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Opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes 7: Stone Cold

Written by

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CHAPTER ONE

Sherlock Holmes leaned forward in his seat, entranced, as the young man on the stage brought his violin up to his shoulder, nestled his chin into the chin-guard and raised his bow until it hovered above the strings. The flickering light from the gas lamps along the edge of the stage illuminated the violinist with dancing shadows, making it seem as if a hundred different expressions were playing across his face within a few moments.

The audience seemed to tense. For a long moment you could have heard a handkerchief flutter to the ground, it was that quiet in the theatre, and then he started playing.

The first note swelled up out of nowhere until it filled the auditorium. It was pure and exquisite, and the sort of note that Sherlock would have given a year of his life to be able to play. It seemed to him almost impossible that something made out of wood and catgut, played by someone human and fallible, could be that close to perfection.

'He's playing a Stradivarius,' Rufus Stone whispered from beside Sherlock, but Sherlock's attention was fixed upon the young man onstage, and he barely registered his friend and tutor's words. He concentrated on the music, on the succession of notes and chords that were

emanating from the small stage as if they were something absolutely real and it was the theatre and the audience who were insubstantial. Sherlock had never imagined that it was possible to play the violin that beautifully.

For the next forty-five minutes Sherlock listened, oblivious to anything around him, barely even breathing, as the violinist played a succession of pieces. One or two Sherlock recognized from his own exercises – some Spanish dances, and a few well-known tunes from operas – but many were new to him. He suspected that the man had written them himself, he appeared to be that comfortable playing them. Some of them were fiendishly complicated as well as beautiful, requiring the violinist's left hand to move along the fingerboard so fast that it was a blur.

After a while he became aware that his brother, Mycroft, seated on the other side of him to Rufus Stone, was shifting in his plushly upholstered seat. It was too small for him in the first place, and his elbows were pushing against Sherlock's arm and the arm of the man on the other side of him. Sherlock could hear him huff every now and then, as if he was unconsciously trying to send a signal out to everyone around him that he was unhappy and wanted to be somewhere else. Or perhaps it wasn't unconscious. Perhaps Mycroft knew exactly what signal he was sending to the increasingly irritated people around him, and just didn't care.

After a particularly difficult volley of notes which the

violinist threw away as if they were nothing, the first half of the concert ended. The musician bowed to enthusiastic applause, and the curtain came down.

'Thank the Lord,' Mycroft muttered. 'I was beginning to think that I had died and gone to hell. Who did you say this young fiddler was?'

Sherlock glanced sideways at Rufus Stone. The expression on Stone's face was somewhere in the ambiguous territory between amusement and outrage. 'His name is Pablo Sarasate,' Stone said in a carefully controlled voice. 'He is Spanish, he is twenty-six years old, and he is probably the most accomplished violinist since Niccolò Paganini.'

'Humph!' Mycroft said. 'I would have preferred a brass band in the park. The music would be more tuneful to my ears.'

'And the deckchairs would be more accommodating to your . . .' Stone hesitated. Sherlock sympathized – Mycroft was technically Stone's employer. '. . . To your natural sitting position,' Stone finished smoothly.

'I feel the need for a large dry sherry,' Mycroft said as if Stone hadn't spoken. 'Do you think we might have time to visit the bar during this welcome break from the caterwauling onstage?'

Stone winced, and opened his mouth to say something cutting, but Sherlock got in first. 'I think that would be a good idea,' he said.

Stone caught Sherlock's elbow as they manoeuvred

their way along the row of seats to the aisle. 'Your brother will be the death of me,' he hissed, 'and if it's not because of the dangerous undercover tasks that he assigns me then it will be because I will punch him in the face if he goes on about how much he hates this music for much longer.'

'I don't even know why he wanted to come along,' Sherlock said. 'This is not the kind of thing he normally enjoys.'

'He told me he wanted to talk to the both of us in a comfortable and informal setting.'

'Even so . . .' Sherlock looked around the auditorium. 'There must have been something more to his taste than this.'

Stone grimaced. 'I may have told him that I was taking you to the theatre without being specific about what we were going to see. Looking back, your brother might have got the idea that we were going to a play rather than a concert recital.'

'He does like a good melodrama,' Sherlock conceded. 'He once told me that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* taught him everything he needed to know about Scandinavian politics.'

They were in the aisle by now, heading up towards the bar. 'What do you think about the concert?' Stone asked.

'Incredible.' Sherlock paused for a moment, recalling the feelings that had poured through his mind as the violinist had played. 'His technique is flawless.'

