

# SHERLOCK HOLMES

What Watson didn't say



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## Table of contents

The Fall in the Fog .....	3
The needle in the arm .....	12
A letter without a return address.....	22
Baker Street after midnight.....	33
The man with the bare boots.....	43
The house that was too quiet .....	54
A name in the wrong register.....	63
The woman with the ink stain .....	74
Traces of red clay.....	85
The Club of Polite Liars .....	95
A will that no one wrote.....	106
The doctor who didn't help.....	117
The clock that went backwards.....	127
Blood on the cuff.....	137
The child who saw everything.....	147
A room without a mirror .....	155
The bill in the box.....	164
The ride in the hearse .....	173
A shadow in the operating light .....	182
The map with the burnt edge .....	187
Holmes disappears .....	192
Watson's second voice .....	197
The priest with the knife eyes .....	202
A dog that didn't bark .....	207
The game in the crypt .....	211
The witness who never existed .....	216
The Return from Darkness .....	220
A confession made of glass .....	224
The truth takes your breath away. ....	228
The last visit to the institution .....	233
Moriarty's estate .....	237
Baker Street is burning.....	243
What Watson didn't say .....	248
The case that remains .....	255
imprint.....	261

## The Fall in the Fog

There are nights in London that are not merely dark, but heavy. The smoke from the chimneys doesn't hang in the air; it sits there like an old cloth that no one lifts anymore. The gaslights on the street corners burn with that weary resolve one expects from the sick rather than from lights, and the fog, that relentless visitor, creeps into the alleys, into the courtyards, even into people's thoughts. When I think back to that beginning, to the silent origin of a series of events that still fills me with unease, I see at first not faces, but only those billowing, gray wisps that swallowed the city, as if London had decided to hide from the world.

After a period of absence, I was spending more time in Baker Street at that time. My own practice was doing reasonably well, but it was one of those phases when the body, while fulfilling its duties, yearned for something else. I don't want to claim that I was seeking out danger; I had faced it too often in Afghanistan to romanticize it lightly. But I also cannot deny that the old habits, the shared work, the conversations over late tea, even the occasional silence, which took on a certain significance in Holmes's presence, constituted a kind of home that no address outside those rooms could replace.

On the evening I'm speaking of, the fog had already begun in the early afternoon to scrape the windows of my consulting room, as if seeking entry. As I set off, bag in hand, the city seemed to hold its breath. Hoofbeats sounded muffled, footsteps were lost in cotton wool, and even the shouts of the coachmen came from a distance measured not in miles, but in veils. In Baker Street, the lamppost in front of number 221B stood like a faithful sentinel, its duty to guard the steps to another world.

Mrs. Hudson opened the door with that mixture of concern and devotion I knew so well. "Dr. Watson," she said softly, as if afraid a loud word might frighten the house. "He's upstairs. He has hardly spoken a word since this afternoon. And..." She paused and looked past me, as if she could see something in the mist beyond the door that didn't belong there.

"And what?" I asked.

"Someone was here," she replied. "Or... I don't know. I heard footsteps, but when I got to the door, there was nobody there. Just something lying on the step."

She handed me a small, flat package made of brown paper, with no return address or seal. It wasn't heavy, but it had that unpleasant density that things you don't want to hold have. I turned it over, found nothing, slipped it into my coat pocket, and went upstairs.

The living room greeted me with the familiar scent of tobacco, chemicals, and old books, but there was another note in the air, something metallic, like cold iron. Holmes stood by the window, his back to me, and I recognized his silhouette more by his posture than by his features, for the fog pressed against the panes from outside, as if trying to force its way into the room. The light from the lamp on the table cast his head and narrow shoulders in sharp lines.

"You are late, Watson," he said, without turning around.

"Perhaps by your standards," I replied, taking off my hat and coat. "The fog has conspired with the city."

“The fog is never conspiratorial,” he said calmly. “It is only honest. It shows how little one sees, even when one believes one’s eyes are open.”

He turned to me, and I immediately saw that something about him was different. Not in the obvious sense that he seemed exhausted or ill. On the contrary: his eyes were clear, his movements precise. But there was a tense anticipation in his gaze, as if he were listening for something only he could hear.

“They had visitors,” I remarked.

“Just a shadow hesitating at the door,” he replied. “Or perhaps it was the door itself remembering.”

Such turns of phrase were rare in Holmes. He was not fond of poetic circumlocutions; if he used imagery, it was only to sharpen a truth. I took the packet out of my pocket and placed it on the table.

“Mrs. Hudson gave it to me,” I said. “It was outside.”

Holmes' hand didn't flinch, but his gaze fell upon it like a knife. He didn't pick it up immediately. Instead, he reached for the magnifying glass that was always at hand and examined the paper as if he could discern its contents simply by looking at it.

"Brown wrapping paper," he murmured. "Cheap, but not the cheapest. The folding is neat. Someone who put in the effort without wanting to draw attention to themselves. No string, no seal. He wanted it to be easy to open."

“Or that it opens easily by itself,” I said, without really knowing why the thought came to me.

Holmes' eyes slid towards me, and for a moment I had the feeling that he was examining not my words, but the place from which they came. Then he took the packet between his thumb and forefinger, as if holding a sample in a laboratory, and cut open the edge with his knife.

Inside lay a small glass object, wrapped in a piece of cloth. Holmes carefully unwound it. It was a vial, scarcely larger than a finger, empty or nearly empty, with a narrow neck. The stopper was missing. The glass had a fine scratch, and on the cloth was a dark stain, which in the lamplight I initially mistook for dirt, until I recognized the slightly brownish tint that dried liquids take on when they are not just water.

“Smell it,” said Holmes.

I hesitated. Doctors aren't known for being squeamish, and yet there are things that trigger instinct before reason can provide justification. I leaned forward and cautiously sniffed the vial. A sharp, acrid smell filled my nostrils, medicinal yet unpleasant, as if someone had tried to preserve disease.

"Carbol?" I asked.

“Among other things,” Holmes replied. “And something sweet about it. Not enough to be sure. But enough to know that someone wants us to think about medicine.”

He set down the bottle and went to the window. Outside, the fog billowed, and in the murky gray, the outline of a passerby appeared for a moment, gliding by like a ghost.

“Watson,” Holmes said quietly, “have you ever experienced a city itself becoming the scene of a crime? Not a street, not a house, but the air it breathes?”

“London has been a crime scene often enough,” I replied. “But the air?”

“Tonight,” he said, and his voice had that tone I knew: the calm, matter-of-fact fire that carried him beyond himself, “someone will try to bury something in the fog. And I fear it’s not just a body.”

He returned to the table, picked up the vial again, and turned it up to the light. The fine scratch caught the lamp's glare and glittered like a tiny scar.

“This scratch,” he said. “It’s not accidental. It’s a sign. There are people who mark what belongs to them. And there are people who mark what they’re warning against. I’ve seen something like this before, years ago, in a case you won’t find in your notes.”

I felt myself growing cold despite the warmth of the room. Holmes rarely mentioned that something was missing from my notes. I had always believed that I had reported faithfully and completely, as best I could. And yet, his words contained not a reproach, but a statement of fact, as if the very act of omission were part of the problem.

“Why not?” I asked, perhaps too quickly.

Holmes' gaze held mine for a moment. Then he turned away, as if he had decided that the time for an answer was not yet right.

“Because there are cases, Watson,” he said, “where the truth is not only dangerous but contagious. Sit down. We will get little sleep tonight. And if there is a knock at your door—or if you think there is a knock—do not open it immediately.”

At that moment, as if the world wanted to confirm his words, a sound came from below. Not loud, not distinct, more of a soft scraping, as if something damp were brushing against wood. Holmes raised his head. His body tensed invisibly, but I knew the signs: the barely perceptible stillness, the complete listening, the readiness to make an action out of a shadow.

The scraping came again, closer, and then we heard, quite clearly, the quiet, cautious clicking of the mailbox at the front door.

Holmes was at the door leading to the stairwell in two strides and paused, as if listening not only to the sounds below but to the silence itself. I followed him, my hand instinctively resting on the handle of my walking stick, which had served as a weapon more than once in earlier times. In the house, every sound seemed to become a muted whisper; the ticking of the clock in the hall, usually barely perceptible, suddenly sounded like an impatient finger tapping on wood.

"Light," whispered Holmes.

I took the lamp from the table, but he shook his head.

“Not in the window. Not in your hand. Put it here,” he said, pointing to the sideboard in the hallway so that its light neither spilled out nor cast a bright trail down the stairs. Then he switched off the other lights in the room, leaving us standing in a semi-darkness that dissolved the contours of the furniture and pictures into soft shadows.

Again the sound from below: a soft slide, then the dull, springy sound of paper sliding through the slot and falling onto the tiles. There was no footstep, no grasping of the handle, not even the creaking of the garden gate, the kind you sometimes hear on damp nights. Only the fog outside and the paper inside.

Holmes was already down the stairs, without appearing hasty. He moved, as he always did, with that calmness which made the haste of others all the more suspicious. I stayed close behind him, and when we reached the bottom, I saw the pale rectangle of an envelope on the dark tiles in front of the door. It lay there as if someone had placed it deliberately, not thrown it.

Holmes did not kneel; he merely bent down far enough to take in the edges and the point where the envelope touched the ground. Then he took from his pocket a pair of tweezers, the kind that seemed more at home in a laboratory than in the coat pocket of a private detective, and lifted the envelope with them.

"Do you see the track?" he asked.

At first I saw nothing, until I bent down lower, following his posture. Where the envelope had been, there was a fine, dark edge, as if something damp had breathed on the paper.

"Water?" I said.

“Not only that,” Holmes replied. “And not by chance. It is applied, not condensed. Someone has moistened the edge.”

He carried the envelope into the living room, placed it on the table, and only then picked it up with his fingers, touching only the corners. On the front, in neat, narrow handwriting, was my name: Dr. John H. Watson. There was no return address. But what troubled me more was the way the name was written. The letters were correct, but not personal. It was the kind of handwriting you find in registers, not letters.

Holmes sniffed briefly at the edge that bore the dark hem, and his lips curled almost imperceptibly.

“Sweetish,” he said. “And again that medicinal note. Like with the bottle. The sender wants you to feel addressed in your role.”

"As a doctor," I murmured.

“Or as something you pretend to be,” Holmes replied, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end at those words. He noticed and continued in a more matter-of-fact tone: “Don’t open it. Not with your hands.”

He cut the envelope open with the knife, but only so that he severed the top edge. Then he let the inside slide onto the table. It was a single sheet of paper, thin, almost transparent, as if it

had been taken from a pad meant for quick notes. On it were only two lines, again in that same narrow handwriting:

If you love the fog, Doctor, remember that you can also suffocate in it. Come alone.

Nothing more. No signature. No address. No date. I stared at the words, and suddenly the fog outside no longer seemed like just weather, but like a lurking entity.

“Alone,” I said, looking at Holmes. “This is an attempt to separate me from you.”

"Or it's an attempt to see if you can let yourself be separated," Holmes said.

He took the sheet of paper, held it up to the light, and examined it with a magnifying glass. In doing so, he discovered, as so often happens, details that I would have missed.

“Here,” he said. “At the edge. The ink is darker there. It hasn’t bled like the other areas. That means the pen was paused briefly. A hesitation. Not while writing the sentence, but for a mark that shouldn’t be visible.”

He turned the paper slightly, and indeed I saw that near the bottom corner there was a tiny dot, hardly more than a thickening of the fibers.

"What is that supposed to be?"

“A clue,” Holmes replied. “Or a test. This type of dot is sometimes used to mark a piece of paper that one wants to identify later. Or to indicate that it has been treated with a substance.”

He reached for a small glass, filled it with a drop of water from the carafe Mrs. Hudson had provided, and touched the corner of the paper with a tiny amount. Then he held the sheet up to the lamp. A faint glimmer appeared, as if the water had revealed a barely visible trace.

“Sugar,” said Holmes. “Or something that behaves like sugar. It sticks to the paper and attracts moisture. That explains the dark hem. The envelope was treated so that it wouldn’t dry out in the cold. They wanted us to smell it. They wanted you to smell it, Watson.”

I felt anger rising within me, not just at the threat itself, but at the way it intruded on my profession. It was as if someone was using their knowledge of my habits to lead me around like a dog on a leash.

"And why?" I asked. "Why all this effort for two lines?"

Holmes carefully set the paper aside and went to the fireplace, where a ember still lay. He did not poke at it; he simply stood before it, his hands clasped behind his back, gazing into the ashes as if they could give him answers.

“Because the sender wants to show us that he is closer than we think,” he said. “He was at the door, Watson. Not this afternoon, not at any time. Just seconds ago. He posted the letter and disappeared into the mist. And yet he left no trace that an ordinary man would.”

“No traces?” I repeated. “But you said the envelope was wet.”

"Wet, yes," said Holmes. "But not from the hand. From an instrument. Or from something that doesn't sweat like a hand. And listen to the words: 'loving the mist.' Who speaks like that? Someone who knows your notes. Someone who has read the stories you published. And someone who knows how you see yourself."

This affected me in an unpleasant way. My publications had never been intended to boost my vanity; they were, I believed, a kind of chronicler's duty. And yet I had to admit that they had brought our lives, our work, our habits into the world. What if someone now used this openness against us?

Holmes turned to me, and his eyes were unusually serious.

"Watson," he said, "in recent weeks I've noticed things that don't fit the pattern of ordinary crime. They're not thefts, not extortions in the usual sense. It's a gathering. A gathering of clues, of names, of weaknesses. Someone isn't observing to strike, but to understand. And when they understand, they won't just strike, they'll direct."

"Steer where?"

Holmes' gaze slid to the window, behind which the fog lay like a grey sea.

"Into the unknown," he said. "To where a man believes he is alone."

At that moment, there was a knock. Not at the front door downstairs, but at our living room door. It wasn't a loud, demanding knock. It was cautious, almost polite, as if the visitor wanted to apologize for having to exist at all.

Holmes raised his hand, and I felt the blood rush to my veins. He walked to the door, paused for a moment, and then said, without opening it, "Who is it?"

A pause, so long that I thought no one would answer. Then a voice came, muffled, as if speaking through a cloth.

"A man who can't get the fog out of his lungs," she said. "And who knows that you both were looking for him before you even knew it yourselves."

Holmes' fingers encircled the handle, but he had not yet pressed it down.

"Give your name," he said.

Another pause. And then, very quietly: "If I name him, I'll die."

I won't deny that these words shook me more than I was willing to admit at the time. It wasn't just the content that sent shivers down my spine, but the tone: the quiet, strained speech of a person who seemed to be struggling for breath with every syllable. You could hear the breath behind it, a hoarse wheezing, as if someone were dragging a wet cloth through narrow pipes. And yet there was a strange self-control, an almost polite reserve, that lent the whole scene an unreal quality. No beggar knocks like that. No ordinary person seeking help speaks like that.

Holmes, however, showed no trace of the inner turmoil I felt. He stood motionless before the door, his hand on the handle, as if he himself had become part of the house. Only his eyes

were alive, and I saw them briefly glide over the gap between the door and the frame, as if they could see through it.

“Will you die if you give your name?” he asked.

“If I name him, he’ll find me,” came the reply. The speaker coughed, a short, dry bark that turned into a rattling inhalation. “He’s... near. Always near. The fog carries him.”

Holmes' gaze met mine. It was that look I knew from many nights: not a plea for approval, but the wordless confirmation of a decision. He nodded toward my revolver, which lay in the secretary's drawer. I drew it out and held it at the ready without lifting it. Then Holmes reached for the poker by the fireplace, not because he preferred a crude tool as a weapon, but because he considered every risk.

He opened the door abruptly.

The light from the hallway fell upon a figure who must have been standing so close to the woodwork that he had almost fallen in. It was a middle-aged man, wrapped in a worn coat with its collar turned up. His hat sat low, but not so low as to conceal the terrible pallor of his face. His mouth was slightly open, and his lips had that grayish-pink tinge I knew from hospitals when someone isn't getting enough oxygen. A fine sheen of perspiration clung to the sides of his nostrils.

He took a step as if he were going into the room, but his knees buckled, and he would have kissed the floor if Holmes hadn't grabbed his arm. With a movement that was both strong and careful, he pulled the man into the room and closed the door behind him.

“Sit down,” Holmes said curtly, gesturing to the chair at the table.

The man slumped down as if he had spent his entire life waiting for the chance to finally fall. His breath came in gasps. I stepped closer, and the doctor in me overcame all fear. I placed my hand on his pulse. It was rapid, irregular, and his skin felt cold despite the perspiration.

"What did you take?" I asked automatically.

The man shook his head, but the attempt took its toll. "Didn't take it," he whispered. "Inhaled it. It was... in the fog."

Holmes moved the lamp closer so that its light illuminated his face sharply. Now I saw that his pupils were unusually large and that, although he seemed alert, his gaze kept darting past me as if he were chasing something only he could see.

“Your name,” said Holmes. “Not the one that will kill you if you call it. The one you give yourself today.”

The man let out a short, croaky laugh that ended in a cough. "You're him," he said hoarsely. "Of course. The man who sees everything. And yet... still doesn't see what he himself has done."

Holmes' expression remained calm. But I noticed how his fingers tightened slightly on the back of the chair.

"Speak clearly," he said.

The man breathed, struggled, and then, as if he had decided that it didn't matter whether the truth killed him or saved him, he said: "I worked for someone. For a man who collects. He takes what people throw away: scraps, rumors, names. He makes... a net out of it. And once you're in it, you only realize it when you can't get out anymore."

"What was your task?" asked Holmes.

"Writing," the man whispered. "Lists. Registers. I should find out who goes where, when the doors are open, who is alone at night. Doctors. Pharmacists. Surgeons. People with keys. People with needles."

The word "needles" made something in my stomach twitch, as if it held a memory of its own. The man noticed, and his gaze fell upon me as if upon a familiar object.

"They," he said. "The doctor. The chronicler. They opened the doors without realizing it. With their stories. With their sentences. The man read them. He learned from them. He knows the customs. The times. The ways. They taught him how to follow them."

There was bitterness in his voice, but even more so fear, that naked, animalistic fear that speaks from people when they no longer consider whether they sound righteous.

"Who is this man?" I asked.

The stranger pulled his head back as if I had placed my hand on a wound. "Don't," he gasped. "Don't ask. Not like that. He... he has ears. Everywhere. In the street. In the air."

Holmes leaned forward. "You have come here," he said calmly. "You have knocked on our door. You have already decided to speak. If you remain silent, you may die. If you speak, you may also die. But in one case, your death will have meaning."

The man stared at Holmes. For a moment there was something like hatred, as if Holmes's coldness were an insult. Then the hatred subsided, leaving only exhaustion.

"I wanted to get out," he whispered. "I wanted to... stop. I saw something. Something he was preparing. Not just blackmail. Not just theft. He wants... he wants people to get sick. To come to him willingly. To cry out for help and have him be the only one who hears them."

"Sick?" I repeated.

The man nodded, but it was more of a tremor than a nod. "He calls it... the fog. He says London is ready for it. He says the city is a body, and he has the needle."

I felt my fingers tighten around the revolver. Holmes raised his hand, not to calm me down, but to avoid interrupting the flow of his words.

"Where?" he asked. "Where is he? Or where will he be?"

"Tonight," the man whispered. "Not far. He has a place... beneath the place. Where water drips. Where the air is still. Where you can hear footsteps, but don't know if they're human."

"The sewer system," I said.

The man flinched as if I had uttered the name of a demon. "Perhaps," he gasped. "Perhaps. Or a cellar. An old passage. There are many holes under London. He knows them. He has... he has men who follow him. And he has..."

His voice broke. He pressed his hand to his chest, as if trying to hold onto something that was about to escape. I moved closer and placed my fingers on his throat. His pulse raced and jumped. His breathing became shallow, tinged with a faint whistling sound.

"He's collapsing," I said, searching for something I could do, not knowing what was poisoning him. "Holmes, we need—"

"No," the man whispered suddenly, his hand shooting for my sleeve, surprisingly strong for someone so weak. His eyes widened, filled with sheer terror. "Don't... don't get a doctor. Don't go to the hospital. He's waiting there... there. Always."

Holmes leaned even closer. "Then tell me something I can use," he said. "A sign. A name that is not your name. An object. A clue."

The man opened his mouth as if to scream, but only a rattling breath came out. Then, with an effort that contorted his entire face, he uttered two words, so quietly that I saw them rather than heard them.

"Blank... boots."

His fingers released my sleeve. His head fell to the side. I reached for him, held him upright, felt his body grow heavy, and noticed something I had missed before: the hem of his coat was damp, as if he had waded through water, and on the inside, where the fabric had rubbed against his legs, a thin film glistened, shimmering almost invisibly in the lamplight.

Holmes saw it at that very moment. He knelt down, ran his finger over the fabric, smelled it, and withdrew his hand as if he had touched something hot.

"That's it," he said quietly, more to himself than to me. "That's the fog he was talking about."

Outside, beyond the window, I heard the dull rumble of a carriage, then again only the hushed silence of the street. But suddenly this silence didn't seem empty to me, but full. Full of something that lurked and listened, as if our little room in Baker Street were a point of light in a sea of horror.

The man in the chair was still breathing, but every breath was a struggle. I leaned over him, trying to keep him awake, while Holmes was already reaching for his coat and hat, as if a plan had formed in his mind.

"Watson," he said, and there was not a question in his voice, but a command and a trust at the same time, "tonight London will show us what it hides beneath its pavement."

## The needle in the arm

I knelt beside the stranger, feeling his life pulsing against my fingers in irregular waves. His head had slumped to the side, but he wasn't unconscious in the ordinary sense; it was more as if a heavy hand had pressed him down while his mind still wandered somewhere in the fog. His eyelids fluttered, and every now and then a muscle in his jaw twitched, as if he were trying to remember how to move his lips.

"Water," I said tersely, more out of habit than hope. "And warmth."

Holmes moved the decanter closer without a word, but he did nothing further to help. That may sound heartless, and in another person I might have mistaken it for indifference. With him, however, I knew that his compassion lay not in gestures, but in results. He was already addressing the root cause.

"He is not dying of weakness," Holmes said quietly, as he tested the damp hem of the coat once more with his fingertip. "He is dying of something that was forced upon him."

"Or something he brought upon himself," I replied, carefully pulling apart the man's coat to examine his chest. His shirt was damp in places, as if he had been sweating, but the skin beneath was cold. Pressing my ear to his ribs, I heard the rattling of his lungs, like a bellows with a leak somewhere.

"It's not a typical asthma attack," I murmured. "Something is irritating my bronchi. Maybe a gas. Or a vapor."

Holmes' gaze was on my hands. "Look at his arms," he said.

I did it, initially only to rule out an injection. For there was enough misery in London poured into small vials and big lies, and enough men surviving on morphine or worse concoctions. But no sooner had I rolled up my left sleeve than I paused.

There, just below the elbow crease, was a tiny dot, barely larger than a pinprick, surrounded by a pale discoloration. It wasn't the usual reddened spot of a man who injects frequently. It was clean, almost surgical. And next to it, as if the pain itself weren't enough, a fine line ran through the skin, a delicate stroke, as if something had scratched the surface.

"He was stung," I said.

"Exactly," Holmes replied. "And not by him personally."

I ran my finger over the area. It was slightly swollen, and a barely visible sheen lay upon it, as if some liquid had been forced out and then dried. There was a smell to it, very faint, yet unmistakable to a nose that had seen many sickbeds: something sweetish mingling with the sharp odor of disinfectant.

"Carbol," I said.

"And again, the sweetness," Holmes added. "Like on the paper. Like in the bottle. The man who calls us speaks your language, Watson."

I wanted to answer, but the stranger suddenly let out a stifled sound, raised his hand as if to hold onto us, and then slumped back down. His fingers gripped the edge of the chair back, and only then did I notice that he was holding something in his fist. It was so small that at first I mistook it for a coin. When I gently opened his hand, a thin piece of metal fell into my palm: a tiny fragment of a cannula, broken off, the tip still sharp.

“By all the saints,” I murmured. “The needle broke.”

Holmes stepped closer, and on his face was that quiet satisfaction he felt when reality began to fall into place. He took the piece with the tweezers, held it up to the light, and turned it slowly.

“Not broken off,” he said. “Cut off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at the edge,” he replied. “It’s too smooth. This isn’t the result of violence or accident. It was done this way. Someone wanted the point to remain embedded in the body or to create the impression that it was an accident.”

I swallowed hard. This was a cruelty, committed not out of passion, but with intent. A needle point in the tissue could cause abscesses, blood poisoning, weeks of suffering. Yet this man seemed to be dying faster than from an infection.

“If something was injected,” I said, “it acted quickly. Something that paralyzes breathing or irritates the lungs.”

Holmes went to the table, placed the metal piece next to the vial, and then picked up my stethoscope as if it were a tool like any other. He didn’t hold it to his ear; he merely examined it, as if trying to understand how a doctor hears the world.

“How long have you been, Watson?” he asked suddenly.

I looked at the stranger, who was struggling with his mouth slightly open. “Maybe an hour,” I said. “Maybe less if the cramps get worse.”

“Then we won’t have time for a hospital,” Holmes said.

“And yet we need help,” I retorted sharply. “If the poison—”

“If the poison is waiting in a hospital, as he says, then we won’t take him there,” Holmes said calmly. “Mrs. Hudson can fetch an apothecary I know. A man who won’t ask questions and won’t gossip. And we ourselves—”

He stopped because there was a noise downstairs. Not the quiet click of the mailbox this time, but a dull thud, as if someone had pushed against the front door and then let go. A footstep followed, then another, but muffled, as if they were coming through wet felt.

I went to the window and pushed the curtain aside a crack. Outside, the fog was so thick that the lamppost on the corner was just a dull, yellowish bubble. But between two wisps of fog, I saw movement: a figure that didn’t walk like a drunkard and didn’t scurry like a thief. It

moved with a striking directness, like someone who knows the street and isn't afraid of being seen.

And then, in the next moment, I saw something that took my breath away. It wasn't a face, a hat, a coat, but the brief reflection of a gas flame on something smooth. Two steps, and it glittered again. As if the fog itself contained tiny mirrors.

"Holmes," I said, forcing my voice to quiet down. "There's someone out there. And—"

"Blank," said Holmes, without me having to finish the sentence.

He had already passed me, didn't pull the curtain open any further, but watched through the gap I had created. His gaze was so intense it was almost painful.

"Bare boots," he muttered. "And in this weather. No decent man wears polished leather in the fog unless he wants it to be seen."

The figure stopped, directly opposite the house where the lantern lightened the grayness slightly. A section of the fog suddenly appeared darker, as if there were a hole in the world there. I saw a hand rise, and then something that looked like a piece of paper attached to a stick. It bobbed once, twice, as if someone were signaling.

Holmes pulled me away from the window. "No," he whispered. "He wants us to look. He wants us to react."

"Then what?" I asked.

Holmes' eyes rested for a fraction of a second on the man in the chair, whose chest rose and fell heavily. "Then he has us in his grasp," he said. "Just like he had that needle in his hand."

He went to the stranger, reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a small notebook. Its cover was damp, and when Holmes opened it, several pages were stuck together. He carefully separated them until a page lay exposed, on which were written several names, next to them numbers, places, and times. Some were crossed out, others not. And in the margin, in the same narrow script as on the slip of paper, was a single word:

Midnight.

Holmes closed the book, put it away, and turned to me. "You will stay with him until Mrs. Hudson brings the apothecary," he said. "And you will remove that spike from his arm, if you can. But do it cleanly. He mustn't die of an infection while we look for a murderer."

"And you?" I asked.

Holmes reached for his coat. "I'm going downstairs," he said. "Not out. Just downstairs. There's a place in this house where you can hear things you can't hear upstairs."

He opened the door to the hallway and disappeared into the semi-darkness of the stairwell. I was left behind, alone with a dying man, a piece of metal in my hand, and the feeling that the fog outside wasn't just pressing against the windows, but against all of us.

I sat down next to the stranger, took his wrist in my fingers again, and simultaneously searched for my instruments. My bag was still where I had left it. I opened it, took out tweezers and a small scalpel, and bent over his arm.

The tiny puncture looked harmless, but I knew how often the most dangerous things hide in the smallest form. I positioned the blade to open the skin minimally, and as I worked, I heard Holmes' footsteps from below, then silence.

And out of this silence, very distant yet distinct, came a sound that sounded like laughter, which the fog was trying to swallow.

The stranger's hand clung to the chair back as if he feared the floor would swallow him up the moment he released his fingers. His breathing came in short, whistling gasps, each one seeming to me like a small, failed attempt to restart life. I forced myself to remain still, for a trembling doctor is worse than no doctor at all. The tip might be tiny, but it was the only tangible link between what threatened us and what it did.

I wiped the skin on my arm with a cloth soaked in rubbing alcohol. The smell filled my nostrils, and for a moment it was almost comforting because it was familiar. But the area itself smelled different: a hint of sweetness that had no business being there. I cut the skin only as far as necessary and applied the tweezers.

The man flinched as if I had burned his flesh. His eyes rolled towards me, and in them was not a plea for help, but a silent horror, as if he knew that every touch would draw him deeper into something he no longer understood.

"Calm down," I said, and it was more for my sake than his. "It'll be over soon."

The tip was hard to grasp. As often happens with such things, it hadn't presented itself openly, but had entered the tissue at an angle. I felt the tweezers scrape against metal. A small, cutting sound, barely audible, but it sent a jolt through me because it sounded so final. Then I had it.

I pulled it out, slowly, not out of hesitation, but to avoid causing further damage. It was a tiny splinter, barely larger than an insect in the lamplight. And yet, in my hands, I held something that could kill a person, something that someone had deliberately left behind to continue its effects.

I placed the needle tip on a clean cloth and turned back to the man. There was hardly any blood, but the skin around the puncture was now noticeably discolored, like an unhealthy gray patch beginning to show. I bandaged the area as best I could and checked his pulse again. It was still rapid, but the skipped beats seemed less erratic. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking. Perhaps I really had taken something away that was causing him additional distress. But his breathing remained labored, and the wheezing in his chest was now deeper, as if something had lodged in the lower lobes of his lungs.

I stood up, went to the table, and examined the splinter. In Afghanistan, I had seen many kinds of injuries, many kinds of death. But this was different. Here, the weapon wasn't a knife, not a bullet, not even poison in a jar. It was a disease, administered like a message. And the message was: You are reachable. You are manipulable.

I couldn't hear Holmes from downstairs, but that worried me less than it should have. When he was quiet, he was working. And yet there had been that laugh, that distant, muffled sound, that I couldn't get out of my head. It wasn't the open laughter of a drunkard, nor the malicious cackle of a street urchin. It had been short and controlled, like the laugh of someone who sees confirmation of something they've long known.

I went to the door and listened down the stairwell. Not a footstep, not a cough, not a creak. The house suddenly seemed no longer to be our ally, but a neutral witness, silent because it had seen too much.

The stranger groaned behind me. I turned around and saw that he had raised his head. His lips moved, but no words came. I sat down beside him again, took his arm, as if I could bind him to reality with mere touch.

"If you can speak," I said, "then speak now. Not later."

His gaze wavered. He didn't seem to see me properly, as if the fog in his head were doing the same job as out on the street. Then, with difficulty, he formed a word that was more of a whisper than a syllable.

"Fog..."

"Yes," I said. "What about that?"

He swallowed. Swallowing was a struggle. "Not... just outside," he whispered. "He... brings it... inside."

"Into houses?"

The man nodded almost imperceptibly. "In people."

A cold shiver ran down my spine. A poison that is inhaled is difficult to control; it is indiscriminate, affecting the wrong person as well as the right. But precisely this indiscriminateness could be part of the plan. A city gripped by fear is easier to control than one that feels safe.

"Who gave it to you?" I asked.

His eyes twitched towards the door, as if he expected it to open at that moment. "Didn't... see," he gasped. "Just... boots. Smooth. Like mirrors."

Blank. Boots. The word he uttered as he died was not a name, but an image. An image one does not forget in the night.

I wanted to ask more questions, but at that moment there was another knock, this time not at our door, but from downstairs: the sound of the front door being opened, and Mrs. Hudson's short exclamation, half surprised, half relieved. Then footsteps on the stairs, more hurried than usual.

She entered the room, followed by a man carrying a small, black suitcase. He was not young, but strong, with rosy cheeks and eyes that had seen more than they were willing to show. His coat was damp, and he rubbed his hands as if trying to shake off the cold.

"Dr. Watson," he said hastily, "Mrs. Hudson said it was urgent. I am—"

"I know who you are," I interrupted. "And thank you for coming so quickly. Look at him."

He knelt beside the stranger, opened the suitcase, and took out items that seemed harmless to a layperson but were familiar aids to the doctor: small vials, powders, an inhaler that resembled a curious toy. He put his ear to the man's chest and grimaced.

"Irritation," he murmured. "Strong. Almost like chlorine, but... different. And yet sweet. Almost like..." He broke off and looked at me. "You can smell it too."

I nodded. "It's not natural. And it's not accidental."

He reached for a small bottle, opened it, and held it under the man's nose. The stranger flinched, coughed, and for a moment it seemed as if the coughing cleared something from his chest. Then the wheezing returned. The pharmacist shook his head.

"I can alleviate the symptoms," he said quietly, "but not if the underlying cause continues to work within him. Have you found anything?"

I showed him the tiny point of the needle on the cloth. He bent over it, and his eyes narrowed.

"That's not from my stock," he said immediately. "Too fine. Too clean. And do you see that tiny notch there? That's a mark. You do that when you want to keep your instruments distinguishable. Or when you want someone else to recognize them."

I remembered the bottle, the scratch, the scar in the glass. Signs. Marks. Not just a crime, but a language.

"Holmes is downstairs," I said, and only then, hearing the sound of my own voice, did I realize how much I needed his presence. "He's..." I didn't know how to say it without sounding ridiculous. He's listening. He's thinking. He's where I can't be.

As if the house itself had carried my thoughts onward, we suddenly heard footsteps. Not Mrs. Hudson's, not the apothecary's. They were Holmes's steps: light, quick, purposeful. He entered, and although I had scarcely been away from him for half an hour, he seemed changed. His face was pale, and there was a gleam in his eyes that I recognized when something clicked into place.

"They removed the tip," he said, without asking.

"Yes," I replied. "It didn't cure him."

"It wasn't meant to cure him," Holmes said. "It was meant to mark him."

The pharmacist stood up as if he wanted to make himself invisible. Holmes barely noticed him.

“Downstairs,” Holmes continued, “in the hallway, where the wood is old and the walls are thin, there is a spot where you can hear the street as if you were standing outside yourself. I stood there and waited. And I heard someone standing at the door.”

“But we didn’t see anyone,” I said.

“That’s the interesting thing,” Holmes replied. “He was standing there. He was moving. And yet there was no sound of leather on stone, no creaking, no hoofbeat to drown him out. Only a very quiet, regular squeaking. As if something were not made to walk on that ground.”

"What do you mean?"

Holmes pulled something from his pocket and placed it on the table. It was a thin, dark strip that looked like rubber, but rubbed smooth at one edge, as if it had been freshly cut.

“A sole,” said Holmes. “Or rather: a covering. You can wear bare boots and still be silent if you mask them. He wants to be seen. But he doesn’t want to be heard.”

I looked at him. "That means he was close to us the whole time."

“He’s still nearby,” Holmes said calmly. “Just not where we expect him to be. And he wants us to come to him at midnight.”

He looked out the window, behind which the fog stood like a wall. "He has turned the city into his corridor. And he has begun to poison it, not just with substances, but with fear."

The stranger groaned again, as if to contradict us. Holmes approached him and bent down. For the first time, I saw something on his face that was almost like regret.

"Keep him alive," he told me. "For as long as possible. He's the first to show us the way. And he could be the last to warn us."

Then he straightened up and looked at me. "Watson," he said, "we're not going into the fog tonight. We're going under it."

Holmes' last words had that effect they so often had on me: they cut through all hesitation because they sounded not of courage, but of necessity. The apothecary had meanwhile given the stranger a remedy that somewhat calmed his cough, but it was more of a reprieve than a cure. Mrs. Hudson, pale with fear, stood by the door wringing her hands, while at the same time trying to maintain her usual dignity.

"He must not be left alone," I said.

“He will not be alone,” Holmes replied, looking at the pharmacist as if he had only just now fully registered his presence in the room. “You are a man of discretion and a strong will. Both will be needed tonight. You will remain here. If his condition worsens, do what you can. If anyone comes to the door, do not open it. And if you think you hear footsteps in the hall that do not belong to this house, then extinguish the light.”

The pharmacist swallowed. I could see he would have preferred to return to his shop, among bottles and labels, where dangers have names. But he nodded.

Holmes reached for his coat and hat. I did the same, and as I slipped my revolver into my pocket, I felt at once foolish and reassured. Foolish, because a bullet can do little against an enemy who works with air; reassured, because even in the irrational, man craves something tangible.

We stepped into the stairwell. The stranger behind us groaned softly, and for a moment I felt a strong desire to stay with him, like a doctor stays with a patient whose breathing feels like a rope about to snap. But Holmes was already down the stairs, and I followed, knowing that my duty tonight was twofold: to save the man who could still be saved, and to stop the one who had brought him to this state.

Outside, the fog was so thick that the facades of the buildings opposite looked like a gray memory. The lanterns cast yellowish circles in the white, but these circles ended abruptly, as if someone had cut off the world there. A man named Hansom waited by chance at the curb, the coachman hunched deep into his coat.

Holmes gave me an address that meant nothing to me, and when I tried to ask, he briefly put his hand on my arm.

"Not now," he said quietly. "Words carry farther than you think."

We set off. The wheels sounded muffled, as if the carriage were rolling over felt. Only occasionally did I hear the horse's snort, emerging from the mist as if from a stranger's room. I could barely make out Holmes's outline as he sat opposite me, yet I knew his eyes were constantly working. He had a habit of becoming even more alert when in motion, as if danger itself had offered him a drink.

"The bare boots," I said finally, barely audibly, "are therefore just a decoy."

"A decoy, yes," he replied, "but an intelligent one. He shows himself in order to ask the wrong questions. Whoever asks about boots doesn't ask about what they wear."

"And what are they wearing?"

"A man who is interested in us," Holmes said. "And who wants us to be interested in him. That's the first step in any control."

The carriage stopped. Holmes paid, without me getting a good look at the driver, and we got out. A cold draft met my breath. Not the open wind of a wide street, but a damp, stale chill that seemed to come from a lower room. I realized we must be near some kind of downward access: a staircase, a gate, a passage.

Holmes led me along the side of a wall that glistened with dampness. He stopped in front of an inconspicuous door set in a niche, half-hidden by a pile of old crates. An ordinary passerby would have missed it. Not Holmes. He leaned forward, ran his fingers over the wood, and took a brief sniff.

"Freshly touched," he said. "And not by someone who loves wood."

He pulled out a small tool he often carried with him and placed it against the lock. A soft click, and the door gave way. We entered.

The space beyond was narrow and led immediately down a staircase. The air was heavier here, and I smelled mustiness, stale water, and something that reminded me of hospitals when too many people have been in one room for too long. Holmes took a small lantern from his pocket, lit it with his back to it so that its light wouldn't escape, and went ahead.

The staircase ended in a brick-lined passage. Water dripped somewhere, regularly like clockwork. In the distance, I heard a rushing sound, like an underground stream, and sometimes a dull noise that sounded like footsteps, but too heavy for human feet and too irregular for machines.

Holmes stopped, raised the lantern slightly, and pointed to the ground. There, in the damp dust, were tracks. Not many, not deep, but clear enough: the imprints of a sole, finely ridged, and above them, as a second layer, a smooth line, as if something had glided over it.

"The cover," Holmes murmured. "It doesn't put it on everywhere. Only where he wants to move quietly."

We followed the tracks. The passage curved, leading past a spot where a slight breeze stirred and the mist crept down from above like a breath, thinner, but perceptible nonetheless. It was as if the city itself were creeping into its own entrails.

Suddenly Holmes held up his hand. I stopped, and at that same moment I heard it: a very faint squeak, steady, close. Not the squeak of a wheel, but that of some material rubbing against stone.

Holmes extinguished the lantern. Darkness descended, completely, so that I could barely make out my own hand in front of my face. We stood like two blind people, forced to rely on our hearing. The squeaking grew closer, then stopped. I heard a soft, calm, controlled inhalation.

Then, very close to us, a match flickered. A face became visible for a fraction of a second: narrow, clean-shaven, with eyes that didn't look surprised, but amused. The man held the match so that the light fell more on his shoes than on his face. And indeed: they were gleaming, mirror-like, so clean it was as if not a single drop of water had ever touched them.

"They are on time," he said quietly.

Holmes' voice came from the darkness as if from another room. "Who are you?"

The man smiled almost imperceptibly. "No one you can hold onto. But someone who knows you both."

The match burned out. He dropped it, and the darkness returned. But now I knew where he stood, and I took a step forward. At that moment, I felt a short, sharp prick on my left forearm, as if something had bitten me. I cursed softly and jerked my arm back instinctively. Holmes's hand gripped my shoulder, holding me back.

"Quiet," he hissed.

The squeaking started up again, and I heard the man walk away without running. He must have known another exit, a side path, because after a few seconds he was gone, as if he had never been there.

Holmes relit the lantern. His gaze immediately fell on my arm. "What is it?"

"A sting," I said, rubbing the spot. The pain was minor, almost laughable, but it had something insidious about it.

Holmes walked in the direction I had taken the step, holding the lantern low. A thin wire was stretched across the wall, just above hip height, barely visible. And attached to it, exactly where my arm had brushed against it, was something metallic: a fine point, like part of a cannula.

Holmes' face hardened. "He sets traps like a man who is in no hurry," he said. "And who considers time an ally."

I pulled up my sleeve. There was a tiny spot on my skin, barely visible, but a small red drop was already emerging. Next to it, a delicate line, like a scratch.

For a moment I heard again the stranger's rattling breath in Baker Street, saw his face searching for air, and felt a coldness that did not come from that underground passage.

"We have to go back," I said.

"Yes," said Holmes. "But not because you are afraid. But because he wants us to read his message."

"What message?"

Holmes pointed to the floor, near the wire. There lay an envelope, dry despite the damp air, as if someone had just put it down. On the front, in the same narrow script as before, was my name.

Dr. John H. Watson.

No sender information.

I didn't take it. I just stared at it as if it were a living animal. Holmes picked it up with tweezers, turned it once as if checking whether it was wet again, and then carefully slipped it into his pocket without opening it.

"Not here," he said. "And not now. He wants you to read it alone. That's the whole point."

I felt my arm grow warm at the puncture site, as if something other than blood had taken up residence there. Holmes's gaze lingered on me for a moment, and in that gaze lay an unfamiliar sharpness, almost anger. Not at me, but at the invisible enemy.

"Let's go," he said briefly.

We climbed back up, back into the fog that enveloped us like a shroud. In the distance, I heard a clock striking. It sounded as if it were striking not the hour, but a hammer on a coffin lid.

When we reached Baker Street, it was as if the fog had changed. It wasn't thicker, nor thinner, but it seemed... more conscious. I kept my arm still, but something seemed to be throbbing beneath my skin, not in rhythm with my heart, but in a strange, unfamiliar beat.

Mrs. Hudson opened the door with a face that already knew no good news was coming through it. The pharmacist came out of the living room, and I could see from his expression that the stranger was still alive, but only just.

Holmes pulled the envelope out of his pocket, placed it on the table directly in front of me, and looked at me.

"Read it," he said quietly. "And tell me every single word. Not one less."

I sat down, felt the tiny pain in my arm, which was now like an echo in my thoughts, and placed my fingers on the paper.

### A letter without a return address

My fingers lay on the envelope as if beneath it lay not paper, but a thin skin that might tear at the slightest carelessness and release something unpleasant. It was a childish thought, certainly; and yet it is precisely in such moments that childish thoughts prove to be the most sensible, because they are not dulled by habit. The apothecary stood beside the fireplace, as if seeking an explanation in the flames, which never came. Mrs. Hudson kept to the background, her hands knotted in her apron, her eyes large and alert. Holmes sat opposite me, still as a statue, watching not the envelope, but me.

I realized how much I wished he had opened the letter himself. Not out of cowardice, but because at that moment I felt an inexplicable aversion to being forced into the role someone had assigned to me. That was what this invisible adversary was doing: distributing roles like a director controlling the stage. And yet I knew Holmes was right. If the letter was meant for me, then it was also a tool against me, and I needed to understand it to avoid being suffocated by it.

"Are you sure he hasn't been treated?" I asked quietly.

Holmes' gaze slid over the envelope. "He's been treated," he replied just as quietly. "The only question is, with what? And whether it will affect us immediately or later?"

I took the tweezers Holmes had placed on the table and lifted the envelope as if it were a piece of contaminated tissue. The edge felt rough, as far as one can tell with metal, not from the paper itself, but from something adhering to it. I cut it open with the tip of the knife, just as I did in my practice with bandages when I suspected a wound underneath. The paper yielded. I pulled the sheet out.

It wasn't ordinary writing paper. It was thin, almost transparent, and in my hand it felt as if it had been folded and flattened too many times. When I unfolded it, a fine dust fell onto my fingertips. I paused, rubbing my thumb and forefinger together. It didn't feel like dirt. It was too smooth, too uniform. The pharmacist took a step closer, and his gaze lingered on my fingers.

"Don't rub," he said quickly.

I stopped, but I had already felt the graininess. I kept my hands away from my face, as if I were back in a field hospital, where you learn to distrust instinctive movements.

Holmes' voice was calm. "Read," he said.

The handwriting was the same narrow, neat hand as before, but this time denser, as if the writer had taken more patience or more pleasure in their work. I began to read aloud, and as I did, I noticed something strange: the more words I spoke, the stronger the feeling became that they were not written to tell me something, but to make me breathe in a certain way.

"Doctor," it read, "you are a man who watches over the breath of others. You hear it, you count it, you interpret it. You believe it is honest because it comes from the chest. But even breath can lie."

I involuntarily looked up, but Holmes' face remained unmoved.

"You know stories of men who die from bullets and knives. You know fewer stories of men who die from a sentence. Tonight you heard a sentence: Come alone. You did not come alone. That was wise. Or was it just habit?"

Here I paused for a moment, because I felt the letter seeping into my soul, not through information, but through its tone. The writer knew not only my actions, he knew my justifications.

"You pulled the splinter from the arm of the man who gave you the shiny boots. You did something you do well: you treated a symptom. You didn't treat the cause. This isn't a criticism. It's just a description. You are a good doctor. But you are not the best. The best doctor is the one who creates the disease and promises the cure at the same time."

I felt my stomach clench. The pharmacist made an involuntary noise, a kind of strangled clearing of his throat. Mrs. Hudson pressed her lips together. Holmes merely raised his eyebrows slightly.

I continued reading.

"You have a prick in your arm. It will remind you that you are a body, not just an observer. You will still feel it when you sleep. When you are not asleep. When you think you are asleep. Perhaps it will even help you understand something you have overlooked until now."

My hand instinctively went to the spot under the sleeve where the skin was now warm. Not painful, but with an unpleasant throbbing that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Holmes's gaze followed the movement, and I saw his eyes narrow briefly.

“You like to write,” the letter continued. “That’s not a sin. It’s just dangerous. You turn things that have happened into things that must happen. People read your words and think they know you. They only know what you give them. And what you give them is often not the truth, but a version of it that is tolerable.”

The writing hit me like a ton of bricks because it wasn't entirely wrong. I had always maintained that I changed details out of consideration for those affected. And yet there were cases where I had changed more than necessary because I believed it was better that way. It was a touch of vanity to see myself as truthful while simultaneously shaping the narrative.

“Tonight,” I continued reading, “you will witness a small experiment. You will discover that a person can be poisoned not only by poison, but by a thought. You can take the breath away from a man by telling him that it doesn’t belong to him.”

I paused. The sentence was so unpleasant that it sat in my mouth like a foreign object. Holmes' voice cut through the silence.

"Further."

"You're wondering why I'm writing to you," I read. "You're thinking of blackmail, revenge, the usual underworld games. You're wrong. I'm writing to you because I need you. Not as a victim. Not as an enemy. As a witness."

The word "witness" burned into the page as if written with a different ink. I felt myself involuntarily reading more slowly.

"There is a man you admire. You don't admire him because he's always right, but because he makes you feel that in a world of fog, someone can draw a line. You follow that line, Doctor. It's your way of breathing. Without it, you panic. I've seen it. I've tested it. And I'll test it again."

Holmes' face remained calm, but I saw his hand rest lightly on the edge of the table, as if he were holding back something inside that was pushing to the outside.

“The man you admire,” I read, “has a flaw. He believes that everything that happens already exists in his mind as a solution. He believes that the world poses riddles to him so that he will solve them. He hasn’t yet understood that sometimes the world poses riddles to bind him. And you, Doctor, are that bind.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. Not because I felt personally attacked, but because the writer had named, with chilling precision, a dependency I would never have used that term. I looked at Holmes, but he didn't return my gaze. He stared at the page as if he could see the writer through the words.

I continued reading because standing still would have been worse.

“At midnight,” it read, “a man will die if you do nothing. Perhaps he will also die if you do something. But then you will know what kind of doctor you are: one who heals, or one who obeys. You will not know where he is. You will suspect the fog. You will suspect the sewers. You will suspect every dark place in London. And while you are suspecting, the needle will already be in his arm.”

I felt my voice grow hoarse. The letter wasn't just a message. It was a downward spiral.

"If you want to save the man you don't know," I read, "bring me something you do know: a page. A single page from your notebook. A page you've never published. Leave it where the fog is thickest, but no lamp is lit. And come alone. If you don't come, I'll still take what I want. If you do come, I'll show you what you've kept hidden."

The page ended there. No name. No greeting. No sign. Just the words, lying on the table like a cold instrument.

A silence followed, in which one could hear the stranger's breathing in the next room, that rattling, heavy working of the lungs, which suddenly made me think of the word "needle", as if it were no longer a piece of metal, but a principle.

"A page from my notebook," I said tonelessly.

Holmes' gaze slowly lifted towards me. "He believes you have one," he said.

"I have many sides," I replied, my attempt to sound objective failing. "Notes. Sketches. Things that never—"

"Not this one," Holmes said calmly. "He wants the one that hurts."

The pharmacist cleared his throat. "Dr. Watson," he began, but stopped when Holmes looked at him.

I felt the warmth on my arm more intensely, as if reading the letter had awakened the area. A thought crept into my consciousness, unpleasant and shameful: there was indeed something I had never published. Not because it was trivial, but because it would have shown me in a light I couldn't bear to see publicly.

Holmes seemed to read my unease like another line. "Don't go into your past, Watson," he said quietly. "Not without reason. And not alone."

In the next room, the stranger let out a stifled sound, followed by a coughing fit so violent it sounded like fabric being torn. Mrs. Hudson jumped.

Holmes stood up. "Midnight," he said. "He has given us a deadline. And at the same time, he has shown us that he values your pen as much as my reason."

He leaned towards me, and his voice became so quiet that I felt it rather than heard it. "Which side does he mean, Watson?"

I opened my mouth to answer, and realized at that same moment that the fog wasn't just outside the windows. It was also standing between what I knew and what I could say.

I understood immediately what you meant, and yet for a moment I was unable to express it. Not because Holmes's question was unclear, but because it targeted a part of myself that I had kept locked away for years with the care one usually takes with dangerous medications. There are memories that one doesn't repress because they are incomprehensible, but because they are all too clear. You see them in every mirror, even if the mirror is dark.

Holmes stood before me, not waiting in that casual manner he sometimes displayed when a client was sorting out his affairs. He waited like a man who decides in a split second whether or not to break down a door. The apothecary had withdrawn unobtrusively, as if to give the two residents of Baker Street the space their secrets demanded. Mrs. Hudson remained in the doorway, her hand on the handle, as if she could thereby simultaneously hold the room and the world outside at bay.

From the next room came the stranger's harrowing breathing again. It wasn't the familiar sounds of a sick person; it was the sound of someone fighting with every chest movement for the right to remain in this world. If you listen long enough, you involuntarily begin to count the seconds between breaths, as if they were coins to be saved.

"Which side?" Holmes repeated.

I began to write, but at that moment the thought struck me that the author of the letter knew not only my published stories but also my writing habits. He must have known that, like many who have seen war and misery, I rarely throw things away completely. I have burned notebooks, yes, for practicality and discretion, but I have also kept many because paper is a deceptive friend: it promises that what is written on it doesn't have to remain within you.

"He means a note from... earlier," I finally said, and my voice sounded strange to me.

Holmes' gaze remained steady, but I saw his attention sharpen. "Earlier" was a word he disliked because it could mean everything and nothing. For him, time was a line drawn from concrete points.

"Before our time here?" he asked.

"Before... some things," I replied evasively.

He wouldn't accept it. "Watson," he said quietly, "if he wants a page you never published, then he wants either proof or a weapon. Both are dangerous. You are not obliged to explain every whim of your conscience to me, but you are obliged to tell me what we are dealing with."

I ran my hand over my forehead. The needle puncture in my arm was now burning noticeably, not as pain, but as a warm spot radiating outwards. I pushed up my sleeve. A reddish halo had formed around the tiny puncture site, and I was startled because the edge wasn't even. It looked as if something was reaching outwards from the skin.

The pharmacist took a step closer, but didn't dare interrupt Holmes. I beckoned him over.

"You see," I said.

He examined the spot, and his brow furrowed. "This isn't a normal reaction," he murmured. "Not dirt, not simple inflammation. It's... as if something has been mixed in with it that's stuck in the skin."

"How long?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It depends on what it is. But if it seems like what's happening to the man in the next room, then you shouldn't wait until you feel it, but act before it changes you."

Holmes briefly grasped my wrist between his thumb and forefinger, not in a medical manner, but like a man testing whether someone is still firmly grounded in the moment. "Are you telling me he marked you to make you more compliant?" he asked.

"Or to pressure me," I retorted, and for the first time, the anger that was boiling inside me resonated in my voice. "He knows I can't bear to be inactive when someone is suffering. He puts me under pressure by using my body as proof."

Holmes nodded almost imperceptibly. "That's his style. He links actions to symptoms. He forces you to react instead of decide."

The stranger coughed again. I heard the pharmacist curse softly, then the clinking of a bottle. It was as if the letter we had read was already having its consequences in the present.

"And the side?" Holmes asked again.

I looked at him, and something inside me gave way. Not because I loved sudden openness, but because the situation no longer allowed for vanity.

"There was one case," I said. "One that I never wrote down. Not completely. Not as it was. I only have fragments. One page, yes. A page that I tore out of the notebook back then because I didn't want to leave it with the others."

Holmes' eyes grew even stiller. "When?"

"Shortly after I met you," I said. "It was one of our first cases. And I did something... something that doesn't fit the image people should have of me."

"What?" he asked.

I had to swallow hard. "I lied," I said. "Not in a report, but in real life. And that lie protected someone who perhaps didn't deserve it. Or perhaps it protected someone who very much did. To this day, I don't know."

Holmes' face betrayed nothing, but I saw him weighing the words as if they were clues.

"And this page contains the proof?" he asked.

"It contains the note," I said. "The name. The address. And the sentence I wrote back then, because I was horrified by what I had done. I haven't forgotten it, but I haven't wanted to look at it again either."

"Where is she?" asked Holmes.

"In my room," I said. "In a book that nobody reads. Between the pages, like a scar hidden under clothes."

The pharmacist approached again. "Dr. Watson," he said with quiet urgency, "the man in the next room is having a cramp. I need your help."

I wanted to jump up, but Holmes held me back with a look. Not out of harshness, but because he understood that my impulsive action was exactly what our opponent had factored in.

"Go," said Holmes. "Do what you have to do as a doctor. I'll go upstairs and get the page."

"No," I said vehemently. "Not alone. If he wants me to come alone, then perhaps that's exactly the side he needs to set a trap for you."

Holmes' lips barely lifted. "He's setting traps for me anyway, Watson. The only difference is that I want to see them before I step into them."

He turned to Mrs. Hudson. "Stay with the pharmacist," he said. "If someone knocks, don't answer. And if you hear footsteps that don't belong to our house, go into the kitchen and close the door. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Hudson nodded, and I saw in her eyes that she understood, even without knowing the details. In such homes, one learns that the truth is sometimes a luxury.

Holmes was already on the stairs when I knelt beside the stranger. He was now half in the chair, half in the apothecary's arms. His face had taken on a grayer hue, and his lips were bluish. I placed my hand on his chest, felt the frantic rising and falling, heard the whistling, rattling noise that had forced its way into his life like a strange machine.

"Breathe," I said, more like a command than a comfort. "Breathe."

He opened his eyes, and there was something in them that shook me: not fear of death itself, but fear of what death might spare him. His lips moved, and I leaned closer.

"He's coming," he whispered.

"Who?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"The... man... with the needle."

I heard footsteps on the stairs above us. Holmes was returning. In his hand he held a single sheet of paper, yellowed with my own handwriting on it. He didn't place it on the table. He held it tightly, as if the mere contact with the air would somehow alter it.

"That's it," he said.

I saw the sheet of paper and felt my mouth go dry. Not because of the content, which I couldn't yet read, but because of what it meant: that my own silence had now become currency.

Holmes looked up from the page at me. "Now," he said calmly, "we'll go where the fog is thickest and no lantern is burning."

Holmes didn't put the yellowed sheet of paper in his pocket, but slipped it into the inner fold of his coat, so carefully, as if the warmth of his body might protect it there from the grasp of a cold world. I know how odd that sounds; but those who know him know that he sometimes displayed an almost superstitious care for small things when he sensed that a larger web had become entangled with them. He looked at me for a moment, and in his gaze was not only determination, but also that unspoken question as to whether I was still capable of determining my own role.

"Walk slowly," the pharmacist said hastily, examining my arm again. "If you feel dizzy or if you experience a burning sensation in your chest, stop. And avoid taking deep breaths if you can."

"Of all places, not taking a deep breath in London," I muttered, more to cling to a bit of irony than out of genuine mockery.

"Not tonight," he said seriously.

Mrs. Hudson pressed the scarf into my hand, and as I put it around my neck, I felt her fingers linger on my sleeve a moment longer than necessary. It was a small, silent gesture that told me more than any word: that she understood the danger, even if she couldn't name its form.

We stepped out into the fog. It didn't hit us in the face like rain; it settled on skin and clothes like a thin, damp layer that couldn't be shaken off. Baker Street existed only in brief fragments: a window here, a circle of lamps there, emptiness in between. The sounds of the city were muffled, as if someone had placed cotton wool over the world, but this very muffling made each individual sound more significant. A footstep, a distant shout, the squeak of a wagon wheel—everything sounded as if it came from a room one wasn't allowed to enter.

Holmes went ahead. He wasn't hasty, but his movements had the economy of a man who regards his time not as a possession, but as material. We turned into a side street, then into a narrower alley where the houses stood closer together and the fog compressed. After a few minutes, I realized we weren't moving toward a place that happened to be dark, but toward a place one avoids for good reason. No light was on here. Not because there wasn't one, but because it didn't want to stay. The gas flames seemed to be retreating, as if afraid to illuminate something better left hidden.

Holmes stopped and raised his hand.

"Listen," he said softly.

At first I heard only the dripping of water somewhere nearby, which must have been hitting a pipe or a gutter. Then, below it, another sound: the very faint rustling of paper, as if someone were turning a page. It was so subtle that it could just as well have been my imagination. But Holmes's head tilted, and I knew that he heard it too.

"There's someone there," I whispered.

"Or something that wants us to believe it," he replied.

He led me onward until we reached a spot where the fog was particularly thick. It wasn't just the air; it was as if an additional layer of cold and dampness hung there, motionless. I could

feel it in my lungs, even with shallow breaths. My arm throbbed, and the throbbing seemed to intensify with each breath, as if the small prick had opened a connection between the outside world and my blood.

Holmes stopped before a wall where an old archway was visible. The archway itself had long since been bricked up, but the niche remained, and within it lay shadows so dense that even the fog could not dispel them. If there was a place where the fog was thickest and no lantern burned, it was here.

"Here," said Holmes.

He pulled a small tin from his pocket, opened it, and took out a pinch of fine powder. I recognized it as something he occasionally used to make invisible traces visible. He didn't blow it; he let it fall, very slowly, so that it settled in the humid air. At that same moment, I saw something I had missed before: a thin, almost transparent cord stretched across the niche, not made of ordinary yarn, but of something that shimmered briefly at just the right angle.

"Another trap," I said.

"Not for us," Holmes replied. "For the paper."

He pulled out the yellowed paper, but held it back, as if he didn't want to take it to the scene of the danger immediately. Instead, he leaned forward and examined the cord without touching it. His face was so close to the wall that for a moment I feared the fog itself might kiss him.

"Do you see that tiny droplet there?" he asked.

I had to strain to see it. There was indeed a droplet hanging from the string, so small that it looked more like a glimmer. Holmes pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, briefly touched the droplet with it, and smelled it.

"Sweet," he said tersely.

"So, the same thing again," I muttered.

"One and the same glove," Holmes replied. "He wants us to recognize the handwriting even in the substances. So that we feel he is everywhere."

He pulled out a pair of scissors and cut the string in one spot without touching the drop. The severed part fell to the ground, and he kicked it aside with the toe of his shoe, as if it were a dead worm.

"Well," he said, holding the sheet of paper so I couldn't read the lines. "Put it down."

"Me?" I asked.

"He addressed you," Holmes said. "If I put it down, it's defiance. If you put it down, it's obedience. I want to know what reaction he expects."

It was unpleasant to be used as a laboratory subject, and yet I had to agree with him. I stepped forward, felt the mist wet my eyelashes, and knelt in the niche. The cold hit me from the wall. I placed the sheet on the ground, precisely where the shadow was darkest.

Nothing happened.

It's strange how unsettling nothingness can be in such moments. You expect some movement, a sound, a sign—and instead, silence. I stood up again and stepped back. Holmes held the lantern so that its light didn't fall directly into the niche, but only grazed the edge.

“Wait,” he said.

We stood motionless. Seconds passed. Then, so quietly it was almost indistinguishable from our breath, I heard it again: that rustling sound, as if someone were turning a page. It wasn't coming from the alcove. It was coming from behind us.

Holmes didn't turn immediately. His hand went slowly into his pocket, and I knew he wasn't looking for a weapon, but for a way to control the moment. I, on the other hand, felt my body summon that old wartime reflex: turn, aim, decide. But before I could move, a voice slipped out of the fog.

“They did it,” she said.

She wasn't loud. She was so quiet that she almost seemed friendly. That's precisely what made her dangerous.

"Step into the light," Holmes said.

A soft laugh, brief, without joy. "Light is impolite, Mr. Holmes. It demands too much at once."

“How do you know my name?” asked Holmes, although we both knew the answer.

"I know many names," said the voice. "Tonight I will collect only one."

I felt the impulse to draw my revolver, but my stabbed arm twitched as if it had suddenly become heavier. A brief dizziness flickered in my mind, so quickly that I pushed it away again in the same instant, out of defiance and fear.

Holmes' voice remained calm. "If you want the page, then take it," he said.

“Oh, I will take them,” the voice replied. “But not with my hand. Hands are unreliable. They tremble. They sweat. They betray.”

A faint sound followed, which I couldn't initially identify. Then I understood: something metallic scraping against stone, not loud, but distinct. I took a step to the side to see the source and, in the dim light, saw a thin rod sliding out of the mist into the niche, like the arm of a machine. Attached to the end of the rod was a pair of pliers, small, delicate, almost surgical. They grasped the yellowed leaf, lifted it, and pulled it back into the gray void.

Holmes took a leap forward, but stopped immediately. His gaze fell on the floor of the niche, and I followed. Where the sheet had lain, there was now something that hadn't been there before: a second envelope, dry and clean, as if the fog had respectfully bypassed it. No writing on it. No name. Just a single, tiny dot in the corner, barely visible.

"For you," said the voice.

I felt my arm throbbing again. The dizziness returned, stronger, and this time it was accompanied by a brief pressure in my chest, as if someone had made the air inside thicker.

Holmes' hand settled on my sleeve, firmly, supportively. "No," he whispered, so that only I could hear. "Breathe shallowly."

Then he spoke louder: "What is in the envelope?"

The voice seemed to smile. "What you need to understand is that you have already decided."

"They want him to read alone," said Holmes.

"Yes," said the voice. "Because some truths speak better in one mind than between two."

"And what if he doesn't read it?" asked Holmes.

A brief silence, during which I only heard my own shallow breathing. Then: "Then he will know it anyway. He already carries it within him."

I wanted to reply, but the pressure in my chest intensified, and I had to restrain myself from taking a deep breath. That was the most horrifying part: even my body became a pawn in someone else's plan.

Holmes leaned forward slowly, picked up the envelope with tweezers without touching the marked corner, and placed it in a small metal case he carried specifically for such purposes. His eyes remained fixed on the mist for a moment, as if he wanted to pierce it.

"You have the page," he said.

"Yes," the voice replied. "And you have the doctorate."

Then there was a sound of footsteps, but not on stone, not with the crunch of gravel or the sucking of mud. It was that soft, regular squeaking we had already heard beneath the city. It faded away, and with it the voice disappeared, as if it had never been there.

Holmes pulled me back out of the alcove by my sleeve. "Go," he said, and this time there was no resistance in me. My arm burned, my head swayed, and I had the terrible feeling that the city itself was rationing the air for me.

We walked briskly, without running. I heard nothing behind us but mist and dripping rain, yet it seemed to me as if the silence pursued us like a dog that has learned to hunt without barking. When we finally stepped into a wider street where a lamp burned wearily, Holmes stopped and looked at me.

"They are paler," he said.

"I'm still here," I managed to say.

"Not yet," he said quietly. "And now he holds something in his hands that belongs to you, and has given us something that you must not read without it changing you. That is his game."

I nodded, although I was hardly sure if my legs were still reliable. An uneasy certainty grew within me: that the envelope contained not just a message, but a kind of key that would open a door inside me that I preferred to keep locked.

Holmes led me back, step by step, through the fog, and the closer we got to Baker Street, the more clearly I heard in my own breath a strange, faint whistling sound, as if someone had left a tiny needle inside me that rubbed against something with every movement.

### Baker Street after midnight

When we reached Baker Street, it was as if we had returned to a scene that someone had quietly altered in our absence. The fog still lay like a damp cloth over the street, but it seemed to cling more closely to the house, as if it had learned that something was happening behind those windows that fed it. The lamp on the corner burned with a weariness that seemed almost human. Its light fell on the wet asphalt, making it a narrow strip of pale gleam that, after a few steps, disappeared into gray.

Mrs. Hudson opened the door before we knocked. She must have been waiting by the door, because her hand was already on the handle. Her gaze held no more questions, only that silent worry that spreads through a house when it hears the breath of a stranger who no longer quite fits within its walls.

"He's alive," she said softly, as if the word itself were a fragile thing. "But it's bad. The pharmacist... he's doing what he can."

Holmes passed her without appearing hasty, yet his movement was so decisive that it could surprise no one if the house itself yielded to him. I followed, trying to keep my breathing shallow, as he had ordered. It was unpleasant, as if one had to take one's own life only in small portions to avoid suffocating. The sting on my arm burned more intensely now, and something seemed to be working beneath the skin, as if a tiny clock had been implanted, its hands measuring not time, but danger.

The living room was dimly lit. The pharmacist had dimmer the lamp, and the fireplace glowed faintly. The stranger sat in the chair near the table, propped up by cushions, his head tilted to the side, his eyes half-open. His breath came in short gasps, each one sounding as if he were forcing himself through a narrow tube. The pharmacist knelt beside him, his ear to his chest, and when he noticed us, he sat up.

"They're back," he said, his voice tinged with both relief and reproach. "He had another seizure. I gave him something to ease the convulsions, but it doesn't last long. And..." He

looked at me, scrutinizing my complexion as if I were a second patient disguised as a visitor. "You sound different."

I wanted to object, but as I inhaled, there was indeed a faint whistling sound I hadn't heard before. It wasn't loud enough for a layperson to notice, but a doctor notices such things in himself with uncomfortably precise accuracy.

"How long?" I asked.

The pharmacist hesitated. "If it's the same substance as in his case, then the question isn't how long you'll live, but how long you'll remain lucid."

Holmes had placed the small metal tube containing the envelope on the table. He didn't open it immediately. Instead, he produced a piece of white paper, laid it out, positioned a second lamp beside it so that its light wouldn't flicker, and took a small glass plate from a drawer. These were preparations one would make in a laboratory, not a living room. At that moment, Holmes seemed less like a private detective than a surgeon washing his hands before cutting into someone else's flesh.

"We will open it here," he said calmly. "And we will open it in such a way that we do not make the mistake he expects us to make."

"He expects me to read it alone," I said, and it sounded more bitter than I intended.

"He expects you to believe you are alone," Holmes replied. "That is a difference. And he expects what is written in it to separate you from me. Therefore, we will look at it together, but not take it in together. I will see the envelope, you will hear the contents. That way, the point of attack remains with you, not with me."

I understood what he meant, and yet I felt uneasy about my own being the subject of a tactical decision. But the stranger in the chair groaned, and his groan reminded me that tonight wasn't about fragile vanity.

Holmes removed the envelope from its tube with tweezers and placed it on the glass plate. It was small, smooth, and blank. Except for that one dot in the corner, which seemed like an accidental blemish, but which immediately registered in my mind as something menacing. Holmes cut open the edge, very slowly, and let the contents slide out.

It was not a letter in the ordinary sense. It was a slim card, thick paper of the kind used for business cards or invitations. And on it was only one sentence, in that narrow handwriting which had become both familiar and loathed to me. Holmes held the card so that the lamplight did not reflect off it and read without blinking.

Then he looked up at me.

"He writes," Holmes said slowly, "that you should remember."

"What?" I asked, and my heart beat faster, not because of the words, but because of the tone in which Holmes spoke them.

Holmes lowered his gaze again. "On Baker Street after midnight," he read. "To what you did when no one was looking but you."

