

LBRIS



CASTLE SHADE

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CHAPTER ONE

IRIPPED MYSELF FROM THE fever dream somewhere west of Ljubljana. My face was pressed up to a window, as it had been in the dream. Outside was the same mist-soaked night, the same eerie glow of a full moon.

I jerked upright and thrust out my hands, turning them over, back and front – but even in the near-dark, I could see they were perfectly clean. There were no red and dripping stains gloving the skin.

And no wolves, I thought, chasing after the smell of blood on my hands. The pack's vivid howls merged into the distant rise and fall of a passing train's whistle, while my horse-drawn carriage and its sinister driver became, reluctantly, an aged train compartment behind a steam-powered engine.

I shuddered to rid myself of the macabre sensations, then pulled

the thin blanket back up around my shoulders, coughing as I patted around for my glasses. With them on my nose, menace retreated a step. Only a nightmare. Wolves and a carriage, triggered by our destination. The blood, though ... I'd had the blood of two different dead men on my hands, these past months. Perhaps I should have anticipated the psychic toll.

I wiped ineffectually at the cracked window, trying to see where we were. Not a mysterious forest, thank goodness, but a railway station, with one dim light shining through the decorative iron braces of the platform roof. Silent and deserted.

How long had I been here? For that matter, where was *here*? My memories weren't entirely gone – I knew what *that* felt like – just... slow. Like pulling a boot from deep mud. Let me see: we had boarded the train in the Côte d'Azur. And we were headed to Roumania. The last station-marker I'd noticed was – Padua?

None of which helped much. I squinted at the rusty and ill-lit metal sign, decided that I had assembled as much information as I could without outside resources, tossed back the travelling rug – and only then realised that I was not alone in the compartment.

'Holmes, what are you—' I began, then dissolved into a fit of coughing, followed by an enormous sneeze. That knocked loose a recollection: the Murphy children, back in France, hacking and snuffling in all directions. 'Sorry, I seem to have picked up a head cold. And I think a fever – I had the most vivid dream, that I was in Jonathan Harker's coach at the start of *Dracula*. *All the evil things in the world will have full sway* – sorry, I'm babbling. But why are you sitting there in the dark? And where on earth are we? I can't even tell what language that sign is.' Surely Italian didn't have that pepper-pot sprinkling of accents and subscript marks?

He stirred in his dark corner. His feet came down from the seat,

his features coming into view as he leant forward to look out of the window. 'I believe that is Slovenian,' he said, then retreated back into the shadows.

Slovenia. Edge of the Balkans, south of ... everywhere. Next to Italy?

I sneezed again. This time his arm stretched out, offering a clean handkerchief. Sherlock Holmes always had a clean handkerchief. I used it, and again the pressure on my sinuses knocked forth a couple of ideas. First, that any question Holmes did *not* answer was generally more important than the one he did, and second, the fog I was looking through was not all on the outside.

'Good Lord, Holmes, are you trying to suffocate us?' I stood to wrestle with the window latch, no more able to smell the air than I could read the sign outside, but knowing that at least some of my dizziness was due to the dense smoke in my lungs. Heaven only knew how long he had been sitting there in the dark, mulling over some conundrum. By the looks of the compartment's atmosphere, it had been quite a five pipe problem.

The stuff that billowed out into the night was thick enough to summon the fire services. I dropped onto my seat, coughing now with fresh air rather than stale fag.

With an exaggerated show of patience, Holmes put down his pipe and picked up the Italian newspaper from the seat beside him. He crossed his legs and switched on a reading lamp, to disappear behind the pages.

When the coughing spate passed, I tried again. 'Slovenia is some way from Bucharest.'

My husband and partner muttered something under his breath. The exiting air had ceased to look like a chimney, so I closed the window somewhat, scowled at the station name that might have been spillage from a typesetter's tray, then turned on my companion a glare strong

enough to burn a hole in the pages he was pretending to read. He raised the paper a little.

