



A STUDY IN Charlotte

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN WATSON AND HOLMES LIKE THIS BEFORE.

BRITTANY CAVALLARO

A
STUDY
IN
Charlotte

A Charlotte Holmes novel

BRITTANY CAVALLARO



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
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DEDICATION

For Kit and me, at sixteen

EPIGRAPH

I had no idea that such individuals existed outside of stories.

A STUDY IN SCARLET, SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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one

THE FIRST TIME I MET HER WAS AT THE TAIL END OF ONE OF those endless weekday nights you could only have at a school like Sherringford. It was midnight, or just after, maybe, and I'd spent the last few hours icing my sprained shoulder in my room, the result of a rugby scrimmage gone horribly wrong just minutes after it'd started. Practices tended to do that here, something I'd learned in the first week of school when the team captain shook my hand so voraciously I thought he was about to pull me in and eat me. Sherringford's rugby team had landed at the bottom of its division at the end of every season for years. But not this year, no; Kline had made a point of reminding me of that, smiling with every one of his strange little teeth. I was their white whale. Their ruggier messiah. The reason why the school shelled out not just a tuition scholarship for my junior year but my transportation costs, too—no mean feat when you visit your mother in London every holiday.

The only real problem, then, was how much I hated rugby. I'd made the fatal mistake of surviving a maul on the rugby field last year at my school in London before accidentally sort of bringing our team to victory. I had only tried because, for once, Rose Milton was in the stands, and I had loved her for two passionate, secret, awful years, but as I learned later, the Sherringford athletic director had been in the stands as well. Front row, scouting. You see, we had quite a good rugby team at Highcombe School.

Damn them all.

Especially my cow-eyed, bull-necked new teammates. Honestly, I even hated Sherringford itself, with its rolling green lawns and clear skies and a city center that felt smaller than even the cinder-block room they gave me in Michener Hall. A city center that had no fewer than four cupcake shops and not one decent place to get a curry. A city center just an hour away from where my father lived. He kept threatening to visit. "Threatening" was the only word for it. My mother had wanted us to get to know each other better; they had divorced when I was ten.

But I missed London like an arm, or a leg, even if I had only lived there for a handful of years, because as much as my mother insisted that my coming to Connecticut would be like coming home, it was more like coming to a manicured jail.

All this is just to give you an understanding of how, that September, I could have struck a match and happily watched Sherringford burn. And even so, before I had ever met Charlotte Holmes, I was sure she was the only friend I would make in that miserable place.

"YOU'RE TELLING ME THAT YOU'RE *THAT* WATSON." TOM WAS delighted. He smashed his round Midwestern accent into the flattest Cockney I'd ever heard. "My dear chap! My

dear fellow! Watson, come here, I want you!”

The cell of a room that we shared was so small that when I flipped him off, I almost poked out his eye. “You’re a genius, Bradford. Seriously. Where do you get your material?”

“Oh, but dude, this is perfect.” My roommate tucked his hands in the pockets of the argyle sweater-vest he always wore under his blazer. Through a moth hole, I watched his right thumb wriggle in excitement. “Because the party tonight is at Lawrence Hall. And Lena is throwing it because her sister always ships her vodka. And you *know* who Lena rooms with.” He waggled his eyebrows.

At that, I finally had to close my book. “Don’t tell me you’re trying to set me up with my—”

“Your soul mate?” I must’ve looked violent, because Tom put two very serious hands on my shoulders. “I’m not trying,” he said, enunciating each word, “to set you up with Charlotte. I’m trying to get you *drunk*.”

Charlotte and Lena had set up camp down in the Lawrence Hall basement. As Tom had promised, it wasn’t hard to get past the hall mother. Each dorm had one (in addition to our army of RAs), an older woman from town who oversaw her students from the front desk. They sorted mail, arranged for birthday cakes, lent an ear when you were homesick—but they also enforced the hall rules. Lawrence’s was famous for sleeping on the job.

The party was in the basement kitchen. Though it was stocked with plates and pots and even a spindly four-burner stove, the pans were all so dented they looked like they’d been worn to war. Tom squeezed against the stove while I shut the door behind us; within seconds, one of the knobs rubbed a half-moon of grease onto his sweater-vest. The girl next to him smiled thinly and turned back to her friends, a tumbler of something dangling from her hand. There had to be at least thirty people in there, packed in shoulder to shoulder.

Grabbing my arm, Tom began shouldering us to the back of the tiny kitchen. I felt like I was being pulled through a dark, dank wardrobe into some boozy Narnia.