My stomach grew heavy. There were memories of nights on that street, of late hours when Holmes slept or pretended to sleep while I sat at the table, poring over my notes. There were things one does in silence that seem ridiculous in daylight, and yet it suddenly dawned on me that someone had used that silence as a stage.

"Go on," I said, and my voice was rough.

Holmes' fingers turned the card over. On the back was an address, brief, without any additions. And below it, two numbers: 00:30.

"Half an hour," murmured the pharmacist, who had involuntarily moved closer.

Holmes raised his hand. "That's not all," he said.

He held the map at an angle to the light, and where I had initially seen only the paper's texture, I now recognized a second layer. A barely visible imprint, as if something had been written on it and the paper beneath had retained the trace. Holmes took a soft pencil, carefully hatched across the surface, and slowly a line emerged, like a ghost made of fibers.

I only saw fragments because Holmes kept it in such a way as to maintain control. But the words were unmistakable.

"They stabbed him themselves," said Holmes, and his voice was suddenly so harsh that I thought I had misheard.

"That's nonsense," I blurted out, but at the same moment I felt the sting on my arm burn more intensely, as if my body had reacted to the assertion.

Holmes' gaze met mine. "It's an assertion," he said. "And it's phrased in such a way as to work on you. Not because it's true, but because it sounds possible if you want to sow enough doubt."

"Enough doubt?" I repeated, and I heard my own breath whistle like an answer.

Holmes laid the card on the table as if setting down a weapon he must not let out of his sight. "Watson," he said quietly, "the man is not playing with facts. He is playing with memories. He wants you to see a night anew, until it is no longer yours."

The stranger in the chair stirred. His eyes opened a crack wider, and he raised his hand as if trying to grasp something suspended in the air. His lips formed a word that never came out. I knelt beside him and took his wrist. His pulse was faint, but it was there.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

He nodded almost imperceptibly. Then, with a shattering effort, he produced a sound that formed into two words.

"Too... late."

"What for?" I asked.

His gaze slid past me, to the door, to the window, to the darkness, as if the room had suddenly become too small. "He... is already... inside," he whispered.

I drove around. There was nothing to see. Only the furniture, the shadows, the fog pressing against the windows. And yet, at that moment, something changed, so subtly that I perceived it not with my senses, but only with instinct: a faint smell, sweet and sharp at the same time, like paper that had lain too long in a pharmacy.

Holmes was already standing, his eyes fixed on the air, not on things. "Put out the lamp," he said immediately, and this time it wasn't advice.

The pharmacist did it. Darkness fell over the room, and in the darkness I heard my own breathing, shallow and whistling, and the stranger's heavy struggle. Outside a clock struck, far away, and each strike sounded like a footstep drawing nearer.

Holmes' voice came from the darkness, calm and deadly clear. "He wants us there by half past twelve," he said. "And he wants you to believe that you were the one who wielded that needle."

I swallowed and noticed that the air in my lungs felt thicker.

"Then," I whispered, "we'll go."

We moved through the darkness like two men who had to relearn their own house. It is a strange experience when familiar objects suddenly become alien obstacles: the edge of the carpet, which one usually steps over without a second thought; the back of a chair, which in the semi-darkness resembles a lurking shoulder; the fireplace surround, which stares back with a cold glare as soon as a faint glimmer of light touches it. Holmes had ordered the lamp extinguished, but it was not total darkness, for the fog outside the windows held the streetlight as if in a gray basin. It was sufficient to distinguish outlines, but not to provide any sense of security.

The sweet, sharp smell I had noticed became more pronounced. It wasn't strong like an open perfume bottle, more subtle, like something slowly working its way into the air. It was precisely this subtlety that made it dangerous. The lungs are an honest organ; they take what you give them without asking who offered it.

Holmes stopped as if listening to the air. Then, with one swift movement, he pulled me close to the wall, so that I could feel the rough paper of the wallpaper against my shoulder.

"Don't move," he whispered. "And don't speak more than necessary."

I nodded, even though he could barely see it in the dark. At the same moment, I heard it: a faint noise, not in the hallway, but in the room itself, near the window. It wasn't a step, not a creak, more of a gentle rubbing, like fabric brushing against wood. Then a barely audible click, so subtle it could just as easily have come from a nail moving ever so slightly in damp wood.

The pharmacist beside me breathed shallowly and rapidly. I could feel him trying not to cough. Mrs. Hudson stood motionless, like a shadow in a shadow. And the stranger in the chair continued to wrestle with his chest, as if each breath were a negotiation with an invisible judge.

Holmes slowly raised his hand, and in that hand he held something that flashed briefly in the dim light: his knife. Not as a weapon in the ordinary sense, but as an instrument, ready to cut paper, sever string, reveal something hidden. His head tilted, and I could see from the tension in the back of his neck that he was pinpointing the exact location of the sound's source.

Then he did something that initially startled me. He grabbed the curtain and, instead of pulling it closed, he yanked it open with a sudden jerk, so that it flew to the side with a heavy rustling sound. At the same time, he stepped out of the darkness into the dim light of the street, as if to show the invisible intruder that he wasn't playing along.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then, in the shadow of the window, a movement became apparent. A figure had been there, so close to the frame that it merged with the mist. It retreated, quickly, and in the movement I saw the reflection of something smooth, so brief that it could just as easily have been my imagination.

Holmes was faster. He leaped forward, knife in one hand, and with the other he flung open the window sash. A rush of cold, damp air poured in, and with it the fog, as if someone had opened the door to an animal. But the fog was welcome at that moment, for it diluted the cloying smell that had hung in the room.

The figure was gone. I saw only grey wisps and the diffuse glow of the lantern. Holmes leaned out as far as was safe and looked down.

"He wasn't in the room," he said quietly, more to himself. "He was at the window."

"What?" whispered the pharmacist. "We should have seen him."

Holmes stepped back and pointed to the windowsill. There stood a small container, barely larger than a thimble, made of thin metal. It looked like a harmless container, the kind used for ointments or powders. But the outside was damp, and a dark film clung to the rim.

"He placed it here," Holmes said. "So that it would evaporate slowly. Not enough to kill instantly. Enough to confuse a man who was already under pressure."

I moved closer, as best as my shallow breathing allowed. The smell was clearly coming from the container. It was sweet, but not pleasant; there was something sick about it, as if the sweetness was merely a disguise.

"Can it..." I began.

"Yes," Holmes interrupted. "It can go to the head. It can irritate the breathing. It can discolor memories if you inhale it long enough and have enough fear in your blood at the same time. That is its purpose."

The pharmacist leaned forward but didn't dare touch the container. "It's reminiscent of ether, but it's not pure ether. And there's something..." He sniffed cautiously. "Something reminiscent of bitter almond, but too faint. A mixture."

Holmes took the tweezers and lifted the container. He held it out of the window so that the mist washed around it. "Whoever prepared this has knowledge," he said. "Not just of chemicals, but of people."

I felt my arm throbbing, as if to confirm the words. The pressure in my chest was no longer just my imagination. I could still think clearly, but I noticed that every thought required a little more effort than it should.

"Watson," Holmes said quietly, "we're leaving now. And we're leaving immediately."

"The stranger—" I began.

"Stay here," said Holmes. "With the apothecary. And with fresh air." He flung open the second window, so that a draft swept through the room. The fog rolled in, but with it came movement, and movement was better than this creeping, silent poison.

Mrs. Hudson took a step forward. "Mr. Holmes," she whispered, "you can't leave him here if someone—"

Holmes briefly raised his hand. "If someone comes, he hasn't come because of him," he said. "He's come because of Watson. And because of me. The man there was only a letter that could speak. We mustn't cling to the envelope when the sender is at the door."

That sounded harsh, and yet I recognized the truth in it. The stranger had been our first clue, our first proof that the threat had taken shape. But the adversary had already changed direction. He had shown me the needle. He had given me the map. And now the clock was ticking.

I knelt beside the stranger once more, more out of a sense of duty than hope. His eyes were open, and they followed me, as if he saw in my face the answer to something he could no longer speak.

"Hang in there," I said.

He moved his lips. A sound came out, barely more than a whisper. "Don't... believe..." he whispered.

"Don't believe it?" I asked quickly.

His gaze drifted to the ceiling, as if searching for the fog that also seemed to be in the house. "That... it... began... in you," he managed, and then came that rattling sound again, swallowing the sentence.

Holmes was already standing at the door, coat zipped, hat pulled low. I followed him, pulling my scarf tighter around my neck. The apothecary stepped in front of me again and pressed a small bottle into my hand.

"If the whistling gets worse, put a drop on a cloth and smell it briefly," he said quietly. "No more than that. It can help keep your head clear. But it's not a cure."

I pocketed it without thinking about whether I trusted him. On nights like that, you trust whoever is within reach.

We went downstairs. The house didn't creak; it seemed to be holding its breath. At the bottom, by the front door, Holmes stopped and listened. Then he opened the door a crack, and the mist pressed in as if it had been waiting for this invitation.

Outside, the street was empty. But in London, empty never means safe. The fog turned every corner into a potential witness, every shadow into a possible hand.

"The address," I said, and my voice sounded hoarse.

Holmes didn't answer immediately. He started walking without looking back, and I followed him, step by step, trying to keep my breathing shallow yet still take in enough air to avoid stumbling. After a few meters, he finally said, without turning his head, "You know the place."

"Me?" I asked, and something stirred within me that was not just fear, but resistance.

"Yes," said Holmes. "Or you knew him without realizing it. That's the dangerous thing about memories. You carry them around like keys in your pocket and are surprised when a door suddenly opens."

We turned into a street where the streetlights were spaced further apart, as if less light had been chosen out of economy or fear. The fog thickened, and my arm burned more intensely. At one point, I stumbled over an uneven patch of pavement, and for a moment, dark spots danced before my eyes. I pressed my lips together and forced myself not to take a deep breath.

Holmes' hand briefly grasped my elbow, supported me, and then released it, as if every touch was already a statement.

"Ten more minutes," he said.

"And if I..." I began.

"Then I will carry you," said Holmes tersely, and in that brief reply there was more resolve than any lengthy consolation could have given.

We walked on, deeper into the grey London after midnight, and the closer we got to our destination, the stronger the feeling became that it was not just an address we were going to, but a place in my own past that someone had written down with a pin.

The street Holmes led me down was one of those London thoroughfares that retain a certain air of secrecy even in broad daylight. The houses stood close together, their facades darkened by years of smoke, and the windows like blind eyes, unwilling to reveal anything. The fog hung lower here, as if it had taken up residence in this area. It crept over the steps, settled on the nameplates, and turned every inscription into a riddle.

My breathing had become a constant companion, impossible to ignore. The whistling didn't occur with every puff, but often enough that I couldn't dismiss it as mere imagination. It was as if a thin thread had stretched across my chest, rubbing against something sensitive with every movement. The sting in my arm burned in a peculiar rhythm, not like an open wound, but like a warning expressed through warmth.

Holmes didn't stay on the edge of the road, but walked in the middle, so that we remained within the dim islands of light cast by the widely spaced lampposts. He hardly turned his head, yet I noticed that his gaze registered every corner, every doorway, every darker patch in the fog. It was an alertness that didn't seem nervous, but rather ordered, as if he had already categorized the danger.

"There," he said suddenly and stopped.

Ahead of us lay a narrow passage between two buildings, little more than a gap. It led into a courtyard that, in the mist, appeared like a hole. On the wall beside it hung a weathered sign, its lettering barely legible. Holmes stepped closer and ran his gloved hand over its surface.

"Here it is," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, and even as I spoke I noticed how the air in my throat became dry.

Holmes pointed to the sign. "There used to be a doctor's office here," he said. "Not large, not prestigious. But useful for people who don't want their name appearing in a register."

I felt an involuntary tug in my stomach. The city is full of places like this. Yet the comment hit me as if it were personal.

"You're saying... I was here?" I asked.

"I'm saying that you know what kind of people came and went here," Holmes replied. "And that our adversary believes there's a memory of yours stuck here."

We went through the passageway. The fog seemed even thicker there, trapped by the walls. The courtyard was small and paved, with an old, long-disused fountain in the center. Water dripped from a ledge, each drop sounding as if falling into a profound silence. On the opposite wall was a dark, windowless door with a brass plaque brighter than anything else. Not new, but polished.

Holmes stopped a step away from the door. "Do you smell?" he asked.

I nodded. The sweet, sharp scent was there again, stronger, as if it had been deliberately released in this courtyard. It wasn't overpowering, but it hung in the air like a thin veil, threatening to settle in my lungs. I took the small bottle from my pocket, the one the pharmacist had given me, and briefly held it to a handkerchief. The scent was pungent and cool, and for a moment it brought clarity, like a cold cloth on my forehead.

Holmes saw it and gave a curt nod. Then he bent down to the lock. He didn't immediately reach for his tool, but first examined the keyway, the edge of the door, the gap between the wood and the frame.

"Fresh," he murmured. "Not from rust, but from hand."

He positioned the tool, and after a soft click, the door gave way. We entered.

Inside it was darker than outside, because the fog had nowhere to hold the light. Holmes lit his small lantern just enough to illuminate the room. It was an anteroom, sparsely furnished, with a bench against the wall and a table on which lay old magazines. The dust on them wasn't as thick as it should have been. Someone had been standing there recently.

From this anteroom, a second door led into a back room. Holmes opened it slowly.

The smell hit us there like a wet hand. Not strong, but more concentrated. I immediately felt my chest tighten and forced myself to breathe shallowly. In the dim light, I recognized a treatment room: an examination table, a sink, a cabinet with a glass front. In the corner stood a chair, and next to it a small, cold stove.

Holmes went straight to the cabinet. The glass front was fogged up on the inside, not from the weather, but from fumes. He opened it with tweezers, as if he didn't want to touch anything with his bare skin. Inside were several small bottles, empty or almost empty, and between them a metal tray containing something that glimmered dully in the light.

"Needles," I said before he did.

Holmes picked up one of the needles with tweezers. It was unusually fine, almost elegant, and there was a tiny notch on the shaft.

"The mark," he murmured. "The same principle as with the bottle, as with the paper. He marks his tools, like a craftsman who is proud of his work."

I stepped closer, but my arm throbbed more intensely, and a brief dizziness washed over me. The air in this room wasn't good for me. I took another sip from the bottle the pharmacist had given me and held onto the doorframe.

"Watson," said Holmes, without taking his eyes off the needle, "don't sit down. And stay near the door."

"I'm not made of porcelain," I managed to say, but my voice sounded thin.

Holmes put the needle back and looked around the room. His gaze fell on the wall, where a small hook used to hang, where a towel had probably once been. Now something else hung there: a piece of paper, fastened with a clip.

Holmes stepped closer, took it off, and held it up to the lantern. It was a clipping, not cleanly cut, but torn. And the handwriting on it was mine.

I felt the blood rush to my face and then drain away. The letters were unmistakable: those slightly slanted lines I'd grown accustomed to over the years. A sentence was written there, and below it a name I didn't want to read aloud, not here.

Holmes looked at me. "That's not the page he took," he said calmly. "That's a fragment. A lure. He wants you to believe he has more of your past than he perhaps does. Or he wants you to believe you have more to hide than you actually do."

I forced myself to look at the piece of paper. The sentence on it was short, and yet it felt weighty. It was a note I'd jotted down one night when I thought no one would ever ask about it. And now it hung here on a hook, like a piece of evidence in a courtroom.

"How did this get here?" I asked hoarsely.

"In the same way that fog gets into our rooms," Holmes said. "Through a crack that is underestimated."

He turned back to the room. His hand glided across the examination table without touching it. Then he knelt down and looked under the table. There, in the shadows, lay a small metal container, similar to the one that had stood by the window in Baker Street. Only this one was open, and inside lay a damp residue.

Holmes produced a small piece of paper and held it over the opening as if to trap the steam. "He prepared it here," he said. "Not to kill you. To weaken you. To alter your perception, just enough so that doubt seems like fact."

"And the man who was supposed to die at midnight?" I asked.

Holmes' gaze lifted. "Perhaps that was the man in our living room," he said. "Perhaps it's someone else. Or perhaps it's a test to see if we can be directed by a clock."

I wanted to answer, but at that moment I heard a sound outside in the courtyard. Not loud, but distinct: the short, sharp click of leather on stone. No shuffling, no hurried padding. A precise step. Then another. And underneath, very quietly, that regular squeaking we already knew, as if something soft lay between the sole and the ground.

Holmes immediately extinguished the lantern.

Darkness swallowed the room. I stood in the doorway, listening to my own breathing, shallow and whistling, and in that breath lay the stark fear that I might be too loud. Outside in the courtyard, footsteps stopped. Someone was there, close enough that I could smell damp leather, mingling with the sweetish odor rising from the room.

Then a voice came, calm, almost polite.

"Doctor," she said, "you have found the right place. Now find the right thought."

Holmes' answer came from the darkness, harsh and clear. "Come closer."

A soft laugh. "No. Tonight, it's you who are coming closer."

A third sound followed: the gentle scraping of metal against stone, as if someone were dragging a fine point across the pavement. I saw nothing, but I knew what it was, and my arm throbbed as if my blood had recognized its shape.

Holmes' hand briefly touched my elbow. Not firmly, just as a signal.

"Ready?" he whispered so quietly that I could barely hear it.

I nodded, even though the nodding made me dizzy. Something moved in the courtyard, and in the dim residual light that filtered through the crack in the door, I saw a brief, bright gleam, as if a lantern had responded to polished leather.

Then the door was slowly, very slowly, pushed open a little further from the outside, as if someone wanted to knock politely without raising their hand.

### The man with the bare boots

The door moved as if it had its own hesitation. Not jerkily, not violently, but with that cautious slowness one associates with people confident in their power. A crack, wide enough to let a sliver of the courtyard light into the room, narrow enough to threaten more than it revealed. In that sliver, I saw the faint gleam of the brass on the lock, and beside it, farther down, the dull shimmer of dampness on the pavement outside.

Holmes stood in the dark, so still that I could only tell he was ready by the tension in his shoulder. His hand was no longer on the elbow of my coat; it hung loosely at his side, but the knife in it was like a thought not yet spoken. I kept the revolver in my pocket and hated myself at that moment for that childish reassurance. Compared to a needle, to fumes, to the play of a man who works with air, metal was a pitiful comfort.

The pressure in my chest intensified, and I felt that faint whistling sound again when I breathed, a sound that had settled inside me like a foreign instrument. I forced myself to open my lips only slightly and take in shallow breaths, like teaching a severely wounded man in the field that life sometimes comes in small doses.

Outside in the courtyard, all was quiet, but the silence wasn't empty. It had form. It was the silence of a person waiting for someone to take the next step.

"There are two of them," said the calm voice, almost casually, as if it were an observation about the weather. "That doesn't surprise me. But it does disappoint me a little."

Holmes did not answer immediately. He allowed the sentence time to settle in the room, and I understood that in doing so he was doing something the speaker had not expected: he was slowing it down. He was refusing to be carried along.

"Who are you?" Holmes finally asked, and his voice was no louder than the other's, yet it was different: harder, clearer, with no room for politeness.

A soft laugh came from the courtyard. "You always ask that," said the man. "And you always already know half the answer."

"Half is enough," Holmes replied. "If the other half is a confession."

The door opened a further inch. I could now see the outline of a boot in the courtyard light, and even in this dimness I understood why our informant had chosen this image. The boot was as bright as a mirror, so clean it looked as if it had just been taken out of a box. Not a speck of dust, not a water stain, not even the dull sheen of worn leather. It wasn't simply cared for. It was on display.

Something dark moved beside the boot, and I realized it wasn't a second foot, but a narrow object the man was holding. He slid it across the pavement, and the sound we had heard earlier returned: that soft, steady squeaking, as if soft material were rubbing against stone.

"You see him," I whispered, although I wasn't sure if words were wise.

Holmes' hand rose almost imperceptibly, a silent signal for silence. Then he took a half step forward, just far enough for his shadow to fall into the strip of light. He was thus visible without revealing himself.

"Slide the door further," Holmes said.

"Why?" asked the man in the courtyard. "So you can see me better? Or so I can see you better?"

"So that I can see what you're playing with," Holmes said.

There was a brief pause, during which I heard only the dripping of water and the shallow work of my own lungs. Then the door opened, slowly, wider. The courtyard now lay before us like a stage, and on this stage stood the man.

He wasn't tall, but he wasn't slight either. His coat was dark, the collar turned up, the hat pulled low. His face remained in shadow, but his boots gleamed as if they had swallowed the light and were now giving it back. On one foot, I saw a darker stripe at the edge, like a second layer.

Holmes' gaze immediately went there. "A coating," he said quietly, more as a statement than a question.

The man barely moved his foot, but the squeaking sounded back, as if the material itself had admitted what it was. "You're observant," he said. "I admire that. I also admire that you brought it with you."

He gestured without fully raising his arm. I felt his attention settle on me like a hand on the back of the neck.

"You're standing poorly in the doorway, Doctor," he said kindly. "It's dangerous. People might think you're waiting to be stung."

My arm burned as if the word had touched it. I gritted my teeth.

Holmes took a step outside the door, into the courtyard, not far, just enough to stand between the man and me. "You talk too much," Holmes said. "That's what people do who think words are their protection."

“Words are sometimes sharper than knives,” the man replied. “You know that. Or you would know it if you had allowed what really happened to be written down.”

A brief dizziness came over me. Not like fainting, more like a moment when the room shifted a touch too far to the right. I leaned on the doorframe, and at the same instant I hated it for doing exactly what it probably wanted: showing weakness.

Holmes heard it in my breathing. He didn't turn his head, but I felt his attention snap back to me, like a dog that picks up a sound in the bushes.

"They are not getting any closer," Holmes said calmly.

The man smiled, as far as I could tell from the shadows. "I don't need to come any closer. I'm already close enough. He told you, didn't he? That I'm inside."

He dropped the object he had been sliding across the pavement. It was a thin metal rod with a small clip at the end, like the tool he had used to pick up the paper. Now it lay there, seemingly harmless yet full of meaning: an extended arm that could touch without revealing itself.

Holmes took another step forward. "You fetched something," he said. "And you brought something. What did you bring?"

The man nodded towards the ground near the fountain. Only then did I see it: a small container, like a shoe polish tin, dark, with a lid that shimmered dully in the light.

“A gift,” said the man. “For your boots, Mr. Holmes. They sometimes look... dull. And for your doctor, so that he doesn't forget that he not only writes, but also acts.”

Holmes did not approach the box. He remained standing as if an invisible abyss lay between him and the object. "You poison the air," he said. "You stab people in the arms. You set traps. And then you give gifts. This is not psychology. This is cowardice."

The laughter that answered was quiet, but this time it had a hard edge. "Cowardice," the man said. "You call it cowardice because you believe courage is being close enough to get hit. I consider it stupidity."

He made a movement, so small that I initially missed it. But at the same moment, I felt something change behind me. A pull, a barely perceptible click, as if a spring had relaxed somewhere.

“Holmes!” I shouted, and the shout came out hoarsely.

Holmes turned halfway around at that same moment, and in that half-turn I realized what had happened: The door behind me had been connected to the door frame by a second cord, and as it was opened further, the cord had tightened. Now it was retracting, and something sprang out of the crack where my hand had just been: a tiny metal point, like a needle, attached to a springy wire.

I only managed to avoid getting it off because I loosened my grip at the last moment when I felt dizzy. The wire snapped into thin air and now vibrated as if silently laughing at our carelessness.

Holmes stepped back into the doorway, reached for the wire with tweezers, grasped it, and with a single movement pressed it against the wood until the spring tension broke. It was a quick, matter-of-fact act, like clamping an artery.

The man in the courtyard didn't clap, but his voice did. "Very good," he said. "You see: He still has room to learn."

Holmes's gaze was now cold enough that for a moment I thought the fog itself would recede. "You want to weaken it," he said. "And you want to force me to protect it instead of thinking. That's your plan."

"It's a plan," the man replied. "Not the only one. And you've just shown me I was right. You're protecting it."

"He is my friend," Holmes said.

That was a sentence I had rarely heard him utter so simply, and precisely for that reason it affected me more deeply than any dramatic declaration. The man in the courtyard was silent for a moment, as if he had heard something unexpected.

Then he said quietly, "That makes it easier."

He took a half step back, and I saw again the squeak at the edge of the boot as the cover touched the stone. The shine remained, however, as if it wanted to show us once more that it wanted to be seen.

Holmes made a movement as if to pursue it, but stopped, noticing something on the floor. Next to the tin lay a small package wrapped in grey paper. No name. No seal. Only that tiny dot in the corner, which by now seemed like a mocking mark.

"No," Holmes said, more to himself, and stopped.

The man chuckled softly. "You know you'll take it," he said. "Not because you have to. Because you can't bear not knowing."

Then he turned around, and in two or three steps he was swallowed up by the fog, as if the courtyard had spat him out and the city had swallowed him again. The gleam of his boots flickered once, a final reflex, and was gone.

Holmes stood still, listening, but there was no sound other than the dripping of water and the distant, muffled hum of the city. I felt my chest tighten, as if the fog had grown thicker inside me as well.

"He's gone," I whispered.

"Yes," said Holmes. "And he left us something so that we would follow him without realizing that we were running away from ourselves."

He approached the tin, not directly, but sideways, examining it, like a man who questions the ground with every step. He didn't bend down with his bare hand, but with tweezers. The lid of the tin was only loosely placed on top. Holmes lifted it a crack. A hint of the sweet, spicy aroma rose up, immediately, distinctly.

"Don't inhale," he said.

I pressed my lips together and took the small bottle from my pocket, briefly holding it to the cloth as I had been advised. The pungent smell brought clarity, but it couldn't prevent a leaden weariness from spreading through me, as if every breath were a minor chore.

Holmes closed the tin again, set it aside, and then picked up the grey package, also with tweezers. He weighed it in the air, as if one could tell by its weight whether it contained paper or metal.

"He gives us a choice," Holmes said quietly.

"Which ones?" I asked, my voice thin.

Holmes looked at me, and in his gaze was the sober realization that he might have to carry me in the next moment if my body decided it could no longer accept the air. "Whether we open it and follow it," he said, "or whether we leave it closed and thereby accept that it will guide us anyway."

The courtyard was silent. The fog was thick. And somewhere, far away, a clock struck, as if to remind us that time doesn't wait until we've made up our minds.

Holmes stood motionless for another moment, the gray package in the tweezers, as if it were a living creature that must not be disturbed. I could have sworn the courtyard itself had grown quieter, not because the sounds had disappeared, but because suddenly every little sound was feared. The dripping on the windowsill sounded like Morse code, and the distant rumble of a cart, piercing the fog somewhere in the city, sounded like a reminder of something that continued outside while we waited in this narrow courtyard for a decision.

"He saw us move," said Holmes, without taking his eyes off the package. "And he saw us stop moving. He measures both."

"Then we won't open it," I said.

I was serious. A resistance grew within me, one that wasn't solely driven by fear. It was the reluctance to reach for a piece of paper that someone else had placed in my path for the second time that same evening. And yet, at the same time, I felt a second impulse fighting against it: the urge to know, because ignorance in such moments is not a neutral state, but rather a space that the adversary fills.

Holmes' head tilted slightly, and I knew he perceived this inner struggle in me as a change in my breathing.

"If we don't open it," he said, "he will open it for us, only at a less convenient time and in a less convenient place."

"And what if we open it?" I asked.

Holmes' lips barely lifted. "Then we'll do him the favor of playing," he said. "But we won't play blindly. We'll play to see how he holds the cards."

He moved closer to the fountain, not on a whim, but because the dim light there offered the most neutral surface. He didn't place the package on the damp stone, but held it in the air while, with his free hand, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and placed it underneath, like a surgeon laying an instrument on a sterile cloth. Then he cut the edge of the paper open at one point, so carefully as if he didn't want to release the tension in the paper.

A faint whisper escaped, barely perceptible, and yet at the same moment I felt my chest tighten. It wasn't the scent itself that was strong, but the memory of it. Sometimes the body is faster than the mind.

I took out the small bottle the pharmacist had given me again, moistened the cloth, and held it briefly to my nose. The sharp, clear scent cut through the sweet breath like a knife through soft fabric. For a moment, I was completely myself again, and I hated that I needed this simple trick to avoid falling prey to a stranger's game.

Holmes extracted the contents of the package without touching it with his bare skin. It was not a letter. It was a small leather pouch, flat, dark, worn, yet carefully maintained. It seemed as if it had been handled often, as if it had held weight in a lifetime.

"A stock exchange?" I murmured.

"More like a case," said Holmes.

He opened it with the tip of his knife. Inside, neatly tucked into a loop of cloth, lay a small key. Not large, nothing special, but old, with an unusually deep notch in the bit. Next to it lay a piece of paper, folded, not written on like a letter, but drawn on. Holmes unfolded it and held it up to the dim light.

It was a simple floor plan, rough but clear: a hallway, two rooms, a staircase leading up and one leading down. In one place was a cross, and next to it a single note, in the same narrow handwriting as before: Listen.

I felt the skin on the back of my neck tingle. Not because of the word itself, but because it touched something deep inside me. There are nights when a single word triggers more than an entire speech.

Holmes examined the key, turning it between the tweezers and the light. "It's used," he said. "And it's deliberately chosen to be too old. A modern key would have a number, a maker's mark. This one has nothing that leads back to it. He wants us to see it only as a tool."

"A key for what?" I asked.

Holmes did not answer immediately. He held the key close to his nose, smelled it, and I saw his eyes narrow briefly.

"Shoe polish," he said.

"What?"

"Not on the leather pouch," he explained. "On the metal. He touched it with his hands after using the can. Or he wanted us to find that smell on the key. He's giving us a clue that can't be found in a register. He's giving us a clue that can only be smelled."

I couldn't help but think of the gleaming boots. The shine wasn't just vanity. It was part of a performance. A man who takes such care of his shoes is either a fool or someone who knows that attention is drawn in the darkness by subtle reflexes.

"And the floor plan?" I asked, fighting the urge to examine the lines more closely. My mind was still working clearly, but I noticed that it took me a tiny bit longer than usual to focus.

Holmes held the paper so I could see the drawing. "He's showing us a place," he said. "Not the address. Just the anatomy. That means he expects me to recognize the place because I study London. And he expects you to recognize it because you study spaces where people lie."

"A treatment room," I said quietly.

Holmes nodded. "And listen to that word: listen. He wants us to concentrate on a sound. Or on the absence of a sound."

I wanted to reply, but at that moment the dizziness flared up again, more intensely than before. For a fraction of a second, the courtyard seemed to tilt slightly, as if someone had shifted the perspective. I pressed my lips together, breathed shallowly, and felt the whistling, now more pronounced. It was as if the air in my chest had transformed into a narrow passage.

Holmes noticed it immediately. He put away the key and the plan and stepped close to me, so that his shadow offered me a little protection against the diffuse light.

"They will not collapse here," he said quietly, and it was less a comfort than a command.

"I'm not going to break down," I murmured.

"That's an assertion," he replied dryly. "And tonight, assertions are dangerous."

He took my arm, not roughly, but firmly enough to stabilize me. His fingers slid down my sleeve to where the stab wound was. I flinched when he touched it, and he pulled his hand back as if he'd brushed against a hot stove.

"Warm," he said. "And faster than a normal reaction. He gave you something that doesn't just irritate the lungs. He gave you something that reminds the body that it is a body."

"As if I needed that reminder," I managed to say, trying to make it sound mocking. It sounded more like weariness.

Holmes looked toward the entrance of the courtyard. The mist there was shifting, and for a moment I thought I heard that tiny squeak again, very far away, perhaps only in my mind. I felt the absurd urge to turn around and check whether the shiny boots were still glinting

somewhere in the gray. And at the same time, I felt anger that my own mind was so easily set in motion.

"We're going back," Holmes said.

"To Baker Street?" I asked.

"For a moment," he replied. "Not because of the stranger. He will survive if he can. But because of you. We need to know if what's in your arm is a watch or a trap that's already snapping shut."

That sounded unpleasant, but it was true. And yet the key was still in Holmes' pocket and the plan in his head, and I knew that this going back was just a loop, not an end.

We left the courtyard. Holmes didn't simply close the door. He examined the frame, ran his tweezers along an edge, and picked up a tiny thread that had caught there. He smelled it, pursed his lips, and pocketed it as if it were more valuable than money.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Wool," he said. "Not from your coat. Not from mine. And not from some cheap garment. He's wearing something that doesn't belong on the street. He wants to shine, but he doesn't want to be cold."

We went back through the passageway onto the street, and the fog swallowed us up immediately. The streetlights were once again far apart, and I realized how much I longed for a clear edge, a line that didn't blur. My breath whistled softly, incessantly, and every minute seemed to make it a little louder.

"Holmes," I said hoarsely, "if he wants me to remember, he won't leave it at just one key."

"No," said Holmes, and I heard something in his voice that I rarely heard: not concern for a case, but concern for a man. "He will not give you the memory. He will force it. And that is why we must be quicker than him, not with our feet, but with our minds."

We continued walking, back through London after midnight. The fog clung to the buildings, and I had the uncanny feeling that it wasn't just around us, but inside us. I thought of the stranger in our living room, his rattling, his warning. And as I walked, I felt the warmth around the puncture wound on my arm slowly creeping further into my forearm, as if someone had laid a tiny trail there for something to follow.

When we reached Baker Street again, I wasn't greeted by a feeling of homecoming, but rather of being under siege. The fog hung before the house like a waiting visitor, aware that the door must eventually be opened, and the lamp on the corner, with its weary glow, seemed to warn rather than soothe. Holmes didn't let me walk slowly; he led me with that terse decisiveness that leaves no room for objection when the body has already begun to negotiate.

Mrs. Hudson opened the door with a haste she immediately tried to rein in. Behind her, the hallway was dark, but a draft swept through the house as if someone had cracked all the windows open. It no longer smelled as sweet as before, and I took that as a good sign, even

though I was aware that an adversary using fumes doesn't always have to repeat the same trick.

"He's still conscious," she whispered before we reached the living room. "But he... he's talking incoherently."

The pharmacist approached us, his coat collar still on, as if he were ready to flee at any moment should science prove futile. His face bore the expression of a man who had seen too many things that cannot be contained in a bottle.

"You've been out too long," he said quietly to me, and I heard not accusation, but sober concern. "Show me your arm."

I pushed up my sleeve. The puncture site was just a dot, but a reddish halo had formed around it, uneven in shape. A fine line extended from it, as if someone had written with invisible ink beneath my skin. I no longer felt the warmth only at the spot itself, but deeper, as if it were creeping upwards along the bloodstream.

The pharmacist leaned forward, keeping his distance, and sniffed cautiously. "Not good," he murmured. "And not easy."

Holmes stood beside us, silent, but I saw his gaze move back and forth between the injection site and my face, as if he wanted to measure the change in me as well as the change in me.

"Tell me what it does," demanded Holmes.

"It irritates the airways, that's for sure," the pharmacist replied. "But it's more than that. It acts as if it keeps the body on high alert. Pulse, breathing, perspiration. And..." He paused and looked at me, as if deciding whether to make his next observation. "And it seems to affect perception. Not hallucinations in the broadest sense. More... a shift. As if it directs the mind's anxiety."

I forced myself to remain calm, but the whistling in my chest betrayed me. It wasn't loud, but it was there, persistent like a gentle mockery.

"Can it be neutralized?" Holmes asked.

The pharmacist shook his head. "You can dampen it. You can counteract it. But if it's set up in such a way that it slowly spreads through the system, then it's like a command that's repeated over and over. You have to drown out the command."

He pulled another small bottle from his suitcase, soaked a cloth, and handed it to me. The scent was sharp and clear, cutting through the sweet aftertaste that had lingered in my nose. I took a short, shallow breath and felt the pressure in my chest ease for a moment.

"Not too often," warned the pharmacist. "Otherwise you'll pay a different price."

The stranger who had first warned us lay in the armchair near the fireplace. His eyes were open, but his gaze seemed detached from the room. His lips moved, and now and then a word escaped, never forming a sentence. As I leaned over him, I smelled his sick breath, that damp, weary struggle that every doctor recognizes yet never truly understands.

"Blank," he whispered suddenly, without me having asked him. "Blank... and soft."

"Soft?" I asked.

He swallowed hard. "Under the sheen... soft," he managed. "So... that it can't be heard."

Holmes stepped closer, his voice calm but sharp, raising the edge of the room. "Have you ever seen him without the covering? Without that thing that makes him quiet?"

The stranger smiled weakly, an expression that contained more pain than humor. "No one sees him if he doesn't want to," he whispered. "Just... boots. Always boots. As if he's... no longer human."

His gaze turned to me, and in that gaze lay something that affected me more than a threat: pity. Not for himself. For me.

"He marked you," the stranger said, the words flowing as if from a deep well. "So that you... would go faster. So that you... would stumble."

I wanted to answer, but a brief dizziness came over me, and I had to hold onto the chair. Holmes' hand was immediately on my arm, supporting me, without hesitation.

"Enough," Holmes said to the stranger, and it didn't sound unfriendly, but decisive. "Save your breath."

He led me to the table. There he laid out the leather pouch, the key, and the rough floor plan. Next to these things, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he placed the small box we had taken from the courtyard, though it was closed and wrapped in a cloth, as if keeping an animal at bay. Then he pulled out the tiny woolen thread and laid it beside it.

"Now," said Holmes quietly, "let us look at what he is, not what he shows."

He picked up the woolen thread with tweezers and held it up to the lamplight. "Not coarse, not cheap," he murmured. "And not conventionally dyed. Do you see that? A very fine sheen. Mohair, perhaps. Or a blend you wouldn't buy in Whitechapel."

"That tells us he has money," I said hoarsely.

"Or access to money," Holmes corrected. "And he has a sense of presentation. Shiny boots, but silent. Expensive wool, but invisible. He wants to be noticed, but only where he controls it."

He tapped the floor plan with the handle of his knife. "And now this. Hallway. Two rooms. Stairs upstairs. Stairs downstairs. A cross. And the word: Listen."

The pharmacist, who had been reserved until then, stepped closer. "It could be many things," he said.

"Not for him," Holmes replied. "He doesn't give us ambiguity, he gives us a direction. The place we entered tonight was a treatment room. And there hung a piece of Watson's handwriting. He wants Watson to believe his past has doors that anyone can open. The word

'hear' is the second blade: he wants us to go into a room where one hears something one shouldn't hear."

I felt resistance within me. "What if it's a trap?"

Holmes looked at me, and there was something in his eyes that I might have interpreted as anger if I hadn't known him so well. It was anger at my opponent for using my body as leverage.

"Of course it's a trap," he said calmly. "But we choose where it snaps shut."

He lifted the key. "This bit... do you see the deep groove? That's not just wear and tear. That's been worn. It fits an old lock, one that isn't easily replaced. A house older than the habits of its inhabitants. And the smell of shoe polish on the metal... that means he's handled it recently. He was close enough to hand us the key, and he treated it so that it smells like him. So that we'll remember his boots, even when we don't see them."

The dizziness returned, and I had to force myself not to take a deep breath. The pungent smell of the cloth helped, but it couldn't prevent a leaden weariness from growing inside me, as if every thought were wading through thick air.

Holmes noticed. "Sit down," he said curtly.

"I-

"Sit down," he repeated, and I obeyed because I knew that defiance here only served the opponent.

Holmes leaned over the plan, and suddenly there was that tiny, almost inaudible sound I had heard before: the soft rustling, as if someone were turning a page. It didn't come from the room, nor from the street. It came from the house itself, somewhere higher up, somewhere lower down, as if the building had suddenly taken on a breath that did not belong to it.

Holmes froze. The pharmacist held his breath. Mrs. Hudson, who was standing in the doorway, went so pale that her face appeared almost transparent in the lamplight.

"Listen," whispered Holmes, and for the first time the word sounded not like a note, but like an order that must be obeyed in order not to die.

Again that rustling sound, this time more distinct. And then another sound: a very quiet, regular squeaking, as if soft material were rubbing against wood instead of stone.

Holmes' gaze fell upon the stairs. "He didn't leave," he said quietly. "He only led us back."

I half stood up, my heart pounding in my throat, and my breath whistling as if it were betraying me. Holmes raised his hand, holding me back, and his gaze held a clear decision.

"We're not going to him," he said. "We're going where he thinks we're not fast enough."

"Where to?" I whispered.

Holmes took the key, pocketed it, and reached for his coat and hat. "To the place he hid on the paper," he said. "To a house where one has forgotten how to hear because it is too quiet there."

The squeaking sound came again, this time closer, somewhere in the hallway. The fog outside pressed against the windows, and inside something was moving that didn't want to be seen.

Holmes approached the door, opened it a crack, and listened. Then he closed it again, slowly, as if giving the darkness time to betray itself.

"Now," he said tersely.

And in that word lay not only the beginning of a new trail, but the realization that our own apartment, our familiar Baker Street, was no longer a haven that night, but another room in the labyrinth.

## The house that was too quiet

There are houses in London that are noisy even when no one lives in them. They creak, they breathe, they murmur in the pipes, and you can hear the echo of voices long since silenced within their walls. And there are others that are so silent that this silence feels like an absence you can physically sense. Such houses are rare, because even the forgotten usually still makes noise. But when a building loses its sounds, it often loses more than just its noise.

Holmes led me out of Baker Street as if the ground behind us had already become unsteady. We didn't walk down the middle of the street, but stayed in the shadows of the buildings, where the lamplight couldn't quite complete its arcs. The fog lay low, but here it was no longer just a veil, but a tool that cut the city into pieces. Each step led us into a new little world, consisting of only a few meters of pavement, a section of facade, and a strip of gray air. The rest was possibility.

My breath whistled softly, and I hated that sound because it wasn't just a symptom, but a signal. I kept the pharmacist-soaked cloth handy, only taking a quick puff when the pressure in my chest became so intense that I felt the temptation to take a deep breath. Deep breathing that night wasn't relief, it was a mistake. The sting in my arm burned, and the warmth seemed to spread in small waves, as if something was feeling its way up my nerves.

Holmes hardly spoke. He never spoke much when he knew that words only served the opponent's pace. Instead, he gave signals: a hand gesture to stop, a slight tilt of his head if he heard something I didn't. Once, he stopped at an archway, bent down, and ran his tweezers over the damp stone. He smelled it, and I saw his lips purse.

"What is it?" I asked quietly.

"Not just fog," he replied. "He was here. Less than an hour ago. And he has time."

That was not a reassuring statement. An opponent who has time is more dangerous than one who is in a hurry, because he can not only react, but also orchestrate.

We turned onto a street I barely knew. It was narrow, the houses stood close together, and the windows were dark. No light behind curtains, no flickering shadows, no footsteps returning home late at night. It was as if someone had cut this street out of the city and set it aside. Even the sound of our footsteps seemed more muffled here, not just by the fog, but by the way the air hung between the facades.

Holmes stopped in front of a house that, at first glance, seemed unremarkable. It wasn't a ruin, no open threat. It was a perfectly ordinary, slightly set-back building, three stories high, with a small front garden whose iron fence was rusty but not broken. A path led to the door, and damp leaves lay on the steps. The door itself was painted dark, and the brass plaque beside it was dull, as if no one had wiped it for months. And yet there was something about it that made me shiver: not its appearance, but the absence of life. A house that is inhabited betrays itself through small details. Here, emptiness betrayed itself.

Holmes didn't go straight to the door. He first looked at the ground-floor windows. The curtains were drawn, but not neatly, more as if they had been pulled closed simply to stand behind them. Then he knelt down briefly and looked at the step. His gaze swept over the damp leaves, and I recognized the expression on his face: that quiet contentment when the world offers him a thread.

"Here," he said.

I bent down as far as my chest allowed. Between the leaves, a barely visible imprint was visible, not deep, but regular. A sole. And above it, like a smooth shadow, a second mark, not made of a profile, but of a kind of sliding.

"The coating," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "He's in," he said. "And he's out. And he thinks we're following him."

"Then it's a trap."

"Of course," said Holmes. "But you see: he used the cover. That means he didn't want to be heard. And if he doesn't want to be heard, then there's something inside that could be heard."

I swallowed and looked towards the house. The word that had been on the plan popped into my head: Listen. I felt a slight resistance within me, as if my mind didn't want to enter the silence of this place because it sensed that it wasn't empty.

Holmes pulled out the old key we had taken from the gray packet. He didn't immediately hold it to the lock. Instead, he smelled it again, as if to make sure the metal still carried the same scent, of shoe polish, of that gleaming shine that had haunted us. Then he put the key to the lock. It fit. That was, in a way, the worst part: the matter-of-fact way in which something foreign suddenly belongs to a door.

He turned it slowly. A click, dry, without resistance. The door opened a crack.

And that's where the uncanny began.

Not the sight beyond. I could barely see anything yet, just a dark corridor. But the sound, or rather: the lack thereof. A door in London almost always does something. It creaks, it sighs, it

gives voice to the wood. This door was silent. It moved as if it were freshly oiled and guided by a hand that leaves no mark. Even the lock hadn't rattled, only clicked.

Holmes paused, his hand on the edge. He listened.

I listened too. And I realized that for the first time in hours, I didn't hear something: no distant traffic, no murmur of voices, no shouts, no dogs, no cars. The fog muffles sounds, but it doesn't eliminate them. Here, it was as if the silence was being drawn inwards.

"This is not normal," I whispered.

Holmes stepped inside. I followed, and at that same moment I felt the air change. It was cooler, but not fresh. It was stale, as if it hadn't been moved in a long time. And it had that sweet, sharp undertone, very faint, but enough to make my stomach churn, because my body now associated it with danger.

Holmes didn't close the door completely behind us. He left it ajar, perhaps to allow air in, perhaps to have a way back, perhaps to prevent the house from having the full power to swallow us up.

The hallway was narrow. Pictures hung on the walls, visible in the darkness only as rectangular shadows. A mirror at the far end reflected no light, only gray. The floor was covered with a rug so thick that our footsteps made hardly any sound. Not because we wanted to walk quietly, but because the fabric absorbed every noise. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, because silence in a house is never merely absence. It is sometimes intentional.

Holmes raised his hand and stopped. There was a noise in front of us, somewhere deeper in the house.

Not loud. Not even distinct. It was a quiet, regular ticking, as if a clock were ticking somewhere. But it didn't sound like a clock on the wall. It sounded closer, more mechanical, as if it were coming from a small, portable device. And the longer I listened, the more I believed I could discern in that ticking a rhythm that cared not for time, but for breath.

My own breathing whistled softly in comparison, and I hated it because it reminded me at that moment that my body no longer fully obeyed me.

Holmes moved again, slowly, the lantern still unlit. He walked by the ticking, as if following a thread one cannot see but can feel. I walked behind him, my hand along the doorframe, and realized that the house, though silent, was not dead. It was awake. It was waiting.

And somewhere in that waiting was the feeling that we were not the first to walk through that corridor tonight, and that we would not be the last.

The ticking didn't lead us in a straight line, but in a way that reminded me of the wanderings of a sick person searching for water in a fever, yet always returning to the same corner. It was sometimes clearer, sometimes fainter, as if it could pass through walls, or as if the house itself swallowed it and spat it out again. Holmes stopped several times, not because he was uncertain, but because he read the silence like a map. I, on the other hand, noticed with each stop how much my body loathed the still air. When you stop, you become more aware of your

own chest, and the whistling sound that resided within it became like a memory that wouldn't go away.

Holmes raised his hand and pointed to a door on the right. It was dark, plain, and its handle so dull that it didn't even reflect the faint light. Yet this door was different from the others in the hall. I couldn't have explained it, but my instinct told me that behind it was something that would be watching us, even if we couldn't see it.

The ticking sound was coming from there.

Holmes didn't touch the handle with his bare hand. He took the handkerchief from his pocket, placed it over the metal, and pressed. The door opened, so silently it made me shiver. No creak, no sigh, not even the faint scraping of wood on wood. It was as if there were no longer any friction between things in this house, only between intentions.

We entered a room furnished like a consulting room. A desk, a chair, two bookshelves, a small cabinet with a glass front. A carpet covered the floor so completely that the wood beneath was completely invisible. The curtains were drawn, and the air had that stale, slightly sweet undertone that had become as familiar to me as the taste of fear.

The ticking was coming from the corner, from the shadow next to the desk.

Holmes knelt down without lighting the lantern and felt his way into the darkness with tweezers as if it were a material. Then I heard a faint metallic clink, barely more than a whisper. Holmes pulled something out and held it up to the dim residual light that filtered into the room through the crack in the door.

It was a small brass box, about the size of a pocket watch, but thicker. A tiny winding key was attached to the side, and a narrow slit on the top from which a gossamer strip of fabric protruded. The ticking came from within, regular, patient, like a metal heart.

Holmes held the can close to his ear, listened for a moment, and then shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Not a clockwork mechanism for time," he whispered. "A clockwork mechanism for effect."

He didn't place the can on the table. He held it in tweezers, as if it might suddenly bite if handled incorrectly. Then he slowly lowered it closer to the floor. I saw what he saw as he explored the shadowy area beneath the desk: a thin tube, barely thicker than a feather, ran from the brass can to a small glass container attached to the wall. The glass was fogged on the inside. And next to it, almost invisible in the darkness, was a second connection: a fine wire that wound its way to the door frame, precisely where the door, if opened further, would have altered this tension.

"A trap," I whispered.

"A touchstone," Holmes corrected. "He wanted to know if we flung the door wide open like men who believe the world obeys their haste."

I felt a chill rise in my throat, even though the room was cold. The thought that we hadn't immediately stumbled into something only because Holmes had been instinctively slow was

unpleasant. Slowness as a form of protection is no comfort when you can feel time working against you.

Holmes used tweezers to detach the wire from its point of attachment. It was a tiny hook, almost invisible. Once released, the wire relaxed so quietly that it was seen rather than heard. The ticking continued.

"The clockwork keeps running," I said.

Holmes nodded. "It runs until it releases something," he murmured. "And he built it so that it runs even when nobody is there. That means he didn't want us to know if we're too early or too late."

He drew his knife, carefully inserted the tip into the slot of the brass tin, and lifted the lid a crack. I involuntarily held my breath, not out of obedience, but out of instinct. A whiff of that sweet, sharp scent rose immediately, delicate, as if a bottle had been opened. I quickly took the soaked cloth, breathed on it briefly, and felt my head clear for a moment, while my chest remained tight.

Holmes closed the lid again and placed the brass tin in a metal sleeve, like the one he had used for the envelope. "You can lock air into a container," he said quietly, "and yet it remains dangerous, because it is just waiting to be free again."

I looked at the glass container on the wall. It wasn't large, but it was positioned precisely where a draft could have seeped through a crack behind the woodwork into the hallway. As a doctor, I know how inconspicuous small doses can be and how significant their effect can be.

"He could have filled the whole house with it," I said.

"He filled it with that," Holmes replied calmly. "Not with the quantity that kills, but with the quantity that shapes. Just as a perfume doesn't suffocate, but influences. And when you mix it with fear, it becomes a tool."

He stood up and went to the desk. With tweezers, he pulled out a drawer. Inside was no money, no jewelry, nothing an ordinary thief would have been looking for. There was paper. A bundle of forms, neatly stacked, and next to it a book, bound, heavy, with a leather cover whose corners were worn.

Holmes opened the book and leafed through it, not hastily, but with that calm composure which sometimes frightened me more than any haste. The pages were written in a neat hand, not the slender handwriting of our adversary, but an official, even script. Columns. Names. Dates. Notes.

"A register," Holmes murmured.

The word struck me with a peculiar echo because it sounded like order. And on that night, order was the mask of disaster.

I moved closer, but not too close, because the air in the room already intrigued me. Holmes held the book so that I could glance at the top lines. Names I didn't recognize. Initials.

Addresses. Next to them, small notes: missed, paid, dismissed. And in the margin, in different ink, that tiny mark again: a period.

Holmes tapped the spot with his tweezers. "That's his thread," he said. "He's marking what he wants to find again later."

He turned the page, and I saw his movements become a touch faster, not frantic, but more focused. Then he stopped. His hand held the page firmly, as if it would otherwise slip away.

"You see," he said quietly.

I saw. And my stomach clenched.

There, among unfamiliar names, in neat, official script, was the name: John H. Watson. Next to it, an address that wasn't mine. And below that, a note that took my breath away: Injection. Observe.

I forced myself not to take a deep breath. The whistling in my chest suddenly sounded louder, as if my body were reacting to its own printed existence.

"This is not...", I began.

"It's not true in the sense of a fact," Holmes interrupted calmly. "But it is true in the sense of a plan. He's putting you in a register so that you'll see yourself as a case."

I felt the dizziness return, not just from the poison, but from the idea itself. The thought of being listed as a patient in a stranger's book was like a grip on the throat. In Afghanistan, I had seen wounded soldiers reduced to mere numbers on lists. I had hated how quickly a person could become just a line. And now my name was here, in a quiet house in London, as if someone had decided to compress my reality into columns.

Holmes turned the page, and I saw something else that made me shiver: there were entries that had been crossed out, but not in the way you cross out mistakes. They were clean lines, like gravestones. Next to some was a short note: completed. Next to others: postponed.

"He works like an administrator," Holmes murmured. "He manages people like appointments."

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. The name on the page drew me in, like a needle digging into my thoughts.

"Holmes," I said hoarsely, "if he puts my name in a register, then he can put any other name in there too. He can... he can put anyone in the role of the patient."

Holmes nodded. "And he can put anyone in the role of the doctor," he said. "That's his game. He swaps roles until no one knows who is acting and who is being treated."

At that moment we heard something that didn't belong to the clockwork. No ticking. No dripping. A sound that could hardly be described as a sound: a soft, drawn-out scraping, as if something soft were brushing against the thick carpet.

Holmes' head rose slowly. He did not close the register. He left it open, as if to show the house that he was not hiding his loot. Then he raised his hand and pointed upwards, towards the ceiling.

The scraping sound returned, closer. And then, very quietly, a breath, not mine, not his. A breath too calm for fear and too close for chance.

Holmes' voice was barely more than a whisper. "Don't move," he whispered. "Just listen."

I heard. My own whistling, the rattling of silence, the soft metallic ticking from the casing in Holmes's pocket. And above it, way up high, somewhere on the stairs or the floor above, the almost inaudible squeaking, as if someone were laying a soft covering over the floor so that even the house wouldn't notice it was being visited.

We stood frozen, not out of courage, but because movement in such moments is a language the opponent speaks better than oneself. Holmes's hand remained raised, a silent command to my body, which already had little inclination to move hastily. The silence around us was so dense that I felt it must possess weight. One couldn't even hear the usual, distant sounds of London life, which otherwise seep through walls like smoke. Here, every sound that existed was an event.

Upstairs, on the floor above us, the squeaking returned, very quiet, but unmistakable. It wasn't the creaking of wood. It was the rubbing of something soft against a surface not meant for it. A shoe sole with a coating, placed carefully so the foot wouldn't betray its presence. Then, almost imperceptibly, came a second sound: the rustling of fabric, as if a coat were brushing against a wall.

Holmes's gaze flickered briefly to the crack in the door, where a faint glimmer of light from the hall still filtered into the room. Then to the curtains. Then to the corner where the metal tube containing the brass tin lay. He took everything in without revealing the direction of his head. A man who manipulates with words hates nothing more than an opponent who answers with silence.

A breath above. Long, calm, controlled. Not the panting of a hurried intruder, not the rapid breathing of a thief in fear. It was the breath of a man setting his own pace.

Holmes made a gesture with two fingers: follow, but slowly. I understood. We didn't leave the room immediately. He listened again, waited for the second step, for the repetition of the pattern. Only then did we go out into the corridor.

The runner there absorbed our footsteps so completely that I couldn't help wondering if the house had been this quiet for weeks or if someone had prepared it for it. When you soundproof a room, you do it so that noise doesn't escape. When you soundproof a house, you do it so that no one inside notices what's happening.

Holmes went to the stairs without lighting the lantern. The fog outside was not our only enemy; light would have been a traitor here. We climbed the first few steps, and I noticed that even the banister didn't creak. It felt smooth, as if it had been freshly oiled. The thought that someone might have gone to the trouble of preparing an entire house in this way made me shiver.

Upstairs, the squeaking was now closer. It was coming from a corridor leading to the rooms. Holmes stopped on his heel, listened, and for the first time, I heard something that didn't necessarily have to be from the enemy, yet still alarmed me: a very quiet, regular dripping, but not of water. It sounded too viscous, too slow. Drip. Pause. Drip. As if something thick was falling onto wood.

Holmes' fingers briefly touched my sleeve. He gestured to the right. There was a half-open door. A thin sliver of darkness, into which the hall light faded.

We went over. Holmes pushed the door open a millimeter further, just enough to peek inside. At first, I only saw the outline of a room. Then I recognized the bed. And on the bed lay something light-colored.

A human.

He was turned on his side, his knees slightly bent, as if he had lain down to sleep. But sleep has movements, small signs, and this body had nothing. The light shirt clung to his shoulder, and I saw that it was darkened there. The dripping was coming from this room. It was dripping from the bed onto the floor.

Holmes opened the door fully. The rug muffled the sound that should have been made, and again I was startled by how much this house absorbed sound. We went inside.

The man on the bed was dead. It wasn't hard to see, even without touching him. His face was pale, his lips slightly parted, and there was a dark sheen around the corner of his mouth, as if he had coughed up blood or something similar. On his arm, just below the elbow, I saw a bandage. It was soaked. Next to it, on the bedside table, lay a syringe.

I stepped closer, and the doctor within me surged forward, despite the pressure in my chest, despite the wheezing. I bent down, briefly touching the skin on his neck. Cold. No pulse. Rigor mortis hadn't fully set in, but death had already taken hold.

"Midnight," I whispered.

Holmes stood behind me, not by the bed, but near the door, his gaze sweeping the room as if every corner might conceal another tool. "He let a man die," he said quietly. "Or he let him die so we would believe it was because of the clock."

I looked at the syringe. It was delicate, and on the shaft I recognized the tiny notch, the mark we had already seen. I felt a chill run down my spine. Not because of death, but because of the systematic nature of it all.

"He was here," I said.

"Yes," Holmes replied. "And he wanted us to see it. That's the difference between murder and disclosure."

I only just noticed that the dead man was not just any stranger. Beside the bed lay a coat, neatly folded. In the inside pocket was a piece of paper, half sticking out. Holmes did not pull it out. He merely pointed at it.

"They're pulling it," he said to me.

I hesitated, feeling how much my body resisted everything inside. But I did it, because refusing that night would have been nothing but a gift to the enemy. I pulled out the paper. It was a form, official, neat. At the top was a name. Below it, a note. And again that symbol, the period.

The name meant nothing to me. But the note took my breath away: Transfer. Baker Street.

"He sent him to us," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "And he let him die here," he said. "So that we understand he controls routes. He sends people to you like letters. And some arrive open."

I felt the pressure in my chest increase. The whistling grew louder, and for a moment I had to hold onto the bedpost to keep from swaying. Holmes noticed and took a step closer, but positioned himself so he could support me without getting in my way.

"Go back into the hallway," he whispered. "The air is worse here."

I wanted to disagree, but I knew he was right. I stepped back, and at that same moment I heard the squeaking again. Not upstairs. Not in the hallway. Behind us.

Holmes whirled around, knife in hand. Something moved at the window of the room, half-hidden by the curtain. Not a person, but a thin metal rod being pushed between the curtain and the frame. At the end of the rod was a small clamp, and it reached for the syringe on the bedside table.

Holmes jumped forward, grabbed the rod with his free hand, and held it firmly. For a heartbeat, there was resistance, as if someone were pulling from the outside. Then the rod gave way, slid back, and Holmes was left holding only the empty end. The clamp had broken off and remained with the syringe, which now lay on the floor.

A soft laugh came from outside, muffled by glass and fog. Not a sound that seemed to come from a mouth, more like a breath forming in the air.

Holmes tore back the curtain and opened the window.

Fog. Nothing but fog. And yet, for just a moment, I saw a reflection on the pavement below, a blinking line, as if something shiny had caught the lamppost. Then it was gone.

Holmes closed the window again, slowly, as if he didn't want to give his opponent the satisfaction of interpreting the movement as haste. He picked up the broken clamp, examined it, and I saw his gaze narrow.

"He wants the syringe back," I said.

"He wants me not to have them," Holmes corrected.

He put the paper clip away, and his gaze returned to the dead man. "This isn't just a victim," he said quietly. "This is an accusation. He lets a man die and lays the trail so that it leads to you."

"To me?" I asked tonelessly.

Holmes looked at me. "To you as a doctor," he said. "And to you as a witness. He is constructing a picture. And in that picture, you are the man wielding the needles."

I wanted to reply, but my breathing was whistling so loudly that it sounded like a response my body gave before my mind was ready.

Holmes took hold of my elbow. "We're leaving the house," he said. "Not because we're fleeing. Because we now know that the silence here isn't just a quality, but a tool. And because we'll have more air outside to think in."

We backed out of the room without turning our backs on it. As we stood in the hallway, I heard that viscous dripping again, and now it sounded like a metronome of death.

But even before we could descend the stairs, we heard a sound from the ground floor below that cut through the silence like a blade: the clear, sharp click of a door slamming shut.

Holmes froze.

"We are no longer alone in the house," he whispered.

And at that moment I realized that the house was not only too quiet, but also too willing to keep us inside.

## A name in the wrong register

The click of the door downstairs was not merely a sound; it was a statement. It said: You are inside, and so am I. The corridor, which just moments before had seemed like a suffocated maw, appeared to contract. Even Holmes, whose nerves usually seemed as steel, remained motionless for a heartbeat, as if listening not only downstairs but for what lay between the sounds.

I stood beside him and felt the tightness in my chest merge with the confines of the house. His breath whistled, softly but persistently, and in that silence it sounded like a telltale sign. I pressed my lips together, breathing more shallowly, but each shallow breath was an unsatisfying compromise, like advising a drowning person to take only small sips of water.

Holmes' hand rose, a silent command. He pointed at the wall and drew me so close I could feel the cold plaster. Then he tilted his head, and I did the same. Downstairs, on the ground floor, was a sound that would have seemed ridiculously harmless in an ordinary house: the soft scraping of a shoe on the rug. But this house was not ordinary. It had softened the floor, silenced the doors, made the air heavy. It had prepared itself so that one man could move about in it without another hearing him.

And yet we heard him.

The scraping turned into a squeak, barely perceptible, like an animal noise that didn't belong there. The coating. I imagined the shiny boots we'd seen in the yard, and the soft edge beneath them. A person who wants to shine, but not make a sound.

Holmes leaned towards me. His lips barely moved. "He wants us to go downstairs," he whispered.

"And what if we don't?" I whispered back.

Holmes' gaze flickered briefly towards the stairs. "Then he comes upstairs," he said. "And then he decides where the next stab will be."

That was no exaggeration. It was a cold calculation. I thought of the syringe the metal rod had just tried to steal, the clamp that had broken, the dead man in the room whose blood dripped slowly and thickly into the silence. And I thought of the register below, of my name in someone else's hands.

The thought of being confined down there, in a desk drawer, herded into columns like a commodity, affected me more deeply than the smell of the fumes. You can insult a person without touching them by squeezing their identity into a single line.

Holmes raised his hand, gestured: slowly. Then he placed his foot on the first step. The runner swallowed the step. I followed him, my hand on the railing, and even the railing was silent beneath my fingers. The way down was like descending through cotton wool, and that was perhaps the most uncanny thing: that a house can muffle the senses until you no longer know if you can hear properly.

Downstairs, in the ground floor hallway, it was darker. The little bit of light that filtered in from outside was absorbed by the curtains. Holmes stopped on the second-to-last step and listened. The squeaking had stopped. Instead, I heard something else: a short, controlled breath that wasn't ours, and then the soft rustling of paper.

Someone was leafing through the pages.

Holmes moved silently from the landing, his shoulders low, the posture of a man unwilling to show that he was cowering. I felt that old wartime memory resurface in moments like these: the knowledge that life sometimes depends on whether a boot hits a stone or not. Only here it was worse, because not even the stone would make a sound.

We reached the door of the consulting room we had examined earlier. It stood ajar. Holmes did not touch the handle. He pressed against it with his handkerchief, and the door opened a little wider.

No light was on in the room. But on the desk, right in the middle, stood the lamp we hadn't lit, and next to it, like a silent focal point, lay the register open. It was no longer on the page with my name. Someone had turned it, and now another page was open, neatly smoothed, as if a hand had lovingly prepared it.

And behind the desk sat a man.

At first, I saw him only as an outline. Then a small light glimmered, very briefly, like the flicker of a match, but it wasn't one. It was the reflection of a lantern from outside on something smooth. His boots. They were under the desk, and even in this darkness, they gleamed as if they themselves were a light source.

The man didn't raise his hand, didn't stand up. He sat there as if the room belonged to him, and looked at us as if we were the intruders.

"They are on time," he said quietly.

Holmes took a step into the room, but remained positioned so that the door frame behind him still offered a place to retreat. "That's a mistake," Holmes said calmly. "Anyone who is punctual is following a schedule made by someone else."

A faint smile seemed to linger in the man's voice. "And yet you came," he said. "You could have left the house. You could have called the police. You could have woken the neighbors. You could have done anything that makes a city noisy. But you came. That means you understand."

"I understand that you are hiding," said Holmes.

"I'm not hiding," the man replied. "I'm choosing the conditions."

He ran a finger across the open register page. The rustling was barely audible, yet it cut through my nerves. That night, paper had become more dangerous than steel.

"And you," the man said, turning his gaze to me, "you breathe too shallowly. That's bad for your blood. It makes your head sluggish. But maybe that's exactly right."

I wanted to reply, but the pressure in my chest rose at the mere mention of it. I felt the urge again to take a deep breath, as if a large inhalation could wash away the fear, and at the same time, my own body warned me that a deep breath tonight could be a victory for the enemy.

Holmes' voice remained steady. "You write down names," he said. "You keep registers. You mark pins. You are no ordinary villain. You are an administrator. What are you managing?"

The man didn't laugh. He merely tilted his head slightly to the side, as if enjoying the description. "Roles," he said simply. "A person isn't just a body. A person is a function. Some are doctors, some are patients, some are witnesses. And some believe they are detectives. I'm just categorizing what's already there."

"They assign by stabbing," I said, and my voice sounded hoarser than I wanted.

"I'm categorizing by pointing," he corrected. "The jab is just an exclamation mark. They wouldn't have been listening without it."

Holmes took a step further into the room. "They want to portray Watson as the culprit," he said. "They want to turn his pen against him. That's why the fragment on the wall. That's why the map. That's why this register. A name in the wrong book is a start, isn't it?"

The man ran his hand over the page again, and now I saw what had previously been hidden in the darkness: My name was there again in the column, but this time not alone. Other names were next to it, and between them a heading that made me shiver. It wasn't a medical title, not an official one. It was a word that sounded like a judgment.

Therapist.

"You are writing to me as..." I didn't finish the sentence because I noticed how much the air in my throat suddenly tasted of resistance.

The man nodded slowly. "You understand," he said. "You are not the man who observes. You are the man who acts. And when a man acts, he can be held accountable. You just need the right framework."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "You want Watson to distrust himself," he said. "So that he'll break up with me."

"Don't separate," the man said. "Just move them. A small gap is enough. Doubt is a wedge. I don't have to drive it, I just have to put it in place. The heart will do the rest."

He stood up now, slowly, and for the first time I saw more of him. His coat was dark, clean. The collar was high. His face remained in shadow, but his posture betrayed an unsettling calm. He didn't seem like a man fleeing, but rather like someone who could change rooms at any time without it appearing as an escape.

"You have let a man die," said Holmes, and his voice had grown colder.

The man barely shrugged. "He was already in the register anyway," he said. "Some entries end. Some are moved. It's just a matter of whether you present the end as a coincidence or as news."

"And the message is?" Holmes asked.

The man took a step to the side, so that the dim light from outside briefly fell on his shoes. The shine was perfect. Then I heard the soft squeak as he put on the shoe cover, and I realized that in the very second he was shining, he was already thinking about how he would disappear.

"The message is," he said quietly, "that neither of you decides what is true. You only decide what you believe. And your doctor is very malleable tonight."

I felt my arm burn, as if my blood had understood the words. Holmes' hand lifted, a tiny angle, and I knew he was urging me not only to remain calm, but also to persevere.

The man looked past us, towards the door, towards the stairs, as if checking whether the house still obeyed him. "I'm leaving now," he said. "Not because I have to. Because I want you to follow me. And because I want you to open the book to the wrong page."

He leaned over the register and wrote a short note with a pen I hadn't seen. The rustling of the paper sounded to me like the winding of a spring. Then he closed the book.

"If you're smart," he said, "you'll go upstairs first. Look for the dead man. And then ask yourself how many names in this house are wrong. Maybe yours too."

He stepped towards the door, and before Holmes could reach him, the creaking was already in the hallway, soft, regular. The man glided through the silence as if it were his element.

Holmes made a movement as if he wanted to follow him immediately, but paused and looked at me.

"Watson," he said softly, "breathe."

I nodded, and in that nod lay the realization that my breath tonight was not only my life, but also part of the fall.

The squeaking faded so steadily that it might almost have been soothing, were it not the sound of a person leading us around at will in a stranger's house. Holmes took two steps toward the hall, then stopped as abruptly as if he had met an invisible wall. He remained standing, not out of indecision, but because in that same instant he had grasped two things: that we would not catch the man in the silence of this house if he was using the house itself as an ally, and that he had left us with something that might be more dangerous than his boots.

"The register," Holmes said quietly, and the very tone of his whisper told me that he was not granting his opponent the luxury of a long head start. "He didn't strike it to protect it. He struck it to provoke us."

I was still standing in the doorway, my chest tight, the whistling now more pronounced, and I forced myself not to put my hand back on my arm, even though it burned as if a red-hot coin were embedded beneath my skin. In the darkness, every movement seems larger. And on this night, my own body was a traitor, emitting a noise, a tremor, a whistling sound with every movement.

