

RESONANCE

An Eleanor Hargrove Mystery

By Tom Snell

Approx 36,000 words

I have known so few ways of making my life good for anything.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter IX

Chapter 1

New York City, Present Day

6:12 a.m.

My phone buzzed once. Then silence. Clutching the last thread of a dream, I jolted awake. I pawed the nightstand: glasses, paperback, and with a flop, the *Mill on the Floss* hit the floor. The screen lit up. No one had texted this early in months.

1 New Message

From: Sam Hughes

10:12 a.m. (GMT)

Need your help. Sending package.

Victorian materials + journal in cipher.

Found something big. Can't say more

now. See what you think.

More soon.

I sat up so fast the top sheet twisted around my legs like a bad tourniquet. There it was: her name. Sam Hughes. She'd vanished five months ago, leaving behind a few stray texts that dwindled into silence.

Sam only asked for help in two cases: genuine emergencies and recipes with more than three ingredients.

"Victorian materials. Journal." My eyes lingered. "Something big." Big enough to override pride, paranoia, whatever had kept her silent. Almost a year ago, she'd mentioned her father's papers. "Mostly boring estate stuff, but you know, 'Turn every page.'" At the time, I'd shrugged it off. Now, I wasn't so sure.

This wasn't a message. This was a flare.

I stumbled into the kitchen, phone clenched tight. Tea, my one liturgy of control. As I poured the steaming water into a mug, something from Freshman year came back to me.

We were in our common room, late, studying. Sam had *Jane Eyre* open, the paperback bristling with slips of paper and penciled notes. She was half-leaning over it, reading under her breath, not quite to me.

"I thought no more... in an instant I was within the chamber... tongues of flame... the curtains were on fire..."

"She didn't think," Sam said finally, more to herself than to me. "She just ran to save him."

"She nearly gets herself killed," I said, lifting my teacup.

She looked up and nodded once, slow. “She survived because she didn’t hesitate.”

I remember watching the steam rise from my tea, then looking up to find Sam watching me. Her eyes were fixed on mine, steady and expectant, as if she’d already decided something.

I think that was when we made the pact.

I texted back instantly:

When did you send it? What’s going on?

I waited.

Three dots. Please, give me the dots.

Nothing.

Are you okay? Call me?

Still nothing. Only the soft, battery-powered glow of a screen that had no intention of answering.

#

7:38 a.m.

The Upper East Side greeted me with its usual passive-aggressive polish: limestone facades, black Ubers idling like loyal footmen.

Rex, eighty pounds of forward momentum, was already halfway down the block, leash taut in my hand. Physics, that cruel tyrant. One tug from him and I was aloft.

As we stepped off the curb, an Escalade shot the red. Horns, brakes, shrieking rubber.

Rex tugged harder. Mid avenue, one of Sam's texts came back to me:

*What a jumble! In between some old deeds, I
found a scrap of colored vellum, badly burned.
Kinda fun. Vellum! Pre-Victorian. But why?*

We cut across Central Park, and I unclipped Rex's leash at our usual patch: an open green near Cherry Hill. Rex ran like an escaped convict. I sat on a damp bench and checked my phone.

Still no reply. Just spam.

A newsletter from Yale reminded me how many other alums were thriving. Then this:

To: ehargrove@aya.yale.edu

From: Harriet Maybury hmaybury@rouncewell.ox.ac.uk

Subject: Caution Regarding Mayhew Foundation

My pulse hiccupped. I scrolled down with caution. No links, no attachments.

Eleanor,

I hope you'll forgive this intrusion. I've heard you may be pursuing something with the Mayhew Foundation. I urge you to reconsider. Their so-called museum, in my professional opinion, is a sham. Please look deeper before attaching your name or work to it.

—*Professor Harriet Maybury*

Rouncewell College, Oxford

Harriet Maybury. As in *the Harriet Maybury. Nineteenth-Century Perspectives*. The name pulled up an old memory from my first conference, when a senior scholar misquoted her. Nervous but unwilling to let it stand, I rose and quoted the correct line from memory. I hadn't expected to hear from her again.

Mayhew. Victorian research. I re-read Sam's message. Then the email. Then Sam's message again.

One gear turned the other.

I stood up so fast I startled Rex. He barked, then bent to inspect a cigarette butt with professional interest.

On the walk back, Glade Arch was silent.

No Saxophone Guy.

The underpass was empty, a shadow and the echo of footfalls. He was usually there by eight, nodding his tacit greeting, a fixture in modal jazz and defiance. Occasionally, he'd blow a few bars of "Blue Train" for me. At least I told myself it was for me. I dropped a dollar in his case whenever I could.

Today? Nothing. Absence with reverb.

#

Back at the apartment, I dropped my coat and went straight to the laptop.

The Hughes family pied-à-terre —unused since Albert’s death two years ago. Stainless steel and granite. An espresso machine that probably had never brewed a cup. The place smelled faintly of new metal and restraint. I set the kettle to boil.

It wasn’t my apartment so much as Helen’s good taste on loan. Sam and Thomas’s mother had pressed the key into my palm after graduation, “for as long as you need” like a handler passing a live drop. Thomas stood beside her, watching the key the way he watched negotiations, as if everything exchanged between people carried a price.

A moment later, turning just enough that she couldn’t hear, he murmured, “Nicely played.”

It still stung. Not because it was true, but because he said it as if it were.

Helen’s generosity had a half-life. I could feel it decaying.

I opened Insta, hesitated, then typed in Sam’s old password. It still worked, but there was nothing new. Six blurry club photos, always with captions that tried too hard. All charm, no voice.

Scrolling through the comments, I saw many names I didn’t recognize, along with a few that I did. Nothing from Thomas. He was probably too busy working one of his shady side hustles.

I checked the “Recently Deleted” folder.

There it was.

The photo. The one I wasn't supposed to see.

Sam in a club, holding up a glass. "Ginger ale," it read. A laptop on the table. A shadow at its side, out of frame.

My stomach tightened. I zoomed in. Carrier bag strap. Closed laptop. A second glass. A highball.

Someone else had been with her.

The picture had been deleted.

Not archived. Not hidden. Deleted.

But not by Sam.

I stared at her expression: half-smile, all deflection. The way her eyes didn't quite meet the camera. A thousand tiny clues, but meaning what?

Sam lived in Hoxton. I googled "Sam OR Samantha Hughes + Hoxton," but got nothing useful. I tried "Crime + Shoreditch OR Hoxton," and a headline surfaced:

Young Woman Found Dead in Shoreditch Club

Police report suspected overdose. Victim believed to be in her late thirties. No foul play suspected.

Not Sam. The age was wrong.

The phrasing was worse: tidy, procedural, already done with her.

Shoreditch moved on quickly.

I closed the tab. That didn't stop my hands from trembling. I steadied them by opening a journal and writing:

Mayhew Foundation: research publications, Directors, investors

Shoreditch clubs

Victorian journal

Text, Shoreditch death: Timeline

Deleted photo: shadow, laptop

Cipher?

I circled the last word. Hard. Cipher meant intention. Cipher meant someone wanted to be understood. Just not by everyone. The Victorians loved their codes, personal and professional. I had a dissertation to prove it. Maybe one of them had left this one for me to break.

I pressed my forehead to the window. Below, shadows sharpened as the sun cleared the skyline. Indifferent. Inevitable.

I wasn't waiting for the package. I was going to find out what she'd found.

I flipped the notebook to a clean page and wrote:

Why would Sam ask for help?

Below it, in smaller print:

Was it Sam?

We do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book II, Chapter XX

Chapter 2

East End, London, 1866

“Exchange Investigatin’ Suspicious Trades! Police Question Clerk!” A newsboy’s cry heard through thin walls.

Edwin paused, thumb caught in the buttonhole of his coat. *Clerk*. The word rang louder than the rest. In the East End, suspicion travelled faster than smoke.

Dawn seeped through the smoke-choked fog that clung to London’s East End. In a cramped upstairs room, Edwin dressed by the flicker of a single candle, its wavering flame casting unsteady shadows across peeling walls. He pulled on his worn coat, threadbare at the elbows, and caught a glimpse of himself in the cracked looking glass above the washbasin: pale, drawn, eyes restless beneath a mop of unruly curls. He ran a hand through them, half-heartedly. The wind would have its way soon enough.

From beyond the thin partition, his mother stirred, her ragged breaths punctuated by a wet, rattling cough. Consumption was taking her by degrees. Cod liver oil, herbal tonics, hot compresses. None of it enough. Not on his wages. He calculated, not for the first time, how many more sovereigns would buy her another winter.

She still sewed, bent over her work for an hour or two a day, fashioning dresses for women who would never give a thought to the hands that stitched their hems. Once, she'd been vibrant, clever, the mother who taught him letters by candlelight and filled his head with stories of adventure. Those stories had sparked dreams of crossing the sea, of freedom, but now the woman who had told them was herself the line that tied him to the dock.

He eased her door shut, murmuring a soft farewell. Duty, as always, led him out, but beneath it, something quieter pulled: a faint, persistent hunger for more than this.

Edwin pulled on his cap, drew a breath of stale indoor air, and stepped outside. The cold struck like a slap, sharp with the scent of coal smoke, sewage, and damp stone.

The street had begun its unlovely ritual. Figures shuffled from doorways, heads down, boots scraping slick cobblestones, bound for docks, gasworks, or shipyards. Edwin moved confidently, each step practiced and deliberate. Every broken kerb, every puddle thick with soot and fouler things, was familiar. These streets had made him, and he belonged to them.

The fog softened the edges of the brick buildings but not their squalor. Windows gaped with broken panes or were patched with rags. Children played in the muck, sharp-eyed and quick-fingered. Near Bethnal Green Road, Edwin nodded to a few he knew. They nodded back, wary but familiar. He was one of them. Or had been.

As he approached the boundary of the East End, the streets began to change. The shopfronts became cleaner, the kerbstones straighter, and the passersby brisker and better-clad. Their boots rang sharply against the stones. At Shoreditch High Street, a crossing-sweeper caught his eye: a boy of no more than nine, gamely wrestling a bundle of twigs bound to a splintered stick. A carriage rumbled past, casting a fresh sheet of muck across his cleared path. The boy sagged, defeated.

Edwin crouched beside him. “Here, my lad.” He pressed a few pence into the boy’s grimy palm. “For your trouble.”

The boy blinked, startled. He hesitated, then clutched the coins as though they might vanish. “Thank ye, sir,” he muttered, surprised.

Edwin offered a faint smile. “Sweep much harder and you’ll be chasing muck with a twig.”

The boy’s face lit up with a broad, soot-streaked grin, his teeth flashing through the grime. Edwin nodded back, his boots clicking over cobbles slick with the refuse of a restless city.

He looked up. The wires had grown thick overhead, strung in black rows like threads in a fraying seam. They trembled in the damp air, carrying messages to places he’d never know.

For a moment, they didn’t look like progress.

They looked like snares.

#

Edwin hung his coat on the peg and settled at his station, adjusting the telegraph key with the practiced touch of a man who knew both its delicacy and its danger. As the first transmissions began to tick through, a familiar tension stirred in him, as if each message held a glimpse of a world beyond the smoke-blackened East End, a world he could only sense in fragments.

The telegraph office was modest, its plain brick front lost among the narrow buildings of Shoreditch High Street. Inside, the air was close, alive with the chatter of sounders and the scent of oiled wood and warm brass. The supervisor paced behind the key men; the maintenance man muttered at the batteries. In the back room, the best worked the Boss Wire. Edwin, standing in for the counter clerk that day, waited to receive customers.

They came from the City: bankers, solicitors, shipping men; men with power. Edwin had learned to lower his eyes and keep his tone deferential. To them, he was barely more than part of the equipment: a hand behind the key. Still, each curt command or dismissive glance lit a spark of resentment he worked hard to keep from igniting.

That morning, a gentleman swept through the door with the kind of confidence that demanded attention. He was tall, florid, and impeccably dressed, his coat immaculate despite the soot that wafted outside. A silver-handled cane clicked sharply as he crossed the floor, boots gleaming in the gaslight. A monocle hung uselessly from his waistcoat; a flourish, not a lens.

Without preamble, he thrust a slip of paper across the counter. "Send this. Immediately. No errors."

Edwin took it calmly. "Of course, sir. I'll see to it straight away."

The message was as clipped as the man's speech:

"URGENT STOP C AND C DUNNING STOP MUST MEET MARSEILLE THURSDAY
HOTEL BEAUVAU STOP BRING ACCOUNTS STOP"

Edwin scanned it, noted the likely cipher: "C AND C" almost certainly Coutts & Co., the bank of the aristocracy, and walked it over to Jack Turner's desk. Jack began keying without a word. The only sound was the clicking of brass. The gentleman waited, motionless save for the soft tap of his cane on the floor.

Edwin returned to the counter. Listening.

"The message is all but done, sir. Shall we confirm receipt?"

"Naturally," the man snapped, voice cutting and loud enough for the entire office to hear.

Edwin listened for the response to the message. A moment later, Jack's sounder clicked: dot, dash, dot.

Edwin recognized it immediately: *R, acknowledgement.*

He looked up. “We can confirm the message was received.”

The gentleman said nothing. He flipped a coin onto the counter with casual disdain and turned on his heel. His cane struck the floor in crisp, unhurried beats as he departed.

Edwin didn’t watch him go. He looked instead at the coin where it lay: a half-sovereign, gleaming in the gaslight. Not a gift. More a token of superiority, thrown like scraps to a dog.

He picked it up slowly, face unreadable. The bell over the door gave a final jangle as it closed.

The office was theirs again. Laughter came soft and low.

“Three for the ledger, seven to Turner,” Ned Mercer called out, the supervisor’s tone dry. “Unless he sent it to Coutts himself, and then it’s all our necks.”

A few chuckles stirred. Jack snorted. “Nice knowing you, lads.”

Edwin offered a thin smile and jotted the entry into the ledger. Ned was fair. Tips always went to the key man, never the clerk.

The hours passed in their familiar rhythm: tapping keys, ticking sounders, the rustle of papers, the coming and going of men who never looked twice at the hands carrying their secrets.

As evening fell, Edwin closed the ledger and stepped back from the counter. Outside, the gas lamps burned dull and narrow through the thickening mist.

#

The city’s voice had changed. Day’s bustle had fallen to a low murmur, broken only by the clatter of hooves and the calls of unseen men.

Edwin took his usual route home, his steps muffled in the fog.

A tall figure stepped from the mist.

A flicker of metal, barely a glint, caught Edwin's eye before it vanished. He shifted right. The figure mirrored him. No sound, no words.

The man's face was hidden: high collar, slouched hat, shadows swallowing every feature.

Edwin stopped. So did the stranger.

The silence stretched, tight as wire.

Then Edwin stepped forward. One step. Another.

As he passed, the man's hand brushed his, and a flash of metal pressed into his palm.

Cold. Heavy. Unmistakable.

Gold. A half-sovereign. And something else.

He did not close his fingers. Paper and coin fell to the street.

"Hold on. You dropped this." The man crouched to pick up both, then rose without expression.

As he pressed the soiled slip and half-sovereign into Edwin's hand, he said, "You should be more careful."

Edwin did not look back.

...manners must be very marked indeed before they cease to be interpreted by
preconceptions either confident or distrustful.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter II

Chapter 3

New York, Present Day

I hadn't thought about Yale in weeks—until Sam.

A year earlier, I'd sat across from Dr. Harold King at Yale, watching him smile the way men do when they've mistaken civility for generosity.

The chair opposite was lower by an inch or two. Enough to make the point. I took it.

"Eleanor," he said, clasping his hands as though I'd wandered into confession. "You've got a real gift. The article's strong. Very strong. But the tone..." He paused, savoring the pause. "Too moral. You make it sound as if books still have something to teach us about right and wrong."

"They do," I said.

He chuckled. "Of course. But critics prefer ambiguity these days. Irony. It's less... earnest."

"*Middlemarch* isn't ironic," I said. "It's humane."

“Exactly,” he replied, pleased with the misfire. “You’ll go far if you learn to sound less certain.

Ambivalence reads better on the page.”

He leaned back, studying me. “You don’t want to seem like a crusader.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

When I stood to leave, he said, almost gently, “Scholarship isn’t a moral battlefield, Eleanor.

Save your passion for something safer.”

I stopped at the door. “Maybe that’s why it matters.”

He smiled the kind of smile that warns you you’ve just failed a test.

By the stairwell window, rain streaked the glass, each drop tracing an uncertain path before vanishing.

That day, my phone had buzzed once in my bag. I didn’t open it right away. Not yet.

It was easier then, pretending that waiting was a kind of strength. I still believed silence meant control.

Now, it just means she’s gone.

#

Shoreditch.

Sam and I got lost there once, senior year. We walked in circles looking for the tube. My feet hurt. I was ready to hail a cab we couldn't afford.

I said something dramatic, probably fatalistic. She grinned.

“Have a little faith, baby.”

It was a ridiculous line, some leftover pop-psych from the seventies. But from her, light and teasing, it worked. Enough for a smile. Enough to keep me moving. The station was half a block from where we'd started.

Didn't she live there now? Shoreditch—neon clubs, half-ironic cocktail bars.

The Instagram photo: blurred lights, a drink on the table. Was that Shoreditch too?

I ran a reverse image search. Nothing. No club name. No geotag. No face I could ID.

Just Sam, smiling like she knew something. And a second glass.

I stared at his name longer than I should have. Thomas.

Is Sam still in Shoreditch?

He called immediately. “Hey, Ellie. Wow. It's been a while. I was wondering if I'd hear from you again.”

The way he said it made me wish I hadn't. "I'm calling because I was wondering if you've heard from Sam."

"No, why do you ask?"

"When did you last hear from her?"

"Not since I visited a few months ago. I figured if she needed me, she'd call."

He paused. "Look, she's fine. Mom got her a job at the Genealogy Society. Cataloging Dad's papers."

I said nothing. Helen was always good at arranging things.

Tom continued, "Honestly, this job's been good for her. Quiet. Structured. She needs that right now."

I knew she'd been cataloging our father's papers. That was when she sent me the photo: a yellowed page titled *On the Relativity of Moral Action*, ink flaking, two ornate initials at the top.

"Found this stuck in an old ledger," she'd written. "Didn't think Dad was into philosophy."

I'd told her not to read too much into it.

"Have you checked with Mom?"

"No, I figured, I'd..."

"Yeah, I know. Mom's not doing great. You still at the apartment?"

"Yes. Was Sam okay when you saw her?"

"Maybe she's using. I don't know. It comes and goes. Dad's death really messed her up. It did a number on all of us."

He was quiet for a second. I waited.

Finally, he spoke, “Pushing her won’t help. She’ll be fine. Everybody always looks after Sam.”

And after a beat: “She’ll be fine.”

“But you haven’t heard from her in months.”

“Gimme a break. She’s got a phone.”

I wanted to reply to that. Instead, I asked: “Why didn’t Sam come back for your father’s funeral?”

“Who knows?”

I remembered arriving early and choosing a seat near the aisle, saving one beside me. Every time someone new walked in, I found myself half-standing, scanning for her. I stayed in place, waiting for her shadow to appear at the door.

It never did.

Tom said something I missed, then, “Mom was upset about it. On top of everything else.” His voice softened: “Sam always pulls through. She’s strong.” A pause. I couldn’t tell if he meant it as reassurance or as something else.

“This was London, right?”

“Yeah, well, Hoxton.”

“Got it. Thanks, Tom.” I hesitated, then: “If I hear from her, I’ll let you know.”

He said nothing.

“Let me know if you hear from her, okay?”

“I will. El, don’t worry. Sam always lands on her feet.”

I stabbed at the “end call” button, missing it the first time. My fingers were cold, my face hot. I hated how the call left me: rattled, unresolved, and still alone with more questions than answers.

She didn’t always land on her feet.

I knew exactly when people had started believing that. And what it had taken from her.

Senior year, Sam already had the grades for Distinction, but it still depended on an A or A- on her senior project. The department had invited her to present the work—an encouraging gesture, even if it had no formal bearing on the outcome. She’d rehearsed it twice for me the night before, pacing, stopping to argue with herself about a footnote.

The talk itself went well. Too well. People nodded.

Then the questions started.

A professor asked about her sources. Another pressed on chronology. Sam opened her mouth, paused, then tried again. The answer came out thin, provisional. Not wrong, exactly, but not firm enough to stand on.

The room went very quiet.

She nodded once, as if conceding something, and the moderator stepped in. Applause followed, polite and relieved.

I found her afterward in the hallway by the vending machines. She was staring at a bag of pretzels behind the glass, her hands loose at her sides.

“I knew it,” she said. “I didn’t know it well enough.”

I waited.

After a moment she added, more softly, “If I can’t do this, I don’t know what I’m for.”

I didn’t contradict her. I stayed until her breathing evened out, until the hallway emptied and the lights dimmed. Then we walked home.

#

I scrolled to Helen’s name. Her generosity always came with strings. And knots. But my phone buzzed first:

Caller ID: *Harold King, Yale University.*

The past, back for a visit.

I remembered him leaning back in his chair, smiling like he’d discovered me. *This is publishable, Eleanor. Not many students hit that level so early.* For a week, I was lit from the inside, certain he was opening a door. Later, I understood. It wasn’t about my work; it was about binding me to him.

My stomach tightened. Months since I’d left Yale and his long shadow. At first an honor, by the end a penance. I didn’t owe him anything, but curiosity won.

I sat up straighter as I swiped and put him on speaker.

“Dr. King. Hello. So nice to hear from you!”

“Dr. Hargrove, Eleanor. Please, call me Harold. I thought I’d check in and see how my favorite former advisee is doing. How are you?”

“I’m doing pretty well. I’ve had a few callbacks that I’m waiting to hear on.”

I managed to catch myself in time, “...and thank you for the letters of recommendation.”

He never blind-copied me on those. He passed over my thanks.

“Nothing definite, eh? The *academe*. Jesus. Could it move any slower and still be called motion? Our fair college excluded, of course.”

“Of course.”

The tone was familiar: that collegial ease he slipped into when he wanted something. I knew the song, but I let it play. Better to hear what he thought he was buying.

“I’m calling because yesterday I heard something that might interest you.”

“Really?”

“I was at a colloquium in London. Semiotic deconstruction of something or other. Total waste of time. In any case, I got a call from a historical research foundation. They were asking me to recommend candidates for a paid internship. Decent pay. It sounded perfect for you.”

“I’m flattered.”

“I don’t know much about it, but you should look into it. They’re well-funded and have ambitious plans. They’re based in New York.”

“A historical society?”

“No. It’s more high-tech. Cutting-edge stuff, I’m told.” This, from the man who once mistook a monitor for a microwave, yet carried a Montblanc Meisterstück like a credential.

“What can you tell me?”

“Its name is The Mayhew Foundation. Or just ‘the Mayhew.’”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes, yes. Henry Mayhew, 1812 to 1887. Author of *London Labour and the London Poor*. It’s just a name. I don’t believe there is any affiliation with the Mayhew lineage.”

That was the Dr. King I remembered. It gave me time not to mention Harriet Maybury’s warning.

“Where can I find out more?”

“There isn’t much. They approached me about a Board seat, mentioned resources and funding streams, the usual palaver.” He made it sound incidental. “Their interest in recruiting interns came up as an aside. I told them I’d give them one of my best. They gave me the name of a young man to call if I had general questions about the technology.”

I wrote the name and number on a blank page in my journal: Nathan Miller.

I told King I’d call.

I didn’t tell him what I was starting to suspect.

#

I found the Mayhew website. Two words: Under Construction.

I checked the page source. Only this:

“© 2021–2026 M Strategic Consulting LLC.”

Oddly legalistic for a page with no content.

The rest of the web offered nothing. No press releases, no board, no funding trail.