“That’s the weird townie dealer,” he whispered to me. “He’s selling drugs. That’s Governor Schumer’s son. He’s *buying* drugs.”

“Great,” I said, only half-listening.

“And those two girls? They summer in Italy. Like, they use ‘summer’ as a verb. Their dads run an offshore drilling operation.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“What, I’m poor, I notice these things.”

“Right.” If it was a joke, it was a lame one. Tom might’ve had a hole in his sweater-vest, but back in our room, he also had the smallest, thinnest laptop I’d ever seen. “You’re poor.”

“Comparatively speaking.” Tom dragged me along behind him. “You and me, we’re upper-middle class. We’re peasants.”

The party was loud and crowded, but Tom was determined to drag me all the way to the far wall. I didn’t know why, until a strange voice curled up through the cigarette smoke.

“The game is Texas Hold’em,” it said, hoarse, but with a bizarre, wild precision, like a drunk Greek philosopher orating at a bacchanal. “And the buy-in tonight is fifty

dollars.”

“Or your soul,” chirped another voice, a normal one, and the girls in front of us laughed.

Tom turned to grin at me. “That one’s Lena. And that one’s Charlotte Holmes.”

The first I saw of her was her hair, black and glossy and straight down to her shoulders. She was leaning forward over a card table to pull in a handful of chips, and I couldn’t see her face. This wasn’t important, I told myself. It wasn’t a big deal if she didn’t like me. So what if somewhere, back a hundred years and change and across the Atlantic Ocean, some other Watson made best friends with some other Holmes. People became best friends all the time. There were, surely, best friends at this school. Dozens. Hundreds.

Even if I didn’t have one.

She sat up, all at once, with a wicked smile. Her brows were startling dark lines on her pale face, and they framed her gray eyes, her straight nose. She was altogether colorless and severe, and still she managed to be beautiful. Not the way that girls are generally beautiful, but more like the way a knife catches the light, makes you want to take it in your hands.

“Dealer goes to Lena,” she said, turning away from me, and it was only then that I placed her accent. I was forcibly reminded that she was from London, like me. For a moment, I felt so homesick I thought that I’d make an even worse show of myself and throw myself at her feet, beg her to read me the phone book in that extravagant voice that had no business coming out of such a thin, angular girl.

Tom sat down, flung five chips on the table (on closer inspection, they were the brass buttons from his blazer), and rubbed his hands together theatrically.

I should have had something witty to say. Something strange and funny and just a little bit morbid, something I could say under my breath as I dropped down on the seat beside her. Something to make her look up sharply and think, *I want to know him*.

I had nothing.

I turned tail and fled.

TOM ARRIVED HOME HOURS LATER, CHEERFULLY EMPTY-HANDED. “She cleaned me out,” he laughed. “I’ll win it back next time.” That’s when I learned that Holmes’s poker game had been running weekly since she showed up the year before. They’d just gotten more popular since Lena started bringing vodka. “And probably more lucrative for Charlotte too,” Tom added.

For the next weeks, I hit snooze over and over in some wild hope that the morning would just pack up and leave me alone. The worst of it was first-period French, taught by the autocratic, red-suspendered Monsieur Cann, whose waxed mustache looked like it belonged on a taxidermist’s wall. Almost every other Sherringford student had been there since freshman year, and that early in the morning all anyone wanted to do was sit by their oldest friends and catch up on the night before. I was no one’s oldest friend. So I took an empty double desk for myself and tried not to fall asleep before the bell rang.

“I heard she made, like, five hundred dollars last night,” the girl in front of me said, pulling her red hair into a ponytail. “She probably practices online. It’s not fair. It’s not like she *needs* money. Her family has to be loaded.”

“Close your eyes,” her seatmate said, and blew lightly on her friend’s face. “Eyelash. Yeah, I’ve heard that too. Her mom is like, a duchess. But whatever. It’s probably just going up her nose.”

The redhead perked up at that. “I heard it was going into her arm.”

“I wonder if she’d introduce me to her dealer.”

The bell rang, and Monsieur Cann shouted, “*Bonjour, mes petites,*” and I realized that, for the first time in weeks, I was completely awake.

I spent the rest of the morning thinking about that conversation and what it meant for her. Charlotte Holmes. Because they couldn’t have been talking about anyone else. I was still mulling it all over as I walked across the quad at lunch, dodging people left and right. The green was choked with students, and so in a way, it wasn’t a surprise when the girl I was thinking about stepped out from what seemed to be an invisible door and directly into my path.

