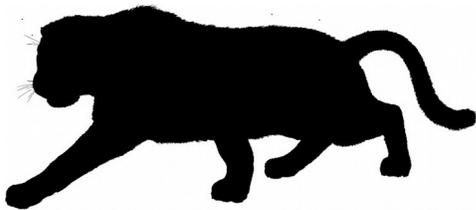


A Most
DANGEROUS

Prey

by

B. L. Higgins



“The *Weres* of London” Mystery Adventure Novel.

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PREFACE

I have written fiction stories since my high school Creative Writing class days, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth. At that time, however, the only way to publish one's work was to go through the big publishing houses, something that was a daunting task, even for the big name writers. So, instead, I entered another field altogether.

Then the internet was born and I discovered a little something called *fanfiction*.

Like, wow, there are places where I can actually publish my stories and people will actually *read* them? I took to this new medium like the proverbial duck to water, starting out with BBC Sherlock fanfiction site AO3. I had previously published some short stories in a now-defunct website, but they hadn't gotten much play before it closed. Here, I had an audience of hundreds, if not thousands, of fans who actually *wanted* to read my work! So, having received some kudos and comments from the readers over the years, and having gone through some personal experiences that fundamentally changed the way I perceive the world, I decided to publish my work on my own.

So, why write about Sherlock Holmes? Simple. I love the characters. I love the original stories. And I love what can be done with them.

I became addicted to them via the redoubtable Basil Rathbone and his colleague, Nigel Bruce. Theirs was the first incarnation to which I was exposed, and the one that formed my lifelong love of the characters. I have read all the canon stories and watched the movies, trying learn how to *think* like the illustrious detective, with varying degrees of success.

Then Jeremy Brett came along with his colleagues, and canon Sherlock became a living, breathing entity (canon relates to the original stories or any author-sanctioned works). His Watsons (there were 2) became fully-fleshed characters in their *own* right, much more like the “bulldog of a man” that AC Doyle had envisioned than the somewhat more comical Nigel Bruce, who was *still* the first Watson to have a role equal to that of the lead character in a Sherlockian film or play.

Finally, there was Sherlock, of BBC fame. A modern incarnation with more quirks and peccadilloes than you could shake a walking stick at. He and his Watson, who more accurately resembles an angry chihuahua with a gun than a bulldog, have captured my imagination in an entirely new way. They have inspired me to write, especially since their creators have not always provided the fans with the scenarios or answers that they have craved over the years.

The *first* fanfiction in modern history was, probably, Sherlock Holmes fanfiction. When AC Doyle killed off the Consulting Detective at Reichenbach Falls, all of London mourned. People wore black armbands, and the first fanfiction was written by those who couldn't tolerate the idea of their hero being dead. It took several years, and much cajoling and gnashing of teeth, for the fans to prod ACD into bringing back the illustrious Sherlock Holmes and continue on with his adventures, something the author hated with a passion, saying that if writing Sherlock Holmes was the only thing he was remembered for, he would consider his life to be a failure.

AC Doyle is currently spinning in his grave.

Oddly enough, people remember Sherlock Holmes as being a master sleuth, whereas, in truth, the stories aren't about the cases, which can be pretty lame on their own. No, they are more about the men themselves; the relationship between Holmes and his Watson is one of the most iconic in literature and has inspired many other literary and film adaptations.

The many incarnations of Holmes and Watson over the years have served as inspiration for many a novice writer. Thanks to the time in which ACD wrote, the Sherlockian canon is open to interpretation through the legal ruling of Public Domain. Basically, it has outlived any copyrights

on the characters and plots (with minor exceptions) by any given person.

As he progressed in his writing, AC Doyle grew to *hate* Holmes and wanted nothing more than to never visit the character again. When the actor William Gillette asked Doyle if he could write a play in which Sherlock Holmes got married, Doyle bluntly stated, "You may marry him, or murder him, or do anything you like with him!", thereby opening Sherlock Holmes up to the tender mercies of his fans.

Besides *that* mandate, the Public Domain nature of Sherlock Holmes made him ripe for fanfiction. *Anyone* can write about him as long as they don't publish anything that could infringe upon modern copyrights, as pertaining to certain Sherlock-related movies and TV shows. Any attempt to write for publication within the confines of a copyrighted incarnation would require authorizations and expenses that would deter most writers.

However, Sherlock Holmes, in his original state, is public domain material. Hence this novel, which came out of a desire to write something...*different* than the usual Holmesian adventure.

I hope you will enjoy it.

