

**The Adventures of
Sheila Holmes**

The California Cases

A Collection of Stories

by

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An Explosive Situation

Johnny Watson despised receiving large manila envelopes in the post. Sheila Holmes gone to California with Tony Downton on the film project, he never knew whether he should open the missives or file them as rubbish.

This was addressed to Sgt. John Watson, 221B Baker Street, however. A United States postmark didn't ease his knotted stomach, especially since the point of origin had been smudged by moisture as it crossed the Atlantic.

He needed a bit of distraction, with landlady Edith Hudson-Thorne out at a West End theatre, and the cluttered sitting room too quiet.

Gingerly, he used the jack knife from the mantle to slit the end and pull out sheets of typing paper covered with an ungainly scrawl atop newspaper clippings. He sank in Sheila's basket-chair near the dormant fireplace and began reading.

"Dear John," the letter began. "Remember me? Aaron Orr of the U.S. Army Medical Corps. We served together at the military hospital during our tour in Afghanistan."

Watson remembered the gangly youth who didn't always believe in following orders.

The narrative which followed quickly engaged the wounded veteran's interest.

"By chance, I met your friend, Sheila Holmes, last month at a party she was attending with Tony Downton," Aaron wrote. "I was there with my older brother, George, who's a well-known stunt coordinator out here.

"Some of the columnists here have been reporting on her supposed relationship with Downton, and implying she's cheating on you. When I spoke with her, though, she made it clear you only share an apartment and are good friends."

Watson squirmed in his seat.

"Last week, George found himself in trouble, so I called Tony, who was tied up editing his picture at the studio. He was kind enough to patch me through to Sheila, though, who drove out with me to see what had happened."

Between the letter and the clippings, Watson pieced together a tale of destruction and official ineptitude.

George and his crew, along with a pyrotechnic unit, had set up at a remote location in Orange County. One particular scene involved a World War II Army jeep with two stuntmen - a driver and passenger in appropriate costumes and helmets - speeding along a packed dirt road, barely outrunning simulated enemy artillery fire.

The explosions were supposed to occur in a timed sequence.

Instead, a simultaneous blast could be heard two counties away.

The two stuntmen had been killed, along with two cameramen, their equipment positioned along the road. Three other cameramen, capturing the footage from varying distances, were seriously injured, as were the director and four journalists covering the filming for websites and newspapers.

George himself, supervising the stunt from a vantage point on a nearby hill, was so traumatized by the mishap, he suffered severe shock and lay in hospital for days, catatonic.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives had representatives on site within hours to investigate. The next day's headlines announced a conclusion that the accident had been deliberate murder.

"Somebody spoke without authorization," claimed an ATF superior in the next edition, while not denying the original statement.

All fingers pointed to George Orr, who could not answer any questions in his present state of health.

Sheila and Aaron arrived at the hospital that weekend. A police guard had been posted outside George's room, pending his recovery and arrest. A nurse accompanied the pair into the room, where they gazed at the man lying - head slightly elevated - on the bed, intravenous tubes in each arm.

George's height could be easily determined, with his feet extending over the edge of the standard-size mattress. His face was sunburned, squarish, with a scruffy mustache and three day growth of dark stubble. His hair amounted to a mass of short, tight curls.

Sheila asked the young nurse for George's prognosis, receiving a noncommittal reply. Then, the detective escorted that woman to the door, against the latter's objections.

The real investigation began by gently examining George's limp yet powerful hands. "He handled the C-4 explosives himself," she told Aaron as he watched, in awe. "During the set-up, he also experienced an electrical shock."

Aaron challenged that statement. Sheila showed him a tiny burn on George's left thumb.

Drawing aside the upper section of the polka-dotted hospital gown, Sheila continued her inspection of his upper arms and torso, peppered with unintelligible mutterings. Then she restored the sheets and moved to the closet, where George's clothes had been hung.

She discovered a pipe in the pocket of a lightweight jacket, a book of matches from an exclusive Hollywood club, tobacco pouch and a spool of twine.

His wallet remained in his trousers, containing less than \$20 in cash, a drivers license and two credit cards.

Closing that door, Sheila turned toward Aaron.

“Well?” Aaron prompted.

“A mature, responsible individual, given the evidence. Also, no physical injuries from the incident.” She approached the bed once more, raised her right hand and slapped George’s cheek with a force that would’ve knocked a smaller frame to the floor.

Aaron protested, especially when George merely bounced back into place. Sheila then repeated the gesture on his other cheek.

The younger Orr roughly pulled her toward the door. That’s when George’s eyes flickered open and he groaned.

“Where... am I?” reverberated the basso profundo.

Aaron rushed to his brother. “George! It’s me!”

Sheila watched the patient’s gradual recovery into full consciousness - and realization of what had transpired.

The man broke down in sobs, Aaron cradling him and whispering soothing platitudes.

Waiting ten minutes for the emotional outburst to subside, Sheila made her presence known to the suspected murderer.

“Once the doctors clear you for release, the police will take you into custody,” she explained. “There isn’t much time. You must tell me everything you remember about how the road was prepared, and so forth.”

Dark eyes, bloodshot from the tears, seemed to penetrate Sheila’s skull, while his face remained at a curious three-quarter angle. He thoroughly reviewed the process of buying the supplies, laying out the timetable for the explosions, planting the charges and programming the computer which would control them.

“We ran a test the day before, and everything operated perfectly,” he stated.

Sheila pressed, “Who else has access to the equipment and the explosives?”

George ticked them off on his fingers: his assistant, the pyrotechnic supervisor and the director.

“That narrows the list of suspects,” Sheila grunted.

“There’s no way this could have been deliberate,” George protested. “A tragic accident...”

Sheila discounted his objections, advising Aaron they would travel to the shooting site the next morning.

“It’ll be cordoned off by the ATF,” the younger Orr said. “You won’t be able to get near it.”

Sheila snarled something about a laxness of duty on Sundays in the States, before flashing a weak smile at George and breezing from the chamber.

Federal agents arrested George Orr that evening, and the newspapers bore sensationalized headlines and full color photos.

He was subjected to hours of questionable interrogation before Sheila and Aaron were granted permission to meet with him, bringing a high profile attorney as legal representative.

Seated at a metal table in the cramped room, the contrast between the Orr brothers became clear to the detective. George was built like a brick, solid and square. Aaron seemingly hadn’t matured yet, still a scrawny boy.

Returned to a cell in the county jail, George’s bail hearing was scheduled for mid-morning on Monday. Sheila and Aaron drove to the filming location, bypassing temporary - and unguarded - roadblocks.

Aaron propped himself on one of the barrier crosspieces, Sheila refusing to let him accompany her through the wreckage, for fear of contaminating valuable evidence. He watched as she trod gingerly past pieces of shrapnel, clods of dirt and charred rocks, occasionally stooping to study a fragment of wire or shred of cloth.

Rejoining Aaron, she straddled the wood and sighed. “Each explosion, of itself, would have done little harm. All together - fourteen charges - cannot be denied as premeditated murder.”

“You’re saying, this wasn’t a horrible accident?”

Sheila breathed, “No way could this have been a random malfunction of the computer, or chance electrical discharge.”

“But, George...”

The woman patted Aaron’s shoulder. “I know he’s not guilty. The person who engineered this tragedy wasn’t even on the site.”

Prodded for additional information, Sheila refused. “I’ll pass along my theory to the judge at tomorrow’s hearing.”

Before she had an opportunity to divulge the fruits of her investigation, though, George’s defense attorney, the assistant prosecuting attorney assigned to the case, the judge, George, Aaron and Sheila gathered in the judge’s chambers.

“We appreciate you meeting us *in camera*,” Orr’s lawyer began. “We would have approached the prosecutor with our evidence beforehand, but much of it was discovered only yesterday, and we feel it is more important to have it formally presented than allow my client to remain in jail for an extended period.”

“You cannot presume I would deny bail,” the judge stated. “This isn’t scheduled as an evidentiary hearing.”

“The prosecutor agrees with me.”

That middle-aged blonde clad in a Christian Dior business suit confirmed her position.

The judge granted the request and, when court convened at 9:00, Sheila was called to the witness stand.

Media representatives hung on her every word. Some even printed an exact transcription in their afternoon editions.

The detective detailed her search of the crime scene. She blamed the ATF for not being thorough and jumping to conclusions about George’s involvement.

“About half the distance along the road being used during filming, I noticed a hollowed-out burl in an oak tree. Secured inside it with duct tape was a mostly-melted cellular phone.”

The judge’s eyes widened at this news. “How did you know it was there?” he asked from the bench.

“I was looking for it.” Sheila rotated on the wooden chair to face the flabby elder in his black robe. “No explosion, set up in such a fashion, could have been detonated manually without some residual material. Even if the culprit had used an old-style device with a plunger, fragments of the wire would have been left behind.”

She added that pieces of wire remained attached to the burned cell phone, indicating it had been used to generate a signal triggering the C-4.

“What’s to say George Orr didn’t plant that phone?” countered the prosecutor.

“All you need do is ask him. I’ve been involved in motion pictures for some months, and it’s a firm rule no cellular phones are allowed within a mile of a planned explosion, because a random incoming signal could disrupt the programming.”

George boomed from the defense table, “That’s correct.”

Sheila smirked. “The person who planted the phone in the tree must have been miles away when the call was made.”

The prosecutor objected.

“My cell phone is still in my pickup, parked at the warehouse we rented to store our equipment for the on-location shoot,” George ventured.

“Then, who...” puzzled the judge.

Sheila supplied the information, gleaned from what George had told police during his interrogation. “There were three - what you call - rent-a-cops, from a

firm owned by the brother-in-law of one of the executive producers, on duty in the hours before the stunt was to be filmed. The explosives had already been positioned the previous evening, because the shoot was to take place at dawn, and the expense of bringing in generator-powered lights to work in the dark was prohibitive. Those guards were dismissed and departed when the crew arrived. My advice to the government agents is to find those men, review their phone logs and see who placed the incriminating call.”

A series of questions directed at George fleshed out this scenario but, ultimately, the prosecutor agreed to the defense motion that all charges be dismissed. The judge banged his gavel, the group dispersed and reporters rushed to file their updated stories on the internet.

Except for Aaron, Sheila and George. Leaping over the low wooden partition between the attorneys’ tables and the public seating, Aaron embraced Sheila with the exuberance of youth and kissed her on the mouth. Once extricated, she could only laugh. Californians, she had learned in her months with Tony Downton, behaved impulsively much of the time.

George, on the other hand, reacted with more reserve. He politely scooped both Sheila’s hands in his, raising them to his lips. “You have saved not just my job, but my life,” he whispered, still managing to rattle the window blinds.

“And, next time?” she prompted playfully.

“I’ll insist the producers shell out for lights and generators, to eliminate any security risks.” His eyes remained focused on her, squarish features at that odd three-quarter angle. “May I, at least, take you to lunch?”

Slightly flustered, Sheila demurred. “I... must be back in Los Angeles for a charity banquet this evening.” She withdrew her fingers from his grasp. “When you get back to the city - if I’m still here - we might arrange an appropriate celebration.”

“Shooting on the picture will be suspended until the director and videographers recover. To keep the budget intact, we’ll all be on hiatus until we receive the call, so I may see you sooner than you expect.”

One newspaper printed a photo of George kissing Sheila as they parted. That sparked a frenzy of paparazzi dogging Sheila whenever she left the lodgings she’d been sharing with Downton.

Aaron wrapped up his letter to Watson with a wry summary. “My brother hasn’t been the same since his encounter with Sheila Holmes. It was rumored they met secretly in Anaheim for some weeks before he left Los Angeles to resume work on the film, but he clams up whenever I raise the subject. When we saw each

other at a family picnic over the weekend, he barely spoke and sat staring at the horizon much of the day.”

Johnny Watson stuffed the papers into the envelope and added it to a pile beside the computer. He'd done a lot of sitting and staring out the window since Sheila had left for California.

She had that effect on men.

The Vegas Cameo

The magazine came wrapped in a plain brown sleeve, which raised Edith Hudson-Thorne's suspicions. She subscribed to no periodicals, barely bothering to read the tabloids while shopping for groceries every week.

Slitting the paper with a paring knife, Edith considered the glossy cover photo of a elegantly-clad couple near an expensive California beach house. Flipping to the contents page, she realized some relative of her late husband had mailed the issue. "Sheila Holmes foils Vegas plot," was the title of an article on page 15.

At least, reading the columns of print and photo captions would occupy her time as she waited for Johnny Watson - her tenant who, along with Sheila Holmes, occupied the upstairs flat at 221B Baker Street - to return from his appointment at the Army clinic.

The russet-haired landlady settled in an overstuffed plaid armchair in her sitting room, toward the dwelling's rear on ground level. A cup of freshly-brewed coffee steamed on the end table, beside an open box of chocolate coated caramels.

"Tony Downton has his hands full these days, putting final touches on his production of the Sherlock Holmes biography," the article began. "It has to be wondered if he realized what excitement was in store for him when he signed Brit Sheila Holmes - the Great Detective's great-great-great-niece - as technical advisor, bringing her to Hollywood six weeks ago.

"In that short amount of time, she has found herself neck-deep in some pretty nasty crimes. The latest, while the couple visited Las Vegas to film Tony's cameo in his friend Max Fein's latest comedy, takes the cake."

Edith chuckled, the phrasing so typically American.

"Rumor had it, Tony invited Sheila to Sin City for a side trip to one of the wedding chapels. Not surprising, with the pair sharing Downton's various accommodations since arriving from London," the article continued.

Good for you, girl, Edith grinned silently. You deserve a little happiness.

As she read further, she learned such was not ultimately the case. While Sheila and Tony had plenty of time to visit casinos between takes for the cameo, they avoided the quicky marriage parlors altogether.

Crafty reporters and paparazzi must have dogged their every step, to report so thoroughly on their activities from dawn 'til dusk, Edith mused, tucking her legs up on the chair's cushion and popping a chocolate into her mouth.

They even overheard the prediction made by a mustached gypsy fortune teller Wednesday afternoon as the couple strolled along the Strip.

“You who share ancient roots: death will come for you, untimely by angered hands,” resonated the accented baritone through the heat.

Tony’s pace faltered at the statement; Sheila pressed on. “Ignore him,” she said.

Downton had whispered, “But, the news we’re distant cousins isn’t known over here.”

“What a field day the vultures would have with that fact!” Sheila chuckled. “At any rate, I’m used to cheating death. What comes will come. No need to worry it into being.”

Yet, when Tony glanced over his shoulder, he saw the gypsy - tall, broad, clad in an elaborately embroidered vest, flowing white shirt, black trousers and boots, with dark curly hair and a diamond stud earring - gazing intently after them, saluting by placing his fingertips to his lips, then raising them to his forehead.

A full-color photo captured that instant, Sheila wearing her Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and Birkenstock sandals, the dark, handsome Downton in a green polo, tan Dockers and brown Hush Puppies.

Over dinner that evening, the conversation returned to the gypsy’s prediction.

Edith smirked. The reporter must’ve been sitting at the next table, or had hooked up a recording device to capture the exchange.

“It was a publicity stunt,” Sheila explained, refilling Downton’s wine glass. “Didn’t you observe the man?”

“All I heard was his voice.”

“Not a callous on what could be considered hands suited to a concert pianist. His shirt was Armani, for heaven’s sake!”

“A gag?” Downton pressed.

“Check with your press agent.”

At that moment, a gaggle of star-struck teens converged on the actor, seeking autographs and selfie photos. Sheila relaxed on the chair, noticing the same gypsy speaking with the maitre d’ near the restaurant’s entrance. Folded currency passed from one to the other.

Perhaps it wasn’t Downton’s press agent responsible for the dirty trick. Some budding journalist, hoping for a sensational scoop to bolster his career...

Feigning distraction, Sheila smiled at the waiter who brought word a phone call awaited her in the lobby.

In an age of mobile phones, such an outdated ploy!

The article's commentary in this regard puzzled Edith. No mention was made of interviewing Sheila to get her perspective, yet the insights were pure Holmes.

The detective accompanied this waiter to the manager's simplistic office, still equipped with a land-line. The door closed; the chamber plunged into darkness.

"What the devil?" she cursed.

"This is your last warning, Miss Holmes," the words reverberated in that deep register, though the accent had changed. "Do not continue to incommode my business transactions."

Sheila remained silent, listening as three sets of feet departed through a second door, while urgent knocking and jiggling of the knob commenced on the first.

She groped her way to the panel, turning the key in the lock.

"Are you all right?" Tony gushed, embracing her - warranting another photo on the magazine page.

"Fine. Another bad joke." Crossing the plush dining room, she eyed the greying maitre d', who flushed and averted his gaze. "I hope he paid you sufficiently," she murmured.

Downton ordered two double whiskeys when they again settled at their table, knocking his back with a shudder. "What was that all about? I finally get rid of those girls, and you're gone!"

"I would write it off as another prank, but it's quite serious, after all. Someone believes I'm here on a case." She, too, drained the amber liquid in one gulp.

"Who?"

"A man of many accents, with a pierced left earlobe."

"In Vegas? That could be anyone!" Downton countered.

"I know. I know." A server appeared, carrying a silver tray loaded with their steaks, and they ate in silence.

Lights from casinos and hotels transforming the desert night into day, the couple walked toward their hotel, intent primarily on settling upset stomachs. A periodic flash blinded them, Downton unfazed, Sheila annoyed.

"We're being followed," she breathed as they traversed a congested intersection.

"Paparazzi."

"No, by five men who qualify as thugs. Two over the road, two ahead, one fifty meters behind us."

“Shit!”

“Grab a taxi and take off. I’ll duck in a doorway and wait until they pass, and see what I can learn about their motives.”

Downton objected, “I’m not going to let you...”

“I’m perfectly safe, Tony. Get going.”

Sheila pretended to veer toward the curb with her companion, who hailed the nearest cab. Timing the ploy to the second, she made it appear as if she climbed into the vehicle, instead retreating to the cover of a recessed storefront.

The five miscreants rushed together, hastily discussing options. Four jumped into grey sedans and made chase, while the fifth pulled a mobile from his trouser pocket.

Sheila yanked him by the collar so hard, he dropped the device, which shattered on the concrete. Dragging him off the thoroughfare into an alley, she pinned him against a slimy brick wall.

“Now, what in hell are you guys doing?” she spat at the youngish, frumpy minion, yanking a pistol from the shoulder holster inside his jacket.

“Nothing, honestly!”

“Bullshit! Talk to me, or the cops.”

She tugged harder on his shirt, then felt him go limp. Flecks of froth at the edge of his mouth confirmed he’d either deliberately poisoned himself, or been murdered.

Using a discarded plastic fork to probe beneath his tongue, the broken capsule containing cyanide slid down the corpse’s chin.

“Shit!” the woman grunted.

No wallet, no papers of any sort identified the hireling. Texting Tony on her cell, she squatted beside the body, examining his fingertips, shoes and grease-coated brown hair.

The police arrived shortly after Downton rejoined her. Taping off the alley, they loaded the deceased in a coroner’s mini-van then directed the couple to a waiting cruiser.

“We’ll take your statements at headquarters,” directed a grizzled sergeant.

Reluctantly, they complied, not returning to their hotel until well after midnight.

“I don’t get it,” Downton complained, unlocking the door to their suite.

“Neither do I. If that fake gypsy thinks he scared me off, he’s sadly mistaken. I don’t know why he’s so pissed, and I’m not going to rest until I unearth the truth!”

Switching on the end table lamp in the sumptuous living room, the actor announced, "I'm phoning Jack to have the plane ready first thing in the morning. We're flying back to Los Angeles."

"You go, if you like. I'm staying."

The two parted company on that note, with Sheila discovering three wireless microphones in her bedroom, and four more in the other rooms. She decided not to disconnect them. Instead, she periodically sounded a very loud whistle or a gong at close range, aggravating the ear drums of whoever might be listening.

She apologized for that rudeness during a press conference days later, according to the magazine article. At a podium near the Las Vegas Police headquarters, she sported fresh bruises on her right cheek, left arm supported by a sling, a photo showed.

"Thanks to the media - many of you present here today - publicizing my presence in Las Vegas, at least two crime syndicates and one drug cartel believed their operations under scrutiny. As a result, 42 people have been arrested and are facing felony charges, three people are dead and two police officers were shot and are in hospital, others suffering minor injuries."

Sheila continued, "While this is reminiscent of how malefactors reacted to the name of Holmes in my great-great-uncle Sherlock's day, it totally ruined what was meant to be a pleasant weekend."

Once Las Vegas Police identified the flunky who'd committed suicide rather than rat out his organization, they made the necessary connections, put all officers on alert and executed search warrants on locations across the city. Dozens of human trafficking victims were freed, massive quantities of crystal methamphetamine, heroine, crack and marijuana confiscated, along with a cache of weapons that would outfit an entire military battalion.

Most of the reporters expressed satisfaction with these details. When Sheila withdrew from the microphone, an ambitious college intern pursued her toward the Strip, digital recorder activated.

"Yes, there's more," she admitted over coffee at a crowded café. "You must promise not to release the details for two weeks, however."

With this promise in writing, the British detective narrated the final chapter of her adventure.

After Tony Downton left the hotel for the airport, Sheila secured a second, smaller room six flights below their suite. She stood on the balcony, using her mobile to phone various supply houses, which delivered her orders to that alternate site.

The woman sequestered herself in the “safe room” until she created a feasible disguise that would allow her to both sneak past paparazzi and meander through the casinos without being recognized.

She managed, through her superior powers of observation, to uncover a number of devious schemes, conducted in full view of tourists and honest employees.

“Drugs being passed hand-to-hand in the aisles between slot machines,” she recounted, “call girls hooking up with men, you name it.”

In short order, she traced the origins of these deeds to the organization heads and their whereabouts. The LVPD may have taken credit for instigating the raids touted at the press conference, but her leads prompted them to that end.

“How did you receive your injuries?” the interviewer queried.

Sheila chuckled. “I slipped on the hotel stairs thanks to an uneven carpet and took quite a tumble. My head hit the bannister and I landed hard on my arm, spraining my wrist.”

He remained skeptical; she shrugged.

She did not mention to this eager young man the true object of her search: the faux gypsy fortune teller. Of him, she’d seen not hide nor hair in her wanderings.

Until she glanced at the counter of the bistro while waiting for the reporter to pay their bill. His black curls towered above those nearest his stool. She moved toward him, thwarted by an abrupt crush of humanity at the cash register and, upon freeing herself from the crowd, he’d vanished.

No gypsy attire this time, just a t-shirt and jeans, from what she saw.

She hurried from the building, but the rear exit wasn’t readily accessible through an adjacent alley or service lane.

That’s when she decided, if he’d intentionally sought her out three times already, he would do so a fourth.

She could afford to wait for him, especially with the city’s criminal element in such disarray at the moment.

That evening, sling discarded, Sheila made the rounds of musical, magic, circus and comedy shows, not overtly conspicuous, yet not trying to hide.