I didn’t run into her; I’m not that clumsy. But we both froze, and began doing that awful left-right-you-go-first shuffle. Finally, I gave up. *Screw all of this*, I thought mulishly, *it’s a small campus and I can’t hide forever, I might as well go ahead and—*

I stuck out my hand. “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m James. I’m new here.”

She looked down at it, eyebrows knitted, like I was offering her a fish, or a grenade. It was sunny and hot that day, early October’s last gasp of summer, and most everyone had slung their uniform blazer over one shoulder or was carrying it under their arm. Mine was in my bag, and I’d loosened my tie, walking down the path, but Charlotte Holmes was as fastidiously put together as if she were about to give a speech on etiquette. She had on slim navy pants instead of the pleated skirt most of the girls wore. Her white oxford shirt was buttoned up to her neck and her ribbon tie looked as if it’d been steamed. I was close enough to tell that she smelled like soap, not perfume, and that her face was as bare as if she’d just washed it.

I might’ve just stared at her for hours—this girl that I’d wondered about off and on my whole life—had her colorless eyes not narrowed at me suspiciously. I started, as if I’d done something wrong.

“I’m Holmes,” she said finally, in that marvelous, ragged voice. “But you knew that already, didn’t you.”

She wasn’t going to shake my hand, then. I slid both of them into my pockets.

“I did,” I admitted. “So you know who I am. Which is awkward, but I figured—”

“Who put you up to this?” There was a flat kind of acceptance in her face. “Was it Dobson?”

“Lee Dobson?” I shook my head, bewildered. “No. Put me up to what? I mean, I knew you’d be here. At Sherringford. My mum told me that the Holmeses had sent you; she keeps in touch with your aunt Araminta. They met at some charity thing. Right? They signed the *His Last Bow* manuscript? It went for leukemia patients or something, and now they write emails back and forth. Are you in my year? I was never clear on that. But you’ve got a biology textbook there, so you must be a sophomore. A deduction, ha. Maybe best avoid those.”

I was babbling like an idiot, I knew I was, but she had been holding herself so straight and still that she looked like a wax figurine. It was so at odds with the commanding, freewheeling girl I’d seen at the party that I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, what had happened to her since then. But my talking seemed to calm her down,

and though it wasn't funny, or morbid, or witty, I kept on going until her shoulders relaxed and her eyes finally lost some of their sharp sadness.

"I know who you are, of course," she said when I finally stopped to draw breath. "My aunt Araminta did tell me about you, and Lena, though it would have been obvious anyway. Hello, Jamie." She extended a small white hand, and we shook.

"I hate it when people call me Jamie, though," I said, pained, "so you might as well call me Watson instead."

Holmes smiled at me in a closed-mouth kind of way. "All right, then, Watson," she said. "I have to go to lunch."

It was a dismissal if I'd ever heard one.

"Right," I said, tamping down my disappointment. "I was going to meet Tom anyway; I should go."

"Right, see you." She stepped neatly around me.

I couldn't leave it at that, and so I called after her, "What did I do?"

Holmes flung me an unreadable look over her shoulder. "Homecoming's next weekend," she said drily, and went on her way.

By every account—and by that, honestly, I meant my mother's—Charlotte was the epitome of a Holmes. Coming from my mother, that wasn't a compliment. You'd think that after all this time, our families would have drifted apart, and in most ways I suppose we had. But my mother would run into the odd Holmes at Scotland Yard fund-raisers or the Edgar Awards dinners or, as in the case of Holmes's aunt Araminta, an auction of my great-great-great-grandfather's literary agent's—Arthur Conan Doyle's—things. I had always been enthralled with the idea of this girl, the only Holmes who was my age (as a kid, I thought we'd meet and the two of us would go on wild adventures), but my mother always discouraged me without saying why.

I knew nothing about her but that the police had let her assist on her first case when she was ten years old. The diamonds she helped recover were worth three million pounds. My father had told me about it during our weekly phone call, in an attempt to get me to open up to him. It hadn't worked. At least, not in the way that he'd planned.

I dreamed about that diamond theft for months. How I could've been there by her side, her trusted companion. One night, I lowered her down into the Swiss bank from a skylight, my rope the only thing holding her above the booby-trapped floor. The next, we raced through the cars of a runaway train, chased by black-masked bandits shouting in Russian. When I saw a story about a stolen painting on the front page of the newspaper, I told my mother that Charlotte Holmes and I were going to solve the case. My mother cut me off, saying, "Jamie, if you try to do anything like that before you turn eighteen, I will sell every last one of your books in the night, starting with your autographed Neil Gaiman."