B. L. Higgins

Chapter 1: One Good Turn...

The Setting: Modern-day London.

There had always been something of the feline about Sherlock Holmes. Not that I had ever noticed anything overt, like playing with string or getting high on catnip. No, it was in the little things that one could see it--the quick, quiet steps; the way in which his eyes darted around a room, finding any little detail or movement and snatching it up; how he could curl those impossibly long limbs of his into the tiniest of spaces; the fascinating, yet unsettling, eyes which could change color on a whim. Yes, Sherlock certainly did possess cat-like qualities, which served him well in detective work, and, yet, he has always been so very human, even though he would himself frown upon the term.

No, there was never anything to cue me in until that case last October, when we were called out by Detective Inspector Lestrade of New Scotland Yard on a dank, drizzly night. Sherlock always *hated* the rain. Never one to carry an umbrella or, indeed, any unnecessary paraphernalia in his leather-gloved hands, he sat, damp and in a foul mood, in the back of an NSY police car next to me, trying hard not to sneeze and failing miserably.

“God, I *hate* having to leave Baker Street on a night like this,” he grouched, snuffling and rubbing

his nose with a knuckle. The rain brings out all kinds of..." he wrinkled his nose in distaste, "odors, most of them decidedly unpleasant to the sensitive nose."

I just raised an eyebrow at his little complaints most of the time, but this time I felt honor-bound to point something out to him. "But, Sherlock," I began, "your coat—your *favorite* coat, I may add, the one you wear *all the time*--is made of wool, which, as you know, can stink to high heaven when wet..."

His head swung toward me and I was favored with one of the most feral looks I have ever had the misfortune to see. "Leave. My. Coat. *Out of this!*" he snarled, biting off each word in annoyance. He settled back into his seat and directed his gaze forward, his expression dark. "My coat is made from pure Irish wool tweed, with natural qualities of comfort and breathability. It does not 'stink', as you say, in *any way, shape, or form.*"

I can't honestly tell you why, but I oftentimes can't resist needling Sherlock about certain things. His love for his coat is one of them. I truly believe that he prefers that coat's company to mine sometimes. He always forgives me for nettling him later, but it does tend to spice up otherwise dull or unpleasant cases.

The car skidded slightly as it came to a halt by a

small road in Bayswater, not too far from Hyde Park. We could have walked it if the weather had been nicer, but Lestrade knew how stropy Sherlock could be about coming out when it rained. By the time we arrived, the police had already cordoned off the area and a forensics team was on the grounds, searching for evidence and photographing the site. We peeled ourselves out of the back seat of the panda car and Sherlock immediately strode over to where Lestrade stood, conversing with his sergeant and a young officer unfamiliar to me.

“Lestrade,” Sherlock nodded curtly, pulling his coat collar up against the chill of the evening’s rain. At least, that’s what he *claims* he’s doing; Sherlock actually loves to be dramatic and he knows this action puts everyone on notice that the Consulting Detective has arrived. “Grayson. Aaand whoever *you* are.”

Lestrade’s second, a snarky sergeant named Grayson, took a deliberate sip of her coffee as her eyes slid sideways toward Lestrade as he waved the new officer away. “Rookie. He’s nowhere ready for *you*, Sherlock,” Lestrade observed as I walked up. “Ah, the good doctor. I was wondering where you were.”

“My legs aren’t quite as long as my associate’s, I’m afraid,” I joked, knowing it was all too true and how I’ve suffered from that inconvenience ever since Sherlock and I started investigating

cases together. “So, did I miss anything?”

“Nothing of importance,” Sherlock noted dryly. “Lestrade just sent off a new police officer so I wouldn’t scare him into early retirement. Not that he isn’t already second-guessing his chosen field of endeavor, judging by...”

Lestrade held up his hand to cut off the inevitable observational analysis. “Not now, Sherlock. Later on, you can give me your input on the career potential of our rookie but, right now, I have an...*interesting* case for you.” He made the word sound almost profane. “An interesting case” nearly always guarantees that NSY will have to endure Sherlock’s haughty presence for the duration. “This way,” he said, gesturing for us to follow.

As we approached the crime scene tape, Sherlock, as always, lifted it high into the air to allow himself to pass under it, and me as well. I have never been able to determine if this is a courtesy on his part toward me or if he just hesitates one second too long, allowing me to scoot under it. Either way, I always thank him and receive either a non-committal grunt or no response at all. That’s Sherlock—“Mr. Eloquence.” Of course, he promptly dropped it on Sgt. Grayson, who swore under her breath and muttered, “Arsehole.” His face partially in shadow, I could still see Sherlock smirk. There’s been a real “disdain/hate” relationship going on

between them ever since she took to calling him “The Weirdo” years ago. She and her fellow officers *hated* that Sherlock could run rings around them when it came to crime scene analysis.