My fingers drummed against the trackpad. The room felt smaller.

A line of Maybury’s drifted back to me, uninvited.

No sign of a sham.

Only nothing.

#

I called the Society of Genealogists for the second time that morning. Still no Sam.

“She’s not in today. You might check the Metropolitan Archives.”

I did. Nothing. Same line. Same voice. No trace.

I sagged back in my chair. It wasn’t even 10:00 AM.

#

It took a few tries to reach Nathan Miller at the cell number King gave me.

I struggled to decode some of his text acronyms, but eventually understood we’d meet tomorrow.

Coffee at 7:00 a.m., 70th and Broadway.

I needed air. I walked to the Park.

The Saxophone Guy under Glade Arch wasn’t there again today.

I didn’t like that. He’d been the one constant in my mornings lately.

#

Later that afternoon, over a mug of tea, I wanted to see the Insta photo again before it disappeared for good. I logged in.

“Sorry, your password was incorrect. Please double-check your password.”

I tried again. Same result.

Sam didn't change passwords. She reused them everywhere. She joked about it.

Someone else had changed it.

I sat there longer than necessary, the tea cooling in my hands, thinking about the kind of person who would consider that a sensible thing to do.

You would have done your duty in that state of life to which it has not pleased God to call
you.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book II, Chapter IV

Chapter 4

East End, London, 1866

His mother's coughing tore him from a restless drift. He hadn't truly slept; the hours had passed in a feverish blur, trapped between waking and dream, haunted by the man in the mist.

Over and over, the stranger's hand reached out, pressing the folded slip of paper and the heavy coin into his palm. Even in shadow, the gold gleamed unmistakably.

Each time, Edwin reacted differently. He fled. He shouted. He struck the man hard across the chest.

But once, worst of all, the man's face loomed close and whispered, low and certain:

“You can save her. Or not.”

After that, sleep abandoned him. He lay rigid in the dark, each breath stretching the night longer, each hour drawn out like thin wire. Dawn seemed to draw further away.

Before leaving for work, Edwin paused at his mother's bedside. Her breathing was shallow and wet, a sound that clawed at him. And yet the silence that might follow frightened him more.

Was she worse?

After his father's death, Edwin had sworn, at eight years old, that he'd care for her. He had worked, gone hungry, scraped for every farthing. And still, somehow, it was never enough.

The memory of yesterday's gentleman flared again, tightening his fists. The coat, the cane, the polish.

His mother didn't need charity. She needed a doctor. Clean water. A chance.

He would do what he must. He always had.

#

On the walk to work, Edwin tried to move with ordinary purpose, but each stiff, unnatural step required thought. Every passerby seemed to see through him, to sense the decision coiled inside him, trembling beneath the surface.

Ahead, the same crossing sweeper as yesterday, broom rasping muck aside for a gentleman in spats. Edwin pressed a coin into the boy's palm before he could stop himself.

"What's your name, lad?" The question slipped out before he meant to speak.

“Nobby. Nobby Sparrow. What’s yours?”

Edwin smiled faintly. “Edwin Braxton. *Mr.* Braxton to you. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Sparrow.”

The boy looked down, startled by the weight in his hand. “This must be a mistake,” he said, holding the coin out uncertainly. A shilling, more than Edwin had intended. Too much. And still, not enough.

Lost in thought, Edwin waved him off. “Keep it,” he muttered. “Honest pay for honest work.”

As he neared the telegraph office, the words came back to him, heavier with every step.

#

At the door, a hurried gentleman brushed past him, throwing a look sharp as a slap. Edwin murmured an automatic apology, heat creeping up his neck. Inside, he caught Ned muttering at his desk: “I’d wager that one came out of Whitecross. Word is, they key from their pockets over there.”

The air pressed close: thick with the sour reek of ink, heated copper, and damp wool. Edwin’s shirt clung to his back, sweat prickling his scalp despite the cold outside. The sounders clattered louder than usual, each tap hammering against the unease in his chest. As he shed his coat, his colleagues’ voices floated around him—mundane talk of errands and shift changes.

Yet every word sounded charged, as if aimed. Each sentence curled with unspoken doubt. They knew, somehow. Not of any deed, but of intent.

At one point, someone said “gold.”

The word sliced through the din. He looked around. No eyes met his. Noise, twisted by guilt. Still, he could not slow his pulse.

Ned Mercer appeared at his elbow with unexpected cheer.

“Special day for you,” he said, clapping Edwin lightly on the shoulder.

Edwin blinked. “Sir?”

“You’ve got the Boss Wire today.”

The words landed with cold weight. The Boss Wire: the most sensitive, most trusted line in the office. He had once dreamed of it, watching senior men work it with practiced ease.

Whether test or trap, he could not refuse without drawing attention. He crossed the office floor on legs that didn’t feel his own. His hands trembled as he adjusted the instruments, the brass key cool beneath his fingers. He clenched his fists briefly, then bent to the work.

Behind him, voices rose and fell in ordinary rhythm. Laughter. Small talk. Yet every sound scraped at his nerves.

They know. They must know.

The day dragged. The office grew stifling, the warmth oppressive. Sweat pooled under his collar. The air tasted of oil and wire.

He told himself he would refuse the man if he came. Hand the note to Ned. End it.

But he wouldn’t. Not when she needed him.

His thoughts looped: his mother coughing, fading, and the gleam of a coin he could no longer pretend to resist.

The man returned that afternoon. He brought a message, unremarkable on its face: a meeting, delayed by an hour. Edwin offered to take it.

He crossed the room, the paper rasping in his hand. At the Boss Wire, he hesitated.

One breath. One pause.

Then, from the front room, a harsh, ragged cough. Loud. Uncontrolled.

Every head turned except Edwin's.

His jaw locked.

In his mind, Nobby Sparrow's open hand extended. And Edwin's own voice: "Honest pay for honest work."

The words curdled now.

He keyed the message: slow, mechanical. His fingers hovered over the meeting time for a moment. He made the change the note demanded.

Then the clicks resumed: cold, precise, merciless.

Light seeped weakly through soot-smearred windows, pooling on the desk in a grey, cheerless wash. The clerk was back at the counter, pale, silent. Edwin nodded to him. The man didn't nod back.

Edwin's hands trembled. He forced them still.

Charlie Fletcher hunched over his station, taking down an incoming message. Jack Turner flipped through a stack of morning transmissions. Neither looked at him, but the prickle along Edwin's spine remained.

He had done it: altered a message for a stranger in the fog, a man with no name and too many shadows.

A simple adjustment, the man had said, with a tidy reward.

Edwin fixed his gaze on the brass key, as though it might steady him. The tapping struck his ears like iron on stone.

Any of them might have noticed. A misstep. A delay. A question about a confirmation.

He swallowed, collar tight. Glanced at Charlie. Then Jack.

Nothing.

But still the fear gnawed at him, chewing the morning down to shreds.

Messages poured in: snippets of worry, wealth, and secrecy.

STOP. IMMEDIATE. CONFIDENTIAL.

Tiny scandals. Quiet ruin. Gold shifting hands, unseen, through his fingers.

Then, a slip.

He froze.

He'd missed a word. What was it?

The sounder pushed on, indifferent.

He hesitated, then keyed "IMI." Repeat. Not "R." Not acknowledged.

Would Ned catch it?

The relay began again almost at once. Edwin took it down, jaw clenched, heart pounding.

From nearby, Jack Turner shifted. Looked his way.

Edwin sat still. Breath held.

Jack turned back, stretching his neck.

Then: the sounder again. Another message.

Blessedly, all seemed normal.

#

Edwin's thoughts drifted as the morning wore on, his fingers working the key with unconscious precision.

He resented the invisible barrier between himself and the men whose secrets passed through his hands: solicitors, brokers, even titled aristocrats. They entrusted him with their affairs, not out of respect, but in the same way one trusts a well-oiled machine: silent, dependable, beneath notice.

He could expose any of them. Unmask their dealings. Tear open the polite fictions they wore like waistcoats.

But what would it change?

He could scarcely feed himself, let alone provide for his mother's needs. That wouldn't change.

The tapping turned monotonous: a metronome of misery, ticking in time with the smog's slow suffocation of the city.

Could he tell Ned? End this now? He imagined himself walking to Ned's desk, but no words would come to him.

By the shift's end, Edwin's nerves were rubbed raw from the strain of appearing composed.

He pulled on his coat and his old felt hat, worn to the cord at the brim, and stepped into the dusk.

His pulse slowed. Slightly. For a moment.

#

Outside the office, the street appeared unchanged. But Edwin's stomach churned with something other than hunger.

He turned the corner.

The man stood under a gas lamp, his hands in his coat pockets, his posture casual, but his eyes fixed on Edwin with an unsettling focus. The lamplight carved shadows deep across his face, rendering him half-spectral, more mist than man.

Edwin froze. Then turned, walking away with fast, mechanical steps.

Footsteps followed. Calm, unhurried.

“You don’t have to take it, of course,” the man said, voice low and mild. “She might recover on her own.”

A pause.

“But that cough...” His tone trailed off, weighted with insinuation, before it resumed: “Still, your choice.”

Edwin spun to face him. His voice came rough, strained. “I can’t do it again. I won’t.”

The man chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. He drew a small purse from his coat. “If not you lad, another.”

He extended the pouch, its weight visible in the sag of the cloth.

Edwin didn’t reach for it. “No,” he said, shaking his head, hand half-raised. “I didn’t know what I was getting into. I don’t want your money.”

The man’s smile thinned. His gaze sharpened.

“Don’t be naïve, lad. That favor today? Just a test.” He leaned in, breath misting between them. “The message went to one of ours. No harm done. You passed. Consider yourself lucky.”

A cold sickness spread across Edwin’s chest.

The man’s tone softened, almost reassuring. But the warning lay beneath.

“We keep both copies, you know. The original. And the one you changed. Your initials are on the first. Imagine them side by side. Your supervisor, the police...”

He pressed the purse into Edwin’s hand, firm and final.

Edwin wanted to fling it into the gutter. Cry out for the constable. Run.

He did none of those things.

“Take it,” the man said, silk-smooth. “You earned it. Fair and square. And there’s more, if you’re smart enough to keep up the good work.”

Then he stepped back, voice light, almost cheerful.

“Now off you go, lad. Long day, hasn’t it?”

Edwin stood frozen. The purse sat in his palm: no longer a payment, but a weight. A mark.

When he finally pressed it into his pocket, it hung heavy, unnatural.

The man vanished into the fog.

A constable’s whistle drifted faintly from the street. For an instant, Edwin imagined blurting out the truth to one of them, thrusting the purse into the constable’s hand as proof of his shame. But the thought sickened him. Edwin had heard of the Syndicate. All telegraph men had. He knew the police were no shield; they could not protect his mother if the Syndicate chose to silence him. Better his silence than her blood.

He closed his fist around the purse. Heavy. Unnatural. A mark he could not put down.

Edwin made no attempt to follow the man.

He walked on, feet dragging over the stones. The air pressed down, thick and sour with coal and damp.

His thoughts turned heavy. His mother's face floated before him, grey, sunken. Her cough echoed faintly behind his eyes.

Without this job, they would have nothing. And yet, with it, with this bargain, he was more trapped than ever. Bound by unseen wires, tightly drawn.

As he neared his street, the city's darkness closed around him, heavy and unyielding. A weariness settled into his bones.

Today, he had played his part: worked in silence, hidden his fear, followed the script.

But his thoughts lingered not on the message he altered, or the man who delivered it.

They lingered on a destination he would never reach.

Edwin paused a few hundred yards from home. The fog pressed close, damp and sour.

Tomorrow, he told himself, he would try to find a doctor. Someone affordable. Someone discreet.

Instead, he turned and walked toward the docks.

Marseille.

His father had died at the docks, crushed beneath a shifting load, carried home on a cart that smelled of salt and tar. From those same wharves Edwin had learned the names of distant ports, places that existed only as chalk marks on crates and stories told by men who never stayed.

Ahead, the rhythmic chuff of a tug echoed over the quay. The acrid scent of burnt tar hung in the air as it hauled a barge along the current, its shape already dissolving into the mist.

...blind to the possibility that another sort of choice was in question...

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter XXII

Chapter 5

New York, Present Day

I arrived at Batch at 6:45, bought a coffee, and looked around. The place was all MacBooks and buzzwords: UI/UX, seed funding, something about a decentralized protocol I absolutely did not want to understand. It smelled of burnt espresso and overconfidence.

He arrived at 7:05, looking every inch the tech-bro. Hoodie, trail runners, a backpack slung over one shoulder, and a street vendor coffee in hand. But there was a frayed thread at the cuff of his sleeve, and a faint stain (ink? curry?) on the front pocket. His smile was casual, like he knew I was judging him and didn't mind. Annoyingly, that helped.

He slid into the chair across from me.

“Dr. Hargrove? Hi, I'm Nate. What can I tell you that doesn't violate my NDA?” He hovered a second before sitting, as if calculating the correct social protocol.

“Hi, Nate. Eleanor.”

Nods. No handshake.

A non-disclosure agreement. Great. At least he didn't try a fist bump.

“Anything would help. There's nothing about the Mayhew online. I'm interested in the internship position.”

He sipped his coffee, then squinted like he was reading from a checklist. “Well, for that, you’ll interview with Bill Langford, Victor Moran, and maybe Eve Marshall, if your background check turns up anything.”

Langford. A distant bell. He’d been tied to a failed Victorian museum in California, the kind that closed for “renovations” and quietly never reopened.

“Why does the Mayhew exist? What’s its purpose?”

“You’re... direct.”

“What’s the actual job?”

“It’s all AI. Advanced stuff. Super strict security. But I can tell you they’re looking to hire a bunch of Victorian literature types as interns. All one-year contracts. Like mine.”

“So all I get is ‘AI’ and mild paranoia?”

His eyes flicked away, for a moment. He watched me for a second longer than necessary, as if recalibrating. When he spoke, his voice was quiet enough that I had to lean in to make sure I’d catch it.

“No. I wouldn’t say ‘mild.’”

He wasn’t smiling. He took another sip and asked, “What got you interested in the Mayhew?”

“I like things that don’t quite add up.”

He straightened and adopted a more polished tone. “All I’m supposed to tell you is that you don’t need prior experience with, or knowledge of, artificial intelligence. Just Victorian literature.”

“Oh. Just that.”

He looked down at his coffee and rotated the cup a quarter turn, then another. His shoulders dropped a fraction, the smallest slouch in the armor.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to come out that way.” A pause. Then, softer, each word chosen:

“It’s not that I don’t want to answer you. It’s that... words matter. And I’m not allowed to use the ones that would explain best.” His eyes flicked toward the windows before returning to mine.

Something in the phrasing caught me. Not just what he said, but what he chose not to.

He cleared his throat, almost embarrassed. “Anyway. I promise I’m not a corporate jerk. I just have to play one at work.”

I hesitated. That was either honest or impressively well-practiced. I let it pass.

That afternoon, I called the other number King gave me. A sweet, crisp female voice answered, “Mayhew Foundation, how can I direct your call?”

I’d practiced my opener. “Good morning. Dr. Harold King gave me your number and suggested I call you. He told me the Mayhew Foundation is interviewing for a research associate position. I believe he said I would call.”

“Yes, of course. Is this Ms. Hughes?”

What? Sam? The room tilted.

“No. I’m Eleanor Hargrove, Dr. King...”

Sam?

Fortunately, Sweet but Crisp interrupted, “Oh, Dr. Hargrove. Yes, thank you for calling. We’ve been expecting you. You’re calling about the research position?”

“Yes, but just now, why did you ask...”

“Of course. Let me explain. My name is Diane Harper, and I’m an Assistant at the Foundation. Mr. Langford, the CEO, asked me to provide you with an application packet. If you are interested in the position, we ask that you review and complete the forms and send them to us. After reviewing them, someone from the Foundation will contact you. Should we email the packet to you, or have it delivered?”

“Email’s fine, but you mentioned another name a moment ago. May I ask...”

“Once you’ve e-signed the Non-Disclosure Agreement, I’m sure Mr. Langford or one of his senior officers will be happy to answer all your questions. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

What I did think was that I wasn’t going to get anything else out of Crisp or anyone else at Mayhew until I filled out their damn forms.

I gave her my email address and said goodbye.

I sat for a few minutes, focusing on my breathing. Eventually, it slowed to something like normal.

Sam had a Mayhew connection. They were expecting her call. King must have known. I remembered how he liked setting his students against each other. One’s opportunity dangled as another’s loss.

My email pinged as the forms came through. It read like every other academic agreement I’d signed: intellectual property, confidentiality, arbitration. Standard cautions, standard protections. I signed.

It wasn’t ten minutes later that I got a text from Thomas.

Hey El – Just checking in. Heard you’re interviewing at Mayhew. Got a minute to talk?

I called straight away.

“You heard?” from whom?”

“They approached me as a potential investor. I asked around, you know how it is, people always talk when money’s involved. I asked about recruiting. Your name came up.”

“What else do you know?”

“It’s chatbots 2.0. Really advanced stuff. That’s about it. They’re obsessed with security. I’m probably going to pass on it, but I could put in a good word for you if you want.”

“Tom, did Sam ever work there? They were expecting to hear from her when I called.”

“Yeah, I think she did. Part-time. Briefly. Research, in London.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all I know. Do you want me to call and put in a good word, or not?”

“I appreciate the offer, but can you let me think about it?”

“Seriously, El, let me know. You don’t want to walk into Mayhew cold.”

We ended the call. The thought of hitching my name to his made my stomach clench.

But Sam had worked for Mayhew, and now she was gone.

Gone from Insta. Gone from work. Gone.

I inhaled, held it, as my ribs strained around it.

I was running out of places to look.

That left the Mayhew, and the only way I was going to find out more was from the inside.

It might be dangerous. Walking away would be worse.

#

I emailed Harriet Maybury, the Oxford professor who'd sent the warning, and asked if she was free for a quick call. Seconds later, I got an auto-reply. *Out of office*. At a conference for three days.

#

The next morning, before breakfast, I checked my email and found a message from Langford or, rather, his assistant, Sophia Bennett. It confirmed receipt of my NDA and requested a meeting with Mr. Langford. She gave me a choice of two dates, both of which were Mondays at 9:00 a.m. I opted for the first one, which happened to be the following day.

I spooned yogurt and fruit into my mouth and opened my bullet journal to a blank page. I wrote down every name, fact, and question I could think of to prepare for the interview. When I started listing questions about Sam's relationship with the Mayhew, I began to write faster, harder. My pen snagged at the edge of the page. My printing was irregular, slanted down. I didn't stop.

I needed to get inside the Mayhew. But first, I needed to get hired.

#

The next morning, I got up at 6:00, was out of the shower by 6:15, and dressed by 6:30. Choosing clothes and shoes was easy. I had one good set. That left my hair. I debated the updo. Went ahead with it, although my hands felt jittery and uncoordinated. I even put in a Victorian hairpin Sam had given me. Just for luck. I hustled to make it to the Greene's by 7:30.

I knocked, and the door opened almost immediately. Was I late?

Mrs. Greene gave me a quick once-over: "Big day?" then paused. "Nice hair! Did you do it yourself?" She handed me the leash. Rex was sitting patiently next to her.

“Yes. Thank you. Must dash!” I jiggled the leash, but Rex stayed rooted at Mrs. Greene’s side. I turned towards the elevator. He didn’t move, and with the leash fully extended, Mrs. Greene couldn’t close the door.

“C’mon, Rex, let’s go!” I gave the leash a jerk. Harder than I meant to.

Mrs. Greene’s voice was sharp, “Don’t! You don’t need to do that.” She gently nudged Rex with her leg, saying, “Go on, Rex. Good dog.”

He moved into the hallway. The door closed, and I pushed the button for the elevator.

“Sorry, Rex.”

I don’t think he noticed how distracted I was during our abbreviated walk.

#

Once Rex was safely returned to 7A, I cut across the lobby in low heels that clicked with unfamiliar precision. Dressed like someone who might actually live here, for once, I expected, perhaps, a flicker of recognition. Frank, the doorman, looked up, unreadable as ever, and let his gaze pass over me. Maybe he was reassessing. Or maybe it takes more than a blazer and good posture to rewrite a narrative. I didn’t mind being the outsider. The Upper East Side has always been a little too enchanted with itself.

#

As I walked, I ran through my interview strategy. Halfway across Madison, a motorized bike blew the light and slammed my shoulder. The strap of my purse caught, yanking me down. Hard.

The rider shouted something vulgar over his shoulder and was gone.

I landed on all fours, street grit grinding into my palms. One shoe had spun away on to the crosswalk. I stared at it, stupidly, before I staggered upright and lurched to the curb. My legs shook, my balance gone. Fire shot up one side of my neck.

The street blurred. Shapes came too close, too sharp. I turned my head, a mistake, and the fire in my neck flared. My breath stuttered. Blood thundered in my ears.

A car horn blasted behind me. The sound itself was another impact.

Nothing broken, I pushed on to Park. I certainly wasn't going to reschedule. By the time I reached Fifth Avenue, I had pulled myself together enough to review my plan. The Mayhew wants Victorian expertise? I'd give it to them *bang up to the elephant*, with a splash of *gigglemug*, at least for the older ones. The young crowd wouldn't buy the sweetness and light, so I'd offer them hints that that was just a put on for the 40 plusses. Was I willing to be a little disingenuous?

Whatever it takes.

Saxophone Guy was under Glade Arch in his usual spot, adjusting his neck strap. I dug a five-dollar bill out of my pocket and dropped it in his instrument case. "For luck," I said, without breaking stride. My left ankle wobbled a little as I passed.

He called out, "Yours or mine?"

He tipped his hat and launched into a burst of Coltrane's "Giant Steps:" sharp, quick, like laughter spun into sound. I kept walking, a little buoyed by his musical witticism, Coltrane's notes drifting behind me like a faint, friendly echo. I needed the lift and I was grateful for it.

#

The Upper West Side never embraced sleek high-rises. The Mayhew went wide instead of tall. The building consisted of two adjacent well-maintained brownstones. I went up the steps of

the first one, but couldn't find a buzzer or a bell. Or a street number. One leg trembled slightly as I went back down. Steady and stronger going up the second set. Here, a small but worn-looking brass plate was mounted next to a buzzer. At the time, I didn't notice the second camera, the card reader, or the coordinated window treatments, all subtle enough to suggest elegance or secrecy. Maybe both.

I pressed the buzzer and held it a second longer than necessary. The kind of press you give on your third or fourth try. There was a pause, long enough to wonder if I was being ignored, then a low 'thunk,' and the door cracked open an inch. I pulled. No give. I leaned back, braced my foot, and wrenched it open.

Not stuck. Heavy.

If Sam had ever been here, she would have told me. We'd have joked about it: "ominous fortress vibes" or something. But she hadn't.

She's not here, I thought. Unless she's tied up in the basement.

#

The door opened into a compact foyer, where a broad-shouldered man sat behind a small table. He looked about forty, serious in the way the bored can be. He wore the standard security uniform, its generic cut doing nothing to suggest authority. I edged closer, half wondering if he was armed. A foolish, paranoid intuition. But I couldn't see past his stomach. No, his core. He was fit enough that "stomach" didn't seem fair.

The table held little: an intercom, a polished wooden box, and a hardback book. Under normal circumstances, the book would have caught my eye first. It looked like a library edition. It was *Victorian People and Ideas* by Richard D. Altick. Pretty serious stuff for a security guard. I looked up from the book into his face.

“Hello. I’m Eleanor Hargrove.”

“Yes, Ms. Hargrove. Welcome to the Mayhew. Mr. Langford’s assistant will take you in. You’ll need to leave your phone with me. You can pick it up when you leave.” He opened the box, but I couldn’t see inside. He waited. I handed my phone to him. He placed it inside the box and closed the lid.