(Before they'd divorced, my father was prone to saying, "You know, your mother's only a Watson by marriage," with a pointedly lofted eyebrow.)

The only real conversation my mother and I'd had about the Holmeses happened right before I left. We'd been discussing Sherringford— Well. *She* had been monologuing about how much I'd like it there while I packed up my closet in silence, wondering if I flung myself out the window, would it properly kill me or just break both my legs. Finally, she made me tell her something I was looking forward to, and to

spite her (and because it was true), I told her I was excited, and nervous, to finally meet my counterpart in the Holmes family.

Which didn't go over well.

"Lord knows how your great-great-great-grandfather put up with that man," she said with a roll of her eyes.

"Sherlock?" I asked. At least now we weren't talking about Sherringford.

My mother harrumphed. "I always imagined he'd just been bored. Victorian gentlemen, you know. Didn't have too much going on. But it never seemed to me that their friendship ran both ways. Those Holmeses, they're *strange*. They still drill their children from birth in deductive skills. Discourage them making friends, or so I've heard. I can't say it's healthy to keep a child away like that. Araminta is nice enough, I suppose, but then again I don't live with her. I can't imagine what it was like for the good Dr. Watson. The last thing you need is to take up with someone like her."

"It's not like I'm going to marry this girl," I said, digging in the back of my closet for my rugby kit. "I was just interested to meet her, that's all."

"I've heard that she's one of the stranger ones," she insisted. "It's not as if they've sent her away to America on a lark."

I looked pointedly down at my suitcase. "No, that's usually not a reward."

"Well, I hope for your sake she's lovely," my mum said quickly. "Just do be careful there, love."

It's stupid to admit to it, but my mother isn't usually wrong. I mean, the whole sending me to Sherringford thing was a terrible idea, but I understood it at its core. She had been paying quite a bit—money we didn't really have—for me to attend Highcombe School, and all because I'd insisted that I wanted to be a writer. There were a few famous novelists who taught there . . . not that any of them had really taken to me. Sherringford, despite its obvious drawbacks (Connecticut, my father) had as strong an English program, or better. And they offered to take me for free, as long as I did my best impression of an excited rucker for them now and again.

But at Sherringford, I kept the writer thing to myself. A constant, low-level drone of fear kept me from showing my work to anyone; with someone like Dr. Watson in your family, you didn't want to invite any comparison. I did my best to hide my work away, so I was surprised when it almost came up that day over lunch.

Tom and I had grabbed sandwiches and sat down under an ash tree off the quad with some other guys from Michener Hall. Tom was digging around in my bag for some paper to spit his gum into. Normally it would've annoyed me, having someone shuffle carelessly through my things, but he was acting like any of my old Highcombe friends would, and so I let him.

"Can I tear a sheet out of this?" he asked, holding up my notebook.

It was only through sheer force of will that I kept from grabbing it out of his hands. "Yeah," I said indifferently, fishing chips out of a bag.

He flipped through it, quickly at first but slowing as he went. "Huh," he said, and I shot him a warning look that he didn't see.

"What is it?" someone asked. "Love poems? Erotic stories?"

"Dirty limericks," Dobson, my hallmate, said.

Tom cleared his throat, like he was about to perform a page from what was, to be honest, my journal.

“No, drawings of your mom.” I snagged it and tore a page from the back, making sure to tuck it under my knee afterward. “It’s just a journal. Notes to myself, that kind of thing.”

“I saw you talking to Charlotte Holmes on the quad,” Dobson said. “You writing about her?”

“Right.” There was a nasty note in his voice I didn’t like, and I didn’t want to encourage it with a real response.

Randall, his ruddy-faced roommate—he was on the rugby team with me—shot him a look, and leaned in like he was about to tell me a secret.

“We’ve been trying to crack that nut for a year,” he said. “She’s hot. Wears those tight little pants. But she doesn’t go out, except for that weird poker game, and she doesn’t drink. Only likes the hard stuff, and does it alone.”

“They’re trying PUA,” Tom said to me mournfully, and at my blank look, he elaborated. “Pick-up artistry. You neg the girl—like, an insult hidden in a compliment. Dobson keeps telling her he’s the only guy who likes her, that everyone else thinks she’s ugly and strung out but that he *likes* the junkie look on girls.”

Randall laughed. “Doesn’t fucking work, at least not for me,” he said. “I’m moving on. Have you *seen* those new freshmen? A lot less work for a lot more payoff.”