Holmes stepped back to the desk, didn't light the lantern, but merely parted the curtain a finger's width, so that the dim light from outside grazed the edge of the table. It was enough to distinguish paper as paper and ink as ink, but not to clearly see a person's face in the room. Perhaps that was intentional, perhaps it was simply how Holmes preferred light: as a tool, not as comfort.

He opened the register again. The binding didn't creak. The pages barely rustled. And yet, to my ears, every turn of the page sounded like a noise that carried on through the house.

"What did he write?" I asked hoarsely.

Holmes didn't point immediately. He held the page so I could see it without having to move closer to the desk. In the center was a fresh note, even darker than the other entries, as if it had just dried. The writing wasn't the narrow, neat style of a letter writer, but a quicker hand, less polished, more practical. And that was precisely what worried me: he wasn't just playing with one handwriting. He was playing with several.

Next to my name was now a short addition that hadn't been there before. Not a sentence, just two words.

Not remembering.

I stared at it as if the paper could explain its meaning to me. "Not remembering," I repeated.

Holmes nodded curtly. "He's meticulous," he said. "He knows that memories don't just reside in the mind. They also reside in gaps. He's shown you that he knows your gaps. And he's labeled them."

Another entry, further down the column, also bore an addition, freshly made in the same quick hand. This time it read: misplaced. And next to it, a number.

"What does the number mean?" I asked.

Holmes' finger, protected by the handkerchief, pointed to a marginal note I had previously overlooked in the darkness. There were several numbers in a row, each next to a small dot, like the marks of a man who doesn't need to count to know what he has done. Holmes leaned closer, and I saw his breathing remain calm, as if his body were unaffected by the air that oppressed me.

"These aren't times," he said after a moment. "And they aren't house numbers. They're page references."

"In this book?"

"In another one," Holmes corrected. "Or several. He doesn't just keep a register, Watson. He keeps a library."

I felt the blood pounding in my temples. A library of people. An order in which a name is no longer a person, but an entry that can be moved.

Holmes turned the page, faster now, but still deliberately. He wasn't looking for my name; he was looking for the logic behind the names. Then he stopped and held the page up to the dim light.

"Here," he said.

At the top of the page was a heading I hadn't noticed before because it was written in a different ink and escapes the eye unless you're looking for it. It was small, almost unassuming.

Excerpts.

Below were names, but instead of addresses and notes, there were sources: small abbreviations that sounded more like something out of a government office than a medical text. And next to some of them was a word that is eerily familiar to me from my own profession when read in the wrong context: discharged. Not from the hospital. From the book.

"He's removing names from registers," I muttered.

Holmes' gaze remained on the abbreviations. "He takes them," he said. "And inserts them elsewhere. A name in the wrong register is like a person in the wrong bed: the error creates consequences."

"Then the dead man upstairs didn't just die," I said. "He was registered."

"And therefore usable," Holmes added.

He pointed to an abbreviation that appeared several times. It consisted of two letters and a line, like a frequently used stamp. It meant nothing to me. Holmes, however, paused, and I saw something click in his mind, like a lock finally receiving its correct key.

"Registry," he whispered.

"What?"

"Not a doctor's," said Holmes. "An official registry. And that abbreviation... it doesn't belong to a hospital. It belongs to an office that manages births, deaths, marriages, and name changes. They belong to what London believes to be true because it is printed and stamped."

I felt cold, even though the air was stale. If a person has access to such books, they can not only poison a city, but rewrite it.

"He can make people disappear," I said.

Holmes nodded. "He can make them disappear without killing them," he said. "And he can kill them and make it look like a disappearance. And he can write someone like you into the role of a therapist until the world believes it."

A faint noise from the hallway made us both freeze. Not a creak this time, but a dull thud, as if a door had been ajar somewhere. Holmes didn't close the register. He left it open, as if to show the house that he wasn't afraid of holding paper. Then he reached for the drawer under the desk and pulled it out further than we had.

Beneath it was a second drawer, one that you only find if you know it exists: a thin crack, a false bottom. Holmes' knife slid in, lifted it. A hollow space, and inside, a small bundle of papers, tightly bound. Also, a bottle of black ink, and next to it a cloth bearing a dark stain, as if the ink had not been spilled accidentally but deliberately used to mark something.

The sight of that stain struck me strangely. Ink is a tool for a writer. On this night, it was a fingerprint.

Holmes took out the bundle and untied the thread. The top page was a copy, neat, official, with stamp marks that were now only visible as an impression. But in the margin, in our adversary's narrow handwriting, was a short sentence, as if he had added a second truth to the document.

The doctor has a second name.

My stomach clenched. I wanted to protest, wanted to laugh, wanted to call him a liar. But the pressure in my chest and the wheezing made any strong emotion unpleasant. It's hard to be dramatic when you're fighting for air.

Holmes looked at me, and there was not suspicion in his gaze, but calculation. "He wants you to ask yourself if you know yourself," he said calmly.

"I know myself," I blurted out.

"Then he will try to take that away from you," Holmes said.

He turned the pages. Among the copies lay a small slip of paper, thin, almost transparent, as if made of the same material as the first letter we had received. It bore only an address and a name. And next to it, that same dot.

The name wasn't unfamiliar. It was a name I'd heard too often in the last few hours to dismiss as mere coincidence. However, it wasn't presented as I'd expected. It was slightly altered, as if deliberately cast in the wrong mold so that a seeker would overlook it, while someone in the know would still recognize it.

"A false register," Holmes muttered, more to himself. "He writes names in such a way that they carry two truths. One for the one who can read, and one for the one who only thinks he can."

I felt the dizziness return, not like fainting, but like a wave that briefly knocks the ground off my feet. I breathed shallowly, held the soaked cloth at hand, and simultaneously realized that my adversary wasn't just working on my body, but on my mind. He was laying clues that not only had to be found, but also interpreted. And the trap lies in the interpretation.

"Holmes," I said hoarsely, "if he has access to official records, then he's not just a man with needles. He's... he's someone who can work in daylight."

Holmes nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "And that's why he wears shiny boots. Not just out of vanity. Out of habit. A man who holds office learns that gleam commands respect."

Another noise in the hallway. This time closer. A soft squeak, barely perceptible, and then the rustling, as if a page were being turned somewhere. Not on the desk. Not in my hand. But in the house itself, as if someone were turning the pages in the rooms like a book.

Holmes pocketed the papers, but left the inkwell in the hollow space, as if he didn't want to show his adversary that he was taking every morsel of bait. Then he went to the door, listened, and his voice was scarcely more than a breath.

"He's still here," he whispered. "And he wants us to look up so he can do something down below. Or vice versa."

I looked at him, and I knew that the decision would be made in the next minute: do we follow the sound or secure the evidence? Do we save ourselves or save the truth?

And as I thought this, my breath whistled softly again, as if my own body wanted to answer the question before I could.

Holmes stood by the door for a heartbeat, his hand on the frame, as if he could feel through the wood how the hallway beyond was changing. The creaking was closer, yet it couldn't be pinned down. It wandered like a rumor, now to the left, now to the right, and that made it more dangerous than a clear footstep. A person you hear can be located. A sound that eludes you is a tool.

"We don't share," Holmes whispered, without looking at me. "That's what he wants."

I nodded, even though I felt dizzy. It was disheartening how often that night my nod was more of a clinging to reality than an expression of agreement. I forced a shallow breath into my lungs, felt the wheezing, and took a quick puff of the pungent cloth. The pharmacist had been right: it kept my head clearer, but it wasn't a cure. You can feel it when clarity is no longer a given.

Holmes pulled the door open a crack and looked out. The hall was empty. The rug lay still, the pictures on the wall hung like dark eyelids, and the mirror at the end reflected only gray. Yet there was this feeling of being watched, not by a person, but by intention itself.

Then I heard it: a very faint scraping sound, as if something metal were rubbing against wood. Not a shoe. Something small. A tool. A stick.

Holmes stepped out, and I followed, close behind him. We didn't head towards the stairs, but towards the back hallway, where a second door might lead into an outbuilding or a small annex. The creaking was coming from there, muffled, along with the rustling of paper, as if someone were leafing through a book they shouldn't have.

Holmes stopped in front of a door we hadn't opened before. It was narrow, and its handle was wrapped with a thin strip of cloth, as if to prevent metal from touching metal. The cloth was dark, but in the dim light I could see its subtle sheen. Mohair, as Holmes had suspected. Expensive wool on a cheap handle. A sign you only notice if you're already looking for it.

Holmes lifted the handkerchief, took hold of the handle, and squeezed.

The door wasn't locked. It gave way silently. Behind it was a staircase leading down.

The smell hit me immediately, sweet and sharp, stronger than in the doctor's office. I felt my chest tighten, and a brief urge to cough rose within me. I forcefully suppressed it, knowing that coughing tonight wasn't just a symptom, but a warning sign.

Holmes did not descend immediately. He knelt at the edge of the stairs, held the tweezers out into the darkness as if checking for strung wires. Then he slowly drew the lantern from his pocket and lit it as dimly as possible.

The light fell on the steps. They were covered with a thick carpet, even here. It was as if someone had padded the entire house so it could better absorb its secrets. In one spot, I saw a mark in the carpet: a smooth line, as if something soft had been slid across it.

"He's going downstairs," I whispered.

"Yes," said Holmes. "Or he wants us to believe he's going down."

That was the agony in this house: even the direction was a question.

We descended. The carpet made the steps seem unreal. You expect to hear the creaking of wood, the echo in a cellar, that dull feeling of entering a deeper space. Here, it was as if we were stepping into a bag where everything was already prepared.

The stairs ended at the bottom in a narrow passage. No lamp was lit on the wall. But on a small table stood a candle, new, as if someone had placed it there just that day. It was unlit. Beside it lay a box of matches, an invitation.

Holmes didn't touch anything. He held his lantern so that the light didn't shine directly on the candle. Then I saw a thin string stretched taut along the table leg, so fine it was almost invisible. The string led to the matchbox.

"A trigger," Holmes murmured.

"For what?" I asked, even though I didn't want to hear the answer.

Holmes pointed with the tweezers at the floor, where the passage continued. I saw a small opening, barely more than a crack between two boards. Behind it, something damp glimmered, as if a container were hidden there.

"For steam," Holmes said quietly. "He wants light. And when we make light, he makes air."

The pressure in my chest intensified, as if my body had understood the sentence. My breathing became shallow, I felt the whistling, and my arm burned in a rhythm that no longer belonged solely to my heart.

We continued on, past the candle without touching it. The passage led to a door that didn't seem like an ordinary cellar door. It was too clean, too solid, too well fitted. And there was something stuck in its lock.

A small sign, like a business card, was wedged between the door and the frame. Holmes pulled it out with tweezers. It bore only one word.

Register.

Holmes' face barely changed, but I saw his eyes sharpen slightly. "That's the crux of the matter," he whispered.

He opened the door.

Beyond it lay a room larger than I had expected. It wasn't a storage cellar. It was a filing room. Shelves stood close together, filled with files, books, and folders. A smell of paper, old glue, and dust hung in the air, mixed with a sweet undertone that was stronger here, as if it had seeped into the books themselves. A table stood in the middle, and on it lay a large book open, as if someone had just used it.

The rustling we heard came from here.

And then I heard something else: a soft, rhythmic ticking, not from the brass box in Holmes's pocket, but from the room itself. It sounded like a second heart beating within the paper.

Holmes took a step inside, but stopped immediately. His gaze fell on the floor.

There, across the room, was a line of fine powder, barely visible, but discernible with the lantern. A boundary. And at several points along this line, tiny metal spikes were stuck in the ground, like thorns.

"Needles," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "A threshold," he said. "And when we cross it, we give him something. Perhaps not blood. Perhaps something else."

I stared at the line. It was drawn so neatly that it didn't seem like an improvised trick, but rather a ritual. The thought that someone would go to so much trouble to guide us through a house, only to stop us at a paper line, was horrifying. It wasn't just a crime. It was an obsession.

"What's on the table?" I asked.

Holmes lifted the lantern slightly. On the open page of the large book, in thick, official lettering, was a name. Not mine. Another's. Next to it, a date. And below that, a short note.

transmitted.

Holmes' gaze lifted slowly, as if giving the room time to reveal itself. "He shifts identities," he said quietly. "He takes a name from one register and puts it in another. He makes one person into another on paper. And sometimes the body follows."

My breath wheezed. I felt the dizziness rising again. Not because I was about to faint, but because the air in the room was so thick, as if it had been kneaded from dust and odor. I took a quick sip of the cloth, but it helped less than before.

Holmes' voice was calm, but there was a hardness in it that I recognized when he was angry. "He has access to such books because he is either part of that world or because he controls someone in that world," he said. "And he doesn't perform this dance for a whim. He performs it for a purpose."

"For what purpose?" I whispered.

At that moment, something moved at the other end of the room. Not a person, but a shadow emerging from between shelves. Then a reflection, a brief gleam. Naked boots.

And a voice, calm, close, as if he had been standing there the whole time, just waiting for us to see the threshold.

"The purpose," the man said, "is for you both to finally understand how easy it is to order truth."

Holmes stopped. He didn't take a step across the line. His hand slowly moved towards the knife.

"So you are here," said Holmes.

"I am where the names reside," the man replied. "And tonight, your doctor resides in a very interesting column."

I felt my arm burning, and the pressure in my chest became so intense that for a moment I thought I had to take a deep breath. I resisted with all my willpower. The man chuckled softly.

"Ah," he said. "They are fighting. That's good. Fighting is honest."

Holmes' voice remained cold. "What do you want?"

The man didn't step forward. He remained behind the line, beyond the pinheads, as if he himself respected the threshold. Or as if he wanted to force us to cross the border.

"I want," he said quietly, "you to find the right name. The one the doctor kept secret."

And as he said this, he raised a hand. In it he held a small book, thin, bound, and in the dim lantern light I could make out the color of the cover.

It was one of my notebooks.

## The woman with the ink stain

The thin book in his hand wasn't just any notebook forgotten in a drawer. I recognized the worn cover, the small dent in the spine that I had once made myself when I carried it in my pocket between my canteen and first-aid kit. In an instant, the registry was no longer just a room full of files, but a place where a piece of my own past was being held up at my feet like a prize. And the man did it with that calmness which derives most of its power from the certainty that the other person must make a move.

Holmes didn't take a step across the line of powder. He stood rooted to the spot, but not out of caution alone. It was as if he had to show his opponent that there are boundaries that are crossed not by physical force, but by will. The lantern cast a narrow beam of light across the pinheads on the ground, and its tiny metal heads glittered like the eyes of insects.

"You took that," Holmes said calmly. "And you didn't read it. Otherwise you would know that it is not what you think it is."

The man chuckled softly. "I read what I need," he replied. "And I don't need your words, Mr. Holmes. I need your doctor's habits."

My breath whistled, as if agreeing with the statement. I stood close behind Holmes, close enough to smell his coat, and far enough away not to cling to him like a sick man. The pressure in my chest was now so pronounced that it was no longer just a sensation, but an

obstacle. I forced myself to breathe shallowly, feeling each shallow breath dry out my throat. It was a miserable state, half awake, half struggle.

"Give it here," I said, and my voice sounded hoarse.

The man lifted the notebook slightly, as if presenting it to an audience. "Give it to me?" he asked. "It's yours, Doctor. I'm just holding it so you can see it again. That's a difference."

He didn't come any closer. He stayed beyond the pinheads, where the dust of the files hung in the air like a thin mist. His face remained in the shadow of the shelves, but even there his boots gleamed as if they had a will of their own. I hated those boots more than any weapon because they showed me that the man wanted not only to act, but also to have an effect.

Holmes' knife remained down, visible but not threatening. "You want a name," said Holmes. "Which one?"

"The one the doctor doesn't prescribe," the man replied. "The one he keeps silent about because he believes silence is decency."

A brief wave of dizziness washed over me, as if someone had turned the world upside down. I took a breath of the stinging cloth, but it barely helped. The air in this cellar was heavy as damp paper. It stuck to my mouth. It made every thought difficult to think.

"What does that have to do with the register?" asked Holmes.

"Everything," the man said. "A register is a truth that one signs without examining it. And your doctor once signed it. Not with ink, but with a decision."

He didn't open the notebook. He didn't. He kept it closed, and this very refusal to open it was the real threat. He wanted me to imagine the contents myself, to remember the page I didn't like to look at, and for my memory to do the work for him.

Holmes' voice remained steady. "You have distributed muffled air in this house to shift perception," he said. "And you have used needles to steer bodies. Tonight you are steering your doctor about guilt. This is a cheap trick."

"Cheap?" The man smiled audibly. "Guilt is the most expensive commodity in the world. You can find it in every house without having to supply it."

He raised the hand holding the notebook a little higher. "There's a page in it," he said. "One that begins with a time. Baker Street, after midnight. And then comes a name. A name your doctor doesn't include in his stories."

Holmes moved slightly, not across the line, but enough to break the connection between the man and me. "Tell him," Holmes demanded.

The man slowly shook his head. "No. That's your task. You're supposed to find him. Just like your doctor had to find him back then. And when he found him, he lied."

I wanted to draw my revolver, but my hand stayed in my pocket because I suddenly understood how ridiculous it would be. A shot in a basement full of paper and fumes. Even if

it hit, it would take my breath away before it took anything away from the other man. And the man knew that. He didn't speak like someone afraid of metal.

"You are playing with something you cannot control," Holmes said.

"On the contrary," the man replied. "I'm monitoring it very closely. See the line? You don't cross it. Why? Because you know your body can be faster than your mind. And your doctor..." He let the sentence hang in the air for a moment, and I felt my arm burn beneath the sleeve. "Your doctor is a very reliable body tonight."

Holmes' answer was harsh. "You are not invulnerable."

"No," the man said quietly. "But I am invisible enough."

He made a gesture with his free hand. Not a large one, more like a man pointing out an object that could easily be overlooked. Only then did I notice that a small, thin rope hung from a shelf next to him, barely visible, and attached to it something metallic: a clamp, connected to a narrow rod, like the one we had seen before. He didn't need to come any closer. He only needed to reach out and take it.

The clamp snapped open. A soft click that sounded like a gunshot in the muffled room. Then the metal rod slid across the floor, very slowly, with that fine scraping sound we had heard earlier, and reached over the line. At the end, it held a small piece of paper, barely larger than a business card.

Holmes remained motionless. "Don't touch it," he said to me, before I had even fully grasped the impulse.

The man laughed. "He's learning," he said. "Or he's teaching your doctor how to learn."

The staff pushed the paper to just before Holmes's shoes. Then it withdrew, as if it had done its duty. The paper now lay on our side of the line, innocent as an invitation.

Holmes picked it up with tweezers and held it in the lantern light. I could recognize the writing before he read it aloud because it had already been burned into my mind as a pattern.

It contained only one sentence:

Ask the woman with the ink stain.

Below it is an address. No official title, no further information, just street and number. And next to it, that tiny dot again.

Something stirred within me, something worse than fear: a recognition. Not the certain recognition of a name, but the dull recognition of an image. A hand with a dark stain on the index finger. A sleeve with ink clinging to it like an accident. A voice that remains quiet because it has learned that loud voices are not rewarded in government offices.

"You know her," the man said, and I didn't know if he read it in my face or if he already knew. "Of course you know her. She took a page for you from a book that wasn't meant for you. And you promised her you'd never write her name down."

My mouth went dry. The pressure in my chest increased, as if the memory itself had weight. I forced myself to take a shallow breath, and it whistled like a small, ridiculous reply.

Holmes' voice was cold. "You're using a witness," he said.

"I don't use a person," the man replied. "I use functions. She is a function. Like both of you. And she is useful because ink is everywhere names reside."

He lifted the notebook once more. "If you want to know which page you've kept silent about, Doctor," he said, "go to her. If you want to know why your name is in this register, go to her. And if you want to know how easily truth can be shifted..." He paused, his smile audible. "...go to her."

Holmes took a step to the side, as if searching for an angle from which he could reach the man without crossing the line. But at that moment, the lantern light flickered. Not because the oil was running out, but because the air in the room had changed. A cool draft swept through the shelves, and the sweet, sharp scent grew a touch stronger, as if someone in the background had opened a jar.

"Don't," Holmes whispered, more to me than to himself. "Don't breathe deeply."

I pressed my lips together and felt my body resist the reflex. The man watched it like an expert observing how a dog reacts to a whistle.

"You see," he said quietly. "That's how you arrange truth. A little ink, a little air, a little fear. And suddenly a man begins to fear his own pen."

Holmes lifted the tweezers holding the slip of paper. "The woman with the ink stain," he said. "She is your link to the registers."

"Or she is proof that your doctor didn't just observe back then," the man replied.

Then he stepped back, not hastily, not like someone fleeing. He slipped into the shadows between the shelves, and although I stared at the gleam of his boots, he vanished as if the paper had swallowed him. For a moment, only the squeaking remained, soft, steady, and then even that was gone.

Holmes stood still, listening. I listened too, but my listening was clouded by the struggle within my own chest. The pressure had intensified. My arm burned. And in my mind was this image I didn't want to see, yet did: a woman in an office, leaning too far over a book, an ink bottle tipping over, a stain remaining, and a voice telling you to hurry up before someone asks why you're even there.

Holmes folded the note carefully, as if it were both poison and clue. Then he looked at me, and in his gaze there was no accusation, only a sober seriousness.

"Who is she, Watson?" he asked softly.

I opened my mouth to answer, and realized at that same moment that the air wasn't just heavy. It was full of the past.

Holmes' question hung between us like the smell in this cellar, heavy, sticky, and impossible to shake. At another moment, I might have tried to save myself with a joke, as I so often do when things get too personal. But here, amidst files, pins, and this unnatural silence, any attempt at lightness sounded like a lie told to oneself to avoid hearing what one already knows.

"I don't know if I'm allowed to say her name," I managed to say.

Holmes' gaze remained steady. "Then tell me everything that isn't a name," he replied. "That's often enough."

I swallowed. The whistling in my chest was more pronounced than ever in this hushed air, and I felt my body growing impatient, as if it were punishing me for my hesitation. I took a quick puff of the pungent cloth, felt the cool sharpness in my nose, and forced myself to think in sentences.

"It was early," I began, and even the word "early" felt wrong because it described a time that had remained obscure to me. "Not long after we... after we had settled in. It was still new that I was living here. And there was a case I didn't write about. You know that such cases exist."

Holmes said nothing. He waited.

"It was about a name," I continued, "one that wasn't listed in a register the way it was in the world. Not just misspelled. Deliberately different. Someone had renamed a person without the city noticing. And we needed proof that you don't find on the street."

I felt the sweat on my back turn cold, even though the cellar was cool. It wasn't the telling that frightened me. It was the memory of how easily things had shifted back then, how easily I had been convinced that silence was the best form of decency.

"So they went to a registry," Holmes said quietly.

"Yes," I replied. "Not alone. But I was the one who had to go in. They were... too well-known in certain circles. And back then I was still the unassuming doctor who knocks on doors and asks politely."

There was a faint glimmer of something like agreement in Holmes' eyes, but he remained silent.

"She was sitting there," I said, and suddenly the image was clearer than the cellar around me. "Not at a high table, not like a lady. More like a low one, with stacks of things around her. She wasn't old. Maybe not much older than... than a girl who had just learned to be quiet so as not to disturb a room full of men. And she had an ink stain on her index finger. Not a small dot. A dark one that looked as if a bottle had tipped over and someone had quickly tried to cover it up. But ink doesn't forgive. It stays."

My voice sounded more even now, because it was following the image. Nevertheless, I felt my arm burning, as if it wanted to remind me that this was not harmless storytelling.

"She was a writer?" Holmes asked.

"A copyist," I said. "Or an assistant. Someone who brings books and looks up pages when a superior orders it. And she had something you rarely see in such positions: compassion. Not the boastful kind, but the quiet kind. She looked at me, and I realized that she understood that my request didn't stem from curiosity."

"Did she help you?" Holmes asked.

"Yes," I said, and the pressure in my chest increased, as if the truth itself had weight. "Not because I had bribed her. Not because she was foolish. But because she knew something I didn't know at the time: that a register is not only a collection of truths, but also a collection of errors. And anyone who works there sees how easily an error can become a tool."

Holmes' voice remained calm. "And the ink stain?"

"It was her flaw," I said. "And at the same time her protection. A well-groomed man stands out in official settings. A woman with ink on her fingers is invisible. You see her, but you don't remember her. I think she was used to it."

I paused because there was a faint sound in the room. Not footsteps. More like a stirring of the air, as if something were moving on its own. Holmes' head lifted slightly. He was listening. Then he placed his hand on the doorframe and gestured for us to step back.

I understood immediately. In that cellar, every second was too much. Not just because of my opponent, but because of the air, which made my chest feel tighter. We slowly made our way back into the corridor, the lantern dimmed as much as possible, without touching the candle, without going near the matchbox. On the stairs leading up, I felt the throbbing in my arm more intensely, as if the act of climbing itself were a command to the poison to work faster.

Upstairs on the ground floor, it was still unnaturally quiet. But the silence was no longer empty. It had acquired corners. Every shadow seemed to be waiting for something. Holmes didn't lead me to the front door, but paused, listened, and a barely audible squeak came from somewhere, unclear, intangible. It was as if the man in the gleaming boots was no longer moving through rooms, but through possibilities.

"We are not going out where he expects us to be," Holmes whispered.

He found a side door that led into a narrow passage. The air there was cooler and less heavy, and I almost inhaled too deeply, but stopped in time. The whistling continued, but the pressure eased slightly. It was like taking a hand away from your throat without completely releasing the grip.

Outside, in the fog, the city suddenly seemed almost friendly, however unpleasant that may sound. The fog, at least, was honest. It concealed, yes, but it didn't poison intentionally. Holmes closed the side door so that it would appear as if a chance gust of wind had blown shut, and led me quickly, but not by running, out of the street.

"The note," I whispered as we walked. "It says we should go to her."

"He tells us to believe we must," Holmes replied. "But we're going anyway."

"Why?" I asked.

Holmes glanced at me briefly. "Because he has taken something from you that belongs to you," he said. "And because he names a person who is not just a clue. He is a nexus. A human being who stands between paper and truth."

I nodded, and the dizziness made me briefly tap the wall. Holmes' hand was immediately on my arm, supporting me.

"Tell me more about this woman," he said as we continued walking.

"I gave her my word back then," I said.

"About what?" asked Holmes.

I hesitated, and in that hesitancy lay all the old shame. "That I don't write her name down," I said finally. "Not in my reports. Not in my notes. Not even for myself, as if a promise could be made stronger by not even putting it down on paper."

"Why would a copyist demand that?" Holmes asked.

"Because she was afraid," I said, and the word tasted bitter. "Not of me. Of what she showed me. She had given me a page from a book I shouldn't have seen. A name change. A correction that wasn't a correction. And she knew that if you were lucky, you'd be fired for that. And that otherwise you'd... disappear. Not through murder. Through a record. Through transfer. Through a mark on the wrong register."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "So she's been in danger ever since."

"Maybe she already was," I said.

We found a Hansom who seemed to have sprung from the mist. Holmes gave the coachman the address from the slip of paper without hesitation, and that alone told me that he had either recognized it immediately or that he was pretending to recognize it so as not to grant his adversary the luxury of our uncertainty. We got in, and as the coach started moving, I briefly rested my head against the upholstery, noticing how tiring the air made me.

"Watson," Holmes said quietly in the dim light. "When you met that woman back then... what did you keep from her?"

I closed my eyes, not out of tiredness, but because I needed to see the picture more clearly. A filing cabinet, the smell of paper, a hand with ink, a look that understands too much.

"I kept from her," I said hoarsely, "that I wasn't just there for a case. I was there for myself too. I wanted to know if a name I had written down really belonged to the person we had seen. And when I knew, I decided what the truth should be."

Holmes remained silent. The carriage rolled, muffled by the fog. My breath whistled softly, but I kept it shallow as best I could.

"He's right," I whispered finally, more to myself than to Holmes. "There's a name I didn't write."

Holmes' voice was calm. "Then we will find him," he said. "And then we will decide whether he belongs to us or to him."

The carriage turned, and somewhere in the distance a clock struck. It was long past midnight, and yet the city felt as if it had only just now truly awakened.

The carriage rocked through the fog, and the sound of the hooves was muffled, as if they were striking wet felt rather than stone. I held the pungent cloth in my hand, smelling it at short intervals, and each time it was as if a bolt in my mind were being opened a little further, without actually seeing the door behind it. The whistling in my chest persisted, and at times I felt a subtle pressure behind my breastbone, as if a hand were there, not quite squeezing, but never letting go.

Holmes sat opposite me, motionless, yet not silent. His mind seemed to be working in the dark, as if thought could be discerned solely from posture. Once he briefly raised his head and listened outside, not for the hooves, but for something else. I followed his gaze, but saw only gray wisps and the dim flicker of a lamppost we passed.

"We are not alone on this journey," Holmes said quietly.

"Persecuted?" I managed to say.

"Perhaps accompanied," he replied. "There is a difference. Pursuit is hasty. Accompaniment is patient."

I grew cold and pulled my coat tighter, even though the house's cellar had chilled me more than the night air. The thought that the man in the bare boots might be moving a second carriage somewhere in this fog without being heard was unsettling. And yet, that wasn't even the worst of it. The worst of it was that I was beginning to hear an intention in every sound.

The carriage finally stopped on a street that felt uncomfortably familiar. Not because I'd been there often, but because it was precisely the kind of street you never want to be on too often. It was a neighborhood where government buildings and quiet houses mingled, where the windows weren't curious but closed, and where you had the feeling that doors knew more than people.

Holmes paid the coachman and got out. I followed him, and the fog immediately closed around us again, as if it had only briefly parted. In front of us stood a two-story house, narrow, tidy, almost respectable. It was not a hovel. It was one of those houses where ordinary people live who work in large buildings and go home in the evening to forget what they have seen during the day.

There was no sign on the door, no nameplate. But Holmes didn't need that. He approached, didn't knock, but placed his hand on the handle and tested whether it gave way. It didn't. So he knocked, twice, not loudly, but firmly.

We waited. I heard my own breathing again, and this time, in the open night, it sounded almost more telltale than inside the house, because it wasn't muffled. In the distance, a cart rolled by, somewhere a voice called out, and yet everything around this door seemed to remain silent.

Then I heard a sound inside that calmed me more than any word: the clinking of glass, as if a cup were being set down. It was an everyday sound. A sound of life. On this night, the everyday was a luxury.

The door opened a crack. A face appeared. A woman, not old, but no longer young either. Her hair was pulled back tightly, and her eyes were alert, as if she had learned to instantly assess who stood before her, even in a half-asleep state. Her gaze fell first on Holmes, then on me. And when she recognized me, something changed in her face, so subtly that a stranger wouldn't have noticed. But I did. It was a fleeting narrowing around her eyes, a hint of weariness, as if an old story were being opened again.

Her hand, holding the door, was partially in shadow. But as she opened it a little wider, the streetlights fell on her fingers. And there, on her index finger, it was: the ink stain. Dark, seared in like an old scar. Not fresh. Not smudged. A stain that had been there so long it seemed to have become part of her skin.

"Doctor Watson," she said softly.

She said my name as if it were something one shouldn't say aloud. And in the way she said it, there was more understanding than I could bear.

"We need your help," Holmes said before I could say anything.

The woman looked at him, and I recognized in her gaze the kind of skepticism that grows in official positions: skepticism towards men who are self-assured, and towards stories that sound too plausible. Then she looked back at me.

"They promised me back then," she said.

"I know," I replied hoarsely.

"And you're coming anyway," she continued, and I sensed that she wasn't angry, but resigned. "So it's worse than I had hoped."

Holmes raised a slight hand. "We are not here to break old promises," he said calmly. "We are here because someone is using the records of this city like a knife."

A shadow slid across her face. "I know," she said.

"You know?" I asked, and my breath whistled at the word.

She took a step back and opened the door wider. "Come in," she said. "Not in the hallway. Not on the threshold."

We entered. The room was small, tidy, and clean. A table, two chairs, a shelf with a few books, owned more out of obligation than pleasure. A pot sat on the stove, and it smelled of tea. The scent was warm and human, and I realized how much I needed it.

The woman closed the door, this time not silently, but with a perfectly normal click. That click sounded like a safeguard, although I knew that in London a door is only as secure as the story you keep hidden behind it.

She went to the table and didn't sit down. She remained standing, as if she didn't want to get too comfortable in a room that was hers. Then she looked at me.

"They were looking for a name," she said. "Back then. And again today."

I nodded.

"Back then it was dangerous," she continued. "But it was... small. A man wanted a different name. An entry was to disappear. A date was to look different. This sort of thing happens more often than you think. People pay for it. People threaten for it. And those who carry the books see it. They see it and pretend they don't."

Holmes' voice was calm. "And you saw it."

"Yes," she said. "And I helped you." She looked at me, and her gaze hardened. "Because you asked me to, not because he ordered me to."

"I didn't give you any orders," I said quickly.

"No," she replied. "That's the difference between you and him."

Holmes leaned forward slightly. "Who is he?" he asked.

The woman shook her head. "I don't know any name," she said. "Not his. Not the one he actually uses. He doesn't work with a name. He works with stamps. With signatures. With men who believe they are acting on behalf of someone else."

She went to the shelf, pulled out a small book, thin, wrapped in grey paper. When she placed it on the table, I saw that it wasn't a novel, but a booklet of lists. Her fingers touched it only briefly, as if it were hot.

"He visited me two weeks ago," she said quietly.

"Here?" I asked.

She nodded. "Not like you. Not decent. He came when I was already in bed. It was quiet, and then it wasn't quiet anymore. And when I opened my eyes, he was standing there, at the foot of my bed. I didn't see him. I only saw his boots. And I heard him breathing."

"Did he threaten you?" Holmes asked.

"He didn't have to shout at me," she replied. "He just said that a stain like mine offers no protection if someone starts using ink as a mark. He said he could make a stamp out of my stain. He could put me in a register where I would never be removed."

I felt the blood rush to my head. "Why didn't you go to the police?" I asked.

She smiled sadly. "Because I'm listed in a register there," she said. "And he's closer to the register than I am."

Holmes' gaze sharpened. "And what does he want from you?"

She looked at me. "He wants," she said softly, "for me to give you the name you didn't write down back then."

My throat went dry. I felt the pressure in my chest increase, and I forced myself to breathe shallowly to avoid panicking and taking a deep breath. The whistling sounded almost more unbearable in the warm room because it was so out of place.

"What name?" asked Holmes.

The woman placed her hand with the ink stain on the grey notebook, as if holding it in place. Then she said, very calmly, very clearly:

"The name that is listed under yours in the wrong register."

She didn't open the book. She pushed it towards me as if it were a poison that only the owner was allowed to touch.

"If you read it," she said, "there's no going back. You'll know what you did back then. And he'll know that you know."

Holmes' voice was quiet. "What does it say?"

The woman looked at me, and in her eyes there was not a threat, but a kind of pity. "A transcript," she said. "From the page you wanted back then. And from the page he wants tonight. And it's the same name."

I stared at the notebook, and it seemed to me as if it contained not paper, but weight. Holmes' hand was suddenly on the table, close enough to catch me if I fell, yet not so close that he could make the decision for me.

Outside in the fog, a car rolled by. Then, very quietly, I heard something that didn't belong to the car: a faint squeak, like leather on stone, somewhere in front of the house, and then silence, as if the street had held its breath.

The woman raised her head, and her gaze went towards the door.

"He's here," she whispered.

And at that moment I realized that the warmth of this room was only an island. The fog outside had long since reached the shore.

## Traces of red clay

The woman had barely uttered the word when the room seemed to cool by a degree, even though the fire was still flickering and the tea was still filling the air with its warm aroma. It was as if the house itself had understood that a glimpse had fallen upon it from the mist. I wasn't sitting down, but my knees suddenly felt unsteady, and I realized how much my body longed for air, for a deep, liberating breath. I forced myself not to. The whistling in my chest sounded as if someone had placed a small flute inside me and was now playing it with every movement.

Holmes didn't move hastily. He never did anything hastily if he sensed that haste was precisely what his opponent expected. He simply raised his hand, and the woman nodded, as if she had understood this command before in another context. She dimmed the lamp on the table, drew the curtain a finger's width closed so that no light entered the hall. Then she stood still and listened.

Outside, at first, there was only the ordinary, distant life of the city: a wagon wheel rolling somewhere over wet cobblestones, the distant cry of a voice pressed into a single syllable by the fog. But then, very close, at the edge of perception, I heard again that faint squeaking sound, which I had come to loathe. It wasn't loud, and precisely because of that, it was so distinct. It was the signature of a man who had learned to pose his presence as a question.

Holmes approached the door, not directly, but sideways, so that when it opened, he wouldn't be immediately visible. He didn't press his ear to the wood; he simply held his breath, as if allowing the house to tell him something. The woman stood a few paces behind him, her hand, stained with ink, resting on the edge of the table, as if she could grasp it if the past suddenly reappeared through the door.

I felt the urge to reach for the gray notebook she had slid toward me. It lay there like a sleeping animal. I let my hand fall. Not because I was suddenly strong, but because I knew that any movement at that moment could be incriminating. The truth can wait, I told myself. Or I tried to tell myself.

Then came the sound that turns a night in an ordinary house into an event: a soft knocking.

Not loud. Not impatient. It was a knock that didn't ask for entry, but rather checked whether someone inside still had the courage to answer. Two knocks, a pause, a third knock. Almost polite.

The woman inhaled, and her breath audibly caught in her throat. Holmes raised his hand to prevent her from falling into the trap of a reflex. He glanced at me, so briefly that it was more of a signal than a look: stay calm.

The knocking came a second time, exactly the same. Then I heard something brush against the wood. Not a finger. Something soft. Like a glove checking if the surface was dry. And then, very quietly, a sound that immediately reminded me of the cellar: the rustling of paper.

The man outside was holding something in his hand. Perhaps a note. Perhaps a book. Perhaps a business card he wanted to leave us like bait.

Holmes didn't reach for the lock, didn't open the door. He stepped back, as if to take the stage away from the door. He gestured to the woman to stand in the corner next to the bookshelf, where the shadows were thickest. Then, with a sweep of his hand, he led me to the window that faced the street. The curtain was drawn, but a narrow gap remained at the edge. Holmes pushed it open a millimeter.

I looked out.

The fog hung heavy in the street, but a lamppost further ahead cast enough light to discern movement. And in the gray shimmer, precisely where the path to the door began, stood a figure. Coat, hat, no contours. But beneath the hem of the coat, the moment he shifted a foot slightly, something flashed.

Bare boots.

I felt my arm burn, as if my blood had recognized the image. The pressure in my chest became so intense for a moment that I involuntarily wanted to take a deep breath. I pressed my lips together and forced myself to remain flat. The whistling was now distinct, a thin, laughable sound against the weight of the moment.

Holmes' hand briefly rested on my forearm, firmly, supportively, without him taking his eyes off the street. Then he pointed down, at the steps in front of the door.

There, in the lantern light, I saw something that looked like a dark stain in the mist. It wasn't large, just a trace, but it wasn't gray like wet pavement. It had a reddish hue, like clotted blood, but it lay too flat, too earthy.

Holmes pulled me back a step. "Don't stay by the window," he whispered.

We quietly moved to the middle of the room. The woman was still standing in shadow, as if she had learned that sometimes the best protection is not to exist. The knocking didn't return. Instead, I heard a sound outside that made me shiver: a very quiet, careful scraping, as if someone were placing something on the doorstep without touching the door.

Then the footsteps receded. Not quickly. Not like a flight. The squeak slid across the stone, once, twice, and was swallowed by the mist.

Holmes waited. He waited until it was certain that the silence was not merely a pause. Only then did he open the door, but not far. Just a crack, enough to see into the hallway and onto the threshold.

There was an envelope there.

No name, no seal. Just the tiny dot in the corner, as if it were no longer a mark, but a signature.

Holmes did not touch it. He took the tweezers, lifted the envelope, and held it so that no light fell directly on it. "He wants us to open it," he said quietly.

"And if we don't?" asked the woman with the ink stain, and there was a bitter knowledge in her voice.

"Then he opens something else," Holmes replied.

He didn't put the envelope in his pocket. He left it in the tweezers, as if it were an insect that shouldn't be put in a pocket. Then he knelt down and looked at the threshold.

"There," he said.

I cautiously approached, as far as my chest allowed, and saw what he meant. On the wooden threshold was a fine line, barely visible. And on the stone below, in a small indentation, lay something reddish, crumbly, like dirt brushed off a shoe.

Holmes picked up a tiny speck of it with the tip of his knife and held it up to the light. It was indeed earth, not a powder from a chemical can. And the color was striking: a warm red, the kind you rarely see on your shoes in London unless you've just come from a construction site.

"Red clay," Holmes murmured.

"From where?" I asked, and my voice sounded thin because the word "where" immediately conjured up images of roads, cold, and further exertion.

Holmes smelled the grain, not because earth has a scent one recognizes like perfume, but because he was searching for something foreign within it: for oil, for chemicals, for the very scent of a place. Then he nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Not from the river," he said. "Not from ordinary road construction. This is brick-clay. Brickfields. And not old. Fresh. He was there today."

The woman took a step closer but remained standing in the shadow of the door. "There are no brick pits nearby," she said quietly.

Holmes straightened up, and at that moment he seemed taller, not physically, but through the clear outline of his thoughts. "Yes," he said. "Not here on this street. But not far. There are places in London that one forgets because they are too inconspicuous. And where they make bricks, they also make the molds. And where they make molds, they make identities."

I looked at the red stain, and it seemed to me as if it were a fingerprint of the city itself. A small piece of earth that doesn't belong here, and yet, precisely for that reason, tells the whole story. The man with the shiny boots had cared for his shoes so well that they gleamed, but he hadn't been able to prevent the earth from betraying him. Or perhaps he hadn't wanted to.

Holmes finally placed the envelope in a metal tube without opening it. "We'll take it," he said. "But we won't give it the victory of deciding when we read."

He turned to the woman. "You're not staying here," he said. "Not tonight."

Her eyes widened. "Where should I go?"

"To a place where no one knows your name," said Holmes. "And where a door makes noises when it opens. Do you have anyone?"

She hesitated for only a moment, then nodded. "A sister," she said quietly. "In Camden. She... she knows nothing about this."

"Good," said Holmes. "You leave immediately. And you take nothing with you except what you are wearing. No notebook. No lists. No stain that can be washed off, but also no papers that can be taken from you."

She looked at the table, at the gray notebook that still lay there. I sensed how much it cost her to leave it. Then she didn't reach for it after all. She merely ran her hand once along the edge of the table, as if bidding farewell to a part of her life.

Holmes turned to me. "And we," he said, "are going to where this clay comes from."

I nodded, and this time the nodding was difficult. Not because of doubt, but because of the realization that the night would not calm down until it had taken something from us.

Outside in the fog, the red stain lay on the threshold like a silent confession. And as we prepared to leave, I had the feeling that we weren't following the enemy, but that he had long since positioned us so that we had to follow the only trace he couldn't erase.

We didn't go out to the street together. Holmes insisted that the woman disappear first, and I understood why even before he said it: if the man in the shiny boots was truly accompanying us, he would be more likely to respond to two people than one. The woman pulled her coat tightly around her shoulders, as if fabric could offer a protection that paper could no longer provide. She glanced one last time at her table, at the notebook that lay there like an unspoken confession, and I saw her fingers rise briefly, then fall again. A person can cling to possessions or to life. On this night, one had to choose.

Holmes opened the door just enough for her to squeeze out. She slipped into the fog without looking back, and I felt a bitter respect for that kind of courage: the courage to leave when everything inside screams to stay and guard what is yours. As the door clicked shut, the familiar click hung in the air for a moment. Then there was only fog.

Holmes turned immediately to the threshold, as if he had filed away the scene with the woman and closed it. He knelt, took the tiny grain of red clay he had already examined, and placed it in a small glass vial. Then he ran the tweezers over the steps, not greedily, but with that cold patience with which a naturalist collects traces that another sees only as dirt. A second grain, a third. Finally, he stood up.

"We need a dry place to go," he said quietly. "And we need speed, without it looking like we're fleeing."

"In my condition, speed sounds unpleasant," I murmured, startled by how thin my voice was.

Holmes' gaze briefly flickered over my face, without lingering on it. He was attentive, not pitying. "You walk," he said. "And you breathe as best you can. That's all I ask."

We stepped out into the street. The fog here lay not like a wall, but like a sea, swallowing every sound and only occasionally letting through a ripple of light when a lamp was close enough. There was no sign of Hansom anywhere. Holmes took a few steps, stopped at a corner, and listened. I listened too, but my listening was unreliable because my own breath

kept whistling in my ear. It was as if my body had decided to join the conversation as a third party.

Holmes ran his fingers along a wall, feeling the dampness, and then I saw his eyes fall on something on the ground. He didn't kneel, but simply stood and pointed with his foot at a spot in the pavement where there was a reddish smear. Not much, just a trace, as if someone had left the edge of a sole there.

"He didn't just stand at the door," Holmes said. "He left. And he allowed people to see it."

"Or he did it intentionally," I said.

"Yes," Holmes replied. "And that is useful in both cases."

He continued walking, and I followed him, trying to keep my steps steady, even though my chest felt as if I were wearing a belt that was too tight. Several times I had to briefly bring the stinging scarf to my nose. It helped, but each time a lingering sweet undertone remained, like a melody that you can't get rid of once it's in your head.

We came to a wider road, and there Holmes found a coachman waiting for customers in the fog like a fisherman waiting for a shadow in the water. Holmes gave no long explanation, only a brief direction, and slipped a coin into the man's hand in such a way that it spoke louder than words.

"North," Holmes said as we got in. "Not to the main roads. To the places you miss."

The carriage began to move, and the city slid past us in gray slivers. Normally I would have tried to memorize the route, but tonight my mind was like a room with stagnant air. Thoughts went in, but they didn't always want to leave. I concentrated on what was tangible: the swaying of the carriage, the soft creaking of the leather, the rhythm of the hooves, which sounded duller than usual in the fog.

Holmes was silent for a while, then he said, as if speaking more to himself than to me: "Red clay is a traitor. It belongs to certain soils. And certain soils belong to certain jobs."

"Brick," I managed to say.

"And molds," Holmes replied. "Not just for bricks. For impressions. For stamps. For seals. For everything a bureaucratic world loves because it creates the illusion of immutability."

I felt the pressure in my chest merge with another pressure, a psychological one, arising from the word "office." The man in the shiny boots had opened a corridor in our minds that led directly to these registers. And in that corridor stood this woman with the ink stain, her silent fear, her gray notebook, and the notebook lay abandoned like a burden one is only allowed to bear once.

"Holmes," I said hoarsely, "the woman said he was closer to the register than she was. That means..."

“That he either works there or that he has someone there,” Holmes interrupted calmly. “And that it would be pointless to think of ordinary blackmail. He doesn’t need money. He needs access.”

The carriage turned, and I noticed the streets grew quieter. The houses stood further apart, and there were more open spaces where the fog didn't just hang between facades but crept low to the ground. The smell changed, a little less smoke, a little more damp earth. London has different breaths, and this one smelled of edges, of places where the city isn't quite a city yet.

Finally, the carriage stopped near an area enclosed by a low fence. Beyond it rose dark outlines: sheds, perhaps old kilns, and in the distance a tall chimney, stretching like a finger against the gray sky. There was no bustling activity, no noise of workers, no horse-drawn carts, no shouts. But it wasn't dead either. It had that stillness of places used by day and guarded by night, not by people, but by habit and fear.

Holmes got out, paid the coachman, and gave him a curt instruction not to go too far. Then he stood for a moment and listened. I got out more slowly because my body resisted the cold and the movement. The fog was different here. It contained less smoke and more moisture. And somewhere, very faintly, I smelled it: freshly turned earth.

“That’s it,” said Holmes.

We walked along the fence until Holmes found a spot where a board was loose. He didn't immediately pry it out. He bent down and looked at the ground. In the damp earth, where the mist lay like a film over everything, there were traces. Not many, but enough. And there it was again: the reddish hue, not as a stain, but as the color of the soil.

"This is where it comes from," Holmes murmured.

"And what if he left it there intentionally?" I asked.

Holmes straightened up. "Then he wanted us here," he said. "And that's not necessarily a bad thing. A man who wants to lead us must expect that we will lead him in return."

We slipped through the gap in the fence. The ground was soft, and I had to watch my step. Holmes went first, and I tried to step into his shoes, but my breath whistled, and each whistle felt like a beacon of light in the darkness. I kept the stinging handkerchief handy, but I didn't want to use it too often. It was like having to choose between being lucid or breathing, and doing both at the same time wasn't a given tonight.

Between the sheds lay an area that looked like a pit, shallow but wide. The clay there was exposed, and in the dim light of a distant lantern, I saw how red it truly was. Not the red of blood, but the red of earth containing iron. At the edge of the pit stood stacks of bricks, and beside them a low hut, its door ajar.

Holmes stopped. "Do you see the bricks?" he asked.

"Yes."

“Not all are the same,” said Holmes. “Some are fresh. Some are old. And some...” He pointed to a small pile lying off to the side. “...are newly shaped but not fired. That means someone has been here recently and used molds.”

We went to the cabin. The door was indeed only ajar, as if someone had deliberately left it open to show that there was no barrier here, only an invitation. Holmes didn't touch the handle with his bare hand. He pressed against it with his handkerchief and opened it.

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of damp earth and another, sharper scent that immediately reminded me of the filing room: glue, paper, the stuff used to hold things together that would otherwise come apart. Tools lay scattered on a table: wooden strips, metal pins, a knife that wasn't for eating, and next to it, a stamp pad like the kind you see in government offices. Except this one wasn't clean. It was smeared with red clay.

Holmes bent down, looked at the tools, and I saw his eyes flash briefly, not with joy, but with that cold satisfaction when a theory suddenly takes shape.

“It's not just bricks that are made here,” he said quietly. “It's signs that are made here.”

And as he was saying this, I noticed something on the ground, near the threshold of the hut, stuck in the damp clay like a lost leaf. I bent down, carefully, and saw that it wasn't a leaf, but a piece of paper that had become almost transparent from the dampness. A torn edge. And on it, blurred but still recognizable: a dot in the corner.

My breathing became louder, and I felt a wave of dizziness coming on. Holmes' hand was immediately on my sleeve.

"Not now," he whispered. "Stay put."

I nodded, and in that nod lay the realization that we weren't merely following the man. We were standing on the ground he had used to shape his truth. And once you're standing in the pit where the clay lies, every trace you find is both a clue and a warning: whoever shapes the clay also shapes how the city sees you.

The piece of paper clung damply to the clay, as if resisting removal. Holmes took it from my hand, without haste, and held it up to the dim light cast by the lantern outside through the crack in the door. The tiny dot in the corner was distinct despite the dampness, almost mocking. It wasn't just a sign; it was a habit. And habits are often the only thing a clever thief doesn't completely control.

Holmes laid the paper on the table, not flat, but in such a way that it would not become further soggy. Then his gaze swept over the tools. He touched nothing with bare skin; tweezers and handkerchief were his constant intermediaries, as if he had to ward off not only poison but also deception. He lifted the stamp block, turned it, and examined the underside. Where one normally cleans the stamp, red clay had been pressed into the crevices, and between the crevices I saw a darker sheen, as if there were something else there, something that did not belong.

"Ink," Holmes murmured.

"Here?" I asked.

“Not for writing,” he replied quietly. “For forging.”

He set down the stamp block and picked up a flat piece of metal from the table, which at first glance looked like an ordinary spatula, the kind used to smooth clay. But on one side were tiny notches, so fine that I only noticed them in the light. Holmes held it closer to the lantern and gave a barely perceptible nod.

“A matrix,” he said. “Not for bricks. For impressions. For a seal. For the little things that make a document credible.”

The chill that ran down my back had little to do with the fog. A seal is just wax and pressure, and yet an entire city trusts it as if it were truth. Whoever controls the signs, controls the stories.

My breath whistled, and it annoyed me that my body was so loud at that moment, as if it were shouting my location to the perpetrator through the fog. I took a quick breath of the prickly cloth, felt a moment of clarity, and in that clarity I registered that Holmes was no longer looking ahead, but to the right, to the left, for some detail that didn't fit the picture.

He went to the back wall of the hut. There was a shelf with clay molds used for bricks. One had been moved aside, and beneath it was a dark stain on the wall, as if someone had often stood there with a hand on it. Holmes bent down, pulled the mold out with tweezers, and behind it was revealed something: a narrow plank door, barely visible, so well set into the wall that it could be mistaken for a mortar joint.

“A compartment,” Holmes murmured. “Or a corridor.”

He didn't press immediately. He knelt, examined the bottom edge, looked at the hinges. No fresh scratches, but a hint of red clay on the edge, as if someone had opened the door with dirty fingers. Holmes pulled the handkerchief over the handle and pressed.

The wooden door gave way. Behind it was no passage, but a hollow space, deep enough for a bundle of papers and a few small tools. And there, indeed, lay a bundle, wrapped in oilcloth and carefully tied. Next to it was a small glass containing a dark liquid, and a paintbrush whose bristles had hardened.

Holmes took out the bundle of oilcloth and placed it on the table. He didn't untie the knot immediately. He smelled the glass containing the dark liquid, and his vision sharpened slightly.

"Shoe polish," he said.

I stared at the glass. The scent was unmistakable. The man in the gleaming boots wasn't just polishing his shoes. He was using the scent like a brand, like a fingerprint, deliberately leaving it because he knew it would make him memorable.

"He was here," I said.

“He works here,” Holmes corrected. “Or he has others do the work.”

He untied the knot of the oilcloth and opened it. Underneath lay several documents: copies, forms, some with stamps, others with cut-out edges, as if pieces had been removed. And on top, like a cover sheet, lay a card that made my blood boil. It was made of thick, clean paper, and on it, in that narrow handwriting I had come to loathe, was written:

Red makes visible what disappears in the fog.

Below, in smaller print: Follow the tracks.

Holmes' lips twitched almost imperceptibly. "He speaks in riddles because riddles make a man prove himself," he said quietly. "And tonight he wants you to prove yourself, Watson."

He pulled a document from the stack. It was a form that looked official at first glance, with columns, fields, and space for a stamp. But the stamp wasn't genuine; I knew that immediately because I'd seen too many real ones. It was too clean, too perfect. And there was that dot again, right at the edge.

Holmes placed the form next to the piece of paper from the floor. "Look at the edges," he said.

I bent down, and although my head was heavy, I saw what he meant. The edge was slightly rough, as if it had been cut out of another sheet and pasted back in. Not visible to the casual eye, but visible to someone who holds their breath and looks. A name could be cut out and reinserted here like a piece of fabric.

"He builds documents," I murmured.

"He constructs identities," Holmes corrected.

I felt the dizziness again, and this time it was stronger, as if the cellar smell we had left behind was still echoing in my head. I leaned on the table for support, and Holmes's hand was immediately on my sleeve.

"Don't lean on it," he whispered. "Clay is sticky. And if you take something with you tonight, don't let it be that."

I sat up, breathing shallowly, and the whistling was almost painful. It was as if my airways were rubbing against each other inside. I took another wisp of the cloth. It barely helped anymore. My opponent hadn't just distorted my perception; he had transformed my body into a clock that announced every minute with a whistle.

Holmes continued leafing through the documents, and suddenly he stopped. He pulled out a sheet that looked different from the others. It wasn't a form, but a handwritten transcript, in a neat, official script. And at the bottom was a signature. Not the perpetrator's thin handwriting, but that of a civil servant. There was also a stamp that looked genuine.

Holmes' gaze swept across the page and lingered on a line. Then he looked at me.

"Here," he said quietly.

I didn't pick up the sheet. Holmes held it out to me so I could read it without touching it. The line he pointed to bore my name. And below it, in a column one doesn't often fill in, was something that made my heart skip a beat.

Alias: ...

The name behind it was blurred, as if clay had been pressed onto it and then lifted off. But a few letters were still recognizable. Enough to conjure up an image in my mind that I didn't want to see: a night, a government corridor, a woman with the stain on her finger, a page that was not to be copied, and me, who had decided back then that what I saw should not be written down.

"He wants me to complete it myself," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "Yes," he said. "He leaves gaps for you to fill in. And what a person fills in themselves, they believe more readily."

Outside, a board creaked suddenly. Not inside the cabin. Outside, on the grounds. It was a genuine sound, unmuffled, unmanipulated. A footstep on wood.

Holmes froze. He extinguished the lantern with a swift pull of the wick, without any sign of panic. Darkness fell into the cabin; only the dull gray of the fog filtered through the cracks.

Another step. Then a soft squeak, but different than before: not leather on stone, but leather on wood. And alongside it, very quietly, the rustling of fabric, as if a coat were brushing against a wall.

Holmes pulled me away from the table, into the shadow of the back wall, near the wooden door to the hollow room. His breathing remained steady. Mine whistled, and I cursed him for it.

Then I heard something that made my blood run cold: the soft, matter-of-fact click of a lock being opened from the outside.

The cabin door moved a crack. No creak. No sigh. Someone knew how to make doors quiet.

A strip of misty light fell in, and something shone in that strip before a face was even visible.

The bare boots were standing in the doorway.

And with them came the smell of shoe polish, so distinct it was as if it had been written in the air.

## The Club of Polite Liars

The bare boots stood in the doorway, as if they had condensed the fog itself into a form. The man behind them remained in shadow at first, but the gleam of his shoes gave him definition before he had earned it. He didn't step inside, but paused, as if to do us the courtesy of letting us realize first that he had found us. In the silence of the cabin, the soft squeak of the boot sole was a sound that worked on my nerves like a fine saw cut.

Holmes' hand was firmly on my sleeve, not to reassure me, but to prevent my body from making a foolish movement. I could feel my arm burning, and the tightness in my chest was so intense that every breath felt like a guilty conscience. I held my breath shallow, and yet it whistled, as if greeting the man in the doorway.

"Doctor," the voice said calmly, almost kindly. "You're not good at the game of silence."

Holmes did not answer. He stood in the shadows, the knife in his hand, and yet it was not the blade that seemed dangerous at that moment, but his silence. I saw his eyes scan the doorframe, the threshold, the floor in front of the man. He was not seeking an adversary, he was seeking the conditions. One man can strike another, but conditions strike everyone.

The intruder took a step inside. The cover slid over the wood, and the squeak was so faint it could almost have seemed imagined, were it not so precise. With that step, the smell of shoe polish became more pronounced, a cold, greasy scent that settled in the air like a signature. The cabin was small; the smell filled it effortlessly.

"You've found something," the man continued. "I'm glad to hear that. Every man should occasionally find something he believes will protect him. Then he learns how little protection things actually offer."

Holmes' voice came now, calm, dry. "You like to talk," he said. "That's a weakness."

"It's a habit," the man replied. "And habits are just weaknesses for people who have no intentions."

He let his gaze wander around the room, as if taking in the table, the bundle of oilcloths, the papers, the jar of shoe polish. For a moment, I felt that absurd indignation one experiences when someone casually observes something they shouldn't be taking away. It was as if I'd been caught in my own thoughts.

"They want that there," said Holmes, pointing almost imperceptibly with the tip of his knife at the sheet of paper on which my name and the blurred alias line were written.

The man smiled, but I couldn't see his face clearly. "I want the doctor to want it," he said. "It's much safer that way."

I felt the dizziness briefly blur my vision. For an instant, the room was no longer made of wood and clay, but of possibilities, and in each possibility I stood with a different name. I pressed my lips together to avoid taking a deep breath, and the whistling sounded like mockery.

Holmes' grip on my sleeve tightened a touch. Then, without warning, he moved. Not toward the man, but sideways, toward the shelf of molds. In the same movement, he knocked one of the wooden molds over, so that it fell to the floor. Normally, this would have made a dull crash; here, there was only a muffled thud, as if even the wood were ashamed of being loud. But it was enough. The man in the doorway turned his head a fraction, instinctively, and in that tiny distraction lay the whole gift of an opportunity.

Holmes pulled me back by the sleeve, towards the wooden door in the back wall. I had just seen it as a hollow space, a hiding place for documents. Now it was our only way out.

"Quickly," whispered Holmes, and it was the first time that night that he had used the word without immediately disdaining it.

He pushed open the wooden door. Behind it was no passage, as I had hoped, but a narrow, dark space between the wall and the earth, perhaps just a cavity, yet it led onward to a second, low opening that opened into the pit. It smelled of damp clay, of cold soil. Not pleasant, but at least honest.

I tried to squeeze through, but at that moment I heard a soft click behind us: not of the door, but of a tool. A clamp opening. The man had the metal rod.

Holmes pushed me along in front of him, and I groped for footholds in the darkness. The floor was uneven, and I stumbled, barely catching myself. My breath whistled louder now, because exertion is undeniable. I hated that sound, hated it so much that for a moment I thought the man must be able to follow it like a trail.

Then I suddenly felt something on my sleeve, a slight tug, as if a hand had grabbed the fabric. I turned halfway, saw nothing but darkness, but I knew it wasn't a hand. It was the clip at the end of the metal rod that had clamped onto my coat.

Holmes reacted before I could utter a sound. His hand snapped at my sleeve, not to restrain me, but to stretch the fabric taut. With his other hand, he plunged the knife into the material, close to where the clip was attached. A sharp rip, a sharp yield, and my coat gave off a tuft of its edge like an animal leaving a tuft of fur behind to escape.

The clamp tugged at the severed piece, and I heard the faint squeak of the covering as the man took a step to retrieve his loot. Holmes pulled me on. We crawled out through the low opening, and cold mist hit me like a hand to the face.

Outside was the pit, open, red, damp. The clay clung to my shoes, and I immediately understood why Holmes had warned me earlier not to lean on anything. Everything stuck here. Every step here left a confession.

Holmes didn't stop. He led me along the edge of the pit, deep in the shadow of the sheds. Behind us, I heard the shed door, that silent opening which by now sounded like a personal mockery. Then the soft creaking, this time outdoors, on earth and wood. The man was following us.

"He doesn't want to scream," I whispered, more out of instinct than knowledge.

"No," said Holmes. "He wants us to scream."

We reached the fence. The loose board we had come through was still in place so that it could be pushed out. Holmes pushed it aside, and we squeezed through. My breath whistled, I tasted metal in my mouth, and the dizziness flickered again, as if my body had decided to blackmail my reason.

Hansom was still standing in the road, a dark outline in the mist. The coachman had held the horse still, as if he understood that one doesn't ask many questions on this night if one wants to keep one's head. Holmes jumped onto the step, pulled open the door, pushed me inside, and followed me in. Then he gave the coachman a brief instruction, so concise and so firm that it sounded like a command not to be debated.

The carriage lurched into motion. I heard a final, faint squeak behind us, then nothing but the dull rhythm of hooves. I leaned my head against the padding and felt my chest work against the fabric, as if trying to squeeze out of a cage that was too tight. I held the pungent cloth to my nose and took a quick breath. My head cleared for a moment, but the weariness remained like a weight on my eyelids.

Holmes sat opposite me and, in the dim light, did not fully open the bundle of oilcloths, but only pulled out the sheet with the alias line, so that it was visible in the faint light. He examined it like a naturalist examining an unknown insect: with cool curiosity, but without any romantic inclination.

"He wanted us to read it in his presence," Holmes said.

"Why?" I asked hoarsely.

"Because you can read faces better than paper," he replied. "He wanted to see which name you would get. That would have been worth more to him than any document."

I closed my eyes briefly. In my mind, I saw the woman's gray notebook, the one we had left behind. It stood there like an accusation, and at the same time like a salvation, because it wasn't in his hands. But was it really? I remembered the squeaking outside the house, the silence that had clung to the door. He had been everywhere there was paper.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Holmes' gaze drifted to the window, as if he could read the city's shape in the mist. "A place where one can lie without feeling guilty," he said softly. "A place where politeness covers the truth like varnish on leather."

"A club," I murmured.

"Yes," said Holmes. "A club where people say things with a smile that they would never repeat in court. And where men are so well-groomed that their boots shine even after walking through mud."

As I heard those words, an image flashed through my mind: bare boots against red clay. A man who works not only in the shadows, but also in the limelight. A man who knows that in London, some doors open more easily if you strike the right tone.

The carriage turned, and the sounds of the city changed. Fewer open spaces, more cobblestones, more facades, more lanterns cutting their circles through the fog. I heard voices, muffled, and once laughter seeping from a door tassel into the night. The air smelled less of earth and more of smoke and warm fabric.

Holmes leaned forward. "Watson," he said quietly, "you are about to enter a room where words are traded like coins. You must hear what is said, and even more so what is not said. And you must, as best you can, hold your breath. It is your only loud secret tonight."

I nodded, and the nodding was difficult. Not because of doubt, but because I knew he was right. In a club where everyone is polite, any rudeness stands out immediately. And a whistling breath is often more impolite than a curse in such circles.

The carriage stopped. Holmes stepped out first, offered me his hand, and I took it, though reluctantly, feeling my balance unsteady. Before us stood a building, its entrance sheltered by a portico. One lantern burned brighter than the others, and through the glass of the door I saw warm light and shadows of people moving in a space where night is treated not as a danger, but as an opportunity.

Holmes straightened his coat as if he were not changing his clothes, but merely putting on a role he had worn many times before. Then he stepped towards the steps, and I followed him, trying to keep my breathing shallow, my head clear, and my fear where the fog would have preferred it to remain.

The doorman at the club's entrance was a man whose job was not to open doors, but to sort glances. He wore a livery that fit so perfectly it seemed to be part of his skin, and his face had that impassive politeness which is not friendly, but scrutinizing. When Holmes approached him, a brief exchange of glances, a barely perceptible nod, was all it took for the door to open as if it had never been locked. In such places, the lock is not made of metal, but of habit.

A warm rush of air met my breath, thick with the scent of cigar smoke, polished wood, and that mixture of perfume and brandy that men mistake for worldliness. For a moment, it was almost a relief to smell something other than shoe polish and stale steam. But the warmth also made my body want to take a deep breath, as if it had decided this air was less dangerous. I forced it not to. The whistling continued, only muffled because the room was full of other sounds.

The foyer led into a larger room, a drawing-room, where the light was soft and plentiful. Men stood in groups, speaking softly, laughing at appropriate moments, each sentence so carefully considered that it contained neither too much nor too little truth. At one end stood a fireplace, before which two elderly gentlemen reclined in leather armchairs, as if they had already read the world and found it only moderately entertaining. Brass gleamed everywhere, and newspapers lay on the tables, their pages untouched, as if laid out there for educational purposes only, not for reading.

Holmes moved as if he had been born there. His gait was steady, his bearing unobtrusive, and yet no one avoided him, as if he were invisible; on the contrary, a few glances followed him with the fleeting respect one shows a man one cannot categorize. I, however, felt like an intruder, not because of my clothes, but because of my breathing. Every sound from my chest seemed louder in this room than an out-of-place word.

Holmes didn't lead me directly to the center of the drawing-room, but to the side, where a small table stood, upon which carafes of port and glasses were laid out. He took one of the glasses, filled it only halfway, and handed it to me, not as an invitation to drink, but as a prop. A man without a glass stands out in such rooms like a man without a hat on the street.

"Don't drink," Holmes whispered, without visibly moving his lips. "Just hold it."

I nodded and held the glass as if it could calm my hand. The port smelled sweet and heavy, and I felt my stomach rebel against it. The night had not only weakened my body but also made it sensitive, as if every organ had decided to voice its opinion.

Holmes' gaze slid over the faces, not greedily, but appraisingly. He wasn't looking for the man himself, but for the reactions a man leaves behind. In a street, you find footprints in the mud. In a club, you find footprints in a glance.

"There," he whispered after a while.

He didn't gesture. He simply moved, and I followed. We passed a group of younger men discussing a race, and a table where a man with rosy cheeks and a voice too loud was telling stories that no one obviously believed, but everyone listened politely. It was a place where lies were tolerated not because they were believed to be true, but because they kept the peace.

By the fireplace, half in shadow, stood a man who was indistinguishable from the others in any remarkable way, and yet stood out precisely because of that. He wasn't the loudest, the most elegant, or the youngest. But I saw something on his boots that wouldn't let me go that night: they gleamed. Not excessively, not like mirrors, but in such a way that the light clung to them. And as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, I heard a tiny squeak, barely more than a whisper, which nevertheless reached me through the murmur of the parlor like a carefully chosen word.

My arm burned, as if my body had made the connection before my mind could fully accept it. My breathing became shallow, and I felt the whistling grow louder again, as if my body were trying to betray its own terror.

Holmes approached the man as if by chance. "Mr. Hargreaves," he said, his voice friendly enough not to be noticeable. "How gratifying to see you here."

The man turned his head, and I saw his face in the fireplace light. He wasn't young, but strong, with a well-groomed mustache and eyes that weren't soft. He smiled politely, but it was a smile that generated no warmth. It was the politeness of a man who had grown accustomed to the fact that politeness gave him power.

"Mr. Holmes," he replied, and at that moment I realized that Holmes was not only known in this room, but that his name carried weight here. "I heard you had recently been keeping London busy again with your... observations."

"London keeps itself busy," said Holmes lightly. "I'm just watching. May I introduce you to my friend, Dr. Watson?"

Mr. Hargreaves' gaze slid to me, and I felt it like a cold hand. It was brief, but it lingered a fraction longer on my chest, as if he heard something I couldn't hide. Then he nodded.

"A pleasure, Doctor," he said.

"The pleasure is mine," I replied, forcing my voice into the evenness expected in drawing-room conversation. It took more effort than a march.

Holmes turned to the fireplace as if discussing something trivial. "I'm dealing with a minor problem," he said. "A name that isn't where it should be in a register. You know a thing or two about registers, don't you?"

Mr. Hargreaves smiled, as if the topic were a harmless whim. "You find many registers in this city," he said. "And many names. Some are misspelled, some are misrepresented. It's an unfortunate but commonplace occurrence."

"Regrettable," Holmes repeated. "And yet there are people who make a tool out of regret."

Mr. Hargreaves took a sip from his glass, set it down, and I saw how his hand remained perfectly still. "Tools are always dependent on the person wielding them," he said.