She half expected the gypsy to plop on the seat beside her in the midst of one of the performances - which she, frankly, didn’t enjoy.

At least, with Tony’s bizarre sense of humor in play, even when an act lacked talent, he could find something funny to say and draw forth her laughter.

As she ambled through the Neon Museum’s “graveyard” of signs the next morning, she sighed.

“Regardless of your efforts, you cannot save him,” came the accented voice, reverberating between huge metal and glass fixtures. “Your own foolishness will prevent you from saving yourself.”

She halted, listening. He would have to move, and she would hear.

Ego drove the man, that much Sheila deduced. He considered her a threat and could not stomach the possibilities.

That would cause him to err in his judgment.

There!

Not easy to conceal a frame so broad and tall. A shard of glass crunched beneath his shoe, and she sprinted toward the noise.

The bullet whizzed past her cheek, barely contacting her skin.

Her Wing Chun training kicked in, and she dropped into a roll - not without pain, given the sprained wrist.

When she righted herself, she almost collided with him.

This unexpected proximity allowed her to knock the Glock pistol from his grip and pin his right arm to his spine.

“My turn to read your fortune.” She sized him up and smirked. “You were an only child, raised by a maiden aunt after your parents died in an avalanche during a skiing trip to the Swiss Alps. Your I.Q. tested off the charts, so you were sent to the best schools, where you excelled in music, art, writing and engineering. That analytical brain found ordinary life boring and devised ways to blackmail classmates and public officials. An insatiable genius drove you, until you acquired not only legitimate companies, but controlling interest in a network of nefarious enterprises.”

Surreptitiously, she scanned their surroundings for the pistol’s location. “You sit in your penthouse, like the ruler of Xanadu, raking in tributes from drug dealers and pimps worried you’ll rat them out to police, politicians afraid you’ll make their infidelities public, and executives anxious to hide illegal business deals.”

She sucked air through clenched teeth, releasing him. “For all that, the boredom endures, leading you to don the guise of a gypsy and adopt a theatrical accent to play a grand game of cat-and-mouse with a most worthy opponent.” She bowed slightly.

Hazel orbs flickered with momentary confusion. Iron-like vices grasped her biceps. “How do you know all this?”

“Genius radiates through the eyes... along with insanity.” She didn’t resist the pressure on her muscles. “Furthermore, the signet ring on your right pinky betrays your name and your history, well documented through the years by Interpol and the American FBI.”

He cast her away with a growl.

Sheila recovered her balance and flexed her arms. "You do realize, everything that happened you brought on yourself, thanks to an innate narcissism."

He spun on his boot heels and stalked in the opposite direction.

She called after him, "You should've had that cheesy Oxford tattoo removed, or covered with something less... recognizable by a fellow alum."

How well she recalled the males at that hallowed British institution starting a rivalry between colleges to see how many of their number would be branded with absurd tattoos on their forearms.

No more had she turned to retrace her steps between the signs than he was upon her, fingers clamped around her throat.

Martial arts training could not aid against such superior force. She sank to her knees. A gunshot, though, freed her.

Chest heaving, she gazed up into the worried countenance of Tony Downton. "What... the hell..." she croaked.

"I came back to redub the cameo," the actor declared. "When the hotel's concierge mentioned what you'd been doing, I knew there'd be trouble."

Two police officers, one with his sidearm still aimed at the prone figure, passed the couple. Bending to check for a pulse, they shook their capped heads simultaneously.

"Who was he?" Downton asked, an arm around Sheila's waist to support her.

"A genius who lost his way. Eric O'Hara."

"You mean..."

The brunette mop nodded grimly.

On that note, the pair shuffled toward a limousine idling near the Neon Museum's entrance. Police body cameras would serve in lieu of an official written statement, so they could leave immediately for Los Angeles.

Edith flipped the page, hoping for additional content, but the article ended there. She tossed the publication on the coffee table, the front door's creaking hinges signaling Johnny Watson's return to 221B from his appointment.

The landlady didn't notice a tiny scrawl in the bottom margin, "I thought you'd like this, Edith," with the initials "S.H."

Sheila had written the story herself, with the magazine actually a mock-up purchased from a Hollywood souvenir shop.

Caricatures

The excited soprano drifted up the servants' staircase and into the sitting room of 221B Baker Street.

"John, come down, quick! They're talking about Sheila on the telly!"

Edith Hudson-Thorne's plea roused Johnny Watson from his post-supper nap in the armchair beside the dormant fireplace. Reattaching his prosthetic leg, he limped toward the door.

"Who's talking about Sheila?" he called.

The erstwhile American landlady replied, "Tony Downton and a bunch of Hollywood big-wigs."

That declaration piqued Watson's curiosity enough to propel him along the corridor. Down narrow steps, through the kitchen and into Edith's floral-decorated parlor, he settled on her overstuffed sofa as an animated conversation continued on the flat-screen TV against the far wall.

An episode of a weekly round-table discussion series produced collaboratively by the BBC and the U.S. Public Broadcasting System, actor/filmmaker Tony Downton sat opposite other popular directors promoting their latest projects.

Downton's happened to be a Sherlock Holmes bio-pic, on which Sheila Holmes had been serving as technical advisor, being the great-great-niece of the famous detective. She'd traveled with Downton to California after location shooting had concluded in England.

Watson and Edith hadn't heard from her in more than a month.

"Is it coincidental that you've been immersed in a host of crimes - even murders - since starting this project?" the bloated elder helming a blockbuster comic-based adventure queried.

Nervous, tapered fingers ran through Downton's tousled dark mop. "Violence is a fact of life these days. No one can really claim immunity from crime; everyone is a victim in some way."

"Oh, c'mon, Tony," railed a young independent, a shock of purple cresting his shaggy black mane. "Since you returned to California with Sheila Holmes, you've been in the papers on a weekly basis. She's made local police look the fools, solving crimes they couldn't."

The lone female on the panel, a bleach-blonde with her long locks pulled tightly back into a bun, snarled, "Isn't it just a glorified publicity stunt?"

Watson knew angering Downton to be unwise, and the television camera captured reddening cheeks and twitching lips. "Sheila is a detective equal to her

noted ancestor. Her habit of keeping eyes and ears open gives her an edge on the rest of us, who wander through life deaf and blind.”

“The incident at the Chinese theater is a fine example,” the African-American with a shaved head beside Downton acknowledged.

“What incident?” scoffed the woman.

“See? You’re so out of touch with reality, you don’t know what took place just blocks from your production office.”

The other voices encouraged Downton to elaborate on the matter.

“How many times did you walk past that edifice, with its famous forecourt, and not notice the guy sitting in the far corner, drawing caricatures at twelve bucks a pop? He’s been there for years, quietly making a nice living.”

Silence.

“Right,” Downton continued. “Sheila noticed him, right off. She gave me his entire life history, in the time it took him - perceptively - to draw her with the deerstalker cap and pipe, and me as her Watson. She compared him to a sixties leftover, with whiskers growing along his jawline, but where many men sport a goatee, his chin was clean shaven. He’d seen better days as an athlete, she told me, but had allowed himself to go to seed.”

Projected on a screen behind the table, the caricature Downton had mentioned. An excellent rendering, in Watson’s estimation, with Sheila clearly recognizable despite some exaggeration of her nose.

“When the newspapers reported on the murder, Sheila pounced on the articles like a rabid hound,” Downton explained. “The dead man’s face half-submerged in fresh cement poured for a hand and footprint ceremony, with a distinctive caricature etched in the half-dried block beside him... And, not his own face, but someone else’s... the killer’s? The excitement she generated could have powered the city for a month.”

“So, she knew the artist was the culprit?” the woman ventured.

“No. She knew the artist had *seen* the culprit but, not wishing to get involved due to his own questionable past, left what evidence he could without implicating himself to authorities, who never realized he’d ever been at the scene.”

The elderly figure supplied, “While the cops scrambled around trying to find the murderer...”

“Thinking they hadn’t a viable clue, Sheila traced the artist and got him to admit the truth.”

The lull which followed gave way to fast food and deodorant advertisements. Edith and Watson glanced at each other, fully cognizant of how Sheila’s mind worked. They didn’t envy Tony Downton having to live in close

proximity to the young woman; all too often, they'd seen how she exhausted herself pursuing a criminal.

"Would you like a cuppa?" Edith asked the British Army veteran.

Watson declined. "I wouldn't want you to miss out."

The program resumed. Experienced videographers panned around the table, Hollywood near-royalty wearing expressions of grave anticipation.

"Who was the artist?" pressed the African-American director.

Downton replied, "Willie Orton."

"The former Olympic speed skater?" the blonde gasped, as a video of Orton winning a 2,000 meter race decades earlier filled the screen.

"That's right, until he shattered his femur in a nasty motorcycle wreck back in '82."

The wispy white-haired elder puzzled, "Who was the dead man?"

"Don't you people watch the news or read the papers?" Downton snorted.

Three of the panel shook their heads, muttering about being too busy with various projects.

"Can't we change the subject?" protested the young man. "We're supposed to be discussing filmmaking."

The African-American blurted, "Are you crazy? This is what filmmaking is all about! A good plot, lots of suspense, everyone on the edge of their seats..."

"Who was the dead man, Tony?" the elder repeated.

Downton smirked. "The police haven't been able to determine that. They found his fingerprints burned off with acid. Dental records weren't an option, because his dentures had been removed. DNA tests of his blood brought up no match."

"What about tattoos, moles, scars?" hinted the woman.

"Not a thing."

The youngster grunted, "If you can't identify the corpse, then tracking the murderer..."

"Is difficult, but not impossible."

Watson glanced up from plucking a loose thread off his sweatpants. Sheila's accented contralto could not be mistaken.

Evidently, she'd infiltrated the set, hovering above Downton's left shoulder, an aging, grey-haired figure well past his prime beside her. One camera had shifted to her face, others caught startled visages.

A commercial break interrupted the scene.

"That's American television for you!" Edith spat. "Just when things are getting good, they make you wait!"

The disabled veteran chuckled. "I wonder if those two planned the whole fiasco."

"Why on earth would they do that... unless Sheila wanted to trap the murderer into a public confession?"

"From Tony's behavior when he was here, I don't think he'd allow..."

"You know as well as I do that Sheila can be pretty stubborn when she sets her mind on something."

"She met her match with Tony. He's a... right bastard when he chooses," Watson stated.

The studio reappeared on the television screen, showing the round table participants vocally objecting to Sheila's presence and declaration, their exact words obscured by the program's musical theme.

As the melody faded, Sheila silenced the group with raised hands.

"The main problem with any police force is their failure to recognize clues right before their eyes," she began. "I viewed the body three days after the crime, and I still noted at least ten indicators of his identity."

"Such as?" prompted the African-American.

"Animal hair on his trousers. He has two large dogs, a Golden Retriever and a Labrador. His left ear was pierced, the hole allowed to grow closed. His fingernails had been manicured prior to the acid being applied to his skin. Flecks of black ink on his right palm point to someone involved in print media."

The woman flinched. "A critic?"

"Not likely. Critics, whether film or theater, use computers to submit their copy these days. They aren't known to consort with laborers in the press room."

"So, a newspaper pressman?" the elder speculated.

Sheila shook her tousled brunette head. "He's a professional, though not afraid to wade into the trenches."

"Who is it, then?"

The detective extracted a folded copy of the *Valley Daily Herald* from the back pocket of her jeans, shaking it out to full size. A four-column color photo of a distinguished gentleman graced the front page beneath the headline, "Publisher missing."

"What motive would anyone have..." muttered the young director.

"Despite the remote location of his offices, he became privy to a massive money laundering scheme involving some Hollywood elite and a major Mexican drug cartel," Sheila declared. "The evidence was locked in his safe deposit box, to which police obtained access after I explained matters to them."

Six uniformed officers appeared on the set as chairs were awkwardly shoved back from the table.

“No need to attempt escape,” Sheila concluded. “Your... activities have been fully documented and presented to a grand jury. You all will be arrested, booked and indicted in short order.”

The blonde lunged toward Downton as handcuffs were revealed. “Tony! What’s this all about?”

“Don’t play innocent with me, Angie,” he replied. “Sheila had me assemble you here, knowing of your connection to the deceased.”

“What about Willie Orton?” snarled the African-American.

Sheila indicated her companion, who wrestled with his uncomfortable necktie. “Willie returned to the Chinese theater late, after discovering he’d lost one of his pens. As he was searching for it behind the information booth, where he usually set up his easel, he saw the lot of you dump the body in the fresh cement, covered with plastic in anticipation of the footprint ceremony the next day.”

“Ludicrous!” exclaimed the blonde.

The photo of a rough sketch filled the screen.

“The caricature he drew in the hardening cement with the pen, once he found it, was not of one face, but four,” Sheila revealed. “The police simply didn’t bother to examine the image closely enough.”

Orton raised a computer tablet and used a stylus to quickly render the four at the table, blending them into an image matching the photo. His smile of retribution caused the whiskers along his jaw to twitch.

Production credits rolled as Tony and Sheila watched police escort the suspects from the studio, cameras following their egress. Sheila’s arm rested on Willie’s slightly stooped shoulders as she kissed the former athlete’s cheek, and she could be seen whispering into his ear, an even wider grin lighting his ruddy countenance.

Edith Hudson-Thorne and Johnny Watson relaxed, chuckling.

“She’s making quite a name for herself in the States,” the latter remarked.

His landlady retorted, “At least, the threat of her wanting to make California her permanent home is remote.”

“How so?”

Edith rose and stretched. “Her heart is here, on Baker Street.” She strode toward the door. “I’ll bring the tea shortly.”

“Thanks.” Watson limped up the stairs to the sitting room, where a jack knife’s polished blade secured a stack of old mail to the fireplace mantle. He lamented, “If you have a heart, Sheila, I hope it’s here.”

Toasted

“Any mail of importance in the post?” Sheila Holmes’ stern contralto crackled through Johnny Watson’s mobile, her slender face tanned and slightly pixelated.

“Nothing from Buckingham Palace, the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s *not* what I meant.”

“You’ve been reading stories about the uptick in crime, and want to know if Scotland Yard is missing you?” Watson quipped.

“As Uncle Sherlock used to say: every time he left London, even for a short holiday, the criminal element took advantage of his absence.”

“Well, they’re definitely taking advantage of yours.”

“I’m not here... willingly, John. I signed a contract...”

The occupant of 221B Baker Street sniffed in disdain. “You’ve been gone for weeks. It doesn’t take that long...”

The sound of a door opening behind her, and the lean, impressive figure of actor/filmmaker Tony Downton approaching the chair where she sat, further aggravated Watson.

“Hello, John!” the director greeted, not looking toward the screen. “Did Sheila tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Sheila shoved Downton out of the camera’s range. “Shut up, already!”

A contrite, “Sorry,” preceded the door’s closure.

“What was that all about?” Watson grumbled.

“Nothing, really. We’re off in an hour.”

“To shoot more of the movie?”

“No. That bit’s done, finally. Tony and his editors are pulling it together, adding some special effects and music...”

“Special effects? This isn’t science fiction!”

“Recreating nineteenth century London takes special effects, John. They used matte paintings in the old days, but now, the computers handle all that.”

“Ah!” Seated in an armchair near the crackling fireplace, Watson flexed his fingers, cramped from holding the mobile. “So, what...”

“We’re flying to Baltimore for the weekend.”

“Across the country, for a weekend?”

“The city is celebrating the tenth anniversary of Tony’s film that featured Edgar Allan Poe, as part of their festival on what would’ve been Poe’s two-hundredth birthday.”

“So, you’re tagging along?”

“Better than sitting in this...”

“Posh apartment?”

Sheila recognized the anguish in her flatmate’s voice. “There’s nothing between us, John. You know that. This penthouse has eight bedrooms...”

At that moment, Edith Hudson-Thorne, the pair’s landlady, appeared on the threshold with a tray of roast beef, boiled potatoes and Yorkshire pudding.

“I gotta go,” Watson stated, rising awkwardly, his prosthetic leg needing adjustment.

“Hullo, Edith!” Sheila called toward the blurred image.

The russet-haired widow set platters on an uncluttered dining table and turned. “Sheila? How are you?”

The screen went blank.

Edith glared at the British Army veteran. “You two have another row?”

“She’s off to Baltimore with Downton.”

“Why does that upset you?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Well, eat your dinner. You’ll feel better.”

Watson limped to his bedroom. “I’m not hungry.”

Left alone, Edith sank on a wooden chair and tucked in for a tasty meal.

She didn’t see much of her tenant over the next two days. Having discovered he didn’t like to be disturbed when dealing with his emotions in regard to Sheila Holmes’ association with Tony Downton - who’d enlisted her as technical advisor for his biographical film of her great-great-uncle Sherlock - Edith left Watson to his own devices.

Until Monday evening’s London *Times* arrived on the stoop.

“John!” she hollered up narrow stairs upon scanning the six-column headline.

A disheveled blond head peered from the sitting room doorway. “What is it?” he muttered.

Even half-asleep, he could read the bold print, “Sheila Holmes Foils Murder.”

Over dinner of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, the pair devoured details of their friend’s journey to Baltimore.

The Poe bicentennial festival had included a Sunday evening screening of Downton's thriller based on the American author's work. Afterward, a mass exodus to the Westminster Presbyterian Church graveyard's engraved stone at the site where Poe had originally been interred, preceded a vigil for the "Poe Toaster".

This mysterious figure had appeared annually in the wee hours of January 19 since the mid-20th century to commemorate Poe's birthday with a bottle of cognac and three roses.

Only, this time, the black-cloaked individual with a distinctive white scarf almost didn't arrive.

Sheila and Downton had been among the last to leave the theater, having endured a tedious receiving line of well-wishers, Watson read in the transcribed police report. As the couple strolled along Fayette Street, they glimpsed the Toaster, as he'd been dubbed, in a wide-brimmed hat, bottle and flowers in hand, then a more furtive pursuer in grey hooded sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers. A switchblade glinted in his gloved mitt.

Naturally - Watson couldn't help smiling at the narrative - Sheila shed her cashmere wrap and bolted forward, only to be restrained by her companion. Slapping away his fingers, she kicked off the Jimmy Choo heels she'd reluctantly worn with the blue dress slacks and satin blouse, and sprinted barefoot after the presumed assailant.

The disabled veteran augmented this printed account with broadcasts from American television outlets posted to the internet. He and Edith watched the videos in awe.

More than one camera, tracking the entertainment, captured the Toaster near the cemetery on Greene Street when the knife slashed at him from the bushes. Summarily shoved beyond the arc of the blow, he continued on his appointed course as Sheila dove at the attacker, disarming him and knocking him unconscious. As she extricated herself from leafless branches, blood dripping from a jagged gash in her left bicep, a cadre of uniformed police converged to apprehend the miscreant.

Media crews promptly shifted their attention from the festivities to incidents more newsworthy. They wedged their equipment through a throng barred by police toward the tuxedo-clad Downton, his companion's coat slung over his shoulder and shoes dangling from his right hand. He hovered over Sheila's seated form, a paramedic examining her wound.

"You'll need stitches," he advised, raising her to the gurney his associates maneuvered into place.

“Balderdash,” she replied, reaching into Downton’s trouser pocket for his linen handkerchief and applying pressure to stop the bleeding. “Get back to the ceremony.”

As the crowd dispersed, the police resumed their duties, taking Sheila’s statement while Downton wrestled with her feet to secure the expensive shoes.

The handcuffed teen, son of a prominent local politician, had gotten drunk and boasted to his college freshman buddies he could make a name for himself in Poe lore by killing the Toaster, the newspaper account concluded. His police booking photo, shown in the broadcast clips, showed a shaved head, bleary blue eyes and tattoos rising above the blood-stained collar on his neck.

“How are you?” Watson queried when Sheila finally activated the video chat on her phone three hours later.

She stood beside a sizeable Poe monument in the graveyard, murky daylight illuminating the names. “Tony corralled me to hospital, where the doctor repaired some muscle damage and gave me thirty stitches. It hurts like the very devil.”

“Another scar to add to your collection,” Edith sighed.

Watson interspersed, “Did this Poe Toaster even realize how you’d saved him?”

“I think so.”

“Didn’t he stop to thank you?”

“The mystery of the annual visit is that no one’s ever seen his face,” Sheila explained.

Edith studied the screen. “But, you did!”

Tangled brunette curls bobbed affirmatively. “As he left the graveyard, his tribute complete, he paused beyond the police barrier and looked directly at me. He had high cheekbones, a prominent nose, longish, greying hair and a pencil-thin mustache. When our eyes met, he nodded and placed a gloved hand over his heart. Then, he vanished.”

“So much for your holiday!” Watson snorted.

Sheila shuffled between old markers, Downton beside her. “You know very well, John, I abhor mental stagnation.”

“And, you always seem to be right where there’s excitement!” Edith concurred.

“You have no idea!” Downton grunted, reaching to disconnect the call.

Watson relaxed on the armchair as Edith tossed another log on the grate.

“What about a midnight snack?” she asked.

“Now I know she’s all right, I could eat a horse!”

Wine, Whiskey and Chocolate

“I can’t believe it!”

Johnny Watson held the newspaper in his right hand, and three bags of groceries in his left. He maneuvered through the kitchen door of 221B Baker Street, followed by Edith Hudson-Thorne, whose keys clattered to the cobbles as she tried to retain her grip on four other parcels.

“It’s a typical scandal sheet, John,” the landlady responded, unloading her burdens on the table, then helping her tenant do likewise.

Watson sank on the nearest chair, rubbing the point where his prosthetic leg met flesh.

“You need to get that adjusted,” Edith noted.

“Yeah. I think something’s come loose.” He slammed his fist on the newspaper. “They can’t make such claims against Sheila...”

The headline read, “Holmes Flouts Tax Laws.”

A reporter, seemingly assigned to dog Sheila Holmes’ every step while she spent a few months in California as technical advisor on Tony Downton’s biographical film about Sherlock Holmes, claimed to have overheard her tell Downton she didn’t care whether she ever paid taxes on money earned from the project.

“Or from her other unauthorized activities while in the States,” one paragraph of the article concluded.

“What the hell does that mean?” grumbled Watson.

Edith unpacked the groceries, placing boxes in cupboards and cleaning supplies beneath the sink. “She’s solved quite a few cases since she’s been there.”

“For her, that’s second nature. She can’t stand to be idle, and with Downton spending so much time in the editing room...”

The piece recounted Sheila’s weekend journey to Sonoma Valley, ostensibly for a tour of the wineries. “She ended up solving a murder which had defied the local constabulary for a decade. The posted reward for the culprit netted her a tidy \$10,000 US, no portion of which will be seen by the British tax authorities.”

“Bastard!” Watson groaned.

“Relax, John.” Edith commandeered the publication. “It’s really quite a rousing story, when you compare the versions you found on the internet.”

“Of course it is. Sheila’s never dull, to be sure. But, this fool makes it sound like she went to the States deliberately to evade taxes. We know that’s not true...”

