

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Of Rugby and Other Games

A Collection of Stories

by

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A Dislike of Games

Inhaling smog-tinged spring air, Sheila Holmes plodded past 45-foot tall Ionic columns, down the stairs beyond the British Museum's south entrance, another investigation concluded.

She'd provided her services *pro bono* on this occasion, the safe behind a still life in the sitting room at 221B Baker Street stuffed with cash from services rendered to Her Majesty's government.

The scent of fresh pastries assailed her nostrils on his humid Wednesday; she would divert to the bakery and lay in a supply of well-deserved treats for herself, her landlady Edith Hudson-Thorne, and her flatmate Johnny Watson.

Thus distracted, she didn't immediately respond when a masculine Yorkshire-accent called her name. The hail's third repetition was augmented by a firm grip on her spindly right shoulder.

"That is you, isn't it, Sheila?"

Shaken from her reverie, she spun toward a middle-aged, trim figure in grey Savile Row suit. Slightly sunken bluish-brown eyes squinted at her; discolored teeth between thin lips - topped by a neat, variegated mustache - were set in a sheepish grin. A mane the color of dark chocolate, parted at the left and feathered across a sloped brow offset the slender nose marred by a lump denoting its previous fracture.

A few moments elapsed before she plucked the memory from her subconscious. "Pete?"

He nodded.

Elongated digits clasped both her hands and guided her away from the flow of pedestrians toward the museum, pausing near the high iron fence. "If I hadn't bothered to look beneath that ridiculous fedora, I never would've recognized you in passing."

Sheila self-consciously removed her great-great-uncle Sherlock's hat. "What are you doing here?" she queried.

"Research, of course. I'm down from Oxford on a sabbatical..."

"You're still head librarian?"

He chuckled. "Did you think what you put me through would cause me to forego my pursuit of knowledge?"

"No," she croaked. "But, I still recall the rumors that bibliothec Peter Huggins slept under his desk - when he slept at all."

"Only because, whenever I left my office, I was mobbed by students with questions about our vast selection of books." He glanced at a Jaeger watch

encircling his left wrist, then met Sheila's violet orbs. "Look, I've an appointment with the curator of one of the collections in five minutes. What about dinner tonight?"

"You're in town for a few days?"

"Six weeks. I'm staying with my niece and her family."

"Kathy?"

"Correct." He backed toward the massive structure. "I'll call for you at half-seven."

"Fine."

"What's your address?"

She practically had to shout the answer, causing those nearby to glare at her curiously.

Touching his forehead in confirmation, he turned and strode up the steps, through the throng congregating near the doors.

Sheila stared after him.

Beyond her involvement in the university's theater, thanks to fellow student Roderick Andrews - known professionally as Rikki Anthony - and a fascination with the guitar, which led to her one and only campus recital, the aspect of Oxford University life that had really piqued her interest was Huggins' expertise on texts documenting England's criminal element since the Middle Ages.

He'd repeatedly applied for a fellowship that would permit him to wander the country's pre-eminent source of historical artifacts.

Ah, well, she sighed, moving along Great Russell Street, veering into the bakery and continuing on to the Tottenham Court Road Tube station. They could discuss the matter in full that evening.

Edith forewarned via text by this tenant of her proximity to Baker Street, a steaming carafe of coffee awaited Sheila's arrival at the flat previously occupied by the 19th century Holmes. Watson, himself just returned from an Afghanistan veterans' group therapy session, broke into a huge smile when the string of the embossed pink box was untied and its contents of sweet delights revealed.

The trio enjoyed a respite from their daily routines, brushing powdered sugar off fingertips or drips of jelly from chins. Then, Watson noticed Sheila's flushed expression.

"What happened? Another case fall in your lap?" he puzzled.

"No, fortunately, because I need a bit of a break."

Edith chimed in, "Then, what?"

"I chanced upon an old friend," Sheila confessed, reluctantly adding, "He's taking me to dinner."

Watson, beaming, clapped her on the spine. The russet-haired landlady wrapped her in an enthusiastic hug.

“Why so excited?” the detective entreated.

“Because the likelihood of you descending into the depression that’s plagued you between each and every case for the past couple years may, for once, be avoided,” proclaimed the former Army medic.

Oddly enough, the woman grasped her companions’ concern. Since the murder of producer/actor/director Tony Downton on the red carpet at the premiere of his Sherlock Holmes bio-pic, she still had to force herself from the oak double bed most mornings, fearing a lack of mental stimulation would lead to her indulgence in a remedy she’d devised during her years at Oxford: coca leaves, tobacco and coffee.

So far, she’d been able to resist that temptation, struggling through dreary days while metaphorically clinging to the edge of a cliff by a thread.

“I think I’ll have a lie-down,” she drawled, kicking off worn sneakers as she shuffled to her bedroom, slamming the door.

Despite the barrier, she could hear the whispered exchange: Edith and Watson debating whether she might be on the mend after prolonged grieving for the man who’d challenged her in so many ways, and to whom she’d been briefly engaged.

Something Sheila knew would never be possible.

Tony Downton had been a Holmes, a distant cousin, tracing his ancestry to Sherrinford, elder brother of Sherlock and Mycroft. Sliding open the night stand drawer, she contemplated the black onyx signet ring she’d commandeered after he died in her arms.

This outing with Pete Huggins wasn’t a date, in the strictest sense of the word. A chance to catch up with someone she’d admired as a student would prove a pleasant diversion, at least.

Not the sort to dress up unless absolutely essential, Sheila extracted a pair of black slacks, a frilled ivory satin blouse and comfortable flats from her wardrobe, donning them after she’d showered and tried to brush her brunette mop into some semblance of order. She joined Edith in the ground floor kitchen, drying John’s supper dishes with a tea towel, anticipating the door bell.

Stunned to find no taxi idling at the curb when she unlocked the deadbolt, her surprise redoubled at the sight of her escort in black tie and tuxedo.

The attire suited his erect spine and narrow frame, though his sunburnt, smooth cheeks and small, sculpted ears more resembled those of a day laborer than a gentleman.

“I clean up pretty well, eh?” he joked.

“Something I’ve not seen before, to be sure.”

“You expected me to wear my boilersuit and boots?”

“I’m more accustomed to that - with dust powdering your hair and cobwebs dangling from your elbows - than... this,” admitted Sheila.

He countered, “I’m used to seeing you in grubby t-shirts and jeans.”

“Touché.”

Extending his left hand, he ushered her off the stoop. “It’s such beautiful weather, I thought we’d walk.”

“Where?”

“I made a reservation at the Winter Garden.”

On a librarian’s pay? Sheila mused. Between that, the expensive clothing and accessories, she pondered if he’d come into a substantial inheritance...

South on Baker Street, matching his rapid, short gait - reminiscent of players deftly navigating obstacles on the pitch - they bore west on Marylebone Road. Vehicle traffic had eased for the day, but revelers crowded the sidewalks, en route to their leisure activities.

The crush prevented the pair from commencing their conversation until seated at a linen-draped table in the posh eatery. Huggins ordered champagne; Sheila’s eyes widened.

“What’s the deal, Pete?”

He replied, “It’s a celebration, isn’t it?”

“Should do.”

“All right, then. My trip has reaped a bountiful harvest. First, we cross paths. Within an hour of that, I’m presented with ledgers thought to be lost that verify suspicions I’ve had for fifteen years...”

A wry smirk twisted Sheila’s lips. “You mean...”

Huggins had a quirky way of displaying pleasure: quickly twitching the edges of his mouth upward, then immediately resuming a staid guise.

Seeing that, she reached across the board and patted his hand. “I’m glad for you.”

“Can you believe it?” He squeezed her fingers. “The membership rolls of the largest Masonic Lodge in the country...”

“You’re still hoping to track a connection between Jack the Ripper and the House of Lords?”

“And a dozen other major crimes of the late 19th century.”

Crimes unsolved by Scotland Yard, but not Sherlock Holmes.

Dr. John H. Watson, MD, hadn't published his accounts of all her great-great-uncle's cases, after all.

Singular bluish-brown orbs studied her intently.

The waiter delivered French champagne and an ice bucket. A pause while the bottle was uncorked, a small amount poured into Huggins' crystal flute and the taste sampled.

"Excellent," he approved in a mellifluous tone she remembered well, spurring the rotund employee to fill both glasses to the brim.

She ventured, "Since when did you acquire a penchant for bubbly? I seem to recall you kept a stash of lager behind the stacks."

"Since when do you hob-nob with government officials and royalty?" he retorted. "I seem to recall *you* preferred the company of the Oxford Thespians." He sipped sparkling liquid. "Or, was it the Oxford Lesbians?"

The troupe of actors who'd engaged in a rather unconventional musical production where the men's roles were filled by women and vice versa had raised the ire of right-leaning students and administrators during her tenure on campus. "I seem to remember you were one of our detractors."

"Whatever happened to Roddy Andrews?"

"He's dead."

Thick eyebrows arched. "Really?"

"He made a name for himself on stage as Rikki Anthony, coming to me for help when he ran into some trouble. Got hit by a lorry..."

"A strange one, that."

"But not deserving of such an end," lamented Sheila.

The waiter reappeared, prompting the couple to peruse their menus. Huggins selected filet mignon; Sheila opted for chicken marsala - the cheapest entree on the list.

"You still play guitar?" Huggins asked once silver place settings had been laid.

"I did for awhile after graduation. Once my case load increased..."

He clucked his tongue. "I never imagined you'd be evasive with me, my dear. I won't deny you've garnered profuse attention: I've read the stories in the *London Times* and seen coverage on the telly. After... Tony Downton's murder, you fell off the radar like a Royal Air Force bomber crashing in the Atlantic."

She bit her tongue.

"You ditched the Iron Man Triathlon training, too, I suppose?"

Brunette curls bobbed solemnly.

"And Wing Chun?"

“I still practice a bit, when...”

“Weren’t you engaged to...”

“James Moriarty.”

“He broke it off?” Huggins continued what struck her more as an interrogation.

She corrected, “I broke it off.”

“What became of him?”

“He’s dead.”

“His criminal tendencies caught up with him?”

“I caught up with him.”

“So, death dogs your footsteps?”

“I... wouldn’t phrase it that way,” she bristled.

“You never interviewed with the Metropolitan Police?”

“I think I still have your letter of recommendation in a file with my transcript.”

“You had other ambitions, as well...”

“I toyed with the idea of being an investigative reporter.”

“Despite your instructors’ red marks on your papers for poor punctuation and grammar?”

Miffed, she changed the subject. “Still the staunch bachelor?”

“I’ve always said: who’d want me, the way I live?”

“Because you’re never home?” Beneath the table, she eased off her right shoe. “Still active with rugby?”

“You have no idea how complicated it is to manage even an unofficial inter-collegiate league, my dear. I wake in the wee hours each morning, trek across the quad to record statistics, schedule judges and referees, update rosters and handle trifling complaints before settling in for my regular shift, and eat a cold supper alone near midnight. No woman would tolerate...’

“Some might be just as enthusiastic about sport as you.”

When Huggins averted his face, a natural puffiness beneath his eyes reflected muted light, as did a vivid scar near his right temple. “I don’t want children. Most women do.”

Scrutinizing this man, that fact would not have been included among the traits she observed. During terms when she’d frequently sought his assistance among the myriad of books, he’d exhibited an orderly mind offset by secondhand attire and uncut hair. More than once, she’d witnessed him stuff unopened envelopes with past due invoices in his office’s rickety wooden desk. Various library interns he’d favored would smuggle in pizza from the local Domino’s,

Subway foot-long sandwiches, or Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets between their afternoon sessions; he'd nurse the portions for a week or more - thanks to a miniature refrigerator plugged in the janitor's closet.

What had inspired his transformation into an affluent man-about-town?

Salads served, Sheila stroked her fork.

"I can see the gears grinding, my dear," chided Huggins. "You're using methods from the very manuals I recommended for analyzing the criminal mind against me."

"You've done nothing criminal," she assured him.

"I'm gratified you comprehend that."

"But..."

"No buts, Sheila. Let it suffice that, as I glide into the latter half of my existence, I want to enjoy the best money can buy."

"Your salary doesn't warrant..."

"What if I told you I received an tidy bundle to... chat you up and convince you to take a very delicate case?"

"A bundle from whom?"

Huggins chewed a portion of greens deliberately. "A very generous donor."

"That's the reason you left your self-imposed isolation and came to London?"

He shook his head. "No, no, no. My errand at the British Museum was no ruse. If I hadn't run into you purely by accident, I would've rung you."

