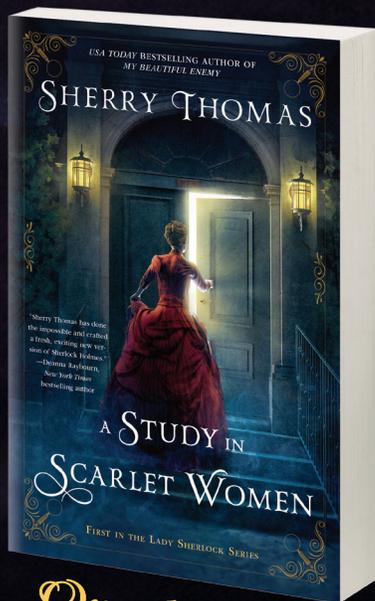




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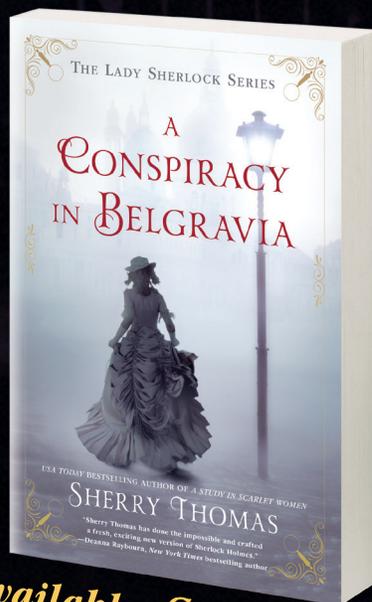
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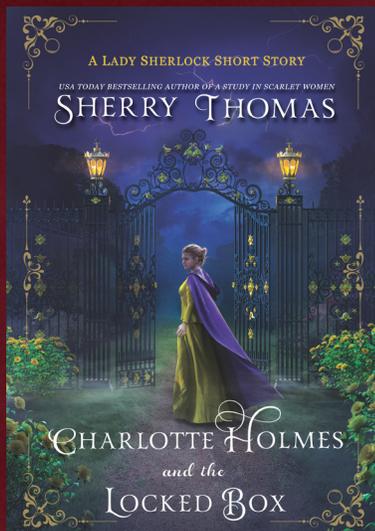
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CHARLOTTE HOLMES
and the LOCKED BOX



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Charlotte Holmes and the Locked Box

By: Sherry Thomas

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“Madame Gascoigne will be making sablé biscuits for our afternoon tea,” said Mrs. John Watson to her young friend, Miss Charlotte Holmes.

Few things galvanized Miss Holmes as easily and consistently as rich, sweet confections. Of course, it wasn't easy to discern her excitement—the non-reactions in her repertoire were legion. But Mrs. Watson knew Miss Holmes well enough now to remark the momentary wistfulness in her wide, blue eyes. “I've never had sablé biscuits.”

“Madame Gascoigne has been wasted on me,” said Mrs. Watsons wryly. She might have had an unconventional past, but her dining habits were terribly unadventurous. “I believe your appetite and sheer interest in every variety of food have given her a much needed jolt of stimulation. Mr. Mears tells me she has been reading her collection of French cookery books in the servants' hall, a sight he had never seen before.”

Miss Holmes nodded solemnly. “That is welcome news. The French are very fond of butter and cream and so am—”

The bell rang. It must be their client Mrs. Gleason, who, according to the grandfather clock in the corner, was ten minutes late to her appointment.

Mrs. Watson answered the front door. Mrs. Gleason was a small, faded-looking woman of about forty, her face framed in a halo of frizzy, reddish hairs that had escaped the confines of her coiffure. Beyond her the street was awash in rain, a solid downpour rather than the usual drizzle.

“I'm sorry I'm so late—I can never seem to leave the house on time,” said Mrs. Gleason breathlessly. “And sorry to bring rain inside.”

Mrs. Watson took her umbrella. “This is an English house--it doesn't mind a little rain around the periphery. Do please come up. Miss Holmes is waiting for you.”

“Miss Holmes? Is Mr. Holmes not home then?”

“It's a bit complicated. I'll let Miss Holmes explain.”

Miss Holmes greeted Mrs. Gleason cordially and did the usual song-and-dance about her brother Sherlock's ill health. “But he is in the next room. We have set it up so that he can see and

hear everything. And while he isn't well enough to receive guests, he will be able to convey to me his thoughts and deductions."

"I see," said Mrs. Gleason uncertainly.

"Would you like to know for certain that Sherlock's powers of observation and deduction are very much intact?"

It was the question Miss Holmes asked all her clients. If they said yes, then Miss Holmes proceeded to lay out what she already knew of them by observation.

Mrs. Gleason glanced at Mrs. Watson, as if hoping Mrs. Watson might tell her what to say. Mrs. Watson smiled as encouragingly as she could—it hurt her to see a grown woman so unsure of herself, of whether she even ought to have a firm opinion.