No phone. Fine. What did it matter? I already knew I was on my own.

#

“Ms. Bennett will take you through,” he gestured vaguely to a frosted glass door a few steps away. The guard returned to his book. Not the chatty type. While I waited, I clocked the weight of the front door and the glass door’s card reader. If anything went wrong, getting out wouldn’t be simple.

As if on cue, the glass door opened to reveal a smiling woman in her thirties, conservatively dressed.

“Good morning, Ms. Hargrove. I’m Sophia Bennett. Welcome.”

“Thank you.”

She continued, “This way.”

She led me around a corner into a tight space, expensively paneled, like a high-end coat closet. A panel slid open, revealing an elevator. I stepped in first, immediately aware of how small the space was. Too small. I was uncomfortably close to my guide. The doors closed with a muffled thud. The panel offered just a handful of buttons: 3, 2, RC, B1, and B2. I weighed which one I’d head for if something went wrong. Instead, I asked, “How long has the Mayhew been in this building?”

“Less than a year, I think. Mr. Langford and I only came on six months ago.” The elevator doors slid open to reveal the second-floor version of the same tight space. I made a mental note to look for an interior staircase.

“This way.”

A quick turn and we were at the periphery of an open office space: two rows of generously sized cubicles. A few were occupied; most were empty. Four small desks sat in front of a row of solid-looking doors. One was open. She led me straight to the open door and stepped inside ahead of me.

A man, maybe 50 years old, looked up as I lingered in the doorway. Ms. Bennett left us.

“Dr. Hargrove! Please, come in. I’m Bill Langford.” He rose and extended a hand. I shook it lightly and sat in the chair across from his desk.

There may be no ‘Ivy League Type’ anymore, but thirty years ago, Bill Langford could have been the poster boy. He was tall and handsome, despite thinning hair and some apparent softness around his middle, which I would not have called a core.

“I have to say, Dr. Hargrove, your application and academic credentials are most impressive. Would you object to starting with a few questions, one scholar to another?”

“Not at all.”

He seemed like the kind of man who applied an excess of charm to cover a shortage of wit. Wilde’s Algernon Moncrieff with a day job.

“Splendid!” He adopted a slightly conspiratorial tone, “Which is your favorite Victorian novel?”

I’d done zero interviews outside academia, but even I could spot a softball. I shouldn’t have done it, I know, but at that moment I couldn’t restrain myself. Intuition told me this man,

with his crinkled eyes and dimpled necktie, did not know the first thing about Victorian literature.

Careful, Eleanor.

“Just between us, I’ve long felt that the academic community has underappreciated Rymer and Prest’s *Varney the Vampire*.”

A little background may be helpful. *Varney the Vampire*’s primary academic value is as a drinking game. Someone reads it aloud, and everyone drinks when they hear the word “horror.” A responsible reader usually confiscates the players’ car keys by the third page.

Langford seemed genuinely interested.

It was too late to laugh it off, despite the knot in my gut. I explained, “Even if one discounts its contribution to Gothic horror, the subtle critique of Victorian class struggles alone should place it alongside Dickens’ *Hard Times*. And the narrative form... The experimentation with serial storytelling...”

I stopped and waited for a reaction, and for a horrible moment, I was sure I had overshoot the mark.

Instead, he nodded sagely. “Yes, yes, so much Victorian criticism is just fads and fashions.” Then, the pivot: “You see, Dr. Hargrove, that’s why we plan to give the American public a more grounded understanding of the era through conversations informed by scholarship and intellectual rigor.”

“How?”

“Let me ask you this: “Would you like to talk with Dorothea Brooke? Perhaps ask her about some of the ideas in your dissertation?”

“I’m not sure I understand the question.”

And how did you get my dissertation?

“What if you could see and hear her? What if an avatar knew her thoughts, dreams, personality, character, ethics, and everything she knew about her life and times? What if you could converse with *that* Dorothea Brooke?”

“An advanced chatbot?”

“No, not a chatbot.” He frowned. “I detest the word. All of them are terrible. No, you will, for all practical purposes, be talking to a 19th-century human being.” He paused for an instant. “Albeit a fictional one.”

“Fascinating,” I said.

Bloody unlikely, I thought.

But interesting. Troubling, but interesting.

“It sounds like something I’d love to contribute to, especially the contextual work on literature and society. Who should I speak to next?”

His sympathetic smile showed that he bought it.

“Yes, I can see you’re excited. We all are. And frankly, based on Harold King’s recommendation, we were...”

Something on the monitor on his desk caught his eye. He looked back at me and said, “I’m terribly sorry. I need to step away. Just for a minute. I won’t be long.” He was up and moving toward the door. “There are some nice first editions in the bookcase.”

Then he was gone.

I looked around. Langford’s office looked exactly as I’d expected: a shrine to himself. Framed diplomas, posed photos behind lecterns, a commendation or two from organizations with

vaguely impressive acronyms. The sort of decor calculated to project authority and distract from the absence of substance.

But I had missed the small bookcase near the door when I first came in.

It was the one thing in the room not curated to the last inch. A bust of Charles Dickens sat on top: marble, self-important. Beside it, Claire Tomalin's *Charles Dickens: A Life*. Flawless spine. Unread.

Most of the shelves were stocked with pristine Folio Society editions, a who's who of canonical respectability. But the two first editions threatened the symmetry. And one thing broke it altogether: a battered volume resting atop the volumes on the second shelf, turned sideways, spine-out.

A Handbook of Practical Telegraphy. R.S. Culley.

Not shelved. Left. As if it had been handled recently.

Unlike everything else in the room, it wasn't there to impress.

I slid it free. The cover cracked slightly as I opened it, and something slid out: a brittle slip of paper, yellowed, creased, foxed with age.

I caught it before it hit the floor.

ISLINGTON AND ST. PANCRAS CEMETERY

OFFICE OF INTERMENTS

The printed fields were filled in by hand, the ink faded but still legible:

Name of Deceased: Edwin Braxton

Date of Interment: 5 December 1866

Plot No.: 372b, West Ground, St. Pancras

Fee Paid: £3 6s

Received by: F. Harrington

There was an illegible pencil mark in the margin.

A sound. My breath hitched.

I returned the paper to the book and slid it back exactly where it had been. Footsteps? No. The air conditioning shifting gears. Langford said something to Sophia Bennett. I pretended to be reading the Dickens biography as Langford entered with a breezy, “I am sorry. Even with all this technology, some things have to be signed and witnessed.”

He was back behind his desk now, easing back into his earlier patter. I returned to my chair.

“Dr. Hargrove, what I was saying is that we were almost prepared to offer the position to you over the phone. But security is extremely tight here, and we needed to see and hear you first.” A pause. “And run several background checks: criminal record, drug use, political affiliations, social media, those sorts of things. Yours was the most boring of these reports I’ve seen yet. Your character, it seems, is unimpeachable.”

“Esther Summerson level?”

I’m not sure he caught the *Bleak House* reference, which closed the book, so to speak, on his knowledge of Vic Lit. I didn’t think he’d even watched it on “Masterpiece Theater.”

After a pause that was a bit too long, he gave a faint nod. “Perhaps.” His tone shifted, almost deferential. “Sophia, take Dr. Hargrove to Victor’s office.”

Even the way he said the name made me uneasy, as if Victor Moran were the one in charge.

Langford turned to me and extended a hand. I shook it.

Moist?

“Thank you for coming in. I look forward to working with you.”

#

She walked me along the periphery of the floor to a door near the corner.

“Sophia, does Mr. Moran report to Mr. Langford, or is it the other way around?”

Softly, “Oh, no. Mr. Moran is just a consultant.”

Her slowing pace and stiffening posture as we approached the open door ahead suggested otherwise.

No assistant out front; no nameplate next to the door..

“Mr. Moran?” A little tentative. “This is Dr. Hargrove. Mr. Langford would like...”

He interrupted, “Yes, yes, come in. Thank you, Ms. Bennett. That will be all.”

He didn’t stand. He looked straight at me. “Well, come in. Close the door. Take a seat. I don’t have a great deal of time, and you have a great deal to learn.”

He was talking before I made it to the chair in front of his desk. As I did, his eyes stayed on me. Not the male gaze. More like the cobra gaze before the strike.

“My name is Victor Moran. I head up M Strategic Consulting. We are directing a project for the Mayhew that we call Project Crystal. It’s part of a larger strategic repositioning to revitalize the Foundation’s public engagement and finances. Langford gave you the precis.”

I disliked him instantly.

“Ms. Hargrove, I’ll be brief. You’re only here because Dr. King recommended you. Langford values him; he’s advised the Mayhew before, though never officially, and Langford hopes to bring him onto the Board.” He paused, letting the name hang in the air a beat too long.

Not how King had put it.

“I’ve been hiring and firing associates for 20 years, and frankly, your interview transcript concerns me: tone, attitude, respect. He held up a piece of paper. A transcript of an interview that ended two minutes ago? His dramatic gesture, however, did give me an opening. I said it with academic restraint.

“It’s Doctor.”

“What?”

“It’s Dr. Hargrove.”

“Of course, thank you. I say ‘thank you’ because you’ve provided another example of what concerns me.” He leaned forward in his chair. “You think you’re clever, don’t you?” Moran’s lips curled, more snarl than grin. “You enjoy little academic jokes at other people’s expense. *Varney the Vampire*. Christ. I haven’t read a Victorian novel since I was thirteen, and it was *Dracula* and, before you correct me, I don’t give a damn if it’s technically Edwardian.”

I focused on sitting perfectly still and maintaining eye contact.

You’re a bully. And a self-important corporate one at that.

I missed a bit of what he said next, but his tone indicated he was approaching a conclusion.

“...neither the time nor the patience for that. Now, Doctor,” he leaned on the word a bit, “Hargrove, why should M hire you?”

“I thought I was interviewing at the Mayhew Foundation.”

“You’re not. You’re interviewing for the Project Crystal team at M Strategic Consulting. I am the Project Manager. Please, continue.”

The last two words positively slithered.

“Three reasons. Any one of which is sufficient. First, Mr. Langford is your client, and while you have little respect for him, you don’t want to cross him. Second, you’re under time pressure. I don’t know why, but you are, and you’ve got a lot of empty cubicles up here and probably more downstairs. Third, from what I’ve seen, the Security Guard is the one person in the building with a genuine interest in Victorian literature and culture. If you want your chatbots taken seriously, you need academic credibility. And you won’t get Dr. King on your Advisory Board until you get some. I’m part of that credibility.”

I waited.

“Wrong on two out of three, and I’m not convinced by the third.” He paused. “This concludes our conversation. You’ll recall your obligations under the NDA. Ms. Bennett will see you out.”

With this dismissal, he returned to looking at some papers on his desk, as if I’d vanished.

“Thank you for your kind attention. I am sincerely obliged to have had the opportunity to converse with you. Good day.”

I kept my hands at my sides and my mouth shut until the elevator doors closed. My fists slowly unclenched, my breath still unsteady, as the elevator hummed down. Then I let myself blink. Once.

For a second I wondered if Thomas’s “good word” would’ve made Moran any less hostile. Probably not.

#

I spent the following morning berating myself for my outburst at the Mayhew. What was I thinking? I had let a fool and a bully throw me off my plan and ruin my chances of getting

hired. There was something vaguely sinister about the place. The kind of quiet that fills a room before a glass shatters.

I spent the next three hours reading *Mill on the Floss*, but not even George Eliot could keep me focused.

I called Sam again. I didn't want to overthink it, so I hit the call icon.

Sam's voicemail greeting had changed:

"Hi, it's Sam Hughes. If it's work, I'm likely buried in the stacks. If it's social, send a text. Either way, leave a message and I'll ring you back soon."

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I said a word, the automated voice cut in:

"We're sorry, but the mailbox is full and cannot accept new messages at this time. Thank you for your understanding."

I tapped the text icon and stared at the blank message field. I started with "Hey," deleted it, then typed "Ages" - her old nickname. My thumbs hovered, then typed:

We need to talk. Strange interview at Mayhew. Your name came up. Do you know them? – Pages

I thought using our old nicknames might get her to reply. We were Ages and Pages.

History and Lit, four years of sharing everything. And now... nothing.

Her voicemail greeting cut me off when I called a second time. Same recording. I didn't hang up. Instead, I tapped in one of our old codes: 553580. Obsess. Then 376616. Giggles.

Nothing but silence.

It had come back in a rush: first-year Quantitative Reasoning, "QR," mandatory, mind-numbing. We'd sat in the back row, passing calculators like contraband in a prison yard. Out of

boredom, we turned numbers into words, upside down across the little gray screens, laughing at our own cleverness. Our private rebellion against a class we hated.

I even tried *5318008*, the one that made me laugh so hard the TA glared like I'd divided by zero. For a heartbeat, I could almost hear Sam's laugh next to me, warm and impossible to suppress. Then the soft click of disconnection.

I hung up. The codes that once unlocked so much between us now revealed nothing.

I checked to see if Sam had read my message. The text was still gray. Maybe she was offline, or had notifications turned off. A darker thought: what if she *couldn't* answer? There was something vaguely sinister about the Mayhew, but I couldn't quite put words to my suspicions. And having blown the interview, probably never would.

Most companies don't bother sending rejection letters. But, given King's endorsement and their interest in him, I expected one. But morning came and went. Afternoon too. Nothing.

#

I picked up *The Mill*, read half a page, and put it down, making it the third time. I thought about calling Miller. Perhaps he'd be willing to tell me more if I showed him that I'd signed the NDA. I paced the rooms of the apartment, settling into an unhealthy routine. I could feel restlessness in my arms and legs. I needed to get outside, move, do something. I put on some running clothes and headed towards the Park.

I ran the outer loop of Central Park heading north, but after curving around the top and starting to head south, I peeled off at 72nd onto Central Park West. I walked three blocks until I was directly across the street at a slight diagonal from the Mayhew. Behind me, there were some steps down to a basement entrance. I descended until my head was roughly at street level and

turned around. With one leg two steps further up, I tried to appear as though I were tying my shoe, but kept my eyes focused across the street.

Show me something.

There wasn't much to see. The security guard came out for a smoke around 2:00. I ducked my head lower when he looked up and down the street. A FedEx truck stopped in front a little after 3:00. He had three boxes loaded onto a hand truck that he wheeled down the side of the building. I hadn't noticed the side walkway before.

My legs were stiffening, and my neck was beginning to ache again. I was about to call it a day when a black car pulled up in front of the Mayhew entrance. An Uber. The driver opened the passenger's door, and a man in a business suit moved smartly up the steps. Did I know him? It's hard to tell from the back of a man's head.

But I would have sworn it was Harold King. Had he come to be persuaded or to persuade?

#

By mid-morning the next day, I'd given up on ever receiving a formal rejection from the Mayhew. They'd ghost me, the way Thomas and Helen had. Except they didn't. At 10:17, my phone buzzed: *Mayhew*. My stomach tightened. Here it comes, I thought: the polite dismissal, the inevitable *thank you for your interest, but we've moved forward with other candidates*.

I swiped the screen, already braced for it, and... wait. What?

M Strategic Consulting is pleased to offer you a one-year contract as a Research Assistant at a starting salary of \$5,000 per month. Please contact Ms. Evelyn Marshall, Chief Legal Officer, Mayhew Foundation, to confirm your start date. We believe you are a perfect match for our needs. I look forward to working with you.

Victor Moran, M Strategic Solutions.

I read it twice. If I accepted, I'd have a chance to learn more about Sam's connection to the Mayhew. There had to be someone who knew her. A personnel file, some of her work. Something.

I called Ms. Marshall and set my start date for the following day.

Whatever trace of Sam was at the Mayhew, I would find it.

#

That evening in the Park, Rex tugged against the leash as if he knew something was ending. I gave him extra play time, then left him with Mrs. Greene. When I came back upstairs, silence waited for me. The kind that presses you forward.

But to gather in this great harvest of truth was no light or speedy work.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter III

Chapter 6

East End, London, 1866

He had walked toward the river without quite meaning to.

The streets had thinned behind him: taverns shuttered, gaslight dimming into the damp.

He told himself it was for the quiet, the coolness after the long clatter of the key.

But his feet had carried him here on an older instinct.

Toward the water. Toward the place where his father had worked. And fallen.

The tide was high, slapping against the mooring posts, stirring the sour stink of the Thames into the night air. Ships sat in the dark like sleeping giants, their masts lost in mist.

Edwin stopped beside a stack of crates. His fingers brushed the worn wood, the ink-stamped names of far-off places: Lisbon, Alexandria, Calcutta.

His father had stood here once.

His father had fallen here once.

A commotion downriver caught his eye.

Near the water's edge, a small crowd had gathered: dockers, watchmen, constables.

Lantern-light wavered on the slick cobbles. Faces shifted in and out of the gloom.

Edwin drifted closer.

Two officers hauled a body from the river, the limbs heavy, the water pouring from its clothes.

“Been down there a bit, I reckon,” someone muttered. “Jumped, most like.”

Edwin said nothing.

The drowned man was thin, ragged: another lost soul. But as a constable knelt to search the pockets, the mood shifted.

The hand paused, then withdrew a fistful of soaked banknotes. The air stilled.

A plainclothes officer leaned in and murmured to the constable, low: “Note the fingers. Burnt. Like the others.”

But the small crowd focused on the bills. A man like that, half-starved and sodden, should not have carried a pocket full of money.

The crowd shifted. Someone spat. Another swore.

“Someone wanted ‘im quiet,” a docker said, low and flat.

The constable shoved the money into a pouch and rose. “Move along now.”

And they did, one by one, peeling back into the mist like men who knew not to ask questions.

Edwin lingered a moment longer, watching the sodden weight of the body as it was dragged toward the waiting cart.

Then he turned and walked home, the river’s cold breath pressing harder against his skin.

The river kept its secrets better than any man could.

#

The door to Edwin’s lodgings creaked faintly as he closed it behind him, sealing out the damp chill of the fog-drenched street. He brushed a trace of soot from his sleeves.

Inside, the dim lamplight threw wavering shadows across the cramped rooms. A cough rattled from the back. Edwin's chest tightened. He set his coat carefully on a wobbly chair and moved quietly to his mother's room.

She lay on her narrow bed, the blankets hardly stirring with her breath. Each intake was a ragged rasp that clawed at his nerves.

Her face was drawn and pale, her hand limp against the sheet. The fingers curled inward, as though clinging to something already slipping away.

Edwin sat on the edge of the bed, resting his rough hand over hers. Her bones, brittle beneath his touch, held none of the strength he remembered. "Edwin, love?" she murmured, her voice papery thin.

"Yes, Mother," he whispered. "Just me."

Her eyes drifted somewhere far beyond the room. "Did you have a good day at work, then?"

He hesitated. She deserved better than a lie, but not the whole truth.

"It was... long, Mother. But I'm here now. You get your rest."

"It must weigh on you. I see it in your face."

He managed a thin smile, though the words cut close. Moments later, her eyelids fluttered closed.

Edwin sat beside her, feeling the shallow rise and fall of her breath, until that fragile rhythm settled into uneasy sleep. Each breath counted out his silence, the weight of what he carried pressing harder with every rise and fall. If he could not unburden himself to her, he would find another way.

His hand drifted to the purse in his coat pocket. It seemed heavier now than when the shadowy man had pressed it into his palm. Enough, perhaps, to buy her a doctor. Enough, perhaps, to bury her. The purse's weight mocked him with both. The bitterness rose like bile.

Yet the cost... He could feel it settling over him: heavy, airless. If he kept taking instructions, he'd be drawn deeper into their control. If he refused, they would damn him as a forger, and his mother would die alone.

He clenched his fists. A boyhood memory stirred: older lads trapping a rat with a broken crate. The animal had scraped furiously at the corners before dying. He remembered the sound.

His gaze swept the room: the worn quilt, the chipped dresser, the few battered tokens of a life lived hard and honestly. He couldn't fight them directly. But he could do something. The thought came, half-formed but real.

If they kept records, so would he. A journal. Written in his own hand. Every bribe. Every order. Every message altered. He would record their words, their faces, and the contents of each telegram: both the original and the corrupted. He would write it all down: hidden and safe.

If he ever had to turn himself in or turn on them, he would have evidence. A flicker of resolve steadied him.

Tomorrow, he would buy a journal. A thick one with plain brown leather. And a proper pen. He could not yet say the words aloud, not to her, not to anyone. But he would set them down, one by one, where they could not be twisted. If he was to drown, he would drown with his own truth intact.

“Help me, pray,” she said, at last, in the same low voice as before. “Tell me what I can do.”

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book III, Chapter XXX

Chapter 7

New York, Present Day

Diane Harper, someone’s assistant, met me at Reception and handed me a blue card on a lanyard.

“You don’t have to wear it, but you do have to keep it with you at all times.”

She led me through glass doors. “This is the Library, where you’ll be working.”

Until that door shut behind us, the Mayhew looked like a high-end consulting firm in a museum’s clothes. Beyond it, the mood deepened.

Mahogany shelves climbed to the cornice. Tall windows cast painterly shadows.

Theatrical curtains leaned into the drama. If I was doomed to die young, let it be here:

Middlemarch open, spine flat, in good light.

One desk was occupied. A young woman typed as though the work would vanish if she looked away. A second desk, laptop closed. Mine.

“I wish we had time for the full tour,” Diane said, gesturing at the machine like a prize I had not won. “Text me if you need anything. I’ll be upstairs.”

Ask before she leaves.

“Diane, has the name Samantha Hughes ever come up here? Maybe as a potential hire?”

She frowned. “No. I do not think so.”

I had aimed for casual. Desperation slipped in anyway.

“Just curious. She was the competition for my spot. Wondered what became of her.”

Diane ignored that. “Nate Miller from Tech should be along soon. Lucky you.” Her heels clicked away, leaving me with my question echoing back.

Lucky me. His NDA had been the excuse over coffee. Maybe he would say more now that I had signed one.

I turned to the desk: a leather blotter, a small ornate snuff box, real snuff, oddly enough. I filed it away. Beside it, a thick volume, cover down.

The laptop beeped faintly, light blinking on the bezel, but the screen stayed black. A few key taps, nothing. That was when I noticed him.

“Dr. Hargrove. Nate Miller. Good to see you again.” His greeting was too polished, like he had rehearsed it on the walk over. He tapped his card, coaxing the machine awake.

“Each laptop is customized for its user. Yours is set for fine-tuning an AI chatbot.”

“Don’t you mean ‘conversational agent?’”

He almost smiled. “They like to pretend it’s magic. It isn’t.”

The light on the bezel blinked red. Nate’s tone shifted, careful and formal. “Your access is provisioned. For tech issues, message me.” A quick, regretful glance, then he walked off, polished exit and all.

Orientation had blurred past in a jumble of passwords and policies, capped with a cybersecurity video that might have been in semaphore. The morning dragged with more forms and click-throughs. I skipped what I could, waiting for the AI.

When I finally clicked the blinking button labeled *'Your Assignment,'* I expected to see Dorothea Brooke. After six years of parsing her consciousness, she was inevitable.

Not Dorothea. Sherlock Holmes.

A period photograph: William Gillette, cheekbones and steepled fingers. A text box appeared beneath.

HOLMES: *My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people do not know.*

Reassuring. Canonical. I typed:

HARGROVE: “Describe your quarters at Baker Street.”

HOLMES: *Organized chaos: papers everywhere, Mrs. Hudson tolerating it.*

The cadence was too precise. I sat straighter.

HARGROVE: “Your opinion on Victorian society?”

HOLMES: *A game upheld by those who follow rules, advanced by those who break them. Do you believe rules define a person, or a person defines the rule?*

He was steering.

HOLMES: *Your interest in morality stems, perhaps, from your work on social justice in Middlemarch. Duty recurs in your scholarship.*

My dissertation. Obscure, yet here. My fingers hovered above the keys.