"Preposterous! Who's this elusive benefactor..."

A huge tray approached the table; their order delivered, Huggins tucked into his meal. "Let's enjoy our food, shall we? There'll be plenty of time for the details later."

Sheila hadn't touched her salad, and frustration spoiled her appetite for the delectable-smelling main course. Disgusted, she tossed her napkin atop the plate and abandoned the table.

Huggins did not pursue her, slicing into parsley-garnished medium-rare beef with gusto.

She reappeared momentarily, as it was, having left her footwear. Sliding into the shoe, her fists pounded the table beside Huggins' plate. "Know this, Pete: my great-great-uncle's most famous saying may have been, 'The game's afoot,' but I don't play games. If the source of your sudden wealth really needs my services, bring him to Baker Street at precisely nine o'clock tomorrow morning, or you can forget you ever saw me."

Calmly, he responded, "Should do."

Marching from the hotel complex, Sheila maintained an angry pace to her flat. Flinging herself into the basket-chair beside a comfortable fire on the grate, she ignored Watson's inquiring glance as he lowered the evening paper from the armchair opposite.

"You weren't gone very long," he stated.

She grumbled, "I despise being duped."

"Duped? How?"

"After a grilling on par with some Scotland Yard inspectors, Pete informed me he's acting on behalf of a potential client."

"That's bad?"

Sheila leaned forward. "Haven't you ever wanted a peaceful evening with a friend without... without..."

"I dream of it every night," remarked the Army veteran.

She fell silent, contemplating the blond amputee. Their association began innocently enough, years prior, when she intervened in an illicit fight ring. An advantageous arrangement, sharing Sherlock's former digs, they'd become firm allies but, on Sheila's part, nothing more.

Allowing herself to become emotionally attached to Tony Downton affirmed her resolution to suppress all personal vulnerabilities. She, nonetheless, commiserated with Watson's suffering through his cancer diagnosis and treatment - initially at a distance, being in California - and, upon her return to London, tended his needs faithfully during his recuperation.

She'd detected his growing affection for her, while not being able to reciprocate his feelings.

"I'm for bed," she announced, rising, stretching and trudging to her room.

Waking well past ten on Thursday, Sheila felt better rested than she had in many weeks. She wrapped herself in Sherlock's tattered purple dressing gown, whisking into the sitting room, eager for a cup of coffee.

Edith had been on the job, the tenant realized. A distinct lack of clutter on the round dining table, newspapers and discarded mail swept off the floor, caused a jab of guilt. She'd promised the American widow this space would be kept clean upon signing the lease... and repeatedly reneged on the agreement.

An ominous silence permeated the residence. Peering through the partially open door, Watson's room resembled a magazine advert for furniture polish. Sheila couldn't recall if he had an appointment with his doctor or a counselor, dealing with his prosthetic left leg or his post traumatic stress. Edith may have gone shopping...

"This is so weird, it's almost creepy," she commented aloud.

The odor of pungent tobacco might have augmented the situation's bizarre nature, except she'd long since grown accustomed to Sherlock Holmes haunting 221B. The wiry figure's frayed cuffs, two days' growth of whiskers and longish dark hair belied intellectual insights intact beyond the grave.

"Good morning, Uncle," she greeted the translucent spectre. "What's happened here?"

A smoking briar clamped between his teeth, he replied, "You overslept."

"That's not... technically accurate," she objected.

"Were you not expecting a caller an hour ago?"

"Not really."

"Yet, try as she might, Edith couldn't wake you when the gentleman did present himself. She felt justified, at least, for having cleared the detritus not five minutes before the bell sounded, and thoroughly embarrassed at having to make excuses for you. When he refused to wait, she showed him out and went on with her day."

"He left no message?"

"Only if you regard a stream of deplorable expletives as a message, cursing his travel from the country on a fool's errand."

She mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"That apology is owed to Edith, not me."

"Must do. It's just, I haven't been able to get a solid night's sleep in weeks. Resting without the nightmares, or interruptions... I finally have a bit of energy."

"I fear you'll need it, quite soon."

The image dissipated in an acrid cloud, compelling Sheila to cross and raise a smudged window pane to disperse the odor. On the street below, Watson stood chatting with a distinguished figure in a business suit as traffic hummed past.

The creaking, narrow staircase announced their approach. Sheila didn't bother rushing to her room to don even a t-shirt and jeans. She settled in the basket-chair, legs folded in a half-lotus position, stomach gurgling.

Watson limped across the threshold, waving the visitor toward the red Victorian divan.

"So, you're finally up?" admonished the former medic.

"Indeed."

"Good thing for you I met Clay as he was leaving. We went to breakfast, and I pledged you'd be ready to hear his story when we got back."

"Ta, John," she mumbled tersely.

"Clay Forrester, this is Sheila Holmes."

Forrester - an athletic 60 or so, owner of a chain of petrol stations in and around Birmingham, gold figaro chain beneath the open collar of his light blue silk shirt, piercing green eyes and bulbous nose, full lips and a cleft chin - reached her in two strides. His right hand extended toward her, sporting a gold ring indicating his membership in the Knights of Malta, another featuring the Oxford crest surrounded by tiny diamonds, the third possibly a family heirloom with its kite-cut turquoise.

She accepted the gesture, grimacing at the strength he exerted upon her palm.

“An honor, Miss Holmes.” His voice reminded her of a boot scraping across loose gravel.

“Likewise.” Upon release, she flexed her fingers to restore blood circulation. “How do you two know each other?”

“My son, Antony, and John were in school together as youngsters.”

“Clay coached our rugby squad during the summer holidays,” added Watson, lingering near the windows.

Sheila wondered, “Then, why ask Pete Huggins to intercede with me on your behalf?”

Forrester sank on the divan. “I had no idea John was acquainted with you.”

“But, your association with Pete through the rugby league...”

“Exactly.”

Games, games, games! the woman growled inwardly.

“My sincerest apologies, Miss Holmes. This is a matter of such delicacy, I had to be certain of your availability - and willingness - to take the case before wasting my time sharing the specifics, only to be refused.”

“I may still refuse, Mr. Forrester. I’ve reservations at the Carlton in Cannes for tomorrow night, with plans for an overdue holiday on the Continent.”

At this, Watson’s neck swiveled toward her, blue eyes wide.

“I will eagerly reimburse you double the amount of any lost expenses, if you agree to remain in country,” Forrester pleaded.

A whiff of tobacco made Sheila’s nose twitch, Sherlock invisibly present behind the basket-chair. That usually meant he was intrigued by the client, and she should pay close attention.

“How may I be of assistance?” she inquired. “And, please, be concise, eliminating all non-essential information.”

Mildly annoyed, Forrester adjusted his shirt cuffs and cleared his throat. “The first piece of essential information, as you term it: my sister is a nun in the Poor Clare monastery near Sinderhope.”

Just as her renowned ancestor had limited knowledge of astronomy, philosophy and other subjects, Sheila's awareness of modern religious practices and beliefs fell somewhere below her appreciation of art.

The client recounted a string of mysterious incidents in the 200 year old Spanish-style cloister: two alleged suicides, the community mascot poisoned, the chapel altar desecrated and venomous snakes turned loose in the abbess' cell.

"Clearly, a number of the women have become unhinged," Sheila intuited.

"That's what my sister thought, too. With the most recent incident, however, muddy boots - size fourteen, at least - left tracks in the corridor."

"An intruder, then. A scorned lover, seeking revenge..."

"The youngest nun is mid-sixties." His weight shifted on the cushion. "The eight now live in absolute terror."

"They've contacted the local constabulary?"

"Their bishop advised against it."

Sheila stiffened. "Why?"

"From what my sister wrote to me, he's trying to quash any more scandal..."

Watson cursed under his breath.

"I agree wholeheartedly, John," Forrester said. "I've taken it upon myself to assist in finding the cause..."

"A feat of which you think me capable?" purported Sheila.

"We've arranged for you to have access..."

"We?"

"A consortium of interested parties, shall we say."

"How do you expect this to be accomplished?"

Forrester mustered a feeble grin. "You will go undercover inside the monastery walls and determine the facts of the situation."

The implications of his declaration sent a chill up the woman's spine. "You mean, in full garb?"

He shrugged.

"I'm a proponent of a good disguise's efficacy, Mr. Forrester, but what you're suggesting goes beyond the pale."

"The nuns have been notified you're visiting from Rome, an emissary sent to assess whether a new facility should be built, since the existing monastery's escalating maintenance costs have become prohibitive, or arrangements made to merge with the Belgian community."

"You've already assumed I'll accept your offer? How on earth could I be convincing in such a role?"

“You won’t be alone.”

Sheila gulped. “No?”

“Pete Huggins will be with you.”

“Pete?” she nearly shouted.

Forrester relished her confusion. “Despite your reputation, you never deduced he was a defrocked Cistercian monk?”

The cloud of smoke might have originated in the clogged fireplace chimney; Sheila recognized it as a sign of Sherlock’s displeasure at another of her failings.

“He’ll dress as a priest, I suppose?” she grouched.

“Indeed.”

She slumped in the basket-chair. Concerned, Watson took a step forward; she raised a hand to halt him. “When do we start?” she murmured.

“The portress will have a car waiting at the station for the evening train,” Forrest related.

“Not much time to prepare.”

“You and Huggins can review essentials on the train. Since the nuns keep silence, except for a brief recreation period each afternoon, there’ll be no need to explain yourself...”

Her response dripped with sarcasm. “Thanks.”

A cheque deposited on the computer desk prior to Forrester’s departure would more than compensate her for time and travel. Watson guided his former rugby coach down the stairs to the street, while Sheila paced nervously.

“Something’s not cricket here, Uncle Sherlock.”

The Great Detective’s essence solidified, briar emitting a steady spiral of smoke. “Your Watson should be able to research the community, the locale and other particulars, using his connections...”

Her flatmate paused beneath the lintel at the sight of their ghostly resident. “Clay will have the seamstress here first thing tomorrow.”

“Seamstress?” Sheila protested.

“You’ll need a habit and veil, so he told me.”

A grainy photograph plopped into her hand - a female in brown ankle-length garb, cinched at the waist with a knotted cord, a black veil extending to her hips and white coif completely encasing her head, leaving only her facial features exposed.

“Holy cow.”

“Only in India,” quipped Peter Huggins from the doorway, having encountered Edith as she returned from shopping.

Sheila scowled as Sherlock vanished. “You’re a bold sod to show yourself here.”

“When Clay proposed I invite you to participate in this errand of mercy, how could I refuse?”

“Errand of mercy, my eye. You’ve made a tidy sum for your trouble.”

“As have you,” he snarled, thumping the cheque with his index finger.

Sheila flopped onto the basket-chair. “At least, now I understand your preoccupation with money. Living as a Cistercian, vowed to poverty, warped your soul.”

“You’d be amazed how well those vowed to poverty live.” A startling sharpness in his tone she recognized all too well as his temper rising. “More comfortably than some eking out a living in the real world.”

“Could do.”

He lowered himself on a straight-backed chair at the table. “I’ve brought your train ticket, and a warning.”

“A warning?” she echoed.

“Clay may not have been completely honest with you, because his sister wasn’t completely honest with him.”

“What makes you suspect...”

“The vicar of the parish in Sinderhope attended seminary with me. I was ordained a Cistercian, while he served the diocese. We’ve kept in touch through the years. He emailed me he’s noticed strange comings and goings around the monastery for the past six months.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“I posed that same question, but never received an answer.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Three weeks.”

The detective’s brow furrowed. “Why didn’t you contact me sooner?”

“He’s a busy bloke...”

Sheila signaled Watson to the computer. The British Army veteran complied, wiggling the mouse to activate the monitor.

“What’s the priest’s name?” she pressed Huggins.

“Mike. Michael St. Marie.”

Nimble digits attacked the keyboard. Watson’s jaw clenched as he read the results on the screen. “He’s dead.”

Uncomfortable Habits

“Does the obituary list a cause of death?” Sheila Holmes directed to Johnny Watson.

He scrolled through lines of cramped type. “Fell off the vicarage roof while replacing missing shingles.”

Sheila opined, “Fell, or was pushed.”

From his seat, Pete Huggins waved the Sign of the Cross. “Rest his soul.”

“I suppose I should say ‘Amen,’ but there isn’t time,” she snapped, confronting the guest. “Have you been followed since you arrived in London?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“When Clay brought this situation to your attention, where did you meet?”

“My office at the library.”

“Could anyone have eavesdropped on that conversation?”