“Over here,” Lestrade called, leading us to a crumpled form on the ground. On first impression, it looked like a heap of old clothes that somebody had thrown on wet ground, but stronger lights had been set up that would enable us to make out more detail. In the glow of these new “pseudo-daylight lamps”, the sight that met our eyes was ghastly. Usually, for Sherlock and me to be called in, the body or crime scene has to possess some peculiar quality which makes it too perplexing for the police to figure out, but *this* one looked like something out of a bad horror film, my favorite kind. The body had seemingly random cut-and-slice marks all over it; some of the cuts looked like the body had been partially skinned while others looked like they were meant to dismember but seemed rushed and incomplete, as if the killer had been scared away. The job was fast and bloody but the cuts were uniformly straight and, I noticed as I bent to examine the body, showed a strange sort of expertise.

“Odd thing, that,” I said, pointing to some of the cuts. “Most of these have no obvious purpose. Cutting for the sake of...*what*? Unlikely anyone is going to *eat* the removed flesh. It almost looks

ritualistic rather than surgical... Sherlock?"

A tall shadow fell across my light as my associate bent over the corpse. His eyes narrowed in concentration, taking in every visible detail. "Unlikely, John," he murmured. He pulled the trailing hem of his longcoat out of the way as he crouched down to get a closer look. "Look here—It looks like there are no parts actually *missing*, just removed and scattered around. Except," he indicated some missing fingertips, carefully cut off at the first joint, "*these* parts, done in obvious haste *and* an incomplete job. It makes no *sense*. Why go through all the trouble of making these cuts and not taking away anything but the tiniest tidbits?" He called over his shoulder, "Lestrade?"

Lestrade walked over, carefully avoiding the rivulets of blood that coursed downhill from the body. "What is it, Sherlock? Find anything of interest?" he asked as he bent over Sherlock's shoulder. "Please don't tell me it's Saucy Jack back again."

"Hardly, Lestrade," Sherlock replied, dryly, pointing to a number of sliced areas on the body where the clothing had been slashed or moved aside. "Have you found any large pieces of the body in the vicinity? Maybe in the trash or sewer?"

Lestrade shook his head. "Nope. Not yet. We're

still combing through everything in the alley and interviewing the witnesses who found her. I thought you'd want to get on this immediately because of...*this*," Lestrade said as he dramatically removed a piece of stained sheeting that had been covering the corpse's head.

Sherlock looked down at the victim's head and hissed. I mean, *literally* hissed, like a big, angry cat. Where the head should have been was a big pulpy mass, brain exposed and mushed, with no obvious bone structure left at all. The face had been all but obliterated, the head partially scalped to boot. Sherlock leaned in, his eyes almost round in horror at the sight. That, alone, was enough to clue me in that *something* was definitely not right. I have *never* seen Sherlock react like that in all the time we've been together. The smell of blood was overwhelming and I honestly thought Sherlock was going to faint, his face having turned whiter than the sheet that had been covering this mess.

"Sherlock, are you all right?" I asked him solicitously, resting my hand on his forearm. He didn't respond, just stared at the "head", nose wrinkled in disgust. He stood up in one fluid move and turned to Lestrade.

"There's nothing I can do at this very moment," he spoke sharply as he backed away from the body, obviously in a hurry to leave. I stood up as

well and watched Sherlock closely. He threw an indecipherable look my way before continuing. "Let me know when the body has been taken to St. Barts and the coroner has had a chance to examine it. I need to know if all the pieces are there. Also, I want *all* forensic reports as soon as they are finished, and they need to be finished by *yesterday*, am I clear?" Lestrade nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but Sherlock cut him off. "John, let's go. Back to Baker Street. Come on."

With that, he strode away, almost breaking into a run as he neared the car.

Lestrade turned to me for an explanation. "What the bloody hell was *that* all about? I mean, he hardly *looked* at the body!" he griped. "Is he... you know..." He made a gesture of shooting up drugs into his arm.

I shook my head. "No, nothing like that. I've been keeping a close eye on him. He's...fine. Or, at least, as fine as Sherlock ever gets."

Lestrade didn't look convinced. "If you say so, Doctor."