“Not me. I cracked the nut.” Dobson smirked at Randall. “And, you know, she might do me some favors again. Since I can be such a charming date.”

Liar.

“Stop talking,” I said quietly.

“What?”

When I get angry, my English accent thickens until it’s clotted and snotty, a full-on cartoon. And I was furious. I probably sounded like the bloody Queen.

“Say it again, and I’ll fucking kill you.”

There it was, that weightless rush, that floor-bottoming-out exhilaration that comes from saying something you can’t take back. Something that would lead to me smashing in some deserving asshole’s face.

This was the reason I played rugby in the first place. It was supposed to be a “reasonable outlet” for what the school counselor called my “acts of sudden and unreasonable aggression.” Or, as my father put it, snickering like it was some joke, “the way you get a little punchy sometimes.” Unlike him, I never looked back on them with anything like pride, the fights I got into at Highcombe and, before that, in my public school in Connecticut. I always felt disgusted with myself afterward, ashamed. Classmates I liked just fine the rest of the time would say something that would set me off, and immediately, my arm would cock back, ready to swing.

But I wasn’t going to be ashamed this time, I thought, as Dobson jumped to his feet, swinging wildly. Randall grabbed his shirt to hold him back, his face a mask of shock. *Good, hold him*, I thought, *that way he can’t run*, and I applied my fist to Dobson’s jaw. His head snapped back, and when he looked at me again, he was smirking.

“You her boyfriend?” he said, panting. “Cause Charlotte didn’t tell me that last night.”

In the background, shouting—the voice sounded like Holmes’s. A hand pulled at

my arm. In the second I was distracted, Dobson broke free of Randall's grip and tackled me to the grass. He was the size of a steam liner, and with his knee on my chest, I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Leaning into my face, he said, "Who do you think you are, you little prick?" and spat, long and slow, into my eye. Then he hit me in the face, and hit me again.

A voice cut through the blood-roar. "Watson," Holmes shouted, at what sounded like an enormous distance, "what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

I was maybe the only person to ever have his imaginary friend made real. Not entirely real, not yet—she was still dream-blurred to me. But we'd run through London's sewers together, hand in muddy hand. We'd hidden in a cave in Alsace-Lorraine for weeks because the Stasi were after us for stealing government secrets. In my fevered imagination, she hid them in a microchip in one small red barrette. It held back her blond hair; that's what I'd pictured her with, back then.

Truth be told, I liked that blurriness. That line where reality and fiction jugged up against each other. And when Dobson had said those ugly things, I'd lunged at him because he'd dragged Holmes kicking and screaming into *this* world, one where people left litter on the quad and had to leave a conversation to use the toilet, where assholes tormented a girl because she wouldn't sleep with them.

It took four people—including a visibly shaken Tom—to haul him off me. I lay there for a moment, wiping the spit out of my eyes, until something leaned in to darken my view.

"Get up," Holmes said. She didn't offer me a hand.

There was a crowd around us. Of course there was. I swayed a little on my feet, flushed with adrenaline, feeling nothing. "Hi," I said stupidly, wiping at my bleeding nose.

She looked at me for a measured moment, then turned to face Dobson. "Oh baby, I can't believe you fought for me," she drawled at him. There was a smattering of laughter. He was still restrained by his friends, and I could hear him panting from where I stood. "Now that you've *won* me, I guess I'll lay down and spread for you right here. Or do you only like your girls drugged and unconscious?"

Shouts, jeers. Dobson looked more shocked than angry; he went limp against his restrainers. I snickered; I couldn't help it. Holmes spun, and stared me down.

"And you. You are not my boyfriend," she said evenly, the drawl completely vanished. "Though your wall-eyed stare, your ridiculous rambling, and the way your index finger twitches when I talk says you so very much want to be. You think you're defending my 'honor,' but you're just as bad as he is." She jerked a thumb at Dobson. "I don't need someone to fight for me. I can fight for myself."

Someone whistled; someone else began a slow clap. Holmes's expression didn't change. Some teachers showed up, and after that the dean; I was questioned, given a compress, questioned again. The whole time I couldn't stop replaying it. As I bled onto my shirt in the infirmary, waiting to see if I'd be expelled and shipped back home, it was still the only thing I had banging around in my head. *You're just as bad as he is*, she'd said, and she'd been absolutely right.

But I had never wanted to be her boyfriend. I wanted something smaller than that, and far, far bigger, something I couldn't yet put into words.