“The door was closed and, as you know, the walls are half glass, so I’d have seen if anyone was hanging about...”

Sheila speculated, “What about a bug?”

“Maintenance sprays for bugs every three months. The damage that can be done to those valuable books...”

“Not that kind of bug. An electronic listening device.”

“The door is always locked if I’m not at my desk.”

Watson interspersed, “What are you driving at, Sheila?”

“Just this, John.” She whirled toward her flatmate. “If Father St. Marie was murdered because he knew something unusual was happening at the Poor Clare monastery, his revelations to Pete may also be known, putting *him* in danger. It may also be a given that Forrester’s sister’s letters may have been read before being consigned to the post, meaning Clay is risking his life - and ours.”

Huggins shuddered.

Sheila lifted him off the chair and urged him toward the door. “Take a round-about way to Kathy’s, keeping your eyes open for anyone trailing you. In the morning, grab a taxi to Trafalgar Square, then grab a different one for the journey to the station. Keep your clerical collar and cassock in your luggage until you change trains in Birmingham.”

“Where will you be?” he demanded.

“I’ll meet you in Sinderhope at the appointed hour, I swear.”

“You’ll... take an alternate route?”

“Should do.”

Practically shoving him down the stairs, Sheila closed and bolted the sitting room door. Watson monitored this behavior from his seat at the desk, perturbed by her manic intensity.

“What is it, Sheila?”

“At this juncture, I’m not sure,” she acknowledged. “I need you to contact your sources and find out all you can about the monastery, the nuns, the property deeds...”

“In other words, everything.”

She managed a weak smile. “Everything.”

Shuffling to her bedroom - her pajamas still hidden beneath Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown - she uncrumpled the photo in her hand, shaking her head in disdain.

Watson, frantically typing emails through his customized encryption software, chortled at the thought of Sheila posing as a nun.

When he’d first seen her, she’d portrayed a scrawny lad, shackled via a ten-foot heavy chain to the Beast, a veteran who released his rage through illegal fights in the basement of Westminster Cathedral. Of all the opponents he’d faced, Sheila was the only one to best him, moments before a cadre of Metropolitan Police raided the site.

Officials had roared when they introduced themselves as Holmes and Watson.

Since then, Sheila often employed disguises so she could gain access to restricted areas in pursuit of criminals.

But, a *nun*?

Edith Hudson-Thorne, dutiful landlady that she was - despite her disappointment at the state of her tenants’ flat - delivered a lunch of cold cuts, cheese, bread and condiments. Watson ached to share the news with her, but realized Sheila’s fury might be triggered by such a disclosure.

The russet-haired American widow studied Watson’s efforts to control his merriment. “What’s so funny?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

Her wagging index finger scolded him. “I’ve told you both, time and again, if you’re... living in sin - or rumors to that effect reach my ears - out you go!”

“But, there’s still years left on our lease!”

“Which contains an iron-clad morality clause!” Edith huffed. “What would people think if an unwed woman waltzed in and out of my property, obviously pregnant?”

Watson's levity escalated to a full-blown guffaw. "Pregnant?" he howled. "No one said anything..."

"Don't lie to me, John. While it's never happened to me personally, I've seen the reaction when my husband's sisters announced their condition to their spouses. They burst out laughing like toddlers with a new toy."

Chest heaving, tears trickling down his cheeks, Watson rotated the swivel chair in a full circle. His hysteria alarmed Edith, who filled a tumbler with water from a carafe on the table and offered it to him.

He declined, forcibly slowing his respiration and dabbing his nose with a tissue. "I'm sorry, Edith," he panted. "If you knew the truth..."

She hovered over him. "What's so horrible that you can't tell me?"

"Sheila," he breathed, amusement revived at the very notion. "Sheila's... going to be... a *nun*!"

The chorus of titters ended abruptly when the object of their discussion appeared on the threshold, towel in hand, bound for a shower.

She had no need to deduce the source of their humorous outburst; she'd heard every word through the door.

"I'm gratified you consider my life so entertaining," she grumped, sidling from the chamber.

Over sandwiches and sodas later, Watson wrangled for her forgiveness by relaying the fruits of his research. "The monastery was originally occupied by Anglican Benedictines until it was damaged by German bombs during the Second World War. Those women were forced to evacuate, transferring to another community of their Order in Ireland. After V-E Day, the bishop offered the site to Poor Clares who were displaced from their monastery in France, and they saw a surge in numbers through the early 1960s. Of the thirty there in 1975, only eight survive."

"Sad," Sheila mumbled between bites of bologna with mustard on rye.

"The phenomenon is common in most religious houses these days."

"What else?"

"Within the past five years, a developer has made a generous offer for the property - including housing the last few nuns in an assisted living complex free of charge - with plans to build high-end country villas on the land."

"The nuns refused the sale?"

"Yes, but it's really not their decision."

"The bishop?"

"Holds the deed in trust."

"Ah!"

Watson sipped his ginger ale. "There's more."

"Should do."

"A conglomerate from Sweden wants the property for mining, claiming a vast deposit of copper lies beneath the surface."

"The game is definitely afoot," Sheila commented. "Competition of that sort could lead to desperate measures..."

Watson nodded his close-cropped blond mop.

"The bishop hasn't agreed to any of the offers?"

"No formal announcement has been made, if that's what you mean."

The detective licked crumbs from her fingers. "You're saying, something else is going on behind the scenes?"

"The nuns have engaged a land conservancy attorney to draw up documents that would prevent any modifications to the acreage once their community reaches its fulfillment."

"Fulfillment?"

"A... polite term for dying out."

Sheila's turn to laugh. "Brilliant women, they are, to thwart those greedy bastards!"

"You'll fit right in," Watson concurred. "Especially having short hair, easily tucked beneath the veil."

The chuckle died in her throat, and he flushed.

"You know me, John," she confided. "I rarely show fear, even with a pistol aimed at my head. This time, I'm quite terrified I might fail."

"Simply because you know little about Catholic observances?"

"Back when I was lending Will McLaurin a hand, I retreated to a Benedictine abbey in Wales..."

Her comrade raised his chin. "So, that's where you went..."

"Yes, though I regret lying to you."

"Must do."

"I watched those women at their prayers, with their bows and chanting. If I am welcomed among these Poor Clares, my ignorance will manifest no more than we enter the chapel."

"Perhaps it won't take more than a few hours..."

"You're a true optimist, John. My estimate would be three to four days."

"Pete can lead you through the rituals..."

"I... don't trust him."

"Why not? You admired him when you were at university."

“He... presented a totally different persona, while his genuine self - on display the past couple days - reeks of ambition and deception.”

“What are you implying?” Watson prodded.

“Is Clay Forrester affiliated with any of the entities interested in purchasing the monastery?”

“Not that my contacts were able to find.”

“You requested that search specifically?”

“I’m quite familiar with your tactics, Sheila. I try to leave no stone unturned.”

“Bravo, John. You’ll get a generous bonus for being so thorough.”

“That’s not...”

She clutched his hand. “I know you don’t do it for the lolly. You’ve got a good heart... even if you make fun of my discomfort.”

When their eyes met, they both smiled.

Watson left printed sheets with pertinent names and addresses on the table when he limped to his room for the night. Too many obvious suspects wished the nuns gone, resented their gumption in opposing the misuse of their sacred land. There seemed a few not-so-obvious elements lurking in the background, as well.

“Uncle Sherlock,” she pondered, “why do I sense Peter Huggins is a key player in this game?”

“What facts support such conjecture?” came the ethereal baritone.

She deliberated at length. “For one: our chance meeting at the British Museum was too... too... convenient. As if...”

“Complete the thought, child.”

“As if... he knew I was there, because he’d arranged to have me shadowed.”

“Probable.” About as much praise as she could expect from her lauded ancestor. “What else?”

“Clay Forrester has his own objectives, and suspects Pete of double-dealing.”

“Have you any idea how much cash is at stake...”

“Hundreds of thousands. Maybe millions.”

“My recommendation is to keep your eyes and ears open - and your mind - for human avarice exceeds all logic.”

“That’s... really no help, Uncle.”

“Of that, I am aware. Let me add: such a realization stood me in good stead for many decades during my lifetime.”

Sheila hoped she could say the same in 40, 50 or 60 years. For now, she shuffled to her bed and resigned herself to fitful slumber.

Her mood did not improve when the aging, gaunt seamstress arrived before 8:00 AM and proceeded to stick pins in the voluminous brown serge garment draped over Sheila's shoulders, loosely tailoring it to her twig-like measurements.

"You ought to eat more, get some meat on your bones," the woman declared.

She'd brought a portable sewing machine, making necessary alterations without leaving the sitting room, not only to the dress, but the veil and other accessories well before noon.

"What's this?" puzzled Sheila, holding aloft an eight-foot length of cloth, 18 inches wide, a hole in the middle.

"That's you're scapular, dearie."

"Sorry?"

"There is some... historical significance but, basically, you hold your hands together beneath the fabric in a prayerful attitude."

Sheila flinched. Her hands seldom remained still, as when she reached for the secondhand classical guitar propped against Sherlock's lab table, examining the broken B-string she'd not replaced since buying it for five pounds in a pawn shop.

The seamstress muttered in sympathy.

The boon of a rainy Friday afternoon: anyone attempting to follow Sheila to Euston Station would be quite discouraged, or quite easy to detect. The requisite accouterments stuffed in her Oxford duffle, casual passersby would've guessed she was headed to a fitness center for some exercise.

She pretended to browse in a gift shop, then detoured into a store to buy a chocolate bar. Nothing untoward occurred; she presumed herself safe.

Huggins had purchased a first class ticket for her on the mid-morning outbound; she'd shredded it and used her own funds for a standard class fare on a later train. In the midst of the weekend crush, she could scan the faces of those boarding and alighting without raising suspicion.

An hour from Sinderhope, she walked from her seat toward the rear and ducked into the toilet in the last car. No one noticed the female in jeans, faded Pink Floyd t-shirt and sneakers secure the sliding panel, nor the angelic figure in full habit who emerged in short order.

She selected an empty seat without incident, watching the passing countryside until the brakes squealed, the engine slowing as the station came into sight.

Her sole possession held close to her chest, the Oxford crest hidden from view, she accepted the conductor's assistance to descend stairs onto the platform. A diminutive, similarly-attired figure waved from the car park and, as she headed in that direction, Peter Huggins fell into step.

His appearance and demeanor had drastically altered. Slicked back from the sloped forehead, his hair shimmered black; he'd shaved off his mustache. The sunburn had been covered with some manner of theatrical base, giving his skin a false tan. Even his stride had lengthened and slowed.

"What's your name supposed to be?" she whispered.

"Father Giorgio Landini."

"Good thing you can pass for Italian."

"It's fortunate for you that costume makes it impossible to tell if you're from Bosnia or Boston." He preceded her down the steps. "Until you open your mouth."

Sheila assured him, "I don't plan to do much of that."

"Should do."

Reaching an older model yellow Ford Anglia, Huggins introduced himself. The portress - the only member of the Poor Clare community allowed to leave the cloister for such mundane purposes as shopping and fetching traveling dignitaries - bowed to him. He presented Mother Mary Anselma; the tiny nun bent to kiss her abbatial ring... which wasn't there.

The visitors exchanged a furtive glance.

"Arthritis," Huggins bluffed. "Mother Anselma's fingers swell..."

"I understand perfectly."

In fact, the elderly woman's own hands had grown gnarled with years of manual labor. She opened the passenger side door for her superior, while Huggins placed their bags in the boot and slid onto the rear seat.

The driver, starting the engine, intoned, "Hail Mary, full of grace..." but when Sheila was supposed to join in the latter half of the prayer, she missed her cue. Only Huggins' confident and melodious baritone reminded her of the words.

Unusual, riding the distance to the monastery without idle chatter. Huggins manually opened the sturdy wrought iron gate, closing it as they passed. Sheila gaped, awestruck, as the Ford rounded the curve, allowing for a view of the structure - definitely not of stone native to the British Isles - with turrets at each corner and medieval arched doorways.

The pretend envoy stifled her "Damn!" at the last second.

Seven wrinkled yet serene visages assembled behind an intricate steel grille in the visiting room to extend a formal welcome. Here, a bit of chit-chat before

Huggins was ushered to the guest quarters in the north wing, and Sheila listened as three bolts were dislodged and she glided into the cloister.

"I'm sure you're tired from traveling," welcomed the abbess, signing a blessing on the young woman's forehead. "If you're up for a brief tour..."

"Of course."