"I—I don't wish to give Mr. Holmes any extra trouble. It must be trying for him to be unwell."

Miss Holmes rearranged the long, glossy ends of the big bow that sat low on her bodice. "It really won't be any trouble at all."

Her calmness seemed to discompose Mrs. Gleason further. "You have—you have already assured me that everything will work. That's enough for me, Miss Holmes."

Miss Holmes gazed at her a moment. "In that case, would you like to show us what you've been given for your birthday?"

In Mrs. Gleason's letter seeking an appointment with "Sherlock Holmes", she had written about a birthday present from a good friend that she couldn't open. After much careful unwrapping, Mrs. Gleason brought out a small wooden box secured by a largish word lock.

Mrs. Watson raised a brow. The lock, which featured five rotating disks, each with ten or twelve letters, appeared plenty sturdy. But the box it kept shut looked like an oversized matchbox, so flimsy that any halfway decent parasol ought to be able to smash it in.

"And this is the clue." Mrs. Gleason handed over a slip of paper.

Miss Holmes and Mrs. Watson examined the writing on the paper, which consisted of a four-digit number and, on the next line, a row of dashes and spaces.

1651

“My friend is terribly kind to remember me,” said Mrs. Gleason in a small voice. “And I wish very much to thank her. But I have been dragging my feet on the matter because I have no idea what her gift is.”

Miss Holmes rose from her chair. “Do excuse me, Mrs. Gleason. I will show everything to my brother.”

She departed to the next room and closed the door. Mrs. Watson urged a cup of tea and a slice of Madeira cake on Mrs. Gleason.

“I do hope,” whispered their client all of a sudden, “that I haven’t offended Miss Holmes when I said I didn’t need to be reassured.”

“Not at all.”

“Are you sure?”

Mrs. Watson leaned in an inch. “Between you and me, I do not believe Miss Holmes knows how to take offense.”

It was an exaggeration, but not, Mrs. Watson felt, an egregious one.

Miss Holmes returned after precisely two minutes. “Sherlock has given me the solution to the puzzle. But first he’d like me to ask you if by some chance you lived with this friend of yours for a time.”

Mrs. Gleason was taken aback. “Yes, I did. The first few years after my husband passed away.”

“And you were there until your parents summoned you home to look after them?”

“Yes. Well, not exactly. I wouldn’t say they summoned me home. I volunteered, of course—duties of a daughter.”

“Your mother passed away a little more than a year ago and your father isn’t in terribly optimistic shape either,” announced Miss Holmes.

“How—how does Mr. Holmes know *that*?”

“You were in a hurry as you left home, were you not? In your haste, you took a pair of mourning gloves on your way out.” Miss Holmes laced her fingers together in her lap. “The rest of your attire is normal, which implies the mourning period for your mother must have passed. It’s considered unlucky to keep mourning wear in the house after mourning has ended. I imagine you got rid of your mourning gowns but hesitated on also getting rid of the accessories, because you might need them again soon.”

Mrs. Gleason shrank before this tide of logic. “I shouldn’t have kept them, should I? It was wrong of me.”

“You didn’t do anything blameworthy—it’s wasteful to acquire an entirely new mourning wardrobe each time a close relation dies. And Sherlock only meant to convey that it has been a difficult few years for you, having to look after two ill and distempered parents. Very different from the easy compatibility you shared with your friend.”

Mrs. Gleason’s lips quivered. “She is ill, too, unfortunately. Gravely so. But I cannot get away to see her. My father wouldn’t like it—he needs me here.”

“But he wouldn’t be uncared for—there will be others in the house to look after his wellbeing.” Miss Holmes laid her hand on top of the box. “He may not like your absence, but he cannot stop you from going, just as this word lock only *appears* to be an obstacle.”

“How—how so?” Mrs. Gleason seemed utterly confused.

“The box will break apart with the slightest application of force.”

“But—”

“Mrs. Watson, please hand me one of Sherlock’s walking sticks.”

Mrs. Watson complied with great alacrity. Mrs. Gleason stared at the walking stick as if it were a cobra about to strike. “What--what if I damage the contents?”

“You must have shaken the box, Mrs. Gleason, as I have. You know there is at most one or two pieces of paper inside, nothing that can be shattered by a quick blow.”

Mrs. Gleason chewed her lower lip and made no response.

“Your beloved friend, in her failing health, sent you a box that is difficult to open but easy to destroy,” said Miss Holmes, very softly. “Do you believe she wishes you to reflect—or to act?”

Mrs. Gleason’s mouth opened and closed several times. “But if I do as you suggest, I might damage your table.”

Miss Holmes laid the box on the padded arm of a sofa. “Here then. You will damage nothing.”

Mrs. Gleason glanced at Mrs. Watson again. Mrs. Watson nodded at her, her own hands clenched together. But her support, instead of spurring Mrs. Gleason to action, only made the latter take a step back.

