

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

A Comic Affair

A Collection of Stories

by

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No Laughing Matter

“Bloody fantastic, getting out for the evening,” breathed Johnny Watson, loosening the Windsor knot on his red silk tie a half-inch.

“Without worrying how to afford the privilege,” Sheila Holmes concurred, her mauve satin blouse and black slacks mirroring the dignified appearance of her blond escort’s new suit.

The pair scanned their surroundings: a hotel basement in a northern London suburb, transformed into a thriving café. Amidst 1920s speakeasy decor, tables of two and four enjoyed cheery banter and excellent cuisine. On a raised stage in the far corner, a duo playing violin and clarinet provided a quiet instrumental undercurrent.

Watson ordered from the reasonably priced menu, though a wallet stuffed with British pounds - his share of the fees from their most recent case - made cost no concern. The mustached waiter nodded his approval of lobster salads and white wine, scribbling on a notepad.

“How’d you hear about this place?” Sheila queried, sipping ice water from a crystal goblet.

“An advert in the *Times*.”

“Do you know its history?”

“Only that the hotel reopened last month after some developer bought the property for a song.”

“The building had been abandoned for twenty years, locked up tight after the most gruesome murders...”

Watson shuddered. “Murders?”

“What started out as a high-class establishment in the 1890s had declined to little better than a brothel by then. A psychotic fundamentalist minister arrived one evening in the guise of a hired musician, proceeding not to entertain, but to make the rounds of every room, executing the occupants with a sawed off shotgun.”

“Gruesome, indeed!”

“Thirty-five killed before the proprietor retaliated, firing his own weapon at point blank range while the assassin attempted to reload.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have suggested...”

Sheila patted his trembling fingers. “I’m sorry, John. I had no intention of spoiling your special occasion.”

“Special?”

“It is your birthday, isn’t it?”

“How’d you...”

“As a detective, it’s my job to observe and deduce...”

Managing a feeble grin, Watson raised his water glass in salute.

“To your health and happiness,” toasted Sheila, drinking simultaneously.

Their meal delicious, and the Chardonnay relaxing, they were considering dessert when a spotlight shone on the now empty stage, drum roll resounding from strategically placed speakers. A jean-clad, fidgety dishwasher, soggy apron tied at his waist, deposited a wireless microphone on a stand in the middle of the dias, and cleared his throat.

“I’ve... been drafted to make this introduction,” he chuckled feebly. “The boss wants to find out if live performances are suited to the venue, but doesn’t want to get hit by any flying tomatoes, if the customers are dissatisfied.” The youth straightened and coughed. “Nunnally’s Bistro is pleased to present, fresh from his Continental tour, the renowned comedian, Will McLaurin.”

A smattering of applause accompanied a 30-ish, 5’7”, solidly-built figure into the illuminated sphere. His tie-dyed t-shirt, baggy black Dockers and fluorescent green sneakers might’ve been better suited to a street corner, and his fluffy shag-styled brown waves smacked of the 1970s.

“Thank you for that warm reception,” he greeted, launching into 30 minutes of rapid-fire commentary on politics, religion and bodily functions, among other topics. As polite titters escalated to raucous laughter, Watson squeezed Sheila’s hand in delight.

Curious, she leaned toward him and whispered, “What’s up, John?”

“It’s working!”

“What is?”

“Later.”

Puzzled, Sheila listened to McLaurin’s routine, peppered with foul language, though no children were present in the establishment. The common public’s type of comedy, perhaps, but she deemed it only mildly humorous. His habit of flicking perspiration-soaked locks off his forehead proved most aggravating, in her estimation.

A standing ovation brought the man back from the kitchen four times, bowing, waving hirsute arms in salute. He beamed, his upper lip disappearing, displaying a slight - but distinctive - gap between his upper incisors. The spotlight finally switched off, and waiters made a circuit of the tables in response to those who wished to order drinks or more food.

“Will you tell me why you were so enthused?” Sheila prodded, draining the wine bottle into her glass.

“I... helped save Sergeant McLaurin’s life in Afghanistan, after he caught a load of shrapnel from an IED. He’s in my PTSD therapy group, but had been a rising comedian before he joined the service. Part of his treatment involved getting in front of a crowd again.”

“You arranged this?”

“No, but I wanted to be here to cheer him on.”

Sheila’s lips twitched into a grin. “Good for you, John. I’m proud of you.”

“Should do,” came a crisp baritone.

Glancing up, Sheila discovered Will McLaurin hovering beside her. Without being invited, he commandeered a vacant chair from a nearby table and joined the flatmates.

“How are you, Johnny?” He wrung Watson’s hand vigorously. “Good show, eh?”

Watson praised, “Stone cold brilliant.”

“Your friend didn’t think so, eh?”

Sheila sniffed. “I... wasn’t expecting...”

“To laugh? Who doesn’t want to laugh, especially with the world in such dire straits?”

“I reserve my laughter for expletive-free narratives.”

McLaurin chuckled Watson’s right bicep. “You were right about her.”

Averting his blue eyes, the wounded British Army medic flushed.

“Right?” Sheila echoed, indignant. “Right, how?”

The comedian smirked mysteriously. His squarish countenance featured a prominent nose, its size hinting at Middle Eastern ancestry. His jutting, cleft chin made him an ideal subject for an artist’s caricature, Sheila mused.

“John, what is he...”

Their waiter brought the bill, and Watson pretended to fumble with his wallet.

“You can tell her, Johnny,” McLaurin insisted. “It’s nothing derogatory, after all.”

Sheila rose. “I should hope not!”

Her hand was clasped firmly, drawing her onto the print upholstery. “I’m just joking, missy,” soothed McLaurin. “In our sessions, Johnny proclaims you his savior, crediting you with much of his recovery.”

“Oh, Will, that’s even worse!” lamented Watson.

Sheila shook off McLaurin’s grip, remarking, “Would it put an end to your ribbing if you knew John is my savior, as well?”

Both men glared at the slender brunette.

“You’ve prevented me from souring into a morbid recluse.”

McLaurin shoved his chair aside. “Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“Why?”

“Because, I like you both, and want to get to know you better.”

“So we can become fodder for your routines?”

“Not at all, missy.”