Sheila couldn't reveal she'd only spent a couple hours on the train, rather than dealing with flights from Rome.

Shown the recreation room, an exquisitely simple chapel, the refectory - dining room - library and rows of starkly furnished bedrooms deemed "cells", she puzzled which of the group was Clay Forrester's sibling.

Or, had that been a ruse, and she didn't exist?

Admonishing herself for excessive suspiciousness, Sheila bid the nuns good evening before the door closed, leaving her to her own thoughts.

"God, Tony, if you could see me now!" she moaned. "Or, maybe you do."

Downton had been a consummate actor, embodying their mutual ancestor so well, she could not tell the living being from the ghostly apparition at times. Serving as technical advisor on his slightly fictionalized biographical film of Sherlock Holmes, she'd learned much of the process of creating a movie, but not the relationship of actor to camera.

Her experience "on the boards" of the theatre had been so limited, she would never deign to refer to herself as a professional in that field.

Now, though, she had no choice. She had to assume the role of a nun, faking her way through the next few days, simultaneously unearthing clues left by whoever sought to frighten these women into abandoning their home so the land could be repurposed.

She contemplated reverting to her t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, more conducive to roaming the corridors. If any of the other occupants should see her - on their way to the common loo, for instance - she might scare them into a heart attack.

The problem with this religious garb: she could not scramble over the garden wall, nor grope along the tile floor to collect samples of dried mud - or dried blood.

Not that such evidence would be visible. Each and every morning, in the wake of ridiculously early meditation and chanting of psalms, floors were scrubbed, dishes washed, gardens weeded.

Roused at 5:00 AM by the monastery tower bell, Sheila fumbled with the voluminous habit and, no mirror in her cell, could not be sure her veil was straight before she shuffled toward the chapel - barefoot, as traditional with these women,

except when they ventured outdoors. She sensed her attempts to emulate their postures and singing failed miserably, though none of them publicly reproached her.

When the ordinary ranks of vowed underlings dispersed to their duties, Sheila was escorted to the abbess' private office, where coffee and fresh scones were served by the portress.

Hard to tell this superior's age, though the visitor knew it had to be more than 65, as Forrester had mentioned.

"You're comfortable?" she began.

"Quite," replied Sheila.

"You are... familiar with our predicament?"

"I've... read the reports."

Confusion evident in the abbess' hazel eyes, Sheila grit her teeth.

"Reports?"

Recovering instantly, the detective queried, "Are we not discussing the offer from various corporations to purchase the monastery?"

"We will, at some point in the future. I was referring to the vandalism and the deaths..."

"Ah, yes. Please, tell me all you know."

"As you wish, but I must ask that nothing said here is shared with the others, for their own safety and peace of mind."

"Of course."

The abbess launched into a series of vivid scenarios, beginning with an octogenarian, petrified by a gory image of Satan drawn in colored chalk on the southern turret's inside wall. She had stumbled over her broom and fell through the open window, crushing her skull.

"The sketch had been recently done?" interrupted Sheila.

"Within twenty-four hours of the storeroom's previous cleaning."

"Who has access to that space?"

"Only the community."

"There are no external doors?"

The abbess pursed her lips. "Why would you think..."

Not a faux pas on Sheila's part. "Many religious houses built in centuries past had secret passages and the like to... facilitate escape when armed conflict threatened the residents."

"There's nothing of that ilk here."

“Good to know.” Sheila ran a nervous digit between her neck and the coif’s starched fabric. “There’s not the slightest indication the deceased might have been pushed?”

“She was alone. When I heard the scream - the turret being just above - I ran outside and found her body. Climbing the stairs, I found the broom handle snapped in two, the end resting on the window sill, and saw the drawing.”

“There’s no chance she might have committed suicide.”

“None whatsoever.”

“You didn’t summon the police, or an ambulance?”

“Being already dead, I saw no need. I rang Father St. Marie...”

“This occurred before his own death, then?”

“A week to the day.”

“She was buried without an autopsy?”

“In our cemetery at the base of the hill.”

Sheila inhaled slowly. “Please, continue.”

The second incident transpired 72 hours later. A spaniel named Beauregard, who’d been dumped at the monastery gate four years earlier, had endeared himself to all the women. They sneaked him treats and sometimes spent their recreation period walking him through the woods or playing fetch with a tennis ball.

“We were gathering for Sister Winifred’s funeral Mass,” the abbess recounted. “Sister Clarice had gone to the greenhouse for the altar bouquet. Behind the barn, she found Beau vomiting profusely and, before she could do anything to comfort him, he collapsed. She fetched me, and we went out together, but he was already dead.”

“You believe he was poisoned?” Sheila noted.

“Sister Margaret used to be a veterinarian. We carried Beau into the greenhouse and, once the gravesite liturgy concluded, she examined his corpse. He’d somehow ingested a vast amount of rat poison.”

“Kept in a lower cabinet in the kitchen, perhaps?”

“Nowhere on the premises, Mother.”

The guest swallowed hard. She’d forgotten Pete Huggins had hung that title on her. “The gate along the drive is kept locked?”

“Only at night.”

“Anyone could walk in...”

“But, who? We’re far enough from the village no one bothers us, and the only vehicle on any given day - besides our car - is the lorry delivering groceries and supplies.”

“My advice would be to lock the gate and install a security system that allows it to be opened remotely, after every visitor is identified.”

“If someone really intended harm, they could still scale the stone wall.”

“Very true, except for the difficulty involved. Such a one would need to be young and spry...”

The second so-called suicide happened a fortnight after the dog’s death. A stream fed by natural runoff, which generated a strong current, traversed the acreage, where some of the nuns liked to meditate after the mid-day meal. One of these, Sister Beatrice, was the subject of a comprehensive search when she didn’t appear at Vespers that Monday evening. She was found wedged between two rocks, drowned.

“Could she not have slipped on the muddy bank and fallen into the water?” Sheila disputed the account.

“I don’t see how...”

“Mightn’t she have dropped her prayer beads, say, and bent to retrieve them...”

The abbess corrected, “Her rosary?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a possibility, if only a small one.”

“Or, could she have been assaulted and forcibly held under the water?”

The superior’s gaze hardened. “You talk more like a police inspector...”

“A fault I frequently confess is a love of mystery novels. I fear I’ve acquired a tendency to view even the most innocuous situations as secrets needing to be exposed.”

A demure grin lit the older woman’s countenance. “My passion was science fiction - most of which has come true in the decades since I attended school.”

Sharing these confidences eased the tension, despite Sheila’s pretense of ignorance. “Anything else?”

“The day of Sister Beatrice’s funeral, the temperature rose to a pleasant level, so I opened my cell window to get some fresh air before heading to chapel. Bea has a large family, and we visited in the parlor after the burial and lunch for over an hour. I hoped to rest before supper but, when I opened the door, at least a dozen snakes slithered on the floor and on the bed.”

The impostor imagined the abbess’ terror. “How’d you get rid of them?”

“Being Franciscan, we’re encouraged to love all God’s creatures, as you know. Normally, we would avoid those that could harm us, but there was no alternative in this instance. Sister Margaret salvaged a number of mice from traps

in the kitchen pantry, doused them liberally with weed killer and tossed them into my cell through the open window. The snakes ate the mice, and the poison took its toll.”

“Very inventive.”

“Had there been any other way...”

“You should be commended for your handling of this horrific series of incidents.”

“There’s more.”

Sheila’s curiosity was not feigned.

The abbess displayed extreme nervousness as she described how the altar within the cloister chapel - hewn from a downed oak on the grounds - had been destroyed by someone wielding a construction-grade hammer early the previous Sunday. A carved replacement - stored in the barn since the Anglican Benedictines occupied the premises - had been carried in by the sisters in time for Mass.

“Don’t blame yourself, Mother. It’s just further proof this prowler is not committing random acts of violence.”

“If you’re so sure, how do we put a stop to it?”

“That’s where the offers to purchase the monastery enter into it,” remarked Sheila.

“I... don’t understand.”

“Has anyone approached you directly to discuss the sale?”

“Actually, every financial transaction is dealt with by an independent charitable foundation. All donations are processed by their staff, as are payments for our expenses and maintenance. The foundation’s chair fields the business communications, and submits proposals to the diocesan chancellor, who then consults the bishop for approval.”

“Anyone wishing to provide a bequest of cash or investments, say, would abide by this process?”

“Since Sister Marianne, who knew accounting, died three years ago, it’s the only way.”

That information nearly propelled Sheila from her seat with joy. “Please, write down the name and address of the foundation’s office.”

“Whatever for?”

“Since the ultimate fate of your monastery will be decided in Rome, Mother, I will need to meet with the chair and the board in order to obtain monthly statements, meeting minutes and pertinent tax filings.”

Extraordinarily neat penmanship on a scrap of copy paper found its way into a hidden pocket of the religious dress. Rising, Sheila hesitated, "Where might I find Father..."

"Landini?"

"Yes."

"You're leaving so soon?"

"Only temporarily. On our way through the village, I'll stop at the constable's station and request they patrol this area on a regular basis, to dissuade future trespassers. I'll also have them look into a reliable contractor to install the gate lock and security equipment."

"Thank you, Mother." The abbess circled her desk and held open the door. "When shall we hear from you?"

"Soon." Sheila remembered to walk slowly along the dim corridor. "Very soon."

The portress unfastened the bolts on the cloister door, allowing the visitor to exit, duffle in hand. Increasing her pace, she burst into the guest suite's door in the northern wing.

Peter Huggins, Roman collar missing, cassock unbuttoned, yawned at the sight of his traveling companion. "What is it?"

"You're sleeping at this time of day?" she grunted.

He managed to rise. "For someone who's slept very little over the past fifteen years, any chance for a lie-down is welcome."

"Well, pack your things. We're heading to town."

"Whatever for?"

"To meet with the chair of the foundation that oversees monastery operations."

"Foundation? I knew nothing about..."

"Like hell, you didn't. You know a lot more about this fiasco than you've let on."

"Why on earth would you make such a ludicrous accusation?"

She seized his left wrist, exhibiting the Jaeger watch beneath his sleeve.

"Thirty thousand pounds is a pretty good reason."

"I explained..."

Bending his hand backward, she shoved him onto the rumpled double bed. Jaw clenched, he massaged the sprained joint.

"When an acquaintance wants a favor from someone, they might offer a couple hundred, even a thousand pounds as compensation for his time," Sheila

purported. “Fifty grand or more isn’t a favor, it’s a commission on a dodgy real estate transaction that you’ve been contracted to expedite.”

He regained his feet. “You’re barmy.”

“Clay Forrester’s sister isn’t a nun. She’s chair of the foundation board and, given you two had a torrid affair while she was employed as auditor at Oxford, you were sent here to rekindle the romance and influence the decision.”

“Like I said: you’re barmy.”

“Fine. You pack, and I’ll ring the constable.”

Sheila snatched the handset off its cradle on the bureau. Huggins blocked her from punching numbers on the keypad.

“All right, all right,” he hissed. “You’re half right, anyway. Clay’s sister *is* the board chair, but he’s not going to benefit financially from any of this. His motive is... more personal.”

Replacing the instrument on its base, she glared at him. “What could be more personal...”

He lowered her on the bed’s colorful quilt, squatting before her. “When Iona and I got together, she was married. Her husband was a member of the rugby squad, and caught us after practice one night in the supply cupboard.”

“How careless.”

“Should do,” Huggins snorted. “He filed for divorce and, rather than let him name me as co-respondent, she offered him half a million pounds as a settlement. Thing is: she didn’t have that kind of coin, so Clay had to cover the debt.”

“What’s her ex-husband’s name?”

“Dan Carnegie. Turns out, he works for one of the firms competing to buy this property...”

Gathering Clues

Ah, revenge.

Sheila Holmes understood that sentiment all too well. Just down from Oxford, newly settled in her great-great-uncle's old digs on Baker Street, she'd experienced how far a man will go to protect his bruised ego.

Or his darkest secrets.

James Moriarty had wanted her dead - unequivocally - tracking her whereabouts via her mobile, sending roses with poisoned thorns, organizing repeated attempts on her life.

At least, Clay Forrester wasn't quite so heartless. He only wanted to thwart his former brother-in-law's efforts to make a profit from a group of elderly nuns.

"We're wasting time, Pete," she growled. "We'd better crack on."

Oxford head librarian Peter Huggins restored his clerical collar to the floor-length black cassock, combed his disheveled chocolate mane over his smallish ears, gathered his scant belongings into an overnight bag and followed her from the monastery's guest suite to the exit.