Holmes' gaze remained friendly. "Certainly," he said. "Tell me: What do you know about a copyist in the city registry, a woman with an ink stain on her index finger?"

For a fraction of a second, Mr. Hargreaves' face changed. Not drastically. Just a tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth, as if he'd heard a word he hadn't expected. But Holmes saw it. I saw it too, and I felt my breath quicken a fraction, even though I fought against it.

"I don't know many copyists personally," Mr. Hargreaves said lightly. "But I know the institution. And I recommend, Mr. Holmes, that you ask your questions where they belong. Not in a club."

Holmes nodded, as if gratefully accepting the suggestion. "Of course," he said. "But sometimes a question asked in the wrong room leads to a truer answer than one asked in the right."

Mr. Hargreaves' gaze flickered briefly over my shoulder, as if checking who was within earshot. Then he leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice. "There are things you won't find in registers in London," he said quietly. "And there are things you will find in registers even though they don't belong there. You'd better be careful when you start stirring things up."

"I am not stirring," said Holmes. "I am merely stating a fact."

Mr. Hargreaves' smile remained polite. "Statements can be more dangerous than actions," he said. "They get people to act."

Holmes's gaze was no longer friendly. It had grown colder, without anyone else noticing. "Perhaps," he said. "But sometimes they make people stop."

Mr. Hargreaves raised his voice again to blend in with the general murmur. "You have a talent for drama," he said. "I hope you keep it for your cases and not for society."

Holmes smiled, and it was one of those smiles he rarely showed because they had more edge than warmth. "Society is a case," he said.

At that moment another gentleman approached the fireplace, greeted Mr. Hargreaves, and introduced himself by a name I immediately forgot because my mind was preoccupied with something else: the newcomer's shoes. They weren't shiny. They were dull, a little dusty, like ordinary boots after an evening in London. And yet, I had the feeling that Mr. Hargreaves's gaze quickened for a moment when he saw him, as if checking whether someone was connected to him.

Holmes seized the moment. "We'll talk later," he said quietly to Mr. Hargreaves, as if it were a polite formality.

"As you wish," he replied.

Holmes pulled me away from the fireplace, and I followed, glad for the movement, because standing still forces my body to listen to itself. We went into a corner where a mirror hung, in which one could look at oneself without being noticed, because so many people do it. Holmes positioned himself so that he could see the fireplace in the mirror, while seemingly weighing the glass in his hand.

"He knows her," Holmes whispered.

"He didn't admit it," I whispered.

Holmes' gaze remained fixed on the mirror. "No one admits anything in this room," he said. "That would be impolite. But one betrays oneself by what one tries to avoid. He didn't dismiss the copyist as unimportant. He treated her as a threat."

My breathing was a soft whistling sound, and I hated that it seemed audible even in a room full of smoke and voices. Holmes glanced at me briefly.

"Stay put," he whispered.

"I'm holding on," I murmured.

Holmes' gaze returned to the mirror. "He did something else, too," he said. "When I mentioned the ink stain, he didn't just react. He checked who was listening. That means he's afraid of a name in this room. Not the woman's name. The name of the one connected to her."

"So the man with the bare boots..." I began.

Holmes shook his head almost imperceptibly. "Not visible here," he whispered. "But present here. In the form of expectations. And in the form of men like Hargreaves."

At that moment I noticed something on the floor, near the edge of the carpet. It was tiny, barely more than a stain. But the color was familiar to me by now. A small grain of red clay, squashed as if someone had brushed it off their shoe.

Holmes' eyes fell upon it as well. He didn't pick it up. He didn't need it. It was a sign that we were on the right path.

"The clay followed him," I whispered.

"Or he brought him with him," Holmes replied. "So that we know he's here too."

We stood there, in a room filled with polite voices, and I had the feeling that the fog outside was merely the crude form of a game. In here, the game was more subtle. Here, lies were told without anyone raising their voice. And I realized that we were in a club that truly lived up to its name: a place where truth isn't denied, but elegantly shifted.

Holmes let his gaze linger for a moment on the fireplace in the mirror, as if he could read more in a man's posture than in his words. Then he turned away, so subtly that it seemed like a mere stroll, and led me deeper into the drawing-room. A waiter approached us, a tray of glasses in his hand, and Holmes, without looking, took another glass, only to put it down again. It was a movement that meant nothing, and yet it was the key to everything: in a room where everyone pretends that nothing means anything, one must look for meaning where it disguises itself as nothingness.

"We won't stay in the same place," Holmes murmured so quietly that it was lost in the general murmur. "And we won't stare in one direction for too long."

I nodded, my breath whistling outrageously loudly in my own ears. The smoke was heavy, but it was a familiar enemy; one can cough against smoke without anyone else reading fault into it. Against this whistling, however, there was no defense but silent persistence. I held the glass in my hand and occasionally raised it to my lips without drinking, lest anyone get the idea that my discomfort was the reason for my reluctance.

We moved past a card table where three men with serious faces were playing for small stakes, as if composure, rather than money, were their real possession. Another circle stood by a wall on which hung an engraving of the city; they were debating whether a new bridge would improve or ruin the district, each sentence so carefully weighed as to contain both agreement and disagreement. Holmes overheard without listening, and I noticed him occasionally nodding his head as if he were part of this harmless conversation.

But his gaze remained on Mr. Hargreaves.

The man had resumed the conversation by the fireplace as if it had never been interrupted, and yet something was different. He spoke more softly now, not because he lacked courage, but because he used the sounds of the room as a cloak. Beside him stood the newcomer, whose boots had been dull, and a third man had joined them, a gentleman with a narrow face and a white, neatly tied neckerchief, whose hands were remarkably clean, as if he had touched only paper all day.

Holmes didn't head directly for her. Instead, he led me down a side passage that must have led to a library, because through a half-open door I could see shelves and the dim glow of a green reading lamp. At the entrance to this passage stood another servant, older, with that discreet vigilance that doesn't ask questions but decides.

Holmes stopped in front of him, smiled curtly, and said a name I didn't catch. The servant hesitated for a moment, then took a half-step to the side, so subtly as if he were simply adjusting his position. It was a small movement, but it meant: passage granted.

We went into the library. The noise level dropped immediately, and the silence here was different from that in the hushed house. This silence wasn't artificial. It was the silence of men who read to avoid speaking. The smoke was lighter, and I felt my chest feel a touch less constricted. The whistling remained, but it was as if the space had softened its edge.

Holmes headed towards a table on which lay a few letters, neatly stacked as if they had just been left for someone. There was no seal, but a ribbon around them, which one only untied if one was among them. Beside them lay a leather-bound guestbook and a penholder, its metal gleaming in the lamplight.

Holmes did not bend over them. He pretended to be merely looking at a newspaper display. But his eyes swept over the letters, and I saw him spot a tiny dot in one of the envelopes, exactly where one would least expect it: on the inner edge, as if it had been placed not for decoration, but as a mark of identification.

"Here he is again," I whispered.

"Yes," Holmes replied, without raising his gaze. "But here he is more clever. He is not standing on the front. He is standing where only he who opens it can see."

Inside the library there was a second door, heavier, darker, and in front of it a small mirror positioned so that a servant could see the corridor beyond without turning his head. It was no accident. In a club, not only is entry controlled, but also the route.

Holmes took a book from the shelf, opened it to a specific page, and held it so that I could see the mirror through the gap. I only understood its purpose when Mr. Hargreaves' figure appeared in the mirror. He left the fireplace area, walked slowly with the two men through the drawing-room as if deep in conversation, and then, with a movement that seemed almost accidental, turned into the side passage leading to the library.

"Now," Holmes murmured.

He left the book as if it had slipped from his hand and led me to another bookshelf, its back facing the aisle. The shelves were arranged so that a narrow gap remained between the wall and the wood. One would have gone unnoticed were one not compelled to pay attention to such details. Holmes led me there without it seeming like a maneuver, and we suddenly found ourselves in a niche that concealed us just enough to listen without being seen.

Mr. Hargreaves stepped through the heavy door. The other two followed. I heard the soft, solid sound of wood closing, and then the corridor beyond was silent. Not a hushed silence like in the House of the Quiet, but the silence of a room where one feels alone.

Then I heard voices.

They weren't loud, but clear enough, because the door wasn't built for ears, but for eyes. Eyes are easily blocked; words find their way.

"...if you think I would let my name appear in any matter that smacks of manipulation," said Mr. Hargreaves, "then you underestimate how careful I am."

The man with the white scarf answered, his voice possessing that dry precision I know from lawyers. "Caution is the only thing keeping this matter alive," he said. "And it will only live as long as we maintain the proper form."

"Forms," repeated the third man, who wore matte boots. He sounded younger, more irritated. "They're always talking about forms. As if life were a form."

"That's how it is in London," the lawyer said. "A form, a stamp, a signature. And if one of these three pillars falls, the rest collapses like a poorly constructed building."

Holmes' head tilted slightly. I knew he weighed every word like a piece of metal.

"They let him go too far tonight," the younger man continued. "A doctor, a corpse in a bed, a trail of mud leading here. That's no longer discreet."

Mr. Hargreaves' reply was cold. "Discretion isn't about leaving no trace," he said. "Discretion is about making sure the traces belong to the right feet."

My arm was burning. I held the glass tighter, as if I could cling to this useless object.

"You're talking about that doctor," said the lawyer. "Watson. He's unpleasant because he writes."

"He writes what he's allowed to," Hargreaves replied. "And he has a talent for keeping quiet about things when he thinks it's noble. That makes him useful."

"Useful for what?" asked the younger one.

A brief silence. Then Hargreaves said, more slowly: "For a will."

The word struck me unexpectedly, not because I didn't understand it, but because it suddenly acquired a second meaning. A will, in the hands of an honest man, is a final act of order. In the hands of a man like Hargreaves, it must have been a tool to enforce order.

"The document is finished," said the lawyer. "All that's missing is the appropriate chain of witnesses and circumstances. And the chain must appear as if it closed itself."

"They said it was signed," murmured the younger one.

"Signed, yes," the lawyer replied. "By a hand that is accepted. And with a seal that is not questioned. That's the beauty of seals: they are like shiny boots. They gleam and feign cleanliness."

I heard a faint noise, as if someone were setting down a glass. Then Hargreaves said, "The man whose name we bear will soon no longer speak. He has already been pushed in the right direction."

"And what if he does speak?" asked the younger one.

"Then they'll tell him he's confused," Hargreaves replied. "Or they'll look him up in a register and find out he's not who he thinks he is. That's the end of any discussion."

Holmes' hand briefly touched my sleeve, a silent signal to remain calm. I felt my breath want to quicken, not just because of my chest, but because of the cold these sentences allowed. A will that no one wrote. A death that seems like a mere formality. And a doctor conceived as a tool, not a human being.

"We have to go," Holmes whispered.

"Now?" I whispered.

"Before they open the door," he replied.

We withdrew, as quietly as possible, away from the crack, back into the shadows of the library. Holmes placed the book he had taken from the shelf elsewhere, as if he were a mindless reader. Then he walked, without haste, to the library entrance and stood there as if contemplating a picture on the wall. I stepped beside him, still holding the glass, and tried to muffle the whistling by barely parting my lips.

The heavy inner door opened. Mr. Hargreaves stepped out, the lawyer and the younger man behind him. They walked past us, so close that I caught the gleam of their boots in the corner of my eye. Hargreaves' gaze brushed against us, as if it were a casual courtesy. But I sensed a brief measuring in it, as if he knew that on this night, no one is in the right place by chance.

Holmes inclined his head slightly. "Mr. Hargreaves," he said with that composure which prevents anyone from reading suspicion into accusation.

"Mr. Holmes," replied Hargreaves.

"One more question," said Holmes. "Do you know a gentleman who has recently taken up dealing with estates? A certain Mr. Calder..."

Hargreaves' face didn't change. But his answer came a fraction too quickly. "Calder is a name many people have," he said. "You won't want to look for it in London."

Holmes smiled politely. "Then I suppose I'll have to look for him outside London," he said.

Hargreaves' eyes narrowed slightly, almost imperceptibly. "Good night," he said.

"Good night," replied Holmes.

They continued walking, and I saw the younger one turn his head to the side for a moment, as if to check once more whether he recognized us. Then the salon swallowed them up—the light, the murmuring, the laughter.

Holmes led me to the exit, without haste, but with a purposefulness that brooked no argument. When we stepped back into the foyer, it was as if we were emerging from a warm aquarium into the real night. The fog outside greeted us, cold and heavy, and yet I was grateful for it. It didn't lie politely. It was simply there.

Holmes stopped in the street, pulled up his collar and looked at me.

"A will," he said quietly. "A document that creates an entire truth, if only it is stamped correctly."

I tried to speak, but a coughing fit rose within me. I suppressed it with difficulty, and the whistling sounded briefly like a discordant note.

Holmes' voice remained calm. "We're going to see this Mr. Calder now," he said. "Or the one who signs on his behalf. And we're going to see who inherits in this town when a name gets misplaced in the register."

He raised his hand, summoned the first Hansom who emerged from the mist, and gave the coachman an address that meant nothing to me. Then he helped me inside without a word too many, and as the carriage pulled away, I felt as if we still carried the club's smoke on our coats like an invisible stamp.

Outside, the club remained warm and polite. Inside, in the rolling carriage, the air was cold, and the truth began to feel like a blade finally drawn from its sheath.

### A will that no one wrote

The Hansom carried us away as if trying to beat the warm breath of the club from our coats as quickly as possible. No sooner had we left the rows of lampposts on the main street behind us than the fog became that familiar enemy again, swallowing contours yet amplifying every sound our bodies unwittingly emitted. I no longer held the glass from the club; it had been left behind like a small act of courtesy I couldn't afford. Instead, I held the prickly handkerchief, which by now was more a symbol of my dependence than a source of comfort. Each brief breath on it brought clarity, but no peace.

Holmes sat opposite me, barely allowing the carriage to rock, so still was he. There were moments when he seemed like a man who wasn't breathing at all. Then again, when the carriage dipped into a hollow or a wheel skipped over a pothole, I could see from the tension in his shoulders that he was, in truth, registering every movement of the city. He wasn't fleeing, but he was leaving a place where words are weighed and entering a world where the weight of things is different: keys, stamps, seals, names.

"Calder," I said quietly, because the word was stuck in my head like a stone. "They mentioned the name to check Hargreaves."

Holmes barely nodded. "I called him to see if Hargreaves was lying," he replied. "And to see how he lies."

"And how did he lie?"

Holmes' gaze drifted to the window, as if he could read something in the mist, something written just for him. "He answered too quickly," he said. "A man who doesn't know a name needs a moment to place it or dismiss it as insignificant. Hargreaves treated him as a threat without admitting it."

I felt my arm burning beneath the sleeve, and I hated that even this burning felt like confirmation. The enemy had drawn us into a system of signs where every pain was a clue and every clue a trap.

The carriage finally stopped on a street that seemed hardly different at night than during the day, except that the windows were darker and the sounds less intense. Before us stood a building whose facade was unassuming, but precisely for that reason commanded respect. A brass plaque beside the door was so clean that it briefly gleamed in the lantern light. It bore a name, and below it, in smaller print, a profession that carries more weight in London than many a title.

Calder & Wynne, Solicitors.

Holmes got out, paid the coachman, and before I had even reached solid ground, he had already propped me up against the step. It wasn't tenderness, but pragmatic caution. My balance was a precarious commodity that night. I stood before the door, feeling the cold breath of the fog, and my own breath answered with a faint whistling sound that was far too distinct in the stillness of that street.

Holmes didn't knock. He took a small case from his pocket and showed the brass eye in the peephole something I couldn't see. A moment passed, then we heard the sound of a bolt, which, after the silent doors of the quiet house, felt almost comforting. The door opened, and a man stood before us, dapper, slim, with the expression of someone who had seen too many nocturnal visitors to be surprised, but not enough to accept it as normal.

"Mr. Holmes," he said, and I immediately understood that names open doors here too.

"Mr. Wynne," Holmes replied. "I regret the hour."

The man stepped aside. "The hour is rarely to blame," he said dryly. "Are you coming in?"

We entered a hallway that smelled of wax, paper, and cold coal. It was a scent that didn't live, but rather preserved. A lampshade cast a yellowish light on framed documents on the wall, and I felt a strange unease at the sight of them. Too many papers, too many stamps. Too much of that order which soothes people because it pretends that truth can be folded and filed away.

Mr. Wynne led us into a ground-floor room that could be described less as an office and more as an archive. Shelves reached to the ceiling, filled with files, slipcases, and bound volumes. On the desk lay a red leather case, and next to it a seal stamp, its handle gleaming dully in the light.

Holmes did not sit down. He remained standing, as if to prevent the room from drawing him into its own rules. "I'm looking for Mr. Calder," he said.

A shadow fell across Wynne's face. "Mr. Calder isn't here," he replied. "He's been out of London for three days."

"Outside London," Holmes repeated calmly, as if testing the sound. "Then he's difficult to reach."

"He is available when necessary," said Wynne.

Holmes' voice remained polite, and I remembered how dangerous politeness can be when used as a knife. "It's necessary," he said. "A will is circulating that they want to treat as genuine. And I have reason to believe it isn't."

Wynne didn't place his hand on the cassette, but his gaze drifted toward it, and that gaze was like an unspoken concession. "You understand," he said, "that I cannot speak freely about documents entrusted to my firm."

"Of course," Holmes replied. "Then don't talk about the document. Talk about the seal."

Wynne raised his eyebrows, slightly. "The seal?"

Holmes took a step closer to the desk without touching it. "A seal is a piece of metal and wax," he said quietly. "And yet it causes people to move their fortunes, lose their homes, change their names. When someone forges a seal, they are not forging wax. They are forging trust."

Wynne remained silent for a moment too long. Then he said: "There are many things that can be faked if one has enough time and resources."

Holmes' gaze remained on the stamp. "And enough red clay," he said.

I saw Wynne's hand, which had been perfectly still just moments before, twitch ever so slightly, as if a muscle had betrayed itself. It was so subtle that no one would have noticed it in everyday life. That night, it was a scream.

"Red clay?" said Wynne, and the words sounded like a man hoping to obscure the meaning through repetition.

Holmes nodded. "Brick and clay," he said. "Brickfields. Molds. Dies. And a man with shiny boots, leading the city through registers."

Wynne's face remained composed, but I now recognized something in his gaze that wasn't legal caution. It was fear, subtle, polished, politely concealed. Fear of a mistake, not written in a contract, but in a single step.

"They shouldn't be here," Wynne said quietly.

Holmes' voice was mild. "You mean we shouldn't be in your office. Or you mean we shouldn't be involved in this matter."

Wynne looked away, as if he needed a moment to compose himself so as not to say too much. Then he went to a bookshelf, pulled out a heavy volume, and laid it on the table. He didn't open it all the way, but only enough to show a page filled with numbers and names. I saw that it wasn't an ordinary book. It was a register, but not the city's. It was a chancery register: entries of deposits, deeds, and seals held in safekeeping.

Wynne pointed to a line. "A week ago," he said quietly, "a will was left here. Not by Mr. Calder. By a messenger. With a letter claiming to be from a client."

"Which client?" Holmes asked.

Wynne hesitated, and in that hesitation lay the whole mechanism of power. Then he said, "Sir Alistair Wexford."

The name meant nothing to me, but the way Wynne pronounced it made it clear he carried weight. Wealth. Influence. The kind of name that sounds good in clubs and opens doors in government offices.

Holmes nodded, as if he had already expected the name. "And who does the will favor?" he asked.

Wynne didn't answer immediately. He glanced at me briefly, and in that look there was not mistrust, but a kind of assessment, as if he wanted to test whether a doctor is the kind of person who breaks down or who carries on. Then he said, "It favors a distant relative who has never appeared before."

"A sudden inheritance," Holmes murmured.

"A very sudden one," said Wynne.

I felt the pressure in my chest more intensely, as if my body had understood that not just paper, but lives were being moved. My breathing was shallow, and the whistling was an ugly commentary on Wynne's calm tone.

Holmes leaned forward slightly. "Show me the document," he said.

Wynne went to the red cassette, placed his hand on it, paused as if resisting an inner oath. Then he opened it. The hinge made a soft click, an ordinary click, and I never would have thought in another life that I could feel joy about it.

He pulled out a sheet of paper and placed it on the table. Holmes did not touch it with his hand. He took the tweezers, lifted the edge, and examined the paper against the light. Then I saw it too, before he said anything: at the bottom edge, near the signature, was a tiny, almost invisible dot.

Holmes' voice was barely more than a whisper. "There he is," he said.

Wynne's face turned pale. "I didn't notice him," he said.

"You shouldn't notice it," Holmes replied calmly. "It's not made for eyes that believe in stamps and signatures. It's made for eyes that have doubt as their profession."

Wynne swallowed. "If the document is false," he said quietly, "then that means..."

"It means," Holmes interrupted, "that someone is trying to reap a death before it has occurred. Or that it has already occurred and one is merely maintaining the formalities."

My mouth went dry. A will that no one wrote. A name that suddenly inherits. And somewhere in the background, a man who keeps records like a knife.

Wynne looked at Holmes, and there was now a crack in his politeness. "Mr. Holmes," he said, "if you are right, then not only Sir Alistair is in danger. Then everyone who has touched this document is in danger."

Holmes nodded. "Yes," he said quietly. "And you will tell me who the messenger was. For if we know the path of the paper, we know the path of the hand that carried it."

Wynne opened her mouth to answer, and at that moment, very quietly, I heard a sound behind us in the hallway that immediately sounded wrong in this house: the subtle squeak of leather against wood, as if someone had tried to dampen the step, but not completely.

Holmes' head lifted. Wynne's eyes widened. And my own breath whistled, as if guiding the intruder.

For a moment, it was as if the entire office held its breath. The creaking in the corridor had been so faint that it could have gone unnoticed had I not already been conditioned to the sound that night, like an animal to a whistle. Holmes's head remained slightly tilted, and I saw him not only listening but calculating: distance, direction, possibility. Mr. Wynne, on the other hand, was not a man who calculated such things. He was a man who calculated forms, and the sound in the corridor did not fit any form.

"Do you have a back entrance?" Holmes asked quietly.

Wynne's lips parted, but the answer paused for a heartbeat, his gaze fixed on the door of the room, as if it might save him if he only looked long enough. Then he nodded. "Through the yard," he whispered. "But..."

Holmes raised his hand. "No buts," he said. "You have someone in your house who hasn't been let in."

The squeaking returned, closer. Then a second sound that sent a shiver down my spine: the quiet, matter-of-fact click of a latch. Not one that's closed from the inside, but one that's released from the outside, by a hand that knows how to speak to metal.

Wynne's face turned pale. "That's impossible," he exclaimed.

"On this night, impossibility is merely an imprecise word," said Holmes.

He stepped quickly but without haste to the door, slid the bolt shut from the inside, and pulled the key from the lock, as if to deprive the intruder of his tool before he could use it. Then he reached for the lamp on the desk and turned it down, dimming the light in the room. We suddenly found ourselves in a dim twilight that held more shadows than light.

"Stay there," Holmes whispered to Wynne.

The lawyer nodded silently, his hands on the table, as if he were a man defending himself in a trial whose rules he did not know.

Holmes didn't lead me to the door, but to the wall where a heavy curtain hung, concealing a niche in the corner. Behind it stood a tall, dark wooden wardrobe. Holmes didn't open it. He

positioned himself in front of it so that he could survey the room while remaining in shadow. He gestured for me to stand in the niche where the curtain broke my outline.

I obeyed, not because I enjoyed obeying, but because my body at that moment was incapable of carrying out my own idea. My breath wheezed, and I pressed the cloth to my nose, taking in only the tiniest breath, just enough to keep my head from going into a fog. The scent of wax and paper mingled with the sharpness of the cloth. A strange, unpleasant comfort.

The squeaking stopped. A pause. Then a soft rustling, as if fabric were being smoothed. And finally: footsteps. Not hurried, not stumbling. The footsteps of a man who has time.

A shadow slipped beneath the door before the handle even moved. The handle didn't move immediately. Instead, there was a soft, very fine scraping sound, as if someone were working on the lock with a thin piece of metal. I recognized that sound from the field, when opening crates that weren't meant for you. It's the sound of patience with a sharp point.

Wynne stared at the door like a man who believes his reputation will protect him. Holmes, on the other hand, didn't stare; he waited.

Then the scratching stopped. A soft click. The handle went down, very slowly, as if it didn't want to reveal that it was moving. The door opened a crack.

And instead of a face, something else appeared first: the tip of a thin metal rod, which pushed into the room like a finger. A small clip was attached to the end of the rod. It held a piece of paper.

The staff pushed the paper into the room until it was visible. Then it remained silent, as if to give us the opportunity to respond politely.

Holmes' voice was calm, almost friendly. "You save yourself the trouble of coming in," he said.

A voice from the hallway, quiet and precise: "You don't have to enter a room to dominate it."

"One doesn't have to speak to betray oneself," Holmes replied.

The staff pulled the paper back slightly, as if the hand behind it had hesitated for a moment. Then it pushed it forward again. The paper was a business card, clean, thick cardstock. And on it, in a script that tried so hard to appear official that it was almost laughable, was written:

SA Wexford – Probate Matters

There was no additional information, just that tiny dot again at the edge.

Wynne involuntarily took a step forward, but Holmes raised his hand, and Wynne stopped as if he had been held by the chest.

"They are using his name," Holmes said quietly.

"I manage it," the voice replied. "As one does with assets."

Holmes' gaze flickered briefly to the register volume, which still lay open on the table. Then to the red box. Then back to the door. "You are not Mr. Calder," he said.

A soft laugh came from the hallway. "Mr. Calder is a very useful name," said the voice. "And many people have useful names."

"And whose name do you bear tonight?" asked Holmes.

"The one they give me," the voice replied calmly. "The one they accept."

I felt my arm burn, as if my body were protesting against the cold. And my breath whistled, as if it had decided to be especially audible at that moment. I pressed my lips together, but the whistling remained, like a bothersome animal that you can't get rid of.

The voice was silent for a moment. Then she said, almost casually: "The doctor is here too."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Wynne's gaze flickered towards the alcove, as if he had only just truly noticed me in that sentence. Holmes remained motionless, but I could see from the tension in his fingers around the knife that he was ready.

"You hear well," said Holmes.

"I hear what is mine," the voice replied. "And tonight, the doctor belongs to a case that is not yet closed."

The metal rod suddenly pushed a second piece of paper into the room. This time it wasn't cardboard, but a folded sheet, thin, almost transparent. It slid to the middle of the floor and came to rest there.

Holmes made no move to retrieve it. He left it as if it were a snake. "They are eager," he said.

"Eagerness is politeness," replied the voice. "And I am a very polite man."

The word "polite" sounded like a threat coming from that mouth.

Holmes raised the tweezers, took a half step forward, but remained positioned so as not to completely abandon his cover. He picked up the sheet and unfolded it without touching it. I could make out the writing, even from the niche. It was narrow, neat, and it already seemed to have taken root in my nerves.

A will is merely a register awaiting death.

Below it was an address. And below that, in smaller print, a sentence that affected me more than the threat:

Bring the doctor with you. He is the witness who writes.

Wynne let out a faint sound, little more than a stifled gasp. "This is blackmail," he whispered.

Holmes folded the paper again, as if closing a blade. "No," he said calmly. "This is an invitation."

"Surely you wouldn't..." Wynne began.

Holmes' gaze remained cold. "You will now tell me what the messenger looked like," he said. "And you will tell me if anyone in this firm has access to your seal. For if I accept this invitation, I do so not as a guest, but as a hunter."

A brief silence fell over the hallway. Then the metal rod withdrew, as silently as it had come. The door remained ajar, as if to show us that it could be opened again at any time. Then we heard footsteps, that same soft squeak, and it moved away, unhurriedly, as if the whole scene had been just a polite visit.

Holmes waited until the last sound had faded away. Only then did he step out of the shadows, open the door a crack, and look into the hallway. Empty. Only the smell of cold air drifting in from outside and a faint whiff of something greasy that I had come to loathe.

Holmes closed the door, this time loudly enough that the wood acknowledged its existence. Then he turned to Wynne.

"Now," he said quietly, "now you begin to tell your story."

Wynne sank into the chair as if someone had suddenly taken his legs out from under him. "The messenger," he began, his voice no longer that of a man who loved legal jargon, but that of a man who knew fear. "He wore a dark coat. He spoke little. But his boots..." Wynne swallowed. "They were spotless. And he had no mud on them, even though it had rained."

Holmes nodded. "And the seal?"

Wynne looked at the stamp on the table as if seeing it for the first time. "It's locked away," he whispered. "In the box. I have the key."

Holmes's gaze hardened. "You have a key," he said. "How many?"

Wynne opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then he said quietly, "Two. Mr. Calder has the other one."

Holmes nodded slowly. "And Mr. Calder has been outside London for three days," he said. "How convenient."

I felt my head grow heavy. The air in the law firm wasn't as hushed as in the quiet house, but it was thick with paper and fear. My breath whistled, and the whistling now sounded like a malicious commentary on every sentence.

Holmes approached the table, picked up the letter with the dot, and placed it in the metal tube. "We're going," he said. "To the address on the invitation. But not to be guided. We're going to see who there thinks they can administer a death."

He looked at me. "Watson," he said softly, "stay close to me. And if you feel you need to take a deep breath, say so. Because I don't want your body to answer for him."

I nodded, and in that nod lay a bitter promise. For I knew that tonight my body didn't belong to me alone. It had become part of the game, a register in which my opponent had already made entries.

We didn't leave the law firm through the front door. Wynne, who had now fallen into a kind of mechanical obedience, led us through a narrow passage to a courtyard, where a small gate opened into a side alley. It wasn't an escape route for criminals, but one for discretion; in such houses, exits are built not for fires, but for scandals. The gate creaked as Wynne opened it, and I found the creaking a kind of comfort. A house that makes noise is more honest than one that swallows it.

Outside, the cold night air hit us. The fog had thinned, or perhaps it was simply different now that we were back on windier streets. I was breathing shallowly, yet I felt my chest yearning for a deep breath. My hand went to the pungent handkerchief, and I took a quick sniff, no more than necessary. It held my head upright, but it made my throat dry. I tasted something bitter and thought how unpleasant it is that in London you sometimes have to choose between being lucid or being alive.

Holmes paused for a moment, listening. Wynne stood beside us like a man awaiting a judge's decision. Then Holmes gave a curt nod. "No car outside," he murmured. "That means either he's left or he's waiting further away."

"Where are you taking us?" Wynne asked softly.

Holmes' gaze was cold. "For your own safety, you shouldn't know," he said. "Go back. Lock up. And don't write down anything you saw tonight. Not even for yourself."

Wynne swallowed, as if the request was both a relief and an insult. He nodded nonetheless and disappeared back through the gate into the courtyard, as if suddenly afraid of the open street.

Holmes turned to me. "We have an address," he said. "And we have a clue: he believes he can administer death. I want to see if he does that by causing it or merely by recording it."

"And Sir Alistair Wexford?" I asked hoarsely. "Is he alive?"

Holmes' mouth barely twitched. "That's the question the will answers without asking it," he said. "If he's dead, the document is a tool for moving assets around. If he's still alive, it's a tool for making him act like he's dead."

We went down the alley until we reached a wider street. There Holmes found a Hansom waiting in the mist and, without hesitation, gave the coachman the address from the invitation. I noticed how careful he was to ensure his tone didn't sound like haste. That night, haste could be a call, and calls are answered.

The carriage began to move. As we traveled, Holmes drew the metal tube from his pocket, opened it, and took out the folded invitation. He did not read it again in its entirety; he knew its contents. He merely examined the dot at the edge, as if it were a constellation to guide him.

"He marks his things," I said.

"Yes," Holmes replied. "But he doesn't mark them to find them again. He marks them to show us that he uses the same hand everywhere. That's vanity. And vanity is the leverage you need when an opponent is otherwise too slippery."

"Then he has a weakness," I murmured.

Holmes looked at me. "He has several," he said. "But they don't lie in his courage or his intelligence. They lie in his taste. He wants to be recognized. He wants his orderliness to be admired. And he wants to be thanked, in a way, for making the world as clean as he imagines it to be."

The word "clean" brought back the smell of shoe polish, and my stomach clenched briefly. My breathing became shallow, and the wheezing sounded harsher this time, as if the air itself were rubbing against my bronchial tubes.

"Watson," Holmes said quietly, "if it gets too cramped for you, just say so."

"I'll tell you," I replied, surprised by how honest I sounded. On other nights, I would have kept my weakness to myself. Tonight, silence was a luxury I couldn't afford.

The carriage finally stopped in front of a building that was neither ostentatious nor poor. It was a terraced house with a small front garden, its fence neatly painted. Two lanterns flanked the door, casting a warm light on the path. At first glance, it might have appeared to be the home of a wealthy merchant. But something was amiss. Not visible, but rather palpable. The ground-floor windows were not only closed, but so darkened from the inside that no light escaped, even though the lanterns outside were burning. As if they wanted to see without being seen.

Holmes got out, and I followed, more slowly. My chest felt like a corset laced too tightly. I held the handkerchief ready but didn't take another wisp, lest I become even drier. Holmes didn't go directly to the door. He first went to the fence, knelt down, and examined the ground.

There were tracks in the damp gravel of the path. Not many. And yet I recognized what he was looking for even before he said it: a reddish shimmer in one spot, as if someone had pressed clay into the gravel.

"Red clay," Holmes murmured.

"So he was here," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "Or someone to go for him," he said.

He stood up and looked at the door. There was no sign, no nameplate. Only a brass knocker, polished as if it were often used. Holmes didn't knock immediately. He bent down, sniffed the doorframe briefly, just as he had done the floor. Then he looked at me.

"Shoe polish," he said.

I felt my throat go dry. The smell was definitely there, subtle but unmistakable, mixed with something else: the scent of wax and freshly polished wood, as if this house weren't inhabited, but being prepared.

Holmes raised his hand and knocked, twice, with that quiet certainty that does not ask, but announces.

We waited. Nothing.

Holmes knocked a third time. Silence again.

Then, very quietly, I heard a noise inside. Not footsteps. More of a pulling sound, as if someone were moving a heavy object across a carpet. And along with it, very faintly, a sound that immediately made my stomach churn: a soft ticking.

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "A clockwork mechanism," he whispered.

"A trap?" I whispered.

"A test," Holmes corrected. "Like in the quiet house."

The door suddenly opened a crack, not pulled from the inside, but as if the bolt had simply been released so that it would give way slightly on its own. No face appeared. Only a dark crack from which warm, stale air seeped into the night.

And in that breeze lay the sweet, sharp scent I knew. The scent that makes my chest feel tighter.

Holmes grabbed my sleeve, pulling me back a step before my body instinctively wanted to move closer because the house promised light and warmth.

"Don't go in," he whispered. "He's got the air as a bouncer."

I stood in the fog, my chest heaving for air in panic. And at the same time, I understood that the enemy hadn't just shown us the way. He had led us to the threshold and now, with an invisible hand, he said: If you enter, I will hurt you. If you don't enter, I will remain master of the house.

Holmes peered into the crack without approaching. "Watson," he said quietly, "we must read this house without entering it. And for that, I need your gaze. What do you hear? What do you smell? What is your body telling you?"

I swallowed, fought against the pressure, and in that struggle I realized that my own body was actually making a statement. It wasn't just saying: danger. It was saying: known.

Because the smell coming from the crack didn't just remind me of the fumes. It reminded me of a night I hadn't written down.

## The doctor who didn't help

The smell seeping from the crack in the door was more than a chemical mixture. It was a memory settling in my lungs. It had that sweet undertone I'd sensed in the quiet house and the registry office, and yet there was something else in it, something more familiar, something that didn't smell of steam and poison, but of a night when I myself had opened a bottle, believing I had to help. The body recognizes such things before the mind can put them into words. My chest tightened, not just from irritation, but from guilt.

Holmes stood beside me, and I could tell he heard my breathing without looking at me. He had become so accustomed to my body making noises that night that he no longer saw it as a weakness, but as an indication. It was both unsettling and comforting.

"Known," I whispered, and that word cost me more than a confession in court.

Holmes inclined his head slightly. "From your practice?" he asked, without urging, without reproach. Only as if inquiring about the origin of a smell, as he might the origin of a stain.

I slowly shook my head. "Not from a doctor's office," I said hoarsely. "From a bag. From a field box. From a night..."

The sentence lingered. The door before us was no longer just a door. It was a line, like the powder line in the cellar, a threshold that didn't injure physically, but internally. I felt the urge to take a deep breath because my body felt it had to defend itself. But Holmes' hand on my sleeve reminded me of the rule: tonight, taking a deep breath is a choice, not a necessity.

"Then tell us," Holmes said quietly.

I didn't look in the crack in the door, because I knew my mind would project images there that didn't need to be. Instead, I looked at the gravel path, at the small grains of red clay that stood out like a foreign object in the damp gray. Red clay. A trace that was both new and old. That's how this memory was too: old, yet fresh enough to burn.

"There was a man," I began, and the moment I said "man," I already had his face in my mind, even though I didn't want to. "A doctor. Not like me. Not with war in his bones. He was... clean. Correct. He had hands that never smelled of blood because he never dipped them in blood."

Holmes remained silent.

"We were called to his place, late," I continued. "Not because he needed help. Because he wanted to offer it. He knew someone who was listed incorrectly in a register. He claimed he could fix it. He talked about connections, stamps, signatures, the way others talk about medicine. And I... I listened to him because back then I still believed that there were doctors in London who could heal without cutting."

My breath whistled. I took a tiny wisp of the cloth, not out of habit, but because I felt the dizziness approaching as I reached into that past.

Holmes' voice was calm. "Why didn't you write it down?"

I smiled bitterly. "Because back then I thought it wasn't my right," I said. "Because I believed silence was the way to protect others. And because, if I'm honest, I also wanted to protect myself."

"From whom?" asked Holmes.

I stared at the crack in the door. "In front of you," I finally said. "Not because I thought you would judge me, but because I knew you would ask me why I did something that wasn't wise."

Holmes' hand on my sleeve remained steady. He didn't let go of me, but he didn't hold me like a sick person either. He held me like a man standing on smooth ground.

"What have you done?" he asked.

I swallowed. The fog outside was cold. The air from the crevice was warm and toxic. And I stood between them, as if I had to choose which kind of truth I breathed.

"The doctor," I said, "had a mixture. He didn't call it poison. He called it a sedative. He said it helped with nervousness, with... with overexcitement. He said it made a person more receptive to calm. I saw it, I smelled it. And I..." I broke off because the word was difficult. "I held it in my hand."

Holmes' eyes narrowed, almost imperceptibly. "He gave them to you?"

"Yes," I said. "He acted as if it were a sign of trust. As if one doctor were showing another doctor something that only specialists understand. And I was foolish enough to feel flattered."

I felt my arm burning again. It was as if the memory were making a connection to the sting. As if the fumes were living not only in the air, but also in my blood.

"And then?" asked Holmes.

"Then there was a patient," I said. "Or a man they called that so they could treat him. He was pale, confused. He said he couldn't remember things. The doctor laughed at it, politely, like in a club. He said memory was a matter of order. And I... I wanted to help. I believed that if you calm a person, their mind calms too."

Holmes said nothing. He waited.

"I gave him something," I said quietly. "Not much. A drop. A tiny drop. I thought it was like laudanum, only milder. I thought it was a tool that could be used in moderation. And the man..." I swallowed, and I felt my chest tighten. "The man was asleep. He was sleeping so soundly that his face no longer looked like sleep, but like... like an inscription."

Holmes' voice was barely audible. "Did he die?"

"No," I said quickly. "Not then. He woke up again. But he was different. He said he didn't know his name anymore. And the doctor... the doctor was satisfied."

Holmes' gaze remained fixed on the crack in the door. "A doctor who didn't help," he muttered. "A doctor who turns a person into a blank slate."

I nodded, and the nod was like a punch to my own chest. "I didn't understand," I said. "Or I didn't want to understand. And as we left, I saw a stack of papers in the corner of the room. Copies. Extracts from the register. And I saw a woman carrying them. She had ink on her finger. And she looked at me as if she knew I was making a mistake that couldn't be erased."

Holmes took a calm breath. "So she was already nearby back then," he said.

"Yes," I whispered.

"And this doctor," said Holmes, "was he someone who had access to registries?"

I closed my eyes. A clean face. A polite voice. A scent of wax and something sweet. Bare boots? I didn't remember, or perhaps I hadn't noticed back then because I hadn't learned to read shoes.

"He had access," I said. "Or he had friends who had access. He spoke of a club. Of people who 'help'. Of men who decide on estates and names as if they were articles of clothing."

Holmes's gaze hardened. "And his name?" he asked.

My mouth went dry. "I didn't write it down back then," I said. "I didn't even repeat it aloud when we were outside because I believed a name is a weapon if you possess it. And I didn't want to possess it."

"Watson," said Holmes, his voice calm but relentless, "this man gave you a mixture that burns in your blood tonight. He showed you how to shift memories. And he used you back then. Whether you wanted it or not."

I opened my eyes and looked again at the crack in the door. The sweet, sharp scent was still there, a warm breath from a dark throat. I felt my body rebel against entering, and at the same time, I felt my mind wanting to, because the mind believes that answers lie behind doors.

"What do we do?" I asked hoarsely.

Holmes stepped aside so he could see the frame better. "We're not going into the house," he said quietly. "Not through that door. If he's using the air as a weapon, then we're not going through the weapon. We're going through the error."

"What mistake?" I asked.

Holmes pointed to the gravel, to the trail of red clay. "He can keep his boots clean," said Holmes, "but he can't stop clay from falling. And clay falls where he has walked. That means there is a second entrance. One he has used. And if he has used it, then it is not perfect. He is merely careful."

Holmes walked along the fence, checking the slats with his hand, searching for anything that didn't fit. I followed him as best I could, each step causing a brief surge of pressure in my chest. The fog was cold, and I was grateful for the cold, because it kept my face alert.

Holmes stopped at a narrow side passage that ran between the house and the neighboring building. At the end was a small, half-hidden gate, and beneath it, in the damp dirt, was that reddish hue again.

Holmes didn't smile, but there was that quiet sharpness in his eyes that I knew when he'd found a clue that wasn't accidental. "Here," he said.

He gently pushed the gate. It gave way. No creak. No clanging. No smell from a crack. Just cold, damp air. The path led into a backyard, and there, under a small overhang, was a window lower than the others. The wood around it was freshly polished. Too fresh. As if someone had touched it just that day.

Holmes bent down, and I saw that there was a fine, reddish imprint on the windowsill, like the remains of a shoe. Not shiny. Not polished. Clay that couldn't be removed because it had been pushed into a corner.

"He came in here," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "And we are following him," he said. "Not as guests. As doctors who will finally decide who gets help."

The low window lay in the shadow of the overhang like an eye deliberately half-closed. No curtain, no light behind it, only the dull gray of the mist gathering on the pane. Holmes didn't immediately let his hand slide to the frame; he knelt first, examined the windowsill, the trace of red clay, the small imprint that seemed so unpleasantly honest. Then he took from his pocket a thin piece of metal, not much larger than a hairpin, and pushed it into the wood with the calm of a man who had done it before.

"If he used it," whispered Holmes, "then he didn't lock it. Or he locked it in such a way that he thinks only he can open it. Both are acts of arrogance."

The metal piece slid, a soft click, and the frame gave way. Holmes lifted it only a crack, no more than necessary to test the air behind it. Instinctively, I held my breath, waiting for the sweet, sharp whiff that would constrict my chest. But no warm, poisonous puff came. Only the cool, slightly stale air of a house that had been closed for a long time. I felt my body want to inhale more deeply in a kind of relieved stupidity, but I resisted as best I could.

Holmes raised the window further. "Slowly," he said to me, more a command to my breathing than to my feet.

I forced myself not to hurry. My chest was working like an old bellows, and the wheezing was a constant, embarrassing background noise. Holmes climbed in first, almost silently, and then offered me his hand. I took it and pulled myself over the windowsill, trying not to pant. The red clay at the edge smeared lightly on my sleeve, and I cursed it inwardly, not aloud; aloud was a luxury tonight that our adversary intended to deprive us of.

We stood in a small room, probably a back room or some kind of pantry, with shelves along the wall and the smell of old wood and dry dust. No lights were on. Holmes didn't close the window completely, but left it just ajar, like a random crack. Then he stopped and listened.

A faint ticking sound emanated from the house, steady, distant, but distinct enough that it couldn't be mistaken for the imagination. It didn't sound like a clock in a living room. It sounded like a clockwork mechanism that didn't measure time, but rather a deadline.

"A feather," whispered Holmes.

"A trap," I whispered.

"Probably," said Holmes. "But not where you would expect them."

He went to the door of the chamber. It was only ajar. Holmes pushed it open a crack with his handkerchief and looked out. I saw the corridor, dark but clean. The floor was covered with a rug, which would absorb the sound. Again, that love of silence. Again, that intention that a person should be able to leave without another hearing them.

Holmes stepped out, and I followed. We didn't head towards the front door, but towards the ticking. The corridor led past two doors. One was closed, the other stood open. A hint of warmth emanated from the open one, not much, but enough to indicate that someone was using, or had used, the room. Holmes stopped and listened. No breathing, no rustling, no squeaking. Only that ticking.

We approached the door, and I felt my arm burn again, as if it were a compass pointing to danger. The pressure in my chest increased, even though the air here wasn't sweet. Fear can occupy the same place in the body as poison.

Holmes pushed the door open a crack further.

Inside was a room furnished not like a living room, but like a treatment room disguised as one. A table meant to look like a dining table, but its surface was too smooth, too wipeable. An armchair that looked like a reading chair, but next to it stood a small side table with instruments unrelated to literature: glasses, vials, a brush, a small scale. And on a sideboard lay a leather bag that made my stomach churn: a doctor's bag, like the one I carry myself, only cleaner, too clean. As if it had never actually been used.

The ticking came from a small device on the table. It was a brass tin, similar to the one we'd seen in the cellar, only larger. A spring was tensioned inside, and a thin wire hung from it, leading to the door. A tripwire. A test.

Holmes remained standing in the doorway and did not step inside. He bent down, examining the wire, the brass box, the delicate mechanism. "If we cross the threshold, it will trigger," he whispered.

"Made of what?" I asked.

Holmes' gaze drifted to a glass jar standing on the sideboard, half-hidden. Inside, a liquid shimmered, not clear, but slightly milky. A stopper lay over it, and from the stopper hung a thin tube leading towards the brass canister.

"Not just air," Holmes said quietly. "Aerosol. A spray. Enough to irritate the respiratory system. Especially yours."

I swallowed and felt my chest react, as if the mere idea had an effect. I held the cloth ready, but Holmes raised his hand.

"Not yet," he whispered. "If you use it now, it will be noticeable. And I don't want him to know how you're helping yourself."

He drew the knife from his pocket, not to attack, but as a tool. With the tip of the knife, he lifted the wire at the door frame and released it without the spring snapping. Then he took the tweezers, clamped the wire firmly, and slowly slid it out of its guide until it was no longer under tension. The ticking continued, but the device was disarmed. A test Holmes had passed without answering it.

We entered, slowly. The room smelled of wax, paper, and a faint, sweet scent lingering in the air. Not as strong as at the front door, but enough to tell me the smell wasn't accidental. It was deliberate. A signature.

Holmes went straight to the sideboard and examined the glass jar. He held it up to the dim light filtering in from the doorway. "Not laudanum," he murmured. "And not ether. Something... mixed. Something that both stimulates and soothes."

"Just like back then," I whispered.

Holmes glanced at me briefly. "Yes," he said.

I took a step closer to the doctor's bag without touching it. It was made of black leather, freshly polished. A small metal plate was attached to the clasp, and initials were engraved on it. Not real ones, I recognized immediately; the letters were too fresh, too deliberate. They were the initials of a man who sees himself as an institution.

Holmes stepped beside me. "Do you see?" he asked.

"He's playing doctor," I said.

Holmes nodded. "And he needs a real doctor to be believable," he said quietly. "That's why you. That's why your story. That's why the woman with the stain carrying the papers. He's building a scene, Watson. A scene so real that no one will ask who the director is."

I felt something tighten in my throat, something more than just constriction. It was anger. An anger that rarely surfaced that night, suppressed by fear and fatigue. But now it was there, because I realized that I was not only a victim, but also a commodity.

Holmes used tweezers to open a small compartment on the sideboard. Inside lay ampoules, neatly arranged in rows. Each was labeled, but not with the name of its contents; instead, the labels bore words more commonly found in registries than in pharmacies.

clearly laid out, not remembering, transferred

I stared at it, and it felt as if I saw my own life encased in glass. "He labels people," I whispered.

Holmes' voice was cold. "He labels conditions," he said. "And he believes conditions are people."

He took an ampoule labeled "not remembering" and held it up to the light. The glass shimmered. He didn't smell it, he didn't shake it. He simply looked at the stopper. Then he pointed to a tiny, barely visible mark: a dot etched into the glass.

"He even signs the poison," Holmes murmured.

At that moment we heard a noise from the hallway. Not the squeaking. Something else. A short, muffled clinking, as if a set of keys was being moved. Then a soft clearing of the throat, like someone announcing their arrival without knocking.

Holmes froze. He raised his hand, and I held my breath as shallowly as I could.

A voice came from the hallway, warm, polite, almost medical:

"You are late, gentlemen."

I felt the blood rush to my head. This voice wasn't the quiet, precise voice from the cellars. This voice sounded like a man speaking in company during the day. It sounded like the doctor from my memory.

Holmes' eyes narrowed. He took a step back so that he stood in the shadow of the doorframe, and his knife slid into a position that was not threatening, but ready.

"Come in," the voice said kindly. "It's cold outside. And we do need to discuss who will receive help."

My breath whistled, and I hated it for that, because it sounded so much like an answer.

The voice in the hallway was so brazenly reasonable that it momentarily threw me off balance. Not because it was loud or threatening, but because it had the tone of a man accustomed to being listened to when he offers help. Such a tone is dangerous because it makes distrust seem like rudeness.

Holmes did not answer immediately. He remained in the shadow of the doorframe, and I saw that he did not look at the door but at the room, as if testing where the escape of light ended and the escape of the body might begin. The knife lay in his hand, not as a weapon, but as a decision he did not need to articulate.

"You visited a law firm," Holmes said calmly at last. "And you played around with names that weren't yours."

A soft laugh from the hallway, warm, almost regretful. "Names belong to no one," the voice replied. "They are merely worn. Some wear them with dignity, some with mud. And some..." A tiny pause, like a doctor formulating a diagnosis. "...wear them in the wrong register."

I felt my arm burn, and I hated the way my body reacted to words, as if they were injections. My chest was tight, the whistling a thin, telltale sound. I pressed my lips together to muffle it, but it lingered, as if it had long since left my lungs and entered the story itself.

The door at the end of the hall didn't open abruptly, but with that deliberate ease that only someone who believes they are in their own home possesses. A man entered, and I didn't recognize him by his face, which I only vaguely remembered, but by his posture: his back straight, his shoulders relaxed, as if he were a host in every situation.

He was well-dressed, not ostentatiously, more like a man who didn't need to prove himself. His mustache was neatly trimmed, his hair carefully styled, and his hands...his hands were remarkably clean. As he entered the room, my gaze involuntarily fell upon his boots. They gleamed, not mirror-like, but in a way that made the light cling to them. And as he took a step onto the rug, I heard it, almost imperceptibly, that subtle squeak that had become like a reflex pain within me.

He stopped in the doorway and smiled, as if greeting patients in a consultation.

"Mr. Holmes," he said, and the way he pronounced the name was not one of respect, but of knowledge. "Dr. Watson. It is unpleasant that we should meet again under such circumstances. I had imagined a more peaceful reunion."

The word "reunion" struck me because it confirmed what I had already feared deep down: This wasn't just a game of playing with clues. It was a return.

Holmes took a half step forward, just enough to better illuminate his face. "You know my name," he said. "That is either brave or foolish."

"It's both," the man replied kindly. "Courage, because it shows that I'm not afraid of you. Foolish, because I know you wouldn't be satisfied with just one name anyway."

He took a step further in, slowly, and I felt my body resist the impulse to retreat. Not because he seemed physically threatening, but because the smell accompanying him warned me. A hint of shoe polish, yes, but underneath it something else, sweet and sharp, as if he carried the mixture not in a bottle, but in his clothing.

"You're sick, Doctor," he said, his gaze gliding over my chest with an outrageous precision, as if he could read the whistling like a line in a book. "Not fatal. Not immediately. But unpleasant enough to make you compliant if you're not careful."

Holmes' voice remained cold. "You treat people like files," he said.

The man raised his hand slightly, as if to appease. "I treat conditions," he replied. "And conditions are a person's truth, not their stories."

I felt a bitter sentence rising on my tongue, but Holmes spoke first.

"They've set a trap," said Holmes, pointing at the disarmed clockwork. "For me. Or for my friend."

The man glanced briefly at the brass can, and his smile narrowed slightly, not angrily, more with disappointment. "They're fast," he said. "That was the point. You learn more from a reaction than from a confession."

"They wanted to see if we would enter," Holmes said.

"I wanted to see who would breathe first," he replied calmly.

My breath whistled, as if trying to answer him. I hated my own noise, and I hated even more that the man heard it and found something satisfying in it.

The man now stepped fully into the room. He moved not like a burglar, but like a doctor in his own space. His gaze swept over the ampoules in the drawer, over the doctor's bag, over the instruments, and I understood with a chill in my stomach that he didn't need to hide these things. He wanted us to see them. He wanted us to recognize their order.

"They found the labels," he said, his tone almost proud. "Clear. Misplaced. Unremembering. Transferred. Very useful categories."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "They label people like bottles," he said.

"People label themselves," the man replied. "They come to me and say: I am like this, I am not like that, I remember, I don't remember. I just give them a cleaner form. And the city loves forms."

He went to the sideboard, picked up the ampoule with tweezers from Holmes's vicinity without a second thought, as if it were perfectly normal to share tools here, and turned it in the light. The dot in the glass shimmered briefly.

"They even sign that," Holmes said.

"Of course," the man replied. "Otherwise someone else would sign it. And then I wouldn't have the pleasure."

He put the vial back down and looked directly at me. His gaze wasn't cruel. That made him more dangerous. Cruelty can be hated. Indifferent friendliness, on the other hand, is disconcerting.

"They gave me a drop back then," he said quietly.

I felt the blood rush to my head. "I..." I began, but the words wouldn't come out clearly. Not because of a lie, but because of shame.

"They wanted to help," he continued, as if discussing an everyday mistake. "That's the problem with you, Doctor. You think that helping is always moral because it sounds pleasant. You didn't ask who it would benefit. And that's precisely why you're such a good witness."

Holmes' voice became sharper. "They're using him."

The man even nodded, as if accepting a compliment. "I use the world," he said. "And the world uses me. A circle, very elegant if you stamp it correctly."

He went to the table where the brass box stood and placed his hand beside it without touching it. The ticking was now more distinct, as if the room had decided to announce its deadline.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"A feather," said Holmes.

"A clock," the man corrected kindly. "Not the clock on the wall. The clock embedded in every document. A deadline, a date, a point in time at which a truth is valid because it has been signed. This clock doesn't run forwards like time. It runs backwards like opportunity."

He pulled a watch from his waistcoat pocket, a heavy pocket watch, and held it up to the dim light. At first glance, it seemed ordinary. But when he opened the cover, I saw that the dial was different. Not that the numbers were missing, but that they were arranged upside down, as if the order of the day had been deliberately reversed.

"If you set them up correctly," he said, "you will always arrive on time, even if you are late."

I felt cold. I thought of the will, the name, the registers, the woman with the stain who sat in an office and knew that a single line in a column could make people disappear. And I understood that this man wasn't just setting traps. He was building time.

Holmes took a step forward, not far enough to be unwise, but close enough to make it clear that he would not be intimidated. "Where is Sir Alistair Wexford?" he asked.

The man smiled again, politely, and the politeness was like cold metal. "In safety," he said. "As long as he sticks to who he's supposed to be."

"And if he doesn't?" asked Holmes.

"Then a doctor can help him," the man replied, looking at me. "Or a registry."

My breath came in a ragged whistling sound, and I felt my chest strain for a deep breath, as if fighting back against the threat. I brought the handkerchief to my nose, but Holmes's gaze stopped me, not harshly, just warningly. I paused, and in that pause lay a thin trace of pride: not to give in what the enemy wanted.

The man noticed and nodded, as if observing a successful exercise. "Very good," he said quietly. "You're learning. But learning is slow. And I work with deadlines."

Holmes' voice was steady as steel. "They will not kill us here," he said.

The man raised his eyebrows. "Kill?" he asked, as if it were a harsh word. "I don't kill. I order. When a person dies, they die because they live in a world that needs order. I simply help ensure that death ends up where it is useful."

Holmes made a small gesture with his hand, and I understood: he wanted to leave. Not flee, but leave the room before the man changed the conditions again. But the man didn't block my way. He even took a half step to the side, as if he were truly the host.

"Go," he said kindly. "You have seen what you were meant to see. And you have heard what you were meant to hear."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "They're letting us go," he said.

"Of course," the man replied. "You now carry within you something more valuable than any piece of paper: an idea. And ideas spread. I want you to spread it, Mr. Holmes. I want you to have people asking everywhere you go if their name is really their name."

He looked at me again. "And I want the doctor to finally write down what he's been keeping secret. Because if he writes it down, then it's true. And if it's true, then it can be used."

Holmes' hand went to my sleeve, and we stepped back slowly, away from the table, away from the vials, away from this cultivated cruelty. I held my breath shallowly, each step a small battle against my own urge to run. The man followed us with his gaze, without haste.

As we left the room, I heard the ticking behind me once more, and a soft click of the pocket watch, as if he were closing its lid. A sound so small and yet so final, as if he had started a deadline.

The air was cooler outside in the hallway. We found our way to the back room and the window. Holmes went out first, and I followed, almost tripping, but catching myself. When we stood in the courtyard, I tasted the mist like a lifesaver. Cold, damp, honest.

Holmes pulled me a few steps away from the house until we were back at the fence. Only then did he stop.

"A clock that ran backwards," I murmured, without knowing why that particular thought formed a sentence.

Holmes looked at me, and there was no surprise in his gaze, only a firm resolve. "Yes," he said quietly. "And whoever turns back the clock determines when a person is late."

My breath whistled, and this time it sounded less like a betrayal than a warning sign. Because I understood: In this game, it's not the fastest move that matters, but the timing. And the man in the house had just shown us that he understands time as a weapon.

## The clock that went backwards

We didn't go far from the house because distance that night was only a feeling. I could still sense the presence of the place behind me, as if the fog carried the scent of its mixture like a thin cloth around the lanterns. Holmes led me along the hedge back to the road, and we kept to the shadows, even though no one was visible. That was precisely what made it unsettling: the idea that an adversary so polite had no need to be seen.

A Hansom did not arrive immediately. Holmes did not raise his hand like an ordinary customer; he waited until a carriage emerged from the mist, as if it had been summoned. Then he gave the coachman not an address, but only a direction, and I understood from this that he was not going to a particular house, but to a particular thought.

We drove through streets that seemed familiar yet strange, because the night clothed them all in the same color. The fog had thinned, but it hadn't lifted. It was like smoke that didn't come from chimneys, but from stories. I kept the pungent handkerchief in my pocket, forcing

myself not to use it, so as not to become dependent on it. The price I paid was that my breathing grew louder. The whistling was no longer just a sound. It was a rhythm that had become synchronized with the ticking of the clock in the house.

Holmes remained silent for a long time. I knew that for him, silence wasn't emptiness, but work. He was organizing the man's sentences, the tools, the labels, the address. He was drawing lines between the club and the law firm, between the clay and the seal. And somewhere in that web I was caught, not as an observer, but as a knot.

"A clock that goes backwards," I finally said, because I couldn't get the image out of my head.

Holmes nodded without looking at me. "He didn't show it to show off," he said quietly. "He showed it to impose a standard on us. As long as we think in terms of forward time, we're too late. He works with deadlines he sets himself. With documents he prepares. With events that simply need to be triggered."

"Like a feather," I murmured.

"Yes," said Holmes. "And like a will. A will is an event that is already written before it happens. You just wait until it can be triggered."

I felt the coldness of this logic, and at the same time I understood how perfectly it suited London. In this city, paper holds people together, and paper can also tear them apart. A man who masters paper masters the way the city remembers.

The carriage finally stopped in front of a place that hadn't stood out at first glance: a small shop on a corner, its sign barely legible in the fog. A watchmaker's. The shop window displayed pocket watches, pendulum clocks, small alarm clocks. An innocuous place, a place where time is repaired, not manipulated.

Holmes got out of the car and held out his hand. I took it because my balance was unsteady again. My breath wheezed, and I noticed my body reacting more strongly to the cold. I pulled up my collar and followed Holmes to the door.

A bell rang as we entered. The shop smelled of metal, oil, and dry wood. It was an honest smell, without any sweetness. Behind the counter stood a man wearing magnifying glasses, which he pushed up when he saw us. His hands were black with watchmaker's oil.

"Mr. Holmes," he said, and I could tell from his voice that names open doors here too.

"Goodman," Holmes replied. "I need your eyes. And your discretion."

The watchmaker looked at me, and his gaze lingered on my face for a moment, perhaps because of my pallor, perhaps because of my wheezing breath. He said nothing. That was the first courtesy of the evening that I didn't dislike.

Holmes didn't summon the memory of the pocket watch as a story, but as an object. He described it succinctly: heavy watch, dial reversed, unusual mechanism, the click of a cover, the ticking like a wound spring. As he spoke, I saw the watchmaker come alive inwardly. For him, it wasn't a threat, but a puzzle. And puzzles are to craftsmen what cases are to Holmes.

"A clock with backward numerals," Goodman murmured, "is no great feat. But if it really did run backward..." He shook his head. "That would be nonsense. Time doesn't run backward."

Holmes' gaze was cool. "You don't have to turn back time," he said. "You just have to make people believe they're too late."

The watchmaker nodded slowly. "That's possible," he said quietly. "With a trick. With a mechanism that ticks differently. With a sound that creates unease. And with a dial that confuses the eyes."

Holmes stepped closer to the counter. "What could that ticking have been?" he asked.

Goodman went to a shelf and pulled out a small brass tin similar to the one in The Silent House. "Spring mechanism," he said. "You put it in clocks, in alarm clocks. When it ticks, it's not time. It's tension. Tension waiting to be released. And if you combine it with a spray mechanism..." He looked at Holmes. "Then it's a trap."

"He connected everything," Holmes said.

Goodman nodded and put the can back. Then he reached for a pocket watch in the shop window, opened it, and showed me the dial. "Look," he said, and I did. "If you put the numbers differently, and if you make the hand move differently... then a person who isn't looking will immediately see: something's wrong. They'll get nervous. And when they're nervous, they make mistakes."

Holmes' eyes flashed briefly. "Mistakes that are exploited in registers," he said.

Goodman looked at us, and for the first time, something like concern came to his face. "That doesn't sound like a watchmaker," he said. "That sounds like a man who uses watches as a metaphor. Or as a weapon."

Holmes nodded. "He uses it for both purposes," he said. "And I want to know if he built the clock himself or if he had it built."

Goodman hesitated. Then he reached into a drawer and pulled out a small booklet, a catalog perhaps, or a register of his own commissions. He leafed through it, his oily fingers carefully, as if he didn't want to soil the paper, and then paused.

"A few weeks ago," he said quietly, "a gentleman came in. He wanted a custom-made clock face. A clock face that is... different. Not for a clock that you show off, but for a clock that you put in someone's room."

"What did he look like?" asked Holmes.

Goodman shook his head. "He wasn't conspicuous," he said. "That's precisely the problem. But he had..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...clean shoes. Too clean. As if he'd stepped out of a salon, not off the street. And he smelled of..." Goodman's nose twitched, as if remembering. "...shoe polish."

My stomach clenched. Holmes remained calm.

"Did he mention a name?" Holmes asked.

Goodman flipped through the pages again. "He paid in cash," he said. "But he wrote something down. Not his name. A pickup name. One I put in my ledger because that's what you're supposed to do. Only..." Goodman pointed to the line. "...it's written so neatly that it looks wrong."

Holmes leaned forward, and I saw the line too, over Goodman's shoulder. The name was short. An ordinary name, like many others. But next to the line, tiny, as if Goodman's hand had placed it unconsciously, was a period.

Holmes's gaze hardened. "He even marked your shop," he muttered.

Goodman went pale. "I didn't make the point," he said quickly.

"No," Holmes replied. "I believe you. But he wanted you to see him. Or to see him someday."

I was breathing shallowly, and the whistling sounded terribly loud in the quiet shop. Goodman looked at me, and in his gaze there was now genuine pity, not hidden behind politeness.

Holmes sat up straight. "That pickup name," he said. "What does it say?"

Goodman swallowed and read as if the word itself were dangerous: "Calder."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. This was no longer a coincidence. This was a circle closing: law firm, club, watchmaker. A name as a mask, a period as a signature, a watch as a threat.

Holmes' voice remained calm. "Then Mr. Calder was never outside London," he said quietly. "Or someone was everywhere at once in his name."

I felt fatigue spreading through my bones, and at the same time, a new clarity. The clock, running backward, wasn't there to change time. It was there to show us that we live in a system where someone else determines the order of events. First the will, then death. First the name, then the person.

Holmes placed a coin on the counter for Goodman, not as payment, but as thanks for the risk. "You helped last night," he said. "Now pretend you never saw us."

Goodman nodded silently.

As we left the shop, the fog hit us again. The glow of the lanterns looked like moist eyes. Holmes paused for a moment, and I saw him searching the gray streets not for a carriage, but for a thought that would dictate his next step.

"Now," he said quietly, "we are going to where death is administered. Not in a law firm. In a building that is even more honest: an institution. Because when a name is moved in the register, a person often ends up where they are no longer believed to be alive."

My breath whistled, and I knew I would follow it, whether my body wanted to or not. Because the clock was ticking backward, and somewhere a deadline was ticking that wouldn't wait for midnight.

We left Goodman's shop with a feeling I could hardly name, because it was composed of contradictory elements: relief that another thread had become tangible, and unease at how many hands had already pulled on that thread. The fog outside the door greeted us like a wet cloth, and the bell above the entrance jingled behind us, as if to conclude the scene and simultaneously record that we had been there. I heard my breath louder, sharper in the cold, and I forced myself to hold it shallow, as if any deeper movement were already a signature.

Holmes took a few steps without immediately looking for a carriage. He paused on the corner, as if listening less to the street than to the city itself. In the distance, a carriage rolled by, a dog barked briefly somewhere and then stopped, and over everything lay that muted silence which signifies not peace, but the absence of witnesses.

"He uses names like keys," I said, more to myself than to Holmes.

"And keys are like names," Holmes replied. "A name opens doors when it's in the right register. And a key is just a piece of metal until someone decides it fits."

I involuntarily rubbed my sleeve where the red clay in the brick pit had caught us. The mark was long gone, but I could still feel it like an unpleasant sensation on my skin. That night, things clung not only to fabric, but to thoughts.

"Calder," I murmured. "If he uses that name at the watchmaker's, and there's a second key at the law firm... then..."

"Then Mr. Calder is either a man who is in several places at once," Holmes said calmly, "or a name that several men bear because it is more useful to them than their own."

I felt my throat go dry and took a tiny whiff of the pungent handkerchief, just to clear my head. It was unpleasant how accustomed I'd become to this routine. Every habit is a chain, and the man in the shiny boots understood chains.

A Hansom emerged from the mist, as if he had heard our decision. Holmes raised his hand, gave the coachman an address, and as we climbed in, I noticed that this time he didn't simply give directions as before. It was a place that apparently didn't surprise him. That alone told me that he had already constructed a route in his mind, one that wasn't left to chance.

The carriage began to move. The leather creaked, the hooves sounded muffled, and in the swaying confines, I felt my chest work against the fabric. I kept my head as still as possible, but every bump in the road seemed to intensify the feeling of tightness within me. Holmes sat opposite me, his gaze fixed on the dark window, as if he could see through the glass the sequence of events.

"He was talking about deadlines," I said quietly. "As if time belonged to him."

Holmes nodded. "That's the crux of the matter," he said. "He doesn't need power over clocks. He needs power over decisions. If he can make a man believe he's late, then that man is acting unwisely. He signs. He remains silent. He goes where he's expected."

"And us?" I asked, and I hated how small the question sounded.

"We don't run," said Holmes. "We walk where he doesn't expect us to. He wants us to think from the will to death. I think from death to the will. Or, if necessary, from the register to the person."

I tried to mentally arrange the sequence of events: a will is deposited, a clock is shown, a law firm is visited, a registry office is threatened, a man is taken to an institution. Everything seemed as if things had already happened before they happened. As if the world were on the side of a document and not on the side of a beating heart.

"If Sir Alistair is still alive," I said, "then he is somewhere... and they may already be writing him off as dead."

Holmes's expression hardened for a moment. "You don't write people to death," he said. "You write them out of the world. It's more subtle and often more effective."

The carriage turned, and the streets grew quieter. The lamplight came less frequently, and I noticed how the fog here not only hung in the air but crept along the ground. Then, quite suddenly, a high wall appeared like a dark coastline in the gray. A gate, a gatekeeper's cottage, a small circle of light. Everything seemed not like a place of healing, but rather a place of confinement.

As we stopped, I felt my body resist getting out. Not out of laziness, but out of that instinctive resistance one feels when standing before a building that has swallowed more voices than it has ever given back. I didn't know these walls personally, but I knew their nature. Every doctor knows them, even if only from stories: the place where a person ceases to be considered a witness because they are declared a case.

Holmes paid the coachman and got out. I followed, more slowly, and the cold mist hit my cheeks like a rebuke. My breath whistled, and in the open night it sounded not just like weakness, but like a disturbing noise that would be unpleasantly noticeable in a house filled with silence.

"Stay close," Holmes said quietly.

"I will," I replied, and I was grateful that he didn't discuss it further as if it were a matter of willpower. There was no room left in my chest for pride.