Yet, Sheila sensed an ulterior motive to the newcomer’s request, and hesitated. Watson, clearly, itched to discard his tie and relax, so she acquiesced.

“Where to?” the taxi driver asked when they piled onto the black vehicle’s rear seat.

“Baker Street, 221B,” she declared.

Deposited on a deserted lane twenty minutes later, the trio met Edith Hudson-Thorne at the door, inviting her to join them in the sitting room, up warped, creaking stairs. The auburn-haired landlady politely declined, pulling her pink bathrobe tighter at the waist.

“I’ll brew a pot of coffee,” she volunteered, believing them drunk.

“If you have anything stronger...” hinted McLaurin.

Sheila ushered the men ahead of her, switching on a floor lamp beside the red velvet Victorian divan. The clutter didn’t bother her - it never had - and Watson ignored piles of newspapers and computer printouts strewn like an abstract carpet.

“What a pit!” McLaurin commented, treading gingerly through the litter. “I’ve seen cleaner cages at the zoo.”

“Turn off the puns,” advised his hostess. “We’re not your audience.”

He surveyed Sherlock’s pipes in their rack on the fireplace mantle. “I’m serious. How can you live like this?”

“We’re... used to it,” Watson explained.

“No wonder you’re attending group three times a week, Johnny. If this is any indication of your mental state...”

Sheila roared, “Enough!”

The word’s force landed McLaurin in the basket-chair. “Damn, missy! I’m sorry!”

Settling in the armchair opposite, Watson perched behind her, she demanded, “You want something from us. What is it?”

“Remember what happens to those who assume.”

“Assume, hell. The entire ride here, you babbled inanities while your fists clenched and unclenched. The veins in your arms and neck bulge with elevated blood pressure. You’ve been biting your fingernails, and grind your teeth in the

rare moments you aren't speaking. You've neither slept nor eaten for two days which, admittedly, could have been in anticipation of your performance this evening, but you didn't ask us out to dine, so you still aren't hungry, which means you're worried about something completely unrelated."

McLaurin's pale blue eyes narrowed, then his jaw softened into a smile. "Impressive."

"Quit stalling, Will," Watson suggested. "You'll only piss her off."

Sheila scowled at her flatmate, who retreated to the desk.

"All right, all right," grunted the comedian. "It's my brother."

"What about him?"

"A strange situation I don't understand."

"Start at the beginning, and leave out no facts, however minor," urged Sheila.

McLaurin recounted how, when he finished school in Devonshire, finding little financial stability as a comic, he joined the British Army. His brother, Liam, accepted a soccer scholarship to a prestigious American university. Minimal contact between the two had occurred in the interim.

"Until last week," the visitor concluded. "I received an email that he would be arriving at Heathrow on Thursday, asking if I could give him a ride to his hotel."

"He hasn't been home in all that time?" Sheila inquired.

"That's just it. He's made a dozen trips across the pond in the last six months, without so much as a text message. Now, suddenly, he wants to see me."

"How did you come by this information?"

"The hotel manager let it slip when I was confirming the reservation. The bloke was surprised Liam wouldn't be needing the airport shuttle, per his regular routine."

Watson ventured, "Maybe Liam's gotten engaged, and is bringing his fiancée with him. Or, he's obtained a job..."

"You fear he's smuggling drugs or other contraband," stated the detective coldly, "and he wants to use you as a mule."

McLaurin nodded, jaw hard.

Watson's blue orbs widened. "He wouldn't..."

Stretching her exhausted limbs, Sheila crossed to shelves holding criminal files compiled by her uncle Sherlock and, recently, updated in her leisure moments. She rifled the pertinent volume, slamming the cover when she located no germane entries.

“Your brother is not wanted by the authorities, thus far. Perhaps we give him the benefit of the doubt, and you meet him with your fiancée, as requested.”

“I don’t have a...”

The woman winked coyly.

“But...” McLaurin tried to protest.

“What better means for me to clandestinely inspect his luggage, and get a thorough look at him?”

“Must do.” McLaurin gulped, “Only, I drive a Fiat.”

“I’ll hire suitable transport, and call at your flat two hours before the flight’s arrival,” Sheila instructed, moving toward her bedroom. “You can ring John with the details.”

The men watched the door close behind her, and glanced at each other. They burst into laughter, and sat up most of the night chatting, which Sheila heard as an annoying drone while she attempted to sleep.

She emerged at sunrise, Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown unbound, to find the sitting room a disaster. Watson had somehow maneuvered himself into a supine position on the armchair, snoring quietly. His prosthetic leg lay on the lab table in an awkward pose. Will McLaurin sprawled among beer cans, his head propped against the leg of the red divan. A depleted scotch bottle had escaped his clutches, dripping remnants on a crumpled newspaper.

Navigating the mess, Sheila poked Watson’s shoulder. He snorted, grumbling unintelligible curses, and fell off his perch with a thump. Blinking tentatively, he squinted against muted daylight filtered through smudged casements.

“What the hell...” he groaned.

Sheila swallowed a snicker. “That’s what I’d like to know. You two make a late trip to the off license?”

The veteran pulled himself partially upright, felt his skull ready to explode, and lowered himself onto the fireplace tiles. “Didn’t you know Edith kept a stash in the pantry?”

“No, I didn’t, and I’ll have a chat with her about it.” She seized his forearms and lifted him onto the chair. “Get yourself to bed.”

Resting his head on the upholstery, Watson glimpsed McLaurin’s twisted posture. “What about him?”

“I’ll take care of him.”

“Thanks.” An outstretched hand seeking aid, Sheila scooped up her fellow tenant and escorted him to his room, where he fell onto the mattress fully clothed.

Retracing her steps, Sheila stacked empties on the round table to clear a path. She then knelt beside the unconscious guest, and lightly tapped his cheek.

“Rise and shine, Will,” she hissed.

He drooled lazily, “No, Lori, don’t make me go. Let me stay...”

Contact with his face increased in intensity. His limber fingers swatted at the disturbance but, connecting with its source, he clamped on her wrist, deftly rolling atop her and planting a rancid liquor-flavored - albeit fiery - kiss on her mouth.