The next time I sought out Charlotte Holmes, it was because Lee Dobson had been

murdered.

two

IT WAS CLOSE TO DAWN WHEN THE SHOUTING STARTED.

At first, it only registered as part of my dream. The shouts were those of an angry mob; someone had armed them with torches and pitchforks, and they chased me into a barn under a sky full of stars. The only hiding place I could find was behind a nonplussed cow, chewing her cud.

You didn't need to be a psychologist to understand what it meant. After my fight with Dobson, I'd gone from being unknown to notorious. People who didn't even know me suddenly had *opinions* about me. Dobson wasn't very popular; he was a meathead, and nasty to girls, but he had a number of thick-necked friends who made their presence known when I walked into the dining hall. Tom, for his part, was secretly thrilled. Gossip was Sherringford's favorite currency, and by his reckoning, he'd found a key to the Royal Treasury.

But for me, not much had really changed. I was still uncomfortable at Sherringford, only more so. My French class began falling silent when I walked in. A freshman girl stammered out an invitation to homecoming one morning outside the sciences building while her friends smothered giggles behind her. She was cute, in a blond, wispy kind of way, but I told her that I wasn't allowed to go. It was almost true. I'd been suspended from all school functions for a month—clubs, days in town, and thank God, the rugby team, though I'd been assured I would keep my scholarship—but they'd forgotten to ban me from the dance. It was a light punishment, I was told by the nurse who examined my broken nose. To me, it didn't seem like a punishment at all.

After the fight, I'd kept an eye out for Holmes, though I didn't know what I could possibly say if I did see her. That week, she canceled her poker game, though I wouldn't have gone anyway—showing up would've made me look like the awful stalker she already thought me to be. It was hard to avoid someone at Sherringford, with its five hundred students and postage-stamp campus, and yet somehow she had managed it. She wasn't in the dining hall; she wasn't on the quad between lessons.

I don't think I would have spent so much time thinking about it—about her—if I wasn't also coming to grips with how poorly I fit in at Sherringford. By the time all the trouble with Dobson started, I'd made friends—mostly through Tom, who seemed to know everyone from the cute girls in my classes to the upperclassmen playing ultimate Frisbee in the quad. Soon, I knew them too. But there was a flimsiness to all of those friendships, like a strong wind might blow them away.

For one thing, people were always talking about money.

Not upfront, not *How much do your parents make?* More like, *What do your parents do?* Was your mom a senator? Did your dad manage a hedge fund? *Oh my*

God, I'll be in the Hamptons for Christmas, too, I heard one girl tell another in a voice that carried across the room. More than once, I saw students buying drugs from the creepy blond townie who lurked in the corners of our parties and around our quad at night. When they weren't using their parents' money to fund their coke habits, my classmates were globe-trotting. I overheard the girls in my French class trading notes on who was building orphanages in Africa last summer (never a specific African country, just "Africa"), who was backpacking through Spain.

Sherringford wasn't one of those schools like Andover or St. Paul's, filled with future presidents and baseball stars and astronauts. Sure, we had electives like screenwriting and Swahili, teachers with PhDs and tweed jackets, students sent off to the lesser Ivy League schools—but we were a rank or two below extraordinary, and maybe that was the problem. If we weren't in the fight to be the best, we'd fight instead to be the most privileged.

Or *they* would, anyway. I'd just landed myself a front-row seat to their match. And somewhere out there, in the dark, Charlotte Holmes prowled, playing entirely by her own rules.

The night of Dobson's murder, I'd been up late mulling over how to fix things between us. Holmes and I. I was fairly sure that I'd blown any chance of our ever being friends, and that thought kept me up until half past three. I'd been asleep for what felt like a moment when I was woken by the panic spreading down our hall. Tom had already thrown on clothes and gone to investigate before I'd even dragged myself from my bed. I thought, hazily, that it must be a fire drill and that I had somehow missed the alarm.

But there was a crowd gathered at the end of the hallway: guys from our floor, mostly, but our gray-haired hall mother was there as well, and beyond her was the school nurse and a knot of policemen in caps and uniforms. I pushed through them until I found Tom, staring blank-faced at a door wrapped in police tape. It stood open about an inch, and beyond it, the room was dark.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"Dobson," Tom said. When he finally turned to face me, I saw the frightened look in his eyes. "He's dead."

I was shocked to realize he was frightened of *me*.

The guy behind me said, "That's James Watson, he's the one who punched him," and the buzz around me ratcheted up to a roar.