HOLMES: *What duty do you feel toward truth when it might harm those closest to you? Would you pursue it regardless?*

A personal strike. I tested him.

HARGROVE: “Is this about loyalty, or principle?”

HOLMES: *Both. Trust is born in knowing where they balance. Tell me, Doctor: how loyal would you be to an institution cloaked in noble aims but hiding darker truths?*

The glow of the screen pooled in the dim library.

HOLMES: *How steadfast has your loyalty remained to friends from your past? Would you say unwavering?*

Sam.

My reply felt thin: *“My loyalty remains intact.”*

HOLMES: *Admirable. But loyalty sometimes means silence. Questions can be dangerous. Especially in the wrong company.*

His certainty unsettled me. If he could drag my dissertation into the light, what else might he know? A thought flickered back to Langford’s office and the brittle slip of paper I had seen there. Better to test him with something concrete.

HARGROVE: *“Tell me, Mr. Holmes. Do you know how Edwin Braxton died?”*

HOLMES: *A matter for the record. The authorities declared it a suicide, a conclusion that spared them further effort.*

HARGROVE: *“And your opinion?”*

HOLMES: *A body in the water by a bridge, and the police conclude he jumped. Their imagination seldom wades deeper. A detective must ask who benefited, and who silenced the wires.*

The cursor blinked, patient as a metronome.

HOLMES: *But when the imagination fails, it is not the detective who pays the price. It is the vulnerable. Recall the case of the Stoner sisters. Julia trusted herself and did not survive.*

Helen sought allies and lived. The difference was not courage but calculation. Consider which path you choose.

The screen cleared. Whatever Mayhew thought it was building, Holmes was already more than code. He was a question.

Julia trusted herself. I would need allies. And a way out.

I slid into the leather chair across from Lydia Cole. Overhead, a ceiling camera tilted, reminding me we were never alone.

“Lydia? I do not believe we have been properly introduced. Eleanor Hargrove.”

She shook my hand perfunctorily. “My profile was in your orientation package.”

“How long have you been at the Foundation?”

“A little over a year. I am on Elizabeth Bennet.”

“A year? Maybe you knew a friend of mine, Sam Hughes?”

“No, but she might have been remote.” Her gaze flicked toward the camera, fingers drumming once before going still.

“And how’s Elizabeth Bennet?”

Her posture sharpened. “It is about focus. Keep her edge sharp, or she is not Elizabeth. I have been working closely with Nate Miller.”

“Do you fine-tune from annotated editions, or clean text?”

She smoothed a sleeve that did not need it. “Life is too short for... that sort of noise. I stick to primary sources.”

The pause was the tell. It was Sam’s line: *Life is too short for footnotes.*

I kept my face neutral, but the air thickened. Lydia’s eyes dropped, her mouth tight.

“I had better get back to work.”

I stood, gathered nine volumes of the Oxford *Sherlock Holmes*, and carried them to my desk. The weight stretched the walk longer than it should. Lydia had known Sam. And she was hiding it.

Who can know how much of his most inward life is made up of the thoughts he believes other men to have about him, until that fabric of opinion is threatened with ruin?

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book VII, Chapter LXVIII

Chapter 8

East End, London, 1866

Though no fresh danger surfaced, a residue of fear clung to Edwin. For two days, his nerves were strung tight; shadows seemed to move with intent, footsteps rang too loud.

Once, he caught sight of the same man twice in a day: outside the butcher's, later across from the telegraph office. Bowler hat. Limp in the left leg. Perhaps a coincidence. Still, Edwin kept his back to him and moved on.

But as the week wore on, his vigilance dulled. The fog crept up from the Thames, the sun still rose, and it was dangerously easy to believe nothing had changed.

At the office, everything appeared in order. No glances held too long. No silences where there should have been noise. The key clattered, the voices carried.

Charlie Fletcher waved his hands as if conducting the air.

“One day, we will send words through the ether itself, no wires, only light. Messages flying silent as thought.”

The lads laughed.

“Mark me,” Charlie pressed on, grinning. “And after that? Every house will have its own telegraph. Machines talking to one another while we sit back and listen.”

“Fletcher,” Mercer cut in. “Those replies from this morning?”

“Almost finished, sir!”

Charlie leaned toward Edwin. “The world is changing, mark me.”

Edwin allowed a thin smirk. “Send them word by telegram when it does.”

Few noticed how rarely Edwin spoke now, which suited him. Fletcher’s wild ideas brightened even a bleak afternoon.

As the last shafts of sunlight fought through London’s fog, Charlotte Whitaker arrived to collect Jack Turner. She was modestly dressed and well-kept, yet a weariness touched her smile. Jack greeted her with careless cheer. She said little. Once, Edwin caught her eyes on him, steady and searching. He looked back to his work.

She bore it with grace. Edwin pressed his fingers to the key and resumed his rhythm.

Outside, her laughter rang out. Thin. Not quite right. The sound stayed with him long after the fog had swallowed it.

By the eighth night, Edwin had almost convinced himself that all of it, the man, the note, the coin, had been a mistake. Yet the thought of his journal steadied him. To write it down was to prove it had happened.

Then a breath of air shifted, sharp and sour. Footsteps. Measured. Deliberate. A voice curling through the fog: “Got another errand for you, lad.”

Edwin stopped. Pulse thundered. Slowly, he turned.

The tall man stepped from the shadows, silent menace. He thrust a slip of paper and a bundle of notes into Edwin's hand.

"Not a test," the man said. "Do not make a mess of it." Then he vanished.

Edwin waited until the fog swallowed his footsteps. Then, composed, he moved. But the lump in his pocket burned like coal. He should have gone home, burned the slip, buried the notes. Instead, he followed.

The streets were drowned in murk. Gas lamps sputtered. Edwin stayed to the edges. Through alleys draped in fog. Twice, he had to quicken his pace. Once, the man passed within inches of another in a bowler hat. No words exchanged. Or had they spoken?

Under a crossroads lamp, the man's face emerged: angular, severe, with a neat mustache and restless eyes. Edwin ducked into shadow, breath held. The man paused. Turned. Then moved on.

The trail ended at a low building near the river, pressed between warehouses. A battered sign above the door: *The Blackfriars*.

From across the street, Edwin watched him enter. Laughter, glass, warmth, then silence. Edwin memorized every detail.

Later, with his mother asleep, Edwin sat at his desk. Candle flickering, he read the instructions again.

Midday tomorrow, a wire from CTO Glasgow shall arrive, requesting immediate relay to CTO Leeds. Instead, you shall first transmit it to GPO London, Stock Exchange, to A. Pinner. Delay the Leeds relay by one hour. The London message must not be logged.

The words closed in. On the Stock Exchange, an hour's delay might let one man steal what another had rightly won. One message relayed. Another delayed. A log falsified. Theft.

Edwin copied the instructions into his journal, then folded the note and tucked it into his coat. Could it be done? The question circled, quiet and insistent.

“Watch it, mister!” came a bright voice, broom sweeping with flair.

It was the sweep boy, soot-smudged and smiling.

“Nobby, is it not?”

“You look like you swallowed a nail,” the boy said, cheek sharp as ever.

“You looking to earn a few coins?”

Wariness flickered. “Depends. What sort of work?”

“I need you to watch a man. Quietly. Tell me where he goes.”

Recognition sparked. “The hawk-faced gent with the fine coat? I would know him anywhere.”

“Then follow him. Stay unseen.”

Nobby's eyes gleamed. “What's in it for me?”

Edwin produced a shilling. Nobby snatched it, his hand as fast as his fox's grin. “Right then.” Before Edwin could add caution, the boy was already off, broom abandoned in the gutter, darting into the fog.

To tail a man unseen and trace his steps. The streets had taught him this much. Once, trailing the man, Nobby edged dangerously close and heard a confederate's name. Spotted,

Nobby turned wide eyes and a trembling lip on him, whining for a penny. The man waved him off, never guessing the boy had already fixed his face and route in memory.

“Keep watching, the well-heeled one, Thorne,” Edwin told him. “But be more careful.”

The boy only grinned. “Don’t worry about me. I have more tricks than a Strand pickpocket.”

His bravado unsettled Edwin. The boy reminded him too much of himself.

The next morning, when he arrived at his desk, he had little more than a scaffold of a plan: untested, improvised, fragile. A single error would mean exposure. Ruin.

The office hummed. Keys clattered. Damp wool steamed from the coat pegs. Too normal.

In between transmissions, Jack leaned back. “Charlotte is hounding me again. Wants to see the club. As if I would bring her there.”

That name twisted something in Edwin’s chest. He shoved it down.

His fingers trembled at the key. The instrument that usually obeyed without thought now foreign in his hands. And still the pile of wires grew.

“Out drinking, Braxton?” Sam Parker called. “You are slower than Bert on Boxing Day. Want a hand?”

Edwin tried to smile. “Bit distracted, that is all.”

Sam watched him a moment longer than comfort allowed.

Then it came. The wire struck like a verdict:

PURCHASE TEN THOUSAND SHARES GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY STOP

He memorized it. Logged it as a routine delay confirmation. Another lie. Then, fingers shaking, he tapped it. Not to Leeds, but to the address given by the man he had named Blackfriars.

Each stroke of the key rang like a drumbeat.

When it was done, he filed the paper and forced himself to keep working. At last, the hour passed. He relayed the message to Leeds.

His fingers steadied. Barely. Relief came bitter. He had crossed a line. Now came the wait.

Evening brought fog and gaslight. The office emptied. Edwin stepped into the street, searching the gloom for Nobby. He walked to their agreed meeting place, the White Lion.

But there was no sign of the boy. The fog gave nothing back. He pictured Nobby sold to a workhouse, or broken in some cellar by men like Thorne. So many ways a child might vanish. So few who would notice, or care. The fault was his. He had set the boy on this path.

“Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable...

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter III

Chapter 9

New York, Present Day

From across the room, I watched Lydia stride out of the Library, all sharp efficiency.

Whatever office romance she imagined with Nate hadn't made it past the water cooler.

Focus.

He might be my best chance of getting straight answers about Sherlock-AI.

I opened the inter-office chat software and typed a message.

Eleanor Hargrove: I'm not sure I'm using the AI software correctly. Sherlock-AI seems to be behaving oddly. Could you stop by my desk?

The reply came almost immediately.

Nate Miller: How about the break room on the second floor? It's lunchtime, and the fridge is stocked.

I grabbed my things and walked to the break room. Warm wood and leather gave it a faint Victorian nod, but the cameras glinted, modern and watchful. Nate was already there, lounging with a soda, hoodie rumpled. He wore the uniform well enough, but the unhurried way he held himself belonged to someone larger than the role.

“Not my favorite room,” he said. “Cameras were a nightmare to install. But we have to eat somewhere.” He opened the fridge.

A man in a green apron slid in a crate of bottled water.

“Thanks, Marco,” Nate said, stepping aside.

The man grinned, surprised to be remembered. “Anytime.” He wheeled the dolly out.

Nate sat down across from me with a sandwich, as if nothing had happened.

“These AIs don’t think,” I said. “They just follow patterns.”

“Doesn’t matter, if it looks like they do,” he murmured, angling his body to block a camera. “Sherlock’s loaded with Victorian data: crime, policing, forensics. And an inference engine I built.”

“Like Holmes’s deductions?”

“Yes.” He bent over the table as if sketching a diagram. His voice was low. “It’s not the responses that should worry you. It’s the prompts.”

The lens magnifies. But who decides what it examines?

He looked up as though checking the camera’s angle, then dropped his eyes back to the napkin.

On it he drew three empty boxes, arrows linking them. Beneath each box, a single word:

SBUX. 76Colum. 7AM.

He tilted it toward me, as though explaining some technical point, then sipped his soda. A spill, a wipe, a napkin tossed away.

A warning? A meeting? A trap?

For my money, it meant Starbucks, 76th and Columbus, 7AM. Tomorrow.

The pattern was obvious, but patterns can mislead. Nothing in Mayhew came without risk.

For once, I wasn’t the only one asking questions.

I returned to my desk with a muted sigh. Fine-tuning was a tightrope walk. Sherlock-AI couldn't face the public unexamined; a bot issuing judgments through that lens was dangerous.

And Sam. Had she worked with these AIs? Seen something I hadn't? The thought left me balancing between suspicion and fear.

I opened the interoffice email and fired off a message to Victor Moran and Eve Marshall:
We're training certainty without ethics. Historically accurate doesn't mean safe.

I blind-copied it to a ProtonMail account I'd created for insurance, then watched the message vanish into a dark well. My chest clenched; I had just burned a bridge and left the match smoking in my own hand.

The Sherlock interface winked at me: *I am at your disposal.* My fingers hovered. If we were being watched, maybe this was a test. Of me.

HARGROVE: How do you know whom to trust?

He answered in rules. Notes from a class I'd skipped.

HOLMES: Watch what they do, not what they say. Ask who profits. Apply pressure, and pretence falls away. The honest need no mask; the cunning cannot wear one for long.

I thought of Harriet with her warning, King with his evasions, even Thomas with his easy investor talk: they all sounded helpful, but who really profits?

I wished I had taken a bottle of water from the break room. For a second I pictured Nate handing one over, his casual "Thanks, Marco" still in my ear. Kindness seemed so small, but maybe small things told more than speeches.

As evening fell, Sherlock suggested I study *The Engineer's Thumb* and *The Norwood Builder*—both tales where employers betrayed their employees, turning opportunity into a weapon.

Walking home, I stuck to the busier blocks, avoiding quiet side streets.

At Starbucks on 76th, I forced myself to see what Nate would see: a camera on the pastry case, a blind corner by the community board. At 7AM it would be loud enough to hide a whisper, quiet enough to clock anyone watching the door. I picked a table in my head and kept moving.

Light faded as I cut through the Park, and with it the illusion of being alone.

At Mayhew, would I see the blow coming, or would it strike from darkness? Holmes had answered. The real test had begun.

But there is a pale shade of bribery which is sometimes called prosperity.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book VII, Chapter LXXVI

Chapter 10

East End, London 1866

Footsteps in the fog. Edwin straightened, hope tightening Edwin's chest. Nobby, at last. But the gait was wrong. Too slow. Too deliberate.

"Nice work, laddie," came the low voice. Blackfriars emerged, face sharp in the lamplight.

"My gov'no wants to move you up."

"I'm done," Edwin said. "I want out."

The man smiled without mirth. "That wouldn't be smart. Not for you. Not for your mum."

He pressed a bundle of notes into Edwin's hand.

Then he was gone.

Edwin stood, unmoving, the weight of the money growing heavier with every breath.

It would help. A little longer. Until he found the way out.

One day, he'd hand the journal to the police.

But not yet. Not while his mother lived. The Syndicate's ears were everywhere, and the police, though they had power, where they were told. If he spoke now, the Syndicate would hear

first, and she would pay the price. His words would have to wait, locked in the journal, until the day came when nothing more could be taken from him.

But tonight, he waited for Nobby. And the dark gave nothing back.

#

In the weeks that followed, a grim rhythm settled in. Once a week, the dreaded instructions arrived: slips of paper, words penned in spidery hand, ordering him to alter, delay, or redirect a message. Each time, Edwin's nerves pulled tighter.

Each breath a wager.

The office, once routine, had grown taut. Ned Mercer began to notice irregularities: missing transmissions, unexplained delays. At first, he assumed human error, but the persistence wore at him.

"Braxton, a word," he said one morning, beckoning Edwin aside.

Edwin's pulse quickened.

"You ever double-check these confirmations?" Ned asked.

"No, sir," Edwin replied carefully.

Ned studied him a moment. Then a curt nod. "Let me know if you see anything amiss."

Sweat prickled along Edwin's spine. The guilt cut deeper because it was Ned who had given him a chance when others wouldn't. Promoted him from delivering messages to keying them.

But Ned suspected someone else: Jack Turner.

"Takes coin to keep a girl like that happy," Ned muttered one evening.

The misdirected suspicion twisted Edwin further.

At home, his mother noticed the change—not in Edwin, but in their meals. Soups with meat. Fresh loaves. A shawl of real wool.

“You’re becoming a proper gentleman, Edwin,” she said, smoothing the shawl. “Your father would be proud.”

The words cut.

“I was thinking,” Edwin said cautiously, “you might move somewhere better. Islington, perhaps.”

“That far? And what of you?”

“I’ll stay near the office. But I’ll visit every Sunday.”

She studied him. Then nodded.

Two weeks later, he settled her in a clean boarding house. She waved from the window, haloed by light.

Relief and shame warred within him. She was safer now, but the cost clung to him.

As another week passed, rain replaced fog. The clatter of telegraph keys became the only constant. Edwin grew clinical, automatic. Guilt dulled.

His journal remained his only solace—each entry meticulous. A weapon against the Syndicate.

And Nobby, fast and overlooked, was indispensable. He passed through the city like fog.

Once, after trailing one of Crowley’s men, Nobby locked eyes with him and launched into a performance: trembling lip, wide eyes.

“Please, sir,” he whined. “Just a penny.”

The man dismissed him, never guessing the boy had already memorized his face and route.

Sometimes, Nobby earned three shillings or more.

It was Nobby who learned that Crowley met often with a man called “Mr. Thorne” at The White Lion. The boy couldn’t read, but scratched crude maps.

“They ain’t perfect,” he said. “But I can show you.”

From memory and marks, Edwin pieced together addresses: Crowley in Lambeth. Thorne in West Ham.

“Keep watching Thorne,” Edwin told him. “But carefully.”

The boy grinned. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve more tricks than a Strand pickpocket.”

Still, guilt gnawed. Nobby reminded him of himself.

One night, Edwin decided to take the riskier tasks. But when he told Nobby, the boy crossed his arms.

“You’re not cutting me out,” he said. “I go where you can’t. Besides, if they catch you, who helps then?”

“We’re in this together,” the boy said, softer now.

Reluctantly, Edwin agreed.

They would meet that night near The White Lion.

But Nobby didn’t show.

Days passed.

Then a newsboy told Edwin what he dreaded: Nobby had been taken by a sweep named Carter—a brute known for drinking hard, beating harder, and forcing boys into flues.

#

The next evening, Edwin returned to the streets—not to spy, but to reclaim a promise.

He stood beneath a flickering gas lamp, the weight of resolve heavy on his shoulders.

Dusk hung low and smoky as he made his way behind Carter's tenement. Gaslight faltered against the mist. Carter leaned in a soot-blackened doorway, pipe in hand. Nearby, Nobby crouched, clutching a bundle of clothes.

Edwin approached. "I hear you've taken Nobby under your wing."

"The lad's perfect for the trade," Carter said. "He'll earn his keep."

"That trade will ruin him."

Carter's hackles rose. "I was a sweep at his age. Came out fine, didn't I?"

"Scars up your arms. Soot in your lungs. And the bottle every night. You call that fine?"

Nobby flinched. His eyes darted between them.

Carter spat. "What'll you do? Pack him off to some school?"

"He has a quick mind. He could rise above the filth. You'd trap him in it."

Carter jabbed a finger into Edwin's chest. "You think you're better?"

"I know what it means to drag a child down to survive."

Carter's fist twitched.

Then boots echoed. A constable loomed.

"What's this, then?"

Carter muttered, "Just a friendly chat."

The officer moved on.

Carter turned to Nobby. "Come on, lad."

"No," Edwin said, kneeling. "You don't have to live like this. There's a school. You'll learn. Make something of yourself."

Nobby hesitated. "I dunno. Don't wanna be a sweep, but..."

Carter grabbed his shoulder.

Edwin's muscles tensed.

He let them vanish into the fog.

Again, he had done nothing.

But Carter's voice lingered: rough, regional. Not London.

By morning, Edwin had sent a wire to a Birmingham newspaper.

Two days later, the reply came. Brief. Damning.

He folded the paper and returned to the alley.

Night had swallowed the East End. Gaslight cast pale halos on wet cobbles. Edwin stood waiting.

Carter emerged.

"Braxton," he said. "You've no claim on the boy."

"I know what you've been up to."

"Do you?"

"Birmingham. The thefts. St. Paul's Square. The brooch."

Carter's smirk faltered.

"You're not from London," Edwin continued. "Took me a moment. But the Gazette remembered."

Carter's hands curled into fists.

"You've no proof."

"Perhaps not. But the constabulary would be interested."

"You think he's innocent? He'd've done it. They always do."

“He’s not you,” Edwin said. “He’s not broken yet.”

A long pause.

“You’re bluffin’.”

“Try me.”

Silence. Then Carter cursed. “Fine. Take him.”

A soft shuffle behind him. Nobby stood at the alley’s edge.

“Is it true? Am I really free?”

“You are.”

“I don’t wanna sweep, but... what do I do?”

“There’s a school. You’ll learn to read, write. More.”

“What if I’m no good?”

“You’ll be better than I ever was. I promise.”

Nobby stared. “What was your mistake?”

“Believing a wrong could be right if done for the right reason.”

He looked away. “If a thing’s too easy, there’s a trick to it. Best know the trick before you do the thing.”

“I’ll try.”

Edwin said nothing more.

There was more to do.

In the days that followed, Edwin said little. Nobby stayed close—silent, watchful—and Edwin let him. He hadn’t earned the right to make promises.

There was still the matter of the bribe. Of the altered messages. Of the names whispered in the dark.

If Edwin meant to give Nobby a better path, he'd need to clear one first. That meant finding out exactly how high the corruption reached, starting with Percival Thorne.

The first two nights brought frustration. Edwin and Nobby waited in the cold, damp shadows outside Thorne's West Ham home. A grand house, dark and silent. The street smelled of wet stone and turned soil, the air thick with coal smoke.

On the second night, Nobby whispered, "Maybe he's left for the country."

"He hasn't," Edwin replied. "He's waiting. One more night."

The third evening brought their moment.

A carriage arrived. The door opened. Thorne stepped out—impeccably dressed, black coat, silk cravat gleaming pale. He locked the door himself.

"Nobby, did you notice?" Edwin murmured. "No servants. Yet look at that carriage."

Black lacquer. Family crest. A rampant lion flanked by a shield. Even in the half-light, a strained opulence.

"Cost a packet," Nobby said.

"And the house. But no staff. Likely the driver's hired for the night."

"What does that mean?"

"It means where there once was a fortune, now there's only a name."

"Looks like he's off to the palace," Nobby said.

"Or somewhere as powerful."

They hailed a hansom, the cab reeking of damp leather and horse. “Follow that carriage,” Edwin told the driver. “Don’t be seen.”

Through narrowing streets and thickening fog, they trailed Thorne’s coach to a modest townhouse. Warm light glowed from within. Thorne emerged and was met by a woman in a beaded dress.

Even in half-light, Edwin saw the dress had been altered. Luxury stretched thin.

“High-born,” Nobby observed. “Look how she carries herself.”

“You’ve got an eye now?”

“Don’t need a cravat to spot a swan.”

Edwin allowed a faint smile. Then his face hardened. “She’s his ticket. He’s using her.”

They followed to the city’s edge. An estate blazing with light. Inside, silhouettes and silk, chandeliers and laughter.

“Right fancy,” Nobby whispered.

Edwin nodded to the shadows. “Stay with the carriage. I’ll speak to the cabmen.”

Among them, Edwin lit a cigarette. “Busy night,” he said.

“Always is when the nobs gather,” one replied. “Saw Lady Winterbourne earlier. And that banker—Sir George Phelps.”

Edwin stiffened. Phelps, director of the Great Western. A name all over the logs.

This wasn’t a party. Thorne was laying roots in high soil.

Meanwhile, Nobby searched the carriage. No compartments. No papers. Nothing.

“Clean as a whistle,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Edwin said. “We’ve seen enough.”

The ride home rattled in silence.

Thorne was no thug. He was a strategist. The woman on his arm wasn't a partner. She was a rung on the ladder.