Whether part of his dream or a waking reaction, Sheila didn’t care. She wedged her knee between them and shoved, sending him tumbling into the wall. The motion evidently disrupted his equilibrium, because he shot to his feet, face horribly contorted.

“Down the hall on the right,” Sheila directed, as he bolted for the loo.

Rinsing off the taste of him with day-old coffee from a mug beside the computer, she meandered along the corridor once the retching ceased. He hadn’t quite reached the toilet on his first go-round, and she uttered an expletive of her own.

McLaurin’s tousled brown mop lay on the cool porcelain, seeking respite from his inner turmoil. Sheila raised him by the sleeve of his tie-dyed t-shirt and thrust him toward the shower.

“Clean yourself up. I’ll raid John’s wardrobe for some clothes.” From the cabinet above the sink, she tossed him a bottle of mouthwash. “Your breath stinks.”

Pulling the curtain closed, he grumbled, “Thanks.”

Sheila detoured into her room, changing into a yellow sweat-suit. Without rousing Watson, she perused the contents of his drawers, selecting a flannel shirt and boxer shorts, since her much-thinner companion’s trousers would never fit the strapping McLaurin. Edith’s washer might be able to remove the stains from his vomit-encrusted garments while the comedian recovered from his intoxication.

She delivered clean items to the bathroom, listening briefly to McLaurin’s inane muttering. As she closed the door, she heard him yelp in pain.

“What?” she wondered.

“Soap... in my eyes.” He groped for relief; she draped a large towel over the curtain rod. Instead, he grabbed her arm and jerked her into the stall.

Beneath a tepid stream of water, he wrapped well defined, wetly furred arms around her and kissed her anew. She resisted vigorously, jamming him against the faucet.

He chuckled, "Just wanted to prove the first time wasn't a fluke."

"If it was or not, it better not happen again." She stepped from the shower, grabbing a towel for herself. "I'd intended for you to remove your clothes..."

"Why? They need a wash, too."

"Bastard," she spat, trudging toward the sitting room, rubbing brunette curls, perturbed at the prospect of shedding her wet attire.

McLaurin's limited energy drained swiftly when he joined her, sitting on the divan. Within minutes, he passed out; she stuffed a section of terry-cloth between his soaked mane and the antique wood to prevent damage.

Edith brought breakfast at 9:00, horror at the conditions unmistakable in her hazel eyes. The russet-haired landlady retained her burden until Sheila moved assorted detritus from the table, then slammed the silver tray on the surface and stormed across the threshold.

The detective caught her in the kitchen below. "I'm sorry, Edith," she apologized sincerely. "John and... his friend celebrated a bit too much last night."

"That's only part of the problem. You swore, when you signed your lease, you'd keep the premises clean..."

"I know, I know. I've... been busy."

"At all hours, it seems!"

"I had nothing to do with... that."

"Don't forget what I told you, Sheila: any talk about unsavory behavior between you and John - or you and any other man, for that matter - and you're out!"

"There's been no..."

"I heard the two of you in the shower earlier!"

In no mood to listen, Edith rejected Sheila's account. The tenant finally mounted the former servants' stairs, her own anger surging.

While McLaurin and Watson dozed, she gathered every scrap of paper into a wicker basket, used an old sock to dust the furnishings, and loaded the tray with dirty dishes, cups and glasses.

"A temporary remedy," boomed Sherlock Holmes, manifesting in a cloud of pungent tobacco smoke.

She glanced at him, wiping perspiration off her forehead with the dressing gown sleeve. "I know, Uncle."

"My Mrs. Hudson was never satisfied with the state of this room. Trying to please some women is a futile endeavor."

"True."

The spectre, shaggy black locks dangling across his oddly handsome features, towered above the slumbering McLaurin. "This is your latest case?"

"In a way."

"Appearances can be deceiving."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The ghost of Sherlock Holmes had dissipated.

"Men!" Sheila snarled. "Damn them all!"

She and Edith shared a quiet cup of Earl Grey tea in the ground level kitchen late morning, reconciled by the bags of detritus Sheila had carried to the wheelie bin, and a rack of freshly washed dishes draining beside the sink.

"It wasn't John's fault," she assured the American widow. "I'm sure his friend put the idea to raid your liquor cabinet in his head."

"He'll have to pay for what they drank, regardless."

"He will, I promise."

Edith placed cups and saucers on the counter. "Now, off with you. I've got shopping to do."

Toting folded laundry upstairs, Sheila heard vomiting behind the closed bathroom door. Though McLaurin grasped the toilet with white knuckles, his heaves elicited no substance.

She stacked his clothes - and her own - on a bare linen cupboard shelf, lending her strength to his weakened form. Brushing limp hair from his forehead, she felt the fever, and cringed.

"John!" she bellowed as she practically carried McLaurin into the sitting room.

He retorted in an agonized tone, "For Christ's sake, don't shout!"

"Your sergeant's ill."

The guest stretched on the divan, Watson shuffled to his side. His training as a medic prompted him to check the patient's temperature, his pupil dilation, and his pulse.

"Dehydration," Sheila deduced before her friend spoke. "Given he's not eaten in three days, and kept none of the liquids you two imbibed last night on his stomach..."

"Must do."

"Get him dressed, and I'll call for an ambulance."

"No need for that!" asserted Watson. "I'll take him to St. Bart's in a taxi."

"As you wish. Just... get him out of here."

"What about his brother?"

"Do you know the flight number?"

Watson's brow furrowed as he searched his alcohol-soaked brain for information. "It's British Air, coming from New York at eight tomorrow morning."

"That's sufficient for my purposes."

"What purposes?"

"I'll see he's fetched to his hotel, as Will asked."

"Thanks, Sheila." Watson glanced around the neat chamber. "Where's his pants?"

His flatmate brought them from the bathroom, and retired to her own chamber, frustrated at this turn of events. She didn't trust Will McLaurin...

Who, when Watson left the hospital that evening, was receiving a steady supply of fluids through intravenous tubes, resting peacefully in a semi-private room on the third floor.

"He's not on drugs," the wounded veteran affirmed, collapsing into the armchair.

"Other than ample doses of whiskey?"

"How..."

Distracted, Sheila noted, "Simple deduction, John. No track marks on his arms, no stains on his fingertips or residue on his lips..."

"You still plan to meet his brother at Heathrow?"