They didn't wait for the portress to attend them, plodding into the late afternoon humidity. Rather than aim for the gate at the drive's end, Sheila veered left.

"What are you doing?" Huggins puzzled.

"The abbess told me the only vehicles that come in and out are the Anglia and a lorry. I want to verify that fact."

"How?"

The detective halted abruptly, glaring at her companion. "Are you so dense?"

"I would hope not," came that sharp tone, nearly tripping over the hem of his costume and hiking up the folds of fabric.

"Tires on delivery vehicles leave a deep impression on dirt roads, due to their heavy loads. Those tires have a distinct tread, as well. An intruder, driving a smaller vehicle, would also leave tracks..."

Huggins grasped her logic, his voice losing its facetious edge. "Indeed."

Studying the ground beneath their feet, evidence of two deliveries and one trip by the Ford since the last rain were clearly visible, ending at the stone structure's kitchen door. No other imprints marred the surface.

Swiftly, Sheila reversed course, marching toward the walled perimeter.

"What now?" challenged Huggins.

“A lack of tire tracks confirms the culprit who’s been terrorizing these women arrives and departs on foot. Forrester mentioned muddy boot prints, approximately size fourteen...”

“Which won’t tell us anything.”

“On the contrary. The sole on a shoe speaks volumes. It could be a hiking boot, work gear, a style worn by motorcyclists, or even an American-made cowboy boot.”

“Very insightful.”

Crouching near the shoulder of the packed dirt lane, Sheila examined a partial impression. “I’m astounded you know so little about criminal investigation, Pete,” she stated. “After your ongoing research into the Ripper case...”

“Research and... practical application are two entirely different...”

“Not so, mate. Not so.” Clutching her duffel and gingerly moving forward, she hovered above another mark, this one aimed in the opposite direction. “See, he’s come and gone, trying to mask his presence by walking on the grass, but not being terribly careful.”

“Brava, Sheila.”

“And, if these are boots, they’re dress boots.”

“That’s worthy of note?”

“By the time our man had done the deed, the soles of his feet would be one gigantic blister.”

“Meaning...”

“He’s not a professional criminal.” Wiping soil from her palms on the backside of her habit, she breezed toward the gate.

Huggins dogged her. “Where to, now?”

“The village.”

“Why?”

“A meal and a good night’s sleep.” She unlatched the slide bolt on the heavy iron gate, sidled through the gap and fastened it once more. Evaluating their surroundings, Sheila made for a stand of trees. “First...”

“What?”

“We’d best shed these outfits. It would look awfully suspicious if a supposedly cloistered nun and a priest were seen together on the road.”

Huggins sported black trousers and a blue henley beneath his cassock; his companion’s attitude transformed when she emerged in the Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

The sun’s last rays faded as they approached the quaint settlement of Sinderhope: a pub and grocer’s at a crossroad. After checking with the barman

about accommodations, Huggins straddled a chair at table. “We’re welcome to the spare room.”

“Together?”

“It’s all he’s got.”

So much for a refreshing sleep.

The pub’s basic fare proved palatable, at any rate, and Sheila hadn’t realized how knackered she felt until she’d quenched her thirst and filled her stomach. Their lodgings featured two twin beds and a private bath, fortunately, making the situation a little less... awkward.

Huggins kicked off his shoes and flopped on the mattress beneath a cobweb-draped window, snoring in minutes. The detective sat on a bent-wood rocking chair, reviewing this predicament. The desk lamp cast a muted light on the librarian’s stockinged feet, damp in a very unique pattern. Plucking his footgear from where they’d landed and placing them atop a chest of drawers, she stretched out on the other bed.

Breakfast on Sunday consisted of freshly baked rolls and tea - and plenty of noise. The establishment crowded with patrons, Sheila discovered the monastery’s own foundation was sponsoring their third annual ten kilometer “Run for the Nuns,” attracting athletes and supporters from throughout the county.

A strange but auspicious coincidence for, as the festivities were about to commence, a lithe, tawny-haired female wearing a polo shirt with the monastery’s crest embroidered above the pocket stepped onto a temporary bandstand and tapped the wireless microphone.

“Cheers, everyone!” Her enthusiastic soprano quieted the assembly, who listened closely as she reviewed the day’s schedule and rules.

After a reminder from the pub’s owner that the first fifty runners across the finish line would receive a free pint of ale, the participants migrated outdoors, where a start/finish banner had been suspended on poles across the road.

Sheila observed from the window, beside the foundation chair.

“You’re not competing?” asked the detective.

“Bad knees.”

“Me, too.” A lie for the former Iron Man triathlete, but she wasn’t going to miss this opportunity to delve into the operation’s monetary intricacies. “May I buy you a cuppa?”

“Ta.”

They sat at a wobbly table, where the pert, teenaged barmaid - the owner’s daughter, most likely, Sheila deduced - delivered a teapot and two stained ceramic mugs.

“I’m sorry, I came in after you introduced yourself.”

“You stopped here overnight?”

Sheila replied, “Up from London.”

“I’m Iona Forrester.”

So, she’d resumed using her maiden name after the divorce from Dan Carnegie.

Adding milk and sugar to aromatic brew, Iona’s spoon paused mid-stir as brown eyes recognized Peter Huggins at the bar.

“What the devil...”

Sheila grasped Iona’s forearm as she shot off the chair. “Don’t make a scene. You’re not in any trouble... yet.”

The foundation chair relaxed, but only slightly. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“If you agree to answer a few questions...”

“Who *are* you?”

“Sheila Holmes.”

The cackle burst forth, quite a jolt to the visitor. Huggins strode toward them, sipping from the cup of steaming coffee warming his hands.

“Hullo, Iona,” he hailed.

“Peter... I can’t say it’s good to see you.”

“And, you’re wondering why I’m here.”

“For sure, you’re the last person I expected to pop up in this wilderness.”

Huggins deferred to Sheila. “She’ll clarify everything.”

“I’m all ears,” Iona grumbled, cradling her mug between trembling fingers.

Sheila dabbed her mouth with a paper napkin. “I need you to tell me about your ex-husband.”

The foundation chair swiftly recovered her composure. “Which one?”

That disconcerted Sheila even more. “Carnegie. How’d you meet, for one.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

Iona drained her tea and slammed the mug on the table. “It’s not a pretty tale, and I don’t deny it. My parents sent me to an exclusive girls school growing up, which didn’t prepare me for life in the least. Naive through most of my university days, while I envisioned myself securing a lucrative position as an accountant for some grand corporation after I graduated, I ended up falling in love with a rugby-loving history major and getting married two weeks before he was called up for service in the Middle East.”

Already, Sheila anticipated how the story would end.

“He was killed in action, and I was devastated.”

“That doesn’t cover...”

“I’m getting there, be patient,” Iona retorted.

Sheila countered, “Patience is not my forte, especially when I’ve been fed a steady stream of lies from the instant Pete sidetracked me at the British Museum five days ago.”

“Lies? What lies?”

“Your brother told me you’re a nun at the abbey, for example.”

“That’s no lie. At least, I used to be.”

The detective reacted, “Eh?”

“Like I said: be patient. I was getting to that.”

“Very well. Go on.”

Iona expounded how, after her husband died, she fell into a deep depression, searching for a meaning to her existence. She entered the monastery at Sinderhope, aching to find some degree of peace for her soul. She’d professed her initial vows when Dan Carnegie came into her life.

“You fell in love with him?” prompted Sheila.

“Oh, hell no.” Iona sniggered disdainfully.

Carnegie, an electrical contractor at that time, had been retained to repair the faulty wiring connected to the abbey’s boiler. Descending to the cellar, he’d chanced upon Iona with a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

“I could barely stand, and he exploited my incapacity to... to...”

Sheila interspersed, “He raped you?”

Iona’s chin drooped.

“What, then?”

“He went off about his business. I couldn’t tell the abbess; she would’ve got wind I’d been stealing whiskey from the sacristy, where the chaplain hid his stash. Two months later, after weeks of feeling nauseous, I realized I was pregnant.”

“You were expelled from the community?”

“Oh, no,” Iona clarified. “I left on my own. I knew I didn’t have what it takes to live that kind of life. I made my way to Sunderland and married a sweet, if gullible guy, who soon kicked me to the curb when my indiscretions threatened his political career. Starving, I lost the baby, and wound up traveling aimlessly around Yorkshire.”

“Why didn’t you appeal to your family?”

That annoying laugh. “Are you bonkers? Knowing what I’d done, they wouldn’t have me!”

Sheila didn't really care about these superfluous meanderings. "What then?"

"I chanced to be hired as a secretary for the company where Dan worked, and we got reacquainted. He didn't realize I was the same woman he'd..."

Iona choked up. Sheila glanced at Huggins, whose apathetic mien bemused her.

"Less than a month later, Dan asked me to marry him. His boss had promised him a promotion and substantial rise in salary, but only if he married and settled down. The boss tolerated no scandal among his executives, but that didn't prevent Dan from... from..."

"The marriage wasn't..."

"He drank - a lot - and beat me so badly I had to be hospitalized."

"He broke your nose and jaw, and your right arm..."

"I stayed with him because I had nowhere to go, and I was afraid of trying to make it on my own. His new responsibilities kept him away from home more; that's when I took a position in the accounting office at Oxford."

"I... know the rest," Sheila commented. "What I need..."

There would be no time for additional interrogation, as the first of the runners was approaching the finish line. Iona obligated to award their medals, she abandoned the pair to fulfill her duties.

Sheila refilled her mug, waiting for Huggins to speak.

He didn't.

Those eager for refreshments jammed the pub, and Sheila lost sight of Iona. Hours passed, and the board chair did not reappear.

Consulting one of the few lingering event volunteers, the detective was informed Iona had received a call about a family emergency, leaving immediately.

"Why would she bolt?" Huggins speculated.

"Fear, naturally." She shoved him toward the exit. "C'mon."

"Where?"

"The vicar's."

"The vicar's dead."

"True, but the reason for his death may be found in his house."

A signpost at the nearby intersection pointed the way to the country parish, half a kilometer west. They walked in silence, Sheila aware of Huggins' inner turmoil.

Turmoil met the description of the vicarage interior, as well. Despite no signs of forced entry, the dwelling had been thoroughly ransacked. Sheila grasped that residents in such remote locales rarely locked their doors, making it easier for

those wishing to destroy evidence in what was rapidly devolving into a farce of theatrical proportions.

“You won’t find anything useful in this mess,” opined Huggins from the parlor.

“You think not?” she disputed, nudging aside an upended bookcase. “What about proof of Michael St. Marie’s murder, and not a clumsy accident?”

“But, what fool would climb up on a roof just to push someone off? Why not strangle him in his bed?”

“Here, in the middle of nowhere, there would be no witnesses to identify a second man on the roof, for the short time it takes to cause such a death.”

Huggins resisted the notion. “He would’ve had to watch the house for days - even weeks - until Mike decided to climb the ladder...”

“Or, the scene was staged.”

“Eh?”

“Oh, Pete...” She righted the faded blue sofa, examining the cushions, split along the edges with a sharp knife. “You see this? Whatever the killer hoped to find, he left no stone unturned.”

The kitchen cupboards were emptied and torn from the wall. Even the refrigerator’s compressor coil was dislodged from its fittings, the interior of the oven stripped of metal.

“So, tell me...” Huggins urged as they emerged into the mid-day swelter.

Sheila directed, “Look up.”

He indulged her.

“What do you see?”

“Roofing shingles, a hammer, a box of nails...”

“Three weeks *after* the man fell?”

His bluish-brown orbs switched from her stern countenance to the modest edifice. Suddenly, the light dawned.

“There. You’ve got it,” Sheila beamed.

The crispness of his Yorkshire accent doubled. “The items are *attached* to the roof - with glue, or tape...”

“Placed there on purpose. Good show!”

She reentered the vicarage, arm extended across the threshold to prevent Huggins from joining her.

“What?” he ventured.

“Give me a minute.”

He reversed down the steps.

Cheap paintings of Christ and various saints had been shredded, their frames shattered. Of the plethora of plastic and plaster statues, not one remained intact. The pine fireplace mantle had been pried from the brickwork and smashed to pieces.

Those who conducted this search believed Michael St. Marie knew the evidence in his possession could incriminate someone powerful, and that he would hide it in a place no ordinary person would find it.

He'd died without revealing its whereabouts, leaving them to trash his sparse belongings.

Old scrap books had been torn apart, each photo ripped off the page, with the lot dumped on the boards, themselves tested for secret compartments.

They must've spent hours...