"Anyway, I need to catch up with him and find out what's the matter. I'll keep in touch." I ran after my partner as fast as I could, dodging crime scene technicians and police along the way. I could hear a few gust a sigh of relief as

we left the area.

As soon as I reached the car and looked inside, I could tell something was *majorly* wrong with Sherlock. He sat...no, actually, he almost *covered* in the back seat of the squad car. His color was still off and he sat with his arms wrapped tightly around himself. The look he gave me had just a touch of panic in it. "John. Inside. Now. Let's go," he ordered in clipped tones. I slipped into the seat next to him, shut the door, and rapped on the plastic partition. "221B Baker Street, please, and hurry. I do believe my friend is ill."

The driver nodded wordlessly and pulled away from the scene. I turned to regard my friend. He didn't return my gaze. He just sat there, curled in on himself, snuffling uncomfortably. I brushed the dark, rain-soaked hair away from his face, gently, to get a better look.

"Sherlock, are you all right?" I asked, in a soft voice. He shook his head, tiny side-to-side movements that barely conveyed the sentiment. When I touched his cheek with the back of my hand, he felt cold, and he was trembling. "I'll get you something to fortify you when we get home," I promised. He stared straight ahead, a simple nod the only answer he could muster.

Once safely inside the flat, Sherlock never actually made it to his chair. He threw off his

coat and, atypically, dropped it on the floor by the living room door before staggering to the couch, where he curled up into an impossibly small ball, facing the wall.

I must admit, I was astounded. I had never seen Sherlock look so...*small*, so fragile. It made my heart hurt. I grabbed the blanket off the back of my chair and threw it over his shuddering form, tucking it in around him. Then I picked up the Union Jack pillow and nestled it under his head, messing his hair as I did so. I heard a tiny, muffled, "John," as I turned away to pick up his coat and hang it on the rack behind the door. I hung up my jacket right next to it, then went into the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea. Searching around the cabinets, I found a bottle of Jamison's. *A good fortifier, indeed*, I thought. Sherlock looked like he needed one. Though normally not a great drinker, even the great "Consulting Detective" sometimes needed a little pick-me-up.

I went over to the couch to check on my charge while I waited on the kettle. He had stopped shaking but his head was buried under the blanket. "You're going to suffocate under there," I warned him, in a mock-stern voice. "Come on out of there, Sherlock."

"NO!" he yelled, his normally-powerful voice muffled by the woolen coverlet. "Go away, John! Leave me *alone!*" He re-positioned himself and

pulled the blanket around himself even tighter.

I've seen Sherlock in all kinds of moods, so this one was nothing new. He could easily go from one extreme to another within seconds, without explanation. "Mercurial" is a good word for it. There's never an apology and never an explanation. You just had to go with it and, eventually, he would smooth out and start to resemble a normal human being again. *Maybe*.

The kettle whistled. I hustled over and began preparing two mugs of tea, one with sugar. For a man with such a sour disposition, Sherlock certainly loved his sugar. Maybe that was it—Sherlock was trying to reach chemical equilibrium by diluting the natural lemon juice he called blood with large quantities of sugar. Well, unfortunately, it didn't always work, but I sure hoped it would this time. Right now, he was evolving into a right pain in the arse and I was finding that, cold and wet and tired as I was, I wanted no part of it. I laced his mug with a liberal dose o' the James for, you know, *therapeutic* reasons. Maybe it would knock him out, if I was very, very lucky.

I set my own mug down beside my chair and brought Sherlock's over to him, setting it down atop a magazine on the coffee table. "Sherlock, tea," I said, as I shook his shoulder (at least, I *think* it was his shoulder—he's so damned bony, it's sometimes hard to tell what is what) and he

just grumbled, without moving. I shook him again, more vigorously this time. “Sherlock, TEA! It’ll get cold!” I yelled at him, never expecting the response I got.

The plaid woolen blanket flew into the air in a flurry of long, slender limbs. Sherlock exploded off the couch and onto his feet in front of me, snarling, his face contorted and almost unrecognizable. He stood in a sort of half-crouch, his back curved unnaturally. His eyes were bright gold with a wide, but obviously slitted, pupil. He grabbed the front of my jumper and I could feel his nails—hell, his *claws*—scrape against my skin as he pushed his face into mine.

“I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE ME ALONE!” he roared, long white fangs bared with each word. His voice was different; *everything* was different. This wasn’t the Sherlock Holmes I knew. I’m not sure *anyone* knew *this* particular incarnation. It was, in a word, *terrifying*.