"I've hired a car, and rented a chauffeur's uniform."

"For who?"

"Myself, of course. What better way to search his personal belongings?"

"Brilliant."

"You'd best have a lie-down."

Watson lifted himself off the cushion and limped to the adjacent chamber. Sheila would be gone when he awoke the next day, having departed for the airport well before the appointed hour.

Seated behind the wheel of the silver Mercedes limousine, she listened to loudspeakers blaring arrival announcements, and timed the appearance of passengers through the nearest exits. When the aircraft from New York taxied to its gate, she stepped into the chill breeze, a sign printed "McLaurin" in bold black letters held at chest height.

Which she promptly dropped upon sighting a business suit-clad Will McLaurin, tugging rolling luggage in her direction.

He even pretended not to recognize her. "Is this my car to the President's Inn?"

“Yes, sir,” she replied through grit teeth, relieving him of the suitcase and opening the rear door.

As he climbed into the luxurious vehicle, she opened the boot and hoisted the weighty blue bag over the bumper. Skilled digits made short work of her examination, including the passport tucked inside his sport coat. The name read “Ian William McLaurin.”

“Bastard,” she grumbled, closing the boot.

Early Thursday traffic didn’t cause too many delays in their journey to Russell Square, a surprising choice of lodgings, Sheila thought. She pondered this tangled web, growing more enraged by the minute.

A twenty pound note graced her palm when her passenger alighted at the hotel entrance. She sneered her gratitude, resuming her seat and driving to St. Bart’s.

Watson met her in the lobby. “What are you doing here, Sheila?”

“I could ask you the same.”

“Will disappeared during the night. Yanked out his IVs and sneaked off the ward.”

“To play us the fools, John. I just picked him up at Heathrow.”

“What?” the young man squealed.

“Come with me. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Circumstances - and time - worked against the pair, however. When they confronted the desk clerk at the President’s Inn, he claimed to have no Mr. McLaurin in residence.

“I dropped him here not two hours ago!” Sheila growled.

“That was before I came on at ten o’clock,” oozed the native of India with feigned courtesy. “Perhaps he was not pleased with our accommodations, and switched to another hotel.”

“He’s stopped here on numerous trips this past year,” offered Watson. “Why would he suddenly opt for another billet?”

The clerk shrugged and moved to assist a couple with their registration.

“Damn that man!” Sheila sniffed, drawing Watson toward the street. “He’s created a complex distraction... why? What evil machinations has he in mind, for which we will be blamed?”

“What are you talking about, Sheila?” queried her companion. “Will hasn’t a deceptive bone in his body. He’s suffering from PTSD, which might make his behavior... erratic periodically, but he wouldn’t deliberately mislead me - or you - about something so close to his heart.”

“Just how well do you know him?”

“We had a few chats while he was recuperating in Kabul after his injury. He started coming to the group sessions about six weeks ago.”

“Not a prolonged acquaintance.”

“No, but we’ve shared a lot of the same hell.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“From what Will’s said in the discussions - and this is confidential - he got back from Afghanistan late last year. His physical wounds had healed, but his commanding officer refused to acknowledge the psychological issues, which happens to a lot of soldiers. Will had to fight to be seen by the base specialists, and almost faced a court-martial for insubordination when they rendered an inconclusive diagnosis.”

“Interesting,” Sheila said, gripping the steering wheel. “Go on.”

Watson related how McLaurin claimed to have gone AWOL, seeking a more precise report from civilian doctors. He finally obtained the required paperwork from his family physician in Wales.

“What was the doctor’s name?”

“He never mentioned it.”

“For good reason, I expect. The McLaurins probably paid for his services - paid amply.”

“I don’t see how. Will’s father is a disabled miner on a pension, and his mother takes in sewing to keep food on the table.”

“Did he ever include his supposed brother in these narratives?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Once more, for good reason. There is no such person. He’s either a figment of your friend’s damaged imagination, or a conscious creation meant to dupe us into a wild goose chase.”

Watson settled beside her, and Sheila edged the Mercedes from the curb. They returned the rental to the garage, paying the mechanic extra to keep the matter quiet, at which he pleasantly touched the side of his nose and winked.

“What was that all about?” asked Watson as they trekked toward the Tube station.

“Ed is the son of Professor Wayne Zucher.”

“Who?”

“A well-established authority on British literature, who’s taught at Oxford for fifty years.”

“Ah!”

“The Prof does me an odd favor now and again, in return for exposing a cheating ring at the university some years ago.”

“So, you have connections, too.”

“Not as extensive as yours.” Sheila deposited coins in the ticket vending machine. “I led a rather sheltered life.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Watson countered, preceding her through the turnstiles. “Taking Wing Chun from René Adler, working with Roderick Andrews on musical productions, and being courted by James Moriarty...”

Sheila leapt the gap and grabbed a strap on the Baker Street-bound train. “Shut up, John.”

Facing the opposite direction, Watson idly studied passengers in the car. Abruptly, he elbowed Sheila in the ribs.

“Watch it!” she warned.

He tilted his close-cropped blond head to the left. “Sheila, look!”

Her violet orbs shifted casually in that direction, briefly locking gaze with the distinctively hirsute Will McLaurin, positioned near the far door.

As soon as the car stopped at King’s Cross station, he vanished among the disembarking crowd.

Sheila shoved Watson onto the platform. McLaurin’s lack of height made it impossible to single him out among countless bobbing heads.

“What do we do now?” her flatmate puzzled.

“Back to Baker Street. If, as I suspect, Will used his participation in the PTSD group to renew your friendship, and gain mine, then he’ll come around in the very near future to further his nefarious scheme.”

“If not?”

“Then, good riddance to a mentally unstable individual, who could well be dangerous.”

The next train rumbled from its tunnel, and the pair boarded with laborers eager to escape the city.

“I still think you’re wrong,” Watson nearly shouted above the din of music, conversations and mobile phones. “Either way, though, you have to admit: he was really, really funny on stage.”

Sheila managed a feeble smile at the army veteran. “Yes, I guess I would.”