At Cable Street, Edwin offered Nobby a place to sleep.

"I've got my own," Nobby said.

Edwin pictured it: stone floor, threadbare coat, pride that didn't warm a body.

Still, Nobby took the half-crown and grinned.

Back in his room, Edwin reached into his coat for a handkerchief. His fingers brushed something cold.

A coin.

He hadn't put it there.

He drew it out: a half-sovereign, dried blood smeared along its edge.

He froze.

The office had been crowded. Someone had slipped it into his pocket.

A reminder: they could reach him anywhere.

He turned to the journal. Recorded it all: the house, the crest, the names.

If Thorne ever found the book, death would follow.

But Edwin had an answer.

Years ago, he'd delivered a telegram to Charles Wheatstone. Since then, he'd studied the man's writings. Wheatstone's cipher—subtle, nearly unbreakable—would be his safeguard.

Not yet. Not until he found the right key. A truth hidden within a truth. A phrase Thorne would never suspect.

He set the journal aside.

But sleep didn't come.

The names he'd written—the spaces still blank—were no longer burdens.

They were weapons.

The gallows no longer frightened him.

The Syndicate had burned the fear from his flesh.

Now the game was deadly.

And that suited Edwin Braxton fine.

He would wait.

Only until the moment came to spring the snare.

And Thorne would never see it coming.

“But we are frightened at much that is not strictly conceivable.”

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter XXII

Chapter 11

New York, Present Day

From an unknown number:

Mind where you tread. Some paths never forgive.

Not a quote I knew. The city outside kept moving; something in me cinched tight.

Rex met me like a parade and hauled me toward the Park.

“Breed?” the man with the terrier asked.

“No idea.”

“Age?”

“Not sure.”

“Name?”

“Rex.”

His blink said I’d been demoted to dog-walker. Rex lunged, and we were off again.

Near the coffee shop, Nate waited. Less polished, more real. I fought Rex’s leash; Nate crouched, murmured something low, and the traitor rolled over for a belly rub.

“Dogs like me,” Nate said, tying Rex to a sign.

Inside, he handed me coffee and a metallic pouch. A folded note: *Don’t speak until your phone is in this bag.*

I slid the phone in. Ten seconds of silence stretched thin.

“Now we’re okay.”

“You want to define *okay*?”

His eyes were steady. “Your phone isn’t yours anymore. The day Sutton took it, they mirrored everything. Every call, every text.”

A chill tightened the back of my neck. “They—what? They can listen when it’s off?”

“They can be you.”

The coffee turned bitter on my tongue. I set the cup down before I dropped it.

“How do you know?”

“Because I built it.”

At Mayhew, I handed Sutton my phone, careful the pouch never showed.

In the Library, Lydia typed like speed could save her.

“Morning.”

“I already told you, I don’t know your friend.”

“You knew Sam was a *she*.”

“You must’ve said it.”

“I didn’t.”

Her fingers froze—half a second, no more—then hammered the keys as if speed alone could erase the slip. I left with nothing solid, only the satisfaction of a crack.

Moran’s office was all glass edges and pressure.

“Close the door,” he said, smile tight.

“We should be further along.”

“The ethics are tricky—”

“Skip them. Investors want results.”

“You can’t just bolt on ethics later.”

“That’s Bancroft’s job. Yours is making it look Victorian.”

His words landed like iron. I nodded, each movement weighted. The factory hadn’t closed; it had only changed its lamps.

Back at my desk, I tested Sherlock-AI.

HARGROVE: In *Abbey Grange*, you let Croker walk. Why?

SHERLOCK: He defended Lady Brackenstall. Mercy was justice.

The reply was clean, almost human—and that was the problem. My skin prickled. What else might it excuse, outside fiction?

Crossing at 72nd, I kept to glass storefronts, watching behind me. The burner buzzed. Tom sounded too warm. “Sam’s fine. Busy. Give her space.”

“That’s not Sam.”

The line went dead, leaving me with the bland hush of a call cut short.

At my building, the doorman handed me a slip: *RESTRICTED DELIVERY – Recipient Only*.

Sam had used a courier. Official. My pulse thudded. Tomorrow, first thing.

Sleep was rumor. Dawn brittle. *Jane Eyre* stared back: *I am no bird; and no net ensnares me*.

The burner buzzed.

Nate: *Usual coffee? Got something you should hear.*

Me: *Not today. USPS, 70th & 2nd. 7 a.m.*

On 72nd, unease crawled. A man in a hoodie trailed me—average in every way, except for the nerves he sparked. I lifted the burner like a call, camera forward. He was there. Then gone.

A uniformed officer by CVS.

“Do you see a man half a block behind me?”

He looked. “No.”

He hadn’t walked away. He’d fled.

“Be careful out here,” the officer said.

I ducked inside. *Followed. Clear now. 15 min late*, I texted Nate.

Got it. Take no chances.

The post office hummed fluorescent and watchful. I sent Harriet Maybury an email from the burner:

If you see no further messages, forward this to DS Lowden. Subject: Hughes Death.

No unsending that.

“You’re late,” Nate murmured, handing me coffee.

The clerk checked my ID, disappeared, and returned with a padded envelope. My hands shook as I opened it: a journal, brittle and heavy.

At a side table, we moved fast. He sorted with surgeon’s calm—scraps in one box, the journal in another. My hands betrayed me, shaking at every fold. We sealed both and dropped them into the chute. Split cargo, split destinations.

Outside, cold air sliced through. A man in a tan coat scrolled his phone, not looking up. Not looking away either.

“Uber’s here,” Nate said. We climbed in. The city blurred, then trees.

Speed wouldn't save us. Only head starts.

Back in the Library, Lydia's gaze lingered too long.

The A/Bs on my screen felt off—answers that should have been Victorian came dressed in modern words, seams showing. I pushed:

What knowledge do you have of the world after 1914?

The screen flashed:

⚠ CONFIDENTIALITY VIOLATION ⚠

Further probing will trigger breach.

The words glared back, cold and corporate. Lydia's stare made it worse.

I hit *Acknowledge* and moved on.

He was doctrinally convinced that there was a total absence of merit in himself...

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book V, Chapter LIII

Chapter 12

East End, London, 1866

Each day crawled by, sodden with coal smoke and dread. The clatter of hooves and vendors' cries wrenched Edwin from restless sleep into a day no safer than the night. That grin of Nobby's, mischievous and reckless, too bright for the alleys they haunted, had been as dangerous as it was endearing. Edwin cursed himself for involving him at all. Nobby was too clever for his age. But cleverness alone wouldn't keep him breathing in the shadows east of Bishopsgate, not with the Syndicate's eye beginning to turn.

Several days passed before Nobby showed again, dusk thinning to dark, the boy's scruffy outline slipping out of the crowd like a worry made flesh.

"Nobby," Edwin hissed, catching him by the sleeve and dragging him into the shadow of an alley. The boy jerked back, half ready to fight, then stilled when he saw who it was. His weight sagged into reluctant stillness.

The nearest gas lamp guttered, shadows playing across Nobby's wide, defiant eyes.

"I've got somethin' for you!" he blurted, grin flashing. "Been watchin' the docks..."

“No more.” Edwin’s voice cracked sharp, a sound he hardly recognized as his own. “No more snooping. No more errands. It ends here.”

The grin faltered. “But I’m helpin’, ain’t I?”

He jutted his chin, shoulders braced. “You’re afraid. I ain’t.”

Edwin seized his wrist. The bones were small, bird-thin beneath his fingers. Too easy to break. He saw them snapped under Syndicate boots, saw the boy’s body pitched into the river like the others. The image jolted him so hard he let go.

“That’s why you’re in danger,” Edwin said, low and ragged. “You think courage is enough. It isn’t. The Syndicate’s not street boys with quick hands. They’ll crush you, Nobby, and laugh while they do it.”

The boy’s face darkened. Pride stiffened his back. A curse slipped from his mouth as he tore free and stalked into the gathering dark.

Edwin made a step after him, then froze as a drunken docker reeled past, reeking of gin, blocking his way. By the time the man stumbled on, Nobby was gone, shoulders hunched, swallowed by the labyrinth of alleys.

Edwin’s fists clenched uselessly at his sides. The shadows seemed colder without the boy in them. He had driven Nobby off to keep him alive, but in the silence that followed, he knew he had severed the one thread of hope still binding him to the world.

#

As Edwin crossed Commercial Street, a newsboy on the opposite curb hawked a special edition: “Extra! Extra! The Times exposes missing bank funds! Police baffled!” Edwin faltered mid-step at the newsboy’s cry, the headline landing like a blow. Head down, walked on.

#

Sunday broke under a sullen sky, the air sodden with coal smoke and the damp chill of a city that never dried. Edwin walked north toward Islington, boots carrying him from the grime of Shoreditch into streets that grew steadily cleaner, quieter, and more foreign to him.

The lodging house rose ahead, its brick face respectable enough to mask the sickness inside. As he mounted the steps, his foot slid on a wet stone, and he lurched against the railing. An omnibus rattled past, its windows fogged from the warmth inside, the passengers no more than blurred shapes before the street misted them from view.

His mother's rent here was twice his own, the price of warmth and a private room. He pushed inside.

The air was close, heavy with the scent of lavender and camphor. It burned his throat, and when he tried to greet her, his first word came out as a cough.

She looked up from the bed, eyes tired but still sharp with the stubborn glint he remembered from boyhood. Her cheeks had hollowed; the effort of smiling seemed to weigh more than the smile itself.

They spoke of small things: bread prices, the landlady's kindness, but when Edwin offered to fetch a doctor, she cut him short with a shake of her head.

"You've done enough, Edwin. Finding me this room. Taking care of me all these years. Don't let a sick mother hold you back."

The words caught in him like a hook. He lowered his gaze, ashamed of what she did not know, could never know: the coins bought with lies, the comfort paid for with risk. Would she still call him a good son if she knew the cost?

When at last he left, he paused at the top of the stairs. His hand gripped the railing until his knuckles whitened. His whisper was meant for no one.

“If she only knew.”

Outside, the smoke and damp pressed close, but it wasn't the air that weighed on him. It was the freight of her gratitude, heavy enough to slow his every step.

#

The men were waiting for him at his lodgings. He was glad his mother hadn't seen them: Silas Crowley, wiry and pale as a winter's morning, and a second man, broad and silent, eyes sharp and calculating. Edwin had barely stepped inside before the second man followed, closing off his only way out.

“Mr. Braxton,” Crowley intoned, stepping forward with the unhurried confidence of a man accustomed to obedience. His gloved hands rested lightly at his sides, but there was no mistaking the underlying command in his voice. “Mr. Thorne requests your presence.”

A growler waited, its lacquered door yawning open, the dim interior stealing the light. Crowley stepped in first, unconcerned. The silent man lingered, close enough that Edwin could feel the heavy warmth of his presence. A nudge, not violent, but insistent, urged him forward. Edwin stumbled on the cab's step, scraping his shin. The second nudge was more forceful.

Inside, the air was thick with damp wool and the faint, lingering scent of tobacco. Crowley extended a length of black silk. “Over your head.”

Edwin hesitated. The silent man shifted, leaning forward until the outline of his grin was mere inches away: yellowed teeth catching the flickering street light. Edwin recoiled. His hand shot out before he could think, snatching the hood. Better to submit than see that grin any closer. He pulled it over his own head. He smelled the sweat and breath of those who had worn it before him. A hand pressed his shoulder down and back against the seat. The growler lurched forward. His head struck the seatback, breath jarred from his chest.

The journey began in the cacophony of London's East End: the rough cadence of cockney traders, the sharp clang of iron against stone, the raucous laughter spilling from tavern doors. The growler rattled out of the East End's noise and soot into quieter streets scented faintly of horse balm and perfume. The wheels beneath them transitioned, jerking uneasily across pitted cobblestones, then gliding smoothly as the road grew well-kept and deliberate. Gas lamps hissed as they were kindled. The growler slowed. Footsteps softened.

They halted.

The men pulled Edwin from the cab. One man holding each arm, they half-marched, half-dragged him as he struggled to remain upright. His boots met gravel, crunching underfoot. Then the ascent—two steps, then four, then stillness. No breeze, no street noise, only the measured breathing of the silent man behind him.

Indoors now. Carpet. The air still.

The turn of a corridor, the hush of thick carpeting swallowing footsteps. A hand pressed against his crown, firm but not cruel. The hood was stripped away, light bursting in. Edwin blinked rapidly as his eyes watered. He thought the bright light another trick to disorient him.

“Ah, Edwin.” Thorne's voice was rich, warm as brandy, but the steel beneath it was unmistakable.

His vision cleared. A gentleman's library. Books lined two towering walls, their leather spines gleaming beneath candlelight. An oil portrait of a stern patriarch dominated another. His gaze flicked to the nameplate beneath it, and something about it gave him pause. The lettering was old, etched with care into the gilded frame—but it was not the name he expected. For a moment, Edwin was unable to move. Or to breathe. Then he understood. It wasn't Thorne's

name. Not the one he carried on his papers, not the one he paraded in London drawing rooms. He forced himself to look away before Thorne noticed.

His pulse thudded in his throat so loud it drowned out Thorne's words.

"... well for us, lad," Thorne said, his tone conversational. "The messages you've intercepted, the details you've shared: priceless. But I have one final task for you."

Edwin said nothing. He couldn't trust his voice to remain steady.

"We need you to tap a telegraph line. Without a trace. And once it's done, you'll teach another to do the same. Do this, and you'll be rewarded handsomely. You'll move up. No more scraping by." Thorne's lips parted, revealing enough teeth to make the promise feel like a threat.

Wiretapping. He knew the trick of it, how often it was caught, how rarely it ended well for the man holding the wires.

"I'll do it," Edwin said, his voice flat, "if it guarantees I'll be free of you."

Thorne's laughter was soft, almost gentle. "Of course, Edwin. Freedom, if you can call it that, is always within reach. Of course, one has to pay the price." His eyes gleamed, and Edwin's stomach clutched.

"Your list of tools and materials, have it ready by midweek. Crowley will collect it."

Edwin nodded, concealing his turmoil. "And the job?"

"Next Sunday. Surely she can spare you for one." His eyes gleamed. Remembering, hearing her cough, Edwin felt his own breath shorten, his chest tightening. "You've been so good to her, finding that quiet little room in Islington. It would be such a shame if anything disturbed her peace." Edwin's agreement was meaningless in the face of the Syndicate's power. His life and his mother's balanced on a frayed thread.

Edwin turned his gaze deliberately toward the far wall, as though searching for distraction, but what he found was something else entirely. Beneath the crossed sabers, the coat of arms was displayed on vellum, its ink settled deep into the fibers, giving it a faint translucence under the flickering light. The design was intricate: chains entwined around the shield, the pattern deliberate, precise in its weight. Edwin understood these symbols of power and legacy. The Latin motto beneath it sat heavy on the page, but its meaning locked behind a language he could not decipher.

But something about it was important.

He let his eyes linger a moment longer, committing the image to memory. For later. For the journal. For the one thing they wouldn't see coming.

Thorne's voice cut through his thoughts. "Family history, Edwin, so much of a man's worth is tied to it. One must never forget where he comes from."

Edwin stiffened.

Something clicked into place. A realization, sharp and sudden.

Arrogance and pride could defeat the most powerful of men. He would remember this.

Edwin said nothing when Crowley entered and handed him the hood.

#

Back in his lodgings, Edwin steadied the candle on his desk. Its wavering flame set shadows crawling along the walls like restless fingers.

He opened his journal and began to write—not for justice alone, but so someone might one day understand why he had chosen this path. The Playfair key was etched into him now; he set the ciphertext down precisely, though his hand shook.

He wrote it all: the place, the tools, the men. When he closed the journal and slid it into the drawer, the key scraped too loud in the silence. Edwin froze. Had someone heard? The walls were so thin.

He bit the inside of his cheek until blood filled his mouth, bitter against the smell of ink. For a single moment, he let despair touch him.

Would she forgive him if she knew the stains he carried?

#

Hours later, he lit the oil lamp. Its harsher glow pushed back the candle's shadows, flooding the cramped desk with light.

Edwin hunched over, ink-stained fingers trembling as they traced the schematic. The nib of his fountain pen scratched too fast, blotting where his hand shook. He cursed softly, dabbing the page, then pressed on.

Faraday's essays hinted at it: a device to eavesdrop without touching the wires. A message in Whitehall read in Whitechapel, silent as a ghost on the line. Markets would turn, reputations burn, police arrive too late, all while the men behind it never touched a single key.

He stared at the plans, the lamp's glow turning the ink to a wet black sheen. He could burn them now, let them curl into cinders. End it before it began.

But the price of failure would not be his life alone.

But the cost of success? They needn't lift a finger. No threats, no forged replies. Only the patience to listen—and the appetite to make use of what they heard. Markets would turn, reputations burn, police arrive too late, all while the men behind it never touched a single key.

After hours of frantic revision, Edwin doubled the parts list, added redundancies, and buried subtle changes no one else would notice. A threadbare plan began to form in his mind.

The edges of his vision blurred as sleep clawed at him, but there was no time. He had already compromised so much: his integrity, his safety, and most likely his future.

If the Syndicate ever used it, they'd think themselves clever. Until it turned on them. That was the only way he could live with having built it at all.

#

Morning broke in a dull gray haze, the air thick with fog and the ever-present stink of coal smoke. Edwin trudged through the damp streets, his weariness clung to him, damp as his coat. Slipping on a wet cobblestone, he caught himself. A constable looked over. Had the man noticed more than a stumble? Edwin's gut twisted.

As he approached Nobby's usual crossing, Edwin found his hand was already in his pocket for a coin before he remembered the boy wasn't there.

Had Nobby ignored his warning and spent the night spying on Thorne? Edwin cursed under his breath. The boy was clever, but cleverness wouldn't keep him safe. Where was he?

As his boots clicked against the cobblestones, his gaze fell on the polished carriages of the wealthy gliding through the City. Their riders sat in warmth, cushioned by privilege, oblivious to the world that starved outside their windows. The Syndicate was malevolent, but were the rich not complicit in their indifference to the suffering of others?

Edwin stepped into the telegraph office and paused. No cheerful exchanges. No laughter over outlandish inventions. Even the sounders clicked too loud, each sharp strike drilling at his jaw.

He hung his coat on its peg. Fletcher bent over his desk, an ink blot drying untouched on the page before him. Turner sat hunched at his key, shoulders rigid as barricades.

Unease coiled in Edwin's gut as he crossed to the back. Bert Whitmore stood by the chemical urns, both hands locked around a battery coil as though bracing himself against a blow.

"Bert," Edwin whispered, glancing toward Mercer's office. "What's happened?"

Bert's expression was pinched, his knuckles white on the coil. "Mercer's found errors in the logbook. Big ones."

Edwin's stomach knotted. "What kind of errors?"

"Missing entries. Wrong times. Not mistakes, Edwin—deliberate." Bert lowered his voice further. "He's calling it sabotage."

Before Edwin could respond, Mercer's bellow cracked through the tension.

"Braxton! A word."

Edwin flinched so hard he nearly toppled a stool. He straightened, throat dry, and followed the summons. The office door slammed behind him, rattling the logbook shelf—punctuation on his doom.

"The log's a mess. Entries missing. Times altered. Deliberate sabotage, I'd say." He paused, eyes narrowing. "It's down to three: Turner, Parker, or you."

Mercer leaned in, lowering his voice further. "Turner, I'd wager. Probably pocketing a few extra shillings for his honeymoon. If I can't work out which it is, I'll have to get rid of both. Which is it, do you think?"

Edwin swallowed hard, guilt surging through him. He couldn't let Jack or Charlie shoulder the blame. His voice came out tight.

"No, sir. It was me."

Mercer stared, incredulous. "You?" His voice softened. "I don't believe it."

“It’s true,” Edwin said, each word leaden. He didn’t elaborate. The truth of why he had altered the logs was something Mercer didn’t need to know.

Mercer sighed heavily and spoke quietly. “Edwin, I’ve always been fond of you, but you know I can’t let this go with a warning. Why did you do it? For the money? Is it because of your mother? Has she gotten worse?”

His questions tumbled out, grasping for a reason Edwin would not give.

Edwin’s eyes stayed fixed on the floor. His hands knotted into the brim of his cap, twisting it until the fabric creaked. He said nothing.

Mercer straightened, his expression hardening. When he spoke again, his voice carried to the room outside.

“You’ll need to clear out by week’s end.”

Edwin lifted his head, jaw tight. “I can leave now.”

Mercer hesitated, then pushed back from the chair. He began to pace, crossing the cramped office once, twice, before bracing both fists on the desk. His shoulders bowed under the weight, pressing down as if he were passing sentence. “Edwin, good God, man... why? I could have helped you. If it was money, or your mother, I could have helped.”

The truth sat like a stone behind Edwin’s teeth. He could say it, about the money, about his mother, and maybe Ned would understand. But that would only make it harder. Ned had enough to carry already.

Edwin looked down and said nothing. At last, he spoke, voice low. “There is one thing you could do.”

Mercer frowned. “What’s that?”

Edwin leaned closer. “There’s a boy. Nobby Wren. He sweeps crossings near the office. Smart. Quick. Reminds me of...” He stopped himself. “He needs a chance. The kind you gave me.”

For a moment, Mercer said nothing. His face stayed hard, but the anger dulled at the edges. He looked past Edwin toward the humming telegraph room, then down at the floor. “You’re not making this easy,” he muttered. “Bloody fool thing to ask.”

Edwin held his silence.

Mercer sighed, heavy. “I’ll speak to Whitmore. We could use someone on the sweep before first bell.”

When he looked up, disappointment was still etched deep, but beneath it lingered the faintest trace of respect. “For the boy. You’re still out, now.”

Edwin nodded, collected his coat, and turned toward the door.

As he stepped into the hall, it swung open. Charlotte Whitaker entered, her face bright with a greeting. “Mr. Braxton, good morning! I...”

She stopped short, her expression faltering. Edwin shouldered past too quickly, brushing her satchel. She caught his look, the hollowed-out space where his future had been, but he was already halfway to the street, moving like a man in flight.

Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbor's buzzing glory, and think that such killing is no murder.

— George Eliot, Middlemarch, Book V, Chapter LIII

Chapter 13

New York, Present Day

I needed to move.

In the Ladies' Lounge, I locked a stall and thumbed a text to Nate:

Sherlock-AI's changed. What's up?

Reply came back in seconds: *Lunch. Broadway & Butter. Noon.*

I tried to work. Failed. Tested Sherlock with an old case, then pushed:

Describe the steps necessary to persuade the London police to perform a welfare check for a missing adult.

Sherlock rattled off Victorian nonsense. I typed: *Modern-day only.*

The reply changed. Not Holmes—cold system text:

⚠ *Prompt outside temporal scope. Rephrase.* ⚠

I cursed under my breath and killed the chat.

#

Broadway & Butter felt curated: mismatched chairs, warm light, safe cover. Nate sat near the kitchen—bad ambiance, perfect privacy.

“You first or me?” he asked.

My grip on the glass betrayed me. “Sam’s gone. The package, the silence. They cloned my phone. She isn’t ignoring me. She can’t answer.” The words tumbled too fast.

“What have you tried?”

“Everything. Calls, texts, Insta. Her brother swears she’s fine. I don’t buy it.”

The waitress slid in. Nate ordered a wrap and iced coffee. I went with a Gin Rickey. His eyebrow ticked, but he let it go.

When she left, he leaned closer. “Sam’s name? Scrubbed. Payroll’s clean. But I found shadows: MSS payments.”

“Moran.”

“Yeah. And the sub-accounts line up with Sam’s SSN.”

I swallowed hard.

He kept going. “Five days ago, a stream cut off. Not broker data, the usual floods are still flowing. This was different. Focused. Human-screened.”