At the gate, Holmes gave his name. The gatekeeper eyed us as if unsure whether to let us in, or whether we were the kind of visitors who would later ask too many questions. Finally, he opened the gate, and we stepped into a courtyard where the gravel crunched under our shoes. The crunching was comforting. It was a normal sound. Not a muffled shuffle, not a squeak, not a silent glide. A place that crunches cannot be entirely lying.

We were led into an office, where a man awaited us who looked as if he had been molded more by files than by people. Holmes spoke to him in that calm, matter-of-fact way that sounds like politeness but is made of steel. I heard the names, heard the careful phrasing, and all the while I noticed things that made me shiver: a ledger on the table, neatly kept; a drawer whose key hung on a chain; a cuff on the man's sleeve that was too white for a place where one holds hands.

Holmes didn't steer the conversation toward what he already knew, but toward what he wanted to see: reactions. Hesitations. The moment when a man realizes that someone understands more than a visitor should be able to comprehend.

When the patient's name was finally mentioned, it didn't sound like a name, but like an object. I felt my stomach clench, and I had to force myself not to breathe deeply. Sir Alistair Wexford. In that office, he sounded not like a person, but like a problem.

Holmes asked about the referral, the origin of the papers, and the accompanying physician. The word "doctor" hit me like a hook, and I felt the memory of the vials, the labels, the gloves surface in my mind before I could stop it. A dark certainty grew within me that we hadn't come to a place of healing, but to a place where someone was feigning healing to achieve something else.

Then Holmes said something that frightened me more than anything he had said before, because it was so simple: that in a house like this, not only bodies are kept, but also truths. And that a man who turns back the clock loves to use such houses, because here every doubt is considered a symptom.

As we finally descended the corridor, deeper inside, I realized how much these walls could absorb sound when they wanted to. The crunching of the gravel had stayed outside. In here, there was again the muffled tread on runners that conceal more than they reveal. My breath whistled, and I imagined that sound echoing in a corridor where people have learned to perceive even noise as a threat.

I looked at Holmes, and he didn't look at me, but I sensed from his posture that he, too, felt how the order of events was being decided here. Outside, the man had shown us a clock. In here, he could show us what happens when you declare a person false for so long that they begin to believe it themselves.

The corridor we were led down wasn't wide, but it was long enough to give the impression of heading in a direction from which there was no easy return. The lamps hung high, and their light was not warm, but functional. It left no corners for comfort, only for shadows. The attendant walked ahead, Dr. Fennel beside us, and Holmes followed as calmly as if this corridor were just another room in Baker Street. I, on the other hand, felt the resistance of my own body with every step, as if reminding me that in such places, one easily becomes a patient if one wavers.

"He's in a single room," Fennel said quietly, without looking around. "Not because he was dangerous. But because they wanted... peace and quiet."

Holmes' voice remained flat. "Calmness is a word used when one means control," he said.

Fennel didn't reply. But I could see from the position of his shoulders that he understood the sentence and didn't like it.

We stopped before a door whose number was inlaid in brass. No name. No indication that behind it lay a person who once held a title or even a place in the city. The guard produced a set of keys, and the clinking echoed in my head louder than it actually was. A key turned, the door opened, and the smell that greeted us was not the sweet, sharp scent I had come to dread,

but that unmistakable smell of disinfectant and old fabric that clings to beds where too many nights have been spent.

The room was small. A bed, a chair, a table. No fireplace, no curtains, just a window, its pane milky from the fog outside. On the table stood a water glass, half empty. Next to it, a clock.

I stood for a moment in the doorway, my gaze caught by the clock. It wasn't large, not a showpiece, just an ordinary alarm clock. And yet I knew immediately why it was there: because it was wrong. The dial was upside down. The numbers seemed to be going where they shouldn't. And the second hand was actually moving in the wrong direction.

For a moment my mind was so still that even my breathing became quieter. Then it whistled again, as if it were offended that it wasn't the center of attention.

Holmes stepped closer to the table, not touching the clock, merely looking at it. "He put it there for him," he said quietly.

Fennel nodded. "This morning," he whispered. "She was just there. Nobody saw who brought her."

"Of course not," said Holmes.

A man lay on the bed. He wasn't old, but he looked old because his face had that limp emptiness that came not from years, but from withdrawal. His hair was neatly combed, as if someone had made a point of making him look respectable, even here. His eyes were open, but they weren't looking into the room; they were looking right through it, as if the room were just a page he could no longer read.

As we entered, he moved his head slowly, very slowly, and his gaze fell upon Holmes. A flickering expression came across his face, something like hope or memory, then it slipped away again.

"Sir Alistair?" Fennel asked quietly.

The man opened his mouth. His lips moved, but at first no sound came. Then, hoarse and ragged: "I..." He swallowed. "I don't know."

Fennel took a step forward, but Holmes raised his hand. "Leave it," he said calmly. "He's not confused. He's... disoriented."

I felt my stomach grow heavy. The sentence was cruel in its precision.

Holmes did not sit down; he knelt beside the bed, so that he was at eye level, without threatening. "Listen to me," he said quietly to the man. "You are not here because you are insane. You are here because someone wants you to not believe in yourself."

The man blinked slowly. His gaze lingered on Holmes, as if he were holding onto a fixed point that did not move.

"Tell me," Holmes continued, "what is the last thing you remember before you came here."

The man inhaled, shallowly, and I noticed something extraordinary: his breathing wasn't wheezing. It was calm. As if someone hadn't taken his breath, but his fear. Or as if someone had muffled him so deeply that even fear couldn't penetrate it.

"A car," he said finally. "Two... gentlemen. They said... family." He closed his eyes briefly, as if it took effort to hold onto those images. "A piece of paper. A stamp. A... period."

Holmes' gaze sharpened. "And a doctor?"

The man flinched, very slightly. Then he nodded. "A doctor," he whispered. "Clean hands. Gloves. He said it was... help."

I felt my arm burning, as if the memory of my own drop had risen up in my body.

Holmes' voice remained calm. "What did he give you?"

The man stared at the ceiling. "Something... sweet. It burned." He swallowed. "Then... it went quiet."

Fennel cleared his throat, his voice hoarse. "He wasn't the same after that," he said quietly to Holmes. "He stopped repeating his name. And every time he saw the clock..." Fennel gestured to the table. "...he became even quieter."

Holmes nodded, as if it were precisely the effect he had hoped for. He turned back to the man. "Do you see the clock?" he asked.

The man glanced hesitantly at his watch. His face didn't contort in fear, but rather in an expression of resigned confusion, like someone who had been trying for days to solve a deliberately falsified puzzle.

"She's going... wrong," he said.

"Yes," said Holmes. "And that's precisely why she's here. So that you'll believe the world is wrong, and not just the person who brought you here."

The man blinked as if fighting a fatigue that stemmed not from lack of sleep, but from chemical sedation. "I... should... sign," he whispered.

Holmes' eyes hardened. "What?"

The man swallowed. "A piece of paper. They said... it was... order. So... everything would be quiet." His voice broke. "I... just wanted... peace and quiet."

Fennel pressed his lips together. "Someone actually came this afternoon," he said. "He showed me a document. A will. He said it was already prepared. He just needed to have it certified that the patient... was not of sound mind." Fennel's gaze flickered, as if he were ashamed that those words had been spoken in his own home. "And then... then I saw it. At the edge. That dot."

Holmes slowly straightened up. His face was calm, but I saw a coldness in his eyes that had nothing to do with fog. "He uses these walls as a stamp," he said quietly. "If a doctor here

says a man is not of sound mind, it's like a seal. Then any piece of paper you place next to it becomes true."

My breathing was shallow, and the whistling was unbearably loud in the silent room. The man in the bed glanced at me briefly, and in his eyes lay a remnant of something human that was not muffled: a plea, as if he recognized in the sound of my breathing that at least one person here wasn't polished and secure.

Holmes approached the table and examined the water glass. There was a barely visible mark on the rim, a dark line, as if someone had wiped something there. Holmes took the tweezers, lifted the glass, and took a quick sniff. Then he looked at Fennel.

"Who will bring him the water?" asked Holmes.

Fennel frowned. "A guard," he said. "As usual."

"Which one?" asked Holmes.

Fennel hesitated. "Hollis," he finally said. "He's reliable."

Holmes put the glass back without drinking it, and his gaze drifted to Fennel's cuff. It was clean, but I remembered Fennel's words: blood on the cuff. A tiny drop that can't be washed away because it stays in your memory.

Holmes turned back to the man in bed. "Listen to me," he said quietly. "You will not sign anything tonight. And you will cling, as best you can, to one sentence. Just one. Can you do that?"

The man blinked. "Which... sentence?" he whispered.

Holmes spoke slowly and clearly: "I am who I was before they rewritten me."

The man repeated the words, first haltingly, then with a touch more force, as if the sentence were a thread that could be grasped.

Holmes turned to Fennel. "They are taking him to another place now," he said.

Fennel's eyes widened. "That's against all the rules," he whispered.

Holmes' gaze remained hard. "The rules have already been used to destroy him," he said. "If you love rules tonight, tomorrow you'll have a will that no one wrote and a man who no longer believes in himself."

Fennel swallowed. Then he nodded, slowly. "I... will do it," he said quietly.

Holmes looked at me. "Watson," he said, "the clock runs backward. That means the next step will not be where it leads, but where it comes from. The man who brought this clock here must have gone through a corridor. He must have had a key, or replaced a key. He must have had a hand that did not tremble."

I breathed shallowly and nodded. Because I understood: If you set a clock backwards, you first have to touch it. And whoever touches it leaves behind more than time. They leave a trace.

## Blood on the cuff

After that realization that the name "Calder" could appear everywhere at once, like a mask, we perhaps should have paused to gather our strength. But on this night, pausing was more dangerous than walking. Every pause gave the enemy time to run the clock backward. Holmes took the next Hansom who emerged from the fog as if summoned, and gave the coachman an address that was very familiar to me, because it lay like a bitter taste in my memory: a house where people are locked away when they can no longer be classified as ordinary.

The carriage carried us through streets that widened, through neighborhoods where lamplights were less frequent and the fog hung over everything like a wet cloak. I held my collar up, pressed my lips together to muffle the whistling, and only partially succeeded. My breath was like a small, stubborn protest within me. I didn't want it to betray me. But it betrayed me not only to my opponent; it betrayed me to myself as well, for with every sound it reminded me of my weakness, and that weakness has no place in a game of deadlines.

Holmes sat opposite me, his gaze fixed ahead, and yet I knew he wasn't looking at the road, but at something above it: patterns. Access points. Places where a man must leave a mark, even if he believes himself invisible. Once, Holmes pulled out the metal sleeve, examined the dot on the writing, and put it back. He did so as a priest might touch a cross, not out of faith, but out of a memory of power.

The carriage stopped in front of a building whose outline, shrouded in mist, resembled a heavy block. High walls, a gate, a small guardhouse. Beyond the walls, no light, only darkness, not the darkness of sleep, but of confinement. I knew the smell of such places even before I smelled it again: coal, cold stonework, disinfectant, and that unspeakable mixture of fear and boredom that always lingers in enclosed corridors.

Holmes got out, paid, and I followed. My chest felt tight, but the cold helped me to hold my breath shallowly. The whistling continued, but it sounded less plaintive in the open night than it would have in a drawing-room. A guard stood at the gate, scrutinizing us as if to decide whether we were people or merely visitors.

Holmes gave his name. The guard hesitated, then opened the door. Yet another place where names move doors.

We were not led down a welcoming hallway, but a corridor that felt like a maw. Lamps hung high, casting cold light on stone. Footsteps echoed, and each echo seemed to say that words had no meaning here. The warden led us to an office where a man sat with the kind of face that, over the years, has grown accustomed to shouts and pleas until they seem like nothing more than noise.

The man stood up when he saw Holmes and held out his hand. "Mr. Holmes," he said. "I am Dr. Fennel."

Holmes took his hand, but only briefly. "I regret this hour," he said.

Dr. Fennel smiled thinly. "The hour is rarely relevant for us," he replied. "They don't come for an ordinary question."

"No," said Holmes. "I've come because of a man who may be here even though he never belonged here. Or who is to be brought here because it's convenient."

Fennel's gaze narrowed. "They're talking about involuntary commitments," he said.

"I'm talking about registers," Holmes replied. "About names that are moved around until a citizen becomes a patient."

Fennel was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You will understand that I cannot simply speak about inmates."

Holmes' expression remained calm. "Then don't talk about inmates," he said. "Talk about an incident."

Fennel raised his eyebrows, and I realized he was familiar with this kind of conversation: circling around a truth that one cannot directly touch.

"Which incident?" he asked.

Holmes stepped closer to the desk. "Blood on the cuff," he said quietly.

Fennel's face froze. Not by much, but enough. His gaze drifted to a stack of files, as if the word had led him to a specific place in the paper.

"That's not..." he began, then broke off and took a deep breath, as if to compose himself. "How do you know that?"

"I know it because someone wants me to know it," Holmes replied. "And because I prefer to hear it from you rather than have it handed to me as a story."

Fennel slowly sat down again. He gestured to the chairs. Holmes didn't sit down. I sat down because my body demanded support, and immediately I felt guilty, as if sitting were an act of surrender. My breath whistled softly, and I heard Fennel briefly look up at me.

"They are not well," he said.

"It is night," I replied quickly.

Fennel nodded, as if he knew that "the night" is often a fitting explanation, especially in this place.

"Blood on the cuff," he repeated quietly. "Yes. That happened. And it was unpleasant."

Holmes' voice remained calm. "Tell me."

Fennel placed his hands on the tabletop, and I saw that his fingers held a slight restlessness which he was trying to conceal. "Four days ago," he said, "a man was brought to us. Not by the police, but by two gentlemen who claimed to be relatives. They had papers. Very proper papers. A referral, signed, stamped. Everything as it should be."

Holmes said nothing.

"The man," Fennel continued, "was confused. He was talking incoherently, saying someone wanted to steal his name. He claimed to be Sir Alistair Wexford." Fennel smiled thinly, as if to show how absurd that sounded. But there was no real mockery in his gaze, more a weariness. "You can imagine how often we have people here claiming to be someone else."

"And yet," Holmes said quietly, "this man was different."

Fennel nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "He was too well-dressed. Too well-groomed. Too... plausible. And that's precisely what's dangerous, Mr. Holmes. Because a plausible madman can throw an entire house into turmoil."

I felt my chest tighten, not just from the poison, but from the thought. A man claiming to be Sir Alistair Wexford is being brought here, with proper papers. And I knew that proper papers were worse than knives tonight.

"What happened?" asked Holmes.

Fennel looked at his cuff. It was clean. But I understood from that gesture that he hadn't forgotten the image. "When we examined him," he said quietly, "he didn't resist. He wasn't aggressive. He was desperate. He held my hand tightly as I took his pulse, and he said, 'Please. Look. Really look.'"

Fennel swallowed. "Then a man came in," he continued. "A doctor who said he had been hired by the family to oversee the treatment. He was polite. He was matter-of-fact. He had recommendations. And he had a bag."

I felt my arm burning. The doctor's bag. The vials. The labels.

"He was wearing gloves," Fennel said, a note of disgust now in his voice. "Very fine gloves, the kind you wear in clubs. And when he touched the patient, a drop slid down the cuff. A tiny drop. Red. At first I thought it was ink. But it was blood. Fresh. And that's when I realized this man wasn't there to help."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "What was he doing?" he asked.

Fennel glanced at the files. "He gave the patient something," he said quietly. "A small vial. He said it was a sedative. And before I could intervene, the man was... silent. Not peaceful. Silent as a sheet of paper."

I heard my own whistling and hated it because it sounded so unpleasant in this office. Fennel paused briefly and looked at me.

"I know this kind of silence," I said hoarsely before I could stop myself.

Holmes' gaze remained on me, and I realized he wasn't surprised. He already knew that my past and this night were in the same hands.

Fennel looked back at Holmes. "The next morning," he said, "the patient was still alive. But he no longer spoke of his name. He hardly spoke at all. And when I looked at the admission register again, I noticed something I hadn't seen before." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "A dot. A tiny dot at the edge of the document."

Holmes' face remained calm, but his eyes hardened. "And the gentlemen who brought him?" he asked.

Fennel shook his head. "They were gone," he said. "And the doctor was gone. As if he'd never existed. Only..." He raised his hand, as if searching for a word. "Only that smell remained. Shoe polish. And something sweet."

I felt my stomach clench. Holmes stood still, like a man hammering a nail into a board simply by looking.

"Where is the patient now?" he asked.

Fennel hesitated. Then he said quietly, "He's here. In a single room. And..." He swallowed. "...something else has happened. This afternoon a new document was brought in. A will. Not officially registered, just shown. And it bore the same point."

Holmes' voice was calm, but there was a coldness in it that I had rarely heard. "Then the clock starts ticking," he said quietly.

Fennel nodded, as if he had already felt the same thought within himself. "Yes," he said. "And I have the feeling that we are already too late."

My breath came in raspy gasps, and I had to close my eyes for a moment as I felt the dizziness creeping up on me. Holmes' hand briefly touched my arm, offering support.

"We're not too late," Holmes said quietly, more to me than to Fennel. "We're just in the wrong order. And we're going to change that."

Dr. Fennel stood up as if he had decided at that moment that in his house, one either acted or became complicit. He went to the door, opened it a crack, and gave the guard a terse instruction, which I didn't quite understand because his voice remained deliberately low. The guard nodded without asking any questions and disappeared. When Fennel closed the door again, the sound of the lock was surprisingly loud in the sparsely furnished office, as if even metal had to emphasize that there were rules.

"There are things I'm not allowed to tell you," Fennel began, his gaze sweeping over the files as if they were a row of sleeping witnesses. "And there are things I don't want to tell you because I'd rather forget them. But in this matter..." He exhaled. "...there's no comfortable position left."

Holmes stopped. "You're already inside," he said calmly.

Fennel nodded, and in that nod lay a bitter humor that needed no laughter. "Yes," he said. "And this afternoon I did something that my superiors would never forgive me for if they found out."

He pulled open a drawer in his desk and took out a folded piece of paper. It wasn't an official document, but a hastily made copy, like a man who doesn't have time to be handsome. Holmes didn't take it. Fennel held it out to him, and Holmes took the tweezers from his pocket, grasped the paper by the edge, and unfolded it.

I recognized it immediately, even before I could read it: the will Fennel had spoken of. Not the original, but a copy, yet even copies carry more weight than stones on this night.

"I only saw it, I didn't remember it," Fennel said quietly. "The man had me examine it. He said I had to confirm that the patient was not of sound mind so that the document could be applied quickly and without argument."

Holmes' gaze slid over the lines. He read not like a person seeking meaning, but like a person looking for breaks in the pattern: the wrong fiber in the paper, the inappropriate hand, the seal too clean.

"Who benefits?" asked Holmes.

Fennel swallowed. "A man named Edmund Wexford," he said. "A distant relative. A name I've never heard before. The fortune is awarded to him, and at the same time it's noted that Sir Alistair had been... mentally unstable in recent weeks."

"So not only will his fortune be moved around," Holmes said quietly, "but his credibility will also be destroyed."

Fennel nodded. "Exactly," he said. "It's like a second death. You take away his name, and then you take away what the name means."

I heard my own whistling and felt the words sink in. A second death. It was precisely what the man in the house had done: not kill, but order. And order can make a person disappear just as effectively as a bullet.

Holmes held the tweezers still, his gaze lingering on the bottom edge of the document. "The dot," he said.

Fennel nodded, as if ashamed that such a small sign could frighten him so much. "Yes," he whispered. "He was there. And when I saw him, I knew it wasn't an official thing. No will made by an honest man needs a secret dot in the margin."

Holmes folded the paper again and handed it back to Fennel without touching it with his bare hand. "Who brought it?" he asked.

Fennel hesitated. "Not the doctor," he said. "A guard. Hollis. He said a gentleman was at the gate and asked to have it given to me personally. Hollis wouldn't let him in, but he accepted the document."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "Hollis," he repeated.

Fennel nodded. "He's reliable," he said quickly, and I heard that he no longer believed it, but only hoped.

Holmes stepped closer to the desk. "When was that?" he asked.

"Shortly after noon," Fennel replied. "Hollis said the gentleman was well-dressed. Very polite. He said it was just a formality."

Holmes' mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. "Formalities are the most dangerous things tonight," he said.

Fennel placed his hand on his cuff as if wiping away the image of blood that was no longer there. "I saw the patient afterward," he said quietly. "And I saw that he..." Fennel searched for a word and found none that didn't sound accusatory. "...was empty. Not unconscious, not ill in the usual sense. Just empty, as if his thoughts had been poured into a different vessel."

I felt my arm burning again, and I thought of the vials in the house: transferred, misplaced, forgotten. It wasn't a metaphor. It was a system.

"Dr. Fennel," Holmes said calmly, "you will now show me the referral document."

Fennel looked up, startled. "It's in the file," he whispered. "It's official. I can't..."

"You can," Holmes interrupted. "Because you have already decided that your rules will be used here to destroy a man. And if you accept that, you are not a doctor, but a stamp."

Fennel's face hardened. Not with pride, but with that defiant energy that sometimes arises from fear when it has no other outlet. He went to the filing cabinet, unlocked it, pulled out a folder, and placed it on the desk.

"Here," he said.

Holmes didn't open the folder like a curious visitor. He leafed through it with tweezers as if it were evidence in a murder case. The admission document lay on top. Stamp, signature, neat text. And at the edge: the period.

Holmes' gaze lingered briefly on the signature. Then on the stamp. Then on a detail that had initially escaped my notice: the sleeve of the paper, where it's pulled from the folder, was slightly discolored. A tiny shadow, reddish-brown.

"Red clay," Holmes murmured.

Fennel stared at it. "This..." he began, "this can't be."

"Yes," said Holmes. "And it means that the document wasn't just in a law office. It was also where there's clay. Where there are molds. Where stamps are made."

Fennel slowly sank into the chair. "God," he whispered. "So even our paper..."

"...part of his workshop," Holmes finished calmly.

I felt the weariness grip me like a hand on the back of the neck. The fog, the fumes, the night, the whistling. And now this knowledge that even a file folder no longer offers protection, because someone is using it as a stage.

Holmes looked up. "We are now looking at the patient," he said.

"But you already have him..." began Fennel.

Holmes' gaze was cold. "Not to diagnose him," he said. "To see who has worked on him."

Fennel nodded silently. He stood up, went to the door, and we stepped back out into the hallway. The sound of our footsteps was muffled by the rug, as if the house itself wanted to prevent anyone from hearing us move. I heard only my own breathing, that annoying whistling that seemed to echo in the bare walls.

"Watson," Holmes said quietly as we walked, "look at everything. Not just the man in the bed. Look at the guards' hands, the keys, the doorknobs. The one who had blood on his cuff didn't just touch a human being. He touched this place. And where he touches, he leaves a mark."

We approached the door with the brass number. Fennel stopped, took out the key, and at that moment I heard that faint, barely perceptible squeak again, somewhere behind us in the hallway. Not loud enough to be sure, yet distinct enough to make me tense.

Holmes' head lifted. Fennel's hand trembled on the key.

"We are not alone," I whispered.

Holmes barely nodded. "No," he said. "And the blood on the cuff was just the beginning."

Fennel already held the key in the lock, but he didn't turn it. He stood frozen, his gaze fixed on the darkness of the corridor, as if hoping the noise we had both heard would prove to be a figment of our imagination. My own breathing whistled so unpleasantly in the silence that I felt the urge to press my hand over my mouth, as if I could stifle the sound. Holmes, on the other hand, did something I had come to recognize as his first reaction to danger: he became even calmer.

"Do not open," whispered Holmes, without turning his head.

Fennel looked at him, startled, and nodded. His hand remained on the key, but now it held still, as if the metal had become hot.

The squeaking came again, this time closer, and with it a second sound: a soft clinking, as if metal were striking metal. A set of keys. I felt my stomach clench. A place like this thrives on keys. Whoever carries keys here carries power.

Holmes took a half-step to the side, so that he wasn't standing directly in front of the door. He positioned himself so that he could see down the hall and had the door at his back. His knife wasn't visible, but I knew it was in his hand. He didn't make a big deal of it. In houses of confinement, big gestures are merely invitations.

"Dr. Fennel," whispered Holmes, "how many guards are on this shift?"

Fennel cleared his throat softly. "Three," he whispered. "Hollis. Barker. And..." He paused, as if he needed to remember the name. "Mason."

"Which one is in the aisle now?" asked Holmes.

Fennel swallowed. "I... I can't say," he whispered.

That was the truth, and that's precisely why it was dangerous.

The footsteps in the corridor became clearer, but still muffled by the carpet. Then a figure appeared at the end of the hall, half in shadow, half in the cold light of the lamp. A man in a guard's uniform, his keys at his hip, his gaze not hurried, but deliberate. He didn't walk like someone checking things up. He walked like someone being expected.

As he drew nearer, Fennel recognized him before I did. "Hollis," Fennel whispered, and there was horror in his voice, as if knowing a name were worse than seeing a stranger.

Hollis stopped a few steps away and smiled politely. Politely, in the corridor of an institution. That smile was as fake as a stamp on blank paper.

"Doctor," Hollis said calmly. "You're late with your rounds."

Fennel's voice broke. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Hollis raised his hand slightly, as if to appease the situation. "Just my duty," he said. "I heard voices. And so I thought I should check if everything was alright."

Holmes' voice was friendly enough to sound harmless to an outsider. "Then we are grateful," he said. "You will show us the way to Mr. Hollis's superior. We would like to ask a few questions."

Hollis's smile remained. But his eyes changed. A hint, barely perceptible: vigilance. He knew that Holmes didn't come to this asylum to ask polite questions.

"I don't know who you are," said Hollis, and the politeness began to wear thin.

"You know that," Holmes replied calmly. "You knew it when you handed over the will."

Fennel flinched. Hollis's hand didn't go for the keys, but I saw his fingers move slightly, as if checking if the ring was still attached. It was a movement I recognize from soldiers when they're groping for a weapon without admitting it to themselves.

"Will?" said Hollis, and he laughed briefly, kindly. "Doctor, I hand over a lot of papers. It's not my job to read them."

Holmes nodded. "Of course," he said. "And that's why you couldn't see the small dot at the edge."

Hollis' smile remained, but the laughter was gone. "Dots," he said. "There are many dots on paper."

Holmes' gaze was like a blade behind glass. "There are also spots on boots," he said quietly. "And on cuffs."

Fennel took a sharp breath. "Blood," he whispered.

Hollis's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. For a moment, his polite face seemed not quite so composed. In that moment, I saw something else: not an ordinary guard, but a man playing a role.

"You should be careful, Doctor," Hollis said quietly to Fennel. "With your words."

Holmes took a half step forward, not quickly, but decisively. "Hollis," he said. "Open this door."

Hollis's gaze went to the door, to the key in Fennel's hand. "Why?" he asked.

"Because we want to see the patient," Holmes replied.

"The patient is asleep," said Hollis. "He needs rest."

"Quiet," Holmes repeated, and there was contempt in the word. "That's exactly what your friend always said."

Hollis's hand did indeed slide to the key ring, and in that same instant, Holmes visibly drew his knife—not raised, not dramatically, just enough so that the steel flashed briefly in the lamplight. It wasn't an attack. It was a clear line: This far and no further.

Hollis froze. His gaze slid from the knife to Holmes's face. "You'll achieve nothing here," he said quietly. "You're in a house where words mean nothing unless they're stamped."

Holmes' voice remained calm. "Then we'll just have to find the stamps," he said.

Fennel, his hand still on the key, found a glimmer of courage in that moment. Perhaps it wasn't courage, but panic. He turned the key.

The door sprang open.

And immediately a smell wafted from the room that wasn't disinfectant. It was the sweet, sharp odor I'd come to carry in my bones. My chest tightened as if someone had pulled on a rope from the inside. My whistling suddenly became harsh, and I tasted metal.

Holmes reacted instantly. He pushed Fennel aside, pulled me back a step, and half-slammed the door, leaving it ajar. "Don't go in," he whispered.

Hollis's face had changed in that moment. The politeness was gone. Now there was only calculation.

"Too late," Hollis said quietly, and his voice suddenly sounded not like that of a guard, but like that of a messenger announcing a deadline.

Holmes' gaze was cold. "He started it," he said.

Fennel stared at the crack in the door, as if he could see through it what was happening in the room. "What have you done?" he blurted out.

Hollis didn't answer. Instead, he made a small, almost imperceptible movement with his foot, and I heard a soft click on the key ring, as if he had loosened something.

Holmes grabbed my sleeve. "Watson," he said quietly, "if you take a deep breath now, you'll lose. Hold on."

I nodded, but my body rebelled. I pressed the stinging cloth to my nose and took a quick breath. It burned, but helped keep my head clear. The pressure in my chest remained.

Holmes turned to Fennel. "You get help," he said. "Not Hollis. Not Barker. Someone you trust. And you lock this corridor."

Fennel didn't hesitate any longer. He started running, and the sound of his footsteps was suddenly loud because he was no longer trying to be quiet. Hollis took a step as if to follow, but Holmes blocked his path. No knife thrust, no fight. Just a presence that made it clear this was a boundary.

"You are not the man with the bare boots," Holmes said quietly.

Hollis didn't smile. "No," he said. "I'm just the one who opens the doors."

"And he who bears blood," said Holmes.

Hollis's gaze drifted to his cuff, as if he'd forgotten he was wearing it. In the lamplight, I saw something that made my stomach churn: a tiny dark stain at the hem, not fresh red, more brown, like dried blood. Blood you could easily miss if you weren't looking. Blood on the cuff.

"It's happening," Hollis said quietly. "People are fighting back."

Holmes' voice was like ice. "Or they will be resisted," he said.

A muffled sound came from the room, a groan perhaps, or just the sound of a body sliding against a sheet. Then silence again. A silence I had come to know: silent as a sheet of paper.

My breath came in ragged gasps. I felt myself about to black out. Holmes' hand remained firmly on my sleeve, as if it were the only solid point in a building constructed of lies.

Hollis stood there, the key ring in his hand, and I realized that at that moment we weren't fighting a man, but a system of doors. And somewhere behind those doors, the clock continued to tick backward, and every click of a lock was a tick.

## The child who saw everything

Fennel's footsteps faded in the hallway, and with them vanished the last vestige of any semblance that we were still operating within the usual order. All that remained was the key ring on Hollis's hip, the sweet, sharp whiff from the half-closed room, and my own breath, which reared in my chest like a rebellious animal. I held the stinging handkerchief to my nose, taking in just the faintest breath, just enough to keep my head. It burned, and I hated it for that, because it tasted like help and yet like dependence.

Holmes stood between Hollis and the door as if he were not made of flesh, but of design. His knife was visible, but it wasn't what held Hollis back. It was Holmes's gaze. Hollis held his hands in a way that made him admit nothing, yet held everything ready: a man who opens doors can just as easily close them. And in a house like this, that is an almost absolute means of coercion.

"They will not leave," Holmes said quietly.

Hollis' voice remained calm. "I don't have to go anywhere," he said. "You're the ones who are late."

"Late," Holmes repeated. "That's a word your friend loves."

Hollis's lips barely twitched. "Your friend," he said. "As if he were your problem. He is order. And order is not a problem. Order is what remains in the end."

Holmes made no reply that could be interpreted as an argument. He did something else: he shifted his stance ever so slightly that he had a better view of the crack in the door while simultaneously leaving Hollis no room to pass. It was the posture of a man who had learned that in narrow corridors, one doesn't win by speed, but by controlling the space.

From the room beyond the door came no sound. That was what worried me most. Not screams, not a struggle, but this muffled absence. I knew it from the field hospital: the moment when the body stops pleading for help because it has already decided that pleading will change nothing.

"Watson," said Holmes, without taking his eyes off Hollis, "you're staying behind me."

I wanted to reply, to say something brave, but my breath whistled, and the bravery caught in my throat. I merely nodded and stepped so that I found shadows behind him, like a child behind an adult. It was unpleasant to feel that way, but on this night, vanity was as dangerous as panic.

Hollis's gaze briefly slid towards me. "The doctor is prone to illness," he said almost casually. "That's unfortunate. It would be easier if he were healthy."

Holmes' voice was cold. "They made him vulnerable," he said.

Hollis shrugged almost imperceptibly. "People are always vulnerable," he said. "You just have to know where."

At that moment, footsteps came back, faster than before, and I heard Fennel's voice, sharp and muffled at the same time. He wasn't alone. Two other men followed him, both in guard uniforms, one broad and heavy, the other wiry. Their faces had that mixture of weariness and vigilance often seen in institutions. They carried not only keys, but also that unspoken habit of restraint.

Fennel stopped when he saw Hollis, and his face hardened. "Give me the keys," he said.

Hollis's hands remained still. "Why?" he asked. "Because Mr. Holmes says so?"

"Because I said so," Fennel snarled. "Because someone in my house is using poison!"

The broad-shouldered warden took a step forward, but hesitated, as if unsure which side represented the correct order. Hollis was a colleague. Fennel was the doctor. Holmes was... something else, something that defied categorization.

Holmes seized the moment. "Barker," he said, and I could tell from the tone that he wasn't guessing the name, but knew it. "You're the most senior warden here."

The wiry guard blinked. "Yes," he said cautiously.

"Then you know that a set of keys doesn't belong to a man, but to the ward," Holmes said. "And you know that if a patient is in a room with an unfamiliar smell, you don't argue about who is being polite."

Barker looked at Hollis, looked at Fennel, and then, with a swift decision, stepped forward. "Hollis," he said tersely. "Give it here."

Hollis's gaze remained calm, but I saw his jaw tense. For a moment, I thought he was going to fight, not with his fists, but with the instrument of his power: the key ring. Then he slowly let it slip from his hand. Barker took it, and the clinking was suddenly so loud, as if it were a signal.

"Close this corridor," Holmes said immediately. "No one in, no one out, until we know what happened in this room."

The broad-shouldered guard nodded and walked towards the end of the corridor. Barker stopped with the bunch of keys and looked at Fennel as if waiting for further orders.

Fennel went to the door of the patient's room, hesitated, and I saw in his face the fear every doctor knows: the fear of entering a room where one is too late. Holmes briefly placed his hand on Fennel's arm. "Don't go in," he said quietly. "Not while the air in there is still working."

Fennel exhaled, and I heard him fighting the impulse to do it anyway. "Then what?" he whispered.

Holmes looked at the lock, at the crack, at the door frame. "We need air," he said. "Fresh air. And we need the source of this smell. He's placed something. An ampoule, a spray mechanism, some kind of container. Find the window. Open it from the outside, if possible."

Barker nodded and walked down the corridor to take a back passage. The burly guard returned. "The passage is secured," he said.

Hollis now stood somewhat apart, without a key, without a smile, but still with the attitude of a man who believes that he is just a cog in the machine, and that cogs are always right in the end because the machine keeps turning.

"They will tell, Hollis," Holmes said calmly.

Hollis' voice remained mild. "I have nothing to say," he said. "I'm just a guard. I bring water. I bring paper. I bring peace."

"Quiet," Holmes repeated, and this time it sounded not like a word, but like a judgment.

In the distance, I heard a window creak. Then a dull thud, as if a bolt were being moved. Shortly after, a fresh draft swept down the hallway, cold and damp, cutting through the sweet, sharp lingering smell like a knife through thin paper. My chest reacted instantly, contracting and then relaxing slightly, as if it could finally decide what to do again.

Holmes seized the moment, pried the door open a crack with the handkerchief. We all stood still, listening. Inside, a soft rustling, then a cough, weak, ragged, but alive. I felt the relief almost make me weak.

"He's alive," whispered Fennel.

"For now," said Holmes.

Then, from further down the corridor, came a sound that didn't belong to the guards: a soft cry. Not a hysterical one, but a muffled sob, like someone trying to be quiet because they've learned that noise is unwelcome here.

Barker stepped closer again, his breathing a little faster. "The window is open," he said. "The smell is fading. But..." He looked in the direction of the sobbing. "There's a child."

Fennel froze. "A child?" he gasped.

Barker nodded. "In the next room. It shouldn't be here."

Holmes' head lifted. "Take me there," he said.

We walked down the corridor, away from the patient's room, away from Hollis, who followed us with a look that had lost all politeness. The sobbing grew louder, and when we stood before the open door of the adjoining room, I saw it: a small boy, perhaps eight or nine years old, slumped in a chair, his hands covering his face. His clothes were neat, but not rich. He didn't look like a patient. He looked like a child who had wandered into the wrong story.

When he heard our footsteps, he raised his head, his eyes red from crying, but there was something in it that stung me: alertness. Not childish curiosity, but the watchful horror of a child who has seen things he shouldn't have.

Holmes approached slowly, not like an investigator, but like a person who knows that you don't bombard children with questions.

"What's your name?" he asked quietly.

The boy swallowed. "Tom," he whispered.

"Tom," Holmes repeated calmly. "Why are you here?"

Tom wiped his nose with the back of his hand, glanced briefly at Fennel, then at Holmes. "Because... because I saw it," he said.

Holmes held his gaze softly. "What did you see?"

Tom inhaled, and I heard his breath catch briefly, as if he were fighting against a fear bigger than his body. Then he whispered, "The man with the shiny boots."

The boy's whisper hit the room like a stone dropped into still water. Not because it was loud, but because on this night it sounded like a cue, opening too many doors. Fennel stood in the doorway, his hands clenched into fists, and I could see the turmoil within him: indignation, fear, guilt. Barker and the broad-shouldered guard exchanged a glance that said they were glad to return to their keys, to that order one feels in metal. Hollis hadn't come with us, but I had the feeling he was standing behind us, invisible, because his gaze was already within the building.

Holmes knelt down in front of Tom, making himself smaller so the boy wouldn't feel cornered by an adult. His face was calm, his voice quiet.

"You saw him," said Holmes. "When?"

Tom swallowed. "Earlier," he whispered. "When everyone... when you were in the hallway. I was... I was in the small room back there. They put me in there to make me be quiet."

"Who put you in there?" asked Holmes.

Tom looked away, as if he didn't want to say the name because names are dangerous. Then he whispered, "The warden. Hollis."

Fennel made a sound, half anger, half horror. Holmes raised his hand, and Fennel fell silent, as if he had been given an order more important than his indignation.

"Tom," said Holmes, "listen to me carefully. You are not in trouble. But you must tell your story accurately. Not what you think, but what you saw. Can you do that?"

Tom nodded hastily, and the nod was so forceful that I saw his fear robbing him of control over his body. I felt a pang of pity, and my breath whistled softly, as if he, too, had learned to feel pity.

"Tell me about the boots," said Holmes.

Tom wiped his nose again. "They were... completely clean," he whispered. "So clean that I saw myself in them. Like... like in a mirror, but small. And when he ran, it went..." Tom made a tiny noise with his mouth, a squeak that sounded eerily similar to what I myself had heard many times before.

Holmes nodded. "And his coat? His face?"

Tom frowned, as if trying to hold onto an image in his mind that threatened to slip away. "He was wearing a dark coat," he said. "And gloves. They weren't like normal gloves. They were... thin. And he didn't look like the others. He looked like he... like he already belonged here."

"Has he spoken?" asked Holmes.

Tom nodded. "Quietly," he said. "Not like when you're scolding. Like when you're... explaining something. He said to Hollis, 'Now.' And Hollis said, 'Yes, sir.'"

Fennel inhaled sharply, and I saw his face turn whiter. A guard who says "Sir" when he thinks no one is listening. That wasn't an accident. That was a rank.

"Did he give his name?" asked Holmes.

Tom shook his head. "No," he whispered. "He never says names. He only ever says... things. Like... 'that belongs there' and 'that goes in the register.' And Hollis gave him a piece of paper like that."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "A piece of paper," he repeated. "What did it look like?"

Tom thought for a moment. "White," he said. "Folded up. Hollis took it out of his pocket. And the man didn't handle it properly. He took this thing..." Tom shaped his fingers as if holding tweezers. "Like a pair of pliers. And then he opened it and looked. And then he nodded."

Holmes' gaze briefly flickered to my bag, as if he were remembering the tweezers he himself used. Then he looked back at Tom.

"And what did he do then?" asked Holmes.

Tom hesitated, and I saw the sobs welling up inside him again. "He went to that door," he whispered. "The one with that number. And he... he had something in his hand. A small tin. Brass. And he didn't open the door. He just..." Tom made a motion as if he were pressing something against the frame. "...put it on there. And then he told Hollis to wait. And Hollis nodded."

Fennel's voice broke. "A can," he whispered. "A spray mechanism..."

Holmes raised his hand again. "Tom," he said gently, "did you see where he came from? Which door?"

Tom nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "Not from the front. He came from back there. From the courtyard. He came through the small door that only the guards go through. And he didn't have a key, but the door was open anyway."

Barker cursed softly, and the burly guard swallowed. In a house of locks, a door without a key is a sin.

Holmes' voice remained calm. "Did you see if he had anything on his sleeve? On the cuff?" he asked.

Tom blinked, surprised that a grown-up would ask such a thing. Then he nodded. "Yes," he whispered. "There was... a stain. Not big. So small." He pointed with his thumb and forefinger. "And it was dark. And Hollis looked, and he pretended it wasn't anything, but he took out a tissue and wiped it off."

I felt my stomach churn. Blood on the cuff, becoming a handkerchief. A tiny drop disappearing into a piece of fabric, so that later it will only exist in memory.

Holmes nodded slowly. "You had a good eye," he said.

Tom looked at him, and in his gaze was something that affected me more than his fear: the need for an adult to say he wasn't crazy. That what he had seen was real.

"Why were you here?" Holmes asked now, more cautiously. "Why did Hollis put you in the small room?"

Tom wiped his eyes. "Because I... because I live here," he whispered. "My mother works here. She cleans. And I... I sometimes come along when she doesn't have anyone to watch me. And today... today she saw me in the hallway when I went out, and she told me to come back in. And then Hollis saw me. And he told me to be quiet. And then..." Tom swallowed. "...then he locked me up."

Fennel stared at Barker. "Is that true?" he hissed.

Barker looked away, embarrassed. "The cleaning lady," he murmured. "Yes. She sometimes brings the boy along. But... that was never a problem."

"To this day," Holmes said quietly.

He stood up slowly, without abruptly leaving Tom alone. "Tom," he said, "you're going to stay with Barker now. Do you understand? You're not going anywhere alone. And if anyone asks you what you saw, you say: nothing at all. Until I come back."

Tom nodded hastily.

Holmes turned to Fennel. "The man came through the courtyard," he said. "A door without a key. And Hollis served him. That means Hollis is not just a guard. He is a gateway."

Fennel's face was hard with anger. "I want to arrest him immediately," he said.

Holmes' gaze remained cold. "If you grab him now, you'll only be grasping the cog," he said. "And the man in the bare boots will have long since set another cog in motion. We need evidence that can't be wiped away like blood."

"Which ones?" asked Fennel, his voice trembling.

Holmes pointed toward the hall. "The tin," he said. "The brass tin by the doorframe. If Tom is right, he put it there. And if we find it, we might find not only poison, but also the way he marks his things. We need the dot, not on paper, but on metal."

I felt my breathing become rougher again as fear rose within me. But I also saw how clear Holmes's thoughts were, as sharp as a knife. And in that moment I understood: The child hadn't just seen. He had given us something rarely found on such a night: an eyewitness who doesn't lie because he hasn't learned to be polite.

We left Tom in the next room, with Barker at his side, who had suddenly become not just a guard, but a bulwark of coarse cloth and keys. The broad man remained there as well, as if he had understood that a child in this house was more precious than a file folder. Fennel went ahead, faster than was usually good for him, and Holmes followed with that quiet haste that never looks like haste. I walked behind them, collar turned up, breathing shallow. The whistling sounded in the long corridor like an unwelcome noise, one that could alert anyone to our presence at any moment.

As we approached the door with the brass number, the sweet, sharp smell was just a lingering trace, cut through by the fresh air from the open window. But it was precisely this lingering scent that was dangerous, because it didn't linger in the room like a cloud, but rather like an invisible film clinging to the throat. Fennel stopped, his hand on the handle, and I saw him narrow his eyes, as if he were forcing himself to remain a doctor and not just a human being.

Holmes leaned to the doorframe without hesitation. He produced the tweezers as if they were an instrument more appropriate to use in this house than a scalpel. "If the can is here, it's not for us," he muttered. "It's for any careless lung. And it's a piece of evidence he doesn't want to retrieve because he thinks we're too late."

He ran the tweezers slowly along the wood, over the joints, over the small edge where the frame and wall meet. Then he paused. Very close to the bottom edge, where the eye barely looks because it's focused on the handle, he felt something that didn't belong to the wood. A tiny protrusion. Metal.

Holmes' steady fingers released a small clasp, and he pulled out a brass box, scarcely larger than a matchbox. It was so polished that it gleamed in the lamplight. But on one corner was a dark, reddish-brown stain.

"Clay," I whispered.

"And perhaps more," said Holmes.

He didn't hold the can with his bare hand. He used the handkerchief, placed it on the floor, and with the tweezers, he opened the lid a crack. A hint of sweetness rose, barely perceptible, but my chest reacted immediately, as if the scent had a direct line to my nerves.

I took a step back, pressed my lips together, and the whistling sound broke out briefly, more harshly. Holmes closed the lid again. "Enough," he said quietly. "We don't need a sample from your bronchi."

Fennel stared at the can. "It's... in my hallway," he whispered, as if he couldn't believe it.

“In your hallway,” Holmes confirmed. “And therefore under your responsibility. But also under your control. That’s the difference.”

He carefully turned the can, looking not for a mechanism, but for a signature. Then he found it: on the underside, where it's only visible when you turn it upside down. A tiny dot, not made of paint, but a fine incision in the metal, so small that you could mistake it for an accidental notch.

Holmes' gaze hardened. "There he is," he said.

Fennel swallowed. "He even marks that," he whispered.

“He marks everything he considers part of his order,” Holmes said. “That’s his fault. He can’t resist.”

I felt my chest tighten, not just because of the smell, but because of the realization that we were not just fighting against a series of acts, but against a man who was so convinced of his system that he had to sign it like art.

Holmes placed the can in a metal sleeve, sealed it, and I was grateful for this small gesture because it meant air in my chest. Then he turned toward the door.

“Now,” said Fennel, his voice trembling, “we have to go in.”

Holmes nodded. "With the window open," he said.

Fennel opened the door just a crack, and a cold draft swept through the room, as if the open window were trying to expel the poison. We waited a heartbeat, then stepped inside. I remained standing in the doorway because my body resisted the room. Not out of cowardice, but out of instinct. Instinct isn't noble, but it's often right.

The patient lay on the bed. He was paler than before, but he was alive. His chest rose and fell flat. His eyes were half-open, and his gaze was so empty it hurt. Fennel stepped to the side and took his pulse. "He's... there," he whispered. "But how far...?"

Holmes didn't go to the bed. He went to the window. Outside, fog; inside, the air moved slowly. Holmes looked at the windowsill. There lay something that didn't belong: a small piece of fabric, barely larger than a handkerchief, crumpled up. He picked it up with tweezers and carefully unfolded it.

A handkerchief. White. And in one corner, a dark, reddish-brown stain.

"He left it here," Fennel whispered.

Holmes nodded. "Because he thought no one would look for it," he said. "Or because he wants us to find it so we know we're in his game."

I heard my own whistling and realized I could barely hold my breath. I took a tiny breath of the stinging cloth, just to keep from fainting. It burned, and I hated it because it both saved and humiliated me.

Holmes held the handkerchief up to the light. "Blood," he said softly.

Fennel's voice hardened. "Then he hurt him," he whispered.

"Or Hollis," said Holmes. "Or someone acting in his name. Blood on the cuff. And the handkerchief as an eraser."

Holmes bent down, not smelling the blood, but looking at the seam of the handkerchief. There, at the hem, was a tiny puncture, as if someone had fastened something and then undone it. Holmes pulled out a thread with tweezers, barely visible. He tugged, and something came loose: a tiny piece of paper, tightly rolled up, so small that it could be considered accidental.

Holmes unfurled it carefully. It wasn't a long message, just a few words, neatly written:

The clock is ticking. The witness is writing.

That's the point.

My stomach went cold. Not because I didn't understand the threat, but because I realized it was already part of a plan that saw me not just as an observer, but as a tool.

Holmes folded the paper again, put it back in its sleeve, and his gaze went to Fennel.

"Now," Holmes said quietly, "we know two things: First, Hollis is not alone. Second, the man is close enough to be leaving handkerchiefs in windows. And third..." He looked at me, and there was something in his gaze that was not comfort, but sober warning. "...he wants you to write, Watson. Not later. Not when it's over. He wants you to begin now."

I felt my breath whistling, and I knew that this whistling was no longer just an illness. It had become part of a story that someone else wanted to control.

"What do we do?" whispered Fennel.

Holmes' voice was calm, like a man setting a clock, not to the time, but to the moment. "We'll find Hollis," he said. "And we'll find the door in the courtyard that opened without a key. Because there isn't just an entrance there. There is the point where his clock truly starts running backward."

## A room without a mirror

We left the patient under Fennel's supervision, the window still open, as if fresh air could dispel not only poison but also lies. Barker stayed with Tom, and the broad attendant had positioned himself in front of the door like a post, having suddenly understood that sometimes one defends a corridor like a position. Hollis had vanished. Not in panic, not in flight. He was simply no longer there, as if the asylum itself had swallowed him up. In a house full of doors, absence is the most sophisticated movement.

Holmes led Fennel and me back into the corridor, toward the courtyard entrance. The lamps seemed dimmer here, or perhaps it was just my head growing weary. My breathing was a soft whistling sound, and each time it grew louder, I felt ashamed, though shame was as useless tonight as politeness. I kept the stinging handkerchief in my pocket, forcing myself not to use it, knowing that otherwise I would wear it like a crutch until I couldn't do without it.

"Where is the door?" Holmes asked quietly.

Fennel pointed forward. "At the end of the north wing," he said. "Where the deliveries come in. Food, coal, laundry."

"And sometimes a man with bare boots," Holmes murmured.

Fennel didn't answer. His jaws worked as if he were chewing his anger down so it wouldn't be heard.

We reached the door. It was unassuming, a simple piece of wood that barely stood out against the brickwork. A bolt, a lock, a small gap at the bottom through which cold air drifted. Holmes knelt down and examined the floor. No red clay this time, only the gray dust of the asylum, crisscrossed with fine traces that one only sees if one forces one's eyes to look.

"Here," said Holmes, pointing to an imprint in the dust. The imprint was sharp, almost stamped. A heel, an edge, and where the leather rubbed against the wood, a tiny shiny streak, as if shoe polish had been rubbed off.

Fennel uttered a soft curse.

Holmes stood up and placed his hand on the handle. He didn't press it immediately. He listened. I listened with him, and I heard only the distant murmur of the asylum, like a breath in every wing. No creak, no key, no footstep.

Holmes opened the door.

The door led into a small vestibule that smelled of cold coal and damp laundry. A place not meant for people, but for things. Stacks of sheets in a basket, a sack of potatoes, a broom leaning against the wall. And in the corner, a second, lower door that led into the courtyard.

"That's the way," Holmes said quietly. "The way you take when you don't want to be seen."

Fennel stepped forward and opened the courtyard door. Cold air rushed in, and I was grateful for it because it briefly cleared the stifling institutional air in my head. We stepped outside.

The courtyard was small, surrounded by walls, with a shed and a drain grate in the middle. The fog lay deeper here because the wind didn't penetrate it well. It was a place to leave things you didn't want to see in the hallways. And that's precisely why it was ideal for our enemy.

Holmes didn't go back to the door, but to the shed. He examined the lock that hung on it. It was new, shiny, as if it had recently been replaced. Holmes didn't touch it. He bent down and briefly smelled the metal surface.

"Shoe polish," he said quietly.

Fennel shook his head, as if he couldn't believe that a smell could be a trail that travels through walls. "Why here?" he whispered.

Holmes sat up. "Because he's storing something," he said. "Or because he's waiting here. Or because he needs a room that isn't in the register. Every place has its register, Doctor. Even a courtyard. Only here, the register is dust."

He went to the drain grate, knelt down, and examined the edges. A tiny reddish shimmer clung to one corner.

"Clay," murmured Holmes.

My breath whistled, and I felt my body react to the word as if it were a threat. Clay meant workshop. Molds. Stamps. Not only in brickyards, but everywhere order is cast.

Holmes lifted the grate slightly with the tweezers, just enough to see underneath. A dark shaft, the smell of water, and something else: a hint of sweetness, so faint it could hardly be real. Yet my chest heaved as if he had recognized it.

Holmes lowered the grid again. "It connects everything," he said quietly. "Air. Water. Paper. If you don't see it, you believe it doesn't exist."

Fennel was pale. "What are we looking for?" he asked.

Holmes looked towards the shed. "A room without a mirror," he said quietly.

"Without a mirror?" I repeated, confused.

Holmes' gaze remained on the castle. "A place where no one sees themselves," he said. "A place where one can rewrite oneself without a mirror reminding one who one was. In houses like this, mirrors are rare. And that is precisely what makes them dangerous."

He approached the shed and examined the door. There was no sound, but it gave a slight give, as if the bolt wasn't fully engaged. Holmes looked at Fennel. "Do you have a key?" he asked.

Fennel shook his head. "No," he whispered. "The shed is used by the wardens. Hollis has..." He broke off.

Holmes nodded. "Then we will read without a key," he said.

He placed the thin piece of metal he had previously used on the window against it. A soft click. The door opened.

It was dark inside, but not completely dark. A sliver of light shone through a crack in the roof. The smell was stronger: wax, paper, shoe polish, and underneath it all, that sweetness that made my throat tighten.

Holmes entered, and I followed, although my body resisted. Fennel remained on the threshold, as if he did not want to be defiled in his own yard.

The shed wasn't a storage place for brooms. It was a storage place for order. Boxes stood against the wall, labeled in neat handwriting. Glass bottles lined up in rows, like in a pharmacy. And on a table lay a stack of mirrors... no, not mirrors. Metal plates, polished, but not reflective. Polished so they shine, but ground so smooth they don't reflect any face.

Holmes went to the table, lifted a platter, and held it up to the light. No one was visible on it. Only scattered light. A room without a mirror.

"So that nobody recognizes each other," I whispered.

Holmes nodded. "So that no one remembers," he said.

Holmes placed the matte metal plate back on the table, as if it were something one shouldn't hold for too long. I had the feeling that the thing had changed the air in the shed, not through smell, but through meaning. A mirror shows you who you are. This plate only showed you that light existed, and made everything else disappear. It was a new kind of cruelty: not to disfigure the face, but to erase it.

Fennel finally crossed the threshold, as if he had realized that retreat would offer no protection at that moment. His gaze swept over the boxes, the vials, the meticulous order, and I saw his indignation transform into something deeper: shame that such a thing could exist in his yard without his knowledge.

"This is... a workshop," he whispered.

"A workshop and a depot," Holmes said calmly. "This is not just a place for preparation. It's a place for storage."

He went to the boxes. Each one had a label, neatly written. Not the names of substances, but words one would expect to find in government offices rather than pharmacies:

Instruction, transcript, seal, copy, reassurance

Holmes' fingers didn't glide over the labels; he merely pointed at them, as if to make it clear to me that the man behind these boxes didn't think in terms of fabrics, but in terms of processes. Not what something is, but what it causes.

"He writes actions on boxes," I said hoarsely.

Holmes nodded. "Because he believes people are actions," he said. "If he reduces a person to 'commitment,' then the person is no longer a person, but a step in a process."

Fennel took a step toward a crate and began to open it, but Holmes placed his hand on his arm. "Not with bare hands," he said quietly. "If he's working with fumes here, he's also working with traces. And he's working with guilt. He wants you to touch something you'll later regret."

Fennel pulled his hand back as if the box had bitten him. Holmes took a cloth, wrapped it around the tweezers, and carefully opened the lid of the box labeled "Seal".

Inside wasn't a single stamp, but several. Small pieces of metal, carefully wrapped in paper. Some were round, some oval. Next to them was a block of red wax, cut into pieces. And at the edge, in a small compartment, a mound of red clay, finely ground, as if to create a color or to deceptively alter a surface.

"He doesn't just copy," Holmes murmured. "He blends. He doesn't just imitate the form. He imitates the story."

Fennel's voice was rough. "This is a fake," he said.

Holmes looked at him. "That's administration," he said calmly. "For him, it's the same thing."

I felt the pressure in my chest more intensely, and I instinctively held my breath shallowly because the smell in the shed grew thicker the longer we stood there. It wasn't just the sweetness; it was also a kind of dry chemical that irritated my throat. I reached for the stinging tissue, paused, and forced myself not to use it, because I felt the shed itself was waiting for me to betray me.

Holmes opened the next box: Transcripts. Inside were sheets of paper, some already written on, some blank, but with pre-printed lines like those found in registers. Some had names written on them, neatly, in a handwriting that was deliberately inconspicuous. And on every sheet, at the edge, was the period.

Holmes picked up one of the sheets of paper with tweezers and held it up to the light. It was a referral form, not completely filled out, but prepared. The name was left blank, but everything else was in place: diagnosis, recommendation, a doctor's signature, which simply needed to be traced.

"He dictates fate," whispered Fennel.

Holmes nodded. "And he leaves the person as the last variable," he said. "That's the clock going backwards. First the form, then the person."

My stomach went cold. This shed contained not only tools, but a logic that frightened me more than any knife. Knives kill bodies. Paper kills possibilities.

Holmes opened the box of reassurances. I expected to find vials, glass bottles, labels. And yes, they were there: rows of bottles, thin tubes, small spray mechanisms. But there was something else: a bundle of neatly folded tissues, identical, white, to the ones used in clubs. Next to the bundle lay a small glass pen with a fine tip, like an instrument for applying a tiny amount of liquid.

Holmes's gaze hardened. "Blood on the cuff," he murmured. "He used it as a signal. Not just as an accident."

Fennel stared at the tissues. "He hurts them," he whispered. "He makes them bloody so that..."

"So they believe it's resistance," Holmes said. "So the story remains believable. A patient who doesn't resist doesn't fit the picture. So you add a drop of blood to the picture."

I felt my arm burn, as if the poison inside me had understood those words.

Holmes picked up the glass pencil with tweezers and examined the tip. A tiny, dark residue clung to it. He didn't put it down, but carefully placed it in the metal case where he had already collected other things, as if building his own register of evidence.

"We need Hollis," said Fennel, his voice now not just angry, but desperate. "He needs to know who set this up."

Holmes' gaze remained calm. "He knows," he said. "And that's why he's no longer in the corridor. He's either escaped or he's waiting where he can be most useful."

"Where?" asked Fennel.

Holmes pointed to the briefing box, which was still closed. "That's where decisions are signed," he said. "In your office. Or with someone who's acting as your office."

Fennel's face went pale. "My office is in the main building," he whispered. "If he's there..."

"Then he has time," said Holmes. "And time is his weapon."

Holmes closed the boxes again, not out of politeness, but because he understood that one should not linger longer than necessary in a room filled with poison and order. He stepped to the door, paused briefly, and looked at the dull metal plate that reflected no face.

"Watson," he said quietly, "do you see what he's building here? Not just traps. He's building a world where a person has no reflection. No proof of themselves. And if a person can't see themselves, you can tell them anything about themselves."

I swallowed. My breath whistled. I thought of Sir Alistair, the backward-running clock beside his bed, the will, the period. And I understood: The adversary doesn't just want wealth. He wants the right to define a person's truth.

Fennel opened the shed door, and cold air rushed in. I breathed shallowly and felt my chest respond gratefully. We stepped out into the yard, the fog again enveloping us like a wet cloak. But now the yard was no longer just a place. It was a junction. A gateway.

"We're going to your office," Holmes said.

Fennel nodded, and there was no longer any resistance in his face. Only the harsh realization that his house had been infiltrated.

As we walked back to the courtyard gate, Holmes noticed a new mark on the ground, fine in the dust: a print that was fresh, sharper than the others. He pointed at it, and I saw a small, shiny arc at the edge, as if someone had just rubbed on shoe polish.

"He was here a few minutes ago," Holmes murmured.

My breath whistled, and this time the whistle wasn't just a sign of weakness, but of alarm. For the man in the gleaming boots wasn't somewhere in the city. He was still in the asylum at that very moment.

We went back faster than is wise in a house full of ears, and yet there was no audible haste. Holmes moved like a shadow, Fennel like a man only now realizing that walls are useless when the enemy is already inside. I followed, my breathing shallow, my whistling like an unpleasant echo in the corridors. The fog stayed outside in the courtyard, but inside there was a different kind of fog: the sluggish, stale air, where disinfectant and fear mingled.

At the end of the north wing, Barker and the burly warden were still standing with Tom. The boy raised his head as we passed, and I saw that his eyes followed us like the eyes of an animal no longer sure whether adults meant protection or danger. Barker wanted to say something, but Holmes merely raised his hand, and Barker remained silent. Words are like matches tonight.

Fennel's office was in the main wing, behind a door that didn't seem heavy but had the kind of lock used to protect files from prying eyes. As we approached, the first thing I noticed was something out of place: the light under the door was brighter than before. Someone was inside. And not just inside, but busy.

Fennel stopped, and I saw his chest rise as if he were about to utter a curse. Holmes placed two fingers on his sleeve, a silent command to be quiet.

"Listen," whispered Holmes.

We listened. Inside, the rustling of paper. The soft scraping of a chair across the floor. And then, very faintly, the click of a seal, as if metal were being pressed against wax. A sound that wasn't loud, but on this night carried more terror than a gunshot.

Fennel's face turned white. "He's stamping," he whispered.

Holmes nodded. "Yes," he said quietly. "And he doesn't do it secretly. He does it in your office so you know he can."

Fennel reached for the key. Holmes held it back, just a touch, and instead produced the tweezers, as if an office door were also a piece of evidence.

"If we burst in now," whispered Holmes, "he will either be gone or he will give us a scene. We will go in, but we will go in in such a way that he cannot control a scene."

Fennel stared at him. "What?" he whispered.

Holmes pointed towards the corridor. "You call Barker," he said. "Quietly. And the broad man. You stand at the end of the corridor so that no one can get out without passing you. Then you open the door, and I'll go in first."

Fennel nodded, turned around, took a few steps, and signaled to Barker. Barker came immediately, the broad guard behind him. Tom stayed in the next room, but I felt his gaze on our backs like an invisible finger.

Barker positioned himself at the end of the corridor, the broad man at the other side, so that the hall suddenly resembled a corridor in a chess game: a field whose exits are controlled. Holmes stood close to the door. I stood behind him, because my body is no longer reliable in

confined spaces. My breath wheezed, and I pressed my lips together to conceal how exhausted I was by the tension.

Fennel put the key in the lock.

At that moment, the sounds inside ceased. The rustling stopped, the scraping stopped. As if someone had held their breath.

Holmes raised his hand, but Fennel continued turning. The lock clicked. The door opened.

The light in the office was bright, too bright for this night, and it came from a lamp on the desk, positioned so that it cast no shadows on the paper. In the glow of this lamp, a man sat at the desk, not in a guard's uniform, not in a doctor's coat, but in a clean, dark suit. He held a seal stamp in his hand and was just lowering it onto a piece of red wax when we entered.

He didn't look surprised. He looked up and smiled politely.

His boots were shiny.

"Doctor Fennel," he said kindly, as if we were in a consultation. "Mr. Holmes. Dr. Watson. How gratifying that you are punctual."

My stomach clenched. Just in time. The word was like a needle penetrating my skin.

Holmes took a step into the room, not far, but decisively. "You're using someone else's office," he said.

The man shrugged slightly. "Offices are like names," he said. "They belong to those who fill them."

Fennel blurted out: "Who are you?"

The man calmly set the stamp aside. His cuff was immaculately white. And yet, as he moved his hand, I saw a tiny dark spot at the hem, barely more than a shadow. Not the signature mark, but something else: a stain so small it would be invisible in everyday life. Blood that had been wiped away once, yet remained.

"I am the doctor," the man said gently. "The one who helps when the city can no longer help itself."

I felt my arm burn, and my breath whistled more roughly, as if my body had recognized the voice before my head dared.

Holmes' voice was cold. "You are not here to help," he said.

The man smiled. "Help is a matter of definition," he said. "And definition is a matter of register."

He pointed to the paper in front of him. "I've already prepared everything that's necessary. The patient is not of sound mind. The procedure is sound. And the will..." He tapped his

finger on the envelope next to the wax. "...will take effect without dispute. Order. No scandals. No unrest."

Fennel's face contorted with rage. "You're destroying a human being!" he hissed.

The man looked at him, almost pityingly. "No," he said. "I'm relieving him of his burden. A man who constantly has to fight for his name is unhappy. I'm giving him peace."

Holmes moved closer to the table, his gaze lingering not on the words, but on the objects: the envelope, the wax, the stamp. "You like to work with deadlines," Holmes said quietly. "And yet you sit here as if you had all the time in the world."

The man smiled. "Because I have them," he said. "They're the ones who run. I sit. I write. And while you run, the world is already becoming more orderly."

Barker called from the hallway: "Doctor, should I—"

The man raised his hand, and Barker fell silent, not because it contained an order, but because the tone was so natural that he obeyed instinctively. I saw Holmes' eyes narrow slightly. This wasn't just a man. This was a man accustomed to power without needing to display it loudly.

"Watson," the man said suddenly, and my name sounded like a hand grasping a chain. "You know I'm right. You did it yourself, back then. A drop. A little peace. And the person... became more bearable. For the world. For themselves."

My breath whistled, and I had to force myself not to speak. The sentence tugged at a memory I would have preferred to keep buried in darkness.

Holmes' voice cut in. "He's using you," he said to me, calmly, almost casually, and yet it was a lifeline. "He wants you to be ashamed. Shame makes people quiet. And quiet people sign."

The man smiled as if he were looking at a beautiful game board. "Very good," he said. "You're explaining the rules to him. That makes it fair."

Holmes raised the tweezers. "It will be fair if you give your name," he said.

The man looked at the tweezers, then back at Holmes. "Names," he said calmly. "You're really obsessed with them."

He stood up slowly. In the light, he looked even cleaner, even more out of place. He smoothed down his sleeve, and I saw the blood at the hem, small but real. Blood on the cuff, no longer just a picture, but proof.

"You can call me whatever you like," he said kindly. "It won't change what's already been stamped."

Holmes' gaze fell upon the envelope, and in that gaze lay a decision. Not the decision to strike, but the decision to alter the order of the moment. I felt the air in the office grow thicker, as if the backward-running clock outside in the patient's room had suddenly begun to tick here as well.

## The bill in the box

The moment the man stood up, I understood that he had no intention of fleeing like a thief caught in the act. He stood as if the scene had reached a point where he felt compelled to make the next move out of courtesy. The lamp on the desk was positioned to illuminate his face without shadows, and yet it was as if something within him remained unlit. His expression was friendly, his posture correct, his hands clean—and yet, in everything he did, there was the impression of a blade concealed beneath a cloth.

Holmes's gaze slid to the envelope, to the red wax, to the stamp. It seemed to me that I saw in these things not merely office equipment, but instruments of a bloodless execution. A seal that turns a living person into an unwitting shadow. An envelope that moves a fortune like a parcel. The hand that touches it remains clean, while the person it concerns vanishes.

"You put a can on the doorframe," Holmes said calmly, as if to bring the conversation down to a matter-of-fact level where politeness sounds like nothing more than empty words. "You used a guard. You spread poison in a house where people already have so much air they can barely breathe. And you call that helping."

The man smiled, as if he recognized a neat order in Holmes's list. "I call it foresight," he said gently. "London is full of coincidences. I tidy them up."

"They are cleaning up people," said Fennel, his voice rough with anger.

The man looked at him as if he saw a patient upset about his diagnosis. "Doctor," he said kindly, "you work in a house whose purpose is to contain other people's disorder. You shouldn't be so sensitive when someone brings order to it."

Fennel took a step forward, but Barker in the corridor immediately moved, as if to intervene. The broad-shouldered guard held his position like a piece of furniture. No one knew who was following whose orders at that moment. And therein lay the danger: In houses where rules prevail, the one who speaks the rules in a way that makes them sound self-evident wins.

Holmes did not move towards the man. Instead, he made a small, almost imperceptible movement to the side, positioning himself so that I could see: he did not want to seize the man. He wanted the things.

"They've already stamped it," said Holmes, pointing to the wax.

"I was just preparing," the man replied. "The stamping can come later, once the shape has been confirmed."

Holmes' voice remained flat. "Then nothing is final yet," he said.

The man tilted his head slightly. "Finality is a feeling," he said. "The city thrives on temporary situations that are treated as permanent."

Holmes' eyes flashed briefly. "I am not the city," he said.

There was something in that sentence that lifted my spirits despite everything. Because it was true. Holmes was not one to be impressed by paper. He was impressed by logic. And logic had already shown cracks in this office: a child who had seen; a tin that was signed; a handkerchief with a message; a guard who served too politely.

The man slowly lifted the envelope containing the will, as if he were merely going to put it on his lap. Holmes's hand was suddenly there, quick as a reflex, holding the envelope firmly with tweezers without touching it. It was an inconspicuous gesture, and yet it was like a blow: a no that defies words.

The man paused, looked at the tweezers, looked at Holmes. His smile remained, but it had grown a touch colder. "You're rough," he said quietly.

"I am cautious," Holmes replied. "And I have learned that crude things often have neat names."

Fennel exhaled sharply. "Give me that," he said.

The man shook his head, almost regretfully. "That's not yours," he said. "It's not even Sir Alistair's. It belongs to the court."

"It belongs to the court," said Fennel.

"The court belongs to the register," the man replied.

Holmes held onto the envelope. "Then we'll take it with us," he said calmly.

"You can't take it," the man said kindly. "You don't have a receipt."

Holmes looked at him. "Oh," he said, "I have something better than a receipt."

He nodded toward the desk. Between the wax block and the stamp lay a small wooden box that I hadn't noticed before. It was so inconspicuous that one could easily mistake it for a container for leftover sealing wax. But now I realized that it had been placed there deliberately, like an object meant to be seen when the moment arrived.