A Thin Veil of Humor

Sheila Holmes trudged up the old servants' stairs at 221B Baker Street, having delivered the monthly rent and expense payment to Edith Hudson-Thorne in the ground level pristine kitchen. Opening the sitting room door, she glimpsed Johnny Watson, in green plaid boxers and a sleeveless white t-shirt, pouring over a page of the London *Times*. She deliberately bumped the wall and, while tightening her belt on the worn dressing gown, noticed how her flatmate scrambled to fold the section and tuck it under his breakfast plate.

"What in the paper don't you want me to see, John?" the brunette detective asked nonchalantly, filling a ceramic mug from the coffee pot.

He stuffed a bite of fried potatoes in his mouth. "I... ah..."

"Could it be the advert touting Will McLaurin at the Comedy Café?"

The British Army veteran blushed to the roots of his blond hair. "He's making quite a name for himself."

"So I read in the Sunday edition review."

Dabbing his smooth features with a linen napkin, Watson rose. "Don't you ever want to confront him about what happened..."

"It's worth neither my time nor effort to concern myself with his... eccentricities."

"Your curiosity doesn't nag you in the night?"

Sheila scowled toward the cluttered fireplace mantle. She would never admit - even to her most esteemed confidant - how strange dreams and bizarre theories of why the 30-ish comedian had played her the fool disturbed her slumber. "I'm involved with other cases."

This statement reminded Watson of an envelope he'd earlier placed on the desk. "By the by, this came in today's post."

Payment for locating a lost diamond earring, very generous, mused Sheila.

"Why is it, Sheila, you don't trust banks?"

"What makes you think..."

"Simple deduction," Watson chuckled. "Every time you receive a cheque, you don't deposit more than the minimum required. The rest of the cash is locked in your uncle's safe. I saw you, just a bit ago, counting out what you owed Edith..."

She sipped her coffee. "It's not that I don't trust banks. I don't trust the people who work in them. I don't trust the computers they use to keep the records. Too easy for hackers to abscond with funds, without so much as having to walk in and pass the teller a robbery note."

“So, you’re saying, from experience...”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe I... should borrow some space in the safe.”

“Or, we could have one installed in your room.”

Watson deliberated this option, then declined. “I don’t have enough in reserve to worry if it disappears, so never mind.”

“As you wish.” She strode toward her bedroom. “What’s on your schedule for today?”

“I’ve an appointment with the orthopedic surgeon, then my... group.”

“You hesitate? Why?”

“Will hasn’t returned to the sessions since...”

“Which confirms my postulation he only attended to renew his acquaintance with you and...”

“Get to you,” Watson concluded.

“Precisely.”

“Would you object if I do a little investigating of my own?”

“You’re quite busy, as it is.”

“I can start at the meeting. Get Will’s address, and call on him...”

“With his burgeoning career, he’s probably hired body guards to keep the riff-raff away.”

“He’s not *that* famous... yet.”

“You’re free to pursue any initiative which strikes your fancy.”

Sarcastically, Watson grunted, “Thanks.”

Sheila’s door closed as he extracted the newspaper from its concealment.

Clad in a Tower Bridge polo shirt, jeans and sandals, the woman trekked to the bank mid-morning. She maintained a leisurely pace, relishing an opportunity to study the faces and behaviors of pedestrians rushing to work, window shopping, or lingering suspiciously at intersections, waiting for a ripe candidate to despoil.

One such, a youthful figure wearing a Manchester United ball cap and long black coat, she greeted in most friendly fashion. He glared at her, baffled, but when he grasped her outstretched hand, she swiftly twisted, pinning it to his shoulder blade.

“Now, put that gentleman’s wallet back where you found it,” she instructed quietly.

The executive-type victim stepped off the curb as the traffic light changed, with no inclination he came so close to losing his valuables.

Sheila warned the amateur criminal before releasing her grip, “I see you again in these parts, and I’ll notify the Yard.”

“Yes, ma’am!” He took off at a sprint, and ducked into an alley to nurse his sprained wrist.

She snickered quietly, continuing along the sidewalk.

Not her usual route to the financial institution which held her slim account, however. This warm, sunny day, she opted to meander for an extended period, pausing far from Baker Street, in the same block where the Comedy Café’s marquee proclaimed Will McLaurin the featured performer.

She had no intention of staking out the location, and passed through the austere bank’s revolving door, completing her transaction in short order. Stuffing a roll of bills in her front pocket, she retraced her steps, sighting the unconscious object of this outing seated across the desk from the manager, discussing... an auto loan.

Feigning interest in a full-color mortgage brochure, Sheila eavesdropped on the conversation. McLaurin’s tenuous entertainment career furnished insufficient guarantee to secure approval. The applicant - his 1970s-style shag haircut and fluorescent green sneakers so distinctive, as were his hirsute arms, well displayed by the short-sleeved print shirt - pressed the issue with all available logic, but the decision proved final. He stood and, dejected, shuffled toward the exit.

Sheila followed him openly; his preoccupation made him oblivious to any impending danger. When he ignored a pedestrian signal and strode into the path of an oncoming lorry, she grabbed his collar and dragged him to safety.

“What the hell...” he croaked, shaking free and spinning irate, pale blue eyes to contend with this assailant.

“Hello, Will. Trying to cut short your promising future?”

He staggered and sought support from a brick storefront. “I...”

“Surprised to see me? Or, do you even remember that night? You and John got pretty drunk...”

“I... remember. Believe me, no nightmare could have been more frightening.”

“Frightening?” Sheila slipped her hand through the crook in McLaurin’s arm, and eased the solidly-built figure toward a coffee shop. “You seemed to enjoy yourself quite a bit.”

“That... I don’t recall.”

“Well, the vomiting wasn’t fun, and the aftermath...”

“Bart’s.”

“When you awoke there, you thought...”

“I was dying.”

They sat at a wobbly square table in the corner. “Which is why you ran?”

He nodded, his upper lip almost invisible beneath the prominent nose.

“Then you showed up at Heathrow with your luggage a few hours later...”

“I what?”

“You don’t remember the sob story you told John and me about your brother?”

“That was no sob story,” McLaurin bristled. “Liam was scheduled to arrive from New York, and I was supposed to meet him...”

Sheila leaned back on the molded metal chair. “You’re either schizophrenic, or you have a twin.”

“Didn’t I mention he’s my twin brother?”