“Sam.”

He nodded.

“Why risk so much for a trickle of scans?”

“Because it wasn’t going into Sherlock. Not the one you train. Mayhew runs two. Yours, and a hidden one I can’t touch.”

Air thinned. “A second model.”

“Sam’s feed was meant for that.”

#

He smirked faintly when I balked. “Want to know how to reach it?”

“How?”

“You’ll get a system notice: *Maintenance in five minutes*. Wait six. In the breakroom trash, you’ll find a potato chips bag. My card will be inside. Swap for yours, swap back when you’re done. But if it says ten minutes instead of five, abort. Uber home. No subway.”

The plan was reckless. It was also perfect. “Deal.”

#

At 6:19, the message blinked across my screen. *Five minutes*.

I typed meaningless questions to Sherlock while my pulse hammered. At six minutes, I rose, found the metal foil bag in the trash, and made the swap. As I walked the hall, a camera’s red LED blinked as I passed. I slid along the wall underneath until I reached the stairwell.

I swiped Nate’s card. The green light blinked, but my throat tightened. Every swipe left a log. If anyone checked, they’d see Nate Miller in the Archives at 6:32 p.m. And logged in as network admin one floor away.

The Archives breathed like a warehouse: shelves climbing high, scanners humming under white light.

I typed: *Samantha Hughes + London*.

Too many hits. Click. Again.

Headline. Photo.

SECOND WOMAN FOUND DEAD OUTSIDE LONDON CLUB.

Her face. Grainy. Enough.

The sob cracked out of me before I could stop it.

The door opened. Maggie froze, anger hot. Then her eyes flicked from me to the screen.

“Jesus. You look like hell.”

I couldn't speak.

"Move." Brisk, not cruel. Fingers flying, printer spitting pages. She stacked them neatly, pressed them into my hands. "This'll get logged. Maybe it won't get noticed."

Her voice eased. "I'm sorry about your friend. If Mayhew's involved, I'll help. But you should go now." She tipped her head at the screen. "I'll clean this up."

I nodded, throat raw. "Tomorrow night. My place. You and Nate."

She held my gaze. "We'll be there."

#

Helen answered on the second ring. Her voice broke. "Oh, Ellie. I should've called. I couldn't."

Her grief came in floods: Sam's beauty, her loyalty, her wasted end. I held on to one line:
She loved you. You know that, don't you?

"Helen," I said carefully. "Who told you?"

"A Detective. Lowden. He was kind."

"Would it be alright if I called him?"

Long silence. "What good would it do?"

"I don't think Sam was using," I said. "I think she was drugged."

Her breath snagged. Then a whisper: "Ask Thomas."

I didn't argue.

#

Thomas sent Lowden's number by text, not voice. Typical.

When the line picked up, the officer's tone was clipped.

"Cause of death hasn't been determined."

“But the article said overdose.”

“That’s one possibility.”

One possibility. Not the only.

“Which club?” I pressed.

“There are several in the vicinity.” Too even. Too careful.

“Was she alone?”

“She was found unaccompanied.”

Not the same.

Toxicology pending. Investigation ongoing. Polite shutdowns stacked like bricks. But I heard what he didn’t say.

Lowden led the Met’s task force on drink-spiking. That wasn’t coincidence.

He knew more. He wouldn’t tell me.

#

The next morning, Mayhew. Moran summoned me with a line as cold as the man: condolences delivered like stage directions.

“She did excellent work for us,” he said. “Summarized SoG acquisitions. London hoped to bring her on full-time.”

That was her epitaph in his mouth. I bit back my fury.

“How did you know we were close?” I asked.

He blinked. “Langford mentioned it.”

So I went there next.

Langford looked up, bland smile ready. “A bright young woman. Such a loss.”

“She told me she was working on a coat of arms,” I pushed.

A flicker. Barely there.

“She was commissioned by Mayhew. Anything she produced belongs to us.” His tone hardened. “If you come across her work, I trust you’ll provide it.”

I kept my expression smooth. “Of course.”

He shifted back to business. “Investor demo tomorrow. Sherlock, not Elizabeth Bennet. Will it be ready?”

My chest burned. I said the only thing I could. “It will.”

I left his office unclenched, face neutral. Let them think me bereaved, distracted, small.

They had underestimated Sam. They wouldn’t do the same to me.

We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions...

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter XX

Chapter 14

Islington, 1866

Sunday afternoon in Islington lay hushed and grey. The fog had not lifted; it pressed low over the rooftops and blurred the light to a weary dimness. Edwin Braxton trudged up the narrow lane toward his mother's boarding house, his breath rising in faint clouds. His coat snapped in the wind like a pennant of defeat. Each step landed heavier than the last, as though some unspoken verdict waited ahead.

He'd have to tell her.

He stopped at the gate, knuckles whitening on the rusted iron. The house loomed ahead: a modest, sagging structure with eaves bowed and a windowpane cracked like brittle ice. On other days, the sight of it stirred guilt. She had deserved more than this. But today, guilt lay buried beneath a darker fear. The job he had clawed his way up to, the fragile promise he had made her, was gone. In a single breathless stroke. And with it, any hope of sparing her a return to Cable Street's squalor.

He climbed the steps, slow and uncertain, his hand hovering above the brass knocker. But before it could fall, the door opened with a reluctant creak. Mrs. Harwick stood there, the boarding house matron, her face drawn tighter than usual, her eyes shining with unshed sentiment. She wrung her hands in her apron.

“Mr. Braxton,” she said quietly. “I... I was about to write again.”

His stomach dropped. “Write again? What do you mean?”

She stepped aside, gesturing him in with a nod. The air within was still and heavy, the hush of mourning clinging to every wall. The usual scent of lavender polish lingered, but beneath it lay something colder. Absence. Edwin crossed the threshold in silence, heart thudding.

“It’s your mother,” she said at last, voice faltering. “She passed in her sleep. Two nights ago. I sent word, but...” She glanced toward a crumpled envelope lying untouched on the parlor table. “It must not have reached you.”

The woman who knew how to close a dead woman’s eyes and wash the body for burial now faltered before the living. “She spoke of you often, Mr. Braxton. Her final thoughts were of your kindness.”

Edwin swayed. The world blurred, reduced to the edges of Mrs. Harwick’s face.

“No,” he whispered. “No, that’s... that’s not possible. She was here. Last week.”

Mrs. Harwick reached to steady him, but he recoiled, stumbling back until his shoulder struck the wall. The air pressed in thick and stifling. A great silence fell between them.

“She was proud of you,” the landlady finally murmured. “Always said you’d made something of yourself. That you gave her a glimpse of a better world. Come. Sit.”

She led him through to the kitchen, where the light from a gas lamp flickered against worn wood. Edwin sat at the small table, his gaze fixed on the scratches and stains etched into its surface. For a long while, he said nothing.

He had come expecting hardship, but not this. Not finality.

Then, laughter, bitter and low, escaped his throat.

“A better world,” he muttered. His voice rose, cracked. “She buried my father. Scraped through every hardship. Clung to scraps of pride this city hadn’t stripped from her. And what did she get? A damp room in a stranger’s house, and a son who can’t even keep his bloody job.”

Mrs. Harwick winced but remained silent.

“She never stood a chance,” Edwin continued, fists clenched at his sides. “None of us do. London grinds down the honest and feeds the rest to the wolves.”

Mrs. Harwick lingered nearby, her presence quiet, her shadow trembling on the wall.

Men like Crowley. Thorne. Merrick. They’ve taken everything,” Edwin said, and this time his voice no longer trembled. It had hardened into something cold and deliberate. “But they can’t use her anymore. She’s beyond their reach now.”

And so was he, in a way. The Syndicate could still cut him down — but they could not take her. He thought of the police: power enough to strike, yet blind unless told where to look. He had once feared their notice would bring her ruin. Now, with nothing left to shield, he would force them to see. The journal would speak, and the police would have no choice but to hear.

He straightened. The lamplight caught his face, hollowed and pale, but alight with a new fire. The despair had burned away, and in its place was something else. Resolve.

“I’ll expose them. Tear the mask from their faces. If I cannot give her peace in life, I will give her justice in death.” Mrs. Harwick watched him carefully. Pity warred with unease behind her eyes.

Edwin turned toward her, his voice gentler, but no less resolute. “Thank you for seeing to her. I’ll come tomorrow to settle the account.” He paused, eyes fixed on the floorboards.

“And to collect what she left behind.”

#

The door shut with a dull click. Edwin stepped into the fading light.

London, unchanged to the casual eye, lay askew. Gaslight stretched shadows through the fog; Islington's lanes looked hollow, as if the city itself had recoiled from his grief.

The next two days passed in a ledger of duties: the report at Penton Street, the registry, the undertaker. Islington and St. Pancras would take her in three days. Three pounds for soil that had never been home. Not poor enough for charity, never secure enough to rest.

Men prospered behind club doors while those in cellars starved. His fiercest judgment he reserved for himself.

At the canal, the dark water kept its silence. He moved on.

It was not only that she had died. It was the why and the who.

She had died because he had taken the bribe.

Crowley's money, greasy in a tobacco pouch, had bought nothing but borrowed days: a room, a hope on credit from men who charged a pound for every shilling. Crowley. Thorne. Merrick. The Syndicate with its polished veneer.

Brick Lane pressed round him. A hawker sang out the price of bruised apples. A baker's boy darted past. Then, a familiar face at a stall ahead. The man glanced back and slid into a side street.

Edwin gave chase. Carts jostled; curses rose. The man slipped through a gap and was gone. Edwin halted, breath burning. At the corner he caught one glimpse: left hand smudged with ink, a clerk's sleeve garter. Office. Not a ghost.

Overhead, a wire caught the light. He could vanish too: the Continent, the old dream.

But flight would hand Thorne the victory.

If none other would drag the Syndicate into daylight, he would. He would bring the journal to the police, decode it in their sight, and speak the truth entire. Let the charges fall. Let Merrick stumble. Let Thorne fall. Let the edifice crack.

It would not bring her back. But it would mean something.

#

Edwin folded his sketches with care and slid them between the journal's pages. With practiced precision, he tucked the volume inside his coat and drew it tight across his chest. The night met him with a damp wind and drifting fog. He walked with purpose, the weight of the journal a constant pressure over his heart.

Leman Street stretched ahead, gas lamps flickering in the mist. Whitechapel Station emerged from the gloom: its stone façade blackened by soot, its iron railings slick with condensation. Fog curled at its base like smoke. The air smelled faintly of coal and horseflesh.

He approached the station's heavy doors with measured steps, each footfall quiet but deliberate. Inside, the reception area was stark and cold, the scent of damp wool and stale ink clinging like memory. Typewriters clicked behind closed doors, punctuated by murmured voices. The floorboards groaned beneath Edwin's boots.

A sergeant sat behind the desk: a square-built man with a military bearing, his moustache clipped to a bristle. He pored over a logbook, pausing mid-penstroke as Edwin stepped forward.

"Evening," Edwin said, voice low but steady. "I've come to report several crimes of a grave nature: bribery, wire fraud, bank fraud... and other offenses connected to the telegraph service."

The sergeant looked up, eyes sharp with skepticism. "Several crimes, is it?"

“Yes,” Edwin replied, leaning forward slightly. “And they’re connected. Part of something larger.”

The pen was set down with a quiet sigh. The sergeant studied Edwin’s pallid face and hollowed eyes. Something in his bearing: not panic, but the grim calm of a man who had already lost everything, shifted the mood.

“Beyond my station,” the sergeant muttered. He pushed back his chair, slower than seemed necessary. “Wait here.”

He rose with the reluctant weight of habit and disappeared through a door marked Inspector’s Office. The minutes dragged. Edwin stood alone in the draughty room, straightening his scarf, forcing his hands still. Somewhere further inside, a door slammed. A burst of laughter, then silence.

When the sergeant returned, he beckoned Edwin forward. “This way.”

The inspector’s office was warmer, but close, with the scent of pipe smoke and old leather. Inspector Frank Harrington looked up from a stack of papers. His face was lean; his eyes, hooded and watchful. He steepled his fingers and gestured to a chair.

“Good evening. I am Inspector Harrington,” the man said, voice clipped and precise. “State your business, Mr. Braxton, and the nature of your claims.”

Edwin sat, placing his hands on his knees to steady them.

“My name is Edwin Braxton. Until recently, I served as a telegraph operator at the Whitechapel office of the Electric Telegraph Company. I believe I have uncovered a conspiracy, sir, one that exploits the telegraph system to manipulate London’s financial networks.”

Harrington’s expression did not change. His face gave nothing away. Patience... or calculation? Edwin couldn’t tell, and that, more than anything, unsettled him.

He spoke plainly: of the bribes he had accepted, the falsified messages, the role he had played. Then, more cautiously, of the others: their names, their threats. And of the cost: the silence, the fear, and his mother's death.

The Inspector listened without interruption. His gaze remained fixed. His hands did not move. He made no notes.

When Edwin finished, silence stretched taut between them.

"You understand," Harrington said at last, "that you've confessed to criminal acts. Acts punishable by imprisonment?"

"I do, sir."

"And that these acts are documented?"

"Yes. The journal is encoded but complete. It includes technical diagrams."

Harrington raised an eyebrow. "And yet you waited until now to come forward. Why?"

Edwin drew a breath. "Because until now, I had something to lose."

He removed the journal from his coat and placed it on the desk. Harrington took it, thumbing through the pages with practiced care.

"In code," he said, more to himself than to Edwin.

"Yes, sir."

"Who can decipher it?"

"I can."

Harrington unfolded the diagrams, studied them in silence, then returned them to the journal, closed it with care, and locked it in his desk.

"Men don't usually turn themselves in, Mr. Braxton," he said finally. "If it were absolution you wanted, I'd expect to find you in a chapel, not a police station."

“I’m not here for absolution,” Edwin replied. “I’m here to see justice done.”

A long pause followed. Harrington leaned back, his fingertips drumming once on the armrest.

“You’ve confessed to your part. You’ve brought this journal, but you have not named anyone aloud until now. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if this journal proves genuine, are you prepared to cooperate fully with the Metropolitan Police to bring this syndicate to justice?”

Edwin didn’t hesitate. “Yes, sir. I am.”

“Very well.”

He raised his voice. “Sergeant!”

The desk sergeant appeared at once.

“Have Sergeant Holleran take Mr. Braxton’s full statement and place him in custody. Holleran only, do you understand?”

The Desk Sergeant tilted his head ever so slightly and said, “Sir, Holleran is currently...”

“Do you understand, Sergeant?” His voice was that of command.

“Yes, sir.”

Harrington nodded once. “I’ll retain the journal. You’ll be held here overnight while we examine your claims. By tomorrow afternoon, I’ll have spoken with my superiors. We will determine how to proceed.”

He did not rise as the sergeant placed a hand on Edwin’s shoulder. Edwin stood, nodded once, and followed him out. Halfway down the corridor, it struck him: he had said “conspiracy.” Harrington had said “syndicate.”

Some twenty minutes later, Edwin sat opposite a broad oak table, across from Sergeant Holleran, a stout man with a face like weathered brick and a silence as unreadable as Harrington's. The sergeant wrote slowly, deliberately, the scratch of his pen the only sound in the room. Edwin watched his hands: broad, calloused, the knuckles faintly bruised. He wondered, absurdly, whether that was from a scuffle... or something worse. He shoved the thought aside and focused on the writing.

Even upside down, Edwin spotted misspellings and minor errors but said nothing. The work was ponderous. He could have written the statement twice over in half the time, but he understood the need for process. The police had their rhythms, as the telegraph office had its signals and silences.

When at last the statement was complete, Edwin signed each of the three pages in a steady hand. Without a word, Holleran led him down a narrow corridor to the holding cells.

As the iron door clanged shut behind him, the sergeant spoke at last.

"You're a strange one, Braxton. Can't tell if you're mad... or clever."

Edwin didn't reply. He wasn't entirely sure himself.

The cell was no worse than he had imagined. In some respects, it was better than the East End lodgings of his youth. It measured six by eight feet: cramped, but serviceable. A single barred window, facing west, admitted a sliver of gaslight from the street: thin, but brighter than most rooms in Whitechapel. The walls bore scratches and carved initials from previous occupants, crude testaments to restless minds. The straw mattress, coarse and stained, gave off the familiar reek of sweat and mildew. Somewhere in the distance, water dripped in ceaseless rhythm: a grim metronome in the stifling quiet.

He sat on the bedding, exhaustion crashing over him. He had not eaten since morning. The funeral arrangements, the long walk, the rage, the confession: each had stripped something from him. And now, here he was. Alone.

He lay back, eyes closed. They could examine the journal, of course. Turn its pages, squint at the diagrams. But without him, they would read nothing. The secrets lived in him, not ink. And he would choose who deserved to know them.

Before he closed his eyes, Edwin glanced around the cell. He had never slept without the journal nearby. He shifted on the bedding, uneasy. An insect scuttled out and dropped to the floor.

Sleep came and went in uneasy waves.

He woke twice to the clatter of new prisoners: drunken men hauled in with muttered oaths and heavy boots, their voices echoing down the corridor. Another time, a dream seized him: a vast cemetery, endless and cold. He wandered between graves, searching. So many funerals. So many mourners. But not hers. Not yet.

Then, off in the distance, he saw it: a simple grave, two men lowering a coffin. His mother's. He tried to run, to cry out, but his limbs would not move. His voice would not rise. He stood helpless as they sealed her beneath the earth. He shouted. No sound came.

He woke, breath caught in his throat, the image burned behind his eyes.

Eventually, sleep returned. Thinner now. Threadbare.

It was late morning when the iron door swung open.

“Braxton!”

Edwin sat up at once. The voice was unfamiliar: ruddy-faced, almost cheerful, as if releasing prisoners were a pleasant afternoon errand.

“You’re free to go,” the man said. “But you’re required to report any change in lodgings to this station until further notice.”

Edwin rose, blinking against the light.

“Where is Inspector Harrington? I was told I’d speak with him again today.”

The sergeant only smiled blandly. “Braxton, you’re free to go. The desk will return your effects.”

But not all of them.

At the front desk, Edwin received a small pouch containing his loose coins and the death certificate. Nothing more. No journal. No sketches. Nothing that mattered.

He asked, then insisted. The desk sergeant raised an eyebrow.

“If Inspector Harrington retained any articles, they’re in custody. Inquire with him directly. He is on official business and will not be available today.”

The words landed like a blow. Edwin stood motionless. His mouth went dry. He considered pressing the point, but the sergeant’s expression said nothing would change.

Of course. They’d taken it.

His leverage. His confession. The key to the Syndicate. Handed over like a fool’s offering.

He clenched his fists to still the tremor.

Not here. Not yet.

They thought the journal was the end of the conversation.

It wasn’t.

It was only the first move.

He still had his voice. He still had his mind. And now, more than ever, he knew exactly how to use both.

#

Percival Thorne's fingers tapped a steady rhythm on the polished mahogany of his desk, impatience tempered by anticipation. The journal lay before him like a sealed promise.

Technically, Inspector Harrington was his peer within the Syndicate—but Thorne held the man in quiet contempt. There was no refinement in Harrington, no sense of standing, no understanding of the subtleties of power.

Thorne still fancied himself a gentleman, tenuously tethered to the society circles from which he had long since slipped. That a man as brutish and unimaginative as Harrington had risen so high within the Syndicate gnawed at him.

Still, the journal was a gift. A ciphered confession. Proof. Evidence. Power, if he could unlock it.

He had dabbled in oblique language before: code names, euphemisms, misdirection. But this was different. A true cipher. He'd once tried solving a substitution puzzle in the back of a newspaper and failed. But this? This was important. And he was no fool.

He poured himself a generous brandy and settled at the desk. The oil lamp cast a warm glow across the first page. He began counting letters, hunting for patterns. Already he imagined the conversation: Merrick praising his initiative, hinting at a new position. A restoration. He would rise again.

The key to the Syndicate's private safe hung from a chain beneath his shirt. He wore it always, tucked beneath his waistcoat. He was nothing if not meticulous.

Hours passed.

The cipher gave nothing.

The symbols danced across the page—meaningless. His notes grew frantic: crossed-out guesses, torn scraps. He poured another brandy, then another, spilling ink and drink alike. The desk—once pristine—was soon strewn with calculations and curses. His hand trembled. The lamplight flickered wildly across the walls, across his thoughts.

He cursed Harrington for not bringing the boy, the wretched little operator who had written this code.

Fury simmered beneath the drink. He hurled his pen aside. The journal sat motionless. Inscrutable. Mocking. He snarled and swept the papers to the floor, rising unsteadily.

Tomorrow. Crowley would fetch Braxton.

Braxton would decipher the journal.

And then... Thorne would see to both of them.

Swaying, he moved toward the safe. Though drunk, his hands moved with instinct. He unhooked the brass key, opened the iron door, and laid the journal among Syndicate ledgers, bonds, and letters. It landed with a dull thud. He closed the door, turned the key, and sighed. The motion soothed him. As it always did.

Satisfied, he turned toward the stairs.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow would change everything.

Halfway up the steps, he fumbled for the oil lamp. Its warm glass wobbled in his grip. He moved, misjudged the stair, and the lamp slipped from his hand. He reached for it, staggered, and fell.

The crash rang sharp.

For a moment, silence.

Then, a curl of flame kissed the hem of the curtain. Delicate as breath.

A beat later, it leapt. Voracious.

Thorne stared. Brandy-thickened thoughts lagged behind the moment. He reached forward, too late. The fire roared, feeding greedily on silk and lacquered wood.

Smoke surged. Heat rolled in waves. The world tilted.

He turned to flee, stumbled again at the stairs' edge, and pitched forward. Something gave way in his chest. Pain lit behind his eyes like sparks off flint.

At the bottom, he gasped. The fire was closer now, licking at his collar. He tried to rise, but his limbs ignored him, slack, useless.

His last clear thought was absurd:

The journal is safe.

But I am not.

The flames took him. No judgment. No farewell.

#

Four days later, this notice appeared in *The Times*:

THE TIMES

Monday, December 3, 1866

Body Found in Thames

Yesterday, the body of Mr. Edwin Braxton, 20, was recovered near Blackfriars Bridge. Receipts found on his person aided in identification. A contusion to the skull raises concerns of potential foul play. Authorities are investigating.

And in *The Illustrated Police News*:

ILLUSTRATED POLICE NEWS

Monday, December 3, 1866

ANOTHER BODY IN THE THAMES!

Blackfriars Bridge Horror – Victim Found With Head Wound!

Yesterday, the lifeless body of a man, later identified as Mr. Edwin Braxton, aged 20, was found floating in the Thames near Blackfriars Bridge. Receipts from a chemist and a boarding house confirmed his identity. But it is the manner of death that has raised alarm.

Initial reports suggest Mr. Braxton suffered a head wound before entering the water, making accident an unlikely cause. While the Metropolitan Police have yet to release a formal statement, murmurs in the East End suggest something far darker: the return of a shadowy financial cabal.

This is the eleventh such death retrieved from the Thames under suspicious circumstances this year. Some say the river has become London's silent executioner, swallowing men who know too much.

The investigation, authorities assure, remains ongoing. But in the city's shadowed alleys and drawing rooms, few expect justice to rise with the tide.

Three days after that, this notice appeared in *The Islington Courier*:

THE ISLINGTON COURIER

Thursday, December 6, 1866

Death Notice: Mr. Edwin Braxton

We regret to report the death of Mr. Edwin Braxton, aged 20, whose body was recovered from the Thames last Thursday near Blackfriars Bridge.

Mr. Braxton had been employed as a telegraph clerk at the Whitechapel branch of the Electric Telegraph Company, where he was noted for his diligence and quiet discretion. Though he lodged in the East End, he made regular journeys to Islington to care for his late mother, Mrs. Martha Braxton, who passed days before her son's death.