Miss Holmes, undeterred, held out the walking stick. “Aim at the center and take a good whack.”

Miss Gleason accepted the walking stick, but in the manner with which she must accept everything else in her life: by a lack of resistance.

“Wouldn’t you prefer to give me the combination to the lock, Miss Holmes? It would be so much neater that way.”

The piteous way she pleaded her case—she might as well be on her knees, tears flowing freely, her arms wrapped around Miss Holmes’s knees.

“Do you wish to see your friend as desperately as she wishes to see you, Mrs. Gleason?”

Mrs. Gleason shut her eyes tight. “Yes.”

“Have you given a thought, perhaps, to the idea that inside the box, there is a railway ticket for you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s inside.”

“What would you have done, had she sent a ticket in an envelope?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do. You would have thanked her and thanked her, then told her that you couldn’t possibly go—that your father wouldn’t hear of it. But the woman who ignores the lock, breaks the box, and puts her hand on the ticket inside? She will use that ticket. Do you wish to be someone who keeps the ticket and looks upon it with regret or someone who goes on a journey?”

Mrs. Gleason shook. The frizzy halo around her face, the still damp edges of her skirt, the walking stick in her hand—everything vibrated with such fearfulness that Mrs. Watson couldn’t breathe. She nearly screamed when Mrs. Gleason’s first blow landed against the back of the sofa.

Her second attempt hit the word lock squarely. The third strike smashed the box, sending it to the floor in pieces. As it fell, two pieces of paper floated out, a railway ticket, and a note that said, *Please come, my dear Eliza.*

Very careful, Mrs. Gleason set aside the walking stick. Then she picked up both the note and the ticket. “It’s for three days hence,” she murmured, panting as if she had fought twelve rounds in the ring. “I will go. I will not disappoint her again.”

*

After Mrs. Watson saw Mrs. Gleason out, she allowed herself a moment at the foot of the stairs to wipe away her tears. She returned to the parlor to see Miss Holmes collecting pieces of the box from the floor.

“What of the lock? Did you solve the combination?” She smacked herself on the forehead. “But of course you solved the combination. That’s how you knew there was a rail ticket inside.”

Miss Holmes pitched a two-hand scoop of box fragments into a wastebasket. “My sister and I were both shameless snoops. It would seem I still am.”

Mrs. Watson picked up the clue again and studied it.

1651

“A clue for the old lady, perhaps?”

Miss Holmes looked around. “Where is she?”

Mrs. Watson laughed, delighted by the compliment. “All right, a clue for your partner, Miss Holmes.”

“All the letters in the solution happen to be Roman numerals.”

Mrs. Watson gasped. Of course, now it was so obvious. 1651 represented the total of all the numbers and the groups of dashes gave the number of digits of each roman numeral. The one in the leftmost spot was M, for 1000, the rightmost I for 1. The two-digit number must be 50, L in Caesar’s day. The two three digit-numbers needed to add up to six hundred, so C and D, which meant the solution was either MCDLI or MDCLI.

The lock came undone obligingly.

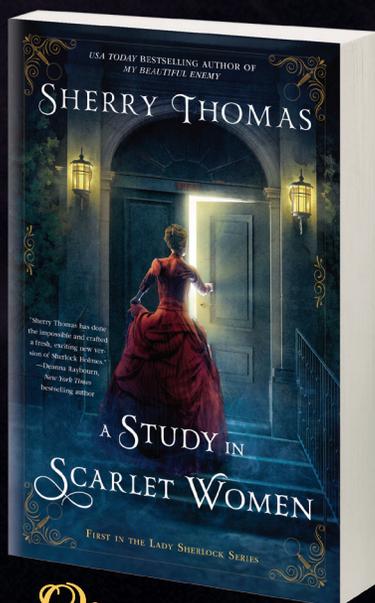
Mrs. Watson glanced at Miss Holmes. “Did it cross your mind to simply open the lock for Mrs. Gleason?”

“Of course. But she was meant to break the box, wasn’t she?” Miss Holmes was in front of the mirror by the door, fastening her hat. “Let’s go home. I’m ready for sablé biscuits.”

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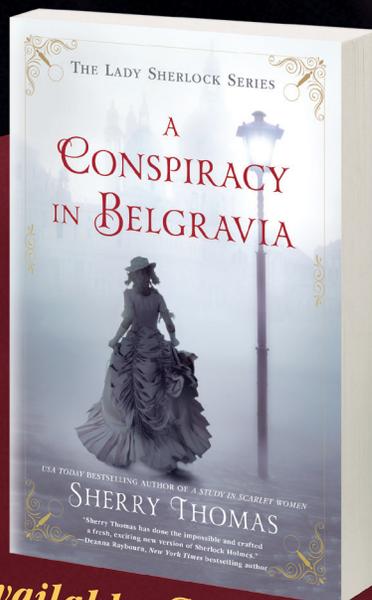
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