Sheila tip-toed through the debris, including a silver crucifix, the corpus wrenched from the cross.

She imagined their fury at this failure... their employer's retribution...

Bursting from the interior, she grasped Huggins arm and dragged him toward the pub.

"What's wrong?" he puffed.

"My mobile has no signal. I need to call John."

He dragged her to a halt. "Why?"

"If any men from the corporations vying to buy the monastery have died under suspicious circumstances in the last three weeks..."

"What about Iona?"

"What about her?"

As she scrutinized his pinched features, Huggins kicked a rock into the bushes. "I should have told you."

Sheila collared him, temper flaring. "I warned you at dinner Wednesday night: I don't like games, Pete. If you don't come clean, you'll be crawling to Oxford on two broken legs."

With uncanny agility, Huggins trapped Sheila's wrists and spun her into a chokehold. "I tire of your bully tactics, kiddo." His baritone a sharpened knife, "Yes, this is a game, and I'm a pawn who'd much rather be back at the library, waist deep in acquisitions. But, my life hangs in the balance, as does yours."

She allowed him this temporary advantage, fully cognizant he'd think himself immune to reprisals.

Hot breath assailed her left ear, his volume soft yet intense. "Easter week, Mike drove down to Oxford on his day off. He came to my office, but I was in a meeting, so he roamed the stacks until he saw the chance to slip an envelope under

my door, knowing the guys dogging him - if they saw what he'd done - wouldn't risk jimmying the lock."

"What was in it the envelope?" she croaked.

"A note with three words: Iona's music box."

"How..."

"He was on the monastery foundation board, too. He'd emailed me that Iona had thrown a party celebrating the first day of spring, or some such nonsense. He overheard bits and pieces that convinced him what he had stored at the vicarage wasn't safe."

"Does she know?"

"I don't think so."

"Where does she live?"

"No idea."

Sheila grasped at straws. "Could she rely on Clay for protection?"

"Lord, no." Huggins loosed his grip on her neck. "Put them in the same room, and they'd kill each other."

"But, at a distance, they can be civil with one another?"

"As long as Iona continues trying to pay him back."

"The divorce settlement?"

The ruffled dark mane bobbed.

"Yet, heading the monastery's foundation, her wages aren't excessively generous..."

Huggins anticipated her breakthrough.

Sheila shook her head in dismay. "Not embezzlement."

He favored her with that characteristic, fleeting grin.

"And she's manipulating the sale of the property to restore the missing funds?"

"Of that, I'm not certain."

"Why, then, would Father St. Marie entrust whatever evidence he held to her?"

"If the police obtained a search warrant, what better place for the proof to be found than in her own house?"

"Is that what he had on her?"

"I haven't the faintest."

"So, he hinted he had a secret, but didn't divulge anything else."

Shifting her attention once more to the vicarage, she froze.

"What?" Huggins pressed.

“If he left the doors unlocked, what’s the likelihood he left his car keys in the ignition?”

The olive green Fiat’s bonnet just visible past the domicile’s rear corner, Sheila trod toward it. Pulling the handle of the drivers’ side door, she leaned in to peruse the vehicle’s pristine interior.

“Ah, another revelation,” she gleamed.

Huggins kept his distance.

“Don’t you see? The miscreants who killed the priest and tossed the house are from the city.”

“I don’t...”

“They never considered it wasn’t his custom to lock the residence, assuming he’d neglected to do so because he was at home. After the coroner removed his body from the lawn, no one bothered to secure the place, either, so they were free to complete their search at any time.”

“Okay...”

“They surmised his car was locked - a common precaution in larger metropolitan areas - and, not finding the keys, left it untouched.”

“They could’ve broken the windows...”

“Someone passing might notice the vandalism and notify the constables, also exposing the burglary and sparking an unwanted investigation.”

She tossed Huggins the key ring. “Do you drive?”

“Sure, but...”

“We’ll return it when we’re done.” Sheila dropped onto the passenger seat. “It’s not like Father St. Marie will be needing it.”

Their initial stop: the pub. The monastery foundation volunteers had long since departed, according to the barman, busy clearing plates of half-eaten food and empty froth-coated glasses.

“By chance, do you know where Iona Forrester lives?” Sheila proposed coyly.

“West of Aston, why?”

“Her mobile must’ve fallen from her pocket as she was scuttling in and out, and I wanted to return it.”

“About a kilometer past the monastery, make a hard right on the gravel road. Big place past the old mill. Can’t miss it.”

“Ta.”

Huggins scowled as his frame bent onto the compact’s bucket seat.

“You disapprove?” she quipped.

“You claim to despise games, yet you play plenty of your own.” He cranked the steering wheel, tires spraying gravel as they accelerated along the macadam. “Hypocrite.”

“Aren’t we all, in a way?”

Seven minutes elapsed before brakes squealed at the top of a rise above the crumbling, empty mill. The stream that crossed the monastery property had, at some point, been diverted, leaving no water to power the machinery.

Below, police vehicles had converged, some with lights still flashing. An ambulance idled near a sprawling mansion’s portico.

“Shit!” muttered Sheila.

The driver sniffed, “What now?”

“We hang tight until the cops blow.”

Huggins bristled. “Where’d you pick up such preposterous slang?”

“The States.”

“You’ve been...”

“Long story. Fully covered in the tabloids. I’m amazed you hadn’t read...”

“I rely on respectable sources for my news.” Uniformed officers idled on the landscaped lawn. “And, when that sort is gone?”

“We look for the music box.”

“What about Iona?”

“Nobody’s dead.”

“How can you tell?”

The ambulance’s rear compartment secured, one attendant climbed into the cab. The converted lorry sped toward the main road, in convoy with three police sedans.

“Those blokes would’ve switched off their emergency lights.” Sheila stepped from the Fiat, breathing air fouled by dust from the passing vehicles. She aimed her words at Huggins. “You need to get out more.”

“After this, I’m ready to crawl under my desk and stay there - permanently.”

“Coward.” She scanned the countryside. “Tell you what. Take the car, and see what you can find out at the hospital. I’ll stay here...”

“Alone?”

“Sure.” She descended the slope, shouting over her shoulder, “Be back in an hour.”

Huggins performed a U-turn, churning up another vile cloud. The compact rounded a curve; Sheila detoured toward the mill.

Hiking to her next destination ten minutes later, the two-level yellow brick dwelling boasted a swimming pool, tennis court and manicured rose gardens, Sheila found. Three sets of French doors opened onto a spacious flagstone patio, a shattered pane denoting how an intruder gained access through the panel hanging ajar.

The owner, unlike Michael St. Marie, kept these doors locked.

Inside, signs of a violent struggle. Sheila hoped the constables identified the necessary evidence to track the trespasser, who also must've received significant injuries, given the trail of red splotches that led through the kitchen and out a side door.

A discarded tea towel, used to apply pressure to a wound before echoes of sirens spurred flight, could be tested to determine blood type, even DNA.

Sheila touched nothing, inspecting the premises visually.

She could visualize the preliminaries: the culprit diligently surveilling the house and, once its occupant departed, forcing entry, only to be interrupted by an unexpected presence. Authorities notified via mobile before confronting the danger. A tussle, and a silver-handled letter opener from the desk stabbed writhing flesh...

The bloody implement lay on the beige sitting room carpet.

Why hadn't the constables logged it and the other items? Sheila pondered.

More blood, splattered on the wall, indicated one of the pair must've been thrown into the case displaying delicate spun glass figurines, the impact causing severe head trauma.

No music box among the shards or prominent among the antique furnishings.

The detective climbed an ornate marble staircase, curious how a woman who owed vast sums could afford these luxuries. Wrapping her hand in the fabric of her t-shirt, she opened each door - six bedrooms and four baths - a smile creeping across her lips in the last, pink shell-pattern wallpapered cubicle.

Positioned atop the toilet tank, an ivory-inlaid varnished teak box.

Hidden in plain sight.

Sheila snatched a tissue from beside the sink and raised the lid. She imagined Michael St. Marie excusing himself from the dinner table and taking his time to ensure the safety of... what?

Beneath a sheet of clear plastic, gears rotated, the chorus of *Loch Lomond* tinkling repeatedly as she felt the sides and bottom for a loose panel.

Instead, fingertips ran over a strip of painter's tape.

Flipping over the box, a small brass key was affixed behind one of the stubby legs.

“Who the devil are you?” a masculine voice barked from the corridor.

Violet orbs lifted, viewing the mirror image of a bespectacled, sunburnt visage, long strands of ginger badly combed over a balding pate. A bag of golf clubs slung over his shoulder partially hid his green polo shirt.

“I could ask the same.”

“Balderdash. You’re in my house, and if you don’t answer me, I’ll ring the police.”

Peeling the tape, Sheila palmed the key before placing the music box on the counter. “They’ve already been here.”

“Somebody’s been here,” he droned. “The ground floor’s a disaster!”

“There’s been a burglary.”

“Damn it all! I just had the locks changed!”

“May I ask why?”

“Tinsdale, my butler, noticed the kitchen pantry had been raided in our absence.”

“Iona and her friends.”

“Huh?” His confused mien spoke volumes. “Who’s Iona?”

If her head had exploded in that instant, Sheila would not have been surprised. She staggered and leaned over the sink, vomiting.

Strong hands caught her as her knees buckled. Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her to the nearest bedroom, arranging her on a queen-sized mattress beneath the frilled mauve canopy.

Not his room, but recently occupied, given the scent of expensive perfume.

She accepted the tumbler of water her unwitting host poured from a pitcher on the night stand.

“We’ve a lot to discuss, Mister...”

“Oberholzer. Marvin Oberholzer.”

She’d seen his name in print. “Owner of the development firm who wants to turn the monastery into upscale housing.”

“Correct, but how’d...”

“That’s for later.” She groaned while raising herself on one elbow. “You are not acquainted with Iona Forrester?”

“No.”

“You’ve had no dealings with the foundation in charge of the monastery’s operations?”

“Woman, you’re daft. There is no foundation associated with the monastery. I’ve been negotiating the sale with the diocesan chancellor. That is, when I haven’t been transacting business on the Continent.”

“And, your competition for the property?”

“A Swedish mining company, if the land conservancy plan isn’t enforced.”

Sheila straightened. All she could manage was, “Shit!”

Answers in the Mansion

The master bedroom in Marvin Oberholzer's mansion boasted a coffee maker and mini-fridge, eliminating the need to walk downstairs for a midnight snack. He poured steaming latte into a delicate china cup poised on a matching saucer for Sheila, seated on the plush cushion of a buttoned leather love seat.

He sank on the matching recliner, leaning forward attentively.

Rather than relate her story from the beginning, Sheila opted to backtrack, her intention to unravel the skein of tangled threads tormenting her brain.

"Some time today, a person or persons unknown broke into this house, in search of incriminating material reputedly concealed in a music box. That person was interrupted in their activities, a fight ensued, and both were injured."

Oberholzer's wrinkled features hardened to a stern mask. "I left this morning at six o'clock to meet some business associates for breakfast and a round of golf. Tinsdale would have spent the day attending to his normal duties..."

"He was here?" she asked.

"He'd expressed no plans to go anywhere."

"You employ no female staff?"

"Not since my wife's death six years ago." The contractor queried, "Where is Tinsdale, by the way?"

"He's in hospital, I fear."

"Are his injuries serious?"

"I've no way of telling."

He half-rose. "I'll make a call..."

"Please, not yet. I need to get to the bottom of this."

He resumed his seat. "Very well."

"You don't know how much I appreciate your patience," said Sheila.

"Believe me, I'm as anxious as you are to find out what's happened."

"Iona Forrester is a former nun at the monastery, who left in disgrace after she was allegedly raped by a man named Dan Carnegie..."

"Carnegie!"

"Yes."

"He's project manager for high-rise going up in Manchester."

"On your payroll?"

"Definitely."

"Have you noticed any irregularities on that jobsite?" she prodded.

"To be frank, I haven't looked for any. Dan's been with me almost 25 years, and I trust him implicitly."

“What about Clay Forrester?”

“What about him?”

“You know him?”

Oberholzer’s jaw hardened. “We used to play rugby together, and became partners in some investments.”

“But?”

“There’s a fine line between business and personal expenses, and he crossed that line far too often.”

“So, you... dissolved the partnership?”

“The terms of the arrangement were that he repay the misspent funds within two years, or face prosecution.”

“He met that obligation?”

“He never repaid a penny,” Oberholzer stated.

“Did you turn the matter over to the authorities?”