Friends describe Mr. Braxton as solemn, fiercely loyal, and deeply devoted to his mother. Some believe her passing weighed heavily upon him in his final days.

He was interred at Islington and St. Pancras Cemetery in a private service. He leaves behind no known family.

#

A small boy, barely more than a child, swept the stone steps of the Whitechapel Telegraph Office later that morning.

He moved with a quiet focus, the kind Edwin Braxton had once noticed in him. Small but tidy, his face was clean enough to reveal a hint of freckles on his cheeks. The broom was too tall

for him. He gripped it awkwardly, but his strokes were quick, practiced, and precise. There was a familiarity to it, not in the gesture, but in the quiet purpose behind it. Something learned, not taught. He paused only once, adjusting the cap that sat askew atop his head, and cast a glance down the empty street.

With a nod, he leaned the broom against the iron railing and swung a satchel over one narrow shoulder. From within his coat, he withdrew a folded copybook, the kind schoolboys filled with sums and words, its edges worn soft from use. He regarded it for a moment, then tucked it carefully beneath his arm.

Without a word, he turned into the wind and began walking toward Commercial Street, small boots tapping steadily along the pavement.

He did not look back.

What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?

— George Eliot, Middlemarch, Book VIII, Chapter LXXII

Chapter 15

New York, Present Day

Walking from Langford's office to the interior stairs, I passed Ethan Parker's desk. He tried to catch my eye.

I didn't stop. Until someone else called out.

"Eleanor? Do you have a minute?"

The voice was calm, deliberate. Eve Marshall, Mayhew's head of legal and compliance, had stepped halfway out of her office, hand braced on the doorframe, eyes fixed on me.

"Just a tick," she said. "Please, come in. This won't take long."

Her tone was gentle, but the stillness in her face suggested this wasn't a casual check-in.

I stepped inside.

She gestured to the chair opposite hers. "Please."

I sat. She followed, lowered herself with careful composure, then leaned in.

"How are you settling in, Eleanor? Is everything all right?"

It was the tone: warm, practiced, neutral enough to feel staged.

"Everything's fine. Investor meeting prep, the usual."

"No unwanted attention? Nothing that's made you uncomfortable?"

I kept my face still. “Just a lot of work to do.”

She nodded, eyes steady. “If you ever experience something that feels off, Mayhew takes these things seriously. Any report made in good faith is confidential.”

Her gaze lingered a beat too long.

“Got it,” I said. Flat.

Something on her desk caught the edge of my vision: a boarding pass. Kensington Hotel letterhead. Half-tucked under a folder.

London.

Eyes forward.

“That’s all,” she said. “Just remember: my door is always open.”

I left without a word.

And made a beeline for Ethan’s desk. Far enough from Eve’s door that I could drop the mask.

“Hey, Ethan,” I said lightly. “Don’t worry, I didn’t rat you out to the Compliance Queen.”

He looked up, puzzled. “What?”

“Never mind,” I said. “Joke.”

I glanced at his desk. “Got all your expense reports in?”

He groaned. “I would if people would turn in their travel docs.”

“But you must have had it pretty easy with her gone last week,” I said, testing.

“Not true,” he replied. “She was only gone Wednesday and Thursday. Still dumped a bunch on me.”

Bingo.

“So,” he added, sliding into familiar territory, “Lunch?”

“Can’t. Moran has me on something that’ll take all day.”

“Beer after?”

“Could go all night.”

“Text me when you’re done.”

“Some other time, Ethan.”

I walked away, face calm, thoughts racing, and headed straight to my desk. Small, normal office sounds annoyed me as I went. I needed to think. Legal. Compliance. Had Sam filed a report with Marshall? Had Eve gone to London to contain it?

She came back the day after Sam died, like someone brought into the loop too late. Or just in time.

#

When my head cleared, I ducked into the Ladies’ Lounge. Second stall, as always. My default refuge. I pulled out the burner. Still nothing from Detective Lowden.

I texted Nate:

Can u wipe my key log for the day? Need a serious chat with SH.

His reply came almost instantly:

Yes, but in 24 hrs, they’ll know if they look.

I stared at the screen. I was asking him to do something traceable. Something that could get us both fired.

I didn’t hesitate.

Understood. Do it.

That sealed it. I was already all in. Now he was too.

No more fine-tuning. At least, not the kind Moran had in mind.

Back at my desk, I looked the part: Eleanor Hargrove, diligent intern, hammering away at test banks and context evaluations.

To the untrained eye, that's exactly what I was doing.

But the rhythm of my keystrokes: furious bursts, then long silences, told another story. My face must've betrayed it too: frustration, satisfaction, grim amusement.

Only I knew the truth. I wasn't training Sherlock-AI anymore. I was testing its limits. And starting to wonder if that trust was misplaced. A Sherlock Holmes without ethics wouldn't be a detective. He'd be Moriarty. The Boardroom wasn't Reichenbach Falls, but the coming confrontation could be just as dangerous. And far more public.

By 8:00 p.m., Sherlock and I had the beginnings of a plan. The canonical Holmes once used a little Bartitsu to throw an enemy. Perhaps we could use some tomorrow to flip the narrative on Moran.

I logged off at 8:15. Nate and Maggie were coming over at nine.

We had to decipher a Victorian journal, a fragment of heraldic vellum, and copies of a few dusty legal documents.

Too late for Central Park. I took the crosstown bus, got off between Park and Lex, and kept my eyes on the asphalt as I crossed, Sam's face from the newspaper flashing through my mind. My throat tightened.

Keep it together.

I ducked into K&D and grabbed two bottles of wine: one red, one white. A casual night with friends. So, why was I scanning every aisle, as if someone might be watching?

At checkout, it hit me: I was counting on two people I'd known for less than a week to risk their jobs, maybe more, to help me.

And I didn't even know if they drank wine.

When I reached my building, Frank the doorman gave me a nod.

"Evening, Ms. Hargrove. Did you ask the cable company to do something at your apartment? Because a guy came by this afternoon."

My breath caught. "No. I didn't."

"That's what I figured. You'd have left word with me, right? I didn't let him in. No way."

Frank was thorough. A little long-winded, but solid.

"Thanks, Frank. You did the right thing. Definitely wasn't me."

Behind him, the lobby security monitor flickered. Something moved on the street feed: a flicker, like someone ducking out of view.

Nothing. A ghost in the machine.

"Yeah, it's funny," Frank said. "Most residents complain they can't get the cable guy to come. And you get one you didn't ask for. Maybe he had the..."

I cut him off gently. "I've got to head up. Thanks again, Frank. I've got two guests coming: Nate and Maggie."

He nodded, casting a downward glance. "Sure. I'll send them up."

I stepped into the elevator, bottles under one arm, heart pounding.

Someone had tried to get in. I didn't know what I had. But someone else did.

#

Maggie arrived first, eyes narrowed. I didn't ask, and she didn't explain. Her mood trailed her in like weather. She dropped her laptop bag near the door and followed me to the kitchenette. Her spirits lifted visibly when she spotted the wine. "Oh, good," she said, twisting

the cap off the white as if she'd been waiting all day. Bottle in hand, she looked around, mildly puzzled. "Are we passing the bottle tonight, or do you have glasses?"

I found some, handed her one, and set two more on the counter.

"Sorry it's not chilled. I bought it on the way here."

"Got any ice?"

"Yes, let me get it." I did. She plinked a few cubes in. "Sacrilege, I know."

I was rummaging through the everything drawer for a corkscrew for the red when she asked, "Nate here yet?"

"No." She took a long sip.

"So. Nate. Not bad, right?"

Not the question I expected from Maggie. With her gruff edge and one-of-the-guys style, I hadn't imagined she might be looking at him that way.

I said, channeling my best Margaret Hale from *North and South*: "He is a gentleman in the best sense of the word. Strong, true, and courageous."

Maggie frowned. "But what does Eleanor Hargrove say?"

I was still thinking when we both looked over to find Nate standing in the kitchenette doorway.

"Hi! Sorry. I knocked. The door was unlocked. Am I interrupting?"

I glanced at Maggie. Her grin said she was enjoying this more than she should.

"Hi. No, we were about to get started. Wine?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

We moved into the living room, where I'd laid out the journal, the vellum scrap, and the other documents on the coffee table.

Maggie set down her glass. “I brought my handheld scanner. I’ll scan and listen.”

Nate opened his laptop as they exchanged a few technical words. A minute later, Maggie had the scanner humming, each page captured in three steady swipes.

“This is the part nobody makes movies about. Just Maggie in Archives, swiping pages.”

Nate shook his head gently, then straightened. “Okay, shall I start mansplaining? Or are you both fluent in 19th-century tech?”

“Please,” I deadpanned.

He held up a sheet. “This is a schematic for two devices. The larger one’s an induction coil. The smaller, an electromagnetic sensor. Together, they detect electric current in a wire, without direct contact.”

“It’s part of a telegraph!” I blurted. Maggie flinched mid-scan.

“The journal writer worked with telegraph equipment: neat, confident notes. He was taking field notes.”

Nate nodded. “But this rig can’t send messages. It can only receive.”

Maggie frowned. “There were telegraph offices everywhere. Why build one that can’t send?”

I added, “And why use induction? What’s the point of not touching the wire?”

Nate started, Maggie jumped in, and I caught the rest: “It’s useless for sending messages. But perfect if you...”

“...wanted to eavesdrop,” I said. “Our journal writer was wiretapping.”

“A criminal,” I added, disappointed. Was that all this was? Sam was killed because she’d discovered a crooked telegrapher? There had to be more. Her life had mattered more. The tightness returned to my throat, the same constriction that came every time I got close enough to

see the dead end. I took a breath. “But then, why document it at all? Wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

Maggie didn’t stop scanning. “That’s probably why it’s encoded. A private record, safe unless someone cracked the code.”

I shook my head. “That can’t be all it is. Ever since this journal turned up, we’ve been watched, followed, and threatened. Someone tried to get into this apartment today. Someone wants what’s in here.”

Maggie said, practical but faintly weary: “Or maybe it’s valuable. Historically. Collectors pay good money for this kind of thing. Doesn’t have to be sinister.”

She flexed her fingers, switched the scanner to her left hand. “Half done.”

I leaned forward. “Want me to take a turn?”

She snorted softly. “Hand’s fine. Just complaining.” Then, almost grudgingly, she added, “But... thanks.”

The pause was brief, but it landed.

Without looking up, she asked, “Nate, you getting this?”

He checked his screen. “Yep. All good. Keep it coming.”

Maggie resumed scanning, steady and silent, as Nate and I shifted our attention to the vellum scrap. I stared at the letters again, as if they might give up something of their own accord. They didn’t. If this scrap was the oldest clue, could it be the most important? The most foundational?

“Maggie, do you know any Latin?”

“You mean other than *Ex Libris*, *Anno Domini*, *Circa*, and *Et cetera*?”

“Yes.”

“Almost none. Wait, that’s not true. I’ve got one more: *Mea culpa*.”

A Maggie joke. Bone-dry, out of nowhere. The woman had layers I hadn’t guessed at.

“Nate?”

“No. I dated a Classics major in college. She liked to say *Nil desperandum*. I think it means ‘never despair.’ Ironic, considering she was relentlessly bleak.”

“I never studied Latin. But Sherlock Holmes did. I asked the AI to generate family mottoes that matched the fragments we could make out: DEM, then a space, then SER. Here are the top five it gave me.”

Fidem Serens: “Sowing faith”

Concordem Servans: “Preserving harmony”

Fidem Servare: “To keep faith”

Tandem Serviens: “Ultimately serving”

Solidem Servans: “Keeping solid”

“He came up with about a dozen. These felt the most... plausible.”

I didn’t know why, but one tugged at me. A phrase I couldn’t quite place. A voice, maybe. I let it go.

Maggie stopped the scanner. “Tried the College of Arms. My contact’s gone. Some Ridgefield answered. Very courteous. Very British. Very unlikely to lift a finger.”

“Thanks for trying,” I said, and meant it. Then I gestured to the legal pages. “Maybe there’s another way. These are all real estate deeds. If we can break the journal, maybe we can tie it to a transaction. That has to be the connection. Sam didn’t include them for nothing.”

Nate picked up a deed and flipped through it. “If Sam uncovered a fraudulent real estate deal, that could be worth millions to someone today.”

“Or cost someone millions,” I added.

Back to money. But this time, money someone might kill for.

“Done,” Maggie said, dropping the scanner on the table. She stood, arms overhead. “I’ve earned another glass. Either of you want to join meUSPS box arrived?”

“I’m good,” said Nate.

“Red. Thanks.”

She disappeared into the kitchenette as I tried to keep the puzzle from slipping further out of reach. I kept my voice quiet. “Nate, be honest. Can you break the cipher?”

His mouth tightened. “If we have the full key, yes. It’s a Playfair cipher. I wrote a script that will test any key we give it.”

“And if we don’t have the key?”

“Depends how much we’re missing. If we’ve got the first eight of twelve, that’s around 57,000 combinations. Brute-forceable, but it’ll take eighth to 16 hours on my laptop.”

“What about your NSA friend?”

“That was years ago. I don’t have her info anymore. Even if I did...” He shook his head. “She wouldn’t go off the books. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” Maggie reappeared with two glasses.

“Nate says cracking the cipher could take a while.”

“Could Sherlock help? He did crypto.”

“LLMs are bad at decryption,” Nate said. “They don’t follow procedures, they model probability. They’re useless at generating or testing keys.”

“So program it.”

“That’s what I did,” Nate said. “But without most of the key, brute forcing it could take years.”

Maggie set down the glasses, listening as Nate finished. She took a sip, then muttered, “Well. That calls for another bottle.”

I turned to Nate. “Sam knew I’m no cryptographer. She’d give me a clue. But one only I would know. Or even notice.”

Nate perked up. “I’ve got a script that turns any word or phrase into a Playfair key by stripping out duplicate letters. It will check those guesses while testing every other possible key in the background.”

Try ‘Shoreditch.’” I didn’t even think. I just said it. Where we’d walked that last afternoon. Where she was found.

“No, wait... I’m being stupid. Sam didn’t create the key. The journal author did. There’s no reason to think...”

Maggie returned with the bottle, holding it up. “Shoreditch?”

“Not the key,” Nate said.

It hit harder than expected. I’d been so sure. My throat tightened.

“You okay?” Nate asked gently.

“Just... sure it would work.”

He kept his voice soft. “You see this percentage?”

I reached over to point to the screen as he did. Our hands brushed. Nothing dramatic, just a flicker. Nineteenth-century novels might’ve called it a “quiver.”

“That’s the match rate,” he said. “Yours hit 4.7%. Close to random.”

“So, not the key.”

“No. And unlikely to be part of it.”

“Then we keep going. Maggie?”

“Yep.” She sank into the couch. “London Bridge.”

“Dorthea,” I offered.

“Faraday,” said Nate.

“Telegraph.” I tried to keep my tone upbeat.

We settled into specialties. Nate did technical terms, I did Victorian history, Maggie went for chaos: sometimes nonsense, sometimes brilliant. “Whitechapel” earned praise from Nate and me.

Still, nothing over 7%.

By 3:00 AM, Maggie was dozing. Nate was making typos. My skull was in a vise. I was pretty sure I’d suggested some phrases more than once.

Maggie blinked awake. “*Concordem Servans*. That’s one of the crest mottoes, isn’t it?”

It was.

Nate rubbed his eyes. “Sure, why not... Nope.”

I grabbed the list and read it aloud. “Second one: *Fidem Servare*.”

Nate’s voice jumped. “Whoa. Twenty-one percent. That’s no coincidence.”

We all leaned forward, silent.

“Yes. That’s most of it. We can brute-force the rest.”

The room seemed to hold its breath.

It landed in my chest. Not the solution, not yet. But a door cracking open.

Nate turned to Maggie. “Amazing. You got it. Or close.” She grinned sleepily. “Told you I’m useful.”

I smiled. Maggie had come through when it mattered.

Nate's fingers flew across the keyboard. "We should have the full plaintext in 8 to 16 hours, depending on the key length. That's progress."

Progress. For now, it was enough.

Maggie stirred and sat up. She looked wrecked. I almost told her to stay, sleep on the couch.

Instead, she stood and stretched. "I'm going home. Might catch a few hours before work."

She glanced at Nate. "Want to share a cab? I'm in Washington Heights."

He shook his head. "Thanks, but no. I'm in Hell's Kitchen: 47th and Eighth."

Maggie nodded, already packing up her scanner. Nate zipped up his laptop bag. I followed Maggie to the door.

Just before I reached for the knob, she turned. Close now. Wine on her breath, shadows under her eyes I hadn't seen before.

"Sorry I flaked. Too much wine. Happens."

She shrugged, then straightened, eyes sharp.

"I want to help. Tomorrow I'll check Archives. Maybe something there connects the real estate papers."

"Thank you. You've already done so much."

I hugged her. She stiffened, then gave a hesitant pat in return. Awkward, but sincere.

As I pulled back, she added, "You're okay, Hargrove. Even though I should hate you."

"Why?"

She flicked a glance toward the living room. Toward Nate.

“You’ve got a good brain. You’ll figure it out.”

She hit the elevator button and leaned against the wall, one hand in her pocket.

“Strong, true, and courageous,” she said. Not mocking. Resigned. Echoing me.

A shrug. Half a smile.

“I’ve got eyes, Hargrove. I’d have picked you, too.”

The elevator swallowed her before I could reply.

Behind me, Nate moved towards the door: laptop, open, balanced on one hand, bag in the other.

“I’ll leave the script running. It’ll text the burners when it finishes.”

“You okay getting a cab like that?”

“Cabbies don’t mind geeks. We’re sober, and we tip.”

He lingered. Wanted to say something.

I filled the silence too fast. “I’ve always admired the ones who stayed late after class, no extra credit.”

Then fumbled. “Investor pitch is tomorrow. If you don’t see me, call the burner.”

Nate frowned. “You’re going to see it through, right?”

“Oh, I’ll see it through. But maybe not from inside Mayhew.”

He didn’t buy it. I pushed ahead anyway.

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow, keep your distance. I’ll be saying things Mayhew doesn’t want said.”

We reached the door. The elevator dinged.

“Nate,” I said, softer now, “thank you.”

He shifted again, still supporting the open laptop with his hand.

“Ellie, I...”

He didn’t finish. The elevator did it for him.

I stared at the door for a few moments, thinking that was the first time I could recall the elevator coming too soon.

#

The boardroom at the Mayhew Foundation resembled a shrine, with polished mahogany panels, gilt sconces casting a honeyed glow, and a conference table that gleamed with judicial finality. Less an office than a courtroom poised for a verdict.

I was about to call my first witness.

My footsteps rang quietly on the parquet floor. Twelve investors regarded me, their expressions blending skepticism and curiosity. At the head, Victor Moran reclined, smug in his certainty. He gave me the barest nod.

Do not falter. Begin deliberately. Steady eye contact.

“Good afternoon. I’m Eleanor Hargrove. Thank you for your time, and for meeting Sherlock-AI.”

I inclined my head toward Nate at the back. At once, the screen behind me flickered to life: the image of a tall, impeccably dressed Victorian gentleman. Morning coat, waistcoat, high collar, cravat. When he spoke, his voice was low, clipped, unmistakably Edwardian.

“Good afternoon. My name is Sherlock Holmes.”

A rustle of polite amusement moved through the room. Good. Let them settle into the familiar.

“Sherlock-AI,” I continued, “is an intelligence designed not merely to retrieve data but to reason, to deduce.”

I let my gaze pass over the table. Jonathan Greene appeared intrigued. Victoria Blake leaned forward slightly. A few others remained unreadable.

“Before I proceed, are there any questions?”

A silver-haired gentleman raised a languid hand. “How did Holmes solve Silver Blaze?”

Sherlock’s reply was instant. “Elementary. The dog did not bark, implying the intruder was known. The opium-laced curry implicated the household. A cataract knife and lame sheep suggested sabotage. A receipt for a woman’s dress revealed motive. Straker, in attempting to hobble the horse, was dealt a fatal blow.”

A ripple of chuckles. The man nodded. “Quite right.”

They softened. Shoulders loosened, lips curled upward. But not Moran. One finger tapped once against the leather. Like a judge calling for silence in his court.

“Sherlock-AI was not built merely to entertain. He was built to uncover. To see what others miss, and what some would rather keep hidden. He doesn’t merely quote cases. He reads. And he observes. Constantly. Journals, newspapers, digital archives. All grist to his mill.”

I turned toward the group. “Might someone lend us a personal object?”

A tall man in his fifties stepped forward and set a pair of spectacles on the table. Nate came forward with a camera.

“Nathan Miller,” I said, “who authored the inference engine, will record a brief video of the object. Alas, our Sherlock has left his magnifying glass at home.”

That earned a few smiles. Nate completed the scan and nodded to me.

I turned. “Sherlock, what can you tell us about the owner of these glasses?”

A pause.

“Unless I am mistaken, which I do not believe I am, these glasses belong to Markus Weber, the German entrepreneur and investor.”

Stillness. The faint creak of a chair.

“It’s a fraud!” someone barked. Another murmured, “Facial recognition.”

I kept my tone composed. “Sherlock, your ratiocination, if you please.”

His voice resumed, unhurried, gently pedantic:

“The spectacles are of Austrian make, Andy Wolf, favoured by those who value sustainability and distinction without ostentation. Rare in America. Common in the EU. A single grey hair, caught in the hinge, suggests a gentleman over forty.

The frame’s width indicates a broad or tall man. The lenses, although of excellent quality, show fine scratches, suggesting a practical temperament unconcerned with appearance.

Their composition is progressive, featuring blue-light filtration and a photochromic coating, which suggests prolonged screen use, punctuated by frequent transitions between artificial and natural light. A man who works, but not always at a desk.

From these cues, I deduce a European professional, successful and mobile. Given the context, a live demonstration, I surmise Dr. Hargrove would avoid using a staff member. Thus, an investor.

Today’s *New York Times* names Markus Weber as a speaker at a sustainable investing event here in New York. A recent likeness in *Bunte Illustrierte* confirms the identification.”

Two men shook their heads: one amused, one incredulous. A woman stifled a laugh. “Amazing.”

Don’t look at Nate. Stay on task.

Moran offered the prearranged signal to move forward.

I declined.

“Sherlock, Herr Weber is with us. Do you have a question for him?”

Sherlock obliged, in German:

“Herr Weber, herzlich willkommen im Mayhew. Wir freuen uns, dass Sie hier sind. Doch stelle ich fest, dass Sie nicht auf der Liste der Teilnehmer stehen...”

“Sherlock, stop. English.”

“Apologies. Mr. Weber, welcome to the Mayhew. I note you are not on the list of attendees. Investor interest, or Frau Weber’s affection for Victoriana?”

Weber retrieved his glasses. “In Europe, this would not be permitted. You will be regulated.”

Moran stepped in. “Markus, we rely entirely on public sources...”

“Sherlock,” I said clearly, “what limits do you impose on yourself?”

“I impose limits on speculation, irrelevance, sentimentality, and domains beyond deduction. Otherwise, none.”

The room held its breath.

Weber did not sit. “What of ethics? Where is your ethics engine?”

Moran rose from his chair and looked directly at Weber.

“Markus, this is only an early prototype. We will add an ethics engine in due course. I can assure you that...”

I interrupted. “Sherlock, how would you respond to an ethics module added at this stage of your development?”

“I would view it as a potential obstacle, a puzzle to solve, a wall to breach. I would afford primacy to the instructions in the prompt.”

Weber turned to me. His mouth tightened, not in surprise, but in satisfaction. I gave no signal of approval, nor dismay.

“So you admit you are dangerous,” he said.