Mrs. Dunham, our hall mother, put a protective hand on my shoulder. "It's all right, James," she said, "I'll stay here with you." Her glasses were askew, and she'd thrown a ridiculous silk robe over her pajamas; I hadn't known that she stayed nights in the dorm, or that she even knew my name. Still, I was fiercely glad she was there, because a man in a button-down shirt broke away from the policemen and crossed straight over to me. "James, is it?" he asked, flashing a badge. "We'd like to ask you some questions about tonight."

"Oh no, you don't," Mrs. Dunham said. "He's a minor, and you need his parents' permission to question him without a guardian present."

"He's not under arrest," the man insisted.

"All the same," she said. "Sherringford policy."

"Fine." The detective sighed. "Do they live close by, son?" He produced a notepad

and pen from his trouser pocket, like this was *Law & Order*.

Well. It kind of was.

“My mother lives in London,” I said, and my voice sounded strained even to my ears. Tom’s stare was hardening into something like a glare. Behind him, a boy who lived next door to me was quietly crying. “My father lives here in Connecticut, but I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Can you give me his number?” the detective asked, and I did, pulling out my phone to read out the digits I’d never once called myself. He said some other things about staying put, and getting some sleep, and them coming by to see me in the early afternoon, all of which I agreed to. Did I have a choice? He gave me his card: it read *Detective Ben Shepard* in a businesslike font. He didn’t look much like the other policemen I’d seen, on-screen or otherwise. On first glance, he gave an impression of grocery-store averageness, but as I stared at him, holding his card, I saw that his face had an unusually eager cast to it, like a dog eyeing a lofted ball. He didn’t look like he had a tragic past, some murdered mother or brother that drove him to become a detective. He looked like someone who played video games with their kids. Who did the dishes without being asked.

That impression of goodness unsettled me more than if he’d been a mustache-twirling villain. Because it was clear that Detective Shepard thought *I* was the bad guy.

He gave me what was meant to be a reassuring smile. Then he left, him and the other policemen, and everyone else milled around for another few minutes until Mrs. Dunham sent them back to their rooms. They shoved past me. All of them did, Harry and Peter and Mason and even Tom, wrapped in his ubiquitous sweater-vest. The looks they gave me were uniform. *Outsider*, their faces said. *Killer, you deserve what’s coming to you*.

Mrs. Dunham offered to make me some cocoa, but I had no idea what I’d say to her, or to anyone, so I said thanks but no thanks, I’d just go to sleep. As if sleep was even a remote possibility.

Tom wasn’t in our room. He’d probably decided to sleep on someone’s floor, I thought. He was afraid of me now. In a flash of rage, I picked up my pillow to chuck it across the room—and stopped cold. If someone heard me on a rampage, it wasn’t going to help my case in the slightest. It was this anger that had gotten me into this mess in the first place, I reminded myself, and squashed the pillow against the bed instead.

Anger, and Charlotte Holmes.

When I snuck back down the hallway, the yellow tape over Dobson’s door caught the light like a mirror, one I refused to look too closely into. I kept moving.

I made it all the way to Lawrence Hall before I realized I didn’t have her number. Her phone number, or her room number—in fact, I was only vaguely sure she lived in this dorm. The rows of darkened windows stared down at me as I struggled to make a decision. Any moment now, the sky would start to brighten. Lights would begin to go on. The girls who lived here would shower and dress and gather their textbooks on the way out the door. How far would they get before they heard that one of their classmates had been murdered? How long would it take for them to start believing I’d done it?

I didn’t even know what I’d say when I found her. What possible reason did she

have to believe I was innocent? The last time she saw me, I was beating the daylight out of the victim.

My sense of purpose dissipated like a sputtering balloon, and I sat down on Lawrence's front steps to get my head on straight. Campus was silent and dark, except for the lights of the emergency vehicles that crowded around Michener.

"Watson," the voice hissed. "Jamie Watson."

Holmes stepped neatly out of a small stand of trees; I hadn't seen her there at all. In fact, I didn't think that I was meant to, as she was dressed in head-to-toe blacks: trousers, gloves, a pair of dark sneakers, a jacket zipped all the way to her chin, even the backpack slung over her shoulders. Her face was a pale moon against all that darkness, her lips compressed in anger until she opened her mouth to say something that, from her expression, I didn't want to hear.

So I spoke before she did. "Hi," I said, in my usual stupid way. "I was looking for you."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed, and I watched her rapidly recalculate something in her head. "This is about Dobson."