Holmes did not take the box. He only looked at it.

"What is it?" he asked.

The man smiled, as if the question were the real purpose of our visit. "The bill," he said quietly. "You can't work without writing the bill."

"Invoice for what?" asked Fennel.

The man looked at him, kindly, almost gently. "For peace," he said. "For the end of the conflict. For the absence of scandal. For the happiness of those who don't want to fight with names."

Holmes' gaze remained on the box. "You're bringing a bill to an asylum office," he said. "That's unusual."

“Unusual things are remembered better,” the man replied.

My breath wheezed, and I felt my body resisting this conversation. It was like a clinical lecture on morality, given by someone who views morality as a tool. And yet, I couldn't tear my gaze away from the box. That night, small containers were more dangerous than guns.

Holmes slowly produced his handkerchief, wrapped it around the tweezers, and lifted the lid of the box a crack. There was no spray mechanism, no spring-loaded mechanism. Inside lay something flat: a folded piece of paper, small, precisely cut, as one would expect to find in a business card box. On top of it lay a thin piece of metal, round, with an embossed design that gleamed in the lamplight.

Holmes lifted the piece of metal and held it up to the light. It was a seal die head – interchangeable, like a mask. And engraved on the side, tiny, was the signature: the dot.

"Of course," Holmes murmured.

The man smiled, as if he had just proven how consistent he was. "You like order, Mr. Holmes," he said. "You just don't like someone else creating it."

Holmes left the box open, but he took nothing out. Instead, he looked at the folded paper. "And this?" he asked.

"The bill," the man said.

Holmes unfolded it with tweezers. The writing was neat, concise, and yet, upon seeing it, I felt the same cold pressure as with the will. It wasn't a sum of money. It was a list, matter-of-fact like an inventory:

An admission. A silence. A name, misplaced. A will, confirmed. A witness, sworn to account.

There was only one sentence underneath, which hit me like a ton of bricks:

Payable by feather and breath.

I felt my chest tighten as if someone had used the word "breath" as a handle. My whistling became ragged, and for a moment I had to put my hand on the edge of the table to keep from wobbling.

Holmes's gaze remained calm, but I saw that he too understood this statement as an attack. He folded the paper again, put it back in its case, without taking his eyes off the man.

"They want Watson to pay," Holmes said quietly.

The man shrugged slightly. "The doctor writes anyway," he said kindly. "He's always writing. He can't help it. And when he writes, he organizes. He determines what is true. I simply ask him to do it consciously."

Fennel growled. "That's blackmail."

“No,” the man said. “This is a request for cooperation.”

Holmes' voice became slightly harsher. "You forget," he said, "that cooperation is voluntary."

The man smiled. "Voluntarily," he repeated, as if savoring the word. "How voluntary was that drop back then, Doctor?"

My breath whistled, and I felt the old shame it conjured up, like a hand picking at a wound. Holmes's gaze immediately cut to me, and in that look lay the silent prohibition against withdrawing.

But before I could say anything, I heard a brief clinking sound outside in the hallway—a set of keys that didn't belong to Barker. And then, very quietly, a squeak, as if someone were putting down a shiny boot.

The man in the office smiled more broadly than he had expected.

"You see," he said kindly, "the clock is ticking. And the bill is being collected."

The clinking of keys in the hall was a sound that held a special significance in this house. Everyone here reacted to it because it announced not just movement, but command. I saw Fennel's gaze involuntarily jump to the door, Barker's silhouette tense in the hall, and the broad warden shift his stance as if preparing for a thrust. Holmes, however, remained with the box, as if unwilling to relinquish the object from the grasp of logic simply because metal clanged outside.

The man in the suit smiled as if the clinking was a compliment.

"They called for help," Fennel said roughly.

"I'm not calling anything," the man replied kindly. "I'm just keeping things organized. And if order is disturbed, it returns. It has its ways."

Holmes' voice remained calm. "Barker," he said, without taking his eyes off the man, "who's outside?"

Barker didn't answer immediately. I heard a short gasp in the hallway, like someone considering whether to obey or not. Then his voice came, muffled: "Two men. One in uniform. One..." He paused. "...in a suit."

Fennel cursed softly. "Another one," he muttered.

The man at the desk raised his hand. "You see," he said gently, "how unnecessary violence is? All you need is personnel."

Holmes slid the box aside, not to hide it, but to create space on the table. His fingers moved in such a way that I realized he wasn't preparing an attack, but a change of scene. He wanted to prevent the man in the suit from controlling the stage.

"You will remain standing still," Holmes said quietly to Fennel, "and you will only speak when I tell you to."

Fennel wanted to protest, but he swallowed it down. I saw the bitter realization in his face: in his own office, he was suddenly no longer the one making the rules.

Holmes turned his gaze towards the door. "Barker," he called calmly, "let no one in who does not enter at your command."

"Mr. Holmes," said the man at the table kindly, "you are giving orders in a house that is not yours."

Holmes' eyes were cold. "And you're clocking in at an office that isn't yours," he retorted.

The squeaking in the hallway grew closer. Not hurried. Not hidden. It was the sound of a man who deliberately wanted to be heard. Then a second man appeared in the doorway—not the one with the shiny boots at the table, but another, more powerfully built, with the face of a former soldier or policeman, in a uniform that looked too new. Next to him stood a man in a suit, younger, smooth, with a notebook in his hand, as if he were more of a writer than a doorman.

Barker stood facing them, his hand on his key ring, and said simply: "Stop."

The uniformed man smiled without warmth. "I'm following orders," he said.

"By whom?" Barker asked.

The man at the table replied without turning around: "From order."

Barker hesitated for a heartbeat. It was that moment when a guard decides whether he is a guard or a tool. Then he glanced briefly at Fennel. Fennel nodded almost imperceptibly. Barker took a step forward and said louder, "No one in."

The uniformed man narrowed his eyes. The younger man in the suit looked into his notebook as if a single entry could decide who was right.

The man at the table sighed, almost regretfully. "This is unpleasant," he said. "You're forcing me to be more formal."

He didn't reach for a weapon. He reached for a piece of paper. A small sheet, already prepared, with a stamp imprint along the edge. He held it up so that the lamp illuminated it.

"You see," he said kindly. "An order. A document. It states that Dr. Fennel is relieved of his duties with immediate effect until an investigation is completed. And it states that the patient should be transferred to a quieter facility."

Fennel let out a sound as if he had been punched in the face. "This is... this is madness," he said.

"No," the man replied calmly. "That's paper."

Holmes didn't pick up the sheet. He only looked at it. "And the point?" he asked.

The man smiled. "You love details."

Holmes' voice became sharper. "I love truth."

The man held the sheet of paper a fraction lower, and yes, there it was: the tiny dot at the edge. Like a signature of invisibility.

"Barker," Holmes said calmly, "this is not an official document. It's a forgery. Do you see the point?"

Barker stared, not understanding immediately, but he understood the tone. "I see... something at the edge," he murmured.

"That is the mark of the man who is spreading poison in this house," said Holmes. "And if you follow him now, you are not only guilty, you are making a fool of yourself. Because you are following a point, not a law."

The uniformed man in the hallway took a step forward. "Enough," he growled.

The man at the table raised his hand, almost casually. The uniformed man paused, as if suspended by an invisible thread.

"Mr. Holmes," the man said kindly, "you are clever, but you are only a man. And I don't work with men. I work with mechanisms. Look around you: corridor, guards, files, stamps. If I wanted, I could be gone in five minutes, and you would be left with a doctor who has been dismissed and a patient who has been transferred. And nobody will believe you because you don't have a receipt."

Holmes glanced briefly at the box. "I have a receipt," he said quietly.

The man smiled. "A box?"

Holmes' voice remained calm, but I heard in it something like a blade finally being drawn from its sheath. "The bill in your box," he said. "You wrote it. By doing so, you have brought yourself into the proceedings."

The man raised his eyebrows. "A piece of paper is not proof," he said.

"Not before a judge," Holmes said. "But before a man who loves order, it's a confession. They couldn't resist signing themselves."

The man chuckled softly. "You think I made a mistake," he said. "No. I gave you something so you'd think you had something. So you'd waste time trying to secure it."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "Wasting time," he repeated.

"Yes," the man said. "Meanwhile, the patient is being transferred. And the witness..." His gaze slid to me, friendly yet venomous. "...will write."

I felt my breathing become rougher, and the whistling was like a reply I didn't want to give. My fingers clenched around the stinging cloth, without using it.

Holmes took a step closer to the table. Not threateningly, but enough that the man no longer completely controlled the room. "You're not embarrassing him," Holmes said calmly.

The man smiled. "They can't stop it."

Holmes nodded very slightly, as if he had been waiting for that exact sentence. Then he said quietly, "Yes."

And in that same instant, so fast that my eye could scarcely follow, Holmes reached not for the man, but for the lamp. He abruptly turned it to the side, so that the light no longer illuminated the table, but the door.

For a heartbeat, everything went white. The uniformed man in the hallway blinked; Barker instinctively raised his arm. The younger man in the suit held the notebook up to his face.

In the shadow cast by the sudden shift in light, Holmes moved the box from the edge of the table into his pocket without it appearing theft. It was a surgical movement: precise, clean, necessary.

"Barker," said Holmes in his dazzled state, "close the door!"

Barker reacted before his mind could fully process it. He slammed the door, and the hallway went dark again; the light remained in the office, but now facing the wrong direction. I heard the uniformed man outside cursing, heard him pushing against the door.

Fennel stared at Holmes. "What—" he began.

"Now," Holmes said quietly, "we have the bill. And without a bill, there is no order. And if he loves order, he will come to restore it."

The man at the table was still smiling, but it was the first time I'd seen something in his eyes that wasn't politeness: anger. Not loud, not wild. But real.

"That was rude," he said quietly.

Holmes' voice was cold. "Rudeness is my profession tonight," he said.

Outside, someone rattled the door, and I heard the soft click of the lock. Barker cursed and braced himself against it.

"We have seconds," Holmes said calmly to Fennel. "Where is the room where you keep documents for the Directorate? Not your desk. A room. A small room. A place that is locked."

Fennel swallowed. "In the west aisle," he said.

"Then we'll go," said Holmes.

My breath was whistling, and I knew I had to run, whether my body wanted to or not.

We didn't leave the office through the door, which now creaked under the pressure of the men in the corridor, but through a second, narrower door behind a filing cabinet, which Fennel

opened with shaky hands, as if he had only considered it for years as a means of escape. Beyond it lay a corridor, narrower and darker, smelling of coal and old paper. The institution had more passageways than its visitors suspected, and these passageways were precisely what our adversary so liked to use: hidden passages through which a person could disappear without anyone shouting "Escape!"

Holmes went first, Fennel behind him, me third. My breath came in short, ragged gasps, and I forced myself to keep my head down to avoid turning dizziness into movement. The hand holding the stinging cloth remained in my pocket, clutched tightly like a lifebuoy one doesn't want to use because it is both salvation and proof of weakness.

Behind us we heard noises: a crash, as if the office door had been forced open, voices, curses, the metallic clang of keys being used too hastily. The man in the shiny boots had left his politeness at the door. Or rather: he let others curse while he remained silent. That was his way. He let the system be loud so he could remain quiet.

"West passage," whispered Holmes, and it didn't sound like a question.

Fennel nodded, panting. "This way," he gasped.

The corridor led to a staircase descending. It was colder down below. The smell of paper intensified, as if everything one didn't want seen upstairs had accumulated down here. Fennel led us to a door made of heavy wood, with a different lock than the ones in the usual rooms. The lock was old and solid, and I immediately sensed how reassuring it was for Fennel to see a lock that wasn't new and shiny.

"Here," he whispered.

Holmes placed his hand on the doorknob. "Before we go in," he said quietly, "tell me: Who besides you has a key?"

Fennel hesitated. "The head of administration," he said. "And... sometimes Barker, when he needs to get files."

Holmes nodded curtly. "Then it's not a secure room," he said. "But it's better than a desk."

Fennel inserted the key and turned it. The lock clicked as if it had been waiting for years for an opportunity to be used again. We entered.

The room was low-ceilinged, windowless, with shelves reaching to the ceiling. File folders, registers, bundles of paper tied with string. It smelled of dust, ink, and leather. And it was quiet, in a way I found almost soothing: no fumes, no sweetness, just dry, stale air. A place where the city archives itself.

Holmes immediately positioned himself so that he had a view of the door. Fennel went to a bookshelf, pulled out a large book, and placed it on a table. "The Register of Admissions," he whispered. "If anyone has changed anything here, then..."

Holmes opened his bag and took out the box he had rescued from the man's office. He placed it on the table like a piece of evidence, not a trophy. "We secure what we have first," he said quietly.

He opened the box, took out the bill without touching it with his bare hands, and placed it on the wooden table. Then he took the rolled-up piece of paper from the metal tube—the sentence from the handkerchief: The clock is running. The witness is writing. He placed it next to it. And finally, he took the brass tin in its casing from his pocket and placed it there as well.

Three things, all marked by the dot, but in different ways. Paper, metal, mechanism. A small, self-contained register of guilt.

"And now," Holmes said quietly, "we are creating something he cannot control: an entry."

Fennel looked at him. "An entry?" he whispered.

Holmes pointed to the register book. "An official entry," he said. "Not in your mind, not in my notebook, but here. In your register. If this man uses the register as a weapon, then we will take the weapon away from him by writing in a truth he cannot erase."

Fennel swallowed. "This is... dangerous," he whispered.

"Yes," said Holmes. "And that's exactly why it works."

Fennel opened the register. The pages were densely covered with names, dates, diagnoses. Each entry looked like a small coffin made of ink. I saw Sir Alistair Wexford's name, and a chill ran through me: there it was, neat, official, with a diagnosis that reduced him to a shadow. And at the edge, barely visible, the period.

Holmes leaned forward, looking not only at the name but at the edge. "He brought it in here," he murmured. "Not just a piece of paper. The point itself."

Fennel reached for the pen that lay on the table, and I saw his hand tremble. "What should I write?" he whispered.

Holmes spoke calmly, as if dictating a truth that sought no embellishment: "Write: Admission under false pretenses. Suspected manipulation by an external third party. Patient in danger due to an unknown substance. Investigation initiated. Access established via the yard shed."

Fennel exhaled, then put the pen to his lips. The nib scratched across the paper, and that scratching was the loudest sound in the room. It was the sound of a man rebelling against a system by using it.

While he was writing, I heard footsteps outside in the corridor. Not muffled, not hesitant. Footsteps that knew where they were going. Then a knock on the door, calm, polite, as if someone were knocking on the door of an office, not an archive in an institution.

Fennel's hand froze over the feather.

Holmes raised his head, and his gaze turned cold. "He's here," he whispered.

The knocking came a second time. Then a voice, warm, friendly, like a doctor who doesn't want to frighten a patient:

"Dr. Fennel. Please open the door. We need to sort this out."

My breath came in ragged gasps, and I felt dizziness tugging at the base of my head. The man stood before the door, knocking as if he owned the room. And in a way, he did, for he lived in spaces without mirrors: in places where you can't see yourself and therefore believe that others have the right to define you.

Holmes did not draw the knife. He pulled the box closer to him, closed it, and put it in his pocket as if it were a heart to be protected from a thief.

"Fennel," he said quietly, "you won't open. Not because he's dangerous, but because he's polite. Politeness is his crowbar."

Fennel swallowed and nodded, still holding the feather.

Outside, there was a moment of silence. Then we heard a key slide into the lock.

Fennel turned deathly pale. "But..." he whispered. "Only..."

Holmes' gaze remained hard. "He has it," he said quietly. "Or he has someone who has it."

The castle began to turn.

## The ride in the hearse

The turning of the key in the lock was a sound that, in the cramped archive room, resonated like a judgment. It wasn't the metallic click itself, but the matter-of-factness with which it happened. As if the door had long since ceased to be Fennel's door, and was merely a point in the process, one that must open when the right key appears at the right time. Fennel stood there, the spring still between his fingers, as if it had suddenly become a weapon, powerless against iron. I felt my breath burn in my throat, the whistle rough and reluctant, and the thought struck my mind like a bell: He's down here. He's no longer just a name, no longer just a smell, no longer just a dot on the edge. He stands before us, separated only by wood.

Holmes moved before the lock gave way completely. He didn't look around searchingly, as if he needed to consider something. He knew long ago that archives, if the world is even remotely sane, have two exits: the official one, and the one used when reason fails. He went to the shelf at the back, where old bundles lay, and ran his hand along the wooden slat. Then he pressed on a spot I would have thought accidental. A soft creak. The shelf yielded ever so slightly.

"Here," whispered Holmes.

"This is..." began Fennel.

"An official errand," Holmes said calmly. "For files that are not meant to be seen. Ironical, isn't it?"

The lock on the door creaked. The key turned slowly, as if the man outside wanted to give us the opportunity to admire his courtesy. I heard his calm breathing, or imagined it, and that was enough to make my chest tighten.

Holmes pushed the shelf further. It swung to the side, and behind it appeared a narrow passage, black as an open mouth. A draft of air came out, damp and cold, smelling of stone and cellar. I saw Fennel's gaze, the decision wrestling within him, and I saw him lose it because he had no choice.

"You're coming?" Holmes asked quietly.

Fennel nodded, the quill still in his hand, as if he didn't want to leave it behind, because it was his last proof that he was a doctor and not just a man who unlocked doors. I went last, and as I squeezed through the narrow gap, I heard the lock finally release and the door open a crack. A voice, warm and friendly, came in.

"Dr. Fennel," she said, as if speaking to a colleague. "You don't need to hide. That only makes things unpleasant."

Holmes pushed the shelf back. The click as it snapped into place sounded to me like a heartbeat. The passageway swallowed us up, and the room behind us fell silent again, as if it had spat us out and immediately felt ashamed of having done so.

We felt our way forward. The passage was narrow, the walls damp, and somewhere water dripped in a steady rhythm. I forced my breathing to be shallow because the air was heavy down here, and each deep breath felt like reaching into an old, long-stale barrel. Holmes walked ahead without stumbling, as if he knew the way, and I realized that he did. Holmes didn't know every door in London, but he knew every kind of door. And that was enough.

After a few dozen steps, the passage opened into a wider corridor. Here, the smell was no longer of paper, but of something that made my stomach churn: carbolic acid, cold stone, damp linen—and beneath it all, a faint hint of something sweet, fainter than before, but there, like an echo. Fennel held his breath, and I could tell by the way his shoes stopped on the stone.

"This is the old supply wing," he whispered. "Here... here is the morgue."

Holmes simply nodded. "Then it's the best place to disappear," he said.

Fennel looked at him as if to contradict him, but he couldn't find a sentence that made sense that night. We continued walking. Doors to the left and right, some locked, some ajar. A cart stood in the corridor, a stack of fresh sheets on it. The cart was old; the wheels creaked when you moved it. An honest creak, I thought bitterly. At least there was that.

Holmes stopped before a door that was larger than the others and bore no sign. He pushed it open. Beyond it lay a dimly lit room, as if even the light here had a duty and no desire. Against the wall stood two narrow metal tables, and beside them a wooden rack with hooks. A smell that was not sweet, but simply cold. The smell of finality.

I felt my breathing become quieter for a moment. Not because I felt better, but because my body instinctively understood that one shouldn't be loud in such a place.

"Here," Fennel said quietly, his voice trembling. "When someone dies, they are brought here first, before... before the family..."

Holmes raised his hand. "Don't talk about that," he said. "Talk about exits."

Fennel swallowed, pointed to a lower door at the far end. "The car comes out there," he whispered. "For the transfer. There's a loading yard. And behind it, a small alley."

Holmes went to the door and listened. Then he pushed it open a crack. Cold night air streamed in, and I could have drunk it. Outside it was dark, but not completely. A lantern's light shone obliquely into the yard. And there stood a carriage.

It wasn't an ordinary delivery van. It was longer, heavier, and its shape was such that you didn't want to look at it for too long. A hearse. Black, matte, with simple fittings, not ornate. It looked as if it belonged to a company that didn't advertise itself with dignity, but with necessity.

Holmes' gaze lingered on that for a moment, as if assessing the probability. Then he looked at Fennel. "Who's driving it?" he asked.

Fennel shook his head. "A man from outside," he whispered. "A funeral director. He comes when we call."

"And when will the call come?" asked Holmes.

Fennel hesitated, as if every answer would be a confession. "If... if someone is dead," he said.

Holmes nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Then we'll call tonight," he said calmly.

"What?" Fennel exclaimed, and I felt my stomach clench.

Holmes looked at him coldly. "Not because someone has to die," he said. "But because someone will claim someone is dead. That's the distinction your adversary loves. He works with claims, Doctor."

Fennel stared at him, and in his gaze was resistance, fear, and a hint of hope, because a man like Holmes can still find possibilities even in a morgue.

"Watson," Holmes said quietly to me, "can you go?"

I nodded, even though my chest protested. "Yes," I said, my voice hoarse.

Holmes's expression softened slightly. "Then listen," he said. "We have two tasks at once: you have to conserve your breath, and I have to buy time."

He went to the cart in the corridor with the sheets and pulled down a bundle. The linen was fresh and clean. He draped it over my arm like a coat, then took a second one and gave it to Fennel.

"They will look like people who belong here," Holmes said. "And people who belong here are rarely stopped, because nobody likes to look in their direction."

Fennel swallowed. "And what if they see us?" he whispered.

Holmes' mouth barely twitched. "Then they're being rude," he said.

He opened the courtyard gate wider. The cold outside was sharp, but it was honest. We stepped out. The courtyard was damp, the fog hung low, and the hearse sat there like a black beetle, patiently waiting. Beside it, half in shadow, stood a man in a hat and coat, his hands in his pockets. He looked up as we approached, and I recognized in his face that weary indifference one finds in people who deal with grief professionally. He wasn't surprised. And that's precisely what made my stomach go cold again.

"I was called," he said.

Holmes walked directly towards him, his voice calm and matter-of-fact. "Yes," he said. "There will be a transfer. Immediately."

The man looked past Holmes, saw Fennel, saw me with the sheets, and his gaze lingered on my face a touch too long, perhaps because of the pallor, perhaps because of the breath which, despite all efforts, betrayed itself as a whistling sound.

"You don't look like you're from around here," he said.

Holmes replied without hesitation: "That's correct. And that's exactly why we have to leave before they make us into that."

The man blinked. Then he slowly pulled a pipe from his pocket, put it back in, as if remembering it wasn't the time for it. "Who is it?" he asked simply.

Holmes stepped closer so that only the man could hear him. "One name," he said quietly. "And one wrong register."

The undertaker looked at him. It was a long look in which I saw not only skepticism, but also a kind of weary experience: he had heard many lies in his time, and he knew that some lies are more dangerous than the truth.

"Get in," he finally said.

Holmes nodded curtly. He opened the rear door of the hearse. Inside it was dark, smelling of wood and cold fabric. Not a place where a living person would want to sit. But tonight it might be the only place where a living person could possibly sit.

I got in first because my breathing was getting rougher again in the open cold. The whistling was loud, and I hated it because it must have sounded like an echo in that carriage. Holmes followed, then Fennel. The undertaker closed the door, and the darkness embraced us like a sack.

The wheels started to spin, a dull thud, and the car began to roll. Outside, I heard muffled voices, hurried, and then the metallic clinking of keys, which I now recognized as a signal of danger. Someone called Fennel's name. Someone shouted as if it were urgent.

The car went faster.

In the darkness beside me, Holmes said softly, so softly that it was more of a thought than a sentence: "If he loves order, he will control every exit. But nobody likes to control a hearse. It is the only vehicle in London that people instinctively make way for."

My breath whistled roughly, and I gripped the sheets tighter around me, as if they could cover not only my body but also my identity. The car rocked, and through a small crack I saw a strip of fog light passing by like a clock running backward.

The interior of the carriage was so silent that every sound became a confession. The creaking of the wood with every bump sounded like an old breath, the rolling of the wheels like a muffled murmur, and my own whistling was the most unpleasant sound of all because it was alive in a space built for the dead. I didn't press the handkerchief to my nose, not even the stinging one; I didn't dare use anything that smacked of help. I breathed shallowly and felt that each breath felt like a small theft, as if I were taking something that wasn't rightfully mine in this box.

Holmes sat opposite me, visible only as a dark silhouette. Fennel was beside him, and I could tell from the way he was breathing that he, too, was struggling, not with poison, but with fear. Outside, the sounds of London were muffled, as if the fog had wrapped the city in cotton wool. But through the thin walls, individual sounds penetrated: a horse snorting, a shout, the distant ringing of a bell. Everything sounded unreal because we were in a moving coffin.

"How long until the alley?" Fennel whispered finally, barely more than a whisper.

Holmes didn't answer immediately. He listened. I listened too, and only after a moment did I understand what he was listening for: not the road, but a second car. A rhythm that was part of us.

"Too long, if he notices us," Holmes said quietly.

Fennel swallowed. "He can't—"

"He can," Holmes interrupted calmly. "He has keys. He has uniforms. And he has men who like to believe they are only doing their duty. If he wants to, he can stop the undertaker by showing him a piece of paper."

I felt my stomach clench. Paper that stops a car. Paper that takes up air. Paper that turns people into boxes.

"Then—" I began, but my breath whistled, and the sentence broke off like a matchstick in the wind.

Holmes' voice softened slightly. "Save your breath," he said quietly to me. "You'll need it soon."

The car rocked more as we drove over cobblestones. Outside, I heard a voice calling something to the undertaker. Then a second horse, closer. A hoofbeat that didn't match our rhythm. I held my breath as best I could. The whistling didn't lessen; it only became more painful.

The wood knocked as someone struck the wagon wall from the outside. Not an angry hammering, but two short, decisive blows, like a man who is used to being heard immediately.

The undertaker pulled on the reins. The rolling slowed down.

Fennel let out an involuntary sound, and I heard him choke it back down.

"Quiet," whispered Holmes.

Outside, someone said, clearly and without haste: "Stop. Check."

I didn't recognize the tone, but I recognized the type: someone who believes they don't need to shout because they're in the right. That was exactly the tone our opponent likes to use, even when they're not speaking.

The car came to a stop. The wood creaked. My breathing was so loud I was afraid it must be audible outside. I pressed my hand over my mouth as if I could somehow control my lungs that way.

A step outside. Then the soft clinking of a set of keys. And finally a voice I recognized immediately, even though it sounded gentle:

"Good evening. You're out early."

Fennel froze beside me, so completely that I only noticed he was still alive from his breathing.

Holmes' voice remained calm in the darkness. "It's him," he whispered.

The voice outside was that of the man from the office. The doctor who offered no help. He spoke to the undertaker as if he were a colleague.

"The city never sleeps," the undertaker replied dryly. "When someone dies, they don't die according to office hours."

A soft laugh. "Quite right," said the man. "May I see whom you are guiding?"

"That's not usual," replied the undertaker.

"Many things are unusual tonight," the man said kindly. "And yet it happens. I have a duty to check that everything is correct."

I heard the rustling of paper. Then the soft scraping of a stamp or someone scratching a seal with a fingernail. The undertaker was silent. In that silence lay the weary deliberation of a man deciding whether he wanted trouble or peace. And in London, peace often wins, because trouble costs time.

Holmes' hand briefly touched mine, firmly, as if to remind me not to collapse.

"When he opens the door," Holmes whispered, "do nothing. Don't breathe deeply. And don't speak."

I nodded, but nodding was useless in the darkness.

Outside, the man said, "Please open up."

The undertaker didn't answer immediately. Then I heard a soft sigh, like a man apologizing before doing something. The bolt on the door was moved.

The wood beside me vibrated as the bolt gave way. A thin sliver of light spilled in, and with it, cold air. I pressed my lips together and held my breath shallowly. The sliver of light widened.

The door opened a crack.

I didn't see the man outside right away, only his shoes, because at this height your gaze falls on them first. They were shiny. The lantern light caught them like on wet stone. And I heard the soft squeak as he shifted his weight.

"Well," said his voice kindly, "what do we have here?"

Holmes didn't move. I didn't move. Fennel didn't move.

The man took a step closer, and the beam of light fell on the sheets that covered us. I felt my chest gasp for air, like a dog on a leash. I held it back. The whistling turned to a whisper, then back to a harsh sound I couldn't control.

The man paused. He heard it.

A brief moment of silence. Then he said softly, and in that soft voice lay a coldness that frightened me more than any cursing: "The witness is breathing."

Holmes' hand slipped into the darkness, and I knew he had the knife in his hand without having to see it.

The man outside didn't laugh. He simply said, kindly, "You can spare me that, Mr. Holmes. I didn't come to hurt you. I came to collect the bill."

He leaned forward, and for a moment I saw his face in the beam of light: clean, proper, polite. And at the hem of his cuff, tiny, a dark shadow. A stain that no handkerchief could completely erase.

"Watson," he said quietly, "write."

My breath whistled roughly, and I felt how the car suddenly ceased to be a vehicle and became a room without mirrors: a place where a man wants to decide who I am by forcing me to define myself.

The man outside knew he was in complete control at that moment, and yet his tone remained polite, too polite. It was the politeness of a man who knew the rules of the game so well that he took them for granted, like breathing. And in that moment, I knew the question was no longer whether we should leave the car, but how we could leave it without losing control.

“Write,” the man repeated softly, and there was no coercion in his voice, but rather an invitation to a game he had already won. The look he gave me was that of a man waiting for the witness—not as a companion, but as an instrument. It was the politeness that wiped away the last vestige of illusion.

I wanted to reply, wanted to say something that would break the silence, but the only thing I heard was my own breathing, echoing in the stillness like a drumming in my ears. I saw Holmes's hand loosen slightly, and for a tiny moment I thought he was going to do it—the movement that changes the space, that pushes the man outside back into the darkness. But he didn't.

“What do we have here?” the man outside repeated, his question not directed at me, but at the darkness of the car. It was a question that didn't wait for an answer, but for confirmation.

Holmes' reply came almost without a change in expression, and yet it was a reply that changed the moment. “You have nothing,” he said, “except a story you want to tell.”

The man outside laughed. It was a quiet, almost ironic laugh. “Oh, Mr. Holmes,” he said kindly, “you don't play by the same rules as the rest of us. But that doesn't make you a better player. Just a different one.”

Holmes' gaze remained steady, but I saw the edge of his mouth twitch slightly. “I only play,” he said, “with the cards that are on the table. And sometimes it's better not to know the cards.”

The man outside was silent for a moment. The look he gave me was no longer just a polite request, but a knife cut. He knew that I knew. And he knew that I couldn't speak without losing everything.

“I understand,” he finally said. “So you have no answer. No confession. No comment. Only questions.”

“And that's precisely the difference,” Holmes replied calmly. “Because you can't answer without questioning yourself. And what you really want isn't an answer. It's control.”

The man outside took a deep breath, and the air between us suddenly seemed to thicken. For a moment, I could hear nothing but the sound of my own breathing and the distant, insistent throbbing in my head. The man seemed to sense the darkness of the car at that moment, as if he were no longer the observer, but part of the game.

“Perhaps you are the only one,” the man finally said quietly, “who still asks any questions at all.”

“And perhaps you are the only one who can truly answer them,” replied Holmes.

The silence after those words was so thick it was almost tangible. The car rolled on, the rocking of the wheels the only sound that remained. I felt my senses sharpen as the car

slowed, as if we were approaching a destination I couldn't yet see. But I knew it was there. The destination that held the same meaning for all of us.

"We'll be there soon," Holmes said calmly.

The words were simple, but they contained a truth that sent shivers down my spine. It was the moment when everything we had done up to this point had become not just a journey, but a process—and we were all part of that process. No excuses, no escape. Only the path forward, straight on, with every turn of the wheels.

The undertaker outside took a deep breath, as if preparing to give us one last look. "Do you know what you're doing, Mr. Holmes?" he asked, his voice now sounding less like a question and more like a statement.

Holmes' reply was a faint smile that I could barely see in the dark. "Yes," he said. "I'm doing exactly what everyone does when they feel they've lost everything: I'm holding on."

The car braked, and I heard the sound of the wheels gripping the cobblestones. The man outside had fallen silent, and I knew he knew we were approaching our destination. But not the destination he had expected.

"Now," Holmes said quietly, "it's a question of what we do next."

The car's shuddering stopped, and the darkness that had enveloped us seemed to narrow, as if the car's walls were now leading us to an inevitable end. I heard the brakes squeal, a rusty latch pop, and then the final stop.

The undertaker got out of the car. A man stood in the doorway, looking not like a guard, but like a messenger. "The end," he said simply, his voice that of someone uninterested in questions.

I looked at Holmes, and in that look there was something I could not name – a relief, a hint of resignation, and at the same time a clarity that could only come from the knowledge that the next steps no longer depended on us.

The undertaker opened the door, and the cold early morning air rushed in, fresher than the city's foul breath still lingering in the shadows of the hearse. One step at a time, and we were outside. The moment that had brought us here was over, and our next move was no longer in our hands.

"Come," Holmes said quietly, "it won't take long."

We approached the man standing in front of the gate, the man who was waiting for us, not with a question, but with an answer: an answer we could no longer avoid.

## A shadow in the operating light

The operating room door opened with a soft creak as the undertaker pushed aside the curtain. The air in this room was different from that in the halls of the asylum; it was heavy and cool, as if the room had its own time and its own breath. The light radiating from the ceiling was harsh and direct—the typical operating room light that banishes all shadows with a single gesture and places the truth mercilessly at its center.

Holmes entered first, his movements calm and purposeful, as if he had been there before. Fennel followed him, more slowly, with the kind of respect one shows to a space that holds both healing and destruction. I went last, my gaze sweeping over the sterile, almost clinical atmosphere, permeated by the cold, blue lighting. The room had the immaculate, almost uncanny cleanliness of a place where no questions are allowed.

The table in the middle of the room was empty, but that wasn't what captured my attention. It was the shadow on the wall, emerging from the operating room lights like a silent witness. A shadow belonging to a man whose form only vaguely crystallized from the darkness. I didn't see him properly until he moved—slowly, with the elegance of a man who knows perfectly well he has nothing to hide.

It was him. The doctor who didn't help. The man who wasn't officially there, but who commanded the room with a certainty and knowledge as if he were the reason it existed.

"Good evening, Mr. Holmes," the man said calmly when Holmes saw him. "I assume you have come to see how we work."

Holmes's gaze narrowed, and I could practically feel his mind filling in the gaps the man deliberately left open. "I have come to see what you are concealing," Holmes said without a trace of politeness. "And what you do not expect the others to understand."

The doctor—or whatever he was—stepped closer. "Conceal," he repeated, as if turning the word on his tongue like a foreign sound. "It's always so easy to conceal something when no one asks the right questions. But you, Mr. Holmes... you are a man who knows how to ask questions. And that is dangerous. For everyone."

Holmes' face remained expressionless, but I could see he understood the threat. It wasn't just the man before us, but also the space surrounding him—a clinical presence that didn't conceal anything he was doing, but rather buried everything within it. The ease with which the man controlled the space was no accident. Here, he was the expert, and we were merely observers.

"How long," Holmes asked, "have you had this room?" His voice was cool, but beneath the surface simmered an unmistakable challenge, which was also evident in his posture.

The man smiled, and there was something in his smile that didn't seem right—something that made me uneasy. "Long enough to know that the truth isn't simple in rooms like this. And long enough to understand that you and I won't be shaking hands, as politeness dictates."

Fennel took a step forward as if to intervene, but Holmes raised his hand and held him back. "Speak," said Holmes, "and make it clear. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

The man placed his hands on the table, which gleamed under the harsh light as if it belonged to a system that administered more than simple medicine. "I am the one," he said, "who ensures that what lies in the dark is put in its proper place. That the corpse no longer speaks, but the body gives answers. And you, Mr. Holmes, have precisely the questions that never appear in any report. That doesn't make you any less dangerous. It only makes you... curious."

I could see the anger in Holmes's eyes, but also the clear realization that he had nothing to offer this man as long as he kept the truth in the room, a truth that required no proof, only the room in which it occurred. The doctor, or the man who wasn't a doctor, knew something we didn't yet understand. And it wasn't the answer that would betray us. It was what he didn't say.

Holmes took a step closer. "And what do we do with the truth you're hiding?" he asked calmly.

"You ask too many questions," the man said, taking a step back. "But you'll soon know. Because in the end, it's not the question that matters. It's the moment you ask it. And the moment you understand that all questions have the same answer."

The space around us was now even quieter than before. Only the light on the gleaming metal surfaces and the shadow watching us in the darkness remained.

"What do you want from us?" asked Holmes.

The man stepped back into the shadows, and I felt the change in the air—the things that moved around us as if by an invisible hand. "What do I want from you?" the man repeated, as if it were the wrong question. "It is not your answer that interests me, Mr. Holmes. It is that of your friends. The witness. The patient. They all have their parts, and they are playing their game. But in the end, it is always the same man who lays all the cards on the table."

His voice trailed off, and I felt the cold breath that surrounded us. "And what happens if you find out, Mr. Holmes? What happens then?"

Holmes remained calm, but I could see that he was ready to break the mask of the game because there was no other option.

"Then," Holmes said quietly, "we will know who the real body is."

The man nodded and turned around to finish the steps that had already begun in the darkness of the room.

I felt the weight of the words in the air, the tension pulling us apart like a wire. The room itself seemed to shrink, as if we were waiting for what would happen in the next few seconds.

The man turned slowly, as if he held time and space in his hands. His gaze was a cold blast that swept through the room, and for a moment I felt as if he were staring not at us, but at the light itself. The light that seemed to be exposing us, as if we were no longer capable of concealing ourselves.

"You are not the first to ask this question, Mr. Holmes," the man said quietly. "And you will not be the last. But you may be the one who takes it the furthest."

He took a step back, leaving us standing in the room, which now held not only the sterile coldness of an operating theater but also a sinister significance. I felt as if I stood on the threshold of a decision neither Holmes nor I had ever wanted to make. The room had changed. It was no longer simply the place where people healed or died. It was the place where answers became traps.

“What do you mean by ‘farthest’?” Holmes asked, his voice calmer than mine, as if he already knew that we were meeting more than just a doctor. It was more than that. We were standing before a man who packaged answers in such a way that they burned like questions on the lips.

“The furthest along,” said the man, “because the question of ‘who’ isn’t the most important thing. It’s the question of ‘why’ that no one has answered anymore. You, Mr. Holmes, are always looking for evidence. But what if the evidence itself is just a story? A story you believe because it’s presented to you, not because it’s true?”

Holmes's gaze narrowed, and for a moment I thought he would seize the man and finally squeeze the truth out of him. But instead he remained calm, observing, like a rock unyielding to the surf.

“If the proof is a story,” Holmes said finally, “then we are all stories. And then what? What do you do with us?”

The man smiled slightly, as if he had been expecting this moment. “You are all part of a game,” he said. “Everyone here is a player. And those who arrive too late lose. But those who arrive too early cannot win. There is no true answer, only the one you are given.”

“And you will let us find these answers?” asked Holmes.

The man nodded as if it were self-evident truth. “I let you search. You search, and you find. But what you find is what I have shown you. Nothing more and nothing less. The truth,” he said softly, “is a film I am writing. And you are acting in it as if you were the heroes.”

An uneasy silence filled the room, and I could practically feel the tension in the air. This man, who called himself a doctor, yet in everything he said sounded like a director writing the script for other people's lives—it was hard to see him as someone who actually worked in medicine. He wasn't just a doctor; he was a real-world author who understood control and manipulation as his tools.

“What have you done with Sir Alistair?” I asked, my voice sharper than I had intended. I felt suffocated by this man and his cold logic. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

The man looked at me, and there was something in his eyes that I couldn't put into words. No anger, no regret—only a deep, unfathomable emptiness. “Dead?” he repeated. “Yes, if you want to call it that. But what is death, Mr. Watson? An end or a transition?”

“What did you give him?” asked Holmes, now much calmer than before, but his voice held a razor-sharp determination.

The man shrugged, as if he couldn't quite finish his answer because it was equally irrelevant to him and to us. "I didn't give him anything he didn't want. What we do here isn't coercion, Mr. Holmes. It's a service. A service to those who are too tired to go on."

Holmes' face remained expressionless. "A service?" he repeated, as if reversing the word so that it no longer echoed in the doctor's room, but in the room of his own thoughts. "And that justifies everything you do?"

"Not everything," the man said. "But it explains it."

I felt my hand begin to tremble in my pocket, and for a moment I thought I had to do something. Something that could lift the weight of this conversation from all of us. But I couldn't do anything. Not as long as this man held us captive with his words in a web that knew neither time nor space.

"Then explain to me," said Holmes, "what exactly you intend to do. What is the goal?"

The man took a step closer, and I saw that his movements were now slowing, as if he were letting the end of the game drift directly toward us. "The goal," he said, "is to restore the body to its true form. Not as a site of illness, but as a site of renewal. Death is only a transition, but it is necessary to see the truth."

"Truth?" I asked, my whistling now barely audible. "And the truth is, you treat a man like Sir Alistair this way?"

The man smiled coldly. "The truth is, Sir Alistair was nothing more than another player. And everyone in this room is also a player. It's just that some of them don't realize they lost the game a long time ago."

Holmes remained calm, but I could see the sharp look flashing in his eyes. "And who decides who loses?" he asked quietly.

The man inclined his head. "I," he said simply.

A cold shiver ran down my spine when I realized he wasn't just a doctor. He was the director of this game, the man who decided when the final chapter would be written.

"And what happens if we want to leave the game?" asked Holmes, his voice now calmer, but with a sharpness that deceived no one.

"Then play it differently," the man said, turning back to the table as if our conversation were just another part of the protocol. "But the rules remain the same."

I felt the space around us begin to narrow, and I knew we were at the end of a journey that could not be reversed. The man in that room had not only the knowledge but also the power to guide us. And the question was no longer what we would find, but how much we were willing to lose in order to understand it.

The man pulled a small knife from his pocket, and I heard the metallic clang in the room as he placed it on the table. A tool. A symbol of what was to come.

“Now,” he said calmly, “we begin the real work.”

With every word the man spoke, the room seemed to shrink even more, as if contracting to a point where there was no escape. The metal in his hand gleamed in the cold light, and the sound it made as it moved against the tabletop was like the soft rattle of a chain—the sound of something that moved with us yet still bound us.

Holmes remained calm, but I could sense the tension in his posture, the way he scanned every corner of the room, as if preparing to face the inevitable. Fennel was silent, his eyes wide open, as if trying to hold onto the image unfolding before him. And I, I felt the darkness of the room envelop me, as if I might lose myself in that moment.

“What do you want from us?” Holmes finally asked, and his voice was that of a man who knew the moment had come when he would either lose everything or gain everything. The question was no longer what this man wanted. The question was whether we could still stop it.

The man turned the knife in his hands, as if examining it from different angles, as if it were a tool he was holding for the first time. “What do I want?” he repeated softly. “I just want you to understand what you see here. To understand that everything you're doing here is part of a larger plan.”

“What kind of plan?” Holmes’ voice remained firm, but I sensed the danger in it – the knowledge that this man was in control, and that he would be only too happy to exploit it.

“The plan,” the man said calmly, “is renewal. The truth that emerges from destruction. The body returning to its original form, free from the diseases that burden it. The mind freeing itself from the shackles of truth and realizing that life is merely a preparation for the end.”

I felt a cold sensation spread through my chest, as if the room itself had turned against us. The words this man spoke weren't just a justification for what he was doing. They were the explanation for everything we had experienced up to that point. And in that moment, I knew there was no easy answer to the question of what we should do. There was only the question of what this man expected of us.

"And what do you expect from us?" asked Fennel, his voice quieter than he probably intended.

The man looked at him, and there was no contempt in his gaze, but something else. Something that sounded like pity. "Expectation?" he said, as if he had used the word in a different context. "I don't expect much from you, Doctor. I only expect you to continue down the path you have already begun. Because you are all part of the same plan. The only difference is that you don't see it. Not yet."

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?" he asked. "What are we not seeing?"

The man slowly sat down at the table, as if he didn't want to leave us, as if he were just as trapped in this room as we were. "You don't see that what's happening here isn't directed against the body," he said softly. "It's not about death. It's about changing the body so that it truly understands. So that it confronts the truth."

"And the truth is?" asked Holmes.

"The truth," the man said calmly, "is that man has no control over his own existence. That he is part of a much larger plan. But this plan is controlled by those who know how to shape it."

He laid the knife on the table, the gleam of the steel like a constant gaze, reminding us of what was yet to come. "And I," he said softly, "am the one who shapes it. I am the architect of the transition."

I felt my breath catch in my throat. The room we were in wasn't just a place of pain and cold. It was a reflection of the truth this man had to offer—a truth that left no room for doubt. This truth wasn't just an explanation for what he did. It was the explanation for the order that reigned in this room, for the rules by which everything functioned.

"What will happen to us if we don't understand?" asked Fennel, and his voice was weak, as if he already suspected that we had arrived too late.

"Then," the man said with a cold smile, "you will do exactly what everyone does when they don't understand: you will adapt to the flow of events. And you will accept the truth when it reveals itself to you. At the latest, when it holds up a mirror to you."

Holmes' gaze sharpened. "And what happens if we don't accept the mirror?"

"Then," the man said calmly, "you will be broken by it. Because the truth cannot be ignored. It always comes to light, Mr. Holmes. And no one can escape it."

The room was so still that I could hear the rustle of my own clothes as I tried to move. The man had spoken the last word, and in that silence lay the certainty that, at that moment, we were no longer able to escape. The truth he described was not merely a concept. It was a reality that encompassed us all.

"And what do we do now?" I asked, although I knew there was no answer to that question that could offer us a way out.

The man looked at me with a gaze that, in that moment, spoke volumes more than any words. "Now," he said softly, "wait. Because that is the only way to see the truth."

## The map with the burnt edge

The room was bathed in a dim light as the clock struck midnight. It was quiet—too quiet for a room that held the weight of secrets and conspiracies. On the table before us lay the map that would change everything. It wasn't large, rather small and unassuming, but its edges were burned, as if it had defied a fire that hadn't entirely spared it. The corners were charred, as if someone had tried to destroy it, but its contents were still too important to lose.

"What exactly is this?" Fennel asked quietly, as he bent over the map, which lay bathed in a thin beam of the spotlight. "Why is it burned?"

Holmes studied it intently, as if he could read more in the burnt edges than in the clear lines of the map itself. "This is no ordinary map, Doctor," he said calmly. "It is not merely a map. It is a symbol. A transition."

"A transition?" repeated Fennel, confused. "A transition to what?"

Holmes' eyes narrowed. "Something we've been searching for for a long time. Something someone desperately wanted to keep hidden."

I picked up the map, carefully, as if it were more than just paper and ink—as if it were a living document, breathing and refusing to be fully seen. The edge wasn't just burned. It was as if it had been deliberately damaged to ask precisely the question we were now asking ourselves: Why?

"Who would do something like that?" I asked.

Holmes took a step closer, his gaze sweeping over the map, and I sensed that in that moment he saw more than he was letting on. "Someone who is certain he is in control. Someone who knows that what he is hiding can no longer be hidden. This map is the key. And the key is never just a key. It is a call."

"A call?" asked Fennel, still confused. "Who's calling?"

"It is a call for a place," Holmes said, "that has never officially existed. A place that extends beyond the streets, that the city does not know. But this place is real. And this place will guide us if we have the courage to follow it."

I saw Holmes, map in hand, turn it slightly as if deciphering an invisible code. "The most important thing," he said, "is not what is burned. It is what remains."

The burned edge of the map was like a tear in time that could no longer be closed. And although most of the map remained unchanged, it felt as if we had just stumbled upon a living secret that was leading us exactly where we never wanted to go – to the truth.

"And what happens if we find this place?" I asked quietly.

Holmes paused, as if the question were not only an answer but also a warning. "Then we must be prepared to confront the people who led us this far. For whoever burned this map has more to hide than just a place. He has hidden us."

I felt my breath catch in my throat. In that moment, I knew we were onto something bigger than we were willing to admit. The map, the burned edge, the place where loss and mystery converged—everything pointed to the fact that the real battle had only just begun.

"And if we find him?" Fennel finally asked, carefully adjusting his features as if he wanted to translate the answer into the correct one.

"Then we must ask ourselves," Holmes said quietly, "who is actually shown on this map. Who led us into this room. And which of us has really disappeared."

The silence that followed was not an ordinary silence. It was the kind of silence that spreads when you know you've taken the final step that will determine the rest of the journey. We were no longer just observers. We had become part of the game.

The light in the room seemed to intensify with each passing second, as if we had reached the very core of darkness. The map lying on the table before us was more than just a piece of paper. It was a bond that bound us with invisible threads, leading us to a point of no return. What lay within the burned edges was not merely destruction, but an intention far beyond anything we had previously understood.

Holmes stood over the map, his eyes fixed on the lines and faded markings. "This map," he said finally, "is not a map in the traditional sense. It does not lead to a place one would find on a normal plan. It is a design. A design for a transition—for a place not of this world."

"Not of this world?" asked Fennel, clearly struggling to understand the context. "This isn't a map to a secret hideout? Not an encrypted message left behind by a criminal?"

Holmes shook his head without looking up from the map. "This is more than that. This map is the blueprint for what has been taken from us. It leads to a place no one is supposed to enter because it is too dangerous to find. But whoever burned the map opened the gate. And that means the path we are seeking doesn't just lead to a physical place. It leads to something much deeper."

I could feel the shiver run down my spine as Holmes spoke those words. It wasn't just the map that preoccupied us, but what it represented. A place we were forbidden to enter, and yet we had to find it because it was the key—not just to a mystery, but to our own understanding of truth and lies.

"And what is this place?" asked Fennel, his voice now barely more than a whisper. "What lies behind it?"

"It is not a place that can be easily named," Holmes replied quietly, almost meditatively. "It is a space that exists in memory but never in reality. It is what we piece together from the fragments of our perception. What we are told, what we are meant to believe—and what we actually see when we have the courage to draw back the curtain."

I took a step closer, a feeling of urgency pressing on my chest. "So you're saying that this place... is a product of perception and illusion?"

Holmes nodded slowly. "Exactly. The place exists only in the imagination of those who need it. And that's why the map was burned. Whoever burned it wanted to prevent anyone from discovering this place—not just as a geographical point, but as a concept. Something that permeates the entire plan."

Fennel frowned. "A concept? A secret place that exists only in the mind?"

"Yes," said Holmes, "but also a choice. For the place is more than just a destination. It is a choice. The choice of what we are willing to understand and what we prefer to leave in the dark. And when we reach this place, not only will the truth be revealed to us—we will create it ourselves."

The words hung in the air, and I felt the meaning of their statement gradually sink in. We weren't just hunting for a solution to the crime that had brought us to this point. We were chasing a truth that was weaving itself into our vision like mist—a truth that slipped further away with every decision.

“How do we get there?” Fennel asked, and I could hear the nervousness in his voice. He had realized that we were at a turning point, and that every answer raised more questions.

Holmes' gaze remained fixed on the map. "There is no direct path. But the point where we begin is where the line of illusion intersects with that of truth. The burnt edge is no accident. It is the key, and it shows us that the path ahead will only become visible when we are willing to let go of the illusions that continually hold us back."

The darkness of the room seemed to deepen as the weight of his words thickened the air around us. I felt my breath grow shallower as a dark realization dawned on me: the search for truth wasn't just a search for evidence. It was a journey into the darkness of the human mind, into the deepest, most hidden corners of our own perception.

“We must decide,” Holmes said finally, and his voice was now that of a man who knew the next step would be the decisive one. “Either we rely on what we are told—or we discover what we were never told.”

"And what will that mean?" asked Fennel, his voice now sounding almost fearful.

“It will cost us everything,” Holmes said quietly, without taking his eyes off the map. “For the truth always has its price. And the price is more than we know now.”

The room fell silent as we all realized we were on the verge of a discovery that would not only uncover the crime, but everything we had ever believed. The burned map had led us to a place—a place that would give us more than just answers. It would ask us the question we didn't want to answer.

The man who gave us the map hadn't just shown us a way. He had presented us with a choice we could no longer reverse.

Holmes picked up the map as if he could see through the paper, and I saw his eyes, which seemed almost to glow in the darkness of the room, glide over the burned edges. “We are not the first to go down this road,” he said quietly, as if speaking more to himself than to us. “This map is not damaged by chance. It is a test.”

"A test?" I repeated, my voice sounding strangely hollow in the still air of the room. "Who's testing us?"

“The truth,” Holmes said calmly, without taking his eyes off the map. “The truth about what we think we see. The burned edge is not accidental destruction. It was done deliberately to show us something—or to prevent us from seeing it.”

Fennel took a step closer. "But why the deception? Why not simply reveal the truth?"

Holmes sighed softly, as if it were a question he himself had heard far too often. "Because the truth is unbearable for most people. It would lift the veil that holds the world together. And

that is why it is torn to pieces, burned, hidden—because those who control the world do not want us to see what lies beneath the surface."

The words fell like heavy drops into a still pond, and I could practically feel the waves of realization spreading through my mind. It was as if I finally understood why we were here, why this room weighed so heavily on us. It wasn't just the crime that brought us together. It was the abyss that opened up beneath us—an abyss that would drag us deeper with every decision we made.

"If the truth has been hidden," I said, "then that means it's still there. It's just... locked away."

"Exactly," said Holmes, carefully placing the card on the table. "And the path we must take is not that of ordinary discovery. It is a path that continually veers away from the truth, that leads us astray, only to then throw us back. It is a game we can win—but only if we understand that the price is our own perspective on everything we believe."

"And the price of finding this truth?" Fennel asked, as if he had reached a point where he was no longer sure whether to continue. "What will it cost us if we actually find it?"

"It will cost us everything," Holmes said quietly. "For it will not only take away our understanding of justice. It will also take away our control over what we believed to be true. The truth hidden here changes everything."

A cold feeling slowly crept up inside me as I understood the meaning of those words. We weren't hunting a criminal. We were hunting a truth so deeply rooted that it would change us all—and the question was no longer whether we wanted to find the truth. The question was whether we could bear the consequences it would bring.

"And what exactly is this truth?" Fennel asked, and in his voice there was now not only curiosity but also deep concern. "What lies hidden behind these scorched edges?"

Holmes held the card in his hand for a moment longer, as if considering his answer. Then he carefully placed it back on the table. "It is a story," he said quietly. "A story no one wants to hear because it would take away everything we consider certain. And yet we must hear it. For if we do not, we will only fall into the trap once more."

"What kind of story?" I asked, although I knew there would be no easy answer.

Holmes looked at us, and in his eyes there was something that seemed almost like a lack of pity. "The story of what really happened. What really occurred before the world began to protect itself. Before the facade was built. And once we know the truth, we'll know why no one is allowed to hear it."

The answer was so simple, yet so terrifying, that it took my breath away. We were here because we weren't just there to seek the truth. We were here because we had to confront the history that lay beneath the surface—the history of those who had not only created the world, but also destroyed it when necessary.

"Then we will have to dig deeper," Fennel said quietly, as he grasped the gravity of the situation.

"Yes," said Holmes. "But we must be careful. Because if we take the wrong step, if we cross the wrong line, we will not only lose the truth. We will also lose ourselves."

The silence that followed was oppressive. Holmes' words hung in the air like a growing threat. There was no safe way back. If we continued, we would find the truth—but at what cost?

"And what happens if we find the truth?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

Holmes looked at the map and then at us. "Then we must decide what to do with it," he said quietly. "For truth has no power until we give it meaning. And sometimes it is meaning that poses the real danger."

I saw the image forming in my mind, and I realized it wasn't just about crime. It was about the truth itself—and how it could drag us into an abyss from which there was no escape. We stood on the edge of a realization that would cost us too much if we went any further.

But the decision had already been made.

"We will continue," Holmes finally said. "Because that is the only way to find the answer."

And with these words, which sounded more like a request than an answer, we stepped into the darkness that awaited us.

## Holmes disappears

It was one of the quietest nights I had ever experienced. The streets of London were shrouded in mist, and the lamplight seemed even fainter, as if it were the city's last attempt to fight off the darkness. As I closed the door of Baker Street behind me, it was as if I, too, was saying goodbye to the world I had known. And yet, it felt as if I had long since passed the point where there would have been any way back.

It was shortly after midnight when Holmes took his leave of us. A quick glance, a brief word, and he was gone—as quickly as he had come. No one saw where he went, and no one asked him any questions. Not even me.

In the hours that followed, I wasn't sure whether Holmes was deliberately keeping me in the dark or whether he simply didn't want me to understand what lay ahead. But one thing was clear: he was gone, and with him, the control we had thought we possessed. I felt the pressure mounting in my chest. The truth we had sought was now so close—and yet it was slipping further and further away.

I sat alone in the apartment, the silence around me oppressive, and yet I couldn't bring myself to voice the questions raging in my head. Why had he left? What had he discovered? And why did it feel as if something inside me was breaking?

The clock ticked softly, and I noticed that time moved more slowly for a moment. The hour was well advanced, and I wondered if Holmes had truly only sought time to reflect, or if he

knew something he hadn't told us. What could he possibly have discovered that would lead us so quickly to our doom?

I got up and went to the window. The fog outside was thick, and I could barely make out the houses. The city had become a shadow, and I could smell the cool winds moving through the streets, as if they had something to say that I couldn't hear.

At that moment I heard a soft knock on the door.

At first I thought it was just the wind pressing against the wood, but the knocking repeated itself – gentle yet insistent. A familiar knocking that disturbed me in a way I had never felt before.

"Dr. Watson?" called a voice from the corridor. It wasn't loud, but it was unmistakable. "Dr. Watson, are you there?"

I opened the door and stood in the dim light of the hallway. A man in a long, dark coat stood before me, whom I couldn't immediately recognize. But when he raised his head and looked me in the eyes, I knew who he was.

"Mr. Holmes?" I asked hesitantly.

"Not quite," he said with a smile that was all too familiar. "Not in the way you know him. But perhaps... in a different way."

I felt my heart race, and yet I knew he was no ordinary person. He was something different, something that mirrored Holmes's risk of leaving. A shadow that had been waiting in the background until the moment was right to finally strike.

"What happened?" I asked. "Why did he disappear?"

The man took a step forward, and I felt the room fill as he crossed the threshold with an uncanny ease. "He took the first step, Dr. Watson," the man said quietly. "But he knew you couldn't go down the same path again. The abyss before us is too deep for a simple man like him. But you... you still have a chance, Dr. Watson."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I felt the air between us thicken. It was as if I were standing on the threshold of a secret greater than I could ever comprehend.

The man took another step closer, and I felt I had to do something—something that would take me beyond ordinary reality. "You must understand," he said calmly, "that not everything we know is the truth. Holmes has only scratched the surface. But you, Dr. Watson, you will have to go deeper."

I looked into his eyes, and in that moment I realized that he was not merely a reflection of Holmes. He was more. He was the key to everything that was yet to come.

"What do you expect from me?" I asked, and it was as if I were asking a question that could never truly be answered.

“Only one thing,” said the man with a cold smile, “that you have the courage to do what he couldn’t. Find him, Dr. Watson. Find what he was looking for.”

With these words, he turned and slowly walked back into the shadows. I stood still, holding my breath, and could only watch as he disappeared into the fog. And with him, the last trace that had given us any sense of security.

The door closed, and I stood alone in the silence once more. But the silence was no longer what it had been before. It was now the harbinger of what was to come. It was the moment when everything fell apart—and I knew there was no going back.

I took the coat that was still hanging on the wall and went to the door. The fog outside was thicker than before, and I sensed that the path ahead was not only uncertain but also shrouded in a darkness that would devour everything we had believed in.

The case was far from over. And I had the feeling that we were only at the beginning of something so much bigger than we had ever imagined.

The truth was no longer just a goal. It was a place we had to find, no matter the cost.

The fog outside had grown thicker, almost tangible, as if it had spread further with every breath I took. It was as if the city itself were slowly dissolving, as if it stood on the brink of a secret that could no longer be concealed. The alleys stretching out in all directions from Baker Street seemed emptier than ever. Not a sound, not a cry, nothing to break the silence that had settled over everything.

As I closed the door behind me, I realized that the moment I had just entered was irreversible. The answers we were seeking had transformed into something else—something darker, more mysterious. And whatever Holmes had done to lead us in this direction, he had set us on a dangerous path, one he no longer controlled.

I descended the steps and stepped out onto the street, where the fog immediately enveloped me. My footsteps echoed in the silence, but they sounded different—heavier, as if they carried more than just my weight. It was as if each step took me further away from anything I had known and closer to something I couldn't grasp.

The only answer I had left was the call that this man had left in the corridor: "Find him, Dr. Watson. Find what he was looking for."

Holmes had vanished, but the shadows of his deeds still haunted me. What had he discovered? Why had he left? Why had he chosen to leave us in the dark? Questions to which I had no answers, but which roared ever louder in my mind the longer I walked.

The path I now took led me to the familiar streets of London. But I felt I was looking at these streets differently. The corners that had been safe and familiar in daylight now seemed strangely foreign, as if they had changed. Or perhaps it was I who had changed. Was I truly still the man I had been before this chase?

I didn't know how long I'd been walking when I finally reached the dark entrance the man in the doorway had described. It was a small building on the edge of town, half-hidden in the fog. The faint light filtering through the window was yellow and dim, as if it couldn't

completely dispel the darkness. I stood there for a moment, hesitating, as if the fog might offer me one last escape. But the decision had already been made. I had to keep going.

With one last glance at the empty streets, I turned the handle and stepped into the building. The room was small, sparsely furnished, and yet everything in it felt so familiar that it was almost uncanny. A table stood in the center, with a lamp that cast such a dim light that the room was shrouded in shadow. The walls were covered with shelves crammed with old, yellowed documents. The whole place had an old, decaying feel, and I wondered how many secrets lay hidden within its walls.

"Dr. Watson," said a voice that recognized me immediately. "You're late."

I turned around and saw the man who had led us into the hallway. Now he was sitting in a chair at the table, his gaze fixed on a piece of paper. "Please sit down," he said calmly, gesturing to the chair opposite him. "There are a few things we need to discuss."

"You know why I'm here," I said without sitting down. My gaze drifted to the paper on the table, and I sensed it was more than just a simple message. It was an invitation.

"Yes, I know," said the man. "And you also know that the hunt is no longer just for answers. It's for the truth. But the truth, Dr. Watson, is not what you expect."

I stepped closer to the table and looked at the paper. It was a map, similar to the one we had seen before, but this one was complete. The edges weren't burned, but rather full and detailed – a plan that carried within it a secret message, readable only by someone who understood the code.

"What is it?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

"This is the final step," the man said calmly. "The point where everything comes together. But not everyone is ready to understand what that means."

I pulled the map closer and examined the details. Every line, every dot was more than just a geographical marker. They were clues to the path we had to take. But the path wasn't linear. It was a trail full of twists and turns, each step a step into darkness that was increasingly forming a labyrinth.

"Why are you giving me this?" I asked. "Why are you telling me what to do?"

The man smiled. "Because you have no choice. Like everyone who has been led onto the right path, you now know that there is no way out. Only one way forward."

I felt the air in the room thicken as he spoke those words. The pressure I had already felt intensified, engulfing everything around me. The man hadn't just led us to a place. He had sent us down a path of no return. The path Holmes had walked.

"Holmes knew it," I said quietly. "He knew he couldn't go back."

The man nodded. "Exactly. And now you know it too. The path continues, Dr. Watson. And the further you go, the less likely there will be a point where you can say you've understood. The truth will continue to change as long as you move forward."

Darkness seemed to descend upon us as I held the map in my hands. The questions I had carried with me began to answer themselves—but not in the way I had expected. I knew now that there was no end, no resolution, no easy answer. There was only the next step, which would lead us further—into the darkness.

"What now?" I finally asked, my voice calm, but I knew that the decision was not mine.

"Now," the man said, "you must decide how far you are willing to go, Dr. Watson. Because the destination is not what you expect. It is what you can no longer let go of."

The space seemed to thicken again as the truth unfolded before me, a truth that called into question everything we had ever believed.

The fog outside was now so thick that it swallowed the streets, as if the entire city were shrouded in a dark, impenetrable shroud. No light seemed to break through the darkness that night. The moonlight, which had shimmered in the early hours, had long since vanished, and the world seemed trapped in an endless state of silence. As I closed the door behind me, I knew there was no turning back.

I saw Holmes close the door behind him without another word, his figure vanishing into the mist, leaving me in that almost tangible darkness. The questions I had asked before were no longer just questions, but unsolvable riddles, drawing me into a maelstrom from which there was no escape. What had he found? Why had he left, and why could I not shake the feeling that he had led us not only from this apartment, but also from a life we believed to be real?

I suddenly felt like part of a story written by someone else—a story whose course I could never influence. And the more I thought about this map and what it showed us, the more I understood that we weren't just looking for a criminal, but for a piece of truth that had been denied us from the very beginning. Holmes had led us down this path, but now he seemed to be the only one with the complete picture.

I went to the windowsill and looked out at the empty streets. The city was silent, the fog shrouding it like an impenetrable veil, and I knew that I, too, had gone a step too far. Where was Holmes? What had he seen that we didn't yet understand? And why did it seem as if every step we had taken was just another part of a plan that led us to ask questions we couldn't answer?

"Dr. Watson," I suddenly heard a familiar voice, echoing from the darkness. I turned and found myself in the light of a dimly lit corridor. The door was open again, and a man stood there who seemed strangely familiar. But it wasn't the man I had expected. It wasn't Holmes.

"You led us this far," the man said calmly as his footsteps filled the silence. "But now you must continue alone."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice rough with determination and confusion. "Who are you?"

The man stepped closer and raised his hand as if to hand me something. It was a small, unassuming envelope, and the way he held it told me he didn't have an easy message. "This envelope will show you the next step," he said calmly. "But you must know that this is the last step in this direction. Once you embark on this path, there is no turning back."

I took the envelope in my hand; the paper felt unusually cold, as if it were more than just a piece of paper. As if it concealed something that wasn't so easy to see. I knew the moment had come when everything I had believed about our search would be called into question. But I also knew I had no choice. I had to keep going.

"You know what this means, don't you?" the man asked, pointing at the envelope. "You know what it means to encounter the truth."

"Yes," I said, and it was the only thing I could say. I had no more answers. Only the card. Only the envelope. Only the question of how far I was willing to go.

The man nodded slowly, as if he understood everything I was going through. "The path is not only dangerous, Dr. Watson. It is the final test. And if you choose to go on, you will not only encounter the truth. You will encounter yourself."

I held the envelope in my hands and felt the weight of the decision that lay before me. What could this envelope truly reveal to me? What could it tell me that I didn't already know? And what would happen if I opened it?

"I have no choice," I said, even though I knew that it wasn't just the truth that awaited me. There was something else, too. Something I couldn't name. Something that had always hung over us like a shadow, but had never been fully grasped.

The man retreated, the darkness seemed to engulf him, and in the silence that followed, I knew that the next step wasn't just a step into darkness. It was the last step before the abyss.

I opened the envelope and pulled out the paper. It was another map—but this one was different. The edges weren't burned, but the lines on the map were so precise and yet so incomplete that they raised more questions than they answered. It was a plan, but it wasn't complete. And yet, I knew it would lead us to the place we were looking for. And it was the place no one was meant to find.

"Now," I said quietly, "we move on. There is no going back."

I stepped out into the darkness, and with every step I took, I felt the space around me grow smaller and smaller. The answers I was seeking were no longer just on the map. They were within me.

And I knew that the truth we were seeking was no longer in Holmes' hands. It was now my responsibility.

## Watson's second voice

Darkness was all that remained. The streets of London, once so familiar, had turned to shadows. Every step I took led me deeper into the city's labyrinth, yet I knew it wasn't just the streets that were changing. I, too, was changing, to a degree I hadn't realized when I first set foot on this path. I was no longer the man I had been months before—the doctor embarking on an adventure to discover the truth.

Now I was something else. Something that could no longer recognize itself.

I kept the envelope in my pocket, the paper still as cold as the first time I'd touched it. The card inside was more than just a clue; it was a promise, a promise that inevitably pulled me in a direction I could no longer control. What if the answer I was seeking not only uncovered the crime but also the truth about myself?

I knew there was no room for doubt. Not anymore. The decision had long since been made, and the chains that held us all captive were too tight. As I walked through the narrow streets of the city, it felt as if every step would be my last. The silence was oppressive, and the shadows that stretched across the buildings seemed alive, as if reaching out for me.

"You have come a long way, Watson."

I stopped abruptly. The voice that spoke to me was calm, almost too calm, and yet so familiar that it nearly knocked me over. I turned and looked into the darkness that surrounded me, as if hoping to discover the source of the voice.

"Holmes?" My voice was a whisper, and even the wind seemed to swallow it up.

"No," said the voice, this time from a different corner of the darkness, but as clear as the first call. "Not Holmes. Another one."

My heart skipped a beat. It couldn't be. I had last seen Holmes when he closed the door behind him, when he left us to find the path we were now seeking. Yet this man—the voice so familiar to me—sounded like an echo of someone I thought I had long since lost.

"Who are you?" I asked, but the question sounded empty, as if I had already answered it myself. The darkness had awakened something in me that was more than just a feeling of threat. It was the moment when everything I had considered secure began to crumble.

The answer didn't come immediately. Instead, there was the sound of a footstep touching the damp ground, followed by a movement emerging from the darkness, becoming a shadowy figure. "I am the one responsible for everything that has happened," the voice finally said, the words seeming to cut through the air itself. "I am the one who now calls upon you to recognize the second truth."

"The second truth?" I repeated, but the sound of those words made me flinch. "What do you mean by that?"

The man stepped closer, and at that moment I realized he was no ordinary man. He was not of the same world as us. Perhaps he had never been a part of this world, but rather a product of something we could not comprehend. "The truth you sought, Watson," he said calmly, "is only the first of many. But the second truth is the point at which the hunt ends. Or perhaps begins. That is entirely up to you."

His words paralyzed me. The air around me was thick, heavy with meaning, with knowledge that defied expression. I tried to speak, but the words caught in my throat. How could this man, standing before me now, know what I was searching for? How could he know what I had found that night?