“You could always call one of your contacts at the *Times* and issue a statement.”

“That’s for Sheila to do, herself, when she returns.”

“Then, you’d best head upstairs and rest your leg.”

Listening as Watson ascended the narrow servants’ stairs, Edith switched on the coffee pot and pulled a stack of computer printouts from a drawer, settling at the table to determine what - if any - facts this sadly twisted article added to the details of Sheila’s latest case.

Producer, director and actor Tony Downton had indeed been consumed by the final stages of his latest project, so Sheila traveled north from Los Angeles alone. Downton owned a vineyard and wanted her to check on the management after hearing rumors of financial malfeasance.

Sheila had been cognizant for some time of being followed, not just by paparazzi, but also by a determined young journalist: Thomas St. John, born in Jamaica, educated in the States and England. She’d mentioned it during her last call home to Baker Street.

She’d stopped trying to evade his pursuit, even joining him at a Sonoma pub, where he avoided locally-produced vintages in favor of whiskey.

Getting him a bit tipsy wasn’t difficult, not that she generalized about reporters and liquor. Sheila told Edith the man willingly divulged his life story, and his hopes of advancement if he could dig up “dirt” about her in America.

The dirt she’d uncovered at Downton’s winery could not easily be swept clean. Regional newspapers reported the indictment of the general manager, chief financial officer and three other administrators who had steadily bled the business dry.

Edith recalled that phone conversation, Watson present in the sitting room of the second floor flat. Sheila used his computer expertise and varied contacts to trace the missing funds deposited in off-shore bank accounts.

Next the landlady heard, two professional assassins were in custody after making an attempt on Sheila’s life.

News coverage came fast and furious, including the murder of the accounting clerk who’d blown the whistle on the operation. That’s when Sheila linked the current crime with one from years previous.

Watson had printed the entire transcript of the coroner’s inquest, during which Sheila served as primary witness. Some of the newspapers included excerpts, but her testimony clarified the event timeline.

Edith, perusing the pages, could imagine her tenant’s anger rising to boiling point.

The detective had arrived at the winery three days prior to the murder. After nearly being struck by two men in a GMC pickup en route to the site, she met Jennifer Unruh, the accounting clerk, in passing, deducing the woman's agitation, sleep deprivation, anemia and affection for cats.

After a cursory tour of the property and buildings, Edgar Duggan, the general manager, refused to allow Sheila access to the accounting files, either on the computer or via hard copy. As she was escorted to the exit, the clerk signaled to her and, later, met Sheila outside the complex's front gates.

"She gave me a computer flash drive, a manila file and in-depth details of what had been taking place," Sheila told the coroner. "I may have been the last person to see her alive."

Duggan's attorney objected to the statement, which the coroner overruled.

"Did you examine the body at the scene?" the latter queried.

"Considering the murder occurred on the sidewalk outside my hotel, yes."

The attorney again rose. "I object to the use of the word murder. It could have been suicide..."

"I've never seen a case of suicide where the victim aimed a 12-gauge shot gun at her own chest," Sheila replied before the coroner could rule.

The ballistics report confirmed no powder burns on the woman's clothes, and the devastation caused by the blast. The weapon had been traced to a former winery employee.

That gentleman, who'd served 18 years in the warehouse, presented the police report he filed after Duggan and his "crew of thugs" confiscated the shotgun from his Toyota SUV parked in the designated lot the prior year. "We'd never been told firearms weren't allowed on the property. It wasn't even listed in the employee manual," he complained.

No fingerprints were found on the weapon, discovered in a dumpster behind the hotel. There'd been no witnesses to the crime, most businesses along the street already closed by that hour.

"The deceased had phoned me, asking if I'd be interested in more information on Duggan and the winery," Sheila continued. "She requested my assistance in finding a safe location to hide, sensing her life threatened. We were to meet at ten that night in the hotel lobby. I heard the gunshot from outside just as I got off the lift five minutes before the hour."

Duggan's attorney asserted an air-tight alibi for his client at that hour.

"Sit down, sir!" the coroner scolded. "This isn't a criminal trial."

The black pin-stripe suited figure dropped onto a wooden chair, according to one journalist in the room.

“Whoever killed Jennifer took her purse, and whatever she had planned to give me,” Sheila stated. “Meaning it was a deliberate act of not just murder but also theft, with possible charges to be considered in regard to conspiracy and accessory.”

“That will be for the prosecuting attorney to determine,” grunted the coroner. “Did the deceased speak before her death?”

“No. She died instantly.”

“You checked her pulse?”

Sheila nodded. “Both at the wrist and the neck.”

“Very thorough. Thank you, Miss Holmes.”

“May I add one detail, sir?” she ventured.

“Of course.”

“The individual who fired the fatal shot could not be considered an expert marksman, as the main impact of the blast struck below the chest. He may have been running past or, more likely, seated on the passenger side of a moving car. The car then stopped, and the theft occurred. The vehicle would have sustained some damage during the incident, as would the culprit’s own clothing - now probably burned or otherwise destroyed.”

Newspapers deemed the murder a “tragedy” and a throwback to the gang violence of the 1920s.

Reporters who attempted to interview Sheila were blocked by a police cordon; she was compelled to change hotels in the wee hours of Saturday morning.

Thomas St. John, however, predicted the tactic and knocked on her door before she’d had a chance to unpack her Oxford duffel.

The dark-complected Jamaican settled on the suite’s brown leather sofa, switching on a digital recorder.

“I can order a fifth of Jameson from room service, if you’re thirsty,” Sheila offered.

An accented tenor scoffed, “Not after you got me drunk last week.”

“What do you expect from me?”

“You know more about this murder than you told the coroner.”

“Which will be revealed in the prosecutor’s good time,” she promised.

“So, he was privy to your investigation?”

“He requested it.”

“You’ve provided him the results?”

“I’m not finished yet.”

“So, you don’t know who murdered the clerk?” St. John pressed.

“I didn’t say that. It’s fatal to twist facts to fit theories, as my uncle Sherlock used to say, and I’m still in search of a few remaining facts before I voice my theory.”

“If my publisher agrees to... compensate you for your trouble, would you allow me to accompany you on that search?”

“Hell, no! I don’t need any interfering hack fouling up the evidence or leaking rumors before they’re confirmed.”

Which, for Edith, explained Thomas St. John’s article that day accusing Sheila of evading taxes.

A Los Angeles paper picked up the story, their own reporter subjected to a more polite reception when she encountered Sheila savoring a double portion of chocolate cream pie and a large chocolate milk shake at the restaurant a block from the hotel.

Perhaps because Sheila recognized a genuine passion for justice in this buxom blonde female, as opposed to St. John’s propensity to sensationalize the news.

That’s how Sheila learned about the decade-old cold case.

Molly Trefoil slid the yellowed clipping across the table. Sheila scrutinized small type detailing how Edgar Duggan’s wife had been killed by a blast from a 12-gauge shotgun - low to the torso - in an unsolved Fresno drive-by shooting.

“Have you anything else on this?” Sheila muttered.

“A file three inches thick.”

Their bill paid, the pair adjourned to the hotel.

Duggan’s history ran to the unorthodox, working across the U.S. selling cars, insurance, designing farm tractors and working on a road crew, before settling in California and marrying the heiress to a lumber fortune.

Frances Duggan died within a week of her father’s fatal heart attack, but Edgar’s presence at a convention in Boston cleared him of all suspicion. He inherited millions and ran through the wealth like water through a sieve.

Two years later, he hired on as Downton’s vineyard manager. Why remained a question in Sheila’s mind, unless he’d sold himself to the distracted film maker no differently than selling a used car.

The winery showed a profit over four years, steadily losing - or seeming to lose - money on more recent financial statements.

“No audit reports?” Sheila inquired.

Molly replied, “Duggan claimed they were confidential, since the company is privately held.”

“Meaning, more than likely, there aren’t any.” She rose and stretched. “I’ll be paying Mr. Duggan a visit this evening...”

“How will you get inside? The vineyard is a veritable fortress...”

“To which I have the key.”

Molly’s report hinted at more in Sunday’s edition.

Chronologically, the next document was a police report of an attempted break-in at the vineyard, featuring barbed wire fences cut after the electrical lines had been disconnected. An alarm system had also been disabled by an expert in the field.

Before the police arrived to investigate, Sheila had confronted Edgar Duggan behind a utilitarian glass and black metal desk in his office overlooking acres of grape vines.

Prior newspaper accounts described him as “dignified” and “trustworthy” with his salt-and-pepper mane parted precisely on the right, exceptional height, broad shoulders, high forehead, serious brows over sparkling hazel eyes, sloped nose, prominent cheekbones and square jaw. His broad shoulders impressed visitors as capable of bearing the weight of the world.

A recording eventually released to the media, made when Duggan left his dictaphone machine operating upon Sheila’s abrupt appearance, caught the heated conversation.

“Through considerable practice, I observe what others never bother to see,” the Brit proclaimed. “You have a red-haired mistress, two dogs, and ever-increasing arthritis. The ill-gotten gains you have amassed will not stay the progress of the cancerous tumor eating away your brain.”

Duggan’s baritone came through with a harsh edge. “There’s no way on earth you can tell...”

“You have a headache this very instant,” Sheila countered. “There’s the slightest hint of a squint in your eyes, and the blood vessels in your temples are visibly throbbing.”

“Outrageous!”

“Yet true. At the moment, you want to call for assistance, but your muscles aren’t functioning due to interference caused by the tumor. You’re a dying man, with nothing to lose. Why kill Jennifer?”

“Why shouldn’t I confess? There’s no one to hear, and you’ll be dead before you can tell anyone else,” Duggan boasted. “Jenny and I were... involved before I met... well, her name doesn’t matter. The red head you so astutely acknowledged. When I broke off with Jenny, she swore revenge. She fabricated

the documents, stealing the money herself and implicating me. When she wouldn't return the funds, I had no choice..."

"What about your wife?" Sheila prodded. "And the Chevy Camaro located in a chop-shop on the outskirts of town, with powder burns on the front passenger seat?"

The silence was broken by the sound of a revolver's hammer being cocked.

The detective laughed. "A horrendous mistake, Mr. Duggan. You should have your subordinates do your killing for you..."

"They're safely in Rio by now, enjoying a well-earned vacation."

A struggle could be heard, then metal crashing through glass. Heavy breathing preceded a snide comment from Sheila: "Oh, dear, Mr. Duggan. You left this contraption on."

A pop signaled the tape's end.

Molly Trefoil's account included a full transcription, as well as photos of Duggan's arrest and bond hearing. He would remain in jail until formal charges were filed and future hearings scheduled.

Edith, being American herself, understood the wheels of justice turn slowly in the States. She entertained a bit of pride at her tenant's successful career as a detective in that country, despite traveling there simply to work on a movie.

Johnny Watson descended the stairs at lunchtime, still peeved about Thomas St. John's article. "I'm writing a letter to the *Times*," he announced.

Edith stuffed the papers into the drawer. "Good for you, John. Peanut butter and jelly all right?"

Mirror Image

Johnny Watson refused to believe the *Times* headline covering six columns: Sheila Holmes arrested in California.

Beside him, Edith Hudson-Thorne, present owner of 221B Baker Street - where Sheila resided when she was in country with her flatmate - grumbled in frustration. "What's she done now?"

"These journalists," Watson lamented, flipping to where the article continued on page 3. "I can't make heads or tails of the report."

"Doesn't the first paragraph summarize the charges?"

"Bank robbery, supposedly."

Edith sniffed. "With Tony Downton financing her, she has no need..."

"The police claimed she admitted doing it to test the bank's security system."

"Outrageous!"

"When she was released on one million dollars bail, she supposedly told the media cadre who rushed her on the jail steps that she'd been misquoted," Watson continued. "She stated, 'I told them: *if* I would ever commit such a crime, it would be because I was *hired* to test the bank's security system.'"

"Typical cops. Twisting the facts to their own ends."

Watson settled on the desk swivel chair, rubbing his sore left calf, where the prosthetic hadn't been completely attached in his rush to respond to Edith's earlier summons. "But, it does sound like a stunt she'd pull. The priest, in a black button-down cassock and wide brimmed hat, assisting a supposedly elderly woman, wearing a white wig, body padding and thick glasses, wanting to cash a cheque..."

"Then pulling a pistol and threatening the teller?" Edith groaned. "I don't think so, John."

He shrugged. "The image printed here, taken from the surveillance camera, is quite blurred... though it may be the printing quality of the paper."

"Can you pull it up on the computer?"

Spinning toward the monitor, he typed search parameters. Even the highest resolution version of the still photo would have proven insufficient evidence to positively connect Sheila to the crime.

"The witnesses..." Edith prompted.

"Described her British accent - which could have been faked."

"Ring her, then. Until I know the truth, I won't be able to sleep."

“Same here,” John acknowledged, rising to fetch his mobile from the night stand in his bedroom.

The doorbell echoing from the ground floor halted his progress. Edith descended to admit the caller. A muffled, albeit heated exchange ensued before the sound of creaking stairs mounted by twos reached Watson’s ears.

A tall, spare, salt-and-pepper crowned individual clad in a grey suit crossed the threshold uninvited.

“Who the devil are you?” demanded the tenant.

A leather billfold appeared from the hip pocket, revealing Metropolitan Police detective inspector credentials for Kevin D.K. Caruthers. “I have an arrest warrant for Sheila Holmes.”

“She’s not here.”

Baritone dripping with derision, Caruthers scoffed, “How did I know you’d say that?”

Edith, panting, leaned on the doorframe behind him. “She’s been in California these many months.”

“Not so, according to the American F.B.I. She flew out of Los Angeles International Airport yesterday morning.”

“What!” the landlady gasped.

“That’s not true,” Watson countered. “The newspaper account states the court seized her passport...”

Caruthers sniffed, “If she can rob banks, she certainly has the requisite connections to acquire forged documents.” Long strides propelled him to the dormant fireplace, visually inspecting the pipes and detritus left by the flat’s original occupant, Sherlock Holmes. “I’ll have to search...”

“Go ahead,” Watson challenged. “You won’t find anything.”

That prediction proved false, however, when Caruthers emerged from Sheila’s bedroom, blonde and black wigs clutched by long, elegant fingers. “What about these?”

“What about them?” Edith retorted from the red Victorian divan.

“Your Miss Holmes used wigs to disguise herself for the bank robberies...”

Watson snorted, “Well, she didn’t use those, being six thousand miles away.”

“Nonetheless, they could corroborate the American authorities’ theory about the case...”

The residents of the domicile tired of this game.

“Are you quite through?” Edith pressed.

“Except for the downstairs.”

“Downstairs is my private living quarters, which have nothing to do...”

“My warrant extends to the entire house. If Miss Holmes was concealed, say, in your bedroom wardrobe...”

“Now, why on earth would she do that?” Edith rose, reluctantly preceding Caruthers to the corridor. “If she *was* here, she’d have long since put you in your place!”

“You’re awfully defensive, ma’am,” Caruthers drawled. “What are you hiding?”

Watson remained in the sitting room, teeth clenched. “Arrogant git!”

Once his breathing regulated itself, he hobbled to fetch his mobile and tapped a series of numbers on the screen.

A groggy contralto snapped, “Hello?”

“Sheila?”

An instant change in tone. “John? What’s up?”

“Scotland Yard just tried to serve a warrant for you. Where are you?”

“California, of course. Tony’s Malibu beach house.”

“For some reason, the F.B.I. reported you took a bunk.”

“You mean, my doppelganger faked taking a bunk.”

“Doppelganger?” Watson echoed.

“The woman committing these bank robberies with the phony priest might be my own twin sister, except for being ten to fifteen years older.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen her photo and, cognizant that I was nowhere near the site where the image was snapped, it has to be so.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Find her, naturally, and turn her over to the police.”

“But...”

His train of thought was interrupted. “Is the Yarder still there?”

“He’s down with Edith.”

A chuckle crackled through the speaker. “She must be livid.”

“Must do.”

“Is it anyone we’ve dealt with previously?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“What’s his name?”

“I didn’t catch it.”

“No worries. Tell him to phone the Los Angeles bureau in an hour. They’ll confirm my whereabouts.”

“Will do.” Watson moved to disconnect, then reconsidered. “Sheila?”

“Yes, John?”

“Be careful. It sounds like someone is out to ruin your reputation.”

Another laugh. “It wouldn’t be the first time, would it, John?” He heard her pensive exhale. “I’ll let you know when the loose ends are wrapped up.”

“Thanks.”

As Watson sank on the mattress to adjust his prosthetic leg, he glimpsed Caruthers scanning the chamber.

“Warning her will serve no purpose,” snapped the detective.

The British Army veteran countered, “Your warrant is a waste of paper.”

Advice about contacting the F.B.I. ringing in his ears, Caruthers departed, his resolve undaunted.

Edith brought Watson a breakfast of muffins, jam and coffee on a silver tray. “What a pompous ass!”

“Gives the police a bad name,” the young blond agreed.

“Did you speak with Sheila?”

He nodded.

“And?”

“Everything’s fine. Some look-alike has been committing the crimes.”

Steaming brew poured into a delicate china cup. “And?”

“Sheila will, as always, get to the bottom of it and make things right.”

“Any idea when she’s coming home?”

“I didn’t ask.”

No more was said about the matter until the *Sunday Times* carried a follow-up to their original article, placed inauspiciously on the inside front page, with a two column heading. *The Hollywood Reporter*, in contrast, ran four full pages of details about the debacle, as Watson discovered with an internet search.

“According to a police source, who spoke on condition of anonymity,” the account read, “Sheila Holmes conducted a private, thorough investigation over the course of three days, delivering the results to the Los Angeles Police on Thursday morning.”

That investigation brought a smile to Watson’s lips.

Sheila determined that the tellers approached at the counters had been part of the scheme, being promised a share of the take if they omitted the security dye-pack from the bag of cash.

Those employees were acquainted with the pair, as well, the latter having previously worked at financial institutions around the city, a familiarity with daily procedures coming into play.

She reasoned that a man in a full-length cassock would be noticed on the street prior to any such encounter as described in police reports of the robberies. Yet, no one had come forward to say they'd seen the culprit before he entered the respective establishments.

"He, therefore, had to don his disguise moments before the event," she told the officials, as the publication recounted.

By mapping the various sites, Sheila pinpointed homey coffee shops or cafes nearby. Interviewing their owners, she compiled a list of similar recollections: a couple came in about an hour before the crime, a large sports-type duffel in tow, sat near the front windows - with a view of the bank entrance - sipped coffee, then paid their bill and headed for the restrooms.

They never left through the street exit, but evidently sneaked out the service door.

"They changed clothes in the toilet," Sheila proclaimed, "walked around the block and into the bank. After the crime, they stripped off the disguises in the alley, stuffed them in the duffel which had been concealed between trash cans or discarded boxes, and fled."

The British detective had provided the police with a list of branches where such eateries supported the existing *modus operandi*, and the officers assigned to patrol those areas converged on the culprits within seconds Friday afternoon before they could make their escape.

Sheila would have joined them on scene, had she been permitted, to unmask the duo personally.

Instead, one of the photos featured in the American account showed Sheila outside the Los Angeles County jail, face-to-face with her double - a striking resemblance, though not perfect.

"Ripe subject for a movie," the unwigged, middle-aged prisoner quipped.

The phony priest, handcuffs secure around his wrists, boasted a broad forehead tapering to a narrow chin, dark hair, a Romanesque nose and lean physique. His threat to kill Sheila, confirmed by the sudden appearance of a switchblade from a concealed pocket in the cassock sleeve - which the young woman wrenched from his grasp with a deft Wing Chun strike - merited him bail of \$1 million at his arraignment, securing his confinement until a trial date could be scheduled.

Bank executives, in conjunction with the Los Angeles mayor, announced that Sheila would receive a commendation for her efforts. She declined the honor, claiming to be too busy serving as technical advisor on Tony Downton's Sherlock Holmes biographical film for such "nonsense."

Closing the browser screen, Watson smirked, shaking his head.

A Northerly Threat

Edith Hudson-Thorne enjoyed sipping a leisurely cup of tea and reading the *London Times* on Sunday mornings in her ground floor parlor at 221B Baker Street. Wrapped in a pink terry bathrobe, bare feet propped on the coffee table, the quiet of Sheila Holmes' absence refreshed the landlady's soul.

She usually skipped the international news section, preferring reports on the royal family and reviews of popular West End shows. This particular Sunday, though, she nearly dropped the delicately painted china saucer at the headline, "Holmes obsession results in fatality of Idaho teen."

A reprint from a New York periodical, Edith perused editorial notes explaining how the reporter heard about unusual circumstances surrounding a 19-year-old girl's death and traveled west for an in-depth investigation.

The article held the widow's undivided attention:

The debate whether Sherlock Holmes was a real man or a fictional character has cropped up periodically in the news since actor/director Tony Downton announced last year his production company, Standish-Minor, would film a bio-pic based on the Great Detective's adventures.

Add to the mix a technical advisor reputedly descended from the 19th century celebrity's eldest brother, who's been regularly seen in Downton's company in the weeks after his trip to film on location at 221B Baker Street, and it might seem an elaborate publicity stunt.

When the couple, driving Downton's exquisite blue Audi R8 to Sun Valley, Idaho, for a film symposium at the College of Southern Idaho and an extended ski vacation, encountered a singular teen, however, life became stranger than the most thrilling mystery novel.

The tale begins in a 1970s-era Winnebago motorhome, parked in the South Hills of Idaho beyond a dense stand of aspen and fir trees. Four flattened tires prevent the vehicle from moving. A dilapidated outhouse leans precariously about fifty yards north; a pump handle and well a shorter distance to the south.

Primitive solar panels are attached to the white metal roof, supplying a modicum of power for the stove and space heater inside. A vegetable garden, hoe and other tools scattered on the

ground, boasts ample tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, carrots and beets.

Such were the conditions where Janie Moriarty grew up. Alone.

Two books the sole occupants of a shelf above her bed, the girl never learned to read more than a few words. One volume was *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. The other - her mother's Hello Kitty diary, itself written in a childish scrawl - noted the highlights of days more than a decade earlier.

The final entry, in fact, mentioned a trip into Twin Falls to fetch supplies.

Those adults, Sam and Cindy, never returned to this extremely remote hovel.

A review of county coroner's records for the date in question revealed a horrendous collision between a tractor-trailer and a Ford F150 pickup at an intersection called Five Points in the city of Twin Falls. The semi's brakes had failed, sending it barreling past the red light.

The pickup caught fire, and two bodies extricated were not positively identified until months later.

Janie's parents.

She'd only been seven years old at the time.

All evidence indicates Janie had a knack for survival, despite not being the recipient of formal schooling. When I breached the yellow police tape to examine the Winnebago's interior, I found scraps of cloth and sewing thread, used to alter her mother's much larger dresses to her own diminutive size.

She'd created sandals from leather strips cut from her father's boots.