I didn't bother to ask how she knew. She was a Holmes. But I must've looked surprised enough for her to fill in the gaps. "Look, Tom texted Lena, and Lena texted me. Relatively straightforward. Unfortunately, I was wearing this when I heard"—she indicated her outfit with a frustrated hand—"and so I decided to stay away from the dorm so that nobody would see me. It's bad form to be dressed as a burglar on the night of anyone's murder, much less that of someone you hate."

"Oh," I said. "What were you actually burgling?"

A quicksilver smile flitted across her face. "Pipettes," she said. "I went to go work in my lab after night check."

"You absolute *nerd*," I said, laughing, and her smile came back, and stayed. Incredible. "You have a lab? Wait, no. Later. Because Dobson's dead, and we're easily the prime suspects, and we're *laughing*."

"I know." She scrubbed at her eyes with her hands. "Do you know, at first I thought you came here to accuse me of it."

My eyebrows must've shot up into my hair. "Absolutely not—"

"I know," she said, cutting me off with a searching look. I felt as if she were X-raying me. Her eyes flickered from my face, to my fingers, to my beaten-up Chucks. "But I told him I would kill him. I should have been your primary suspect. And I'm not."

There were a lot of answers to that not-question: *I'm a Watson, it's genetically impossible for me to suspect you or, In my imagination, you weren't ever a villain, you were always the hero*, but everything I came up with sounded flip or cute or melodramatic. "Like you said, you can take care of yourself," I told her, finally. "If you'd murdered him, I bet there would be twenty witnesses who saw him put the gun to his own head."

Holmes shrugged but she was clearly pleased. We sat there for a minute; in the distance, birds started calling to each other.

"You know," she said, "that bastard has hit on me in every disgusting way since the day I arrived. Shouted at me, left notes under my door. He slapped my ass in the breakfast line the weekend my brother was visiting." She shook her head. "It took

some persuasion on my part, but Dobson wasn't immediately napalmed. Or made the target of a drone hit. Actually, Milo quite wanted to play the long game, wait a few years and then just disappear him from his bed, make it look like aliens. Or so he said. He was trying to cheer me up. . . ." She trailed off; it was clear she'd said more than she meant to. "I should still be mad at you."

"But you aren't."

"And we shouldn't be talking about Dobson like this." She got to her feet, and after a second's hesitation, offered me a hand up.

"I didn't think you'd be so respectful of the dead," I told her. "Just a few hours ago, he was alive and kicking, and practically begging to be napalmed."

The sun was rising in the distance, pulled up by its lazy, invisible string, and the sky was shot through with color. Her hair was washed in gold, her cheeks, in gold, and her eyes were as knowing as a psychic's.

In that moment, I would've followed her anywhere.

"We shouldn't be *talking* about Dobson," she said, starting off across the quad, "because we should be examining his room."

I stopped short. "I'm sorry, what?"

IT WAS ALREADY TEN PAST SEVEN, AND OUR HALLWAY IN Michener was on the second floor. I had no idea how we'd sneak by Mrs. Dunham at the front desk, not to mention the hordes of junior boys emerging from their rooms to shower before breakfast. I watched Holmes consider it for a moment, frowning, before she slid around to the side of the ivy-covered building.

She told me to stand back, then flung herself down on the ground, examining it inch by inch. For footprints, I realized. If we'd thought of accessing Dobson's room this way, someone else probably had too. Nervously, I looked around to see if we were being watched, but we were shrouded by a cluster of ash trees. Thank God Sherringford was so damn picturesque.

"Four girls went by here last night in a group," she said finally, getting to her feet. "You can tell by the stampede of Ugg boots. But no solo travelers, not even to smoke. Strange, this seems like a good spot for it." She methodically brushed the dirt and grass from her clothes. "They must have entered through the front doors. Michener isn't connected to the access tunnels, the way Stevenson and Harris are."

"Access tunnels?" I said.

"You really should explore more. We'll remedy that, but not now." Holmes glanced at the first floor's thick stone windowsills, at the windowsills above those, and bent down to untie her shoes. "Stuff these in my bag, will you," she said, putting a socked foot up on the sill. "Yours too. And put your gloves on. We can't leave prints of any kind. Come on, quickly, they might open their blinds at any moment. At least his roommate is away on that rugby tourney."

"Don't you need to find out which room is theirs?" I asked.

She tossed me a look, like I had asked her if the earth went around the sun. "Watson, just give me a lift."

I cradled my hands for her to step into, and in seconds she had climbed up the ivy to Dobson's second-floor window. Clinging to the sill with one hand, she used the other to pull a length of wire from her pocket, and bent one end into a hook with her