The detective stiffened. “No, you didn’t.”

“He’s Ian William McLaurin, and I’m Owen William McLaurin.”

“And both of you use variations of your middle name...”

“Both our grandfathers were named William, which is why we were equally blessed with the legacy. And we both liked it better than our first names.”

“Didn’t it confuse your relatives, especially being identical?”

“Liam has a scar on his left shoulder from a nasty scrape he got when I threw him out of a tree on our sixth birthday.”

Sheila’s eyebrow arched.

“Look, missy, whatever put me in Bart’s, some nurse came poking and prodding at seven that morning, and once she’d gone, I grabbed my clothes and took off for the Tube. I must’ve missed Liam by ten minutes, so I rode the Tube back to the City, and popped into his hotel.”

“President’s Inn, Russell Square.”

“Right. He was just boarding the lift, and told the concierge on our way out that he wouldn’t be back. We ate breakfast together at some dive in the East End, chatted for a couple hours, then he had me hire him a taxi to Heathrow.”

A waitress approached the table; Sheila waved her away.

“The gist of your conversation?”

McLaurin volunteered, “Our parents, the old homestead, school...”

“He gave you no clue as to why, so abruptly, he’d contacted you?”

“None.”

“He gave you no packages to deliver, no messages...”

“Nothing.”

“Did he speak to anyone else in this dive?”

“No.”

“Odd.” Sheila could make no sense of the situation. “You’ve neither seen nor heard from him since that day?”

“Not a word.”

The woman rose, swallowing her pride. “I apologize for misjudging you, Will. I wish you the best in your professional endeavors...”

He caught the hem of her polo shirt as she withdrew. “You mean, you’re not going to get to the bottom of this?”

“The bottom of what?” she countered, not turning.

“It doesn’t seem insane to you that my brother requests a meeting, and flies round-trip across an ocean to spend a measly three hours with me?”

“Should do.”

“Yet, you won’t look into the matter?”

She faced McLaurin. “There’s no evidence of any wrongdoing...”

“That may be, but there’s still something rotten in Denmark, if you ask me.”

No mistake there, Sheila acknowledged. “I’ll need to you write down the entire conversation with your brother, verbatim. Leave nothing out as inconsequential. You can drop it at Baker Street, or send it by post.”

“And, then?”

“I’ll give it my full attention, between other cases.”

“Eh?”

“It’s not urgent...”

“How can you be so certain?” McLaurin straightened. “Or, is it because I can’t afford your fees?”

Sheila smirked. “You can’t afford to buy a car, Will.”

Embarrassed, his protruding chin retracted. “Oh, you heard that?”

“It will go no further, I assure you. I have been known to dispense with my fees, if the case is intriguing, or a client’s life is at risk.”

“I can arrange for you and John to have an unlimited supply of tickets to my shows...” The comedian gulped. “Oh, yeah, you don’t like my humor.”

“It is a bit... blue for my tastes.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. If a few choice expletives make your preferred audience laugh, so be it. I just won’t be among them.”

“You won’t allow me to... be your friend either, will you?”

“By the way you tried to kiss me that night, I believe I can confidently state your intentions went beyond mere friendship.”

“What a man does under the influence of alcohol...”

“Amplly reflects his innermost wishes.”

He clutched at her arm; she dodged. “Sit down, please?” he begged.

She obliged, the coffee shop growing more crowded with mid-day clientele, and not desirous of a scene.

His brown-maned head moved within inches of hers, his crisp baritone quiet. “I enlisted in the army five years ago. I did three tours in Afghanistan and, in between, was stationed at a base where few women interacted with the soldiers - mostly officers’ wives. My PTSD diagnosis left me... ill equipped to pursue a meaningful relationship. You were the first girl who... paid attention to me in a very, very long time. I can only apologize if I misread your kindness.”

Sheila realized he’d sandwiched her right hand between his long, nimble digits during this monologue. Rather than wrestle herself free, her left stroked the crop of black hair coating his skin. “You are more than forgiven, Will, so long as there’s no repeat of such antics.”

“I swear.” He freed her, raising a Boy Scout salute to confirm his pledge.

She slipped from the table and exited the establishment before he could give chase.

Rather than hike the distance to Baker Street, she hopped a double-decker bus at the corner, jumping off at the Tube station. When she collapsed in the sitting room basket-chair, Watson abandoned his computer project, anticipating a major health crisis.

“What the devil...”

She gasped, “Devil, indeed, John. Your friend, Will.”

“He accosted you?”

“Nothing so dramatic.” She recounted the exchange, and advised him to watch the post in the coming days. “If he rings in, though, I’m not available.”

Blue eyes squinted at his flatmate. “You’re frightened of him. Why?”

“His mere proximity knots my stomach in a most unpleasant fashion.”

“Some would call that love,” chuckled Watson, resuming his work.

Sheila’s fist clenched, then she reconsidered her reaction. “While I’m not immune to that emotion, as proven by past associations, this is more an overriding suspicion he’s hiding the truth beneath a thin veil of absolute rubbish.”

“You want my opinion?”

“Of course.”

“Will’s not that devious. He might not have told you exactly what’s worrying him, but he *is* worried about something.”

“Fine. Poll your connections for all facts available on Ian William McLaurin and Owen William McLaurin.”

Watson’s fingers hovered above the keyboard. “What some parents do to their children!”

Echoing his chuckle, Sheila retired to her bedroom, sleeping until well after dark.

Edith Hudson-Thorne roused her with vigorous knocking; the detective staggered to the door and yanked it inward. “What is it?” she snapped, cringing against harsh lamplight.

“You tell me,” retorted the landlady, her face as red as her wavy tresses. “Some guy named Will has phoned fifteen times in the last three hours. I’m sick of taking messages.”

“Where’s John?”

“He went out, and hasn’t returned.”

“Where are the messages?”

“On the table.” Edith stormed along the corridor. “He got pretty explicit in the last one: something about doing his show, and you’ll have to hurry to catch him in time.”

Sheila repeated, “In time? In time for what?”

Bundled in her uncle’s tattered dressing gown, she snatched the pile of scrap paper off a surface cluttered with glasses, cups, plates and assorted detritus. Most included the word “Urgent”, but little else to pique her interest. The one scrawled at 8:42 PM, however, yielded a hint of clarity: “John at club with me; come at once. Liam here 8:00 AM flight.”

