs a little behind him.

Together. We started this together and we will end it together. 'Who the hell are you?' he demands, confused. His hair is wild, his clothes disordered, his face suffused with blood. I step forward, into the light.

'I am Sherlock Holmes' housekeeper. I am Mrs Hudson.'



Farewells and Greetings

April 1889, London

If you have read John Watson's thrilling stories, and I am sure you have, you know me best as housekeeper and landlady to the Great Detective, Sherlock Holmes.

Such a short sentence to write, and yet, oh my, what a wealth of information is there. Such adventures, such stories, such people. And as for me – I did so much more than bustle in and out with the tea. Although to be fair, I did bustle, and there was an awful lot of tea consumed by everyone. And I feel you should know John did make a few mistakes in his stories. He claimed artistic licence, though I feel it was faulty memory. But what people don't know about me is that I had adventures of my own, with Mary Watson, and sometimes other friends and acquaintances, and the occasional enemy, of Mr Holmes. So now it's time I told a few stories of my own . . .

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Believe it or not, I was a young woman once. For the first nineteen years of my life, I was Miss Martha Grey: sweet, innocent, and ever so slightly bored. Then, one particularly dull evening, I met Hector Hudson, and I wasn't bored any more. I loved him on sight. He was a soldier, so tall and handsome in his uniform, with dark blond hair, and a special smile just for me that made the lines around his grey-blue eyes wrinkle in a fascinating way. To my delight, he loved me on sight too. He proposed just a week later, and I said yes before he had even finished asking.

We were a love story come true, but unlike most love stories, it did not end with a happy marriage.

It ended with his death.

He was a soldier and we were at war. Six months after our marriage, he died alone, on a blood-soaked battlefield, in some place I had never heard of, leaving me only with his child growing inside me.

But he didn't leave me destitute, like so many other poor widows of the war; Hector provided me with the rent from several properties he had owned in London, which were now mine. Including, of course, 221b Baker Street.

But I didn't go to London then. I stayed in the country with my son. He grew strong and clever and adventurous. He would stride out in the morning and not return till tea, full of tales of what he had done and seen, his pockets stuffed with treasures that he laid on my lap with pride. I know I should have tried to keep him indoors, keep him at his lessons, but he would not be shut up. He would escape into the world, and I did not have the heart to stop him. He looked at me with his father's eyes, full of wonder and joy, and I knew he would grow up to be a great explorer, or writer, or something thrilling and exciting.

Except that he didn't grow up. One day he was tired and stayed indoors, quietly watching me do my work. Poor fool me, I was glad of his company. One week later, he died – his last, great

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adventure – leaving me behind, as his father had done on that godforsaken battlefield.

I don't want to talk about what my boy's death did to me. Not yet. Not now. I will just say that I could not stay there, where every object, every sound, just the light in the trees, reminded me of what I had lost. I moved to London then. I became a landlady and looked after my properties efficiently, all those rooms in all those houses. All those bright young men and lovely hopeful young women in my rooms became ill and old and bitter. London can do that to some people, when they are alone, and poor, and lose all hope. It's not kind to everyone. London can be cruel. I did not find friends. I did not find love. I did not find my place. However, I did learn to balance account books and make agreements with tradesmen and haggle for the best prices and everything else that came with running a business. I learnt how to appraise a maid or a tenant on sight, and how to get rid of them too. I learnt how to offset loss with profit, and what was a good investment, and what bad. Whilst Parliament argued over whether women had the mental ability even to own their own clothes, I quietly administered an empire – and no one noticed.

I also discovered cooking. As Hector's wife I'd had nothing to do except tell the servants what to do for me. As the landlady of all of these properties, I had to be capable of doing any work required, at any time. Therefore, I learnt to do every job of every servant. Cleaning bored me, laundry I loathed, but cooking I loved. Taking the ingredients one by one, all looking so simple, and then combining them and cooking them and using all kinds of secrets to make them into something delicious, I felt to be a form of magic. With all these discoveries about myself I changed and grew and became not Martha Hudson, grieving widow, but Mrs Hudson, formidable housekeeper and successful landlady.

As I got older, I gradually sold all my properties and moved into what I was sure would be my final home: 221b Baker Street. It was a very elegant new building, rising several storeys above the busy street, with a smart black door edged in white woodwork and

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red brick. There was room for me, and a suite of rooms for a pair of gentlemen, and I settled down for my long and inevitable slide into old age. The first few men who rented my rooms were nice and polite. They had reasonable hours and required only breakfast and the occasional cup of tea, and kept themselves to themselves. They were the perfect tenants. Other landladies envied me.