'He is going to be famous,' Stone confirmed. 'Just be glad you got to see him early in his career.'

They got to the bar. Mycroft pushed through the crowd like a galleon pushing through rough seas. Within a few minutes they were all settled in a bow-front window and sipping their drinks.

Mycroft took a sip of his sherry, and grimaced. 'If this is dry,' he said, 'then the Thames must be an arid, dusty wasteland by comparison.' He shook his head ponderously. 'This is what happens when one leaves the comfortable environs of one's office, one's club and one's rooms. The world becomes unpredictable.' He glanced up at Sherlock and Stone. 'I believe I will not return for the second half of the recital. I cannot imagine that the music will become any more listenable or my seat any more comfortable. I do, however, wish to say something before I leave.' Turning his attention to Sherlock, he went on: 'You have been staying in London now for a month since we returned from Ireland, and we need to make a decision about your future. The cost of your hotel room and your food is small, in the scheme of things, but not negligible. Sadly, with the death of our Uncle Sherrinford, I see no way that you could return to Farnham.'

'What about . . . home?' Sherlock asked quietly.

'The situation there has not changed.' Mycroft's face was grave. 'Our father is still abroad, in India, with the British Army, and our mother is still confined to bed,

too weak to move. The only things that pass her lips are the occasional slice of toast and sips of weak tea. I fear for her future.'

'And . . . our sister?'

Mycroft shook his head. 'In the absence of any parental guidance, she has, I am informed, fallen under the spell of a most unsuitable admirer. I have tried to speak to her about it, but she will not listen to reason. No, I fear that the family manor house is not a suitable place for you either.'

'Then what else is there?' Rufus Stone asked.

'You could find me rooms in London,' Sherlock pointed out. 'I have got used to living here now. I love this city.'

'You are fifteen,' Mycroft pointed out. 'I am not going to let you live by yourself in a metropolis this sordid.'

'I'm actually sixteen,' Sherlock pointed out, 'and I have got quite used to surviving and even thriving by myself. I don't need anyone to look after me.'

'Indeed?' Mycroft gave Sherlock a lingering glance, rising from the tips of Sherlock's shoes to the crown of his head. 'I see that you have been consorting with that disreputable canal-dwelling friend of yours – Matthew Arnatt – who has apparently relocated his water-borne dwelling place to Camden Locks. I see also that you have together visited many markets in London, as well as travelling on the Thames several times. During those escapades you have got into –' he paused for a moment,

looking at Sherlock's hands – 'five separate fights, and you have escaped from trouble over rooftops on three occasions. You have also been stopped and questioned by the police eight times. Is this what you mean by "thriving"?'

Sherlock opened his mouth to say something in his own defence, but Stone spoke first. 'You can tell all that just by looking at your brother's clothes, shoes, face and hands?' he asked. 'Mr Holmes, I have been impressed by your deductions before, but this is just amazing.'

Mycroft preened, like a large cat being stroked. Sherlock couldn't help himself, and said, 'He knows all that because he's been having me followed and his agents have been giving him daily reports.'

Mycroft's lips pursed in annoyance.

'Is this true?' Stone asked, disappointed.

'Young Sherlock has a habit of getting into trouble,' Mycroft grunted, 'and in our father's absence it is my responsibility to make sure that he gets to his twenty-first birthday intact in body and mind.'

'I thought it was me that was supposed to be looking after him,' Stone murmured, looking away, out of the bay window into the crowds outside the theatre.

'You have had other things to do for me,' Mycroft pointed out in a tone of voice that had no apology in it, 'and besides, Sherlock would have recognized you. His ability to see through disguises has improved markedly over the past two years.' He glanced at Sherlock and

raised an eyebrow. 'I am, I confess, somewhere between amused, pleased and irritated that you spotted your followers.'

Sherlock smiled at his brother. 'Not only that, I found a bellboy at the hotel who was my general size and build, gave him a shilling and my coat and got him to walk around London in my place. Your people never noticed.'

'You are mistaken,' Mycroft said levelly. 'They followed you and him both. He went to a music hall; you went to the British Museum.'

'Oh.' Sherlock was crestfallen.

'There is also the question of your continuing education to consider,' Mycroft said, as if the previous discussion had never occurred. 'You were removed from the Deepdene School for Boys before your exams, and your experiences since, while they may have taught you a great deal about the way the world works and how to survive in street fights and climb across roofs, have left you woefully under-equipped in the fields of Latin, Greek, the natural sciences and the great body of English literature.'

'I see no need to know about dead languages or old books,' Sherlock murmured.