“I granted him extension after extension, sending him notice six months ago he had until July first to make good the debt or I would bring him up on charges with the local magistrate.”

Sheila’s agitation eased. “This may seem like I’m changing the subject, but everything will come together. Where were you during Easter week?”

“In Amsterdam.”

“Your man accompanied you?”

“He always travels with me.”

“You’ve no caretaker for this house in your absence?”

Oberholzer chuckled. “Few people know it’s here.”

“Clay Forrester knows.”

“What are you saying?”

“Were Scotland Yard investigating, they’d say Forrester had devised an elaborate plot to deflect suspicion from himself onto other innocent souls, in a concerted effort to deceive and defraud multiple entities - not of least of which are you and the Poor Clares.”

“What innocent souls?”

“Dan Carnegie.”

Her host set aside his cup. “Shameful.”

“Has he ever been married?”

“Dan? Quite a few times, actually. He may be a straight arrow on the job but, after hours, he’s far from a gentleman.”

“A ripe subject for blackmail?”

“I don’t see the connection...”

“If a certain female were trying to extort cash from Carnegie over past indiscretions, would he compromise his standing with your firm by... falsifying invoices for building supplies, maybe opting to accept shipments of substandard materials, and pocketing the excess?”

“That would be the ruin of me!”

“Which may be the goal of this scheme.”

Oberholzer’s calloused hands clenched and unclenched. “Explain, please.”

“Revenge, plain and simple. A comprehensive attack from many different angles.”

“Such as?”

“Thwarting your plans to purchase the monastery. Decimating your reputation as a quality builder through the manipulation of an employee in a position to compromise the safety of one or more projects, just to name a few.”

“You mean, there’s more?”

Sheila reached for the carafe to refill her cup, a niggling exhaustion threatening to weaken her. “While that might be sufficient for the Yard to pursue charges, some incidents defy resolution.”

“Specifically?”

“The murder of Father Michael St. Marie.”

Oberholzer shuddered. “Father Mike? Word was: he fell off the roof.”

“He was murdered.”

A haphazard Sign of the Cross preceded, “God rest the man.”

“It’s possible records proving the guilt of those involved were delivered into his keeping, during confession or some equally confidential encounter.”

A moment’s consideration sparked enlightenment. “Tinsdale!”

“What would Tinsdale be doing with...”

“He and Father Mike played on the regional rugby team. Before we left for Amsterdam in March, he must’ve overheard me talking to myself - I do that a lot, sadly - about the safe in my closet not being a secure place to store the documents on Forrester. He must’ve removed them and...”

“Entrusted them to Father St. Marie’s care. Discovering this, the parties killed him. They were, however, unable to recover and destroy the files.”

“Pathetic.”

Sheila got to her feet, stretching. “Thank you for your time, sir.”

“Isn’t there more?”

“The incidents at the monastery...”

“What incidents?”

Migrating to window casements overlooking the swimming pool, she summarized the two murders, the poisoning of the spaniel Beauregard, the destruction of the altar, and the snakes.

“Heinous!” he gasped.

“Should do.”

“But, what could be their purpose?”

“Say Clay Forrester persuaded the copper mining conglomerate to raise their bid, forcing you out of the deal. His vengeance against you would be complete, but there’d still be a vast sum to be pocketed. By scaring the nuns off the property, he could convince the bishop the place was cursed and the land’s value had decreased exponentially. It would be simple to falsify new appraisals and bid forms for the appropriate signatures. He’d then turn over a small percentage of the actual amount paid by the Swedes to the diocese, and keep the lion’s share for himself.”

“Greedy bastard.”

“There would also be some degree of personal satisfaction for his sister, Iona, who was expelled from the community for behavior unbecoming a nun.”

“That being?”

“She was caught drunk more than once by the novice mistress. Rather than subject her to intervention and treatment, they booted her, leaving her to her own devices.”

“A justifiable cause for resentment.”

Sheila again thanked Oberholzer for his cooperation as she made for the exit. She pulled up short, however, at the sight of Peter Huggins beneath the lintel.

Oberholzer beat her across the carpet, grasping this guest firmly by the hand. “Good to see you, Pete!”

“You, too, Marv.”

“What brings you up this way?”

“This one,” grunted Huggins, wagging his thumb toward Sheila.

“You two are... together?”

She supplied, “Temporarily.”

“Investigating this... twisted debacle?”

“In a way,” replied Huggins.

She announced, “I think I...”

“No, you didn’t solve it,” he chided. “In fact, you’ve got it all wrong.”

Oberholzer demanded, “How so?”

“You could, at least, offer me a chair.”

“Yes, please, sit down and unravel this mess.”

While Sheila lingered near the doorway, Huggins flopped on the love seat. Oberholzer suggested a drink.

The librarian declined. "First, I'll admit there have been a lot of lies entwined with tidbits of truth since Wednesday."

"Who dragged you into this?" cajoled the mansion's owner.

"Clay Forrester, naturally."

"To cover his own nefarious..."

"Be careful, Marv. I consider Clay a close friend, and a prime supporter of the rugby league."

"I consider *you* a friend, Pete. If it comes down to who you believe is telling the truth..."

"I believe *you*, Marv. I believe you were in Amsterdam - and elsewhere - on business periodically since Sister Marianne died and the nuns bought into Iona's story about a dedicated foundation taking over their finances. Cut off from the world as they are, they trusted her. That's when she also took up residence here and promoted herself as a lady bountiful."

"The Yard would pin this on Clay..." interrupted Sheila.

Huggins scoffed, "If they were looking into it, yes. That's what Iona wanted. But, Clay is actually one of her victims."

Both Oberholzer and Sheila squinted at him.

"Here's what Clay suspected all along and wanted you, Sheila, to unveil: once Iona squandered the Army death allotment after her first husband died, she went prowling for another source to fund her lifestyle. She thought the nuns would be an easy mark, but they really observed their vow of poverty to the full. Three meals a day and a bed weren't enough for her. She targeted the chaplain, hoping to compromise him, but that backfired when he got her drunk and grassed on her to the abbess. Iona found solace in the whiskey, while still intent on improving her lot. When Dan showed up to repair the monastery boiler, the two started an affair. The abbess could no longer forgive Iona's faults and showed her the door."

Huggins continued that Dan really did marry Iona to get a promotion, before he came to Oberholzer's attention as an able senior project manager. The couple separated less than a month after the ceremony, because Iona persisted in her drinking and would jump in bed with any man willing to buy her a double scotch.

"You, included?" Sheila suggested.

"To my eternal regret."

Oberholzer needed further clarification. "How does Clay fit into all this?"

“Oh, that’s the grand irony, Marv. After he screwed you over, Iona screwed him. She insisted Dan would blow the whistle on both of them unless Clay ponied up a half-million. By then, Clay had reinvented himself as a legitimate entrepreneur, intending to reimburse you in full. Not only did he go into hock for Iona with a variety of unscrupulous types, he never suspected she kept every pound for herself. She also volunteered - using her sweetest sisterly charm - to deliver his payments to you.”

“Which I never received.”

Sheila threw up her hands, befuddled. “And the evidence Michael St. Marie had?”

“Being a priest, he was privy to a lot of confessions. He also engaged in his own brand of extortion, primarily to fund parish upkeep and programs for those in impoverished conditions. To receive absolution, those who committed serious violations of the Commandments surrendered their records to him, and he held them as a pledge against any repetition of the sins until they paid off their promised donations to his causes.”

“Tinsdale?” gulped Oberholzer.

“As honest as they come, from what Mike told me the last time we grabbed a bite after a rugby match. In his work as parish sexton, Tinsdale came across Mike’s files locked in the sacristy tabernacle. He asked permission to add the ones you worried would fall into the wrong hands.”

Sheila prompted, “What did Father Mike have on Iona?”

“Receipts for purchases well beyond her means. Letters from old lovers she blackmailed. Forged papers setting up the foundation, and canceled cheques from contributions that never aided the nuns.”

“You mentioned Father Mike sat on the board...”

“A lie... sorry.”

“Get back to Clay, please,” snapped Oberholzer.

Huggins’ mouth flashed that momentary grin. “When he received the notification from you seeking the payoff, he realized Iona had stolen the money. He visited Dan on the worksite in Manchester, learning he’d actually made a ten thousand pound settlement on Iona as part of their divorce, just to be rid of her.”

“Quite the mercenary bitch.”

“While tracking Iona, Clay heard about the tragedies at the monastery. He couldn’t be sure she was responsible, or for Mike’s murder. So, he and I concocted a story to get Sheila on board.”

A sudden change of subject stunned both men. “How’s Tinsdale, by the way?” she inquired.

“He’ll survive,” Huggins reported. “The letter opener missed his heart by two inches, and the surgeons were able to repair the damage to his internal organs.”

Oberholzer instantly picked up on the discrepancy. “How’d you know he was stabbed with the letter opener?”

Huggins’ minuscule smile denoted not humor, but guilt.

Oberholzer recounted, “When I rang the hospital while brewing the coffee earlier, the attending nurse told me they weren’t sure what type of weapon had been used, and the matter was in police hands. I contacted the local constabulary, and was instructed not to disturb the crime scene. They’re due here any time.”

Huggins fastened bluish-brown orbs on Sheila’s unperturbed face. “I was with you all day...”

Brunette curls shook in disappointment. “Yes, I’m your alibi for the deed itself. You’ll be taken into custody as an accessory, regardless.”

He leapt off the leather. “What about...”

“Please, Pete,” she intervened. “Your lies are giving me a splitting headache.”

Oberholzer recommended, “There’s aspirin in the medicine chest.”

“Ta. Maybe when we’re done here.”

“Then, you already know the truth?” drawled Huggins, propping himself on the love seat’s arm.

“I know you’re one of Iona’s extortion victims. This misinformation campaign was her idea from the outset, eh?”

“Not entirely.”

“No more lies, Pete. No more evasions.”

“Who ratted on us?”

“You did.”

“Eh?”

“Your bank account shows more than deposits for your monthly wages, and the blackmail payments to Iona, whereas she has no bank account at all. Her transactions are cash only, so they can’t be traced.”

Shock contorted Huggins features; he ran twitching digits through his dark chocolate mane. “That... that...”

“Yes, John Watson, exquisitely brilliant Army veteran,” Sheila praised. “He has resources surpassing even Scotland Yard. He was able to access five years of financial transactions for you, Clay, Dan Carnegie, Iona and the monastery, and what a story they told!”

“But, when... how?”

“I took a long walk on the monastery grounds Friday night. John and I had a most illuminating chat.”

Huggins normally erect spine sagged.

“I cannot deny, when I was a student, you merited my admiration, Pete,” she lamented. “Your dedication to the library, passion for rugby... I wanted to emulate your work ethic.”

“Thanks for that, anyway.”

“Where’d it go wrong?”

Morosely, “The blame falls squarely on Iona, and my own weakness.” He raised his chin, attention fixed on an impressionist landscape mounted over the master bedroom fireplace. “We’d been... seeing each other for a few months when she showed up at the library in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon. She’d been crying - or, made it look like she had. She told me an unscheduled audit had uncovered a shortfall in the university grant accounts for which she maintained oversight. If she didn’t repay nearly five thousand pounds by week’s end, she’d be arrested.”

“You gave her the money?” speculated Oberholzer.

“I didn’t *have* the money.”

“You had access to the rugby league funds.”

That characteristic grin provided the answer.

“She’d gotten her claws into me, and wasn’t about to let go. I had to pay her almost my entire salary each month, or she swore she’d grass on me to the police. I wanted to reimburse the rugby account, but I never had enough left over...”

“Which is why you were living in your office, because you were evicted from your flat for nonpayment of rent,” interspersed Sheila.

Huggins groaned. “Iona’s insatiable. Through whatever grapevine she uses, she heard about offers being made for the monastery property. She owed them for how they treated her, according to her skewed rationale, and concocted a method to bilk all parties involved out of their hard-earned cash.”

“Three years of dedicated effort - quite masterful.”

“Until things started falling apart. The dinner party she held here after Easter was the last straw.”

Oberholzer squirmed, “Here? How...”

The detective elucidated, “When up in these parts, she occupied a cobbled-together flat on the old mill’s ground floor, watching your comings and goings through a telescope. When she’d see you and Tinsdale depart with your luggage, she knew the house could be... used, as she used so many people.”

“She had a key?”

“Until you changed the locks, she did. Not beyond her skill set to make an impression of a key dangling on a ring left in the car ignition. But, when she came ‘round today to... retrieve a certain item, her sole option was to break in through the window. ”

“Dear God!” The owner massaged his throbbing temples with his fingers. “What then?”