But I was so bored.

They didn't need me, they needed an automaton. I did not need them. We were perfect strangers living under one roof.

Then *he* came. On a rainy night in September, he rang my bell and asked if my rooms were still vacant.

He was so tall and thin that at first I thought he was quite elderly. Then he stepped into the light and I saw his face was young and lean, with restless dark eyes. He looked around then smiled and raised his hand, but oddly, as if he was remembering he was supposed to be polite. Those hands were covered in sticking plaster, and his jacket was strangely stained.

He was soaked to the skin, so I invited him in and said I would bring him tea and, in the meantime, he could pop upstairs and view the rooms.

I knew he'd like them. They were nice rooms, though I say so myself. Comfortable, but not shabby, well furnished, with plenty of space for my gentlemen to keep their books and such-like, with two large bedrooms and all conveniently situated near the centre of London. The question was: would I like him?

When I brought in his tea, I found him standing in the middle of the carpet – the exact middle – looking around curiously, with a certain intensity. I felt sorry for him then. There he was on a rainy cold night, all alone, nowhere to go, wet through, searching for a home. He turned to me as I entered, and took the tea and drank it gratefully. I felt he too had looked at me and studied me and come to his conclusions.

'You keep a very clean house, Mrs Hudson,' he said. I liked his voice. It was low, but expressive and strong.

'I do, and a very private one,' I assured him. He struck me as a man who treasured his privacy. 'I will supply your meals and

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do your washing and clean your rooms, of course, but I won't impose or interfere.'

He nodded.

'I may have many visitors, Mrs Hudson, in connection with my profession. Will that be an inconvenience?'

'Not at all,' I told him. Though I would regret that in years to come, running up and down those stairs to show in some very odd visitors, at all hours of the day and night. 'May I ask . . . ?'

'A consulting detective. The *only* consulting detective,' he said, with a touch of pride.

'How interesting,' I said politely, as my heart stirred inside me. A detective! The things that could happen in those rooms, what I might see and hear, the kind of people who would visit – the lost, the lonely, the curious, even the dangerous . . .

Excitement, of a sort, even just second-hand – but still, excitement!

'I work with the police, but not for them, so discretion must be guaranteed,' he warned.

'I understand.'

'I have odd habits,' he admitted. He almost seemed to be warning me against allowing him into my home. 'I keep strange hours. I can be very messy. I do chemical experiments that always seem to smell,' he said ruefully. 'There may be noise . . .'

I raised a hand to stop him.

'None of that will be a problem,' I assured him. Oh, how I longed for noise and mess in my pristine home!

'Other landladies have found me difficult,' he warned. 'In fact, I have been thrown out of my rooms three times – the latest just two hours ago.'

'Why?'

He took a breath, determined to admit it all.

'I poisoned her cat. It was entirely accidental . . .'

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. His contrite face, his bizarre admission – it was all so ridiculous! He stared at me, and then smiled. I looked up at him, this man tramping the streets searching for a room. He seemed to have no family, no friends to

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turn to in his hour of need, nowhere to go, never quite fitting in anywhere, no place he belonged to, and my heart just went out to him. He was a lost soul, just like me.

‘I don’t have a cat,’ I told him. ‘Do as you will, sir, as long as you pay for any damages.’ I was not a soft touch, after all. He nodded, serious again.

‘The rent . . .’ he started to say. His coat was patched, his bag worn. Consulting detectives were, I imagined, paid by results, and how many results had there been so far?

‘There are two bedrooms. I would have no objections to your bringing a companion to share the rooms and the rent.’ ‘I have no companions,’ he said, his face turning from me towards the windows. ‘I have not that nature.’

‘You can have the rooms half-rent for a month whilst you find one,’ I told him. I could not let him go back alone into that dark and damp night. ‘London is full of men looking for a refuge. Perhaps a soldier returned from the wars? They always need a place to stay and an understanding companion. Just be sure and tell them about your bad habits first.’



It was three weeks later that he brought him home. He’d followed my advice and found an ex-soldier, a doctor, with a pleasant smile, a hearty handshake and haunted eyes. He badly needed a place to stay, a task in life and someone to care for him. Although he thought he needed only one of those things.

In the first days they were there together the doctor fixed my kitchen door, the detective had sharp words with the butcher, who had been cheating me (I had suspected as much) and I made them the best meal of their lives.

They sat in their rooms and smoked and talked into the night, and I sat in the kitchen and listened to them through the air vent and there we all were. Sherlock Holmes, John Watson and Martha Hudson. Three lost souls who had found each other.



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