What struck me as most poignant, however, I discovered upon making my exit. On the back of the door, a newspaper clipping was tacked to the panel. The date in the corner read a month prior. The image that of Tony Downton, a caption proclaimed, "Sherlock Holmes comes to the Magic Valley."

A dart was wedged in the middle of his face, and the word "Killer" scrawled in red crayon across his forehead.

Why Janie Moriarty held a grudge against Tony Downton, we'll never know. Living in such isolation, not a soul in the county

even knew of her existence. The Saturday she ventured into Twin Falls, on foot, a rough-hewn walking stick in hand, passersby thought her just another homeless wanderer seeking a hand-out.

Or, so Twin Falls County Sheriff Dan Carter related. Standing with me beside the coroner's gurney where Janie's body lay, he commented on her long sandy hair, innocent features and slender frame.

"She might have been anybody's daughter," he said. "I saw her before... she was browsing the booths at the Farmer's Market by the college, and she smiled at me. So sweet."

From there, Janie meandered over to the campus, known as CSI by the locals, where Tony Downton was due to address the students mid-afternoon.

Enter Sheila Holmes. Ostensibly from London, Oxford educated, the 20-something detective made a name for herself when she unraveled the criminal network of James Moriarty - no verifiable relation to the infamous professor of the same name. She claims to be Sherlock's great-great-niece.

Holmes noticed something odd about Janie Moriarty before she ever knew the girl's name, according to the police affidavits filed at the time.

While Downton focused on preparing his lecture in the CSI Fine Arts Center, Holmes remained outdoors, savoring the crisp, clear winter air, so unlike that in Great Britain. She observed Moriarty's odd attire, unsuited to the cold temperatures, and obvious unfamiliarity with her surroundings.

From a discreet distance, Holmes monitored Moriarty's activity over the course of three hours. Finally, the latter entered the Fine Arts Center, taking a seat in the 930-seat auditorium's last row.

Downton's presentation last on the programme, Holmes positioned herself where she could easily intercept Moriarty, should any threatening move be made.

After each speech, audience members were invited to pose questions by approaching the stage, where a microphone stand had been placed at the base of the steps. Holmes told police afterward she suspected such access unwise under the circumstances.

The queue for questions after Downton's combination of film clips and humorous banter reached to the emergency exit, forcing the dean to limit the number to 20. Moriarty had moved to a vacant seat in the second row after a brief intermission, and managed to be sixth in line.

Holmes had maneuvered herself backstage, hovering behind heavy gold curtains.

The queries posed by the students merited one or two word answers from the Hollywood actor and director, especially when they asked what it takes to have a script turned into a movie, or succeed in front of the camera.

"Hard work," Downton said more than once, court documents reported.

Moriarty didn't bother with a question. Her view of Downton clear from the microphone, the buck knife emerged from her hand-sewn vest.

Holmes flew through the air like some superhero, tackling the assailant.

Blade held to her throat, Holmes kneeling on her chest while panicked students used their cell phones to summon the authorities, the girl squealed about Sherlock Holmes murdering her forebear, the mathematics professor of the same surname.

Abruptly, the knife point sank in the girl's chest.

Sheila Holmes leapt upright, bumping against Downton. The pair towered over the corpse while the auditorium cleared.

Holmes claimed the girl committed suicide, jamming the knife through her own flesh as the detective struggled to halt the motion.

A thorough investigation commenced, impeded by Moriarty's lack of proper identification. In the end, K-9 dogs were used to track her path through the South Hills where, more than a week later, the Winnebago was located and searched.

Holmes and Downton skipped their planned vacation to assist. The Londoner pieced together facts from the items scattered around the motorhome.

"Growing up without parental influence, abandoned, Jane Moriarty concocted a fantasy world based on the tales of my great-great-uncle," Holmes told police. "She blamed Sherlock for her

plight and, unable to distinguish between reality and her own illusions, when a newspaper clipping about Tony coming to the area blew across her path from some campsite or trash bin, she believed it the real Sherlock Holmes and swore revenge.”

The Twin Falls County Coroner accepted the theory and ruled Moriarty’s death a suicide.

Sheila Holmes may have lived up to her revered ancestor’s example of deductive reasoning, but the fact remains that children will continue to fall through the cracks of state-sponsored social service agencies, and end up as did Jane Moriarty: ignorant, abandoned and, ultimately, dead.

Edith folded the newspaper and tossed it aside. She couldn’t say she missed the knocking at all hours and chaos Sheila generated when in residence in the upstairs flat, but having her back on Baker Street would, at least, allow the landlady to keep an eye on the young detective’s antics.

Views of a Crime

“Testing, one, two three.”

Johnny Watson sat at the desk in the cluttered sitting room of 221B Baker Street, a computer monitor running video in split-screen mode. Watching three images simultaneously - from eye, collar and chest level - proved rather disconcerting, but there was a method to the madness.

Or, so Sheila Holmes indicated.

In California with Tony Downton, as the filmmaker finished his production of a bio-pic on Sherlock Holmes, the Great Detective’s great-great-niece had established a reputation by solving various crimes. That’s why the Los Angeles Police Department contracted with her to test new police body camera technology.

“The existing system falls short by cutting off the subject’s head,” she narrated as images of a bustling city street flickered. “That makes proving a suspect guilty before a judge difficult.”

Watson concurred, favoring the angle shot from equipment mounted on safety glasses, according to his erstwhile flatmate’s description.

He fast-forwarded to a scene eight minutes into the recording, as Sheila’s email recommended. It showed her approaching a modest storefront with “Hamilton and Sons Tonsorial Emporium” painted in gold lettering on the window beside a revolving red, white and blue barber pole.

Entering the establishment, an antique barber chair to the left confirmed the business’ original purpose. At the hand-carved oak counter, though, a well-dressed ebon-haired female held a pink-bowed miniature black poodle.

Not visible until Sheila greeted the proprietor - roughly 35, stocky, small in stature with a blond, shoulder-length shag cut and aviator-style amber-tinted silver frames, wearing jeans and a light blue smock embroidered with his name - a mutt with brown and white matted fur was placed on a protective pad.

“This presents an interesting challenge,” acknowledged Paul Hamilton in a nasal tenor.

“Tony Downton wants to use it in a scene he’s reshooting for his movie,” Sheila explained.

““The dog did nothing in the nighttime?””

“Precisely.”

“His search made the papers.”

Sheila chuckled. “He was inundated with dog owners seeking auditions.”

“Where’d you find this candidate?”

“In an alley behind a restaurant in Chinatown.”

“Leave him with me,” Hamilton stated. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Sheila exited the shop, leaving Watson confused - momentarily.

Advancing the footage two days, he could tell Sheila was out in the wee hours, dawn painting the sky a brilliant red. She had returned to Hamilton’s, where three police cars idled at the curb, blue and red lights flashing. A dozen curiosity seekers gathered behind yellow crime scene tape, strung across the sidewalk from a bus stop shelter to a traffic signal and back to a bench near the row of brick shops.

“What happened, Paul?” Sheila inquired of the flustered dog groomer, clad in plaid pajamas and red terry cloth robe.

“I don’t know, exactly,” came the response. “I woke up when my cats knocked over their water dish around midnight. When I went into the kitchen to fill it, I saw a beam of light beneath the door. I must’ve scared off the thieves, but not before they opened and emptied the safe.”

“Fingerprints?” Sheila directed to the nearest uniformed officer.

“The evidence team is on its way.”

She faced Hamilton. “What was in the safe?”

“Cash, and a few important papers.”

“How much cash?”

The video showed him stiffen and avert his gaze.

“Well?” Sheila pressed.

“Thirty thousand.”

Watson recognized the shock in Sheila’s rich contralto. “Dollars?” she gasped.

Hamilton nodded.

“What in the name of all that’s holy...”

“My great-grandfather lost everything in the Crash of ‘29. Ever since, my family has mistrusted banks...”

“What nonsense!” Sheila steamed before inhaling deeply to recover her composure. “Show me the safe.”

Whoever had committed the crime qualified as an expert, Sheila opined later in the recording. Entry through the rear door had not been forced, the safe opened using the combination lock. Nothing else had been touched.

“The culprit knew what he was after,” she deduced.

That afternoon, by the clock on the screen, she again interrogated Paul Hamilton as he washed the grungy mutt.

“Tell me more about your family’s history,” she prodded.

Fingers drenched in shampoo, Hamilton twitched. "Through the Great Depression, my great-grandfather struggled to recover his losses."

"His occupation?"

"What did anyone do who came to Los Angeles back then? He was in pictures."

"How so?"

"He wanted to be an actor but, once he married, decided to earn a steady living as a camera operator."

"Go on."

"My grandfather barely made it through grade school before getting a job as copy boy with a suburban newspaper. He worked his way up to city editor, and encouraged my dad to join him on the staff, but Pop wanted nothing to do with tight deadlines and long hours. He bought this place with the inheritance from Great-granddad, and made his mark as a barber."

"So, how..."

"About 20 years ago, around the time my older brother, Steve, joined Pop, the big thing was for people to bring their dogs with them everywhere. One guy, as a joke, asked Steve to trim his Schnauzer while he was getting a cut and shave. Pretty soon, we were not only doing humans, but their pets. Eventually, it became exclusively pets."

"You earn enough to save so much money?" Sheila queried. "Or, do you have... other interests?"

Hamilton's shaggy head cocked. "How'd you..."

Sheila crossed to a rolling metal shelving unit in the corner. "You should be more careful about leaving out betting slips, for instance."

"Some of my... clients' dogs race..." The tenor cracked. "They would give me tips, and I would pass them along to others who I knew gambled... and soon I found myself keeping the books."

"And this theft is the result of you welshing on a bet?" she puzzled, three cameras focused on a stack of green ledgers.

"I... don't think so. A couple weeks ago, one of my clients came in with her dog, and her teenaged son. He looked like he might belong to one of the gangs that run rampant hereabouts. He..."

"No good, Paul," Sheila admonished. "A gang would use a crowbar on the door and, most likely, the safe. If you're honest with me, I can talk to the authorities about possible immunity..."

"How could you possibly..."

She snickered derisively, a sound which annoyed Watson, even on the recording. “Some people, attempting to fake a burglary, toss the furniture and fixtures, thinking it misleads the police. Others, like yourself, are too neat, though a real thief would have not only robbed the safe, but also the cash drawer, which you leave unsecured.”

Hamilton slumped on a wooden stool, the dog shaking water on the tile and walls. “The burglary was real enough. I came down to fill the cat’s water dish, to find a guy picking the lock on the back door, with two thugs waiting. They... had bet on a horse at Santa Anita...”

“The incident being investigated for the favorite potentially throwing the race, letting the long shot win?”

“Right.”

“But, the jockey, now dead, changed his mind and spurred the horse to victory, so those who bet on the long shot...”

“Lost their shirts.” Hamilton sighed. “Standing there with pistols in my face, I had no choice but to open the safe and give them the cash.”

“Considerably more than you told the police?”

He smirked and shrugged.

“My recommendation is to let the investigation run its course, and get out of the... bookkeeping business. The racing commission should unearth the fools behind the scam.”

Hamilton led Sheila through the shop, the dried and coifed canine a photogenic bundle of fluff.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“An excellent job, Paul. Tony should be quite pleased.” Moving toward the exit, she turned. “I’ll let slip to the media how well you did. The increase in trade should allow you to quickly recoup your... losses.”

His response was preempted by another customer stumbling in, towed by an energetic Saint Bernard.

The video ended when Sheila climbed into a waiting black Lincoln limousine.

Watson closed the software, typing a quick reply to the original email. “I agree, the collar-level is the most viable option. The camera mounted on the spectacles could, possibly, fall off, as you observed. Thanks for letting me... share this adventure.”

He leaned back on the swivel chair, rubbing his prosthetic leg. He secretly missed the noise and activity commensurate with Sheila’s presence and couldn’t wait for her to come home.

Ball Gowns and Brawls

Edith Hudson-Thorne brought Johnny Watson breakfast on a tray late that crisp Thursday morning. While the disabled Army veteran didn't like special treatment, she needed his assistance and hoped the plate heaped with bacon, scrambled eggs, toast and coffee would ease the process.

"Have you heard from Sheila lately?" the landlady of 221B Baker Street queried, plumping the pillows as Watson smeared grape jelly on his toast.

"She's busy chasing around California with Tony Downton, I'm sure," he replied. "Why?"

Edith hesitated, wiping moist hands on her apron. "I... received a strange email last night from my brother-in-law in the States. There's an attachment I can't open..."

Watson chuckled softly. "It might be spam."

"I don't think so. His message mentioned Sheila being in trouble again."

"Turn on the computer in the sitting room. I'll be out as soon as I'm dressed."

With a relieved sigh, Edith left the bedroom, closing the door. Starting the day for Watson included not just selecting clothes, but attaching his prosthetic leg - having suffered a horrific injury while serving in Afghanistan.

Ten minutes later, the pair sat at the desk among a selection of random clutter. Edith periodically cleaned the chamber where Watson and Sheila Holmes, her tenants, spent much of their time, but the mess always reappeared.

Even with Sheila out of the country, consulting on a film shoot, her flatmate continued to collect plenty of detritus.

Typing in her email password, Edith watched as Watson masterfully selected the post and downloaded a file. When it opened on the screen, they both gasped, then laughed.

The copy of an American tabloid newspaper proclaimed the headline, "Ball Gown Brawl," featuring a photograph of Sheila in a high-necked blue Dior formal using a Wing Chun-style kick on a man's startled face.

The article - and more photos - on page six of the publication detailed Sheila's "antics" during the return trip from a charity performance of *My Fair Lady* at San Diego's Globe Theater on a recent Saturday evening.

Calling her the "Bad Girl from Britain" and other derogatory titles, the author of the piece claimed Sheila had done nothing but stir up trouble since arriving in Los Angeles with actor/producer Tony Downton.

“She waltzed into the bar, ostensibly waiting for a tow truck to come for their broken-down limousine, and proceeded to start a fight, in which five men and two women were seriously injured.”

Watson chuckled at the account. “She must’ve been seriously provoked.”

“If she was here, this wouldn’t have happened,” responded Edith.

“You know as well as I do: yes, it would, or something similar.”

The russet-haired widow shrugged.

“What time is it in California?” Watson puzzled.

“Sun’s not up yet.”

“Why don’t we ring her up and have a chat.”

“The expense!”

The scruffy blond head shook with mirth. “We’ll reverse the charges!”

After digging around piles of paper surrounding the computer, the pair located Sheila’s contact information. Watson snatched up the receiver on the desk and dialed series of numbers.

He tried three times to get through over the course of the next two hours, leaving voicemails when the detective didn’t answer. Finally, he tried to connect using video chat software on the computer.

A few crackles and pops preceded the appearance of her face in a small box on the screen. “Hullo, John.”

“Good morning, Ms. Publicity Hound!” he joked. “You’re looking well.”

“Eh?”

He and Edith took turns explaining what they’d read. They heard the discontented grunt with a two second delay.

“Damned paparazzi. They follow me everywhere!” Sheila snarled.

Watson countered, “Probably because you’re a good source of income!”

“Be that as it may, those scandal sheets never report the whole truth.”

“Then, what is the truth?” Edith prodded.

“We’d gone to San Diego to catch a thief,” Sheila began her narrative. “We never got close to the Globe Theater that night.”

The incident started one afternoon, while she and Downton were headed home from the studio in their limousine. The vehicle had stopped at a traffic signal and, as the couple idly chatted about the day’s progress to complete the film about Sheila’s renowned great-great-uncle, Sherlock Holmes, she glimpsed a bizarre sight through the tinted side window.

“Roland, open the sunroof, now!” she shouted to the liveried driver.

As soon as the overhead glass retracted, she leapt onto the leather cushion and popped her brunette head into the sweltering heat.

“What is it?” Downton asked.

The light turned green, and the limousine moved forward. Sheila continued to stare at an unusual and suspicious character.

Downton finally pulled her inside, and she flopped on the upholstery.

“What the devil...”

“Of course, you didn’t notice,” she chided him. “A man well over six feet in height, broad square shoulders, wearing a black fedora cocked over his right eye, a black trench coat buttoned and tied at the waist, fitted black leather gloves, blue jeans frayed at the cuff and scuffed brown motorcycle-style boots.”

“So?”

“In this heat?”

Downton leaned forward on the seat. “I see what you mean.”

“When he glanced up as I was studying him, he flashed a very... knowing and sly smirk.”

“And?”

“There’s bound to be a report about a robbery - a bank or,” she considered briefly, “one of those posh jewelers in the neighborhood.”

“Wouldn’t we have heard alarms?”

“Not if the man immobilized the staff, or was so crafty in his methods...”

Sheila was proven correct in her deduction by the evening news. One of the prominent jewelry stores, located within blocks of where she had spotted the man, had discovered a loss of \$3 million just as the process of securing the inventory in a safe commenced at closing time.

“That means he has a four hour head start on his escape,” Sheila remarked, switching off the telly.

“But, the police stated they have no definite suspect, because the security cameras malfunctioned,” Downton protested.

“The man was clever, as I said. He had a signal jammer in one of those trench coat pockets. The fact no one noticed him stealing the jewels...”

A glint in her violet eyes had become all-too-familiar to Downton. “You’ll be needing the car.”

She nodded.

“May I come?”

“I thought you had a dinner engagement with the producers of your next film.”

Thus, Sheila rode alone in the Cadillac limousine to the crime scene. Police had the building surrounded by yellow tape, which she disregarded.

“You can’t come in here!” scolded one of the detectives, supervising technicians dusting for fingerprints.

“You won’t find any,” she predicted.

“How do you know?”

Identifying herself did not have the same effect as it did when she handled cases in London, she chuckled to Watson and Edith over the computer screen.

Still, a lieutenant emerged from the manager’s office, where the safe stood open and store employees completed a secondary count of the items on hand, to better determine exactly what had been stolen.

“I believe I saw your thief,” Sheila announced, at which all eyes focused on her. She strode toward a timid ebon-haired clerk, nose red from weeping. “Did a man - a big man - come in this afternoon, at approximately two o’clock, wearing a black hat and coat?”

“Why, yes!” the girl gushed. “He was looking for a graduation present for his granddaughter.”

“Did it not occur to you that wearing a coat, gloves and hat on such a hot day was in any way unusual?”

A lanky male clerk chimed in, “That’s right!”

“Were there many other customers in the store at the time?”

“A handful.”

The police lieutenant demanded, “Where did you see this man?”

“Four blocks from here.”

“On foot?”

“Yes, and in no hurry,” Sheila stated.

“Can you give us a description so the our artist can create a rendering?”

“Could do.”

As the pair moved to the front of the structure, the official prompted, “Have you any notion of how he...”

“Sleight of hand.”

“Huh?”

“Magic,” Sheila clarified. “The man undoubtedly is a professional magician, who is adept at using modern technology in his act.”

“A professional?”

“Of course. If I were you, I’d start with the Magic Castle.”

The Magic Castle was a private club frequented by magicians in Los Angeles, she told her friends on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

A review of that organization's membership database took more than a week, Sheila added, due to the red tape of obtaining a search warrant through a very skeptical judge.

By then, their suspect - listed only by his stage name "Harry Lime" - had seemingly vanished. His social media pages and website had been deleted from the internet, so it was impossible to tell where he'd gone after leaving Los Angeles.

He had also severed contact with various magic societies and his booking agent.

Rather than publicly announce they were searching for this individual, Sheila convinced the police to let her pursue a few leads. One involved posting on magic organizations' social media a carefully worded plea for friends of Harry Lime to contact her, giving her status as his sister and using a pseudonym of her own.

She received two private messages. One hadn't heard from Harry in weeks, expressing concern about his well being. The other indicated a willingness to meet with her at Johnny Rocket's diner in Hollywood for lunch.

After some preliminary discussion of motives and tactics, Sheila wheedled pertinent information from the slightly built, aging gentleman, who'd trained the suspect and kept in close touch. "Harry will be doing one last show in San Diego before leaving for his European tour."

"I'm so glad!" Sheila sighed. "I've been trying to reach him for months about Mother and Dad..."

Once the magic instructor left the booth, the woman drained her chocolate shake, thinking. If Harry Lime was planning a jaunt to Europe, he was covering his tracks well.

He'd easily be able to fence the stolen jewels in Amsterdam or other large cities, and live off the proceeds for years.

At the penthouse, she related the situation to Downton, who agreed to travel south with her on the premise of attending the charity performance - to which they'd already purchased very expensive tickets, benefitting a children's hospital.

The ritzy nightclub where Lime was slated to give his final American performance required formal attire, so the couple fit right in with the rest of the audience that evening. A series of amateur illusionists were allowed stage time prior to Lime's introduction and he, frankly, amazed everyone with his skills, banter and finesse.

During a bit where the white-tie-and-tails attired performer pretended to read the minds of those at circular, linen covered tables, he came face-to-face with

Sheila. His patter faltered momentarily, as Sheila fastened him with a smirk identical to that he'd shown her on the day of the theft.

He recognized her, she knew.

While Lime was busy preparing two individuals to disappear in cabinets, Sheila waved Downton toward the door. They slipped out together, and rounded the structure to the stage entrance.

"He's not going to get away," she pledged.

Tony hinted, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

"We'll deliver him in person."

That statement proved erroneous, however. Rather than go backstage after the final curtain, Harry Lime mingled with his admirers, grabbed his trench coat and fedora from the check room, and left by the main exit, hopping into a waiting cab.

Sheila had wandered to the edge of the alley and observed his escape. She shouted for Downton and the limousine to make chase.

Up the I-5 interstate highway both vehicles flew. When the cab pulled onto the Oceanside exit, Sheila questioned the ploy.

The yellow taxi stopped at a gas pump, leaving Lime to jump from the rear door and run as fast as his height and bulk allowed, toward a nearby dive.

Sheila directed Downton and the chauffeur to cover the alley, while she sauntered past a burly bouncer near the graffiti-marred steel door.

"What do you want here, Missy?" he barked.

"I'm meeting a friend."

"Your friend ain't here."

"How do you know?"

"If he's dressed like you, he's not."

She dropped the man with a knife-edge blow to his jugular.

Inside, cigarette - and other - smoke created a haze through which it was difficult to see. Yet, Harry Lime could be distinguished by his height, girth and unusual garb.

Sidling past tattooed bikers and leather-skirted prostitutes to him at the bar, she hissed, "We can do this easy or hard. It doesn't matter to me."

He seized a half-empty beer bottle and shattered one end on the stained, moist wood, arcing it toward her face, growling, "We don't need to do this at all."

That's how the brawl commenced. The owner of the beer resented the waste and swung at Lime. Sheila blocked the shot, while others joined in the fray.

Lime may have wished he could magically disappear, but found Sheila as his unwilling - albeit adept - advocate. The blue gown torn and spattered with blood, she fought all comers.

Ten minutes later, the floor was littered with broken glass, puddles of liquor and cracked skulls. The detective led Harry Lime into the humid night air, presenting him to the Oceanside police, who had converged on the establishment in response to multiple calls of a disturbance in progress.