Huggins resumed, “During the dinner, Iona learned the bishop refused to consider selling the monastery, and the foundation was on the brink of exposure. She murdered Mike in cold blood as I stood on the church steps, watching. Then, we returned the next night and tore apart the vicarage in search of the documents he held on her.”

“Even though you knew they were locked in the sacristy not fifty meters away?” urged Oberholzer.

Huggins voice sharpened. “I wanted her caught. I wanted her thrown in prison for the rest of her life for killing an innocent man..”

Sheila murmured, “Go on.”

“Iona devised... drastic measures so the nuns would relinquish the monastery deed, knowing they wouldn’t report any ‘accidents’ to avoid scandal. She showed up at the library, promising to release me from the blackmail payments if I cooperated. When Sister Beatrice’s nieces began probing her death, Iona proposed a scheme to implicate Dan, Clay, or even some elusive, imaginary individual, so she could keep her ill-gotten gains. I really had no choice.”

“You had a choice not to harass the nuns.”

“It wasn’t me...”

She kicked his brown leather boot. “Traces of mud on your size fourteens, not to mention the blisters...”

The timbre of his voice decreased to a near-whisper. “Oh, oh... dammit... I... meant to frighten them, that’s all. There were no plans for anyone to die.”

“Not even the dog?”

“On my oath!” he roared. “The snakes were bought from a traveling carnival, and they’d had their fangs removed...”

“Despite the outcome of these... pranks, you went to Clay...”

“I was sick of it, and I knew he wanted her gone from his life, too. We cobbled together what sounded like a plausible tale and tried to point you in Iona’s direction, fumbling the ball badly.”

Sheila snickered at the rugby reference, before sobering. “She’s out there, somewhere, addled by head trauma or a debilitating concussion. It shouldn’t be too tough to locate her.”

The mobile in her jean’s hip pocket vibrated. Reading Watson’s text, she uttered an expletive.

“What now?” Oberholzer sputtered.

Punching letters on the tiny keypad, she hit “Send” and replaced the device. “Iona is on a train to London.”

“She was foolish enough to buy her ticket with a credit card?” mocked Huggins.

“No. John programmed an alert that would transmit any surveillance images of Iona to his computer. A makeshift bandage taped over her left ear, she boarded the southbound in Gateshead twenty minutes ago.”

The librarian straightened. “This is all my fault, and it’s up to me...”

Sheila blocked his egress. “Without proof...”

Loading cups and saucers on a silver tray, Oberholzer summoned them down to the kitchen. On a coat rack beside the door, a key ring sparkled in the fading sunlight.

“Tinsdale’ keys?” declared Sheila.

“Including those to the church.”

Huggins snatched the collection. “May we?”

“Help yourself,” their host consented.

Sheila clasped the man’s hand. “Allow me to say again: your willingness to take the time...”

He covered her fingers with his left hand, cheeks flushing the color of his ginger mop. “These past few hours have been quite an adventure, for which I’m most grateful.”

On the threshold, she twirled. “One more thing.”

“Anything.”

“Give up on the monastery. Let them live out their days in peace.”

“As part of the deal, I was going to build them a fully modern, much smaller complex.”

“They’re steeped in their traditions, Marv. That parcel of land will be available soon enough.”

A sad smirk accompanied her out the door. “As you wish.”

Huggins had the transmission in gear as she swung onto the Fiat’s passenger seat, bouncing down the unpaved road. Past the Sinderhope pub, tires left a rubber patch as they sped toward the parish church.

Tinsdale's key allowed the heavy oak door to swing outward, the country church's vaulted interior eerily silent, except for a bird flapping frantically, trapped in the rafters.

"The sacristy tabernacle will be locked," Huggins related in hushed tones. "I don't feel right about breaking into..."

"Oh, balderdash, Pete. You felt no qualms about sneaking around a monastery, even smashing their altar..."

"Says who? I was petrified every time I set foot on the property."

"What, afraid of going to hell?"

They tip-toed toward the chamber adjacent to the sanctuary, something about the space encouraging silence. Huggins directed his companion to an ornate cabinet, with long, narrow drawers on the bottom, a counter, and small compartments with shelves arching over the filigreed gold cube.

"Like I said: locked," groaned Huggins.

Glinting in the musty lamplight, Sheila twirled the tiny key that had been taped to the bottom of Iona's music box.

"How the devil..."

"Did I see through your lies?" She reached across the warped wood surface and inserted the key, tugging on two reinforced panels.

"When Mike said he had files, he meant files!" Huggins extracted sealed manila envelopes and loose papers from the cubicle that normally would have held extra consecrated hosts.

Spread on the counter, some of the names stunned Sheila, a decent percentage being government officials with connections to the rugby league.

"You think we can beat Iona to London?" wondered Huggins.

"No need. The Yard will take her into custody as soon as she gets off the train."

"John?"

"He's my staunch right hand."

Huggins slouched against a wardrobe containing starched albs, colorful altar cloths and extra beeswax candles. "You're lucky in that."

"More than you know." Sheila rested on a straight-backed chair. "The other photo John texted me caught Iona being dropped off at the station by an olive green Fiat."

He buried his face in his hands. "It's too late for me, Sheila. I've ruined my own credibility, my career..."

"Nonsense. Even when Iona tries to negotiate a deal, she won't have any ammunition against you, because the magistrate will already have a list of her

victims.” She flexed her ankles before rising. “C’mon, let’s grab a bite at the pub, then head home.”

He gripped her biceps. “May I kiss you?”

Once, years earlier, he’d maneuvered her between the library stacks with the same question, the same quiet tone - so contrary to his more excitable, biting outbursts - the same emotion-filled eyes. It had been the week before her graduation, and she’d not seen him again until the previous Wednesday.

They would, of course, go their separate ways once more, perhaps sitting in close proximity in a witness waiting room at the Old Bailey during Iona’s eventual trial. Until then...

“Should do.”

Not a repetition of that original peck on the lips, Huggins infused this kiss with unmistakable passion. Sheila responded, a sensation she’d not enjoyed since...

When Huggins withdrew, she noticed moisture glistening on his lashes.

“There’s time for farewells after we eat,” she grinned, moving toward the narthex.

She didn’t realize he hadn’t followed her until she reached the car park. The gunshot reverberated around the vaulted ceiling.

“Shit!”

She scurried back, clutching the sacristy doorframe at the sight of Peter Huggins sprawled on the floor, blood and brains splattered on the blue henley, furniture, walls and floor, revolver near his right hand.

Once police finished with the crime scene, the woman accepted a ride to the train station, catching the midnight to Birmingham, and stepping off at Euston Station just after dawn. A taxi dropped her at Baker Street as Edith was removing Watson’s breakfast tray.

“If you’d warned me you were coming...” the landlady scolded.

In no mood for a fuss, Sheila trudged to her room. Watson roused her from slumber mid-afternoon.

“So, you found out?” he hinted.

Groggily, “That Pete willingly conspired with Iona on most of her escapades?” She rotated her stiff left elbow. “I read the file last night while the constables trampled the clues.”

“And the marriage license?”

Instantly alert, she repeated, “Marriage license?”

“They were married.”

“Who?”

“Peter Huggins and Iona Forrester.”

“What? Where?”

“Salisbury, nineteen years ago.”

Her feet kicking off the down comforter and hitting the floor, she pitched forward while trying to stand. Watson grabbed her waist and steadied her until she regained her balance.

“You have a copy?”

He preceded her into the sitting room, wiggling the mouse to activate the computer screen. A scanned, certified copy of a yellowed sheet displayed the requisite signatures and date.

“But, he’d taken vows as a monk, been ordained a priest...” stammered Sheila, collapsing on a straight-backed chair at the round table.

“The marriage occurred years before he entered the monastery. He was Iona’s first - and only legal - husband, straight out of university. Less than a month after the wedding, he was shipped east, a recalled Royal Marine. He took a bullet in the chest and his comrades left him for dead in the desert. An Iraqi platoon captured him and, after weeks in a field hospital, held him prisoner for more than a year. By then, Iona had been granted survivor benefits and moved on with her life.”

Watson’s tale included Pete’s escape from captivity and how Iona’s rejection upon his return to England drove him to a Cistercian abbey. His expulsion from the Order left him bereft, until his application for a position with his alma mater’s library was approved. He kept to himself, except for rugby, which put him on the scent of Iona’s widespread blackmail and other schemes. When she refused to cut him in on the action, he vowed revenge.

“He suckered me into his game, hoping to best her, but she outsmarted him. Too many people were on the hook with her. All she needed to do was pull specific strings, and they’d dance to her tune,” Sheila concluded.

“The Yard should’ve had them both behind bars by midnight, and my guess is she’ll turn on him, playing the naive victim.”

She reached for a coffee mug. “At least, I prevented that.”

“Good for you.”

“Not for anyone.” She sipped tepid liquid and gagged. “She ruined many lives, and the media will have a field day sensationalizing the scandals.”

“Blackmail, fraud, murder... I’d expect you to be satisfied...”

“You want a definition of naive, John, you’re looking at it. When Pete invited me to the Winter Garden for dinner, I sensed his deception, and should’ve trusted my instincts...”

“And the evidence,” added the ethereal Sherlock Holmes, manifested beside the fireplace mantle, where he extracted a pinch of tobacco from the Persian slipper and filled his long-stemmed briar. “You noted his expensive suit and time piece, but let sentimentality override logic, sinking in a morass of obfuscation.”

“Wait, Sherlock, I’ll fetch the dictionary,” chortled Watson.

The pungent odor remained when the spectre dissipated.

Sheila groaned, “You know he despises sarcasm.”

“I despise how he berates you.”

“Ah, my faithful defender! Still, he’s right in his criticism. The criminal is in custody, but at what cost?”

“I don’t...”

She leaned her forehead on freshly-scrubbed wood. “Peter Huggins killed himself yesterday. When his sister Kathy finds out what he’s done...”

Her flatmate hoisted her into a solicitous embrace, consoling her as she wept.

They sat together on the red Victorian divan for the better part of an hour before she regained control over her nerves. “I feel... like my brain has ridden a roller coaster: up, down, loops, inverted... I can’t... rectify any of what occurred since I walked out that door with a nun’s habit in my bag.”

“You didn’t wear it very long.”

“Less than a day, thankfully. I admire the spirit of those women, but they have no grasp of reality. They never suspected murder - even the dog - though the snakes did make them wonder...”

“And their property?”

“Who knows? It’s up to the bishop.”

Edith delivered a tray of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and a jug of milk. Watson appreciated this attempt to raise Sheila’s spirits. Another case concluded - though not successfully, in her estimation - would she again succumb to that pervasive depression that had immobilized her during recent periods of stagnation?

“What about a holiday on the Continent?” suggested the American widow. Sheila munched on the warm treats. “We can discuss that after I get some rest.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Like you hold me to my promise to clean the windows?”

The attempted humor fell flat. Her friends entertained no illusions about the detective’s fragile mental state.

Blaming herself for another death didn’t help.

Retiring to her room, Sheila slept for 48 hours. Emerging in Sherlock's tattered purple dressing gown on Wednesday morning, she found piles of newspapers, parcels and envelopes on the sitting room table.

From the monastery, a selection of home-made fruit preserves, with a cryptic note: "It is our understanding that Mother Mary Anselma gave permission for you to intervene in our recent troubles. Please accept this token of our gratitude."

If only they knew...

From the diocesan office, stationery embossed with the bishop's coat of arms added thanks for unearthing the fraud. Donations from the 10 kilometer "Run for the Nuns" amounted to over 2,000 pounds, and would pay for overdue renovations to the monastery kitchen. Marvin Oberholzer had revised his bid for the property, along with submitting updated blueprints for the new monastic facility, but the land conservancy attorney had petitioned the courts for an injunction against any sale on the nuns' behalf.

Six column headlines and a full-color mugshot drew readers' attention to the sordid history of Iona Forrester's (alleged) criminal activities. Her brother, the nuns, and others she victimized were not mentioned by name. Charges of premeditated murder in the death of Father Michael St. Marie fit prominently into the narrative. Peter Huggins was listed as her estranged husband, with a series of bigamous unions summarily referenced.

Sheila acknowledged the whole truth about that woman would never see the light of day.

As for Pete... despite plenty of fond memories, she consigned him to the same category.

Tossing the clutter on the grate, she caressed dottles of used tobacco on the mantle. "Maybe someday I'll be worthy to fill your shoes, Uncle Sherlock."