“Shit,” she muttered, crumpling the sheet and pitching it in the wicker trash basket.

Donning an Irish cable-knit sweater against the evening chill, jeans and loafers, her uncle’s black fedora hiding tousled brunette curls, Sheila directed a cabbie idling down the block to the Comedy Café. Alighting near the neon-illuminated refurbished theatre, she passed the fare and a generous tip through the window.

A male voice blared through overhead speakers as she traversed the blue-carpeted lobby; an usher wearing white tab collar and black bow tie barred her entrance.

“You’ll have to wait until the opening act is finished,” he commanded.

“Nonsense. I’m to join Johnny Watson...”

Stone instantly transformed. “Oh, Mr. McLaurin’s friends.”

“That’s right,” agreed Sheila, her tongue rebelling against the lie.

The majority of patrons already intoxicated, they laughed at the basest puns from what clearly merited the designation amateur. Sliding onto a maroon naugahyde upholstered bench in the booth Watson occupied, her expression betrayed displeasure at finding two tumblers of whiskey on the table.

“I’ll not have a repeat of the last go ’round,” she remonstrated.

“There’s a two drink minimum. I had no choice,” Watson replied.

“Besides, Will’s buying.”

“I don’t care if Prince Philip is buying. What the devil is going on?”

Shifting his attention from the stage, Watson leaned across the board, so Sheila could hear him above the amplified performance. “I had a chance to review Will’s service record after our group session this afternoon.”

“Aren’t those supposed to be confidential?”

“Naturally. The group moderator, however, left his office unlocked while giving some colonel a facility tour. I slipped in, and...”

“What did you discover?”

“Pretty much what he told us: three tours in Afghanistan, earning both the distinguished service cross and the conspicuous service medal.”

“And, his brother?”

“Not one jot.”

“Eh?”

“I could locate no school transcripts, no immunization records, no passport application for Ian William McLaurin.”

“You challenged him with that fact?”

“Not yet. I arrived in the middle of some negotiations about his contract. He... wasn’t in the mood to discuss much when he blew past me backstage. Told me he’d see me after the show.”

Sheila deliberated, despite the chaos around her. “Yet, he managed to ring me fifteen times...”

“What?” Watson almost shouted.

“Nothing!” A waitress in leather mini-skirt and halter top arrived to take her order. She pointed to the untouched glasses. “Two of the same.”

McLaurin appeared on stage at 10:15, making a late night for those with office hours the next day. He’d adjusted his stream of raunchy patter to include more references to sex and drugs, the Scots, Irish, and Americans. The stifling atmosphere reverberated with laughter throughout.

Except Sheila. She grew impatient as an hour elapsed, then another 30 minutes. McLaurin’s signature tie-dyed t-shirt - this with a peace emblem integrated in the pattern - dripped with perspiration. He maintained the annoying

habit of running a hand through his brown shag, to keep the drenched strands off his forehead. He drained six plastic water bottles in the course of his routine, utterly fatigued when he finally bowed to a standing ovation.

“If he’s in the mood to talk after that, I’ll be damned shocked,” Sheila grumbled as the patrons cleared the floor.

Watson quipped, “Didn’t you see him blow you a kiss right at the end?”

“No.”

“Seems a tradition for him to put two fingers to his lips, then point in the direction of... someone special.”

“So, you’ve witnessed these... exhibitions on a regular basis?” She exited the booth, stretching her limbs. “Let’s to his dressing room and get this done and over.”

“He said to wait here...”

“And let him duck out the rear? No, sir. He won’t fool me again.”

Compared to some theatres, the Comedy Café offered few amenities to its stars. The cramped chamber where Will McLaurin sat on a low wooden stool before a lighted make-up table might have once served as a janitor’s closet. He’d stripped to the waist, exposing his exceptionally hairy torso and arms, a towel draped around his neck.

“Did your mother mate with a gorilla?” escaped Sheila’s mouth before she could restrain the pun.

He snorted, “There are some gorillas who’d like to mate with *me*.”

“I don’t wonder.”

Gazing at the pair’s reflection in the mirror, he queried, “What’d you think, John?”

“My muscles are sore from the exertion.”

“But, not hers.”

“No, not hers,” Sheila commented.

“The day you so much as smile at one of my jokes, I’ll stroke out.”

“Hopefully, our fleeting affiliation won’t hinge on that requirement.” She towered over him. “Now, what’s the urgency?”

Dabbing persistent droplets from his angular chin, he swiveled toward her. “After our... interlude earlier, I walked to my flat and, checking my email, found a message from Liam. He’s flying in first thing tomorrow.”

“No details?”

“Other than the flight number, and a request to meet him at Heathrow, no.”

“Any progress on the assignment I gave you?”

“A page or two. Nothing unusual.”

“Let me be the judge.” Sheila averted her gaze from his pale blue orbs.
“Did Liam hug you when he saw you last?”
“Sure. He’s... always been very affectionate.”
“Did anything peculiar occur afterward?”
The comedian pondered. “A kid on a bicycle nearly collided with me once Liam’s taxi pulled away, but no one was hurt.”
A slight grin lit Sheila’s slender countenance. “Don’t be so certain.”
“What do you mean?”
“Never mind.” She sobered instantly. “Why is it there are no public records of your brother?”
“Depends on where you’re searching.”
Watson interspersed, “Be more specific.”
“Mom and Dad separated when we were twelve. Dad took Liam to County Clare, and I stayed with Mom. So, all Liam’s records would be in Ireland.”
“Ah!”
“Your parents live together in Wales these days?” Sheila asked.
“Growing older, they weren’t individually earning enough scratch to pay their bills... so they reconciled.”
“Thank you for that.” She retreated toward the threshold. “Meet me at Baker Street at 6:30.”
McLaurin promised, “I’ll set my alarm.”
In the taxi to 221B, Watson pressed, “But, you don’t have a car...”
“I phoned Ed before I left for the club. He’ll deliver the Mercedes first thing.”
“Brilliant!”
“No, just simple logic.”
“Do you think simple logic will solve this conundrum?”
Sheila slumped on the seat. “I’ve no idea.”
What amounted to a two hour nap didn’t aid her mental processes. Groggily, she accepted limousine keys from the mechanic at street level, only to hear Watson raise the sitting room window pane and shout down, “Cancel it, Sheila. Liam’s flight was grounded due to mechanical difficulties.”
With a shrug, she relinquished the fob and, miffed, Ed burned rubber off the rear tires as he sped down Baker Street.
Rather than yell up at her flatmate, the detective sprinted into the dwelling and up the stairs. “Will’s to come, regardless,” she announced.
“You’ll have to ring him back, then.”
She stared at the phone, hesitant.