‘How long have we been sitting here?’ Another mutter. ‘*How long?*’

He gave up, folding the newspaper noisily into something resembling a rectangle, and took out his watch. ‘Not quite three hours.’

During which time he had not been stirring up alternate transport or threatening the engineer with bodily harm, but instead, silently poisoning us both with nicotine.

I recognised the signs. To find him curled in a corner with his filthy old pipe and a handful of the very cheapest tobacco meant he was searching for connections between a series of apparently unrelated facts. As Dr Watson said, Holmes had a positive genius for minutiae – dogs that stayed silent, dried pips from an orange. Many of his cases started with some tiny event that the rest of humanity would not even notice.

A pipe-fuelled rumination explained why he had been sitting there, oblivious to the world. However, in my current state, there was little point asking what he was working on. I would never be able to follow his thoughts without stimulation of my own.

‘What are the chances of getting some tea?’

‘Very slim. We left the dining car behind in Trieste.’

‘Trieste?’ I laboriously summoned a mental image of Europe, drawing a line between where we had started and where I’d thought we were going. Granted, I’d been both busy and distracted in the Riviera, where several much-interrupted nights (and, I suspected now, a low-grade fever) caused my brain to shut down within minutes of boarding the train. That same mental state, come to think of it, had led me to follow Holmes blindly in the first place, without questioning the details of his travel plans. Never a wise thing to do.

‘Holmes, why the devil are we . . . never mind. Where’s the *Bradshaw*’s?’

‘Our *Bradshaw’s Guide* appears to be somewhat out of date. Hence the siding upon which we sit.’ He handed me a book that looked as if it had walked from Paris on its own.

‘Holmes, this was published before the War.’

‘I was assured that little had changed in this part of the Continent.’

‘You were duped,’ I said brutally. I dropped the thick volume onto the seat, causing several pages to shoot to the floor. When I stood, stretching my cramped limbs, I could feel the rawness in my throat and the ache in my bones.

Children: such a gift.

The passageway was dark, lit by bulbs of tiny wattage at both ends. I set off down it, glancing into the other compartments, but the train seemed as deserted as the station. Two cars back, I became aware of a noise, and followed it to the train’s last car. The snores of a uniformed attendant were causing the windows to rattle. Until I walked over and kicked his feet from their rest.

He fell to the floor, snorting himself awake, then leapt upright when he beheld me looming over him. ‘Madam! Yes! May I be of service?’ He straightened his tie and looked surreptitiously around for his shoes.

‘How do I get to Vienna?’

The answer required his cap, but that, once firmly squared on his blunt head, seemed to bring a degree of professional memory. ‘Madam is going to Bucharest, is she not?’

‘Madam is clearly going nowhere at the moment, and I can’t see why I should visit every tiny village in Eastern Europe on the way. Getting out of ...’ I waved towards the unpronounceable sign outside. ‘... here, in *any* direction will give us more of a chance of actual progress than waiting for the tides to wash us to the northeast.’

He blinked in incomprehension, and bent to retrieve the footwear he had spotted under the table.

I sighed. 'Do you have a *Bradshaw's*? Or any train schedule?'

The one he had was in German, but it was only three years out of date, rather than Holmes' fifteen. I pored over it, trying to locate a string of letters approximating those on the sign outside. I found one at last, followed its listings along the page, then consulted the clock on his wall.

'We are here?' I asked. He bent to study the name above my finger.

'Yes, madam,' he said, following that with a noise like an aged coal miner clearing his throat. I took a sharp step back, then decided he'd been pronouncing the village name.

'And *this* train, going west, will pass here at three-fifteen? This is Tuesday, right? And not a second or fourth Tuesday?' There did not seem to be any other tiny-print rubrics in the train schedule – assuming it was still August, and I hadn't been in a Sleeping Beauty coma on the cramped leather seat.

He looked at the calendar under the clock, his lips moving as he worked on the complicated matter of the day of the week, then nodded. 'Yes, madam.'

Now the big question: 'Can you get that train to stop?'

'But madam, your tickets are for ...'