'You may not,' Mycroft countered, 'but the rest of the world disagrees – at least, the bits of it that count. In order to secure a lucrative job in the Civil Service or one of the major banks you will need to learn a great many things that you may not think are important. It is

my job to make sure that you do so.'

'You are sending me back to school,' Sherlock said, feeling his heart grow heavy. He had dreaded this moment. His life for the past two years had been interesting, exciting and even dangerous. He had travelled to foreign countries and seen things that he would never have believed had he not experienced them himself. He had been thrown on to his own resources, and he had survived. He couldn't go back to school and meekly do what he was told to do by the teachers. Not now. He was a different person to the one who had left Deepdene School at the end of the summer term two years before, in uniform and with his cases packed.

'No,' Mycroft said, surprising Sherlock, 'that would be looking backwards, not forward, and to do so would be a capital mistake. No, I believe that your future lies at one of the great universities, so I propose that you live either in Cambridge or in Oxford for now, having one-to-one sessions in the important subjects with an experienced tutor, with a view to your entering either of those universities two years hence.'

'Cambridge is nearer to the family manor house, for when father returns home,' Sherlock said, feeling his heart lighten just a little bit. This could actually be fun.

'I have acquaintances in Oxford,' Mycroft continued, 'so I propose to send you there. You will recall that I studied at Oxford a few years ago. It was not a happy time in my life, but I value the education I received there and

the friends I made. In particular, I knew a man named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who is now a lecturer in mathematics at Oxford, specializing in the field of logic. I will find you rooms in the town, and he will teach you for an hour a day, when he is not engaged on lecturing duties or one of his odd hobbies. There was also a police officer named Weston with whom I shared several very interesting conversations.'

Quickly going over Mycroft's proposal – well, more of a fait accompli than a proposal, Sherlock thought – he found there were several things that caught his attention. A lecturer in logic sounded fascinating. Sherlock's mind had always worked in a logical manner, and he found the trust that other people appeared to put in luck, faith or superstition quite odd. His former tutor and friend, Amyus Crowe, had done a lot to make him think in a rational manner. He thought he might enjoy studying logic.

'What does this Charles Lutwidge Dodgson do that is so odd?' he asked.

'For a start, he is interested in this new-fangled thing called photography. You are familiar with it?'

Sherlock frowned, trying to remember things that he had read, or overheard. 'It's a way of capturing the details of a scene not in a painting or a drawing, but by letting the light from that scene fall upon a chemically treated glass plate and recording the image directly, is it not?' he said.

‘Indeed. The chemicals involve a nitrate of silver that changes colour when light touches it, or so I understand. I find myself in two minds about photography. On the one hand, the final result is much less pretty than a painting, and is only represented in shades of grey. On the other hand, it does represent what is actually there, rather than what the artist thinks is there, or hopes is there, or wants you to believe is there. It is either a fad or it will supplant portraiture and landscape painting and also help considerably in the investigation of crime – I do not yet know which. I used to talk with my police acquaintance about that.’

‘You said, “On the one hand . . .”,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘What are his other hobbies?’

‘He is apparently, in his spare time, a writer of children’s books under the pen name “Lewis Carroll”. In particular, one with the title *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* has caught the public imagination and sold rather well. It is published by Macmillan and Co, who are themselves a reputable publisher. It is even said that Her Majesty Queen Victoria has read it and let her approval be known.’

‘A children’s book?’ Sherlock said, rather sniffily.

‘Indeed, and a rather odd one. On the face of it the book is a tale about a girl who falls down a rabbit hole and finds a fantasy world inhabited by talking animals, or who may just have fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing, but it is possible that there is a deeper meaning and

that the entire thing is a satire on various mathematical and logical concepts.'

'You've read it?' Rufus Stone asked.

'Certainly not,' Mycroft huffed, but he wouldn't meet Sherlock's or Stone's gaze, and Sherlock wondered if he was telling the truth. 'But we are moving away from the point, which is that I have already written to Mr Dodgson at his rooms in Christ Church College, and he has agreed to take you on as an extraordinary – in all senses of the word, Sherlock – student. I am currently seeking accommodation for you in Oxford, probably at some boarding establishment close to Christ Church and beyond reproach.'

'And will you have anyone following me around Oxford the way you have in London?' Sherlock asked.

'Will I need to?' Mycroft countered.

Before Sherlock could say anything, Rufus Stone said, 'Almost certainly.'

A bell rang, indicating the end of the intermission.