The following morning, reputable newspapers and media outlets reported the magician's name as J. Harrington Fitzmorton, facing felony theft and flight charges.

"His last magic trick was making the jewels completely disappear," the transplanted Brit sniffed via the computer.

That topic exhausted, Watson whispered, "Are you alone, Sheila?"

"In a way. Tony's still asleep. Why?"

"What really happened with George Orr?"

Edith squinted, confused.

"George Orr?" Sheila replied. "How do you know that name?"

"I served with his brother in Afghanistan. He wrote me about some rumors..."

"Good Lord, John! You *do* have sources around the globe, don't you?" the woman snickered. "The only thing between George and myself was a lunch, after I cleared him of murder charges, and a weekend trip to Catalina Island so he could prove to me there are buffalo - or bison - living there."

Watson's expression darkened.

"Don't be so disappointed. I'm not some Hollywood floozy who jumps in bed with every good-looking fella." She grinned broadly through the screen.

"Besides, you're my guy, right?"

As the connection was broken, Watson couldn't be sure whether he saw a huge diamond and platinum band glinting in the light from its place on Sheila's left ring finger.

Island Holiday

Edith Hudson-Thorne didn't carry her mobile phone around 221B Baker Street while she performed her daily chores. The device's insistent chiming that Monday morning, though, forced her to abandon breakfast dishes in the kitchen sink and trudge to her parlor, fingers wrapped in a tea towel.

A quick glance in the mirror over the dormant fireplace to check her hair preceded the landlady activating the video call.

"Cheers, Edith!" came Sheila Holmes' brisk contralto through the speaker.

"Sheila? What on earth..."

The erstwhile tenant chuckled with forced levity. "I know, I usually ring John. This time, I have a question for you."

"What's wrong?"

"Does anything have to be wrong?"

"No." Edith settled on the floral print sofa. "I know you well enough that I'm not expecting idle chatter."

"Should do."

Natural scenery behind Sheila's head confused the widow. "You're not in Los Angeles?"

"I came to Catalina Island for the weekend." The camera rotated, allowing Edith a view of Avalon Bay, expensive yachts anchored in the marina, and a huge catamaran marked "Catalina Flyer" easing away from the pier.

Sheila began walking toward the hillside town, dwellings almost stacked atop each other on steep inclines. The motion caused a frustrating vibration for the woman viewing the panorama.

"What's going on?" Edith prodded.

"Why are men such... bounders?"

"How so?"

"They have an unflinching notion that women should fawn at their feet, be willing to abandon their own careers..."

Edith clucked her tongue. "You've been discussing marriage with Tony?"

"No!" Sheila denied vehemently. "There'd be no way..."

"The scandal sheets think otherwise, from what I've read."

"What are they printing?"

"Photos now and again. You and Tony out to dinner on Rodeo Drive. You and Tony at some movie premiere. Always dressed to the nines..."

"You know I hate that."

“You left most of your t-shirts and jeans in the wardrobe here,” Edith admonished.

“Yeah, I knew Tony expected... more of me. But, that’s not who...”

Edith pricked up her ears. “Somebody else?”

Sheila explained about George Orr, the pyrotechnics expert she’d cleared of murder charges weeks earlier.

“You’ve been seeing each other?”

“It was a way to kill time until he was recalled to the film set. He’s intelligent, funny...”

“But he wanted a commitment?”

“Correct,” Sheila confirmed.

“So, you sent him packing?”

The conversation was interrupted by panicked shouting audible through the mobile’s speakers.

Edith heard, “I’ll ring you back,” before the call disconnected.

Befuddled, the woman remained glued to her seat for an hour. A timid knock on the parlor door roused her from near panic; Johnny Watson stood on the threshold.

“I was worried when I found the dishes half-washed. Are you all right?” queried the blond Afghan war veteran.

“Sheila rang in, then we were cut off...”

“From California?”

“Catalina.”

Watson’s youthful brow furrowed. “Which is...”

“An island 20 miles off the Los Angeles coast.”

“Ah! And why is she...”

“A weekend holiday.”

“So, just girl talk?”

“Pretty much, until...” Edith acknowledged.

“Well, ring her back.”

“I... wouldn’t want to disturb her.”

Watson smirked. “Nonsense. She needs to be more responsible, and not leave those she claims to hold dear hanging while she gallivants around the globe!”

He commandeered her mobile and activated the video function.

Sheila’s face appeared, briefly pixelated, in short order.

“John! What the...”

“Well, well, Sheila! You’ve had Edith on edge and didn’t think to check in?”

The pair could see the detective sat in a rather noisy restaurant, plates heaped with food on the table.

“I’m... sorry, John. To you, too, Edith. I got... distracted.” She swiveled the phone toward her companion, a pleasant enough young man with Asian features. “This is Luke Keyes,” she introduced. A tentative, bandaged hand waved. “He ran into a bit of trouble, and I was able to help... bring about a resolution.”

“She saved my neck!” Keyes countered in an unaccented tenor.

Watson pressed, “What...”

“Luke owns a bakery here in Avalon, and a martial arts school,” Sheila related. “It seems a few unsavory types flew over from Hawaii to... settle an old score.”

Again, Watson attempted, “What...”

“A news crew covering this week’s boat races just happened to get the whole thing on film, John, so you can pull it up on line later...”

Again, the screen went blank.

“Of all the...” Edith swore.

“You know how... brusque she is when she’s in the middle of an investigation,” Watson consoled the widow. “At least, we know she’s not dead.”

“That’s small compensation for...”

“Mr. Keyes seemed to have been badly hurt in the incident, from the looks of that bandage and the swelling around his eye. There must’ve been a fight...”

Edith scowled at him.

“I’ll keep checking the California news feeds, and let you know as soon as I find the reports,” Watson promised.

“Okay.”

He mounted creaking stairs to the sitting room while Edith reluctantly resumed her cleaning.

The alert based on specified search parameters resounded in the wee hours. A groggy Watson hobbled from his bedroom, switching on a floor lamp and settling at the desk to view the story scrolling on the computer screen.

“Detectives’ Descendants Foil Murder Plot,” read the headline.

Watson thought the apostrophe a typographical error, then he began reading the narrative about Luke Keyes, prominent Avalon entrepreneur and grandson of noted Hawaii detective Sidney Wang, and Sheila Holmes, great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes, pooling their skills to apprehend a cadre of armed thugs.

He shared the tale with Edith come daylight. They rang Sheila as soon as they calculated the time difference would mean she’d wakened.

From a hotel balcony overlooking the crescent moon-shaped bay, the terry robe-clad Sheila sipped coffee and munched cinnamon toast, a breeze rustling her brunette curls. "It's not that big a deal, John, really," she stated. "Luke was jumped while unloading a delivery of flour and sugar, and I lent a hand."

"Six trained assassins?" Watson chided. "That's not a minor set-to, Sheila."

"Probably not."

"Why did they..."

"Some traditions die hard, John. Luke's grandparents emigrated from China to Hawaii as children, marrying on the island and raising a dozen of their own. Each was expected to choose a spouse from within their race, but Luke's father broke with the family and wed a U.S. Navy nurse who'd been stationed at the Pearl Harbor base hospital. Shunned by his relatives, they moved to Catalina."

Edith gasped. "That wasn't in the news story!"

"But, it clarifies a lot," John remarked.

"Not everything, though. You see, Luke's grandfather, a respected police detective on the island of Oahu, thwarted an opium smuggling operation run by a Chinese gang fifty years ago. That honorable gentleman was murdered in his bed Friday fortnight, and those of his children not already deceased have been threatened with a similar fate. Most are in protective custody."

"That's a long time to hold a grudge..."

"Not when it paves the way to resurrect the old smuggling route - only now, it's cocaine and counterfeit designer jeans."

Watson squinted at the screen. "They thought Mr. Wang would interfere again?"

"Or, those to whom he related details of the scheme, as he'd exposed them."

Edith interspersed, "But, Luke?"

"The destination for the goods was, naturally, Los Angeles. They presumed Luke's father had been sent purposely to Catalina to monitor suspicious incoming shipments."

They heard knocking through the speaker.

"Hold on a tick," Sheila directed to them, setting her mobile on the table.

Muffled voices grew louder as the young woman accompanied Keyes onto the balcony.

"I've got to go," she spoke to the pair in London. "Luke is taking me sightseeing before I catch the boat back to the mainland this afternoon."

Watson and Edith mouthed "sight-seeing?" to each other.

"Quick question!" spouted Watson before she closed the app.

“Should do.”

“What happened to the guys who attacked Luke?”

“Los Angeles County Sheriff’s deputies hauled them to jail. Before they could be interrogated, though, they committed ritual suicide.”

“So, the name of the criminal who masterminded the operation...”

“Remains a mystery I’ll leave others to solve,” Sheila affirmed.

“Good for you,” Edith praised. “Now, go and enjoy yourself.”

Relaxing on the sofa, Watson and his landlady chuckled simultaneously once the mobile switched off.

“Never a dull moment with that one,” Edith sniffed.

The former medic adjusted his prosthetic leg. “Even when she’s not here!”

Southern Exposure

In those rare, quiet moments when Sheila Holmes wasn't occupied with a case, she chatted up her great-great-uncle Sherlock about his varied and sundry interests, including classical music.

She couldn't share these conversations with Edith Hudson-Thorne, of course. The widowed American landlady didn't realize the Great Detective's ghost haunted 221B Baker Street, often assisting with investigations, and fouling the sitting room with the odor of pungent tobacco.

Johnny Watson, Sheila's flatmate, had witnessed many of Sherlock's manifestations since moving into the residence. He served as audience one comfortable spring evening, for that matter, when the pair broke out their instruments of choice - Sherlock's Stradivarius violin and Sheila's Fender 12-string guitar - for an impromptu concert.

The Army veteran, disabled in Afghanistan, envied these two logical individuals consumed by creative interpretations of melodies and harmonies.

When Sheila departed for California in her capacity of technical advisor, consulting on actor/director/producer Tony Downton's quasi-biography of the more famous Holmes, the nights proved too long and dull for the remaining tenant of Baker Street. Phone conversations and video calls lacked the personal contact he preferred.

Hearing about her cases long-distance made him feel quite left out of the action.

Not that he would've wanted to be present that July 4th when she became embroiled in another quandary requiring her analytical skills.

They'd spoken earlier in the week, Watson sitting beside Edith at the computer desk, with Sheila's face slightly blurred on the screen.

"Tony is flying to Austin, Texas, for a board meeting," she related, explaining Downton's maternal grandfather had owned a cattle ranch in the Lone Star State, which he sold at a vast profit when oil was discovered on the property. The sole stipulation required by the seller had been a seat for himself or his designated descendant, in perpetuity, on the company's board of directors.

Making a weekend excursion of this necessity, the couple would also attend an Independence Day concert in the state capital.

"They're playing Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, naturally, and a medley of John Philip Sousa marches," Sheila specified. "The featured performance will be Stuart Christian at the piano for Gershwin's *Concerto in F*."

Sheila had dragged Watson to a number of Christian's concerts in London, when her case load permitted. The Brit traveling to the States would give the event an ironic international prestige, considering the holiday commemorated the Colonies' break from England.

Within hours, Watson read of the celebration's tragic aftermath.

The Austin360 Amphitheater had been packed with more than 10,000 spectators from around the globe. Austin's Symphony Orchestra joined with the 1st Cavalry Division Band from Fort Hood Army Base - supplying four cannons - and fireworks for the finale, which merited thunderous applause.

A V.I.P. reception beneath a vast white tent followed the festivities. Society's elite spread onto the lawns, champagne flutes in hand, enjoying what breeze alleviated the summer heat.

They scattered in terror when a single shot struck the symphony's music director/conductor, Noel Beatty.

"Yes, John, I saw it," Sheila acknowledged when he finally reached her early evening London time. "Less than five feet away, I could've saved him if I'd had a third hand!"

The younger Holmes recounted her experience, beginning with Christian's phenomenal rendition of the Gershwin piece. She'd noticed a few flat trumpets during the Sousa arrangement, but the *1812 Overture* ended the night with perfectly synchronized cannon fire.

Watson sat on the swivel chair's edge, impatient for the heart of the tale.

"Tony and Stuart Christian are old pals," Sheila noted. "Tony likes to joke how, back when we first met, I erred in not mentioning his stint at Juilliard, before he was a Notre Dame football washout."

"What's that got to do with..."

"Tony and Stuart shared a flat in New York during that semester before Tony got the boot for... violating school rules. We attended the reception so he could introduce me, knowing I appreciate Stuart's work."

That made sense, Watson sighed.

"Noel Beatty had joined us and, as we toasted the fundraiser's success - the proceeds supporting local cancer programs - I heard something overhead," Sheila continued.

"What was it?"

"A remote-control drone." Sheila had questioned the presence of such a device, and Beatty presumed local television stations were filming clips to use in a news broadcast. "That's when I saw the light from the laser scope in a tree."

Instinctively, Sheila had grabbed Downton and Christian by their suit collars, knocking them to the ground. Unable to reach Beatty, however, she glanced up to see a bullet rip into his abdomen.

Two doctors in the crowd rushed to attend him; an ambulance was already on-scene as a precaution. Still, Beatty died en route to the hospital, Sheila lamented.

“Have they caught the person...” Watson prompted when she fell silent.

“John, Beatty wasn’t the target. I sat up last night, calculating the shot’s trajectory. Whoever did this was targeting Stuart.”

“Have you told the police?”

She laughed, a lyrical sound though distorted by the computer. “Scotland Yard may be receptive to my input now and again, but I’m mostly an unknown quantity in the States.”

“They wouldn’t take your call,” he snickered.

“Texas is a world unto itself, John. I heard a mechanic at the airport tell Tony’s pilot that every Texan has a right to have a beer on his way home from work - while driving. I presumed he was joking. This is no joke, though: the state has open carry laws, allowing civilians to tote their sidearms wherever they roam. Gun stores are everywhere, and many pickup trucks have racks mounted where drivers can easily reach the weapons of choice.”

“Incredible!” Watson gulped. “What will you do?”

“Tony and I were scheduled to fly back to Los Angeles tomorrow. Since it’s his private plane, he’s agreed to give me time...”

Edith appeared in the doorway with a dinner tray. “Hello, Sheila!” she called.

The exchange eroded into idle chatter, soon ending. Watson settled in the armchair near the dormant fireplace to mull over this bizarre situation.

As was his wont aiding Sheila with her investigations in-country, he soon migrated again to the keyboard, typing search parameters. If he could trace Stuart Christian’s background, he might expose facts which would propel the case in the right direction.

Christian’s music studies began at age three. His first public recital four years later had critics heralding him a prodigy. Photos showed, now in his early thirties, he retained a youthful, round countenance; longish, straight, light-brown hair framed sparkling brown eyes. Neither trim nor obese, journalists described him as having a “sturdy build.”

Kind, considerate and generous to the point where he’d once emptied the coins and bills from his pockets into the case of a guitarist performing on a corner

near London's Russell Square, the only adverse criticism of Christian came when referencing his abrasive manager, Max Coffin.

A cutthroat negotiator, Coffin used bribery and threats - unbeknownst to his client - to have other artists' contracts canceled in favor of Christian headlining events throughout Great Britain and on the Continent.

According to assorted reliable blogs, at any rate.

Reading these insights, Watson speculated an angry musician might blame Christian for Coffin's actions, and seek revenge...

He texted Sheila the links, so she could review the material herself. His mobile rang in short order.

"Excellent work, John!" she praised. "Can you get in touch with Coffin and question him about his... underhanded behavior?"

"I... wouldn't know where to begin!"

"Tell him Stuart's been trying to reach him, and be sure to mention the name Gloria Hilmar."

Watson hesitated. "Who's Gloria Hilmar?"

An accented baritone crackled through the phone. "He'll know, and if he denies knowing, it'll prove Sheila correct."

"Who..."

"That's Stuart, John. He, Tony and I are having dinner at the Odd Duck in Austin."

Squinting at the clock on the screen, Watson read 2:36 a.m. "It can wait until morning, can't it?"

"Indeed. Get some sleep. And wear your best suit."

He chuckled. "I only have the one."

Hobbling to his room, Watson detached his prosthetic leg and fell onto the mattress, still clothed.

Max Coffin's Regent Street office conveyed his affluence via art deco furnishings and avant garde paint scheme. He saw no one without an appointment, the ebon-tressed receptionist tried to explain when approached at a utilitarian table.

"I've a message for him from Stuart Christian," Watson repeated for the third time.

"You can write it out and I'll hand it in when he's available..."

"Stuart instructed me to see him in person."

Realizing a verbal battle would not dissuade this visitor, the woman rang an inner chamber and, in short order, an officious, tow-headed assistant in grey pin-stripes signaled Watson across the threshold.

“What’s this malarkey about a message from Stuart?” he grumbled.

“I spoke with him overnight, and he asked me to pay a call on Mr. Coffin.”

“That’s impossible.”

A lie, as evidenced when the manager yanked open the door to his suite.

“Dammit, Giles, there’s a typographical error in this contract...” Coffin halted.

“Who the devil are you?”

Watson introduced himself and explained his presence.

Weasel-like features twitched. “Come in.”

Directed to a sculpted metal chair, Watson waited for Coffin to sit at the glass-topped desk.

“A clever ploy to gain access, Mr. Watson,” chided the middle-aged businessman. “What’s this nonsense about Stuart?”

“He’s been trying to reach you since arriving in Austin. You heard about the murder?”

“Murder?” Coffin stiffened. “Who’s been murdered?”

Watson summarized the incident.

“My God! Is Stuart all right? He has concerts scheduled into next year...”

“At what cost, Mr. Coffin? Upsetting people like Gloria Hilmar?”

“How’d you know...”

“Does that matter? A man is dead because you threatened to expose the erstwhile criminal record of an exceptional pianist...” Watson had done a bit of on-line research prior to leaving Baker Street.

“My management techniques fulfill a promise to bolster my clients’ careers. Look around you, and see how successful I’ve been...”

Watson disregarded the autographed photos lining the walls. He rose, disgusted. “If it comes to light that your... techniques drove someone to make an attempt on Stuart’s life, killing Noel Beatty instead, you may be charged as an accessory...”

Coffin pursued his visitor toward the exit. “No, wait! How much...”

“I don’t want your tainted money. Justice will be served. Sheila Holmes will see to that.”

Gnarled fingers clutched Watson’s arm. “What’s she got to do with this?”

“She was with Stuart when the murder took place.” Blue orbs scrutinized the smaller figure. “How do you know her?”

“I... tried to sign her years ago, when she earned spending money with her classical guitar at Oxford.”

“Good day to you.” Watson shook free and strode toward the lift.

The base of the young veteran's neck tingled the entire distance to Baker Street. Checking the time, he assumed Sheila would be abed, but discounted the inconvenience.

Her groggy contralto hissed through the mobile, and he didn't wait until she composed herself to begin the grilling.

"This is why I hate being away from you, John," she muttered.

"Misunderstandings can happen so quickly..."

"Then, explain what's going on!"

"Step by step?"

"Yes!"

"Calm down, for heaven's sake! I've not deceived you..."

"Deceived, no. Evaded the truth, yes."

"How so? Yes, I crossed paths with Max Coffin in the past. I shunned him like the plague, because his tactics reminded me very much of..."

"Moriarty?"

"Indeed, though on a lesser scale. I'm in the process of convincing Stuart to cancel his contract and secure more... ethical representation."

"Okay, then. Have you contacted Gloria Hilmar?" Watson wondered.

"Gloria Hilmar is dead. It's a story that didn't make the papers. When... Max pulled his little stunt and she lost her chance to play the Gershwin, she took an overdose of painkillers. We think her brother took the shot at Stuart..."

"But?"

"He's vanished into thin air."

"How does the drone..."

"It became the murderer's eyes, searching the crowd during the reception to locate his victim."

Dropping onto the swivel chair, Watson woke the computer from sleep mode. "What's the suspect's name?"

Tapping the keys, a flurry of credit card charges scrolled down the screen, a grin flashing across his face as he proclaimed, "He registered at the Vancouver Marriott yesterday, after flying from Austin through Dallas."

"Thanks, John!"

Watson didn't hear from Sheila for a week, keeping him on pins and needles. Edith failed to soothe his agitation with invitations to the movies or delicious meals.

The white cardboard envelope with red and blue border arrived that Saturday via express international mail, containing a CD, snapshots of a smiling Sheila, Tony Downton and Stuart Christian with the Vancouver Gastown steam

clock behind them, a handwritten letter, a pair of concert tickets, and newspaper clippings.

“Texas murderer captured,” read one of the latter, detailing the apprehension of Paul Hilmar after a lengthy police car chase through the heart of the Canadian metropolis. In his confession, the irate gunman cited Christian’s involvement in cheating his sister of her rightful accolades.

The letter, in Sheila’s almost illegible scrawl, answered Watson’s unspoken questions.

A confrontation in the jail’s visiting room - at her insistence - placed Hilmar at a metal table opposite Christian. The detainee ignored Sheila’s narrative about Max Coffin, lunging at the British musician, eager to throttle him.

Guards dragged a shackled Hilmar to his cell.

“That proved nothing,” Christian groaned.

Sheila responded, “It’ll sink in eventually. Then, his remorse will be genuine.”

As for the tickets to Christian’s November engagement at Albert Hall, she added, “For us to use, when I get home. We’ll dine with him at Claridge’s beforehand, as well.”

The CD featured Christian playing short pieces by Mozart, Bach, Rachmaninoff and Chopin’s 12th Etude, one of Watson’s favorites. An original, untitled duet blended piano and guitar strains. A card, inscribed by the pianist, thanked him for his assistance and explained Sheila had rented a private studio - at considerable expense - to make the recording, especially the new composition dedicated to “her good right arm.”

Christian wrote, “Without the two of you, my career might have ended in Austin. Sheila saved my life - literally - and you made it possible for me to once more step on a stage without having to fear bullets aimed in my direction.”

That his flatmate would expend such an effort dispelled the veteran’s periodic malaise that she took his efforts for granted.

As Watson had predicted, Coffin faced an indictment in the scandal, his assets auctioned to cover legal fees. Paul Hilmar was extradited from Canada to Texas for trial and imprisonment.

Sheila connected with Baker Street from Los Angeles three days later, the Pacific Ocean visible in the background. “Just lounging on the beach after a hectic few days!” she joked. “I’ll be home soon, my friend!”

For an Uncle's Honor

Tony Downton's tanned visage, with its mustache and goatee framed by a shaggy dark mane, pixelated twice before coming into focus on the desktop monitor.

Brushing aside stacks of unopened post, Johnny Watson ran a wireless mouse across the wooden surface, trying to adjust the audio so he could hear what the movie actor/producer/director was saying.

The speakers finally online, the question amounted to a shout.

"Have you heard from Sheila lately?" Downton bellowed.

The disabled Army veteran sighed. "Not for two weeks."