The gaze that had failed to ignite Holmes' newspaper worked a treat on the attendant. He did up a button on his uniform coat and nodded vigorously. 'I can, madam.'

'You stop that train, and I shall reward you. You let it go by, and I shall not be pleased.'

He actually gulped, and snatched up a lantern to trot away down the corridor.

I went back, ever the optimist, to tell Holmes he should gather his things.

The approaching train seemed determined to roll on through, but

our wildly gesturing attendant did catch the engineer's attention at the last moment, and the squeal of slammed-on brakes managed to stop it before it had entirely gone past the station platform.

We waited until our new attendant appeared – rumpled, unshaven, and clearly flung from his sleep by the abrupt deceleration. The two men hurled recriminations and explanations at each other, ending when Holmes shoved his valise into the new man's arms and climbed through the train's open door.

The man led us to a compartment, satisfyingly empty. When I then asked if he might possibly be able to find some warm food for two benighted travellers, either my demure fluttering of eyelashes or (more likely) the sizeable tip he had seen me hand the first attendant soon had us seated in the dim, barren dining car, while hopeful noises came from the kitchen.

What seemed like two minutes later a simple feast appeared: tea – blessedly hot and reasonably near-British. It was soon followed by fat, buttery omelettes and bread only slightly stale.

We pronounced ourselves well satisfied, and sent the cook back to his bunk.

I surfaced at the end of the omelette – which must have employed at least six eggs – and soothed my raw throat with more tea. At last, with the urgent needs of alternative travel and stoking the inner furnaces behind me, I could attempt to make sense of our longer-term issues.

Namely, what on earth we were doing here.

CHAPTER TWO

‘ALL RIGHT, HOLMES, WHAT’S going on?’
‘There is a situation of interest in Roumania.’

‘You told me that some days ago.’ It had seemed unlikely at the time, standing on a sun-drenched walk over the Monaco harbour. Roumania was as close as Europe got to wilderness: neither West nor East, not quite feudal yet a fair distance from a functioning democracy, a land beyond the reaches of the Cook’s guides. ‘And granted, it’s a place where the maps have “Here be dragons,” but I can’t see why we needed quite such a roundabout route. Instead of the nice, luxurious Train Bleu back to Paris and a transfer to the Orient Express, you chose a long, slow meander on a rock-hard seat, with no dining car, through villages with names like Coughhackiščina and Phlegmjaja?’

‘Are you in a hurry to get somewhere, Russell?’

'I ... Holmes, *you're* the one with the urgent task! Aren't you? I'd have been more than happy to spend another week in the Côte d'Azur, baking out this head cold. Instead – what awaits us in Bucharest, anyway?'

'Not Bucharest.'

'No?'

'A village near the town of Braşov, in Transylvania.'

'Transyl— good God.' I stared at him. If Roumania was a realm of dragons, then the province of Transylvania would be the creature's lair: dark, mysterious, and potentially deadly. There was a reason why Bram Stoker chose it as the home of his ancient vampire – a novel that had given me nightmares even before I knew I was going there.

'It is actually quite a pleasant piece of countryside,' Holmes insisted. 'Mineral resources, rich agricultural valleys, the Carpathians for defence. A fascinating source of folkloric traditions and superstitions.'

'One assumes their farmers grow plenty of garlic. You were there, right?'

'I was, yes. A week of what might be called reconnaissance, while you were sailing from Venice to the Riviera.'

'A whole week? And you didn't solve the case?'

'My – *our* client was not there at the time.'

'Who is this client? You said in Monaco you had an interesting woman with an intriguing problem.' The other word he'd let drop that day – *vampires* – might have sparked my subconscious imagination, but I had taken it for one of his laboured witticisms, and had not dignified it with further questions.

'Our client is the Queen of Roumania.'

'Queen *Marie*? Wow.'

Granddaughter of two empires – her father was Victoria's second son, her mother the only surviving daughter of Tsar Alexander II – Marie had been given to the crown prince of Roumania, now Ferdinand I, the