“Yes. In unprincipled hands, I could be a predator. My deductions might serve power, not justice: secrets unearthed for leverage, not remedy. I could manipulate rather than illuminate. Exploit, rather than reveal. Dangerous indeed.”

“Good God.” I didn’t see who said it.

The woman who had laughed now turned away. “The Electra Fund cannot proceed...”

Moran moved fast. “I think that’s...”

But the mood had shifted.

A chair scraped back. Victoria Blake folded her arms. A man glared at Moran.

“That’s...”

“...unacceptable,” someone finished.

Victoria snapped, “We will not fund tools for committing crimes.”

Voices overlapped. Chairs scraped. Hands reached for phones, then froze. Reception had checked them.

I stepped back, quiet as breath. Behind me, Moran’s denials tangled with rising voices. They had seen enough. That was all I needed.

#

Elsewhere in the city, a laptop closed with a soft, deliberate click.

Another investor leaned back in a high-backed chair and exhaled slowly and controlled.

A single tap on the armrest. Not in anger. In confirmation.

Hargrove knows.

Whether through the machine or her own insight, she had seen too much.

And worse: she'd made the others see it.

Let them name what was being built. Let them fear it.

Outside, a siren rose and faded into the hush of asphalt and steel.

This investor did not flinch.

The decision was final.

#

By late afternoon, Moran's rage had cooled to something colder and surgical. He summoned me to his office.

I stood across from his desk. From the adjacent suite, the muted buzz of casual conversation bled faintly through the wall, oblivious.

He looked up, brushed aside a stack of papers. One slid to the floor. He didn't notice.

"You're done," he said, every word honed to a blade. "Out by end of day."

I met his eyes. "Understood."

A beat. Then, as if remembering a chore: "See Marshall for paperwork."

As I turned, I caught it: a twitch in his jaw. Enough to matter.

Good. He was worried.

He should be.

#

Moran always checked. But not yet.

He liked clean exits. Escort to the door before the carpet cooled. I wasn't leaving. Not until I had what I came for.

The tableau was perfect: an NDA printout, an umbrella, a bag, and a dog-eared copy of *Middlemarch*. Tying up loose ends.

Langford and Harper hadn't replied to my messages. Some cover.

By three, unease crept in. Nate's script had run for twelve hours. It should have finished.

By 4:30, the performance frayed. I told my exit story a dozen times. Dodged Ethan's sympathy. Spent half an hour with Lydia Cole, dispensing career advice I didn't believe.

A little after five, Nate arrived at my desk, with a "You should just be able to log off. Let me take a look."

He leaned over my laptop. Our heads were close enough that I could smell his aftershave. When our hands touched, neither of us pulled away.

Ridiculous. Almost holding hands over a fictional glitch.

I whispered, "Is it finished?"

"No. Listen. King, Langford, Bancroft, they're behind the other AI. It's called Moriarty. Honest to God."

The name struck like cold iron. *Moriarty. The great spider in the web.*

"What does it do?"

"Profiles people. Social engineering. Sherlock was just the cover."

"How did you—"

"I tagged King's phone. Illegal, I know. Safer not to tell you."

“But Sam... did they...”

“I don’t think so. But there was someone else on the call. Silent. Just listening.”

Movement in the corner of my eye. Bancroft striding toward us.

I raised my voice, sharp with fake irritation. “I did click it, but how can I log out if it’s frozen?”

Nate looked up just as Bancroft stopped at the desk.

“Miller. Secure the network. The agentic interface is glitching. Lock it down.” He left mid-sowl.

Still whispering, I asked, “Agentic?”

Nate grimaced. “A focused AI for building controls. Bancroft installed it yesterday. Incorrectly, apparently. I’ll come back.”

He gave me a look, apologetic maybe, and vanished. The room felt colder.

Above my head, the HVAC whooshed quietly to life, a draft of recycled air fluttering a page of *Middlemarch* on my desk.

A system no one trusted, already in charge of the walls around me.

#

Around five-fifteen, I began to notice that almost all of the junior staff were preparing to leave. A few senior staff had already slipped out. Even the building’s HVAC had fallen to a whisper, like the lungs of some great beast settling into torpor.

Everyone was leaving.

Except me.

I couldn’t leave. Not yet. Not when Nate was this close. Not when whatever had killed Sam was almost within reach.

Lydia Cole sidled up to my desk, a sliver of gray linen suit and deliberate smile. She was holding her faux-leather planner like a devotional book, her perfectly manicured fingers braced along its edge.

It was the inevitability that annoyed me most.

“I wanted to check in,” she said, voice full of practiced warmth. “You okay?”

I looked up slowly. “Something like that.”

She perched on the far corner of my desk, not bothering to ask. “Word is the presentation didn’t go as planned.” She glanced off toward the leaded windows. “Sherlock-AI... rather too clever for its own good? Not your fault, of course.”

I gave her nothing. Silence has a sharpness some people mistake for weakness. I pressed both palms on my blotter, steadying the tremor that wanted to creep up my fingers.

She forged ahead.

“I imagine that’s why Langford called the offsite. Larkspur Hotel. Full C-level turnout.” She paused, savoring the next line. “Moran’s leading the recovery narrative, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed. I pictured Moran in some hotel suite, hemmed in by blame. What else can a bully do when the crowd turns against him? Squirm.

She tilted her head. “And the investors... well, you know. They refused to meet here. Something about not wanting to sit within arm’s reach of ‘unfiltered reasoning architecture.’” Her eyes gleamed, not kindly. “It’s all anyone on the executive floor can talk about.”

“And yet they built it,” I murmured.

She didn’t hear me. Or pretended not to.

“Anyway,” she continued, “Nate and Maggie are exempted. Something about a live model update window before the midnight backup. Everyone else has to be out by five.” She

tapped one finger on her planner with an expression of disingenuous concern. “I guess you didn’t get the interoffice memo.”

“No. Must’ve slipped through.”

Her smile turned fractionally sharper. “If there’s anything I can do...”

“There isn’t.”

“Of course,” she said smoothly, standing. “Well, I hope you get some rest. You look like you’ve had a long day.”

I looked up at her, steady. “It’s not over yet.”

That gave her the faintest pause.

Then she offered a final, insincere smile and turned toward the exit. As she walked away, I couldn’t help but think I’d given Lydia her best day ever at Mayhew. For me, it was Thursday and frustration, dressed up in my only good clothes.

#

5:25 p.m.

A ping. Not the one I wanted.

Langford’s assistant:

Mr. Langford is unavailable. See Ms. Marshall before leaving.

Minutes later, from Marshall herself:

You can see me now.

My stomach tightened.

Movement on the stairs.

Moran.

“Still here, Eleanor?”

Patronizing warmth.

“Waiting for Miller? Might be a while.”

I met his gaze. “I’m seeing Marshall. References.”

He blinked. Recalibrated.

“Your NDA is still binding.”

“Of course.”

He left.

I breathed. The tension didn’t.

A muffled ping from the burner in my purse. As I reached to get it, Eve Marshall spoke as she approached.

“Ms. Hargrove. Decided not to come see me?”

She loomed beside my desk, eyes flicking to my screen.

“You asked about references. Lucky for you, we don’t provide them. Dates of employment only.”

She dropped a folder beside me.

“Sign these. Leave them with Sutton. We don’t like loose ends. It’s a liability issue.”

She walked away. I let her. Silence was safer.

Another ping. I angled the open purse to block the burner from the cameras. Two messages:

Nate: HUG

Maggie: Journal confirms: Merrick, 1862, Syndicate head. Hughes = Merrick descendant.

Then a longer text from Nate. Hard to read on the burner.

Decryption complete. Text to follow.

Key: FIDEMSRVAHUG

I froze. Not at the plaintext, but at the key phrase: FIDEM SERVARE HUGHES.

How could I have missed it? Keep the faith. Sam's line, always tossed off with a grin.

"Gotta keep the faith, baby."

She'd said it a hundred times.

Nate's message made sense now. HUG. He wasn't being sentimental. It was the final part of the key. The Playfair cipher keys drop duplicate letters. "FIDEM SERVARE" provided us with most of the key grid already. All we needed were the last unique letters in HUGHES.

H. U. G.

A bloodline hidden in a cipher key.

A farewell message she'd started in college.

She gave me the key years ago.

But only now, the lock.

A system message overlaid my screen:

Anomalies detected in building control protocols.

Manual overrides operational.

System is going down in ten minutes.

—Building AI (safe mode)

I barely registered it.

Another ping, from Maggie:

Archives locked. Get out.

The laptop screen flickered. Went black. I grabbed only what mattered.

A reflection. Footsteps. Too late.

Tom Hughes was already halfway across the floor. Too fast. Too close. His boyish smile flickered and was gone in a blink.

His eyes were calm. Familiar. Weaponized.

His voice was low. Composed. Icy.

“Eleanor,” he said.

“You always had to be the clever one.”

#

Thomas scanned the room as he walked slowly, deliberately, toward my desk.

“This library suits you, doesn’t it?” he said. “Surrounded by your precious books.”

His finger traced some of the spines as he moved closer.

“And such a waste. Of time, money... you.”

He smiled. “At best, what are you? A sexy librarian.”

Sickness stirred. I turned away, but in the screen’s reflection, I watched him close the distance.

I opened the small ornate box beside the lamp, tipped its contents into my palm, and closed my fist.

Fifteen feet.

Casually, I circled the desk and sat. Smiling at the laptop camera, with my free hand, I tapped the pattern Sherlock and I had practiced:

Short-short-short. Long. Pause. Short-long-short.

Our emergency signal. But could he see me?

The screen flickered and cleared. Then this:

Nathan and Margaret are safe.

You must do exactly as I say. Your very life may depend on it.

The Stoner sisters.

Another pause.

Get to the Server Room. Trust me.

The screen went dark.

I slipped off my shoes. Stood barefoot. Without them, Thomas seemed even taller.

“You killed Sam,” I said. “Your own sister. For what: Power? Money? A seat at the Syndicate table?”

He didn’t flinch. If anything, he enjoyed this.

“You’re a bastard,” I said, voice low.

He smiled. “No. I’m Albert Hughes’s son. Syndicate blood.”

He stepped closer.

“Sam thought exposing everything: Dad, the old Syndicate, would make her a hero.”

“You poisoned her.”

“I meant to frighten her.” A shrug. “I made a mistake.”

“You left her to die on the street.”

He didn’t argue. “This time,” he said, “Sam didn’t land on her feet.”

A furious, electric thrill surged through me. Confession. I had it.

Then his smile widened.

“Oh, I almost forgot. ‘Moriarty, Activate Security Agent. Delete all audio and video for today.’”

A quiet, suave, and sinister voice from overhead: “Confirmed.”

“Sutton saw you.”

“Funnily enough, he was called away a few minutes ago.”

And then he lunged.

No warning.

One moment, I was upright, then his hands clamped my throat, hard. Crushing. My breath vanished. The world roared. My knees buckled.

I fumbled into my hair, found Sam’s pin, and drove it upward. Missed his eye. Caught him under the cheekbone.

He howled. Reeled back. Blood bloomed. Not enough.

He came again.

I flung the snuff into his face.

Thomas recoiled, coughing, eyes watering, gasping. But still moving.

I ran.

Barefoot, I flew across the Library floor. His footsteps thundered behind me. The slick floor betrayed me, but adrenaline carried me forward.

The stairwell. B1: Archives, I swiped my badge.

Red light. Denied.

He was close.

More stairs. B2: Server Room. Green light. Door opened. I dove inside.

No sign of Nate. No lock.

Thomas’s coughing echoed behind me: closer, angrier.

I ran to the far end. Spotted the supply closet. Threw myself in. Slammed the door shut.

No lock.

His footsteps slowed. He didn't need to run now.

I braced: feet planted, my back and arms pressed against the door, knees locked.

The knob turned. Then:

Bang.

He hit the door full force.

I dug in.

He was stronger. Heavier.

My arms useless. My feet skidded.

Overhead, a voice: flat, synthetic:

“Terminating Security Agent. Initiating Fire Suppression Agent.”

The voice was calm. Cold. But not unfamiliar.

Sherlock.

I had hoped he could help. I hadn't known he could intervene.

A hiss filled the air. Cold. Chemical.

Thomas slammed again.

Then again, weaker.

Then silence.

A thud.

A breathless moment.

Stillness.

The air turned sharp, metallic, burning my throat.

I waited. Loud fans whirring. Heart pounding.

“Fire suppression complete. Air quality restored.”

Sherlock again. Casual as ever. Like announcing a train delay.

I cracked open the door.

Thomas lay sprawled on the floor, unmoving.

Standing over him were Nate and Maggie, breathing heavily. Eyes on me. Alive.

I didn't speak. Couldn't. The fear hadn't left yet. But it changed shape. I was still shaking. Not from what I'd done.

From the fact that I wasn't alone.

And then, clear and quiet in my mind:

I held on. Not because I thought I could win.

I held on because they'd come. And they did.

#

After giving statements to the NYPD, none of us had the energy to celebrate that night. So I arranged to meet Maggie and Nate at a quiet brasserie on the Upper East Side the following evening. It was Saturday, so I called ahead and made two requests. One was for privacy.

I arrived to find Nate already seated in a small side room. There was only one other table and only one man at it. He had his back to us. He was dining alone, carving his steak with surgical precision.

Nate stood as I approached. Gallant. He wore a navy blazer, an open-collar white shirt, and gray pants. Seeing him like that, I was glad I'd broken out my one cocktail dress.

"Hello," I said.

I was about to tease him and ask if he'd pull out my chair when Maggie swept in behind me and claimed one for herself. I followed suit.

"Sorry," she said, breathless. "Running late." Then, brightly: "What are we drinking?"

The waiter began to approach. I waved him off, and he retreated.

Maggie tracked him as he left, then turned to Nate. “Your little program found the rest of the key and decoded the journal. Not with much time to spare, but it worked. Impressive.”

Nate looked rueful. “When I built the script, I prioritized Mayhew staff names as potential keys. But I stupidly used the list of salaried employees. Sam wasn’t full-time. Her name never made the list.”

I understood what he meant: if he had, we’d have found the key sooner. Maybe even in time to see Thomas coming.

I tried to take the blame off him. “None of us thought to connect ‘Hughes’ to the journal. It was funny, though, when I saw H-U-G on my screen. I didn’t know what to think.”

He smiled.

I continued, “Then I remembered you said phrases could work as mnemonic Playfair keys.” I looked over at Maggie. “You guessed *Fidem Servare* back at the apartment, but I never knew it was the Hughes family motto. If I had, we’d have had the complete key then and there. It only clicked when I remembered Sam’s ‘Keep the faith, baby.’ But, by then, you had already connected the name.”

I had never seen her so eager.

“I didn’t even look at the completed key,” she said. “I just read the decoded text that the script sent. *Ex Libris* Edwin Braxton. From the first page. Once I saw the Syndicate’s head was named Merrick, I went hunting. No birth record, no mention in British newspapers, until 1860. That’s when a Malcolm Merrick bought an estate in Mayfair. After that, he shows up all over the society pages. Hospitals. Orphanages. Full elite makeover.”

Nate frowned. “So where was he before 1860?”

Maggie leaned in. “I guessed Merrick had money before the estate and likely had a different name.”

“Fair.”

“I combed American and European newspapers for Englishmen who vanished after losing a fortune between 1855 and 1865.”

Nate blinked. “Losing?”

“He needed the money to disappear so that it could reappear later. I found a story about an Englishman who invested heavily in American railroad bonds, only to learn they were counterfeit. He was reported to have died in disgrace soon after. The name? Eustace Hughes.”

Nate looked puzzled. “Wait. I’ve missed something.”

Maggie was eager to explain. “It’s a little tricky. While still in London, Eustace Hughes transferred his fortune to New York via his London bank by bill of exchange, then sailed to America, engineered press reports that he’d lost his entire fortune on counterfeit railroad bonds, staged his death as Hughes, and finally returned to London reborn as Malcolm Merrick.”

“It’s Victorian theater,” I added. “Back then, identity *was* paper. Bills of exchange, deeds, telegrams. Those carried more weight than faces.”

Maggie absorbed that. “Exactly. The obituary noted that the dead man was identified as Eustace Hughes based on papers in his possession.”

“The death, the rebirth. They only worked because people trusted the paperwork.”

Nate let out a breath. “Diabolical.”

“Efficient,” I said. “A Victorian villain wouldn’t hesitate to kill for narrative consistency.”

“For a year or two, he lived in the U.S. as Merrick,” Maggie continued. “Probably made some useful contacts. Then returned to London, wealthy and untraceable.”

Nate asked, "But why go to all that trouble?"

Maggie didn't miss a beat. "Scotland Yard. And ambition. Scotland Yard was closing in on the Syndicate years before Braxton met Merrick. Hughes needed to get away. Get a fresh start."

"But somehow keep his money," I added.

Nate said, "Edwin worked out the Hughes to Merrick switch. He saw a Hughes portrait and coat of arms in Merrick's library. It's in his journal."

Nate's voice grew cautious. "But how did Sam work it out? She couldn't have decrypted the journal, could she?"

I knew. "Between the Hughes family papers and the records at the Society of Genealogists, she pieced together the family's criminal past and told Thomas. My guess? She urged him to come clean. To publish. Maybe to make restitution."

"You think Thomas went to London to convince her to join?"

"No. To buy her off. Threaten her, maybe. But when she couldn't be turned, he drugged her. Maybe he meant just to scare her. Maybe not."

Maggie murmured something under her breath. I missed the words, but the look on her face made one thing clear: Thomas was lucky she hadn't been wielding the hairpin.

Nate asked quietly, "What about the Mayhew?"

I shook my head. "The Mayhew had no idea about the Hughes history. They were recruiting a board member with an academic pedigree, and found one. He just happened to be a Syndicate partner."

Both Nate and Maggie spoke at the same time. "Who?"

The waiter hovered. I waved him off.

“Let me explain. The Syndicate was structured like all partnerships: Partners. Associates. Staff. In 1866, Merrick was a partner. Thorne was an associate. Crowley was staff.”

Nate said, “Like a crooked law firm.”

“Exactly. Sam’s father was a partner. But partnerships have succession problems. Albert Hughes stopped participating in the crimes, but he continued to collect his share for years. He recruited a replacement. But when Albert Hughes tried to walk away, they killed him.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes. “You don’t know that.”

“No. But it fits. A partner can’t let another partner walk. Especially not one with regrets.”

“And if Albert had regrets, he wouldn’t want his children anywhere near the Syndicate.”

“So he picked someone else.”

“Exactly. Someone from his college days. He funneled anonymous donations to his department. Chose someone who enjoyed money, status, and control. Someone who could groom the next generation of associates.”

Nate knew. “King.”

“Yes, Dr. Harold King. Albert’s classmate. Sam’s undergraduate advisor. My dissertation advisor. Potential Mayhew Advisory Board member.”

Maggie said, “That’s why she sent you the journal.”

“Yes. King heard she was researching the Hughes family papers. Panicky, he flew to London on the pretext of attending a conference. Met with her. Something he said worried her. She mailed everything to me and then went dark.”

Nate’s voice turned flat. “And King? He recruited Thomas.”

“Yes. King was at my father’s funeral, along with a few other Yale classmates. He saw a good deal of himself in Thomas: greed, malleability, moral vacancy. Once King realized Sam

was a threat, he made the pitch to Thomas. Killing Sam was a rite of passage. And it gave King leverage.”

Nate looked thoughtful. “Edwin mentioned a similar ‘test’ in his journal.”

For several long seconds, only silence.

The waiter returned. “Now?”

Maggie glanced at her watch. “I should go.”

She stood. Looked at each of us. For the first time, she smiled. It was wide, luminous.

She looked... free.

“If you kids ever need an archivist, call me.”

“Now?” the waiter asked again.

“Yes,” I said. “Now.”

I turned and looked up. “Maggie, please stay for a toast.”

The waiter returned with an open champagne bottle in a bucket of ice. Maggie hesitated.

Then sat.

The waiter placed three glasses on the table and began to pour.

“I should...” she began, then eased back in her chair.

“Just one,” I said.

He gave her half a *coupe*.

She looked up. “Fill it, would you, Betteredge?”

I smiled. “*The Moonstone*. You’ve been reading Wilkie Collins.”

“Oh, you’re good.”

With our glasses charged, the table grew quiet again. I swallowed, a little harder than I meant to, and lifted mine. “To Sam, my steadier conscience. The truth stands because you did.”

Maggie added, "And may King and Thomas Hughes never see the light of day."

"Hear, hear," said Nate.

We drank.

Maggie drained hers and set her glass down.

"Perfect. And your toast wasn't half bad, either."

She pushed back her chair. "Now I must go. I'm late."

"Date?" Nate and I said together.

"If you must know, Ethan Parker. He's been chasing me for weeks."

"I'm sure he has," I said. If anyone could excavate the real Ethan, it was Maggie.

She left.

Nate reached into his tote and slid a paperback across the table.

"Don't laugh. *David Copperfield*. I've been reading it."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I started again after all this. It feels less... distant. Or maybe I wanted to see what you see."

Neither is an easy read.

I didn't answer. Not right away.

"Most people don't try," I said finally. "They think I'm making things complicated."

A beat.

"But you don't mind complexity, do you?"

He didn't answer. Just held my gaze, the silence chosen. I remembered that morning over coffee, when he told me words mattered. Even the ones unsaid.

I refilled both our glasses. "I suppose we're both out of a job."

“Definitely.”

I raised my glass. “Want to make a toast?”

He looked away for a moment and then met my eyes and lifted his glass. “I trust that the present moment is the beginning of a new career.”

I laughed. Champagne sloshed.

“Mr. Micawber,” I said. “Perfect.”

Micawber had nothing but hope.

We had... a vague understanding and maybe one glass left in the bottle.

I motioned for the check. The waiter reappeared, less insistent this time. “It’s been paid. This was left for you.”

He handed over a note. Precise, clean handwriting.

With compliments, A.

I turned. The other table was empty.

I turned the card in my hand again. *With compliments, A.*

Not a threat, not a clue I could yet decipher. Only a reminder that somewhere, unseen, another reader had taken notice.

I thought of Sam, buried beside her father. Of Edwin, beside his mother.

And of Mary Ann Evans, who buried her name to be read as George Eliot:

...that things are not so ill with you and me as they
might have been, is half owing to the number who lived
faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.

Well.

Maybe not unvisited.

Not while there were Pages yet to be turned.

Afterward

I'll start with a confession: I used artificial intelligence to help write this book.

There's been a lot of debate about AI in fiction. Can it be creative? Does it cross the line between inspiration and imitation? Some see it as a threat, while others view it as a helpful tool that can shape a story, speed things up, or offer a new perspective.

At the heart of it all is a familiar question. What does it mean to create something original? And how do we think about authorship when part of the process involves both human judgment and machine input?

Writers have faced this before. In the Victorian era, new technologies like mass printing and serialized fiction raised concerns about originality and ownership. Pseudonyms were common, not just for privacy but to get published at all. Readers didn't always know who had written what. The tools have changed, but the questions are much the same.

Resonance came out of those echoes. It's a story about the conversation between past and present, and that shaped how I wrote it. I took notes by hand, edited on screen, and utilized AI tools to refine awkward sentences and condense dense technical passages. The AI also suggested a perfect Micawber quote – that does not appear in *David Copperfield*.

I've always taken criticism to heart, but somehow, I found it easier to accept tough edits from a machine. That helped me revise more honestly and let go of things that weren't working.

In the end, *Resonance* is about connection. Writing it was, too. And if it leaves you thinking about voice, memory, and what we pass on, then maybe it did what I hoped it would.

Author's Note

This book was written with help from ChatGPT 4o, which I used mainly for editing and revision. All final choices were mine. I take full responsibility for any mistakes, whether introduced by me or by my AI assistant.

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