"Damn!"

"Why? Has she gone off on an adventure without you?"

Palm trees visibly swayed beyond the windows behind him; Downton bit back a retort. "If I knew, would I be asking you?"

"Could do." Watson leaned back on the swivel chair. "What happened?"

The video caller launched into a narrative that sounded like a film script.

"First of the month, I was editing the reshoots in my den," Downton began. "Sheila was eating breakfast on the veranda, reading the Sunday *Los Angeles Times*."

An expletive-laced outburst attracted his attention, he related, and he left digital files open on his computer to investigate the ruckus. Sheila Holmes had smashed the glass table and was nursing a nasty gash on her right palm.

When he inquired, the woman pointed to the newspaper among the shards. Downton read a headline on the book review page, declaring another Sherlock Holmes mystery had just been published.

"I couldn't imagine why it would upset her so," he told Watson. "She answered, 'Doctor Watson must've given his unreleased manuscripts as Christmas gifts, or this is another forgery!'"

Downton acknowledged that any publicity about the Great Detective could only help raise awareness of his forthcoming bio-pic, on which Sheila had served as technical advisor. His attempts to soothe her passed in vain.

She'd stormed from the residence and hadn't returned.

"You have the capacity to track her mobile, or her credit cards, don't you, John?" Downton implored.

Watson smirked. "I'm in London. Have your Hollywood crew use their contacts."

"We don't have... that kind of influence. We're not tight with the cops."

“All right, all right. I’ll see what I can do.”

The screen wavered again, making Downton’s “Thanks,” sound like a backfiring auto before the video disconnected.

Running agitated fingers through a close-cropped blond mop, Watson grit his teeth. Bad enough Sheila had absented herself from 221B Baker Street for an extended period, leaving him to deal with phone calls, visitors and letters seeking her unique investigative talents. Now, he was expected to track her whereabouts from thousands of miles away.

Not a difficult task, really. Activating his mobile, he tapped the icon resembling a blackthorn pipe. He typed the message JW*911 and hit “Enter.”

A minute later, Sheila’s face appeared, slightly distorted by the sun’s glare over her right shoulder.

“John, are you all right?” came the rich contralto through the speaker.

He grunted, “Where are you?”

“Why?”

“Because Tony is worried about you.”

“He rang you?”

Watson nodded.

“I’m so sorry.”

When she didn’t continue, he urged, “Well?”

“I got involved with a case and...”

“What case?”

She countered, “What did Tony tell you?”

“You’re being awfully... circumspect, Sheila. What’s going on?”

“Should do,” she muttered, recounting the book review of the “new” Sherlock Holmes mystery novel, heading out for a long walk, and discovering Tony’s assistant director staked out over the road from the apartment building.

“Did he follow you?” Watson asked.

“No. I followed him.”

“Where?”

“Escondido.”

“Es-con-what?”

“A city south of Los Angeles. Richards hopped the Metrolink train to Oceanside, then another called the Sprinter to the east end of the line.”

“Who is Richards, and why is that suspicious?”

Henry Richards, according to Sheila, was an alias of Aldo Cellini, a Venice-born violinist who toured America with the Naples Symphony eight years prior, remaining behind when the orchestra flew back to Europe. He changed his name,

eliminated his accent - except for a few tell-tale words - and weaseled his way into the movie business. He worked up the ladder from arranging musical scores to Tony's A.D.

"That still doesn't answer..."

"Patience, John," Sheila scolded. "Richards has another pseudonym: Peter Scarsdale."

With his free hand, Watson typed the name into a search engine - sometimes faster in providing details than his erstwhile flatmate.

Scarsdale had authored the Sherlock Holmes novel which so incensed the young detective.

"So, the man can write. There's no crime..."

Sheila snorted. "It is a crime to misrepresent the source of material being presented to the public as fact. It is a crime to steal confidential information, to stalk public figures..."

"Richards did all this? Why?"

"That's why I'm in Escondido."

"For two weeks?"

"Weekends only. Monday through Friday, he's traveling to book signings and press junkets..."

"And you couldn't tell Tony about this?" Watson challenged.

"I didn't want to distract him from editing the film, knowing parts of his movie script were integrated into Richards' novel."

The seriousness of the situation spread before Watson like a banquet. Downton's assistant director had plagiarized sections of dialogue and action for his own gain.

"What's more, he's claiming the manuscript was written by your namesake, John," Sheila persisted. "Found in a dustbin behind 221B by one of the Baker Street Irregulars and preserved in an East End attic for more than a century."

"Ludicrous!" Watson slumped on the swivel chair at the desk. "How will you break the news to Tony?"

"I don't..."

Abruptly, Sheila's head cocked sideways and she dropped the phone. The last image Watson saw was the heel of a man's shoe smashing the device.

Blue eyes stared at the mobile for an extended moment, before fingers reacted with practiced precision.

Downton's face appeared, frustrated, on the monitor, looking away from the camera. "I'm busy..."

"Tony, get on your phone and call the police in Escondido."

Brown orbs flashed toward the distant image. “What? What’s happened?”

“Sheila’s in trouble. She’s been attacked...”

“Where?”

“Escondido.”

“You said that, but where in the city?”

Watson deliberated. “All I could see behind her head was a sign with a bent yellow arrow and the letters I and T.”

Downton’s turn to think. “The In-N-Out Burger!” he finally exclaimed.

This time, not even a “Thanks” was offered before the screen went blank.

Watson inhaled slowly, as Edith Hudson-Thorne, the owner of 221B Baker Street, carried in a tray loaded with steak and kidney pie.

“You cooked this?” he queried.

The landlady snorted, “Lord, no. I picked it up at the deli on the corner.”

The aroma tempting, the Afghan War amputee couldn’t eat a bite. The sun vanished beyond smudged Baker Street windows; he guessed the time to be early afternoon in California.

Waiting knotted his stomach. Edith cleared the dishes after an hour, asking if her tenant wished to join her in the ground floor parlor for some television. He declined, settling in the winged-back armchair beside the dormant fireplace.

Pipes and yellowed envelopes attached to the mantle with a jack knife looked as lonely as he felt. He imagined hearing the clock ticking interminable seconds...

The computer alert roused him from a light doze. He lurched toward the desk, his prosthetic leg nearly wrenching loose.

“Well?” he demanded of Downton, once the screen ceased flickering.

“She’s fine, John,” came the rich baritone. “She’s giving her statement across the parking lot. I’m out one A.D.”

“Henry Richards?”

The film director’s brow furrowed. “How’d you... Oh, right.” He appeared to walk further from flashing police cruiser emergency lights, his tone somber.

“She told me, before the cops got hold of her, that she dodged the baseball bat he swung, but dropped her phone. He smashed the screen before she knocked him over the bus stop bench, cracking his skull on a steel trash can.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“I’m familiar with Wing Chun. She... defended herself, and rightfully so, but with a little too much... force.”

“Sheila doesn’t tend to lie,” Watson remarked.

“The instinctive reaction could have happened so fast, she didn’t realize what she did.”

“If you say so.”

Downton shrugged off his frown. “Anyway, I appreciate your help in finding her. She’ll have a new phone by end of day, and we’ll send you the number, so you can set up whatever tracking app you used...”

A uniformed police officer approached at that point, and the call abruptly ceased.

Watson, only partially relieved, switched off the desktop computer and hobbled to his bedroom.

His mobile vibrated on the night stand in the wee hours; he groped in the dark for the device. Bleary eyes didn’t recognize the number. “Yeah?”

“John.”

He shot upright on the double mattress. “Sheila? More trouble?”

“Calm yourself, for Pete’s sake,” soothed the detective. “Everything’s fine.”

“Then, for Pete’s sake, what the hell happened yesterday?”

“What the hell happened months ago, you mean.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever. It’s too early for riddles.”

Sheila related the tale of Henry Richards’ hijacking of Tony Downton’s script - or key parts thereof. According to the police report, Richards had previously confided to his girlfriend such details would add a “realistic tone” to the story he’d cobbled together about a lost Sherlock Holmes case. A New York publisher bought the manuscript, along with the falsified provenance of Dr. John H. Watson discarding the papers at Baker Street, to be found by a youngster Sherlock Holmes employed to run errands.

“But, why get so miffed, when other authors have pulled the same stunt for years?” the younger Watson puzzled.

Sheila grunted, “Plagiarism is a crime.”

“Not to mention, bad publicity would hurt Downton’s film at the cinema,” her flatmate added after a thoughtful pause.

“Should do.”

“But, why would he try to kill you?”

“He realized his blunder when we crossed paths in Escondido. The potential to lose not only a lucrative Hollywood career, but face deportation after years of hiding his actual identity...”

Watson grasped the unspoken conclusion. “So, you’re okay?”

“If you mean, will I recover from watching the man die at my feet... eventually.”

“Then, can I go back to sleep?”

She chuckled. “Yes, John. Have a good lie-in.”

“Without an apology for causing me more worry?”

“You don’t need to worry about me, John.”

“But, I do. You’re...” He couldn’t think of the right word, his brain still fuzzy.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry, John. I’ll try to keep a low profile from now on.”

His turn to laugh. “I won’t make bank on that.”

The call disconnected and he flopped on the pillows, closing his eyes once more.

Recognizing Holmes

Johnny Watson initially believed the email to be spam. He didn't recognize the sender's name, and clicking the link in the message might have loaded a virus into his computer system.

Yet, the subject line - "Sheila Holmes Receives Award" - intrigued the young Army veteran. Occupying their flat at 221B Baker Street while she spent a few months in California, he tried to keep tabs on her activities, far more interesting than his own sedentary lifestyle.

He took the risk and opened the post.

"Dear Mr. Watson," the message read. "Since the ceremony which can be viewed at the link below, I have been unable to contact Sheila Holmes. If you know her whereabouts, please ask her to get in touch as soon as possible."

Luis Reyes had included not only his address and phone number, but also his social media accounts.

The link opened a screen allowing Watson to watch a somewhat shaky video taken in a dimly lit auditorium. A thin man with short black hair and a goatee, clad in a tuxedo, stood at a podium on a stage, speaking into a microphone.

"While many of the awards presented this evening have honored those in the field of entertainment, the next presentation hits very close to home for me," he began in a refined tenor. "For those who may not read the paper or watch the news: three months ago, I found myself in the wrong place at the wrong time, and wound up in jail for a crime I didn't commit."

Luis Reyes, as Watson discovered through a quick internet search, was a young Puerto Rican rap music artist going by the stage name "MC Sour Cherries." He'd moved to Los Angeles two years earlier in the hopes of landing a recording contract.

Reyes' narrative described how, after a club gig in Santa Barbara one Friday night, he stopped to help a stalled vehicle on Interstate 5 north of L.A., only to find the driver dead, a bullet wound in the side of his head.

Police arrived seconds later, arresting him for murder.

The deceased proved to be a cousin of Tony Downton's casting agent, Reyes related. Downton, in the midst of finalizing his Sherlock Holmes bio-pic - with Sheila as technical advisor - took Friday morning off to attend the funeral.

"How Miss Holmes could deduce my innocence, just by listening to the mourners' idle graveside chatter, blew my mind," continued the video.

Three days were wasted before the detective received permission to interview Reyes. Seated on opposite sides of a metal table in the L.A. County Jail's interrogation room, Sheila assessed him, disregarding the orange garb and wrist shackles.

"In less than a minute, she nailed me as an anomaly in showbiz: not drinking, smoking or doing drugs," praised Reyes from the podium, deep brown eyes moist with admiration. "She called me out on my day job at the mall, too, the artists who did my ink, my three Cocker Spaniels, two cats and a canary."

The audience chuckled.

"We reviewed the facts of the case as they were known: no gun had been found, and I had none on me when the pigs cuffed me. Miss Holmes promised to get at the truth, so justice would be served. I had to remind her, though, this isn't Britain, and how Latinos, Blacks... they're railroaded through the courts all the time in this country."

Rumblings of discontent briefly obscured Reyes' voice, so Watson couldn't hear what had been said.

"Miss Holmes convinced the public defender to arrange bail, so I got sprung and went with her to the crime scene."

There, she gathered few clues, thanks to curiosity seekers obliterating shoe and tire prints, and Saturday's heavy rain, according to Reyes. They drove to the police impound lot, inspecting the victim's vintage white Porche.

"She impressed me even more going over the front and back seats. Compiled the man's entire history: he'd been driving back from an unsuccessful business meeting in Fresno and a visit to his mistress. All I saw was blood staining the upholstery. My brain, frankly, wanted to explode!"

Over the course of a week, the pair were almost inseparable, Reyes stated. They browsed through old newspapers at the Los Angeles Public Library, interviewed the woman who'd phoned authorities after noticing the car parked with flashing emergency lights on the highway shoulder, and reviewed the coroner's report.

"She's a dynamo of energy, this Miss Holmes," he lauded her. "She should be a rapper, herself!"

Cheers and applause forced him to pause.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for her valuable service to me, personally, and the Southern California community as a whole, I'm proud to present Sheila Holmes with the 21st Century Music Society's first ever Humanitarian Award."

Watson fast forwarded the video through more applause and vibration as Sheila rose from the first row of seats and ascended red carpeted stairs, where she

received a poster-sized, engraved plaque. She evidently asked Reyes to hold it for her, he reclaimed it while she delivered her acceptance speech.

Preferring t-shirts and jeans most days, Watson chuckled at Sheila's obvious discomfort wearing a purple satin designer gown. Not one to address the public, either, she took a moment even after the crowd ended its standing ovation before opening her mouth.

"Thank you, Luis," she stammered. "I appreciate the compliment that I might venture into the field of rap, but my practice has always been to keep my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut!"

This honesty elicited a wave of laughter.

"Suffice it to say, bringing this case to a successful conclusion - meaning, bringing the real murderer to justice - would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of the Los Angeles Police Department."

A chorus of boos.

"Yes, the investigating officers jumped to erroneous conclusions in the aftermath of the crime but, at least, they were willing to admit their mistakes, drop the charges against Luis, and pursue the facts I uncovered to their logical end."

"It took 'em six weeks!" Reyes interspersed hotly, leaning toward the mic. "And only after you met personally with the D.A!"

"You're correct, Luis. I'll reserve my comments on American law enforcement, being a temporary visitor to this country. Let me say, however: nobody's perfect, and police officers around the globe are often distracted by demands for results, so they don't observe the minor - yet vital - details staring them in the face."

Sheila jerked awkwardly; Watson guessed a foot had slipped out of a heeled black pump beneath her skirt.

"In conclusion, I thank you for honoring me for doing a job I love, in the midst of being part of what I hope is a well-received account of my great-great-uncle Sherlock's life and times. Being in California hasn't been the holiday I expected, but it's been an eye-opening experience!"

She relieved Reyes of the plaque, raising it beside her face so photographers could snap the required shots for media publication. Then, she and Reyes strode into the wings and the recording ended.

But, a clip had been badly edited onto the end, after some static on the screen.

"John," came Sheila's voice over a blurred, dark image, "I'll be sending this award to you in short order. We'll decide where to hang it when I get back to Baker Street, sometime after the fifteenth. I have to stay here to testify at the trial.

A murky business, which I convinced Luis not to include in his introduction. The victim was a California state prison guard who'd been smuggling mobiles and drugs into maximum security facilities. When he demanded more money for his services, a gang leader ordered him hit - from solitary confinement, of all things. Not a difficult case, really, just tragic. Talk to you soon."

Watson closed the screen and archived the email as Edith Hudson-Thorne delivered his lunch on a tray.

Boat Race

Johnny Watson had taken to monitoring Los Angeles television channel KTLA on his mobile phone while Sheila Holmes absented herself from 221B Baker Street in favor of serving as filmmaker Tony Downton's technical advisor on a Sherlock Holmes bio-pic in California. As the weeks passed, news reports of the young woman's antics - solving crimes, mostly - became more frequent.

At least, reading the articles and viewing the videos distracted the disabled veteran from his chemotherapy treatments. Confinement in a hospital bed bored him no end.

The latest coverage occurred inadvertently, Watson acknowledged, brushing a clump of blond hair off the starched white sheet. Sheila, after all, proved hard to miss - even in a crowd - with her short brunette mop topped by her great-great-uncle Sherlock's black fedora.

Watson enlarged the paused image, recorded during a series of cigarette boat races near Oceanside. Sheila had climbed on the roof of a blue Dodge Ram pickup truck, the better to see the aftermath of a horrendous wreck and explosion. Then, she'd leapt onto the sandy beach and sprinted toward a cadre of emergency personnel scrambling to their watercraft.

Camera crews pursued the group, their own speedboat idling just off shore. Impossible to determine the gist of an intense conversation between Sheila and a uniformed police official, but Watson guessed she wasn't inquiring after the man's wife and children.

A written transcript of the interview one particular journalist secured, well past sunset - the deceased had been recovered, along with the multiple shattered hulls - went into far more detail than the visual file.

Watson tucked the mobile behind his back when a white-clad orderly delivered the bland, liquid lunch.

"You should be resting, sir," the burly youth scolded.

The patient bristled. "I *am* resting. You don't see me jogging in place, eh?"

"I meant..."

"I know what you meant." The smell of the chicken broth turned his stomach.

"You'd better eat."

"Should do."

The door closed once more, Watson poured over text scrolling on the tiny screen.

“I came down to support Tony’s team,” was Sheila’s first quote. Downton, supposedly, was occupied with Hollywood meetings to iron out final details of distribution for his pet project. He owned a 51% share of the boat, though, and asked his companion to check on that asset’s performance.

An accompanying video clip caught the strapping driver in his skin-tight black jumpsuit on the dock. His bronze mane resisted stiff winds as he kissed Sheila rather passionately, just before a sponsor-decaled helmet obscured his tanned countenance and he sank behind the wheel.

Watson’s stomach knotted anew.

The reporter’s own observations painted a vivid scene: Downton’s red and gold number 99 literally rode above the waves at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. “Lucky 13” - a royal blue and white version of the same body style - had jumped to the head of the pack on the second lap of the elongated water course, cutting inside as the leaders veered past buoy markers.

Both competitors survived the explosion of the purple number 21, which seemed to lose control before slamming into the white number 45. Two other boats, unable to avoid the impact, slammed into the flame-engulfed pair.

“It was no accident,” Sheila countered the reporter’s assertion regarding the tragedy.

Pressed for a clarification, the detective ended the conversation.

Edith Hudson-Thorne, the owner of 221B, poked her russet head through the hospital door at that moment. “John! You should be eating!”

“Not hungry,” Watson grumbled, swiping the phone screen to find additional information.

The widow revealed a bag with hamburger and chips, and a chocolate milk shake. “Will this tempt you?”

“Doc says I’m not to be on solid food.”

“When has what the doctor said ever stopped you - or Sheila, for that matter - from doing as you please?”

Watson managed a weak smile, accepting the meal Edith laid on the rolling tray.

“What are you reading?” she queried.

“Sheila’s latest.”

“In California?”

He nodded the patchy bald cranium.

“What’s she done now?”

“Proven a boating incident was deliberate sabotage.”

Edith snatched the mobile, squinting at the screen. “Where?”

The former British Army medic reclaimed the device, pinpointing the narrative. “Here.”

Settling on a metal chair beside the bed, Edith read in silence while Watson consumed the greasy sandwich and sucked the styrofoam cup dry.

“God, that tasted good,” he breathed.

“I’m glad.” His visitor glanced up. “Did you know Sheila understood engines?”

Watson chuckled. “Sheila’s head contains a wealth of what some might deem useless information on a myriad of topics. Unlike Sherlock, who was very specific about what he retained, Sheila remembers every tidbit of every crime she’s heard about.”

“Meaning...”

“For a boat to malfunction at such a speed, it wasn’t by chance. There are set safety procedures and equipment inspections, prior to each race, given the risk of injury or death.”

Continuing to read, Edith murmured, “Ah, here! It took a week, but Sheila found a small pinhole in the steering fluid line...”

“And, the force of turning the boats had exacerbated the leak, so when the fluid pressure dropped...”

“Three dead, and a fourth seriously injured.” Edith returned the mobile to Watson.

“The only remaining question is: who’s responsible?”

“I’m sure Sheila will track down the culprit.”

Watson relaxed on the pillows. “Must do.”

Folding the sheet and blanket around his chest, Edith drawled, “Except...”

“She has a high success rate. High enough to draw more clients.”

Eyelids fluttering, the patient slept.

For her part, Edith meandered down the corridor to the lounge, pouring herself a cup of stale coffee. A copy of that day’s *London Times* had been discarded in the recycle bin; she plucked it out and scanned the headlines.

A three-column image of the explosion on the upper half of the back page drew her attention. The British account told the entire story, praising Sheila for discovering the mechanic responsible for sabotaging number 21: the brother of the owner’s ex-wife.

That individual confessed to the Oceanside police and federal agents he resented the man’s refusal to adequately support his erstwhile spouse and their children, despite having millions deposited in off-shore bank accounts.

Three counts of first-degree murder, assault and destruction of property were filed by the San Diego County prosecutor's office.

Sheila received a commendation from the Oceanside mayor.

A cheesy photo of the ceremony, below the fold, revealed the detective's discomfort - to those who knew her well, at any rate.

Edith deposited the newspaper on Watson's night stand before departing at the conclusion of visiting hours.

Of Sand and Murder

Edith Hudson-Thorne yawned silently as Johnny Watson stirred in the hospital bed beside her.

The disabled British Army veteran's condition remained tenuous, his cancer diagnosis compounded by the absence of Sheila Holmes, whose frenetic pace and near-madness might have raised his spirits as he endured radiation sessions and chemotherapy.

She was enjoying herself in California, however, working as technical advisor on a film about her great-great-uncle, Sherlock Holmes.

Tending the young man fell to Edith, faithfully spending each afternoon at St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

Watson had forced a promise from her that Sheila not be told about his illness. "I don't want to spoil her trip," he'd whispered as the treatments began taking their toll on his already frail body. He lay, motionless, on the plastic-covered mattress, fluids dripping from clear bags through intravenous tubes into his arms, his purple-checked hospital gown askew.

The russet-haired landlady adjusted her position on the uncomfortable armchair as her mobile pinged with an incoming message. She extracted the device from her pink sweater pocket and squinted at the screen.

"Is this your gal?" read tiny letters, followed by a link.

Time and again, Edith had been warned about viruses and scams, but she recognized the name associated with the question: a cousin of her late husband employed by the U.S. government.

"What's she done now?" the widow muttered as she tapped the string of blue letters.

The video flashed "Top Secret" and "Confidential" before a white-washed rectangular room appeared, the sole furnishings a square wooden table and four chairs.

Edith recognized filmmaker Tony Downton on the left, Sheila to his right, with two unfamiliar figures opposite.

Downton, dark wavy hair and handsome features part of the reason for his Hollywood stardom, wore a brown pin-striped Armani suit, gold tie loose. Sheila, as per her usual, sported a tie-dye t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, her famous forebear's black fedora propped atop brunette curls.