'I shall leave now,' Mycroft said, but he made no move away from the bay window. 'Or perhaps I will stay for one more dry sherry. You two head back in and listen to the rest of that infernal racket. Sherlock – I will send you a note within the next few days outlining where you will be living, when you will be moving and when your tutorials will start.'

Sherlock opened his mouth to argue, but one look at his brother's face made him shut it again. Once

Mycroft made his mind up about something, there was no changing it.

As a second bell rang out, Sherlock and Stone headed back into the auditorium. Sherlock glanced back briefly over his shoulder. Mycroft was still there, sitting in the alcove – filling the alcove, to be more precise – and sipping at his sherry. As Sherlock watched, a man in a faded jacket and trousers that were too short for him approached the bay window and hesitated, holding back. Mycroft looked up and nodded to him. The man took an envelope from his pocket and handed it over. Mycroft took a small knife from his pocket and slit the envelope open. Taking out the letter inside, he read it briefly, then sighed. Sherlock was too far away to hear any words, but he could distinctly see Mycroft's lips forming the words 'The Mortimer Maberley problem again – I don't know what he thinks I can do!'

Even when he was supposed to be at an evening's entertainment, Sherlock reflected, his brother still appeared to be working. Sherlock turned away, shaking his head. He loved his brother, but he was increasingly becoming annoyed by him. Sherlock was growing up, but Mycroft still treated him like a child.

The second half of the concert was, if anything, more technically and artistically amazing than the first, but Sherlock didn't enjoy it as much. His thoughts kept turning to what his brother had said, and to his own particular future. He had no great love for Farnham – it

was a pleasant town, with pleasant people, but he had never considered it as anything more than a temporary waypoint in his life, a stopping station, like those places horse-drawn carriages used to break their journeys across country so that the passengers could eat a meal and sleep before continuing their travels. London, on the other hand, had captivated him during his short time there. The city was almost like a person – it had its own character, its own moods, and it could change in a moment. He loved it, and he wanted to live the rest of his life there, if he could.

But first, Oxford. There seemed to be no way to avoid it. The trouble was that it was all built up like a row of dominos in Mycroft's mind – two years living in Oxford, being tutored by this Charles Dodgson, leading to entrance into the University and full-time studies, leading to a degree in some useless subject, leading to a dull job in government or in a bank, leading to . . . what? Retirement somewhere by the sea? That was not the kind of life he had planned out for himself.

Of course, he didn't actually have a plan for his life. At the moment he was just drifting, testing the waters, seeing where the currents would take him. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the vague thought that he might turn his logical thoughts and his ability to see through complex problems to the simple truths that lay within them into a full-time career – but as what? Some kind of policeman? A secret agent, maybe, like the ones

that obviously reported to his brother?

He sighed. Life appeared to get more and more complicated the older he got.

That thought led on naturally to thoughts of Virginia Crowe. He had, in the past, assumed that she and he would have some kind of life together, although he had never dared wonder at the nature of that life. It had just seemed that she would always be there for him, and him for her. But she was in America now, engaged to be married to someone else, and her father – the man who had taught Sherlock more in two years than he had learned in his entire life up to that point – was probably teaching someone else's son. Life, it would appear, had other plans for Sherlock.

It would be nice, he reflected bitterly, if life could actually let him know what those plans were.

The concert came to an end. The violinist took several curtain calls as the applause kept on coming. Stone was on his feet, clapping wildly. Sherlock joined in, but his heart wasn't in it. Thoughts of Oxford, and degrees, and banks, kept intruding.

The two of them made their way out of the theatre, along with the rest of the audience. On the pavement, Stone turned to Sherlock and extended a hand. 'Good night, Sherlock,' he said, and then added, 'Don't let your brother's words discourage you. He may have his plans, but it's your life to live. Go with your heart.'

'Thanks,' Sherlock replied, shaking Stone's hand. 'But

wherever I end up, I hope you will seek me out there. I haven't made many friends in my life, but I count you as one of them.'

Stone nodded. 'And I you.' He smiled. 'I have friends in the Oxford area – well, to be completely honest, I have friends pretty much everywhere. Farnham was always just somewhere to live while I carried out a job – a job that became something much more, I should point out. I could just as well live in Oxford as in Farnham – and, I have to say, the chance to listen to, and play, good music is much better there. Do not be surprised if you bump into me sometime soon.' He raised a hand to his head in a sketchy salute. 'I will see you again, Sherlock. Until then, be careful, and take care of yourself.'

Stone vanished into the crowd, Sherlock turned away. He had only taken two steps when a voice beside him said, 'What was all that about then?'