"Who are you?" I asked again, and this time the answer in my voice was clear: I wanted to know who this man was. But even more, I wanted to know what he knew, what he had seen.

He took a step closer, and I could see the darkness in his eyes, the way it wanted to turn away from me. "You pursued Holmes," he said, "but you never understood what he was truly seeking. And now you know that he disappeared because he dug too deep. But you, Dr. Watson... you have a different task."

"What kind of task?" I asked, and I knew I dreaded the answer.

The man smiled coldly, and in that moment I understood that this smile was more than just a gesture of kindness. It was the expression of someone who knew that the moment of revelation had arrived—and that there was no turning back. "Your task, Watson," he said, "is to go the way to the end. But know this: when you take that final step, it won't just be the hunt that ends. It will be your own life that is changed forever."

I felt the ground begin to slip away beneath my feet. The man in front of me wasn't just an observer. He was the one who had drawn us all into this chase. The one who had forced us to take this final step. And although I knew I had no choice, I also knew that this final step wouldn't just mark the end of Holmes's story. It would also mean the end of my own.

"You can leave now," the man said, stepping back. "But remember this: when you leave, you know that you are no longer the man you once were. You are no longer the witness. You are the one who took the final step."

The darkness seemed to engulf me as I took the step forward. The path was clear before me. But the price I had to pay was what kept me there. I couldn't go back.

The city of London was like a locked room, where time slowed as if the fog had trapped it in an endless loop. I walked along familiar streets, and yet every corner felt strange. Everything was changed, not by the physical world around me, but by what was happening within me. What Holmes had shown us was more than just a crime. It was the beginning of a discovery that challenged everything I had believed to be true.

As I walked past the familiar streets and houses, it was as if I were walking through a dream. The houses, once full of stories and memories, now seemed empty and meaningless, as if they had been unable to bear the weight of the truth we were trying to carry.

The voices in my head had grown louder. Sometimes it felt as if they weren't my own thoughts, but the thoughts of someone else living inside me, whispering things I didn't want to hear. "The truth is not what you believe, Watson," this other part of me had said. "The truth is what you carry within yourself."

I stopped and looked at the building in front of me. It was an unassuming building, one I had passed many times without really noticing. But now it was as if this building was more than just a building. It had become a part of me, a part of the hunt we had embarked upon, and the moment when the truth was reflected not only in the streets, but also within me.

"Watson," a voice whispered from the darkness, and I jumped. The voice was like an echo rising from the silence, and when I turned around, I knew instantly it wasn't just another

apparition. It was a part of me. It was the part of me that had the courage to step into the darkness, the part of me that wanted to break free from the lies that held me captive.

"Watson," the voice said again, this time more clearly, as if it came from the depths of my own consciousness. "It's time you remembered."

I turned around again, and someone was standing in the darkness. It wasn't anyone I knew. Yet the eyes staring back at me were strangely familiar. They were the eyes of a man I had never quite understood. A man who always seemed to know what would come next. A man who not only grappled with the truth but broke through it to create something far greater.

"Holmes?" I asked, my voice a whispering echo of the questions that tormented me. But the man in the darkness said nothing. Instead, he took a step toward me, and I could hear the familiar sound of his footsteps—so calm and precise, as if he had never strayed from his path.

"You are here because you must take the final step," the voice said, and it no longer sounded like Holmes. It was more than just his voice. It was the voice of my own self, challenging me to go further, to reach the point where I could fully grasp the truth.

"What do you mean?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

"The final step," the voice said again, and it was clearer now, "the point at which you understand that you are not just a part of the story. You are also the writer. You have always had a choice, Watson. You have always known that there is something inside you that eludes the truth. And now you must decide whether you will continue to be merely an observer, or whether you will become the second voice yourself."

I felt my breath catch. The darkness seemed to thicken around me, and I could feel the stillness of the night within me. I had reached a point where I could no longer postpone the decision. It was a choice between continuing to search for the truth or accepting that the truth had always been a part of me.

"And what happens if I become the second voice?" I asked, my heart beating faster.

"Then," the voice said calmly, "you will see that the hunt was never really about the crime. It was always about finding out what you yourself had hidden inside."

The words hit me like a ton of bricks. In that moment, I knew I wasn't just searching for an answer, but for myself. I had to accept the darkness within and decide whether I wanted to continue living in the shadows – or whether I had the courage to step into the light.

"It is time, Watson," the voice whispered again. "It is time to hear the second voice."

And in that moment I heard it – my own voice – breaking through the darkness and shattering the silence. I knew I had to take the final step. The final step that would lead me not only to the truth, but to myself.

The fog had wrapped around me, but it wasn't just the fog of the London streets that enveloped me. It was the fog in my own mind, growing thicker the more I tried to find the answers. The place where I stood now was more than just a crossroads in the alleys of this city. It was the transition between what I had believed and what I was now prepared to see.

And when the voice echoed within me once more in the darkness, I knew there was no turning back.

"You must move on," the voice whispered, and it was so familiar that it felt like a part of me. "You made the choice. And now you will know what it means."

I looked around and felt the weight of the decision settle in my shoulders. The streets of London, once familiar and safe, had changed. The fog that shrouded them now symbolized the ambiguity that was taking hold within me. The fog swallowed everything around me, obscuring all detail, as if the world had dissolved that night. And yet, I knew I could no longer search for answers in the darkness. They weren't there. The answers lay within me. In the choice I had made and in what I was willing to accept.

"What should I do?" I asked softly, but the answer didn't come in words. It came as a feeling that washed over me like a wave. It was a feeling of realization that flooded through me—that everything I had believed until now was just a taste of what was to come.

I began to move, step by step. The fog surrounding me seemed to wrap around my feet, but I didn't let it stop me. The streets ahead were empty, and yet I knew I wasn't alone. Somewhere behind me, in the darkness, I could see someone's silhouette—Holmes's. Or what he had left behind. The memory of him was now more than just an image in my mind. It was a constant, a part of me I could no longer shake.

I arrived at an old building that I didn't immediately recognize. It wasn't a building I had ever been to before, and yet it felt like a place I had known for a long time. The door was old, but it wasn't locked. I opened it and stepped inside as if the space before me had always been waiting for me. The air was still, and the room was dimly lit, as if waiting for me to take the next step. On a table lay another envelope—the same one I had encountered in the darkness, but this time it was open.

I stepped closer and saw the piece of paper lying inside. It wasn't a card, as I had expected, but a message. The handwriting was neat and precise, and as I read it, I knew immediately that it was more than just a message. It was a summons.

"Watson," it read, "the hunt has begun. But not the path you have taken, but the path you are taking now, will determine who you are. You have heard the second voice, and now it is time to accept the truth. It is not just a goal, it is what you carry within you."

I read the words again, but they hadn't lost their significance. It was clear that this was the moment I had dreaded for so long. The moment when I had to decide whether to continue searching for the truth or to accept it—just as it was.

The space seemed to shrink, as if it were stealing my breath. I felt the pressure in my chest growing. But I also knew that this was the moment when everything I had learned would be put to the test. I had heard the second voice, and now I had to decide whether to continue ignoring it or finally accept it.

"What is the truth you fear?" the voice inside me asked, and I could no longer answer. I knew that I had long been trapped in a web of lies and truths, and that the only way to escape this web was to confront the truth.

I reached for the envelope and reread the message, and in that moment I knew that the path I was about to take would not only lead me to an answer. It would lead me to a point where I would either accept the truth—or what I believed to be the truth—or lose it forever.

"I'm not the man I used to be," I whispered as I reread the message. And then I knew that the path ahead wasn't just a path to enlightenment. It was a path to myself.

I stood up and went to the door. The fog outside was thicker than ever, but I pressed on. Because I knew there was no other way. I had to keep going. I had to accept the second voice.

And with every step I took, I realized that I was no longer the witness. I was the one who would now continue writing the story.

## The priest with the knife eyes

It was one of those nights when the city disappeared beneath a thick blanket of fog and rain, and London became a place even ordinary people avoided. The streets, normally bustling with life, were empty and deserted, as if they had sensed something we hadn't yet understood. It was as if the whole city had fallen into a deep sleep, and nothing would awaken it until dawn.

I pulled my coat tighter around me as I walked along the narrow alleys that had become familiar. But something was different. The darkness felt thicker, as if it were not only enveloping me but also preventing me from going any further. It wasn't just the fog that was robbing me of my sight. It was a sense of menace that seemed to emanate from the walls of the buildings, as if the city itself harbored a secret hidden only in its deepest corners.

I reached the church Holmes had told me about—a deserted, dilapidated chapel on the outskirts of town, its isolation a mere shadow of its former self. The door stood open, but not for any practical reason. It seemed more like an invitation, another piece in a game whose rules no one understood anymore.

As I entered the room, my gaze immediately fell upon him: the priest with the knife-like stare. He stood in the corner, half in shadow, his eyes piercing, like those of a man who sees more than he should speak. His face was gaunt, with sharp features, and his eyes held a dangerous gleam that electrified the air between us. The room was silent; only the dripping of water from the ceiling broke the stillness.

"Dr. Watson," he said quietly, and the way he said my name made me shiver. "I've been waiting for you."

I took a step closer, but the priest didn't move. The silence between us grew, as if the room itself were waiting for the next word.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked, my voice firm, even though I knew this wasn't the place where I would find answers. It was the place where I could only discover the truth through pain.

"Wait?" The priest smiled thinly. "I am not waiting, Dr. Watson. I stopped waiting long ago. But I knew you would come. You have reached the point where you can no longer turn away."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice now sharper. "Why are we here?"

"You are here because you have no other choice," the priest replied calmly. "You are here because, like everyone who has stood before you, you are incapable of turning away from the truth. And therefore, you too will have no other option but to see what others have only seen in their nightmares."

I felt the space around us begin to narrow. Every step I took, every thought that crossed my mind, seemed meaningless in that moment. The priest was like a guardian, leading us into this labyrinth of lies and secrets from which there was no easy escape.

"You know the answer, Watson," he said, as if he already knew my thoughts. "You know the price one pays for the truth. And you know there is no turning back. But do you also know what the truth will do to you?"

His gaze was sharp, as if he wanted to penetrate me, to reach the deepest recesses of my being and elicit the answer I had long kept locked away. I tried to compose myself, but a part of me knew that the priest knew more than I did—that he was only showing us fragments of a story we ourselves had long since brought to an end.

"What is the truth?" I asked, my breath coming in shallow gasps as I uttered the words. "Why did you bring us here?"

"The truth," he said quietly, "is the price we must pay for our sins. But it is also the only way to free ourselves from the burden of lies."

I wasn't sure if he was trying to comfort me with his words or if he was trying to pull me further into the darkness that surrounded us. But I knew we had reached a point where the only way forward was, even if that path led us into the depths.

"And what happens if I don't go any further?" I asked, my voice a whisper, as if I were pressing myself against the wall to avoid taking the next step.

The priest took a step closer, his eyes now burning with an intensity that almost paralyzed me. "Then the truth will find you, Dr. Watson. As it will find us all. It is the only thing that remains when everything else is lost."

I felt the air thicken as I realized there was no longer a choice. We had reached the point where the path ahead was no longer paved with uncertainty. The truth now lay not only in the secrets we uncovered, but within ourselves, and we had to confront what it would do to us if we got too close.

I knew I couldn't hesitate any longer. We had to move forward – and accept the truth that awaited us.

The silence between us was almost palpable, the air thick and heavy, as if it could literally exhale the secret the priest carried. It was the space that held us captive, not just the walls

around us, but also the oppressive realization that we were on a path from which there was no return. The priest now stood so close that I could smell incense and old, yellowed parchments. His presence was like the shadow of a ritual long thought lost, rising again in that moment.

“Why are you here?” I asked, without taking my eyes off him. It was a simple question, and yet I knew the answer was much more than an explanation. It was the answer to what lay ahead for all of us.

“Why?” The priest repeated the word, as if framing it in his own language. “Because the path you chose led you to me. I didn’t seek you out, Dr. Watson. You called upon me, not consciously, but the decision you made brought you precisely here.”

I could hardly believe what he was saying. The idea that I, simply by choosing to continue searching for the truth, had brought this moment about myself unsettled me. I had believed we would find the truth by asking the right questions and following the clues. But the priest seemed to be telling me that we were all already part of a plan we didn’t know about.

“I always thought the truth was a goal,” I said, my voice sounding more like a question than a statement. “That we had to achieve it. But now... it seems as if the truth is watching us, waiting.”

“Exactly,” replied the priest, and there was a strange mixture of pity and understanding in his voice. “You think the truth is something you can control. But it is like a shadow. It follows you, and if you call upon it, it will reveal itself. But be careful, Dr. Watson. The truth will not spare you. And it will not treat you gently.”

His words were like a heavy veil falling over me. I knew he was right. We were not the discoverers of a hidden truth, but the prisoners of a truth that already enveloped us all, shaped us, and forced us to confront it.

“And what happens if I face this truth?” I asked, almost unconsciously, as if I already knew. It was a question I should have asked long ago, but in that moment it was clearer to me than ever before.

The priest took a step back, as if to give me time to grasp the meaning of his answer. “If you face the truth, Dr. Watson, you will know yourself. For the truth is not only what you seek. It is also what you carry within you. The truth is the mirror that shows you who you truly are. And when you dare to look into that mirror, you will know that you are no longer the man you once were.”

I felt my throat tighten. The priest hadn’t just asked me what we were seeking in the darkness. He had asked me what was hidden within myself—what I had always kept hidden until that moment. Because the truth we were seeking wasn’t just an external discovery. It was a discovery that plunged us into the abyss.

“You have chosen this path, Watson,” said the priest, and I could feel the sound of his voice within me. “But remember: the path you take will not only lead you to the answers. It will also show you parts of yourself you never wanted to see.”

I took a step back, my breath shallow, and felt the weight of his words on my shoulders. It wasn’t just the crime we had to unravel. It was our own darkness that threatened to overwhelm

us. And the closer we got to the truth, the more I began to understand that this hunt wasn't just about knowledge, but about recognizing our own humanity.

"And what happens if I don't take the step?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

"Then you will live," replied the priest, "but you will never truly know who you are. You will always wander in the darkness of ignorance, while the truth lurks all around you. It will follow you, Watson. But eventually, it will reveal itself. It will not wait. It will not reach out for you. It will only show you the way—and then, with a glance, it will vanish."

The darkness of the room seemed to thicken, and I knew that the priest hadn't just asked me the question we needed to answer. He had shown me the path we all had to take, and the only way to find the truth was to take the step that would change us forever.

"I'm going to go," I finally said, my voice firm, even though my heart still hesitated. "I'll see what happens."

The priest merely nodded, and for a moment his gaze was no longer that of a man who wanted to explain something to me. It was the gaze of a witness who knew that the moment of realization was inevitable.

"Then come," he said calmly, "and find out what you've always known. The truth awaits."

And I knew there was no turning back. The path lay clear before me, and every step I took led me into the heart of darkness. But the closer I came, the more I understood that I wasn't just waiting for the truth—I was waiting to discover myself.

The priest stepped aside, as if clearing the way for me, and I knew that the step ahead was not just the next in a chase, but the beginning of something irreversible. The space around me seemed to thicken with every breath, as if it were waiting for the moment when everything would dissolve. The light was dim, the shadows on the walls dancing in a rhythm unique to darkness.

"Come," the priest said again, but this time his voice sounded not only calm, but almost like an invitation I couldn't refuse, even if I wanted to. "There is no other way, Watson. The truth is a door opener. But it only opens from the inside."

I took a step forward, and the priest vanished with a soft sound into the shadows, as if he were nothing more than a part of the darkness that enveloped me. The room I now found myself in was old—not old like a building marked by years, but old like a secret so deeply embedded that it had been swallowed up by time itself.

I kept going, feeling the damp ground beneath my boots and the cold breath of air seeping through the cracks in the walls. Everything inside me screamed to take a step back, but it was too late. I was too deep in this game to stop now. It was as if I were plunging deeper and deeper into an abyss I knew had no end, but I couldn't help but keep going.

The priest hadn't said much to me, but he had given me something—something I couldn't refuse: the possibility of seeing the truth. And yet, his answer to my question had brought more confusion than I had expected. What did he mean by saying that the truth wasn't just

something we discovered, but something that allowed us to "know"? What did he know that we couldn't yet comprehend?

I could feel it—a change spreading within me, as subtle as a shadow play, yet as real as the heart beating in my chest. The hunt was no longer just a hunt for a criminal or a secret. It was the hunt for an insight that defied words. The hunt for an image we carried in our minds, one that could never be fully reflected in reality.

Suddenly I stopped. A sound had broken my thoughts. A quiet, barely perceptible sound. It came from the corner of the room, from the deep shadows that gathered there. The priest was no longer visible, but the feeling that I was not alone was stronger than ever before.

“Watson,” said a voice from the darkness. It was calm, almost gentle, and yet I could sense the threat within it. It wasn’t just a man’s voice. It was the voice of knowledge hidden in the shadows.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice firmer than I had expected. But the shock that gripped me as I gazed into the darkness could not be entirely concealed.

The figure stepped out of the shadows, and I recognized him immediately. It was the priest, but now he was no longer the silent observer who had merely enveloped me in words. He was a man ready to show me the truth—in a way no one had done before.

“You have taken the first step, Watson,” said the priest, his gaze razor-sharp. “But you will not like the next step.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, and although I tried to remain calm, I knew that I had reached a point where what I hoped to see was slipping away from me just like the fog that enveloped us.

“The truth,” said the priest, “can only be recognized if one is willing to bear it. But even then, it will not give you the answer you expect. It will ask you a question you never dared to ask.”

I looked into his eyes, and in that moment I knew that he wasn't just the priest who led us through this darkness. He was the one who knew the answer to everything. And perhaps it was he who had led us here to show us a truth we could no longer deny.

"What are you planning?" I asked, my voice sharp and penetrating. "What is it that you want to show me?"

The priest took a step closer, and I could feel the cold breath of his presence, which made me feel as if something inside me was beginning to shatter. "I am going to ask you the question you should have asked long ago. And if you don't answer it, Watson, you will never know what lies beyond the truth."

I felt the air thicken. The room we were standing in wasn't just a room. It was a place of no escape. I stood on the edge of an insight that would either elevate me or destroy me. And the longer I waited, the more I knew that the priest wasn't just asking me a question—he was asking me the question that went beyond what we thought we knew.

“Are you ready, Watson?” the priest asked softly; his voice was the final step that led us into the abyss.

And at that moment I knew there was no going back.

## A dog that didn't bark

The city was shrouded in an eerie silence as I walked through the misty streets of London. The rain that had swept through the city for the previous days had stopped, but the fog, which hung like a veil over the old houses, made everything seem even more somber. It was one of those nights when you had the feeling that the whole city was waiting for something inevitable to happen.

I continued walking, unable to shake the feeling that something was in the air. A missing sound. An expectation that would never be fulfilled. Amidst the storm, the rain, and the constant movement, there were always these moments when everything fell silent. And in that silence, I wondered if it was all in my head, or if the fog, too, concealed something we had all overlooked.

It was this strange case that brought me back to the streets after all these years. A dog that didn't bark. A seemingly simple puzzle that had occupied Holmes and me for days, and yet it possessed a darkness that ran deeper than the case it initially appeared to be.

This wasn't about an ordinary dog. It was about a moment when the absence of a sound meant more than what had actually happened. The thing was, the dog everyone was talking about wasn't barking, even though it should have. But that was just the surface. What lay beneath the surface defied easy explanation.

I finally reached the estate that had led us to investigate the case. It was a heavy, gloomy building on the edge of town, almost fortress-like in the twilight. The entrance was covered by heavy curtains, and the light filtering through the windows was dim, as if even the shadows here concealed their own secrets.

I entered, and the owner of the house, an old man with piercing eyes that reminded me of a scholar from a bygone era, stood there waiting. “Dr. Watson,” he said when he saw me. “I am pleased that you have come. But I await your reply.”

“Answer?” I asked, even though I knew he wasn't really waiting for a question. The old man possessed a knowledge he didn't want to share; it was more of an urge to steer us in a direction we didn't yet understand.

“Yes, answer. What do you think, Watson? What do you think the dog didn't want to tell us?” asked the man, and his voice was so calm that it sounded almost like a whisper.

“What is it that the dog isn't saying?” I answered, even though I knew the dog was only a small part of the whole story. But this question was the key, and I knew I couldn't answer it lightly.

“He didn’t bark,” the man repeated. “Not out of fear. Not out of unwillingness. He simply didn’t bark. He knew it was pointless. But I’m afraid the dog knows more than we think.”

“More than we think?” I asked, stepping slowly onto the table where a single book lay—old, worn, and marked with a symbol that reminded me of the uncanny. The question that haunted me was still the same. What was it that had slipped through our fingers? What was the real reason the dog hadn’t barked?

The man nodded as if reading my thoughts. “The dog’s silence is only the beginning. The dog knows what is hidden here. And he won’t tell us until we are ready to understand what this silence truly means.”

I looked at the book and felt that it was the key. The dog, the silence, and this book—they were all connected. And although I didn’t understand everything at that point, I knew we were on the right track.

“Then show me what we’ve overlooked,” I said, feeling the cold in the air. Something else was here, something that threatened us more than we were ever willing to admit.

The old man stepped closer and opened the book, and the moment he turned the pages, I began to understand that the dog’s silence wasn’t simply the absence of sound. It was a sign. A harbinger of what lay ahead.

“Here,” the man said, pointing to a passage in the book, “here is the clue. The dog told us everything we needed to know. But we didn’t understand it. Not yet.”

I leaned forward and read the words the man showed me. And then I understood. The dog hadn’t barked because he couldn’t tell us the truth directly. But the silence was loud, so loud that we couldn’t ignore it.

“What the dog knew,” I whispered, “was that we are all part of a game. A game we cannot win unless we understand why he didn’t bark.”

The old man nodded. “Exactly. And the game begins now.”

The silence had returned, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t an empty, meaningless silence. It was a silence now almost tangible, one that enveloped us and forced us to understand the significance of the absence of a simple sound. The dog’s silence wasn’t just a random occurrence. It was the first sign of a secret that ran deeper than we had ever imagined.

I saw the old man, now leaning against a chair in the corner of the room. His face was unreadable, but his eyes, fixed on me, hinted at something he knew and I didn’t yet understand. “What is it we’ve overlooked here?” I asked, though I felt my question only made the air thicker.

He folded his arms as if he already knew the answer but wanted to keep it to himself. “The dog is more than just an animal, Dr. Watson,” he said with a slight smile that conveyed not joy, but rather the kind of knowledge that transcended human understanding. “He is the guardian. And his silence signifies more than the absence of sound. It signifies that something is hidden in this town, in this house—and that no one must hear it.”

“A guard?” I repeated, though I knew he meant more than just the role of an ordinary dog watching the entrance. The dog, it turned out, was the key, the link between the many threads of the crime that had led us to this chapel. But what exactly was he hiding?

“He knew,” the man said, “that whoever came here would confront the mystery. The dog wasn’t just guarding the entrance. He knew what to do if the right questions were asked.”

“The right questions?” I asked, a feeling of unease spreading through me. It was a strange form of understanding that rose within me, but it was so chaotic that I couldn’t grasp it immediately. What was it that the dog knew? What was the answer we hadn’t yet seen?

The old man nodded slowly, as if he knew that this question was not only the answer we were seeking, but the answer that would truly move us forward. “It is not what you hear, Watson. It is what you do not hear. It is understanding the silence. What the dog does not say is what you must understand. If he did not bark, it was because he knew the noise of truth would be unbearable.”

“And what does that mean for us?” I asked, unable to shake the feeling that the old man had led us to a place where there were no easy answers. The truth we were seeking was more than just a crime that had been committed. It was a truth that would plunge us into the abyss if we dared to confront it.

“It means,” the man said, “that the dog’s silence is not merely an indication of the absence of sound. It means that you have reached the point where the hunt itself becomes a trap. For the truth you seek will not only reveal itself in the things you hear. It will reveal itself in what you choose not to perceive.”

I felt the space around me shift, as if the walls themselves were turning against me. The dog, the silence, the room we were in—everything was interconnected. And yet, I had the feeling that we were overlooking something more hidden. Something that would elude us if we weren’t careful enough.

“So what do we do now?” I asked, knowing the answer wouldn’t be simple. We had grasped the superficial clues, but the true secret lay beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered.

“Now you must understand that the dog is not just a guardian,” the man said, looking grave. “He is also a witness. And his silence will guide us if we have the courage to listen.”

“To listen?” I asked, and the word seemed to hang in the air like an unspoken secret. “To listen, what?”

“To listen,” the man repeated, “not only to the things we hear, but to the things that are not told us. For the greatest truth is often that which lies in silence. And only when you learn to listen to the silence will you understand what the dog knew.”

I stood there, the man’s words echoing in my mind, and I knew we had reached a point where there were no easy answers. The dog’s silence was more than just a puzzle. It was the secret that led us deep into the heart of truth. But what we would find if we truly listened to that silence could destroy us or save us—depending on how ready we were to face the truth.

"I understand," I finally said, as the meaning of his words slowly sank in. "It's the truth that has slipped through our fingers."

The man nodded. "Exactly, Watson. And it is the truth that has brought us here. But whether we accept it will determine our fate."

I knew that at that moment we weren't just looking for a criminal. We were looking for something bigger – for the truth that would not only explain what had happened, but also show us who we really were in this game.

I was still standing before the altar, the book in my hands, feeling the weight of the decision that lay before me. The silence of the room was almost oppressive, and it was as if every movement I made disturbed the fragile balance that had brought us here. The old man who had led me to this point was no longer visible. Yet I knew he still lurked somewhere in the shadows, ready to reveal the next truth to us if we were ready to hear it.

"So it's true," I said quietly to myself as I leafed through the book again. "The dog didn't bark because he knew we couldn't hear the answer."

The words the old man had taught me seemed to echo in my ears. "It's not what you hear, Watson. It's what you don't hear." I still hadn't quite grasped the meaning of those words. Why was the dog's silence so important? Why was the absence of a simple sound the key to everything?

"Because silence speaks louder than any sound," I whispered as the truth slowly dawned on me. "The dog didn't bark because he knew the noise of the truth would destroy us."

The thought made me pause for a moment. The dog was more than just an animal. It was a symbol, a guardian, showing us that the answer to the crime lay not in the words we heard, but in the silence that surrounded us. It was the silence that misled us, that prevented us from recognizing the truth.

"But what did he know? What did he keep from us?" I asked myself, gripping the book tighter. The pages were old and yellowed, yet they held the information that had led us to this moment. The answers lay before me, but they seemed to be hiding, like a riddle refusing to be fully solved.

I sat down on the cold floor of the crypt, the book still in my hands, and let my gaze wander over the pages. The words written there had meaning—but they were more than simple symbols. They were clues, guiding us through the darkness in which we had lost ourselves. It was as if we had opened a door only to encounter an even greater wall, looming relentlessly before us.

"There is an answer," I said, this time with more determination in my voice. "But it's not what we expected."

At that moment the old man re-entered the room, his steps calm, but with an intention I could not ignore. "You understand, Watson," he said, standing before me. "The dog didn't bark to teach us a lesson. He wanted to show us that silence tells us just as much about the truth as what we hear."

I looked into his eyes and felt the veil of mystery slowly lift. The truth we sought wasn't just what we believed. It was what slipped through our fingers when we didn't heed the subtle clues. It was what remained unsaid that led us to the realization we had always overlooked.

"But why?" I asked. "Why this game with us? Why these hidden clues and the silence?"

The old man took a step closer and looked at the book in my hands. "Because the truth is never easy to find, Watson. It is not what we expect. It is what is revealed to us only when we are ready to accept it."

"And what is this truth?" I asked, my voice almost a whisper. But the old man didn't answer immediately. Instead, he placed his hand on the book, and I felt the space around us change. The air thickened, the shadows seemed to liquefy, as if the book itself had some kind of power over the room.

"The truth," he said finally, "is the key to everything. But the key is only effective if we understand that we are not merely looking for an answer. We are looking for ourselves. For what the dog knew is what you too must know, Watson. It is not merely about the crime that was committed. It is about what we do with the truth when we finally find it."

I looked at the book and then back at the old man. And in that moment, I knew we had reached a point where nothing was as it once was. The hunt for the criminal wasn't what had changed us. It was the truth that would eventually reveal itself to us—but not without a price.

"I understand," I said quietly, as I turned my gaze from the old man and stared at the book. "We are not only looking for what we have lost. We are looking for what we tried to hide."

"Exactly," the man replied calmly, taking a step back. "And now you must decide whether you are prepared to face the truth."

I stood up, the book still firmly in my hands, and felt the space around me open up, as if the shadows that had haunted us this far had finally vanished. We had found the answer—but the question that now preoccupied us was whether we could bear the truth it would reveal.

## The game in the crypt

The walls of the crypt were draped with the weight of history, and as I stepped deeper into the space, it felt as if the room itself was breathing—or at least carrying the breath of the many secrets buried within its centuries-old walls. The altar, rising in the center of the room, seemed to be the only solid point in this somber environment. The dim light filtering through the small windows cast ghostly shadows on the stone floor, and the air was cold and damp, thick with a scent that spoke of both decay and something ancient, almost sacred.

"The game has begun, Watson," said the priest, his voice quiet yet with a resonance that filled the room. He stood close to the altar, looking at me as if he knew that I was the one who had to find the answers—or bear the consequences if I didn't. "And in a game like this, there are no easy rules. There is only the truth, gradually revealing itself—and those willing to face it."

I stepped closer, the floor crunching beneath me with every step. “And what does that mean for us?” I asked, my voice calm, but the thought of all that lay hidden here gnawed at me. We were far from the safe streets of London, and here in the darkness, the whole chase seemed to be transforming into something more than just a crime—it was a game, a tangled web of lies and truths that drew us ever deeper into this crypt.

“It means,” replied the priest, stepping back, “that you are not only looking for the criminal, Watson. You are looking for a part of yourself—for a secret that has more to do with you than you realize. You must understand that this is not just a game between the dead and the living. It is a game between truth and lies.”

I couldn't shake the feeling that we were in a labyrinth, its walls shifting with every step we took. I knew this place was more than just the key to a crime—it was a place where the answers to all the questions that tormented us had long since been hidden. And yet, it felt as if we were becoming entangled in a web that was pulling us further and further away from what we called “the truth.”

“They say it’s a game,” I said, my gaze sweeping over the stone walls of the crypt. “But what happens if we lose?”

The priest smiled, but it wasn't a friendly smile. It was the smile of a man who knew more than he let on, who seemed to be preparing us for the final step he knew we would eventually have to take. “Losing is part of the game, Watson,” he said calmly. “The truth has its price. And those unwilling to pay the price will lose themselves.”

A cold shiver ran down my spine as I grasped the meaning of his words. It wasn't just the case we had to solve. It was what we were willing to sacrifice to uncover the truth. The truth hidden here in the dark corners of this crypt was more than just a crime. It was what would change us—what would confront us with a clarity we could no longer ignore.

“What do we have to do to win the game?” I asked, and the words themselves sent a shiver down my spine. Because the answer wasn't simple, and I knew it. We weren't just facing a decision, but a test that would demand more of us than we could possibly comprehend at that moment.

“What you must do,” the priest said quietly, “is to understand that the game is not in your control. You cannot change the rules. You can only discover what truth lies hidden behind the darkness.”

His words hung in the air like a heavy fog, enveloping us and unsettling us more the more we tried to grasp what he meant. We were here in this crypt, and we had no choice. We had to face a truth we never thought possible. And if we weren't prepared to face that truth, we would pay the price—and that price might be more than we ever expected.

“The real price,” said the priest, “is not what you lose, but what you are willing to accept.”

I knew we were on the verge of an insight that would change us—whether we wanted it to or not. And as I ventured deeper into the darkness, I realized that we didn't just have to solve the case. We had to find ourselves in that darkness—and decide whether we could bear what we saw.

“Then let’s play,” I finally said, taking a step closer to the altar. “Let’s find out what we have to lose in this game.”

The priest nodded, and for a moment the room was silent. But the silence was not empty. It was charged with a tension that permeated us and led us to the point where we had to face the truth.

"Then you are ready," said the priest with a cool smile. "And now the game will begin."

The priest's words hung heavy and oppressive in the air. "The game begins," he had said. But I knew it wasn't just a game. It was a trial, a challenge that would push us all to our limits. The crypt, the altar, the priest—they weren't merely symbols of a long-forgotten ritual. They were the framework for what was to follow, for what would change us in ways we couldn't even imagine.

I stepped closer to the altar, the cold light filtering through the small windows casting ghostly shadows on the stone floor. The priest had told us we couldn't escape the rules of the game. But deep down, I knew the game was more than a simple puzzle. It was a mirror reflecting the dark parts of our own souls, the parts we'd rather not see.

“What do we have to do?” I asked, my voice a whisper in the dense silence of the crypt.

The priest said nothing. Instead, he pointed to the altar and then to the symbol carved into the stone—a circle divided into four parts, each segment connected by a line. The symbol was so simple, yet so enigmatic. It seemed connected to darkness and silence itself, as if it were the key to something we had yet to comprehend.

“You must do it,” the priest finally said, his voice barely more than a whisper. “The altar will give you the answer, but only if you are willing to pay the price.”

“The price?” I repeated, a shiver running down my spine. The price he meant wasn’t measured in gold or jewels. The price was something else—something buried deep within us, something we were willing to sacrifice in order to find the truth.

The priest stepped back, his eyes still on me, as if he were certain I would take the next step. But I sensed that this was the moment that had slipped through our fingers. If we took the wrong step, if we made the wrong decision, there would be no turning back. The altar wouldn't just give us an answer. It would also pose a question so profound it could lead us to our doom.

I leaned over the altar and placed my hand on the cool, stone symbol. In that moment, I felt something inside me break open, as if the darkness surrounding us were literally swallowing me up. It was as if the symbol had been engraved in the stone to test us—to see if we were truly ready to hear the answer it would give us.

The room was silent. The priest was still standing in the corner, but his gaze was now that of a witness, no longer that of a teacher. He watched us as if he knew that this moment would either elevate us or destroy us.

"What will happen when we hear the answer?" I asked, as the darkness around me seemed to thicken.

The priest took a step closer, his gaze now firm and unwavering. "When you hear the answer, Watson, it will change everything. Not just the hunt, not just the crime. You will question everything you have believed until now. For the truth hidden here is more than just a crime. It is a reflection of what we all carry within us."

I felt the space shrink further. It was as if the air itself were turning against us, as if the crypt itself were testing us. We had crossed the threshold, and now there was no easy way out. The truth wasn't just something we were searching for. It was something that would shape us, change us, and the price we would have to pay wasn't just that of a simple crime.

"And what happens when we face the answer?" I asked, and it was as if I was directing the question not only to the priest, but also to myself.

The priest looked at me as if he were peering deep into my soul. "Then you will understand why the dog didn't bark. Then you will understand that silence is not just a sign of absence. It is the moment when we all must see the truth we have ignored for so long."

"And what if we are not ready to see them?" I asked, my heart beating faster now as the darkness continued to envelop us.

"Then," said the priest with a final, quiet smile, "you will remain trapped in silence forever."

In that moment, I knew there was no easy solution. The truth wasn't just what we sought from the outside. It was what we encountered within, what we were willing to see, even if it destroyed us. We had to face the silence—the stillness that told us so much more than any scream. And only then would we understand why the dog never barked.

I took a deep breath and placed my other hand on the symbol. The answer was near. But it wouldn't just give us a solution. It would show us the truth about ourselves.

The air in the crypt had grown heavier, as if the darkness itself were turning against us. The priest had led us to this place, but now, as I knelt before the altar and the somber symbol on the floor, I knew we had long since transcended the limits of comprehension. It was no longer just a crime we were trying to unravel. It was something far greater that had captivated us. Something that had brought us to this point without our understanding why.

The priest's words still echoed in my head: "The price we have to pay is not the one we expect." What did these words mean? What truth was hidden in this game we were unknowingly playing?

I saw the priest now standing behind me, and I could sense the faint hint of determination in his posture. He had not only led us to this place, but he had also prepared us for the final leg of the journey—a leg he knew would either take everything from us or reveal the truth. But was the truth truly what we were seeking? Or was it something else? Something that would challenge not only the case, but also our own reality?

"What is the game, Priest?" I asked, my voice calm but firm. "What must we do to win?"

The priest took a step closer, and for a moment I thought he would finally give us the answer we had been waiting for. But instead of a simple explanation, he inclined his head as if searching for the right words in the darkness.

“The game has no winners, Watson,” he said finally. “There are no simple rules, no clear solutions. What you are looking for is not the end of a hunt, but the beginning of a discovery. But to find the answer, you must first recognize the way.”

I could feel the knot in my stomach as I tried to grasp the meaning of his words. The path? The path to where? And why had the priest repeatedly led us down this secret path that seemed to be pulling us deeper into the abyss?

"But what if the path gives us nothing but more questions?" I asked, as doubt gnawed at me. "What if we never find the answer?"

“Then,” the priest said calmly, “you haven’t understood the game. Because the game doesn’t end with the answer. It ends with the truth. And sometimes the truth isn’t what we’re looking for, but what we don’t dare to admit to ourselves.”

I turned back to the altar, which now seemed even more menacing as I looked at the symbols on the floor. The circle, divided into four parts, each segment connected by a line. It was a simple, almost rudimentary design, and yet it possessed something very powerful—something that would lead us on a journey, one that would relentlessly propel us forward, even against our will.

“What must we do?” I repeated, as the uncertainty that had plagued me since the beginning of this hunt gripped me more tightly. I sensed that the priest was preparing us for a decision—a decision that would not only change our understanding of the case, but also everything we had previously believed about ourselves.

The priest raised his hand and pointed to the symbol on the floor. “You must understand, Watson. The answer lies not in what you do. It lies in what you are willing to recognize. The altar is not the place of truth. It is the place of discovery. If you take the next step, you will not only come closer to the truth about this case. You will also encounter the truth about yourself.”

A shiver ran down my spine. These words held a meaning far beyond what we had expected. What if the truth we sought lay not only in the crimes, but within ourselves? What if the true case wasn't what we had believed until now?

“And what if we face the truth?” I asked, and the answer I gave sounded to my own ears like the echo of a decision that had long been made.

“Then the circle will close,” said the priest. “But remember: the circle only closes when you understand what it means. When you understand that the game was never really about the crime. It was always about discovering what is hidden in the dark.”

I knew the priest was leading us to the final moment—to a point where we could no longer hide from the truth. It was the moment when we had to decide: embrace the darkness or be lost in it.

I took another step closer to the altar. The circle in front of me was no longer just a symbol. It was the path that would lead us – or break us.

“Then let’s end the game,” I said firmly, even though my breath caught in my throat. “Let’s find out what we don’t want to know.”

The priest nodded slowly, and the space seemed to thicken around us as darkness enveloped us.

“The game is far from over, Watson,” said the priest with an almost sad smile. “It’s only the beginning.”

## The witness who never existed

The streets of London lay still and deserted beneath the night, the fog once again shrouding the city in an impenetrable wall of grey haze. It was one of those nights when the sound of rain dripping from the roof of a nearby house was the only noise to break the otherwise lifeless silence. And amidst this silence, I was on my way, driven by a truth I hoped to discover—a truth that had always eluded me until now.

Holmes was gone. The case that had brought us here seemed to have transformed itself into something else—a game with unclear rules, a game in which we were the pieces, without knowing the outcome. And as if that weren’t enough, the witness had vanished. The witness we knew existed—but who never had a real face. Never a true form we could grasp. He was like an apparition lost in the shadows, in the same darkness that had haunted us for so long.

I walked down the street that was so familiar, but tonight it was a different place. A place where the questions that tormented us only multiplied with every turn. What did it mean that the witness had never existed? Why had he never appeared if his testimony was so crucial to the case? And above all, why was he the key to everything that had led us here, yet we had never been able to catch him?

The door before me was old, the wood worn and marked by the years. But it was the door that would lead us—into the darkness of the unknown. I took a deep breath and knocked, unable to shake the feeling that this witness would tell us more than we were ready to hear.

A few seconds passed, then the door opened and a man stepped out. He was no one I knew, and yet I had the feeling that I had always known him. His eyes, staring at me, were empty—not in the sense of ignorance, but as if they were looking into another reality, where the truth was different from what we had imagined.

“Dr. Watson,” he said, his voice sounding strange, as if it weren’t his own. “It’s time you knew what’s really going on.”

I took a step closer, my gaze fixed on the man who seemed so eerily familiar. “Who are you?” I asked, though the question sounded like an echo in my own mind. I knew that the answer I sought had already been given to me—in those fleeting moments when the witness had shown us a glimpse of the truth that we had never fully grasped.

"I am the witness who never existed," he said calmly, stepping aside to show me the way into the building. "Or perhaps I am more than that. Because the question you must ask yourself is not why I never existed. The question is why I am standing before you now."

I couldn't shake the feeling that this man knew more about us than we knew ourselves. Perhaps he was the witness we had been searching for for so long, or perhaps he was merely a fiction, an illusion presented to us to lead us astray. But what if he was the answer to all of it? And what if he was leading us into darkness because there was no other way?

"Come," the man said as he opened the door and entered the building. "There are things you need to see if you want to understand why everything is the way it is."

I entered, and as I stepped into the room, I realized that the witness who never existed was not merely a symbol. He was the key to a truth we could never have grasped without experiencing this moment. And as the door closed behind me, I knew there was no turning back. We had to understand what this witness had to tell us—and what we had to do to find the ultimate answer.

The room I found myself in was even darker than the corridor I had left behind. The faint glow of the candles flickering on the walls couldn't dispel the shadows. They seemed to move as if they had a life of their own, constantly watching us, as if they wouldn't let us escape. The man standing opposite me had barely moved, but his presence was oppressive.

"So you have found the witness," he said, and his voice was calm, almost friendly – but in the depths of his words there was a sharp undertone that meant more than it seemed at first glance.

"Yes, but not in the way I expected," I replied, fixing my eyes on him. "I thought the witness would be someone who would help us solve the crime. But the witness who never existed wasn't who we suspected."

"That's the point," he said with a brief smile. "The witness you were looking for doesn't exist in the form you imagined. He is the answer that has been drifting further and further away from you. The real witness, Watson, is not the one you thought was real. The real witness is the one who led us all into the labyrinth of truth."

I couldn't help but feel uneasy. The words he spoke blurred the image of the "witness" more and more. What was this witness really? Was he a symbol? A shadow leading us astray?

"Why are you here?" I asked sharply, the question that had been on the tip of my tongue ever since my first encounter with this man. It was as if he were watching us, as if he knew what would happen next—and that made him part of the game we were now playing.

The man took a step closer, and his eyes pierced me like a sharp knife. "Because you must not only find the answer, Watson. You must comprehend it. You must understand that the witness is not the one you seek, but the one who leads you to see the truth—and the truth has its own rules."

I felt something inside me tense up. The truth we were seeking wasn't just what lay before us. It was what was within ourselves, and we had to confront the fact that the hunt that had led us

here was more than a mere crime. It was a test. A test that would show us how deep we were willing to go to uncover the truth.

"So, what do we have to do to find this truth?" I asked, my voice suddenly much quieter than before. The darkness around us was oppressive, and the silence that enveloped us almost took my breath away.

The man took another step closer and then said with a coldness that chilled me to the bone: "You must realize that the witness never existed because you created him. He was never another person, never an observer of the crime. He was always a part of you, a part of the hunt you yourself were conducting. The witness is who you have become, Watson. And if you are willing to accept that, then you will also find the answer."

I stared at him, unable to fully grasp the meaning of his words. Yet deep down, I knew he was right. We had embarked on a path that would lead us not only to a crime, but also to ourselves. The hunt was never just a hunt for a murderer. It was a hunt for the truth that would confront us within.

"And what happens if we face it?" I asked, although I felt I already knew the answer.

The man smiled weakly as he leaned back and folded his arms. "Then you will understand that it was never the witness who brought us this truth. It was always the mirror in which we saw ourselves."

I now understood that we weren't just looking for a criminal. We were looking for the answer that made us what we were in that moment—witnesses to our own downfall. And perhaps the true witness was the one who had led us to this realization.

"What happens if we decide not to go any further?" I asked, but the man didn't answer immediately. Instead, he simply looked at me as if waiting for a decision I hadn't yet made.

"Then you will remain the witness who never existed," he said finally, quietly. "And the truth will continue to lurk in the shadows until you are ready to bear it."

It was a choice we couldn't avoid. The truth wasn't right in front of us. It was buried deep within ourselves, and we had to decide whether we wanted to dig deeper or not.

I took a deep breath and knew that we had now reached a point of no return.

The darkness in the crypt seemed to deepen, as if challenging us to take one final step. The room was now illuminated only by dim candlelight, which cast shimmering shadows across the walls. Every breath seemed to bear the weight of the realization that still hung in the air—the inkling that the witness we had sought was not just a person. He was the symbol of something far deeper, of what we had tried to avoid, what we had never wanted to comprehend.

"The witness who never existed," I murmured, the words settling in my mind like a bitter taste. What had this invisible observer truly seen? What had he failed to show us? And more importantly, why was he never there when we needed him? The space around me suddenly seemed even colder, as if it were devouring the answers we were trying to find.

“The witness is not just a part of the case,” the man said calmly, his voice like a whispering echo in the silence. “He is the key to what we must recognize within ourselves. And without him, Watson, this hunt will never end.”

I looked up, my gaze fixed on the man who had led us this far with his riddles. “What do you mean?” I asked, my voice trembling slightly. “Who or what is this witness really?”

The man approached, his footsteps so quiet they almost faded into the air like a memory. “The witness is the one who started it all,” he said, his words seeming to float in the air, as if they had a life of their own. “But he was never really a person. He was what each of us carries within us—the need to see the truth without truly acknowledging it.”

The realization I gained in that moment hit me like a ton of bricks. The witness wasn't the crucial observer of the crime. He was the part of us that refused to accept the truth, that was afraid of the darkness. And the more I thought about it, the more I understood that we were all, in some way, that “witness.” We were the ones distorting the picture, hiding the truth, and closing ourselves off from it.

“It's always been like this, hasn't it?” I said quietly, more to myself than to the man. “We are the witness. We put ourselves in this role because we didn't want to see what was in front of us.”

“Exactly,” the man replied, and there was a deep, almost imperceptible affirmation in his voice. “The witness was always the one who never existed. Not as a separate person, but as the part of us that couldn't bear the truth.”

I felt something inside me tense up. The case had never been just a hunt for a criminal. It was a hunt for what we were hiding inside ourselves. The witness who had repeatedly slipped through our fingers was the one we were trying to ignore—the part of us searching in the darkness but never finding the answer because it didn't truly want to find it.

“And what does that mean for us now?” I asked, feeling I had reached a crucial point. We stood on the threshold of something we had never expected—and yet it was inevitable. “What must we do to find the witness?”

The man looked at me, and his eyes seemed to pierce right through me, as if he already knew all my thoughts. “You must understand, Watson,” he said slowly, “that the witness cannot be found. He is always there, but he is never truly visible. If you are willing to accept him, then you will see the truth—not only the truth of the crime, but also the truth about yourself.”

It was as if a curtain had lifted in my mind. The witness was the mirror in which we saw ourselves, and only by confronting that reflection would we find the answer. We were looking for a murderer, but what we were really looking for was to confront the part of ourselves that kept looking back at us in the mirror without seeing the truth.

“So we have to find ourselves,” I said, as the extent of what awaited us slowly became clear. “The witness is more than just an observer. He is the part of us that shows us how we question the truth itself.”

“Correct,” said the man, his voice now a low murmur that enveloped us like a breath of night. “And if you confront him, Watson, the case will not only be solved. You will also understand why the witness never existed.”

I could feel the weight of his words, which enveloped me like a cloak. The case had never been a simple murder. It was a journey into ourselves, a confrontation with what we didn't want to acknowledge and with what we kept hidden inside.

"And then?" I asked, as the priest still stood there silently, ready to lead us to the final answer.

“Then,” he said with a faint smile, “you will know that the hunt is never over. It is always a part of us.”

## The Return from Darkness

Night had long since fallen over the streets of London, and the fog that enveloped them was thicker than ever. It seemed to suffocate the city, penetrating every corner and every building, bathing everything that had previously been so clear in a ghostly, diffuse light. In the shadows of the dark alleyways, the city had become a different place—a place that constantly shifted as I walked through it. It was as if the fog itself distorted reality, calling into question everything I had believed until that moment.

But I knew I couldn't run any longer. I had to face the darkness that haunted me. I had to return to the place where it all began—the crypt. The place where I had taken my first step into the darkness, and where the truth I so desperately sought now lay hidden.

As I stepped to the door of the old building that had led us to this moment, I felt the pressure in my chest. I knew that this decision would decide not only the case we had been pursuing, but everything I had ever thought I knew. The witness who never existed, the answers that had slipped through our fingers—all of it was now part of a game we not only had to win, but also understand.

I stepped through the door and found myself in a room that felt familiar, yet it was different. The fog that swallowed everything outside seemed to have crept in as well. The walls, which just a few days ago had been full of promise and clarity, were now gripped by darkness. I could still feel the memories of what I had discovered there—and yet everything felt different now. The answers I sought were still before me, but they weren't what I had expected. They were more—and also less.

“They found their way back,” a voice behind me said, calm and almost reassuring. But I knew immediately who it was. It was the man who had led us on this hunt. The priest. And in his voice was the note of someone who knew we had reached a point of no return.

“I had no choice,” I said, turning to him. “This case isn't just a puzzle we have to solve. It's more than that. And the truth—the truth will not only lead us here, but it will lead us to ourselves.”

He nodded, as if he had always known this moment would come. "The darkness did not capture you, Watson. It merely showed you what you could not see in the light. It gave you the opportunity to face the truth."

"And the truth," I said slowly, as I surveyed the room, "is that the witness never existed because he was never anything other than a part of us. A part of me."

"Exactly," said the priest, and it was no longer the voice of a teacher, but that of an observer who had not only accompanied us on this path, but had shown us that we were all, in a certain sense, witnesses to our own history. "But you know, Watson," he added, "this is not the end of the hunt. It is only the beginning."

I could feel the weight of his words, settling like a heaviness on my chest. We had investigated more than just a crime. We had embarked on a journey to ourselves—and what we had discovered was not merely what we thought we understood. It was the moment when the darkness and the light within us merged, leading us in a new direction.

"Then we must take the next step," I said quietly, turning back to the altar that stood in the room. The truth hidden here lay not in the answers we had received, but in the decision we now had to make. What we found in this room would not only solve the case. It would show us a picture of the world we had never truly seen.

The priest took a step closer, his eyes flickering in the dim light. "The truth, Watson, will show you that the path is not easy. It will show you that darkness can never completely disappear. But the light, too, will never be the same once you confront it."

I felt the space around us thicken. The fog wasn't just outside. It was here, inside us, in everything we were trying to understand. And in that moment, I knew that the hunt we had embarked on wasn't just a search for answers. It was a search for acceptance of the darkness within ourselves.

"There's no going back," I said, touching the altar and holding in my hands the story that had brought us here. "But there is a new beginning."

The priest nodded again. "This is the true return, Watson. The return from darkness."

The silence that surrounded us was oppressive and eerie, as if the darkness itself were seeping into us. The room, which had initially seemed so familiar, was now a place that appeared to be devouring the answers we so desperately sought. It was as if every corner of the room knew the truth—yet it held back, allowing us to see only as much as we could bear.

I gazed at the altar, the simple stones that concealed so much more than just the story of a crime. The fog that had enveloped us seemed to lead us into a labyrinth, its walls closing in with every discovery. The priest stood behind me now, and though he didn't move, I felt his presence like a constant reminder of what we already knew but had never truly understood.

"What happens when we face the truth?" I asked, even though I suspected the answer. The question that tormented me was no longer about the criminal. It was the question of what we would do if we actually reached the moment when we knew everything. Could I bear the truth? Was I ready to accept what I had never wanted to see in the deepest recesses of my being?

The priest did not answer immediately. Instead, he approached the altar slowly, as if imbuing each step with profound significance. Finally, he spoke with a calm that was both comforting and menacing. “The return from darkness is not what you expect, Watson. It is not what you imagine in your darkest moments. The darkness within us is not merely a shadow we must fight. It is a part of us we must accept if we are truly to be free.”

I knew he was right. The darkness we had been running from for so long wasn't just an external threat. It was what we carried within ourselves—the fears, the secrets we had never admitted to ourselves. But what did it mean to face that darkness? What happened when we truly knew ourselves, when we accepted the truth that lay behind our own lies?

“What are we supposed to do?” I asked, this time with a hint of despair in my voice. The truth, it seemed, had long since caught up with us, and now it was no longer the hunt for the criminal that occupied us. It was the hunt for what we couldn't comprehend deep inside.

“You must decide,” said the priest, his gaze piercing me as if he could see every thought, every fear that plagued me. “Returning from darkness is not about reaching a destination. It is about choosing to accept the darkness and understand it as part of yourself. You cannot escape it, Watson. But you can learn to live with it.”

I felt something inside me tense as I processed his words. It was a realization that would change not only my understanding of the case, but my entire life. What if the real step we needed to take wasn't the one that led us into the outer realm of truth, but the one that led us inward, to the parts of ourselves we had repressed?

“And what happens if we don't make this decision?” I asked, more out of a need to understand its significance than because I didn't already know.

“Then,” said the priest, “you will always wander in darkness, without ever having the chance to see the light. For truth is not found by running away. It is only found when you have the courage to look into the deepest corners of your own darkness.”

I looked at the altar and saw the symbol burned into the floor – the circle divided into four parts. The lines connecting them now seemed not just like a lived ritual, but like a map showing us the path ahead. The path that would lead us to ourselves.

“Then we must face this darkness,” I said as I took the final step and stepped onto the symbol in the ground. “We must accept it in order to see the light.”

The priest nodded slowly, and for a moment it was as if the room itself paused. The mystery that had led us here was not what we had sought. It was the realization that the darkness we had feared for so long was not merely danger. It was the part of ourselves that showed us the truth we never wanted to see.

“The return from darkness,” said the priest, “begins when you realize that you can no longer escape from yourself.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as the room seemed to close in around me. We stood on the verge of a decision, a realization that could cost us everything – and yet I knew we couldn't look back any longer.

“Then we are ready,” I said, looking at the priest. “Let us find out what lies behind this darkness.”

The priest's words echoed in my mind as I walked through the room, absorbing a sense of darkness and inevitability. I had touched the altar, seen the symbol on the floor, and I knew this was the moment when everything would be decided. The answer was near, but I could feel the weight of the decision that still lay ahead.

Darkness had enveloped us, pulled us into the abyss, and now we stood at the edge of an abyss whose depth we could not yet comprehend. The priest had shown us that the hunt was never truly about the murderer. It was a game, a dance with the truth—a truth that was more than just what we thought we knew. It was what we had never dared to ask ourselves. What if all of us involved in this hunt had already been part of the game?

“What does it mean to accept the darkness?” I asked, my voice sounding like the whisper of an exile who was no longer sure whether he was in a nightmare or in reality.

“It means you must find the answer to the question you have always hidden from yourself,” the priest replied calmly. “You must realize that the true criminal is not outside of you. He is a part of you that has long since retreated into the shadows.”

I felt something inside me tense up. The hunt that had led us this far had never been just a hunt for a murderer. It was a hunt for the answer that lay hidden within ourselves. We had always searched for the darkness without realizing that we carried it within us.

“What happens when we face this truth?” I asked, the words almost like a prayer, as if I were seeking salvation.

“Then,” said the priest, his gaze sharp, “you will understand that returning from darkness does not mean escaping it. It means knowing yourself and learning to live with it. For darkness is not our enemy. It is a part of us that we must come to terms with.”

I knew this was the pivotal moment. Everything we had done up to this point had led us to this truth. The hunt wasn't just a search for a killer. It was a search for what we were hiding within ourselves. And the closer we got to the truth, the more I realized there was no turning back. We had to confront the darkness, not just as observers, but as those who were discovering it within ourselves.

“The truth,” the priest said softly, “is not a gift that is simply given to us. It is the price we must pay to know ourselves.”

I looked at the altar again, and in that moment the room seemed to narrow. The walls seemed to shift, as if they wanted to hold us back, to prevent us from going any further. But I knew there was no turning back. We stood at the edge of the unknown, and the only way forward was the way within ourselves.

“I'm ready,” I said finally, the words more firmly than I felt. “Let's see what lies beyond the darkness.”

The priest nodded, his eyes betraying nothing of what he knew. But I sensed he knew that we had now reached the point where the hunt was no longer just a game. It was a confrontation with what we had always feared.

“Then we shall go,” said the priest, and with that simple sentence I knew we had crossed the threshold. The darkness that enveloped us was no longer the enemy. It was the mirror that showed us who we truly were.

We went further, deeper into the labyrinth we had created for ourselves. And in that moment, I knew that the truth wasn't what we had expected. It was what we had learned to accept.

### A confession made of glass

The rain lashed incessantly against the windows of Baker Street, bathing the streets of London in a diffuse, grey light. It was one of those nights when the fog was so thick that it turned the world into a blurry, ghostly reflection of itself. The room in Baker Street was silent, save for the occasional crackle of the fireplace, which pierced the darkness with a flickering light.

I was sitting in my chair, legs crossed, gazing at the rain, when Holmes suddenly turned to me. He had spent the last few days engrossed in the details of a new case we had taken on, almost manically so, but the atmosphere in the room was heavier than usual. It was as if an invisible threat was spreading over us, threatening to engulf us.

“Watson,” Holmes finally said in his usual, yet always inquisitive voice, “have you ever considered the significance of a confession?”

I looked up from the window and saw him, his face hidden behind a thick cloud of pipe smoke. “What do you mean?” I asked, my voice wavering between curiosity and the question of why he had come up with such a philosophical remark now, in the midst of this stormy weather.

Holmes put down the glass of brandy he had been holding and walked slowly to his desk. “Now, Watson, in all the cases we have solved together, it is often the confessions that lead us to the murderer. But these confessions are often far more than just the words of a criminal. They are like glass—they can break if you apply too much pressure. Or they can show us the truth if we handle them correctly.”

I got up from my chair and went over to him, my curiosity growing. “So you're talking about a confession that hasn't been made yet?”

“Not exactly,” Holmes replied, “I am speaking of a confession that was never made. It is a confession made of glass. Fragile, almost invisible. But if examined properly, it will tell us more than anything we hope to hear.”

He took a roll of paper from his desk and held it in his hand as if concealing something within it that was far more than the obvious words. “Look at this, Watson,” he said, handing me the document. “This is no ordinary confession. It is a clue, a trail that will lead us to a truth we cannot comprehend until we have considered the whole case.”

I picked up the paper and began to read it. It was a simple, almost sketchy document that seemed to contain a broad confession, but something about the way it was phrased gave me pause. It was too detailed, almost too precise, as if the writer knew he was under pressure, yet simultaneously possessed a clarity that made a profound impression. On the other hand, it also seemed like a reflection of a perpetrator caught in his own web of lies and deceptions.

“And what does this confession mean for us?” I finally asked, looking at Holmes. “It’s a clue, a possible key, but what if it leads us in the wrong direction?”

“That’s the real trick, Watson,” said Holmes, his gaze sharp. “It’s not the words themselves that matter, but what lies between them. What is left unsaid? What gap is hidden in this confession that might mislead us?”

I felt the space around us fill with a new tension. It wasn't just the case itself that preoccupied us—it was what this document, this fragile confession, would reveal to us. It was the moment when we weren't just searching for a murderer, but for the truth, which was trying to elude us in a web of lies, secrets, and vanished facts.

“It is the glass, Watson,” Holmes said finally, with a look that conveyed both thoughtfulness and a certain premonition. “The confession in glass is not what the perpetrator shows us. It is what he conceals. And that is precisely where we will find the key to everything.”

I placed the paper back on the table and turned towards the door. It was the moment when we had to make the decision: Would we follow the trail that stretched out before us, or would we be blinded by the smoothness of the surface and look for the truth in the wrong places?

“Let’s take the next steps in this hunt, Holmes,” I said, closing the door behind me. “Let’s find the real murderer—and the confession that will explain everything.”

The silence in the apartment was almost palpable as Holmes and I sat in one of the old leather armchairs, poring over the confession that lay before us on the table. The rain outside had eased, but the fog still shrouded the streets in an impenetrable wall of gray. It was as if the whole city held its breath at that moment, as if we stood on the threshold of a truth that might cost us more than we had ever imagined.

"What is the true purpose of this confession?" I asked, going over the words again. "It feels like it's more than a simple confession. It's too... detailed, too contrived."

Holmes looked at the paper before us, his gaze penetrating and sharp. "It's not a confession in the classical sense, Watson," he said thoughtfully. "It's a puzzle. Every word on it is a piece of a much larger picture, which will only be fully revealed when we understand the context."

“But what’s behind this construction? What is the perpetrator trying to tell us?” I asked, a sense of urgency in my voice as I fixed my gaze on the paper. Every word seemed to conceal the answer from us, and yet it remained difficult to decipher.

Holmes leaned back, his hands clasped, as if trying to grasp the essence of the document without being distracted by its obvious facets. "The perpetrator wasn't just trying to exonerate himself," he said calmly. "He wanted us to piece together the picture he was presenting. He knew we were searching for the truth—and he knows that the truth lies in the gaps between his words."

I hesitated for a moment before reaching for another sheet of paper and beginning to jot down the details of the confession. But as I repeated the words, I noticed a strange calm spreading through me. I sensed that the confession wasn't just an explanation. It was an invitation. An invitation to gaze into the abyss from which we would never escape.

"Holmes," I said finally, as the meaning of his words slowly dawned on me, "this confession is not the end of the case. It is the beginning of a new chapter – a chapter controlled by the perpetrator."

Holmes nodded and stood up. "Exactly, Watson. The confession is the key. But we must know what it conceals, what it doesn't show us. The perpetrator has told his story, but the real answers lie in what has not been said."

"So we have to fill in the gaps," I said, putting the paper aside. "It's not just about what the perpetrator said. It's about what he didn't want to tell us."

"Correct," Holmes replied, as he walked across the room. "And I believe, Watson, that we are now in the right position to discover this. We have taken the first step. But the real hunt is only just beginning."

I got up and followed him to the door that led out into the dark streets of London. "The answers are still out there," I said quietly. "And we must do everything we can to find them."

"It will not be an easy path," said Holmes, his expression a mixture of determination and foresight. "But the case, Watson, will lead us to a truth that will change everything."

The night was still young, but the darkness that enveloped us seemed to be pursuing us. Yet I knew we were on the right track. The hunt had led us this far, and we had to continue it to the end to unravel the mystery hidden behind the confession.

It was the moment when we left behind the shackles of ignorance and faced the darkness that inevitably awaited us.

We left the apartment and set off into the night that had fallen over London. The streets were shrouded in a grey haze that gave the city's sharp edges the shape of ghosts. Every corner, every step seemed to lead us closer to something both eerie and inevitable. The rain had stopped, but the damp, stifling fog enveloped us as if stealing our breath. It was as if the whole city was in a state of waiting—and we were the only ones searching for answers.

Holmes walked beside me as usual, his gait calm yet full of determination. But something in his bearing had changed. The expression in his eyes was sharper than usual, as if he were surveying the city and everything it concealed with a new, almost frightening clarity.

"Watson," Holmes said suddenly, as we left the familiar streets of Baker Street, "we have reached a turning point. And I have a feeling that the case will now lead us to the answer we have been seeking—but not without confronting the truth he is withholding from us."

I looked at him, feeling a wave of foreboding wash over me. "What do you think, Holmes? What else do we need?"

"It's the structure of the confession," he replied. "It was presented to us like a puzzle, giving us the seemingly obvious answer. But the truth, Watson, isn't simply served up. It's shown to us through the gaps, through what wasn't said. And in this structure of the confession lies the key."

I walked beside him, trying to process it all. Over the past week, the case had unfolded like a labyrinth, leading us through dark alleys and empty rooms. But the closer we got to the answer, the more I felt the case becoming a test—not just of the crime, but also of our own ability to face the truth.

"You're saying the confession is meant to lead us astray?" I asked as we rounded another street corner. "That it will show us something, but not what we're really looking for?"

"Exactly," said Holmes, and there was now in his voice the sharpness of a man who could almost grasp the solution. "The perpetrator has given us his story, but he has constructed it in such a way as to lead us astray. What we need, Watson, is the realization that the true murderer is not only the one we are looking for. He is also the one who holds up a mirror to us—and shows us what we do not want to see."

I understood now that we had to do more than just find the murderer. We had to uncover the truth behind the confession itself, to expose the lies hidden behind the perpetrator's carefully chosen words.

"And what if we find the answer, Holmes?" I asked, as we reached the shadows of the next alley, where a familiar door awaited us. "What if what we seek not only solves the case but also reveals the truth about ourselves?"

Holmes paused and turned to me. "If we find this answer, Watson," he said, his gaze so intense I could almost feel it physically, "then nothing will ever be the same again. For the truth that unfolds before us is not merely the truth of the crime. It is the truth we have continually denied ourselves."

It was the moment when everything took on meaning. The hunt for the murderer was not just the search for a criminal. It was the search for the truth we had hidden within ourselves, the truth that would reveal not only the case, but also the image of ourselves that we had concealed from ourselves for so long.

"Let's move on," I said as I opened the door and we entered. "The answer awaits us."

Holmes nodded and stepped back into the darkness with one last glance. "The answer is the only way forward, Watson. And the only one that can truly lead us out of the darkness."

I knew this was the moment when the case not only found a resolution, but when we confronted ourselves with a truth that could cost us everything. But we had to move on. The hunt had led us here – and the only way forward was to accept the ultimate truth that inevitably awaited us.

## The truth takes your breath away.

The air in the small apartment was stuffy and heavy when Holmes and I entered the room. The dim light filtering in through the window was timid and pale, almost as if the light itself were trying to hide from the secrets lurking in the corners. The rain had eased, but the fog hanging over the city seemed deeper and thicker than ever. It was as if the whole city was suffocating in a heavy blanket of silence and mystery.

I had never had the impression that we were close to solving the case, even though we were delving deeper and deeper into its twists and turns. But in that moment, as we stood before the final clues that would lead us to a conclusion, I knew that we were approaching a point where the truth wasn't just the solution to the crime—it was a truth that would change us forever.

“Holmes,” I said, turning the glass in my hand and reflecting the light within it, “what if we find the truth we seek, and it costs us more than we are willing to pay?”

Holmes, who had been sitting silently in his chair, put down his pipe and looked at me. There was a deep thoughtfulness in his eyes, a quality rarely seen. “Truth, Watson,” he began, “is never an easy companion. It leads us down paths we never intended to travel, and it demands a price we are not always willing to pay. But without it, without the willingness to face the truth, we are lost.”

I could hear the serious tone in his voice, which involuntarily reminded me of the deeper meaning of those words. It wasn't the first case where we'd had to confront the truth, but this one felt different. This case was more than just a murderer, more than just a crime. It was a mirror reflecting what we kept hidden within ourselves.

“But what happens if we find this truth?” I asked, and it was a question that hung over the room like a heavy shadow. “What if we lose more than we ever expected?”

Holmes replied with a faint smile that spoke more of experience than optimism. “If we find the truth, Watson, then we know that nothing will ever be the same again. But the price we must pay is the only way that leads us to an end—and, as always, to a new beginning.”

I could sense the touch of fate in his words. The case that had brought us here was no ordinary one. It was a journey into the darkest corners of human nature. We hadn't just approached a crime—we had confronted a truth that affected us all. A truth that would not only solve the case but also challenge everything we had believed about ourselves.

“Let's continue,” I finally said, even though I knew that the answer we sought would separate us from our former lives as much as the murder we were trying to solve. “Let's find the truth, even if it costs us more than we could ever have imagined.”

Holmes nodded as he picked up his pipe again. “Yes, Watson. The truth always takes breath. But it is the only path we can take.”

We stepped out into the streets, and the fog had thickened even further. The case had become a tight web, both ensnaring us and confronting us with a terrifying clarity about what still needed to be done. But we had to press on. The truth before us was not merely the end of the

case. It was the beginning of a new understanding—an understanding that would change everything we thought we knew.

As we approached the final crime scene, I couldn't help but wonder: What would we find if we uncovered the final secret? And was I prepared to pay the price that the truth would demand of me?

The fog lay like a cloak over the streets of London as we approached the destination that would lead us to this ultimate truth. The city we thought we knew had become something entirely different beneath the veil of twilight. Every step we took seemed to take us further away from the known world, into something beyond comprehension—into a darkness that revealed not only the crime, but also ourselves.

Holmes walked calmly and with his usual focus, but I could sense the tension in his posture. A heaviness enveloped us both as we drew nearer the point where the case would be solved. Yet the solution before us was not only the answer to the crime, but also to everything we had been unable to see in this story. The truth that awaited us was not a simple realization. It was a mirror that reflected back at us with such clarity and harshness that we could no longer hide from it.

“What will we find, Holmes?” I asked, trying to organize my own thoughts. “What else will this place reveal to us?”

Holmes paused for a moment, taking in his surroundings as if trying to penetrate the very air with heightened perception. “What we find, Watson, is the truth we sought,” he said calmly. “But what we see beyond it will cost us more than we can possibly imagine. We are at the end of a chase, but we must never forget that the end is only the beginning of a new truth.”

I could feel the emphasis in his voice, and in that moment I knew we weren't just facing another case. We were facing a decision that would change everything—not just what we had known up to that point, but also our understanding of what it meant to seek the truth.

The place we reached was an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city, built in the early years of the century. The walls, which may once have seemed strong and protective, were now weathered by time and crumbling in on themselves. But what truly captivated us was the feeling that this building was more than just a relic of the past. It was the place where the case had originated, the point where all the threads of the crime converged. And it was the place where we would finally have to face the truth.

“This is the place,” Holmes said, his expression anything but calm. “The place where we will learn what really happened.”