The taller of the other pair, snow at the temples, slender with a smooth mien and darting grey-blue eyes, appeared nervous, his elegant fingers running along the collar of his green Izod polo.

In a black suit and starched white shirt, the last had to be the official, Edith surmised. She'd seen too many in her life to mistake them for ordinary citizens.

The ruddy minion periodically scribbled on a small notepad, as well.

As when he asked his companions to spell their full names.

That's how Edith discovered the third man's identity, Delbert Klein.

"What's your profession, Mr. Klein?" the federal agent pressed.

"He's my assistant director," Downton interspersed. "Or, he was. Now he's working for one of my colleagues, scouting locations for an upcoming shoot."

"Is that why you spent three weeks in Morocco last month?" the fed directed to Klein.

An uncertain tenor replied, "That's right."

"What about you, Miss Holmes? Were you scouting locations, too?"

"No." Not a hint of fear in the young woman's contralto. "I was investigating a murder."

Downton's hand seized her forearm in warning.

Too late.

"Murder?" echoed the agent.

"Must do." Sheila affirmed. "Three of Tony's previous scouts never returned from their assignment. I was sent to..."

"Who sent you?"

Downton intervened. "Mr. Barr, I must admit Miss Holmes traveled to Morocco at my expense, but it was meant to be a pleasure trip. The fact she became involved in what was..."

"An international debacle!" Barr chided. "We are now faced with easing tensions raised when she arbitrarily detained six Moroccan nationals - at gunpoint, no less - interrogating them under threat of torture."

"That's not true!" Holmes raged, rising.

"Sheila, calm down," soothed Downton.

Settling again on the hard surface, Edith watched on the mobile as her tenant grit her teeth, breathing tensely.

"Mr. Downton, you are excused," Barr announced. "If we are to get to the bottom of this..."

"Are you sure?"

"You weren't in Morocco yourself, were you?"

"No. I flew over after..."

"Then, yes, you may go."

Downton pushed back the chair and, with a pleading glance at Sheila, made his exit.

Barr's green eyes scanned the two remaining. He flipped through his notes, then focused on Klein

"Now, Del - is it all right if I call you Del? - tell me what happened on the night you arrived in Casablanca."

"Nothing unusual," Klein related, still trembling. "We passed through Customs, collected our luggage and equipment, and took a taxi to our lodgings."

"Which hotel?" Barr queried.

"Not a hotel. A... private house. To save on expenses, since the production budget is quite tight on this... passion project, of sorts, we rented the upper floor of what had been a sheik's palace. We were each assigned a cubicle, divided by heavy curtains."

"How many were there in your group?"

Klein counted mentally. "Twelve."

"Including you, Miss Holmes?"

She nodded, smirking.

"So, you went directly from the airport to this palace?" Barr continued.

"Yes," replied Klein.

"But, you didn't stay there very long."

Sheepishly, Klein averted his gaze. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a notorious womanizer," Sheila spat. "Get on with it, already. You know what happened."

Barr scowled at her. "Perhaps. I want him to tell me."

"If you keep pussy-footing around like this, we'll be all day," she protested. "Suffice it to say, a girl caught his eye, and he followed her down the street. When he reached the door of her residence, he realized the man approaching from the opposite direction was either her father or her husband, so he hid in a nearby doorway."

"Which is when you..."

"Created a distraction, so he could escape."

Barr contemplated the scenario. "But, he didn't comply."

"No, the idiot." Sheila glared at Klein. "He leapt through a window into the house with the grace of a much-younger acrobat. When I pulled back the draperies, I saw him embracing and kissing the girl. Footsteps grew louder, and he retreated, but not before she gave him two necklaces as a remembrance."

"Those necklaces being..."

"One of shell, not terribly valuable, the second a sizable ruby surrounded by a ring of one-carat diamonds."

“Isn’t it true that you’re shielding this man, because he stole the necklaces from the woman’s jewel case beside her bed?” Barr demanded.

“That’s what the husband would like the world to think,” Sheila retorted. “If it became public knowledge that he and his wife were con artists, luring unsuspecting - and vulnerable - tourists into their home, presenting them with gifts only to later report them stolen...”

“So, you’re saying Mr. Klein’s own foolishness...”

“Not just that.”

“Then, what?”

“The wife’s brother holds the political post of issuing permits to foreigners wishing to film in-country. He would tip off his in-laws when a new batch of suckers was scheduled to arrive, in the hopes of snaring one or two in their trap. If that ploy didn’t succeed, this weasel would escort the scouts to the desert so they could view potential sites, where his confederates would beat and rob them.”

“Leaving them for dead?” Barr wondered.

“Usually, their victims survived, bruised and wiser for the wear. The heat in recent months, though, took a toll on the trio Tony’s production company tasked with the job.”

“And, how did you discover this?”

Sheila sighed at the agent’s dimness. “When we arrived back at our lodgings, Del gave me the necklaces for safe keeping. My cubicle was two down from his, so I heard how, less than an hour later, the husband and five members of the local constabulary invaded our privacy with a warrant for Del’s arrest. When they didn’t find the goods, they put him on notice they would return in the morning.”

“You became suspicious?”

“If I hadn’t been suspicious, I never would’ve flown that distance in the first place. You see, I’d interacted a bit with Del during the filming of Tony’s movie. Any female with a decent amount of curves attracted his eye, no matter how busy he might be. I... interrupted him once - accidentally, mind - in Tony’s trailer, with a script girl... well...”

Klein’s face reddened.

“So, you arranged for Del to be bait on the latest trip?” Barr speculated.

“Could do.”

The assistant director’s embarrassment transformed to anger. “You mean, you deliberately...”

“The only danger you were in was from your own... overactive libido,” Sheila chided. “I was well prepared for any eventuality.”

“Except for sparking international outrage by holding those men hostage,” Barr stated.

“I didn’t hold them hostage. They... were caught in our rooms, having failed to recover the jewels, and I... let justice take its course.”

“By breaking the nose of one, the arms of two others, and knocking the rest unconscious?”

“Four of them had knives, and two had guns. I wasn’t about to let them get away with...”

“They claimed you attacked them in an alley, in an attempt to steal their wallets.”

“Then, why would I drag them up a steep flight of stairs, tie them to bedposts, and only then summon the police?” Sheila scoffed.

“True.”

“Were they not found to have substantial criminal records, each and every one?”

“True,” Barr repeated.

“Then, rather than ruffling their feathers like some offended peacock, the Moroccan government should be grateful this criminal ring was exposed, and tourists - whose money they value so much for their local economy - may travel a bit safer in future.”

Barr closed the notepad and dropped his pen atop it. “If it becomes necessary, are you willing to so testify before an international tribunal?”

“Of course.”

“My report will reflect as much. Thank you for your time.”

Klein rose and moved toward the door. Sheila restrained him, allowing Barr to depart.

The video continued as Sheila seized Klein’s polo. The taller man’s blue-grey eyes widened in fear as he gazed down at her determined countenance.

“All right, Del. I bailed you out this time,” she hissed. “From now on, you better keep your fly zipped, or you’ll end up on the business end of some irate husband’s shotgun.”

“I know, I know, Sheila,” he admitted. “I wouldn’t have to look elsewhere if you just...”

She released him, turning away, though her voice did not soften. “No, Del. I’ve no interest in the... frivolities of romance.”

“With me, no. With Tony?”

“Not even with Tony.”

“But, you’ve been living in his penthouse...”

“Which has eight bedrooms, for Christ’s sake!”

“Are you saying...”

“Yes! My work is my life, and there’s room for nothing else!”

Edith watched the video dissolve as Sheila left the room, leaving Del stunned.

“Room for nothing else?” came Johnny Watson’s weak utterance, his eyelids fluttering.

“Rest, John,” the landlady advised.

The cancer-bald cranium rolled toward her. “I thought I heard Sheila...”

“No, she’s not back yet. Soon, though. Soon.”

Before she replaced the mobile in her sweater, Edith deleted the link. Suspecting how the veteran felt about his flatmate, she couldn’t risk him finding the video and having his heart broken in his weakened condition.

A Monster's Death

International cable news hoped the broadcast would net them some serious ratings. Global print media outlets predicted the "Trial of the Century."

The appeal of Hollywood scandal with the masses could not be denied.

For Johnny Watson, other aspects of life held higher priority at the moment. Wisps of blond hair were gradually regrowing on his cranium, the effects of chemotherapy slowly dissipating. His body felt as if it had been crushed by a steamroller; he hadn't the strength to attach his prosthetic leg to even hobble from his bedroom to the sitting room.

Edith Hudson-Thorne proved herself a true blessing these weeks, in the absence of Sheila Holmes. The landlady had carried up a television and positioned it on a folding table so Watson could enjoy some distractions while he recuperated.

The judicial proceedings against a woman who'd allegedly murdered her husband in cold blood, in his estimation, didn't qualify as a distraction.

Yet, every channel either carried live reports or updates scrolling at the bottom of the screen.

Thanks to Sheila.

Shy and retiring most days she'd spent at 221B Baker Street, her excursion to California as technical advisor for Tony Downton's Sherlock Holmes bio-pic had thrust her into the limelight - almost willingly, it seemed to the British Army veteran who shared the flat.

Or, perhaps, American cameras realized their ability to net viewers beyond their normal demographics if this young, rather pretty British detective featured prominently in their coverage.

Depending on which commentator supplied the information, Sheila served as the lone eyewitness to Fred Robinson's bloody demise, or as an accomplice to the crime. The consensus, however, remained: the two-week court circus would reveal every detail of Hollywood's sordid underbelly.

Watson found himself glued to the set from late afternoon to midnight, given the time difference between London and Los Angeles. Edith chided him for such odd hours, especially when she prepared his meals and he slept through all but dinner.

"I'm sorry, Edith," he apologized during jury selection.

She dismissed his remorse, glad something held his attention during this critical phase of his recovery.

Opening statements on Tuesday riveted the disabled former medic. Aware of Sheila's disdain for legal theatrics, he could still envision the posh Malibu beach

house where Celia Lawrence sent her “abusive monster” of a spouse - according to her erudite attorney - careening over the balcony with a bullet in his heart.

Both prosecution and defense employed the phrase, “We will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt...”

Watson couldn’t contain his chuckle.

Testimony began in earnest shortly before the evening recess. A police investigator recollected finding Robinson face-down in the sand late that August Friday, the coroner pronouncing him dead. He deemed Celia’s tale of self-defense a fabrication to clear her of responsibility.

“Were either Mr. Robinson or Ms. Lawrence drunk?” the prim female prosecutor prodded.

“No, ma’am. My men performed a blood alcohol test on the defendant before she was booked into the county jail, and the toxicology report from the deceased’s autopsy showed no drugs or alcohol in his blood.”

During cross-examination, Celia’s attorney disputed this account. “Were there not a collection of empty liquor bottles scattered around the living room when you arrived, Lieutenant?”

A hesitation, then, “Yes.”

“But, you stated...”

“The bottles had been deliberately emptied by the defendant, at the behest of Sheila Holmes, to provide false evidence.”

Watson sucked air. He imagined Sheila tearing into the man with vicious Wing Chun strikes at such a lie.

“You have facts to support this supposition?” came the follow-up.

No response.

“Your Honor, will you instruct the witness to answer, please.”

The judge prompted the investigator.

The latter glared at the jurors. “Miss Holmes wanted to discredit my department, after...”

“After what?” pressed the defense attorney.

On the chair, a man sat, his bravado abruptly deflated. “After we ticketed Tony Downton for speeding on the Pacific Coast Highway a week earlier.”

Gasps from the gallery, silenced by a banging gavel.

“So, no evidence exists to prove collusion between Miss Holmes and Ms. Lawrence in regard to the empty liquor bottles?” the attorney persisted.

“None.”

The judge advised, “Any repeat of your unfounded speculation may result in charges of perjury.”

“Yes, sir,” gulped the investigator.

The attorney resumed, “What, actually, happened to the liquor from the empty bottles?”

“There’d been a party over the weekend, during which dozens of guests consumed the contents.”

“Except for Mr. Robinson and Ms. Lawrence.”

“That seems to be the case.”

“Were any of the bottles broken?”

“One.”

“Did not Ms. Lawrence tell police at the scene that Mr. Robinson had threatened to harm her with that broken bottle?”

“Yes, but...”

“But?”

The witness exhaled. “Nothing.”

“Were Mr. Robinson’s fingerprints on the broken bottle?”

“Yes.”

“Any others?”

“No, but...”

“But?” urged the attorney.

“Those attending the party confirmed the deceased poured most of the drinks, so his fingerprints would naturally be on the bottle.”

Not the slam-dunk conclusion the attorney had hoped for, by the expression a close-up camera revealed.

Sheila, her hatred of injustice perpetrated by the courts intense, took the stand as a prosecution witness on Friday. Watson managed to summon Edith with a shout, so the pair could watch their friend verbally shred the legal advocates.

“Why were you present at the Malibu residence owned by Mr. Robinson and Ms. Lawrence?” the prosecutor began.

“Tony Downton and I were invited for the weekend.”

“What is your relationship to Tony Downton?”

Watson glimpsed the minuscule quiver of Sheila’s lip, a portent of anger.

“I’m technical advisor on his latest film.”

“Isn’t it true that you live together in a Hollywood residence...”

“We share a penthouse, which has eight bedrooms.”

“You’re saying, you aren’t his mistress?”

“Objection!” cried the defense attorney. “Irrelevant!”

The judge sustained the motion. “Get on with it, madame prosecutor.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” She smoothed the skirt of her navy blue business suit.
“Miss Holmes, how are you acquainted with Mr. Robinson?”

“He had a role in Tony’s film.”

“Which film is that?”

“Tony’s biography of Sherlock Holmes.”

“And, how are you related to Sherlock Holmes?”

“Objection!”

Again, sustained with a reprimand.

“Sorry, Your Honor,” breathed the prosecutor. “What role did Mr. Robinson have in the film?”

“Inspector Lestrade.”

“You interacted with Mr. Robinson closely in your position as technical advisor?”

“Not really. Our dealings were more... social.”

“Social, in what capacity?”

“We’d eat lunch together and swap stories about London.”

“He was born in England?”

“That’s what he claimed.”

“Claimed?” echoed the attorney.

Watson sensed a blow-up in the offing. He cringed; Edith squeezed his trembling hand gently.

“Fred Robinson was born in the Czech Republic - while it was still known as Czechoslovakia. His family emigrated to England when he was seven. He never quite lost the accent, even after relocating to California ten years ago.”

“And, you know this how? By researching his background?”

“No, by observation.”

A derisive laugh - enough to set Sheila off, Watson knew from first-hand experience. “Observation?”

“Yes, observation.” Her contralto dropped to a rumble. “The foundation of any true detective’s skills. Through observation, I am able to categorically state you live alone, keep canaries and enjoy chocolate. You take sleeping pills on a regular basis and are behind on your paperwork at the office.”

The prosecutor visibly swallowed her heart. “How...”

“Similar observation led me to deduce Fred was allergic to cats, but loved dogs, owning three spaniels and a terrier,” Sheila persisted. “He liked to work on cars; a residue of motor oil remained in the ridges of his hands. Of greater concern, however, was his propensity to immerse himself in whatever role he portrayed at any given moment, maintaining the pretense ‘round the clock.’”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“While he played Lestrade, we got along well because he assumed the demeanor of a Scotland Yard detective. His subsequent role cast him as a vicious mob hitman, a persona he brought home with him, abusing Celia in the most violent fashion.”

“You’re saying Mr. Robinson was mentally unstable?”

“The trauma wrought by his dysfunctional upbringing eradicated any sense of self, so he found respite in assuming the personalities, voices and mannerisms of others. This trait increased his demand as a character actor, with unexpected consequences. Once he allowed himself to be consumed by a part, it became impossible to shed that guise until filming - and often, post-production - wrapped.”

“So, you maintain that Mr. Robinson threatened the defendant with bodily harm during the party, and she shot him in self defense?”

“Absolutely.”

Without another word, the woman resumed her seat, a not guilty verdict hanging over her head.

The defense took advantage of his opponent’s setback. “Miss Holmes, you were present when Mr. Robinson met his end?”

“I was.”

“In the same room of the Malibu residence?”

“Yes, the living room.”

“What, exactly, transpired?” he urged.

Sheila launched into a riveting narrative; though the lunch hour neared, the judge failed to call a recess.

The young woman related how the party progressed well enough, with most guests leaving in the wee hours, others - too intoxicated to drive back to the city - crashed in the spare bedrooms. Other than serving as bartender, Robinson had avoided much of the idle chatter or dancing to the music provided by a hired DJ.

“He was moody, scowling,” she detailed. “His brown eyes smoldered, his mustache twitched and, when he did speak, that upward slope of his mouth seemed quite exaggerated.”

“Where was Tony Downton through all this?” asked the attorney.

“He left early, after receiving a call from the film’s editor.”

“So, as the party ended, only you, Mr. Robinson and Ms. Lawrence were awake?”

“Correct.”

“Then, what happened?”

Sheila recounted how Robinson tore into Celia for supposedly flirting with men during the festivities. She noted that his voice, usually a light baritone, became almost a bass growl. He'd clutched Celia's dress, ripping it as he sent her reeling across the room, where she landed on the sofa.

"If I hadn't stepped in at that point, he might've killed her."

"Please, explain."

"He broke the whiskey bottle on the bar, holding it like a weapon. He was moving in her direction, when I... disarmed him."

"How?"

"Wing Chun."

At the attorney's request, she described the martial art for judge and jury.

"Were you injured in the process?" the attorney inquired.

Sheila rolled up the sleeve of her satin blouse, revealing a jagged scar on her forearm. "In the mindset of a hitman, he adopted impressive defensive techniques."

At her seat behind the defense table, tears streamed down Celia's cheeks.

Her attorney allowed himself to be momentarily distracted. "Then, what?"

Sheila had grabbed a stack of paper napkins off the bar to soak up the blood. Robinson renewed his pursuit of Celia, who'd crossed to a rolltop desk, opened the drawer and grabbed a Colt revolver intended to dissuade intruders.

The actress aimed the weapon at her husband, who stopped but did not retreat. Celia tried to maneuver him toward the door, hoping to lock him out until he "got right in the head," per Sheila's chronicle. "Instead, he circled toward the deck overlooking the ocean. He wanted to pin Celia against the railing..."

"Did he have a weapon?" asked the attorney.

"The fireplace poker."

"And, what did the defendant do?"

"The outdoor lights extinguished, Fred tripped over a deck chair in the dark, so Celia slipped past him. When he turned, swinging the poker at her, she fired. He flipped over the railing and landed on the beach."

The attorney presented the fireplace poker as an exhibit, with the request, "Your Honor, I make a motion all charges against my client be dismissed."

While not immediately granted, the court adjourned for the day and, the following Monday, Celia Lawrence regained her freedom - a special report Watson watched, smirking.

He'd have a few choice words for his flatmate when next she rang him.

Downton's Documentary

Sheila Holmes had hinted, for weeks, about her return to 221B Baker Street after a prolonged trip to California, serving as actor/director/producer Tony Downton's technical advisor on his bio-pic of her great-great-uncle Sherlock Holmes.

Johnny Watson, in the depths of his heart, suspected she liked the adulation she received, on both a private and public level, having become involved in solving a series of crimes around the United States.

She tended to ring him at odd hours with reports of her activities, or he and Edith Hudson-Thorne, the landlady, read about them in American tabloids and British newspapers.

Scrolling through his emails, mostly junk, that Saturday morning, Sheila's name popped up. He opened the post to find a brief - somewhat suspicious - message with an internet link.

"John," it began, "I wish we could duplicate this effort in London. It might serve as a means to enlighten humanity and promote understanding between races."

Not that Watson considered Sheila racist; she'd never made note of any client's skin color or culture, unless it held a direct bearing on the matter at hand. For her to suddenly focus her energies on the topic...

He double-clicked the link, opening a video with a running time of nearly two hours.

The raw footage of pagoda-style structures and open air markets appeared to have been shot by an amateur, in the British Army veteran's estimation. That is, until Sheila appeared before the lens, explaining the project.

"I've convinced Tony Downton to shoot a documentary in Los Angeles' Chinatown," came her stern contralto. "There've been a series of attacks against Asians living in that district, based primarily on misunderstandings about their ancestry and traditions. I was contacted by the director of the Cathay Bank to investigate and, above and beyond capturing the miscreants who were perpetrating the ambushes and assaults, I discovered a vibrant heritage that needs to be shared so more can grasp that these people, often maligned because their native government engages in the most horrendous atrocities, are upstanding, dedicated and sensitive individuals."

The Steadicam - on Downton's shoulder, Watson presumed - followed Sheila along a crowded street, where she, with the help of a translator, interviewed shopkeepers and residents.

“We’ll add subtitles in post-production,” she noted, “but this woman” - an elder with white hair and care-worn features - “has related how a gang of teenagers broke into her son’s restaurant and trashed the place. They would’ve burned it to the ground if neighbors hadn’t intervened.

“Frequent is the mention that police don’t always respond to emergency calls in Chinatown,” Sheila continued. “Especially at night. The residents believe it’s because the authorities would rather they shutter their shops and move elsewhere. There are interpreters available during business hours at the police precinct serving the area, but for a shopkeeper to report a crime more than twelve hours after it occurs makes little sense. Efforts to track the offenders are minimal.”

The film progressed, showing Sheila enjoying a meal with a Chinese family. They laughed heartily at her attempts to use chopsticks, dropping rice on the table.

The patriarch of that clan told his story in broken English, aided by his college-age grandson.

The man had come to America as a child after World War II. He and his parents stowed away on a freighter, fleeing the impending Communist takeover of their homeland. Persevering against ongoing racist treatment - including his father’s death at the hands of a motorcycle gang in the late 1950s - they managed to earn enough through menial jobs to relocate to Chinatown and open a modest pottery shop.

That shop had been torched less than a month prior, leaving the family to rebuild their livelihood from scratch.

“These are human beings!” Sheila raged into the camera. “No one should be allowed to treat others in this manner, without making amends and facing justice!”

Watson sat through the entire film, envisioning its final form as a dynamic statement about the equality of all people. Pride at his flatmate’s social consciousness, heretofore unknown, swelled his chest.

The last ten minutes of the recording had been tacked onto the end of the rough cut, a more personal message from the young detective.

“John,” she spoke quietly, as if afraid of being overheard. “I’ve spent the better part of two months back and forth from Chinatown, working to gather evidence against the lowlifes who’ve been terrorizing the residents. Surveillance recordings show young Latinos, Blacks and Caucasians executing the crimes on an alternating basis, but the organizer behind it - including the failure of the police to seek indictments - is a wealthy Asian, preying upon his own people.”

She adjusted what must’ve been a mobile phone in the tiny, dim chamber. “Corruption of this magnitude cannot be stopped from the inside. I’ve seen it too

much in this country, and I know it happens elsewhere, as well. Members of a particular ethnic group extorting their own countrymen for money, promising protection... an old and contemptible scam.