It was Matty – Matthew Arnatt. Sherlock knew the voice without having to look.

'It looked pretty serious,' he went on. 'It looked like a "goodbye and fare thee well". You're not off to China again, are you?' Matty's tone was casual, but Sherlock could detect an undercurrent of unease in his friend's voice. Matty had once told Sherlock that he had spent his life watching friends and family leave him. He had resigned himself to being lonely all his days.

'It's Mycroft,' Sherlock admitted without turning. 'He's got plans for me. He wants me to go to Oxford.'

There was a moment's silence. Sherlock didn't dare look at Matty's face. He and the boy had spent a lot of time together over the past few years, but that had been broken by his unplanned visit to China. Although the two of them had grown close again since they had met up in Ireland, the more so after a few weeks in London, he wasn't sure that Matty would want to be uprooted again.

He was surprised.

'Oxford's nice,' Matty said. 'You can get there by boat, all the way up the Thames, pretty much. Been there before, I have, an' it's very pleasant. Lots of toffs leaving half-eaten food lying around on the grass by the river after they've 'ad a picnic, an' lots of absent-minded lecturers doin' the same. Rich pickings, for someone like me. Even the swans there eat better than some of the people 'ere in London.'

'You would come with me?' Sherlock asked, finally turning to look into Matty's face.

The boy was smiling. 'Why not?' he said. 'This city's too big for me, an' the market stallholders are too fly. It's difficult to get a decent meal without them chasin' after me twice a day. When are we off?'

'Soon, I think,' Sherlock said.

'Fair enough. I've got everything I need on the barge, an' Harold's been itching for a move. 'E's not like my old 'orse, Albert. 'E just wanted to stand in one spot an' eat grass an' 'ay forever. 'Arold likes to move around.'

'Can you get the barge along the Thames?' Sherlock

asked. 'After all, it's a river, rather than a canal.'

Matty nodded. 'It's possible, but the width makes it tricky – not so much when you're movin' along the river, but more when you need to come off it on to the Oxford Canal. Thinkin' 'bout it, might be better if we went straight up the Grand Junction Canal, then came off on to the Oxford Canal at the top rather than the bottom an' get to Oxford from the north, rather than the south.'

'Sounds good to me.' Sherlock caught the boy's eye. 'Look, are you sure you want to come? Don't do it just because you think I need looking after.'

Matty nodded. 'Yeah.' He seemed as if he was about to go on, then he looked away, suddenly embarrassed. 'That is, if you want me to. I mean, if you'd rather be on your own . . .'

'No,' Sherlock said firmly. 'There might be times when I like being alone, but there are definitely times I need to be with friends – and I haven't got that many of them.'

'Suppose I'll 'ave to do then,' Matty said with a lopsided smile.

'Suppose you will,' Sherlock echoed.

'Besides . . .' Matty said, and trailed off.

'Besides what?'

'Well, I don't like to say. It's not very nice.'

'Force yourself.'

'Well, I s'pose we'll be seeing less of your brother in Oxford.'

Sherlock thought for a moment. It was getting harder and harder to get Mycroft out of London. In fact, it was getting harder and harder to get Mycroft out of the Diogenes Club. There was a distinct correlation between his reluctance to travel and his size. 'I doubt,' Sherlock replied, 'that Mycroft would spend as much time with us as he does here, in London.'

'That's good.' Matty glanced sideways at Sherlock. 'It's not that I don't like 'im – it's that he don't like me. An' besides, he keeps tryin' to teach me stuff, like readin' an' writin'. I don't need that stuff.'

Sherlock thought back to his argument with his brother only an hour or so before, when he had told Mycroft that he didn't need to learn about dead languages or old books. Wasn't that more or less a refined version of what Matty had just said? Perhaps he should be less picky about the facts he allowed into his brain.

He shook himself to get rid of the uncomfortable thought.

'Now, let's get some food,' he said, changing the subject. 'Where do you recommend?'

'Borough Market'll be closin' down now. There'll be plenty of pies an' apples goin' spare.'

'Spare?' Sherlock questioned.

'Well, if the stall-owner's back is turned. The way I see it, we're doin' them a favour. If we didn't take the food then, they'd only 'ave to carry it 'ome again, then back to the market next day, an' the chances are that it might

have gone off overnight an' someone'll get stomach ache from eatin' it.'

'You're right,' Sherlock said. 'We're actually providing a public service.' He clapped Matty on the shoulder. 'Let's go, and on the way you can tell me more about Oxford.'