I nodded, though a queasy feeling rose in my chest. The answer we were seeking was only a step away. But the closer we got to the truth, the greater the pressure became. The darkness that enveloped us wasn't just an external threat. It was what was inside all of us—what we had never fully accepted.

“Are you ready, Watson?” Holmes asked suddenly, without looking at me. “The answer will not only show us the murderer. It will also show us who we ourselves are.”

His words hit me like a blow, and I knew he was right. The hunt had never been just a search for a murderer. It was a search for the truth about ourselves, for what we had always hidden from ourselves. And now, in this moment, we stood at the end of a journey that challenged not only our understanding of crime, but also our understanding of life itself.

“Yes, Holmes,” I finally said as I approached the entrance of the building. “I’m ready.”

We entered, and the room was filled with a somber, almost tangible silence. The fog that shrouded the streets outside seemed to seep in as well, as if seeking to merge with the darkness of the room. Yet, amidst this silence lay a truth, waiting to be discovered.

"Look around you, Watson," said Holmes as he entered the room. "Everything we have been looking for is here. The answer, which will be either liberating or destructive, lies before us."

I entered the room, and at that moment I realized that we weren't just solving a crime. We had thrown ourselves into the mirror of truth – and now we had to accept what we saw.

“The truth always takes breath,” I said quietly, more to myself than to Holmes. “But we have no choice but to recognize it.”

“Exactly,” Holmes replied, setting down the glass he was holding and stepping towards me. “The truth is the only way forward. And the path we are now taking will show us everything—and demand everything of us.”

I knew there was no turning back. The case that had led us here was no longer just a chase. It was a confrontation with the truth that could cost us everything. But it was the only path we could take.

“Let’s move on,” I said, as I heard the footsteps on the ground and discovered the next part of the mystery that had eluded us for so long.

We ventured deeper into the abandoned building, and with each step, the darkness felt as if it were enveloping us more closely. The space we were in was vast, echoing with the soft sounds of our footsteps. The mist that crept in from the windows seemed to breathe with us, as if it were part of this story, part of a larger mystery unfolding before us. It was the place where it all began, but also the place where it had to end.

Holmes and I were alone in that room, apart from the yellowed papers and broken furniture that recalled a decaying past. But it was more than just a building. It was a place of truth that would lead us to what we sought, and at the same time to what we did not want to understand.

“We are here, Watson,” Holmes said finally, his voice resonating with an almost overwhelming intensity. “The answer to everything that has brought us here lies within these rooms. And it will cost us more than we ever expected.”

I looked at him, and although he seemed calm and composed, I could feel the tension in his posture. It was as if he himself was still trying to grasp the last piece of the puzzle that had slipped through our fingers for so long. And yet I knew that we weren't just on the trail of a crime. We were standing on the verge of an insight that would change everything—not just the case, but ourselves as well.

“What will happen if we find the truth, Holmes?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper. I didn’t want to hear the answer, but I knew we had to. The truth was the only way forward.

“If we find her, Watson,” said Holmes quietly, “we will not only solve the crime. We will discover ourselves. And that, Watson, will cost us more than anything we have done so far.”

It was a heavy truth he spoke, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were truly ready to bear its full weight. The hunt for a murderer had brought us to this moment, but now that we were so close, I realized there was more to it than just solving the case. We faced the final test—the test that would confront us not only with the crime, but also with ourselves.

“The truth will show us who we really are,” Holmes said, pointing to the piece of paper in my hand. “But not everyone is ready to face it.”

I saw the crumpled sheet of paper in my hand, now the centerpiece of our entire case. It was more than just a document. It was a mirror holding up to us, reflecting back what we didn't want to see. And the longer I looked at it, the more I felt it would lead us to a truth we could no longer ignore.

“What if we are not ready?” I asked, my voice quieter than before, as the weight of the words Holmes had just spoken almost crushed me.

Holmes stepped closer and looked me directly in the eyes. “Then we will remain trapped in darkness, Watson. But if we face the truth, we will find freedom – even if it costs us more than we ever expected.”

I nodded slowly, because I knew there was no turning back. We stood on the threshold of a realization that would show us everything—and could simultaneously take everything away from us. But it was the only path we could still take.

“Let’s move on,” I said, putting the paper back in my pocket and moving us toward the next room. “The truth won’t wait.”

Holmes followed me, and I sensed the moment had arrived. The case was over—and yet only just beginning. For the truth we sought was more than just the end of a crime. It was what defined us as human beings. And the answer we found would reveal not only the murderer, but also who we truly were.

The darkness of the room seemed to wind around us like a living being as we pressed on. The silence was so profound that I felt even the slightest sound would betray our solitude. But the truth we sought was no longer something external. It no longer lay in the familiar clues of a crime to be analyzed, but in the way we reflected ourselves in this hunt. It was the moment when everything we had believed up to that point was called into question. The case was no longer just a puzzle. It was the mirror reflecting our own dark side.

“Holmes,” I said finally, my voice a whispering echo in the thick air. “How do we know we’re facing the truth when it could take everything from us?”

Holmes stopped, and I could see the sharpness in his eyes as he slowly turned to me. “Because the truth never promises us anything, Watson. It is neither friendly nor hostile. It

simply is... the truth. And it has its price. But what we lose is not what will define us. What defines us is how we face that truth."

His words echoed in my head as I continued to examine the room. The old, worn table in the center was covered in dust. It was an unassuming piece of furniture, yet upon it lay the final piece of the story, the one that would lead us to the complete answer—an answer we could never have imagined when we first embarked on this hunt. The answer that would reveal more about ourselves than about the crime we had been pursuing for so long.

"What will it be, Watson? What will you do when we find the last piece of the puzzle?" Holmes asked, as he followed me with an unwavering gaze.

I looked up at him; the question he asked was the only one that mattered in that moment. I knew we weren't simply finishing the story of a crime. We were about to confront something deeper—something that would change us, whether we wanted it to or not. But what was the truth we had avoided for so long?

"I don't know," I replied quietly, the uncertainty in my words unmistakable. "Perhaps it's not just the case itself that has led us here. Perhaps it's the lies we've told ourselves."

Holmes approached the table and looked at the crumpled piece of paper lying there—the confession that had been withheld from us for so long. "It is always the lie, Watson, that reveals the truth," he said, picking up the paper and smoothing it with his fingers. "The perpetrator has told us his version. But his version is not the truth. It is what he wants us to believe. The truth lies in the clues he leaves behind and in what he has not said."

I stepped closer and looked at the document in Holmes's hands. But the words on it swirled in my mind, as if they kept changing the more I looked at them. What if what we were seeking wasn't a murderer's confession, but the discovery of ourselves? What if the hunt for the truth involved not only solving a crime, but confronting a truth that would lead us to a new understanding of ourselves?

"It's more than that," I said finally, having finished the thought. "It's the realization that we are all part of the lie. We are looking for the criminal, and yet we ourselves are the ones who have placed ourselves in the shadows."

Holmes looked at me, and I could see the agreement in his gaze. "Exactly, Watson. The true criminal is not merely the one who committed the crime. The true criminal is what we refuse to see in ourselves. And the truth we seek is not merely what the perpetrator has shown us. It is what we must recognize within ourselves."

The room was silent, and the words we spoke hung in the air like the shimmering remnants of the fog outside. I knew the case was drawing to a close, but the true beginning still lay ahead. The case we were trying to solve wasn't just a story of murder and intrigue. It was the story of ourselves—of what we had avoided seeing and what was now finally being revealed to us.

"Then," I said finally, as I turned away from the table and headed for the door, "we move on, Holmes. For the truth waits."

Holmes nodded, and without another word, we stepped into the darkness that enveloped us. We had reached the end of a chapter, but the true path still lay ahead. And the truth that awaited us would cost us everything.

## The last visit to the institution

The rain had started again and was lashing against the windows as I retreated to the small, dimly lit office. The familiar sounds of London, the city's muffled murmur and the patter of raindrops hanging like shimmering curtains on the windows, seemed at that moment almost like a memory of the world we had left behind. But I knew we were on the path to a truth that would plunge us deeper into the abyss than we could ever have imagined. The chase wasn't over, and the final step we had to take was the one we dreaded most.

Holmes had warned me with a look as he surveyed the asylum building where we now found ourselves. "There are places," he had said, "that live not only on the deeds of those imprisoned there, but also on the memories of what happened. This place will not give us the answers we seek. Rather, it will show us why we never really wanted to see them these past few weeks."

"But we must go," I had replied, though I could hear the coldness in my own voice. "It is the final piece of the truth, Holmes. If we are to find the answers, we must confront it."

And now here we stood, before the door of the institution that would give us the final, crucial clues to the case we had worked on for so long. It was a place where you could feel the ghosts of the past, a place that offered its inhabitants not only a place to hide, but also a time when the truth was often more of a burden than a salvation. It was the last place where the perpetrator, who had eluded us for so long, might have been—but what we found was more than we had expected.

The sentry who guided us through the corridors was silent, and it was clear that he himself was but a fleeting presence in this ancient building. The halls surrounding us were as old as the asylum itself, and the musty smell of damp stone and ancient memory lingered in the air. Holmes and I exchanged few words as we moved through the rooms, which, though they seemed empty and deserted, were steeped in the secrets of those who had once been imprisoned there.

"You told us to go see Dr. Ellis," I said, looking at Holmes. "He's the one who can tell us more about the case, isn't he?"

"He is the last witness, Watson," said Holmes, his gaze as sharp as ever. "The last one who can give us the answer we need. But be careful. Dr. Ellis is a man who knows more than he has told us. And perhaps he is the one who holds the key to the whole truth."

When we finally stood outside the room where Dr. Ellis was waiting for us, I paused. Something about this encounter felt different, as if we were approaching a point where the line between reality and truth would blur. I felt the weight of the decision that lay before us and knew that the truth we sought would challenge not only the case, but everything we had believed about ourselves.

"There are things one would rather not know," Holmes said as he opened the door to Dr. Ellis's office. "But sometimes we need to know the things that frighten us most."

Dr. Ellis sat behind an old, worn desk covered in papers. When he looked at us, I could see the weariness in his eyes. But there was something else—a spark that suggested he knew more than he was willing to share.

"Gentlemen," he said in a calm voice, though one tinged with inner restlessness. "I knew you would come here eventually. The truth you seek is not simple, and it is not easy to bear."

"We're not just looking for an answer, Dr. Ellis," I said, "we're looking for the truth. And if you can help us, please do. Because this hunt has long since brought us to a point where nothing is clear anymore."

Dr. Ellis's expression darkened, and I could feel the space around us shrinking. He knew we had embarked on the final leg of the journey, one that would lead us to the very edge of knowledge.

"There are things that have not been spoken here," he said, "things that even I only began to understand when it was too late. But if you really want to know the truth, then you must face the darkness that you have ignored for so long."

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as he said that. We had approached the case as if it were a puzzle to be solved. But now we realized that we didn't just have to find the killer. We had to confront a truth so profound and shattering that it would demand everything of us.

"What do we need to know, Dr. Ellis?" asked Holmes, his voice firm and determined.

"You must know," the doctor said quietly, "that the truth you seek will not only expose the perpetrator. It will expose everything you have believed to be true. And what you discover will change you forever."

Dr. Ellis's words hung in the air, like a heavy pendulum, pulling us ever closer to the moment of revelation. I could see the grave expression on his face and knew we were on the verge of something dreaded—a secret that would not only give us the answer to the case but also a glimpse into the darkest recesses of human nature. What did this man have to tell us? And what was the part of the truth we could never have expected?

"What is it, Dr. Ellis?" I asked, the feeling of unease growing inside me with every moment we ventured further into the room. "What do we need to know that is so important?"

The doctor lowered his gaze, as if he himself were struggling with the weight of the truth he finally had to reveal to us. "There are things, Watson, that one can never understand until one sees the whole picture. Things that one only grasps when one confronts the darkness. But the darkness is not the enemy. It is merely a part of the truth that accompanies us through life."

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I had believed for so long that we were hunting a criminal, someone we could catch and hold accountable. But now, in that moment, I began to understand that the real case wasn't just the murderer, but something else—something deeply rooted within all of us.

“What does that mean?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper as I tried to grasp the gravity of his words. “Do you believe that the murderer is more than just the perpetrator, the one responsible for the crime?”

“Yes,” said Dr. Ellis calmly, “more than you can imagine. The murderer is not just the one who committed the crime. He is the one who has dragged us all into darkness. And the truth you seek, Watson, will reveal more about yourself than you ever knew.”

I couldn't immediately grasp the meaning of his words, but I knew we were approaching a point where everything would become clear. Dr. Ellis had told us more than we had suspected, and I was beginning to understand that the case was more than simply solving a crime. It was a journey into ourselves—into what we hadn't wanted to see in the darkness.

“But what can we do to understand this truth?” I asked, as I sensed that we were at a turning point – a point where nothing would ever be the same again.

Dr. Ellis looked up, and it was as if he had finally made the decision to give us the complete answer. “You must face the darkness, Watson,” he said, “and you must realize that the murderer you are seeking is not just a man of flesh and blood. He is the part of all of us that we repress. The truth you are seeking is that the criminal is a part of you, of me, of all of us.”

I couldn't help but wonder if this was the final confession. But in that moment, I knew the answer was more than just a simple realization about the case. It was a glimpse into what connected us all. The killer we were looking for wasn't the individual who had committed the crime. He was what we kept hidden within ourselves—what we didn't dare to see.

“The murderer is in all of us,” Holmes said softly when he first spoke, “and the hunt, Watson, is not merely a search for what happened. It is a search for what we ourselves carry within us.”

It was as if the space around us was thickening, and the fog streaming in from the windows was growing denser and more impenetrable. We stood on the verge of an insight that would not only solve the case but also lead us into the deepest, darkest corners of the human soul.

"And what happens when we face this truth?" I asked, turning away from Dr. Ellis and looking at Holmes. "What happens when we find the murderer we're looking for within ourselves?"

“Then,” said Holmes, “we will realize that the hunt was never about the murderer. It was always a hunt about ourselves.”

I felt the air in the asylum grow even heavier as the meaning of those words sank in. The case was never just a search for a criminal. It was a search for the truth that had led us all to the abyss. The darkness we had run from for so long wasn't the enemy. It was the part of ourselves we had to accept in order to move forward.

“Then we must face the darkness,” I said as I opened the door behind us and we stepped out into the cool night. “The hunt has led us here, but the truth still lies ahead.”

Holmes nodded, and we ventured further into the night. But I knew this was the final step that would separate us from the complete truth. It was the moment when we not only found the culprit, but also discovered ourselves in the darkness we had suppressed for so long.

The door clicked shut behind us with a dull thud as Holmes and I stepped into the asylum's dark corridor. The sounds that accompanied us seemed almost excessively loud in this silence—the crunch of our footsteps on the old, worn floorboards, the dripping of water somewhere in the walls, and the constant, incessant roar of the wind lashing against the windows from outside. Yet even in this eerie silence, I couldn't shake the feeling that we had arrived at the end of a long journey—a journey that would confront us not only with crime but also with our own inner darkness.

“Watson,” Holmes said finally, his voice calm, yet behind the calm lay a sharpness I knew all too well. “The answer to everything that has led us here lies not in the words we have heard so far. It lies in what we ourselves are unwilling to acknowledge.”

I wasn't sure if he was referring to the significance of the conversations with Dr. Ellis or to what we hadn't yet dared to comprehend. But I knew we'd reached a point where there were no more excuses. We had faced the darkness that had guided us through this case. But now, standing in the corridor, I knew that the darkness was more than just where the killer lurked. It was the part of us we had never fully accepted.

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked as I walked with Holmes toward the corridor that would lead us to the deeper, forgotten parts of the asylum. The atmosphere grew increasingly oppressive, and I could feel the cold breath of the old and the hidden in the air.

“There are things we don't want to admit to ourselves,” said Holmes, as he continued walking slowly. “Things which, in this case, have more to do with ourselves than with the crime we are trying to solve. The murderer we are looking for is not just the one who committed the crime. The real murderer, Watson, is what we suppress within ourselves.”

I paused and stared at him as his words swirled through me like a raging storm. "You mean we have to find the murderer within ourselves? That we're not just looking for a criminal, but for what we hide in our own darkness?"

Holmes turned to me, his eyes sharp and piercing. "Exactly, Watson. The murderer is not just one person. He is a part of all of us, a part we refuse to acknowledge. Yet this part is the key to the truth. And if we do not accept it, we will never solve the case."

I could barely suppress the cold shiver that ran down my spine. The idea that the true murderer was not just a stranger, but a part of us all, was a terrifying and deeply unsettling realization. Yet Holmes's words held me captive, and I knew he didn't speak lightly. He had long since grasped the truth—and now we had to face it.

“What must we do?” I asked as I entered the room Holmes seemed to be leading us into. It was dark and dreary, with yellowed wallpaper hanging on the walls and furniture battered by time. But in the center of the room stood something that immediately caught my attention—a table covered with old, yellowed documents.

“We must find the final pieces of the puzzle, Watson,” said Holmes, gesturing towards the table. “And we must understand that the answers lie not only in the murderer's actions. They

lie in what he has not shown us. What he has not told us. We must confront the darkness he shows us. And the darkness we carry within ourselves.”

I stepped closer to the table and examined the documents before us. They were heavy, written in ink that had long since smudged and faded. But in that moment, I knew we were on the right track. The answer we were seeking was not far off. And it would reveal more about ourselves than we could ever have imagined.

“So we must move forward,” I said, picking up the first document and handing it over to Holmes. “We must accept the darkness and recognize what we have hidden from ourselves for so long.”

Holmes nodded, a heavy but determined look in his eyes. “Exactly. And if we face the darkness, Watson, we will not only solve the case. We will discover ourselves—and that, Watson, will demand more of us than we are prepared to give.”

I could almost physically feel the pressure surging through me as we continued into the asylum. But I knew there was no turning back. The truth we were now facing was more than we had ever expected. And as I walked down the corridor with Holmes, I knew that in that moment we were about to change everything—not just the case, but ourselves as well.

## Moriarty's estate

It was one of those nights when the fog lay over London like a living veil, swallowing everything it touched. The streets, which just hours before had felt familiar, now seemed like a nightmare—an endless, winding corridor of darkness and uncertain shadows. The rain had eased, but the damp mist enveloped the city in a murky, elusive silence, broken only by the muffled sounds of footsteps on the wet cobblestones.

Holmes and I walked silently through the streets, each step heavier on my chest. It wasn't just the darkness that threatened to suffocate us. It was the case we now had to bring to a close, a close that was both liberating and destructive. The name we had avoided for so long, the one that had haunted us to this point, wasn't just a memory from the past. It was the key to everything that had led us here.

“Moriarty,” I said finally, as we changed direction and our footsteps led us into an even more remote corner of the city. “It was never just a crime. It was always him, wasn't it?”

Holmes nodded, his expression as impassive as ever, yet I could see the sharpness in his eyes—a sharpness that held us both captive and plunged us into darkness. “Moriarty was the architect of this whole story, Watson. There is no simple solution. The case we have solved is only one part of a much larger game.”

I knew he was right. The chase that had led us through the streets and alleys of London was more than just the search for a murderer. It was the beginning of a game Moriarty had forced upon us—a game where the price was far higher than we had ever expected.

As we reached the door of the unassuming villa, I knew we had to take the final step. This was the place that would lead us to the ultimate truth. The place where Moriarty's legacy still lived on—not only in the deeds he had committed, but also in the impact he had on our own lives.

"So you think there's more than we know so far?" I asked as Holmes opened the door and we entered the villa's gloomy hallway.

"Oh, most certainly," he replied calmly, but the heaviness in his voice told me we had now reached a point where there were no more excuses. "Moriarty's legacy is not merely material. It is not only the secrets he left behind, but also those he sowed within us. The truth we seek is not what we have been told, but what still lies hidden."

We walked down the corridor, which wound its way deeper and deeper into the building. It was as if the darkness within this villa took on a form of its own, and every step we took distanced us further from the outside world. The walls surrounding us seemed to bear witness to a past that told us not only the story of a crime, but also the story of a man who had managed to hold all the strings in his hands.

"Moriarty was never just the criminal we've been pursuing for so long," Holmes said, with a look that both invited me to follow him and hesitated to open up. "He was the man who showed us how thin the line is between order and chaos. And his legacy, Watson, will always haunt us."

I looked at him, his words sinking into me like heavy gravel. It wasn't just the criminal we had been searching for, but the influence he had on us and the world around us. His legacy wasn't just what he had left behind, but what he had demanded of us, the investigators and the victims.

"And what do we find here?" I asked as we moved into the next room. "What remains of him?"

"His memories," Holmes said softly, "his last throes. And perhaps also a final truth that will finally show us what we never wanted to understand."

The room before us was dark and seemingly empty. But as we drew nearer, I could make out the shadows lurking in the corners—not just the room itself, but also what it had to show us. Moriarty's legacy was more than just what he had left behind. It was what he had taught us, what we had never dared to grasp.

"The truth lies in what we have never asked," said Holmes, as he searched a desk that stood in the corner of the room. "And here, Watson, it will confront us."

The darkness of the room seemed to thicken as we ventured deeper into the building. The air was heavy, and each step on the creaking wooden floor made the room feel even quieter. Holmes had moved away from me by now and was leaning over a table covered with yellowed papers and old, broken mementos. This mansion was not just the scene of a crime—it was a reflection of Moriarty's own spirit, a place where everything he had left behind converged.

"What exactly are we looking for, Holmes?" I asked, looking over his shoulder. "What exactly did Moriarty leave us?"

Holmes slowly turned to me and fixed me with a look that was both sharp and thoughtful. "He has left us a test, Watson. A test that will not only lead us to a criminal. It will lead us to ourselves. These papers, these clues—they are the remnants of a man who so skillfully pulled the strings of the world that he entangled us all in his story."

I could feel the pressure mounting on us. We were no longer hunting a murderer. We were hunting the last fragments of a man whose influence reached into the deepest corners of London. Moriarty had never been interested in us merely as investigators. He had considered us part of his game, and everything we had uncovered so far was only a piece of a larger plan that had not yet been fully exposed.

"Look at this," said Holmes, pulling an old, almost crumbling letter from the pile and examining it with a deliberateness that inevitably captivated me. "This is it. This is the last part of Moriarty's estate. And it is more than just a letter. It is a clue leading us to what we were not yet ready to see."

I stepped closer and examined what Holmes held in his hands. It was a simple piece of paper, but the faded ink around the edges suggested this was no ordinary document. The words that remained legible possessed a chilling precision that unsettled me—they were not merely a plan, but a warning.

"‘Truth is the mirror that shows us what we really are. Only by recognizing what we ourselves repress can we move forward,’ Holmes read aloud. ‘That is the key, Watson. The key to what Moriarty left us. We are looking for an answer that lies not in the deeds of the perpetrator, but in ourselves.’"

I stared at him, unable to immediately grasp what he meant. "You're saying that the case leads us not only to Moriarty, but to ourselves?"

Holmes nodded slowly and folded the paper again. "Exactly. Moriarty was never just a criminal, Watson. He was a teacher. A man who wanted to show us that the world we live in is governed by truths we don't want to see. The murderer we're looking for isn't just the one who committed the crime. The real murderer is what we hide within ourselves."

The words struck me like a bolt of lightning. I had never truly understood what Holmes had meant by those final, enigmatic clues. But now, in that moment, I knew that we weren't just looking for a criminal. We were searching for the part of ourselves that we kept hidden from the world—and from ourselves.

"So what do we do now?" I asked, as I began to grasp the weight of his words. "What do we have to do to end this game?"

"We must move forward," Holmes said calmly, as he placed the paper back on the table. "We must face the truth, Watson. And the truth will not only solve the case. It will show us everything we have repressed within ourselves. Everything we have not dared to see."

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I fully grasped the meaning of his words. It wasn't just the case we had to solve. It was our own darkness, the part of ourselves we refused to

acknowledge. Moriarty's legacy, which we had avoided for so long, was more than just the story of a crime. It was a mirror reflecting how deeply we ourselves had stared into the shadows.

"Then we'll move on," I finally said, as I stepped away from the table and pointed in the direction. "We have to face the truth, even if it costs us everything."

Holmes nodded, and I could see the determination in his eyes. "The hunt, Watson, is never merely a search for the culprit. It is a search for a truth we can no longer deny."

We left the room and stepped once more into the villa's gloomy hallway. The fog outside seemed to follow us, and with every step we took, I knew we were approaching the ultimate truth—a truth that would reveal not only the case but also ourselves.

The villa was quieter than ever as we crept along the creaking wooden floors, and the rain outside had once again cast an eerie atmosphere over the streets. Holmes and I continued our exploration of the rooms without another word. Every step we took seemed to lead us deeper into the heart of a secret that would shake not only the case but also our very understanding of reality. We held Moriarty's estate in our hands—and with it, the final truth hidden from us.

Holmes stopped as we stood before an old desk covered with a collection of documents and scattered notes. It was the room that seemed to have been forgotten by time—and yet it had proven to be the place that would lead us to what we had been searching for so long. On the desk lay another document that immediately caught our attention. It was neatly folded and bore no other distinguishing marks except for the writing on the front, which was clearly Moriarty's handwriting.

"It ends here, Watson," said Holmes, picking up the sheet of paper and slowly unfolding it. "What we find here will not only solve the case. It will show us everything we never dared to see."

I stepped closer and glanced over his shoulder. The words written on the paper were precise yet mysterious. "Darkness is the origin from which all things come. The answer you seek, Watson, is not what you hope to find. It lies in what you cannot see within yourself."

Holmes read the words and carefully put the paper back down. It was clear that the significance of this note was greater than it initially appeared. Moriarty had not merely left us a puzzle. He had held up a mirror to us, one that would reflect not only the case but also our own fears and secrets.

"This is the moment, Watson," said Holmes, his gaze a mixture of determination and ominous knowledge. "Moriarty knew that we were not merely searching for a criminal. He knew that the true key to solving this case lay in what we suppress within ourselves. We have the answer within us, but it remains hidden until we confront the truth."

I looked at the note and couldn't shake the cold feeling of realization. What if Moriarty was right after all? What if the case that had preoccupied us for so long wasn't just a crime, but a hunt for the truth about ourselves? It was as if we had become entangled in a web of lies and illusions that was leading us ever deeper into darkness.

"What does this mean for us?" I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper, as the weight of the truth that threatened us overwhelmed me. "What must we do now?"

Holmes replied with a sharp look. "There is only one answer, Watson. We must confront the darkness that has always haunted us. We must accept that the hunt for truth is not only the hunt for the murderer, but also the hunt for what we ourselves carry within us. And that means facing the fact that we are all parts of the game."

I felt the space around us contract. Everything we had believed up to that moment began to slip away, and we stood at a point where nothing was as it seemed. The fall had led us to a destination we hadn't expected—and the truth that now awaited us was more than we had ever thought possible to grasp.

"Then we have to move on," I said, turning away from the table and stepping into the hallway. "There's no other choice. The truth doesn't wait."

Holmes nodded and followed me. "Correct. The answer lies before us, Watson. And we must accept it, even if it costs us everything."

We left the room and walked through the old building, whose walls revealed more of Moriarty's darkness than we had ever expected. But whatever awaited us, we had to face the truth – even if it took more from us than we were willing to give.

The fog outside was thicker than ever, and the streets seemed to warp under the weight of the realization that now accompanied us. It was clear that we had reached a point where the case was no longer just a crime. It was a mirror reflecting what we didn't want to see in ourselves.

"The hunt continues," said Holmes, his gaze leading us into the darkness. "But what we find will be more than just the solution to a case. It will be the solution to a riddle that lies within us all."

Darkness completely enveloped us as we left the villa and ventured once more into the fog-shrouded streets of London. The rain had stopped, but the cold had settled over the city like an invisible veil, and the air was heavier than ever. I could feel the fog not only around us but also in my mind. My thoughts, swirling and intertwining like a labyrinth, led us ever deeper into the unknown.

"There will be no turning back, Watson," Holmes said finally, as we walked out into the darkness. "The truth we now seek will cost us more than we could ever have imagined."

I looked at him, and the sharpness of his words struck me like a heavy blow. We stood on the verge of ultimate revelation, and I knew that we now had to finally confront the darkness. But what did it mean to confront this darkness? What if the truth not only revealed the murderer but also exposed those parts of ourselves we had most wished to keep hidden?

"It feels like we're trapped in a labyrinth of lies and secrets," I said as we continued walking. "The truth always seems to be just one step ahead, but we can never quite reach it."

Holmes nodded. "Exactly, Watson. Moriarty never just showed us the crime. He drew us into a game where the rules weren't ours. But what we're finding now will show us the truth. And that will reveal more than we expected."

“But what if the truth not only solves the case, but changes everything?” I asked, a knot of unease in my stomach. The hunt had never been just about the murderer, I knew that now. It was a search for a truth that would reveal not only the perpetrator, but also ourselves.

“That is precisely why we must find her,” said Holmes, his voice now calmer and more resolute than ever before. “We have reached the point where we have no choice. We must confront the darkness that has been pursuing us and discover what it wants from us. Only then will we solve the case—and understand what has brought us here.”

As we continued walking, I felt the weight of realization growing ever heavier on us. The case had never been just about a murderer. It was the hunt for a secret that involved not only a crime, but also the question of our own identity. Who were we, and what had led us into these dark alleys? What had driven us ever onward?

“What is it that haunts us so?” I asked, almost to myself. “Why has this case never let us go?”

Holmes didn't answer immediately, but I could see the thoughts in his eyes. “It isn't that, Watson. It's what he awakens in us. The darkness we've hidden for so long. And it's in all of us. Moriarty knew we would seek the truth. But he also knew that we could only face that truth if we had the courage to face the darkness within ourselves.”

I stared at the fog spreading before us, and it dawned on me that we were no longer looking for a perpetrator. We were looking for something deeper. Something that affected us all. And what frightened us most was the possibility that we ourselves were playing the leading role in this game.

“There will never be an end, will there?” I said, feeling that the case that had brought us here was relentlessly pulling us further into darkness.

“Not in the way you expect, Watson,” Holmes replied. “The truth we seek is more than what we see on the surface. It is what we must discover within ourselves. And that is Moriarty's true legacy. That is what he left us.”

The wind was blowing against us, and I could feel the fog slowly engulfing us as we continued. The hunt had led us not only to Moriarty's legacy but also to a point where we had to confront ourselves. And in that moment, I knew that if we found the ultimate truth, we wouldn't just be unmasking the murderer, but facing a truth that would take more from us than we were willing to give.

“We must go on,” said Holmes, taking a step forward that led us further into the darkness. “And if we find the truth, it will show us everything.”

I nodded as I surrendered to the silence and the mist. The answer lay before us, but the path there was the most difficult we had ever traveled. And we knew that the darkness would demand more of us than we could ever have imagined.

## Baker Street is burning

The wind had died down, but the twilight over London seemed to envelop the city in an almost tangible heaviness. Baker Street, which had become so familiar to us in recent years, suddenly seemed foreign to me, a place I no longer recognized. The streets were empty, no noise penetrated the apartment, and the windows, which usually reflected the hectic life of London, now seemed like eyes sensing the silent death of the night.

I stood at the window, staring out, the feeling that something inevitable was drawing near never leaving me. Holmes had leaned back in his armchair, the incessant tapping of his pipe against the old wooden table the only sound filling the room. It was as if the entire world around us paused, held in a moment of waiting, as if something momentous was about to happen—something we couldn't control, no matter how hard we tried.

“Baker Street is burning,” Holmes said suddenly, and I turned to him. His voice was calm, almost melancholic, but there was a sharpness in his eyes, which now fixed on me, that sent shivers down my spine. “It has always been burning, Watson. Since the first day we arrived here. But what we see now is only the last embers of a fire we ourselves started.”

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I tried to grasp the meaning of his words. What did he mean by “Baker Street is burning”? Was it a metaphorical expression for the fall that was dragging us deeper and deeper into the abyss, or was it something else—something that would change us forever?

“Holmes, what do you mean?” I asked, when the questions forming in my mind could no longer be ignored. “What is it that brings us here? What exactly will the end of this hunt mean?”

Holmes took a deep drag on his pipe and looked out the window. “It means we’ve reached a point of no return, Watson. Baker Street is burning because everything we’ve done up to this point has led us to this moment. The case that has haunted us for so long was never just a crime. It was a fire that spread through our lives, and now we must face the truth we have tried for so long to ignore.”

I felt the weight of his words penetrate me. The case had never been just a hunt for a murderer. It was a journey that had led us ever deeper into the heart of something dark and unknown—and what we were now beginning to realize was that the darkness didn't just come from outside. It was within us, buried deep, and only now, at the end of the hunt, were we beginning to understand that we didn't just have to find the perpetrator. We had to find ourselves.

“We have done much, Holmes,” I said, “and yet we still do not know what the end of this chase truly means. If Baker Street is truly burning, what will be left when the fire is extinguished?”

Holmes turned slowly to me, his eyes flashing with an intense clarity I only saw in moments when he had grasped something for himself. “What remains, Watson, is the truth. And the truth will cost us more than anything we have done so far. If we find the answer, it will show us how deep the fire truly runs.”

The words he spoke sounded like an echo of something that hung in the air—a memory of the beginning of the hunt, of what we were thinking as we took the first step on this perilous journey. But now, as we neared the end, it was clear that we had lost more than we had ever gained.

“Then we must continue,” I said finally, and the resolve in my voice surprised even me. “We have no choice, Holmes. The chase has led us this far. If the fire is truly burning, then we must extinguish the flames.”

Holmes nodded, and I saw in his eyes the same determination that gripped me. “Yes, Watson. We must. And when the fire is out, then we will see what remains. Perhaps we will discover that we had to burn ourselves to understand what we feared most.”

We stepped into the hallway and left the apartment that had been our home for so long. But the flash of light that shot through my mind showed me that we were now standing before something far greater than we could ever have imagined. The streets of London suddenly seemed emptier, the darkness deeper. And yet we knew that we were facing the ultimate truth.

“The hunt has brought us here,” said Holmes, “but this is not the end. The truth we seek will lead us to what we truly are.”

We stepped outside, and the rain began to fall again as darkness enveloped us once more. And this time I knew we weren't just ending the case. We were going to face the truth, which would reveal everything—and demand more of us than we were ever prepared to give.

The rain fell again, this time in heavy downpours, as we walked along the streets. The city lights blurred into the gray wall of fog that settled over everything, like a veil concealing the truth. It was as if London itself held its breath that night, as if the streets, the houses, and the old cobblestones were merely a shell hiding the unspeakable. The case that had led us ever onward was more than just a chase. It was a confrontation with what we refused to acknowledge within ourselves.

“Holmes,” I said after a while, as we walked towards our next destination. “You say the fire will show us the truth. But what is that truth, really?”

Holmes gazed thoughtfully into the dark alleys that stretched out before us. The gloomy atmosphere surrounding us seemed to merge with his thoughts, as if he could pierce the entire city with a single glance. “The truth, Watson, is not what we expect. It is not what we hope to find. It is what we have never dared to ask, for it might cost us everything.”

I felt the weight of his words spreading through me. We had almost caught the murderer who had repeatedly eluded us—but the closer we got to solving the case, the more we realized that the real case wasn't the murderer. It was the realization that we ourselves were part of the game. What if the perpetrator we were searching for wasn't just a man of flesh and blood, but a part of us?

“You're talking about more than just a crime, aren't you?” I asked, and it was more of a statement than a question. “It's about something else. Something we're looking for within ourselves.”

Holmes nodded, and in his eyes was the sharpness of a man who had understood everything we were still trying to grasp. "Exactly, Watson. The murderer we are seeking is more than just the perpetrator. He is what we cannot admit to ourselves. The true murderer is the part of us that we have repressed for so long, that we refuse to see. And this hunt that has led us here is not merely a hunt for a criminal. It is a hunt for what we keep hidden within ourselves."

The darkness surrounding us now seemed thicker, almost tangible, and I couldn't help wondering how much further we had to go to find what we were looking for. It was as if the fog enveloping us also obscured our own consciousness, as if we were trapped in a labyrinth from which we could never find our way out. Yet the truth Holmes promised us seemed to be the only way forward.

"What will happen if we find the truth, Holmes?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly. "What will happen if we finally see what we have always denied ourselves?"

"Then everything we have ever known will be turned upside down," Holmes replied in a tone that made me shudder. "The truth will show us that the case we have been pursuing was never just about the murderer. It will show us that the murderer lies within ourselves. And that, Watson, will demand everything of us."

I could hear the urgency in his voice, but also something else—something that reminded me of something I couldn't yet grasp. We had reached a point where the case was no longer just a mystery. It was a challenge to confront what we never wanted to acknowledge.

"And what if we are not prepared to face this truth?" I asked, my thoughts swirling. "What happens then?"

Holmes turned slowly to me, and for a moment it was as if the mist around us thickened. "Then," he said softly, "we will remain lost in darkness forever. The truth is not easy to bear, Watson. It will cost us more than we are willing to give. But only by facing it can we truly be free."

We stopped in front of a building that peered out at us from the darkness, as if it were waiting for us. It wasn't the destination we had expected, but the moment when everything we had learned would coalesce into a single, all-encompassing truth. The hunt wasn't over. It was the beginning of something much greater.

"We must go on, Watson," Holmes said calmly as he opened the door. "There is no further choice. The truth is here, and it is waiting for us."

I nodded, and together we stepped into the darkness that now enveloped us not only from the outside but also from within. The case we thought we were solving was no longer just a hunt for a criminal. It was a search for the truth about ourselves. And the darkness that now surrounded us would reveal everything—and cost us everything.

The silence that enveloped us was almost oppressive as we took the final step into the villa's inner room. I could feel the cold fog that swallowed the streets of London outside, even here. But the darkness that awaited us was not merely the darkness of night. It was a darkness that concealed more than mere shadows—it concealed the truth we had dared not acknowledge for so long.

Holmes moved calmly, almost like a shadow creeping through the confusion of the past few days. Not a word passed his lips, yet I knew that he had long since grasped the significance of what lay ahead in his sharp mind. I could see the keenness in his eyes, and I knew that the answer to everything we had sought was only a step away.

“Watson,” he said finally, as he walked past an old desk whose drawers were half-open. “We’ve reached a point where nothing will ever be the same again. The case we’ve been pursuing was never just a hunt for a criminal. It was a search for the truth that concerns us.”

I nodded, even though I knew this was more than just another chapter in an unsolved case. The hunt for Moriarty wasn't simply a search for a murderer, but a discovery of what we ourselves had repressed. And now we stood before the ultimate truth, which would reveal not only the perpetrator, but also what we had never dared to see.

“What exactly are we looking for here?” I asked, watching Holmes go through the old papers. “Haven’t we already seen everything that led us to this point?”

“No, Watson,” Holmes replied calmly, without looking up from his papers. “What we have been looking for is not what we have found in the last few weeks. It is what we never dared to ask. And that, Watson, will show us that the case is much bigger than we ever imagined.”

I felt a lump forming in my throat. The darkness around us seemed to thicken, and the more Holmes spoke, the more the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. But what we found wasn't a simple solution to the case. It was the realization that the true murderer was never just one man. It was the darkness within us all.

"So it's not just about Moriarty?" I asked, trying to grasp the meaning of his words. "It's about more than just him?"

“Yes,” said Holmes, looking me directly in the eyes. “It’s about what he showed us. He was the architect, Watson. The architect of the game we play. But the game was never just against him. It was against ourselves.”

I couldn't suppress the cold shiver that ran down my spine. The hunt for Moriarty had led us to a place where we confronted not just a criminal, but ourselves. The real killer wasn't just the man we had been pursuing. He was what we refused to acknowledge within ourselves.

"What does this mean for us?" I asked, trying to grasp the implications of this discovery. "What happens now?"

Holmes took a deep drag on his pipe and let the smoke rise slowly as he approached the window. “Now we must face the truth, Watson. We have found the murderer, but we must also face what we ourselves dared not see. The true legacy of Moriarty is not the one he left behind. It is the one we have hidden within ourselves.”

I stared into the room, and suddenly I realized that the darkness that had led us here wasn't just the external case. It was also what we carried within ourselves. The hunt that had brought us this far was never simply an attempt to catch the killer. It was a search for the truth about ourselves.

“Then we must continue,” I said, suppressing the cold in my chest. “We must find the last pieces. And if it demands everything of us, then we must face the truth.”

“Correct,” Holmes replied with a determined look. “The answer always awaits those who are willing to accept the darkness. And only by facing it will we find the true answer.”

We left the room, and the darkness around us swallowed us even deeper. But I knew we weren't just chasing a murderer now. We were hunting what we didn't want to see within ourselves. And the truth that awaited us would cost us more than we were ever willing to give.

The streets of London blurred before our eyes as we continued through the night, the darkness seeming more impenetrable than ever. The fog that had accompanied us everywhere was now a thick veil, concealing not only the world from us but also what we were trying to understand. I could almost feel the heaviness of the air, as if it were permeated with the unspoken truths that had accompanied us for the past few weeks.

“It feels like we have to cross the entire city just to make a single step forward,” I finally said as we stopped at a familiar corner of the street. I felt the fatigue in my limbs, but the pressing need to finish the case wouldn't let me rest.

Holmes looked out at the street and then at me. “You are right, Watson. But what we are doing here is not simply a hunt for a criminal. It is a hunt for something that concerns us personally. The real case we are trying to solve is the one we carry within ourselves.”

I turned to him, and the expression on his face showed that he understood more of this truth than he had previously let on. “You mean we're not just hunting Moriarty or the murderer who's been stalking us. It's about more than that. It's about ourselves.”

“Exactly,” Holmes replied. “The murderer we are seeking is not just a person. He is what we ourselves suppress within ourselves. The real case is not the one that reveals the truth about the criminal, but the one that reveals the truth about ourselves. The case, Watson, never truly ended. And what we are seeing now will show us that we are still part of the game.”

I stared at the road ahead, feeling the realization slowly sink in. The hunt for the perpetrator had never been just a search for a criminal. It was a search for a truth that had led us to a point where everything we thought we knew was called into question. The real killer wasn't the one we were pursuing. He was the part of us we never wanted to acknowledge.

“But what can we do now, Holmes?” I asked, a feeling of powerlessness at the magnitude of the truth that had just been revealed to us pressing down on my chest. “How are we to deal with all this?”

Holmes took a deep breath and looked down at the road that led ahead. “The truth, Watson, will show us everything. But we must be prepared to accept it. What we are doing here is not merely trying to solve the case. It is the realization that we always live in the darkness of our own making.”

I felt the realization sink in. This hunt that had led us here was never just an attempt to catch the killer. It was a confrontation with ourselves. The darkness that accompanied us throughout the case wasn't just the darkness of the crime. It was our own darkness, which would now confront us.

“Then we must face this darkness,” I said, looking out into the street and taking in the wide, empty lanes of London. “We have followed the case, but now we must face the truth, which will show us everything.”

“Correct,” said Holmes, his gaze steady. “The hunt is never truly over, Watson. It continues until we accept the truth. And the only path we can take is the one that brings us not only closer to the murderer, but also to what we have refused to see within ourselves.”

We continued walking, the darkness of the night enveloping us like a heavy cloak. But I knew we weren't just getting closer to the murderer. We were walking toward the ultimate truth, a truth that would demand more of us than we were ever prepared to give.

The hunt had led us here, but now the moment had come when the darkness that had pursued us all this way would finally show us what we could no longer ignore. And in that moment, it was clear that the answer lay not only in the murderer's actions. It lay within ourselves.

### What Watson didn't say

It was late at night, and the rain was lashing against the windows of Baker Street. The constant dripping on the glass was both comforting and unsettling. It was the sound of a tunnel, stretching ever deeper into the darkness, as if the city itself sensed the end of this chase. The fog that had settled over the streets had taken the form of a thick wall, concealing everything and everyone who hadn't firmly resolved to continue. And in this darkness that now enveloped us, I knew that we were no longer merely concerned with the external mysteries of the case. We stood on the verge of an insight that would not only reveal the murderer—it would also reveal ourselves.

Holmes sat as always in his chair, pipe in hand, his gaze fixed on the flickering embers in the fireplace. But I knew that even he, despite his outward composure, felt the weight of what lay before us. It wasn't just the case we had to bring to a close. It was the case that would confront us with a truth that could cost us everything.

“Watson,” Holmes said suddenly, without moving from his seat. “There are things one cannot say, aren't there? Things that weigh on us, torment us, but that we cannot speak of.”

I stopped, my gaze sweeping across the room. It was as if he were stripping me bare in that moment, without a word. The room that had always given us safety and comfort seemed anything but familiar that night. It was as if we were no longer on Baker Street, but in another world—a world riddled with secrets and lies.

“You're talking about me,” I said, the words I had held back until then finding their way to my lips. “You're talking about what I've never spoken aloud.”

Holmes turned to me, his eyes piercing me as if he could see more in me than I was willing to admit. “Yes, Watson. I'm speaking of what you hide from yourself. Of what you've never said—but what we both know.”

I could feel my heart racing, and a cold shiver ran down my spine. I never thought we'd reach this point, where I'd be forced to confront the things I'd suppressed for so long. But now, in this moment, I knew there was no turning back. The truth that had brought us here wasn't just the truth of the case. It was also the truth about me.

"What do you mean, Holmes?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. "What is it that I have kept from you?"

Holmes took another puff from his pipe, and for a moment he said nothing. The silence between us was oppressive. "It's not about what you've kept from me, Watson," he said finally. "It's about what you can't admit to yourself. And it's about what this case has shown us both."

I could hear the sharpness in his voice, and in that moment I knew that the hunt wasn't just for a murderer. It was leading us to ourselves. The case we had pursued for so long had never been merely the solving of a crime. It was a confrontation with a truth we had both repeatedly pushed aside—a truth that had accompanied us this far without our recognizing it.

"There are things I cannot speak, Holmes," I said finally, and the words that had been held back inside me for so long now finally found their way out. "But I am beginning to understand that I must. I must tell you the truth."

Holmes stood up and slowly approached me. "You must face the truth, Watson. The truth is the only way to be truly free. And the case we have here has shown us more than either of us could have ever expected."

I took a deep breath as I finally found the words that had remained unspoken for so long. "The murderer we were looking for is not just the one we were pursuing, Holmes. He is the part of us we never dared to see. I know that now. I always knew it. But I never said it out loud."

Holmes nodded, and I could see he wasn't surprised. He had known what we had been hiding from ourselves time and time again. But in that moment, with the truth standing between us, I knew there was no way we could hide any longer.

"The hunt was never merely an attempt to catch the murderer," Holmes said quietly. "It was a hunt for what we refused to acknowledge within ourselves."

I looked at him, and in his eyes lay the realization that we had now reached a point where the darkness not only showed us the murderer. It showed us ourselves.

"Then we must move on," I said, breaking free from the silence that had held me for so long. "The truth awaits us, and we must accept it."

A strange stillness now hung between Holmes and me as we sat facing each other in the chairs. The twilight had given way to the deep, dark night that spread over London, and the rain, which repeatedly pattered against the windows, was the only sound that still broke the silence. But even this sound suddenly seemed muffled, as if it reached us from a distance that was becoming increasingly alien.

“Watson,” Holmes said finally, his voice almost too calm for the moment. “The truth you have now spoken will cost us more than we have been able to comprehend. It is the key to everything. And yet, it is also what should frighten us most.”

I looked at him and sensed that we had reached a point of no return. The chase that had led us through the dark alleys of London had never been just a search for a criminal. It was a search for a part of ourselves we had never dared to confront. And now, with the truth between us, it was almost as if the darkness around us was growing thicker, as if it were drawing us into its grip.

"So you mean, Holmes, that we must face the truth, even if it demands more of us than we are prepared to give?" I asked, my voice still heavy with the weight of the realization. The words I had just spoken still echoed within me, as if they had opened a door that could not be closed again.

Holmes nodded, and for a moment his gaze was so sharp it seemed to pierce the darkness around us. "Yes, Watson. The truth we seek is not only what the murderer reveals to us. It is what we have kept from ourselves. And it is the realization that we are not only hunters, but also part of the game."

It was hard to imagine that we weren't just looking for a criminal. We were chasing a truth that, even if we found it, would change us forever. I had believed the case was simply a matter of logic and reason—but now I realized we were dealing with something far deeper. It wasn't just the killer that had brought us to this point. It was the realization that we were part of a game we could never have understood until we were willing to know ourselves.

"But what will remain of us, Holmes?" I asked, as the silence almost suffocated me. "What will remain when we have found the truth?"

“What remains, Watson,” said Holmes with an almost pensive calm, “is the realization that the truth never gives us what we expect. It takes away everything we thought we knew and gives us instead a new view of the world—a view that confronts us with ourselves.”

It was as if his words pierced the very air, and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were walking a tightrope that could lead us to the abyss. The case we were trying to resolve wasn't just a chase. It was a confrontation with the deepest truth we hadn't dared to see about ourselves.

"So what remains if we find the murderer?" I asked, as I drew nearer to the answer I had withheld for so long.

“Then we will realize that the real murderer is not the one we have been hunting, but the one we have been suppressing within ourselves,” Holmes said quietly. “We had to find ourselves, Watson. The case was never just a search for a perpetrator. It was a search for ourselves.”

It was a final step we were taking now—a step into the darkness that had haunted us in the past. The case we thought we were solving was more than just a hunt for a criminal. It was a hunt for ourselves. And the answer that awaited us wasn't the solving of a crime. It was the realization that we weren't just hunters. We were also part of the game we had played for so long.

"And if we find the truth, Holmes?" I asked, although I knew that the answer could no longer save us.

"Then nothing will ever be the same again," he said, his gaze both thoughtful and determined. "But the truth is the only path we can take. And the only one that will free us from the darkness."

We stood up and continued walking. The darkness that enveloped us was now not only the darkness of night, but also the darkness of truth, which would reveal everything to us—and demand everything of us. But there was no turning back. The hunt was over. And the true case that remained would stay with us forever.

The streets of London lay before us like an open book, its pages long since read, yet its true meaning still eluding us. The rain, which had previously darkened the twilight sky, had become a soft murmur that accompanied us as we walked through the empty alleys. But it wasn't just the rain that pursued us. It was the dark truth that drew closer with every step, as if we were facing a final test.

Holmes proceeded at his usual, measured pace, and I followed, sensing, however, the weight of realization that was growing between us. The case that had led us this far was more than just an unsolved crime. It was the abyss itself, staring back at us with a clarity and sharpness. And we stood on the threshold that would not only offer us the solution to the case. It would reveal to us the end of a story we had never thought possible.

"We have come this far, Watson," Holmes said finally, his voice breaking the silence of the night. "But what we find will cost us more than just our resolve. The truth we seek will show us everything. And it will show us not only the culprit, but also what we do not want to see in ourselves."

I could feel the sharpness in his words. It was as if he was not only preparing us for the final step, but also protecting us from the realization that the true case wasn't just a murder. It was the realization that we ourselves were part of this story.

"The truth will change us, won't it?" I asked, my voice more of a whisper than a question, as the weight of what lay ahead spread through me.

"Yes, Watson," Holmes replied, and it was more than just confirmation. It was the realization that at that moment we were no longer merely investigators. We were witnessing a transformation that would demand everything of us. "The truth will show us everything. But it will not only show us the murderer, it will reveal to us what we have repressed within ourselves."

I could feel the darkness enveloping us. It wasn't just the night. It was the truth that would now confront us—the truth we had avoided for so long. The case that had haunted us for so long was never just a hunt for a criminal. It was a hunt for ourselves, for what we didn't want to see.

"We've searched for answers for so long," I finally said, as we stood before the last address that would lead us to the final secrets. "But what happens if we find the answer we're looking for?"

Holmes took a step back and looked at me with his piercing eyes. "If we find the answer, Watson," he said with a look that spoke louder than words ever could, "we will not only find the murderer. We will find ourselves—and that will cost us everything."

The darkness around us seemed to deepen, and I knew we were taking the final step. The case had never been merely an attempt to catch the killer. It was a search for the truth about ourselves. And the answer that would confront us now was more than we had ever dared to comprehend.

"Then let's continue," I said as I opened the door and we entered the room that was to show us the ultimate truth.

"There is no other way, Watson," said Holmes, as he followed me. "Only by facing the darkness will we find what we truly seek."

The room was dark and seemed to greet us with an oppressive silence. But I knew this was the moment. The case that had haunted us for so long was more than just a crime. It was a mirror reflecting our own darkness. And now, as we faced the truth, I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

"It ends here, Watson," Holmes said quietly as he closed the door behind us. "But the answer will tell us more than we ever expected."

The door clicked softly shut behind us, and for a moment we stood in complete darkness, as if the city outside, which we thought we knew so well, had now turned its back on us. Holmes and I stood in a room that told us more than we had ever wanted to hear. The familiar scent of old wood and dust hung in the air, and the feeling that the room was trapped within itself intensified with every breath. The walls that surrounded us were merely witnesses to an unspoken crime, one that could never be clothed in words. But what we would discover in this room was not just the answer to a murder. It was the answer to ourselves.

"It feels as if we are in an old dream, Holmes," I said quietly, taking a step further into the room. "A dream from which we cannot wake up."

Holmes turned slowly to me, and in his eyes was the sharpness I knew him to have—the sharpness of a man who held the final, crucial pieces of the puzzle. But at that moment, I was certain he knew more than he had let on. We had reached a point where we weren't just searching for the solution to the case. We were searching for the truth about ourselves, and the answer that now lay before us would demand everything of us.

"It is no dream, Watson," he said, his voice calm and firm. "It is the moment when we must recognize ourselves. The truth we seek will show us everything. And it will force us to confront what we have hidden from ourselves for so long."

I could feel the weight of his words as they spread through me, yet it was still difficult to grasp their true meaning. The case we had been pursuing had never been merely an attempt to catch a murderer. It was a hunt for a truth that would reveal not only the perpetrator but also ourselves. The darkness that had always followed us had finally led us to the space where we had to confront the ultimate truth.

"And what is this truth, Holmes?" I asked, as the questions within me grew to a crescendo. "What exactly are we supposed to find here?"

"What we find here, Watson," said Holmes, with a look that was both thoughtful and determined, "is not what we expected. It is what we did not want to see. The answer we seek is not to be found in the deeds of the crime. It lies in what we have repressed within ourselves. It is the truth about ourselves that we have so long refused to acknowledge."

I stared at the room we were in, and the feeling grew within me that everything we had believed up to that point was now being called into question. The answer that awaited us was never a simple solution. It was a confrontation with what we ourselves had not dared to see. In that moment, I realized that the case had never been just about the murderer. It had always also been a hunt for what we were hiding within ourselves.

"The hunt was never just a search for a criminal, was it?" I asked, trying to grasp the significance of this realization.

"No, Watson," Holmes replied. "The hunt was the search for the truth we did not want to recognize within ourselves. And the answer that awaits us will show us more than we were ever prepared to see."

I felt the darkness around us grow even thicker. It was as if the room itself were ensnaring us, holding us captive in the final moments of this journey. The truth that would now confront us was not merely the end of a criminal case. It was the end of a lie we had told ourselves and the beginning of a new realization that would demand everything of us.

"What shall we do, Holmes?" I asked, when I felt that the truth not only stood before a wall, but forced us to face it.

"We must face the truth, Watson," said Holmes, turning toward the dark corner of the room. "We must realize that the real murderer is not just the one we have been hunting. The real murderer is what we have repressed within ourselves. And when we realize that, Watson, nothing will ever be the same again."

The silence that surrounded us was almost palpable as I reflected on Holmes's words. The case we had been pursuing had never been merely a puzzle. It was the search for something we had suppressed for so long. And now that we had reached the end, we had to confront this truth—a truth that would demand more of us than we had ever been willing to give.

"Let's continue," I finally said as I took my steps forward and entered the room. "There's no way out now."

Holmes nodded, and together we stepped into the darkness, which not only revealed the murderer to us, but also showed us the parts of ourselves that we had refused to see for so long.

We now stood on the edge of what we had never dared to acknowledge in all these years. The darkness that had pursued us thus far now seemed to envelop us like an invisible net. Our footsteps echoed in the silence as we stepped deeper into the room that would reveal the ultimate truth. I felt the air thicken, as if bearing the weight of our own uncertainty. The doors

we had closed behind us led not only back to the streets of London, but also back to ourselves—to the secrets we had kept hidden from ourselves for so long.

“We have reached the point where there are no more excuses, Watson,” Holmes said finally, his voice a low but determined murmur. “What awaits us now will show us everything. And nothing will ever be the same again.”

His words hit me like a blow. We had reached the point where we had to confront the ultimate truth—the truth about ourselves. We had believed the case would lead us to a murderer, but the real case wasn't the one we were trying to grasp. The real case was the one that forced us to confront the darkness we had suppressed within ourselves.

"And what happens when we discover this truth, Holmes?" I asked, my voice trembling as the weight of the realization grew within me. "What happens when we learn everything we didn't want to see?"

Holmes turned to me, his eyes sharp and piercing, and for a moment it seemed as if he pierced all the darkness around us. "If we find the truth, Watson," he said quietly, "we will realize that we are not merely investigators. We are also part of the game. The murderer we seek is not just the one we pursue. He is what we suppress within ourselves."

The meaning of his words hit me like a heavy blow as I tried to grasp the breadth of the truth he was now revealing to us. We had never truly confronted the fact that we ourselves were part of the crime—that the darkness that had led us this far was not just the murderer's. It was the darkness that lay within us all.

"You mean that we are not only looking for the perpetrator, but ourselves?" I asked, as I tried to grasp the consequences of what he had just said.

“Yes,” Holmes answered, his voice now as calm as the dark water of a pond deeper than could be discerned by the naked eye. “The hunt, Watson, was never merely an attempt to catch the murderer. It was the search for what we ourselves did not want to see. The real case that has brought us here is the one that confronts us with ourselves.”

I looked at him and knew that we weren't just going to solve the crime. We would have to confront ourselves—the darkness we had always hidden from ourselves. We stood at a point where nothing was the same anymore. The hunt was more than just a crime. It was a journey to ourselves.

“What are we to do, Holmes?” I finally asked, as the darkness continued to spread around us. “How can we deal with this truth that now so obviously confronts us?”

“There is only one way, Watson,” said Holmes, and the sound of his words was like a quiet promise. “We must face it. The truth will show us who we really are. But we must not forget that it will demand more from us than we are prepared to give.”

I nodded slowly as I grasped the meaning of his words. The case we had pursued for so long hadn't just been the search for a murderer. It was the search for what we had denied ourselves. And now, as we faced the ultimate truth, I knew it would reveal everything—and cost us everything.

“Then we’ll continue,” I said finally, as I took the last steps into the room that was to show us everything. “There’s no other way.”

Holmes nodded, and we continued as the room slowly closed around us, as if drawing us into the ultimate truth. We had reached the end of the hunt. But the true beginning still lay ahead—in the darkness we had to confront ourselves.

## The case that remains

It was as if the streets of London continued to haunt us as we walked through the mist that shrouded the night. Every corner, every step we took, seemed to draw us deeper into a darkness we could no longer control. The rain had eased, but the damp chill of the streets remained like a crushing weight on our shoulders. Holmes walked calmly ahead, his step firm and sure, as if he feared the darkness. Yet in his eyes was a spark of something I couldn't quite grasp. Something that accompanied us on this final leg of our journey.

“What remains, Watson?” Holmes asked after a while, his voice calm, but with a hint of something I couldn't quite put my finger on. “What remains of all that we have experienced?”

I looked at him, and the question hit me like a blow. The case we'd been pursuing hadn't just revealed the killer to us. It had shown us more than we'd ever dared to understand. And now, standing at this point, it felt as if everything we'd believed up to this moment was coming together in one final, decisive instant.

"What remains of a case like this?" I asked, more to myself than to Holmes. "What remains when the murderer is caught and the crime solved?"

Holmes stopped and looked at me as if he had already known my thoughts. "What remains, Watson," he said with a look that was almost challenging, "is the case that is never truly closed. For what we have witnessed here is more than just a crime. It is the confrontation with what we did not want to see in ourselves. And the true case that remains is the one that shows us everything we did not want to acknowledge."

I felt a heaviness settle over me as his words echoed within me. The case had never been just a hunt for a killer. It was a search for a truth we had avoided for so long. And now, as we neared the end of the hunt, I knew we wouldn't just find the perpetrator. We would also find the truth about ourselves—and that truth would cost us more than anything we had endured before.

"You mean the case is never truly closed?" I asked, even though I knew the answer wasn't that simple. "That we're looking for more than just a criminal?"

“Yes,” said Holmes, looking into the mist that enveloped us as if slowing the flow of time itself. “We have sought more, Watson. The true case is not the one we pursued. It is the one we found within ourselves.”

I nodded slowly as I fully grasped the meaning of his words. The hunt had never been merely a search for a murderer. It was a search for ourselves, for what we had suppressed within, for

what we had never dared to see. And now, at the end of this journey, I had to acknowledge that the real case lay not only in the actions of another. It lay in the darkness we had so often avoided.

"What will remain of us, Holmes?" I asked, my voice now quieter as darkness seemed to envelop us. "What will remain of a case like this, when we have finally seen the truth?"

"What remains, Watson," said Holmes with an almost melancholic calm, "is the realization that the case has not only shown us the murderer. It has shown us ourselves. And what we must realize is that we are all part of this story. The case that remains is the one that will not let us go, because it reveals more about us than we were willing to admit."

I couldn't shake the cold shiver that ran down my spine. The case had demanded more of us than we had ever expected. And yet I knew it hadn't just given us answers. It had led us to a truth that would stay with us forever.

"So we go on?" I asked, even though I knew we had no choice anymore. "Shall we go on into the darkness that has haunted us for so long?"

"Yes," said Holmes, taking a step forward. "Darkness will always be with us, Watson. But only by facing it can we free ourselves from it. The case that remains will not only show us the truth about the murderer. It will show us the truth about ourselves."

And so we continued, the fog enveloping us, and I knew that we now faced not only the case, but also ourselves. The truth that awaited us was more than we could ever comprehend, yet the only path we could take now was the one that not only freed us from the darkness, but also placed us in charge of everything we had discovered on this hunt.

The streets that led us through London seemed to grow ever longer the further we walked. The fog had tightened even more around the buildings, and the light from the streetlamps seemed to disappear into the white walls of the night. It was as if the world around us lingered in a silent, almost forgotten state as we strode through these endless alleys that only led us further into the unknown. It was darkness that now accompanied us—not only the darkness of night, but also the darkness of the ultimate truth that would reveal everything.

"Watson," Holmes said suddenly, his voice calm, but I sensed the sharpness behind it. "The case we are pursuing here is more than just a puzzle. It is the final test we must pass."

I turned to him, and in his eyes was the same intensity that I had seen again and again in recent days – an intensity that led us into the abyss, but also to a truth that we could no longer deny.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, although I suspected he was alluding to something much bigger. "Haven't we found enough already?"

"We have found the murderer, Watson," said Holmes, "but we have not yet solved the case. The real case is the one that reveals not only the culprit, but also what we have refused to see in ourselves. And that, Watson, will cost us more than we are willing to give."

The words he spoke struck me with an unexpected force. We had believed that the hunt for the criminal was the climax of the case. But now, as we drew closer to the truth, I realized that

the real case lay not only in the actions of a murderer. It lay in the darkness we had hidden within ourselves for so long.

"You mean we haven't found ourselves yet?" I asked, as it suddenly dawned on me that we hadn't reached our destination. "That the real case isn't just that of the murderer, but that of ourselves?"

Holmes nodded and paused for a moment, as if sensing the weight of his words himself. "Exactly. We haven't just been hunting a criminal, Watson. We've been searching for the truth we refused to acknowledge within ourselves. And the case we have here will reveal more than we ever expected."

I could feel the sharpness of his words, and they stirred a thought within me that I had suppressed for so long. We had never been just investigators. We were also part of the story we were pursuing. The darkness that had haunted us for so long wasn't just the darkness of a murderer. It was the darkness that lay within us all.

"What will remain of us then, Holmes?" I asked, as we broke through the darkness of the streets and reached an old building that would lead us to the final secret. "What remains when the case is closed and we have found the truth?"

"What remains, Watson," said Holmes with a thoughtful calm, "is the realization that the true case is never really closed. The case remains because it does not only show us the murderer. It shows us what we have repressed within ourselves."

We entered the building, whose walls told us more than we had ever dared to admit. The case that had haunted us for so long had not only confronted us with a crime. It had confronted us with a truth that would change us forever.

"We've been focused on the perpetrator the whole time," I said, looking out over the dark corridors and doorways. "But we've never really thought about what this case reveals about ourselves."

"Exactly, Watson," Holmes replied, his words as sharp as the sound of a blade. "The case that remains is the one that shows us everything. And what we discover will demand more of us than we are prepared to give."

We pressed on, the darkness threatening to engulf us, but with every step I knew we weren't just getting closer to the killer. We were getting closer to the truth—the truth that would not only reveal the perpetrator but also everything we had avoided until now.

"It ends here, Watson," Holmes said quietly as he reached the room where we would finally find the answer. "But the answer will tell us more than we expected."

I nodded, and we continued on, towards the final part of the hunt, which showed us not only the darkness of the case, but also the darkness within ourselves.

The room before us was heavy and dark, the walls seeming to close in, as if drawing us into the depths of the secrets they held. The heavy scent of dust and old paper hung in the air, mingled with the faint smell of damp wood, carried in by the rain outside. It was the room that would reveal everything to us—and at the same time, what we had never dared to

comprehend. Every step we took seemed to bring us closer to the point where the case would not only be solved, but also unraveled. Yet I knew that the answer we now sought was far more than the end of a crime. It was the end of the lies we had told ourselves.

"Holmes, what will remain of us?" I asked, taking a step back from the threshold of the room that had slipped through our fingers for so long. I could no longer suppress the question that was churning inside me. "What will remain of a case like this when we finally know everything?"

Holmes stepped forward, his eyes sharp and penetrating, yet tinged with melancholy. "What remains, Watson," he said calmly, "is the realization that the true case can never be closed. For the case that remains is not the one we pursue, but the one that confronts us with ourselves."

I felt a heaviness settle over me as I processed those words. The case we had pursued for so long had never been just a hunt for a criminal. It was a search for something we had never dared to confront. And now, as we stood before the final answer, I knew that this truth would demand more of us than we were prepared to give.

"The case that remains..." I repeated quietly, "is therefore the one that shows us everything about ourselves?"

Holmes nodded slowly. "Yes, Watson. The murderer we have been seeking is not merely the one we have been pursuing. The true murderer is the part of ourselves we have repressed. And the case that remains will show us everything—even what we never wanted to see."

The words hung in the air like a heavy fog, and I could almost physically feel the weight of the truth. What if, in that moment, we not only found the perpetrator but also exposed ourselves? What if the real case wasn't the crime, but the darkness we carried within ourselves?

"And what happens when we face this truth?" I asked, as the significance of this realization slowly began to sink in.

"Then we will know ourselves, Watson," said Holmes, his gaze both sharp and thoughtful. "But that will not only set us free. It will also cost us everything we have ever believed to be true."

I could feel the lump in my throat as the reality of those words sank in. We weren't just hunting a criminal. We were hunting a truth that would show us everything—and demand everything of us.

"Then we must face the truth," I finally said, as the weight of the realization grew within me. "No matter what it costs us. We must close this case."

"Correct," Holmes replied, casting one last glance at the room that would reveal everything. "The case doesn't end where we end it. The true case ends within ourselves."

I knew we were now facing the final part of the hunt—a part that would reveal not only the truth about the crime, but also the truth about ourselves. And as we entered the room that

would give us the final answer, I knew the case was never truly closed. The case that remained was the one that would haunt us forever.

We had reached the end of the hunt, and yet I knew that the true beginning was only just beginning. We would face the darkness – not only the darkness of the crime, but also the darkness we had hidden from ourselves for so long.

The room we stood in was empty, yet it was full of secrets. Secrets that concerned not only the deeds of a murderer, but the shadows cast over us all. Holmes and I stood facing each other, the realization of the case hanging heavy in the air. The case that had haunted us for so long was not merely the hunt for a criminal. It was a confrontation with ourselves, with what we kept hidden within.

“We have found the murderer,” Holmes said quietly, as his eyes surveyed the empty walls. “But what we were really looking for was never just the solution to a crime. We were looking for the truth about ourselves.”

I nodded slowly, grasping the meaning of his words. The real issue was never what we tried to grasp. It was what we had to discover within ourselves—the darkness we had always hidden from ourselves.

"It's over, isn't it?" I said finally, as the weight of the last words we had spoken settled within me. "The case is solved, but the hunt continues. We have faced the truth, but what remains of us, Holmes? What remains when we know everything about ourselves?"

Holmes looked at me, his eyes shining with an understanding that only he could grasp at that moment. "What remains, Watson, is not the end, but the beginning. The case that has led us here does not end in a solution. It ends in the realization that we never truly found the culprit. The real case, Watson, is the one that has shown us what we have repressed within ourselves."

I felt a lump form in my throat as the full meaning of those words dawned on me. The killer we had been hunting was never just a person. He was what we were unwilling to see within ourselves. The case that had led us here was the hunt for the darkness that had always haunted us and the truth we had never wanted to acknowledge.

"What do we do now?" I asked, gazing into the darkness that enveloped us. "What will remain of us when everything has been said and done?"

“We go on, Watson,” said Holmes in a low but determined tone. “There is no point at which the chase ends. What we have found will always haunt us, but it is also the beginning of something new. The case that remains is the one we will always carry within us.”

We stood there, speechless, as the fog continued to drift across the streets outside. The chase was over, but the truth it had revealed was only the beginning. What we had found wasn't the solution to a mystery, but the realization that we could never escape ourselves. The case that had brought us here wasn't just a crime, but a mirror—a mirror reflecting everything we never wanted to see.

"It ends here," said Holmes as he left the room. "But what we see, Watson, will never end."

I followed him; the last step led us out into the night, which enveloped us like a heavy cloak. And although we had left the case behind, I knew it would never let us go. The case that remains would accompany us forever—in the darkness we carried within ourselves.

## imprint

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