“I know I’m being watched ‘round the clock; the documentary proved a reasonable cover for my query, since the constant media attention prevented the mastermind from taking any public action against me. You’re the only one I can trust to decode the message encrypted in this cut, then convey the details to California’s governor, in my name. He’ll be in London this weekend for a family wedding at Westminster Cathedral. He knows me, and will act upon what you tell him, enlisting the National Guard to wipe the slate clean, if necessary.”

Watson slumped in the desk chair, puzzled by this mention of encryption. He’d noticed no indication of code...

His mouse reversing the recording to its beginning, he slowed the speed, scanning each frame intently.

Three minutes in, he noticed “SH” imposed on a seemingly innocuous wall hanging. He enlarged a screen capture, jotting the remaining letters on a notepad.

The process took most of the afternoon and gave Watson quite a headache. The amount of information transmitted astonished the disabled veteran; he’d never suspected Sheila could be so devious.

Tucking the sheets in the pocket of his suit coat, after a shower and shave, Watson enlisted Edith to accompany him on the Tube to the Catholic church near Buckingham Palace.

“I’ll feel like an idiot, crashing a stranger’s wedding!” the russet-haired widow objected.

“You can wait outside. I simply need to pass this to the governor, then withdraw quietly.”

Easier said than done, however. Attendants at the neo-byzantine cathedral’s entrance required invitations from arriving guests, and Watson had none. Access denied, he contemplated the structure, then signaled Edith toward the rear, where a group of bishops and priests gathered outside the sacristy, their gold embroidered vestments rustled by the breeze.

“Excuse me,” the blond veteran hailed a figure in tall red-piped mitre, holding a gold, curved crosier.

The white-haired cleric tilted his head, curious. “May I help you?”

“I come from Sheila Holmes,” Watson whispered. “I have a delivery for the governor of California.”

Fortunately, Sheila's name merited respect from the clergy, one of her cases involving the theft of valuable artifacts from an ancient monastery excavation near Leeds.

The bishop summoned a black cassock and lace surplice-clad altar server, instructing her to inquire of the ushers where the governor had been seated and bring him, *post haste*.

Grey-suited, squat and balding, the American elected official squinted through horn-rimmed spectacles as he waded through the priestly cohort. "Is there a problem, Your Excellency?" he addressed the bishop.

A second later, he faced Watson, who bowed slightly from reflex, extending the papers. "Sheila Holmes requested I place these in your hands."

"Isn't she still in Hollywood?"

"Yes, sir, but the sensitive nature of the situation..."

Comprehending the unspoken import, the governor slipped the document inside his coat. "This will be dealt with as soon as my obligations conclude here."

"Thank you, sir."

Rejoining Edith, the pair returned to Baker Street. A niggling uncertainty claimed their nerves over the course of the ensuing weeks. Then, Watson began receiving emails from various contacts, praising another illicit operation successfully thwarted.

In total, three dozen police officials were terminated from their employment, twice that many youths roused and charged with felony weapon violations, assault and burglary. Public meetings were scheduled with the new administration to repair damaged relationships with the Chinatown residents, according to media reports.

Sheila lamented in a brief post to Watson the governor's failure to apprehend this syndicate's architect. Her statement hinted at a different result to that endeavor and, in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*, an otherwise inconsequential item declared the discovery of prominent entrepreneur Chen Woo's corpse on the beach near San Clemente the previous Friday. His cause of death: a broken neck.

Watson didn't dare question the young woman whether she had defied local authorities, confronting the suspect and, supplanting the American justice system, ending his reign of evil with a precise Wing Chun strike.

The California Conundrum

Johnny Watson never expected to receive a thick manila envelope in the post, much less one with a California return address. Edith Hudson-Thorne usually gave the lot to Sheila Holmes, being the tenant listed on the ten-year lease, but Sheila had opted for a weekend in the country, finally succumbing to pleas from an old Oxford classmate to find the culprits behind a bizarre museum burglary.

Resting his prosthetic left leg on an upholstered ottoman matching the wing-backed armchair near the dormant fireplace, the young Afghan veteran ripped open the clasp and pulled out a sheaf of computer-generated papers.

A cover letter printed on *Los Angeles Times* letterhead explained the contents. A recently-graduated investigative reporter had been privy to the facts of a delicate case, which her editor would not allow to be published. "My cousin in law enforcement gave me the original tip," the last paragraph concluded. "I thought you might want this for the record, given Ms. Holmes' notoriety."

Watson couldn't read the signature.

Once begun, he couldn't stop reading the narrative under the headline "Holmes More Than Just On-Screen in Hollywood" - able to visualize his flat-mate roaming Tinseltown in pursuit of a serial killer.

While many paparazzi snapped photos of Sheila Holmes in the company of A-list actor/producer Tony Downton during the recent filming of his blockbuster about the 19th century Great Detective, Sherlock's great-great-niece proved to be more than just eye-candy during her weeks on the set and at fashionable bistros.

It seems she managed to slip away from the spotlights and, at the behest of the Malibu Police Chief, provide much-needed insights into the motivations of a criminal dubbed by the media, "The Beach Bum Murderer."

The case came to the fore six months ago, when tourists from Kansas discovered a former *Sports Illustrated* bikini model dead by strangulation on a private beach near the Serra Retreat Center in Malibu. During the ensuing weeks, five more attractive females suffered the same fate, within two miles of that location.

City, county and state police were stumped by the lack of evidence. The deaths seemed almost ethereal, given no footprints in the sand, no DNA, blood or signs of struggle. Just when discussions were raised about involving the FBI, a photo of Sheila Holmes on the cover of *L.A. Now!* magazine gave Chief Enzo McNerny an idea.

Dressed in a Pink Floyd t-shirt and relaxed-fit jeans, the slender London detective, who has garnered attention on her own turf for bringing to justice a number of criminals which eluded the famed Scotland Yard, is quite unremarkable in appearance. Her brunette curls stuffed beneath a battered black fedora, she presented an almost mannish demeanor as she walked the crime scenes and interviewed witnesses.

At Serra Retreat, she stood beneath a large cross and statue of St. Francis of Assisi, gazing down at the ocean from the balustrade. She had arranged to speak with each friar in residence at the facility, along with the lay employees and volunteers, and received the registration log of those who had been in attendance at a sobriety retreat the day of the first murder.

Carefully placed microphones in the small parlor captured these conversations, and a hidden video camera preserved the scene.

Ms. Holmes lounged in a recliner, as if without a care in the world. She took no notes, but her reputation precluded that necessity.

“How long ago were you assigned here, Father Robinson?” she began.

The balding elder, wearing not the traditional brown Franciscan robe and knotted cord, but a St. Bonaventure University sweatsuit, ran arthritic fingers through his few wisps of white hair. “Thirteen years.”

“You’re the superior?”

“Guardian, yes.”

“What were your activities on February 19?” she pressed.

“The Men’s AA gathering was in full swing. One of the cooks called in sick, so I had to help prepare breakfast in the kitchen. Lunch and dinner, too.”

“You’re a chef?”

Robinson explained, “Before I joined the Order, I owned a restaurant in Seattle.”

“Ah.” She rose, glancing out the window at a flock of seagulls. “You’re the guardian, but not the director of the retreat house?”

“No. I... handle day-to-day concerns for our community. Fr. Martinez has the administrative experience, which is why he’s in charge.”

“I’ll see him next, then. Who are the others living here?”

A list of six names were provided to her.

The questioning took most of the morning, but Sheila Holmes didn’t break for lunch. She tracked down the last friar, who had been supervising a construction crew replacing stones on the outdoor labyrinth. A wide-brimmed straw hat protecting his face from the August sun, he maneuvered the Bobcat Loader with an expertise envied by union workers observing his technique.

Waiting patiently, she noticed perspiration streaming down his sallow cheeks. A former marathon runner, sidelined by hip replacement surgery six years earlier, he remained active and, consequently, somewhat underweight for his age.

Climbing off the equipment, he paused to wipe his face with a linen handkerchief, spinning to find Ms. Holmes blocking his route to the main building.

“What can I do for you?” he gulped.

“Br. Dale? I need a few moments of your time.”

“Not now. Not today, in fact. We’ve got to get this done before the Sisters’ retreat on Saturday...”

“I’m afraid it must be now,” she insisted. “It may be a matter of life and death.”

His countenance sank as he brushed dust from his San Diego Padres ball cap and grimy shirt sleeves. “All right.” He led her to a bench beneath a willow, gently blown by a cool breeze.

The same set of questions fielded by the others frustrated the older man. “You can’t possibly suspect one of us!”

“I suspect everyone and no one. I’m compiling the facts.” Rotating her aching neck, she met his accusatory gaze. “Among those facts: this community boasts some of the most dysfunctional misfits I’ve met since my days at university. There’s latent homosexuality, bi-polar disorder, alcoholism, narcissism and insecurity that would make a small fortune for any psychologist worth his salt.”

“Who told you...”

“I don’t need to be told. I observe.”

Br. Dale scowled. “What have you observed about me?”

“You suffer from sleep apnea, and the effects of an enlarged heart. You don’t take the medications doctors have prescribed. You need surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome, and enjoy smoking illegally supplied Havana cigars. Your best friend is a ten-week old black Labrador retriever puppy.”

“How on earth...”

The dog bounded across the grounds toward Br. Dale, answering his question before Ms. Holmes did. She bent to stroke the droopy ears, which softened the friar’s demeanor.

Squatting beside her, he flashed tobacco-stained teeth. A slight Irish brogue tinged his words. “You’re right about this lot. And, just between you and me, the leadership won’t lift a finger to fix things, for fear of rocking the boat.”

“So, any one of them...”

“I wouldn’t say that. They may have their quirks, some of them serious, but they do their best to keep their vows. They wouldn’t kill...”

Ms. Holmes straightened, while Br. Dale scooped the puppy in his arms, receiving a thorough face-washing with the excited tongue. “What’s her name?”

“Molly.”

“She’s sweet.”

“She’s curious,” added the friar. “I’m afraid she’ll get into the equipment, and get hurt.”

“Better train her to the leash, then, and keep her tied up when you’re working.”

“St. Francis wouldn’t like that.”

“St. Francis wouldn’t want to see her dead.” On that note, Ms. Holmes strode toward the parking lot.

Through the main door, she glimpsed another figure in conversation with Fr. Robinson. Squat, rotund, with curly black hair, he matched the image conveyed by many friar cookie jars. She diverted along the sidewalk.

“Good afternoon, Father...” she probed.

“Ah, Ms. Holmes. This is our Minister Provincial, Fr. Amos Bancroft,” Robinson made the introduction.

“I came down from Sacramento to show fraternal support for the community here,” remarked this superior.

Sheila Holmes bristled at the falsehood. “If I might have a word, Father...”

The door of the small parlor closed behind them, she directed Bancroft to a seat. “How may I help?” the man asked.

“Show fraternal support for these men by arranging for their proper psychological and medical treatment.”

Bancroft’s thick eyebrows arched.

“You know full well what I mean. Or, if you don’t, you’re not fulfilling your duties.”

“Ms. Holmes, it’s not that easy. Franciscans are... independent individuals. Getting them to agree on anything is like herding cats.”

She snorted, “Isn’t one of their vows obedience?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have the same meaning as it did fifty or sixty years ago. The brothers who are here in their... retirement... are under the care of a nurse, while still benefitting from a communal atmosphere.”

“Hogwash. They’re a danger not only to themselves, but everyone who walks through the door.”

Defensively, Bancroft rose - not an easy feat, given his weight. “I’ll take your opinion under advisement.”

“It’ll save you more lawsuits, Father.”

With a disapproving backward glance, the Minister Provincial trundled from the chamber. Sheila Holmes followed, climbing into a police cruiser for the ride downtown.

She would return to Serra Retreat, however, after another victim washed up on the beach less than a half-mile from the site.

The lapel camera of a Los Angeles County detective, who wished to remain anonymous, recorded the conversation over the deceased, and subsequent investigation.

“The coroner will determine if she died in the water, and washed ashore,” proclaimed the official.

Ms. Holmes countered, “He’ll find no water in her lungs. Though her clothes and hair are wet, it’s from the high tide overnight. She never went in swimming.”

“How can you tell?”

She flashed the man a withering glance.

“Okay, then, what’s your opinion of the cause of death?” he pressed.

“I never state my opinions. I state theories based on fact. Notice how her blouse is partially unbuttoned. Also, the impression on the sand. She was preparing to... um... earn her wages, if what you said about her being a high-priced escort is true. Instead, she was strangled with her own necklace.”

“Meaning, no fingerprints,” confirmed the detective. “Again.”

“It wasn’t robbery; her purse is undisturbed beside her. There has been no sexual assault. Someone with deep-seated psychological issues...” Sheila Holmes raised her eyes to the retreat complex visible in the pre-dawn glow.

Her companion interrupted this contemplation. “I’ve a car waiting.”

“Why?” she queried.

“To interrogate the owner of the outfit which... handles these broads.”

“A waste of time. I’d be willing to wager the clients have names like John Smith or David Jones.”

John Smith, indeed, with numbers after each to provide some measure of distinction. “We don’t care about their personal information,” declared the owner of a one-room establishment above an adult bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard, whose identity matched a drivers license emblazoned “John Johnson”.

“It’s a cash only deal, so no credit cards, or bank ties?” the detective scoffed.

“Simpler that way.”

Ms. Holmes grunted. “Simpler to avoid prosecution and taxes.”

She received no reply.

“No files, nothing in writing?” ventured the detective.

While the shaggy black head of this pimp wagged side-to-side, Sheila Holmes kicked a metal trash can. “All burned before we arrived,” she noted.

The suspect was dragged across the cluttered desk by his unruly mane. “Who tipped you off?” the detective growled.

“No one, man! I figured, hearing on the news...”

Handcuffs were slapped around his wrists and firmly locked. “You’re coming with me.”

“What’s the charge?”

“Obstruction. Those papers could’ve led us to the murderer.”

Ms. Holmes placed a soothing hand on the official’s bulging bicep. “Calm down, Lieutenant. If this was the first time this particular John Smith used these... services... that in itself is a clue.”

The pimp released, he fell back, knocking over his chair and landing on the grimy floor.

“How so?” wondered the detective.

“I’m sure you have contacts on what you call the Vice Squad, who are aware of similar businesses in the area. Offering immunity from prosecution, they notify key figures that the police should be informed of anyone unknown to them who requests an escort in the weeks to come.”

“That doesn’t...”

“Should do,” Ms. Holmes insisted. “His previous victims have no connection to each other. One, a former model. Another, a dancer at a strip club. The third, a school teacher who moonlighted as a waitress, and so forth. None of them knew each other. He’s... trolling for random women, not focusing on a particular demographic. And, he’s running out of resources, which is why he’ll be calling other escort services. The common point in all this is these women might be what some call ‘loose’.”

“What would you call them?” retorted the pimp, recovering his composure.

“Sinners.”

Both men glared at her.

Emerging from the building, Ms. Holmes paused to consider the stars embedded in the famous sidewalk. She whispered to the officer nearest, “We’re being followed.”

Naturally, the man’s head whipped around, to determine the correctness of that assertion.

“Idiot! He just ducked into that souvenir shop,” she chided.

“Sorry.”

They strode to the police cruiser, curses muttered loud enough for the microphone to capture.

Posing as a rookie on the Malibu Police force, I was able to chauffeur Ms. Holmes during her rounds in the days which followed. We had ample opportunity to discuss her methods and suspicions.

Multiple times, we parked near crime scenes and wandered the beach, enveloped in an eerie silence except for the crashing of white-capped waves. She kept her eyes on the sand, searching for any sign of the culprit then, ultimately, admitting defeat.

Except for that morning when she noticed the man in white cut-off jeans, barefoot, with a red bandanna tied around his bleached hair like a sweatband. A faded jean vest, sleeves missing, protected his shoulders from the sun, his skin well leathered from previous exposure.

“Do you know him?” Ms. Holmes whispered to me.

“Nope. Never seen him before.”

“You should have.”

Listening to her opened my mind to how little ordinary people see of their own world. She connected his presence to a make-shift hut behind a stand of palm trees within sight of Serra Retreat, and his homeless, albeit comfortable, position.

She didn't have to ask him about his days as a teacher in the public school system; she could tell from merely looking him up and down.

They sat together on a mound of sand he'd been sculpting, while I strained my ears to hear the soft tenor.

“The friars know about me, and don't bother me,” he confessed. “They're not interested in going to court to file eviction papers, or call the cops.”

“Could it be because you once numbered yourself among them?” prodded Ms. Holmes.

“I gave it a shot, in the early 70s. They were in transition then, everyone exploring the new freedom granted by the Second Vatican Council. I was young, and wanted something a little more...”

“Structured?”

“Right.”

Sheila Holmes chuckled. “So you opted for the rigors of a teacher's schedule.”

“It kept me from losing my mind.”

“As so many of them did?”

“Not that. They... they...”

“I understand.” She climbed upright and brushed off her grey slacks. “You’ll be needing an alibi, you know, for the nights in question.”

“Don’t have one. I’m up and down this stretch of beach at random...”

“But never saw any of the murders?”

He shrugged.

With a terse motion, Ms. Holmes signaled me toward the wooden staircase which would take us to where the black Dodge Charger was parked.

“He’s lying, of course,” she announced, closing the passenger door.

“You’re certain?”

“When a person lies, not only do they blink excessively, their entire body proclaims the fact, without their conscious knowledge.”

“Wow. I think I’ve learned more from you than I did during months at the academy.” Sure, a lie, but she wasn’t looking at me as I steered onto the highway.

“I appreciate your assistance,” she commented. “In London, I’m able to bounce my ideas off John Watson, who has been of inestimable value to me these recent years. I sometimes need that, to clarify my own thought processes.” With a glance in the rear-view mirror, she ordered, “Stop the car.”

Reflexes complied, almost causing a collision with the Mustang convertible that had been tailgating us. Ms. Holmes leapt from her seat, and collared the driver before he could flee.

“Why have you been following me?” she barked.

Recognizing the ruddy face and Air Jordan sneakers, I supplied, “I can tell you that.”

Ms. Holmes eyed me.

“He’s Nathan Marx, an ex-convict freelancing for the mob.”

“That’s bullshit!” protested the man. “I’ve gone straight, I swear! The only weapon I use these days is a camera!”

Sheila Holmes alternated between Marx and myself. “Paparazzi?”

I shrugged. Marx uttered pleas for mercy.

She released him roughly. “I cannot abide those who make a profit off the misfortune of others,” she snarled. “If I see you again, I’ll put your head through the closest brick wall.”

Profuse apologies preceded his flight from the neighborhood. Chest heaving with anger, Ms. Holmes marched back to the car, and flopped onto the passenger seat. “Let’s go.”

Merging with traffic, I desperately wanted to continue our conversation from prior to the untimely interruption.

“What do you think about this whole mess?” I inquired shyly.

“Marx? An opportunistic egotist, if ever I met one..”

“No. The case.”

“There’s a psychological deviant at work. Someone who craves female companionship yet, when the moment for intimacy approaches, his conflicted spirit rebels and turns violent.”

“You have a person in mind?”

“Not as of now. But, how would you like to gain more experience by impersonating a potential victim?”

I swallowed my heart but, given the role I was playing, agreed.

Outfitted in a black almost mini-skirt, tailored white silk blouse and spiked heels, I reported to Serra Retreat that Saturday evening to serve at a large fundraising dinner. By the time a dessert of chocolate mousse garnished with whipped cream and raspberries had been placed before each of the 300 donors, my feet hurt like the very devil. I retired to an unlocked office, cast off the painful shoes and stretched my legs.

I didn’t see him walk into the room, having not turned on the light. “What you need is a walk on the cool sand,” he suggested in a smooth baritone. “That will soothe your tired muscles.”

Hoping Sheila Holmes was on the job, I accompanied this shadow along a dim corridor to a service entrance, then down stone steps damp from an evening rain to the beach.

Busy watching where I was going, I paid little heed to his incoherent ramblings. All I knew is that he must’ve been a guest at the dinner. He wore a white shirt which reflected the moonlight, and dark trousers. While he had a strong profile, I still couldn’t see his face.

We strolled a good 200 yards south, the sand indeed providing relief to my aching limbs. Then, he wrapped one arm around my mid-section and amorously planted his lips on my neck.

I pulled away, on instinct.

“No woman dresses as you do, without expecting this kind of attention,” he droned, yanking me toward him.

Without going into detail, his passionate attack startled me. If this was how he’d behaved with his other victims... I wanted to run, but his grip on my arms was too strong to escape.

Thrown down on the sand, I gazed up at him, face still shrouded in darkness, thanks to the moon overhead. I did sense, however, a change in his demeanor, and saw his hands move toward my throat.

From the only concealment near the site - a row of weeds at the base of a low dune - something flew toward my assailant and knocked him off me. He rolled toward the gently-lapping waves, stunned.

When I regained my wits enough to scramble upright, I saw Sheila Holmes restraining the man by pinning his right arm at an odd angle against his spine. Blood ran from his temple, where the carefully aimed stone had contacted his skull.

“Who is it?” I puzzled, limping toward them.

Br. Dale, who I recognized from the hidden camera videos, sneered at me. “Whore of Babylon! The likes of you have been the downfall of many vowed to celibacy!”

“Huh?”

“Run to the retreat house,” Ms. Holmes instructed, “and fetch the superiors.”

“Why isn’t he wearing... He was wearing his robe at the dinner...”

“He discarded it in the kitchen pantry,” she recounted. “The prospect of breaking his vows while thus clothed would have been too much for his fragile psyche.”

Privy to the interrogation at the Los Angeles County Jail, I learned that this friar had been diagnosed with severe mental illness ten years earlier. He lived at Serra Retreat, supposedly under the constant supervision of a qualified nurse. A recent change of guardian, though, saw the nurse dismissed for financial reasons. Br. Dale had stopped taking his medications, and his illness resumed its destructive course.

“When he told me, ‘St. Francis wouldn’t like that,’ about keeping his puppy on a leash, I recognized his problem,” explained Sheila Holmes. “An unhealthy... devotion to the radical views of the saint propelled him over the edge. That included St. Francis’ own opinion about the corruption of priests in the 13th century. While he respected them for being ordained to consecrate the Eucharist, he disapproved of their... philandering. Quite a number of men who have taken such vows eventually find themselves conflicted, because they pursued this lifestyle before they were sufficiently mature, resulting in ignorance of how to deal with their sexual urges.”

With that, she climbed into a limousine with Tony Downton, and flew back to London the end of the month.

Br. Dale was confined to a mental institution, and the friar in charge of Serra Retreat, Fr. Robinson, was named in a civil suit by the victim’s families. A total of eighteen million dollars was awarded in a settlement.

Johnny Watson laid aside the manuscript, chuckling. He debated sharing it with Edith Hudson-Thorne, then carried it into his bedroom and stuffed it under his mattress.