“What’s wrong?” puzzled Watson.

“He’ll... think I’m... encouraging his friendship.” She passed him the receiver. “You place the call.”

“You’re afraid he’s seeking a relationship beyond that of client?”

“You know he is!”

“Sure, I do. He told me as much. I... didn’t know you knew.”

“He’s not subtle in the least.”

“PTSD makes it difficult to... define the parameters of intimate relationships.”

“Is lying among the symptoms?” Sheila pressed.

“I... ah... why do you ask?”

“Did you find any information on Liam through your Irish contacts?”

Watson sighed. “I don’t have many, but, no. Not one iota.”

“I still hold Will created a brother to draw us into some depraved plot.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re right.”

“Then, notify him to be here by ten o’clock.” En route to the bathroom, she halted, turned, reconsidered, then continued along the corridor.

“Anything else?” inquired Watson.

“I... was going to have you instruct him to bring the clothes he wore the day he accompanied this alleged brother to that East End dive, but it’s not necessary.”

Showered and re-energized by a hearty breakfast, Sheila paced near the windows, anxious to clear the slate of this idiocy and focus on the next case. Sighting Will McLaurin sauntering up Baker Street toting a bouquet of red roses and candy box, she shrank from her vantage point, praying Edith would deny him admittance.

Too late. The visitor ascended the creaking staircase and breezed into the sitting room, broad smile revealing the gap between his front teeth, while hiding his upper lip. He wore the same tie-dyed t-shirt and baggy Dockers from that first night, when he and Watson had drunk to excess, and he’d spent a good portion of the time clutching the toilet bowl. “These are for you, missy,” he proclaimed, laying the gifts in her unwilling arms.

Watson muffled a chuckle; Sheila glowered at the wounded veteran, depositing the load on the red velvet divan.

“Will, you must get it through that thick skull of yours that I’m not...”

“I’ve got good news,” he interrupted. “They rescheduled Liam’s flight. We can try again tomorrow.”

Watson, his mien once more solemn, noted, "Will, we can't find one stitch of verification you *have* a brother."

"Of course, I have a brother!" McLaurin's temper flared. He yanked a wallet from his hip pocket, and brandished a small color print of parents with two young sons on a park bench. "See? The photographer snapped this a month before Dad moved to Ireland with Liam..."

Inspecting the faded glossy paper stock, Sheila remained unconvinced. "I'm sorry. It's not definitive confirmation..."

"What do you want of me?" the comedian bellowed, sinking on the armchair. "He'll be here in less than 24 hours!"

"Can you tell me who's his employer in the States?" prodded the woman softly.

Hopeful, McLaurin groped his memory. "He told me... he told me. It's the Conestoga... Conestoga.... Yes! Conestoga Internet Applications."

Jotting the name on a narrow notepad - one word per line - Watson scrutinized the initials, horrified. "Sheila..." he drawled.

"What is it?"

"Have a look."

In a bold stroke, Watson circled C.I.A. with his pen. Sheila inhaled deeply.

"It's a coincidence," she stated.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Corroborate it."

Her flatmate settled at the desk, typing a search into the web browser. The screen flashed zero results.

Observing this ritual, McLaurin cried, "That's impossible!"

"Actually, it explains quite a lot," countered Sheila. "If your brother is a covert operative for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, every jot of his personal information would have been deleted from public records."

"So, you believe me?"

Doubts remaining, she offered her hand; he grasped it and she pulled him to his feet. "Show me how Liam hugged you, when last you parted company."

"I... he hugged me. A typical..."

"Please, humor me."

An unpleasant noise emanated from McLaurin's nose. "Ironic choice of phrase."

Sheila cracked a grin.

"Okay..." Staring at his arms, he adjusted their angle until satisfied, then moved to embrace his hostess.

She didn't reciprocate, but closed her violet eyes and visualized the gesture's potential implications.

"Thank you," she said, ready to be released.

McLaurin, however, took advantage of the contact and planted a gentle kiss on her mouth.

Realizing her objections would fall on deaf ears, Sheila merely cleared her throat and sidled to the dormant fireplace.

"Have you laundered those trousers since..."

Chagrined, he replied, "Washing clothes isn't a high priority for me."

"Then, please empty your pockets."

"Why on earth..."

"Please."

Besides keys to his flat, his wallet and two hard candies wrapped in clear plastic, a torn corner of white paper presented itself.

Sheila beamed. "As I suspected!"

"What?" hinted Watson.

She assuaged McLaurin's bewilderment, "Will, again I apologize for doubting you. Your brother, sadly, used you to pass a message to his associates, planting it when he bid you farewell. The bicyclist who almost struck you shortly thereafter provided a distraction so a skilled accessory could retrieve the missive without detection."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"We'll never know. The Prime Minister would be highly displeased if I were to interfere with the activities of British allies, and potentially cause an international incident, so I must recuse myself from this investigation."

Both men's jaws gaped but, after a moment's thought, nodded their agreement with this decision.

Watson eased the tension. "Let's get some lunch."

Fears of a Clown

Sheila Holmes peered through the microscope lens, examining a scrap of paper under maximum magnification. Her intense focus blocked all distractions, including the ringing phone.

Frustrated by the jangling, Johnny Watson hobbled from his bedroom on his prosthetic leg, plucking the receiver from its cradle. "Hello?" he growled. Recognizing the caller's crisp baritone, he poised the instrument toward the lab table. "Sheila, it's Will."

She failed to acknowledge the summons.

"Sheila?"

Nothing.

"Sheila!" her flatmate fairly shouted.

"Not now, John. I've almost identified..."

"It's Will, for you."

Her brunette head bobbed upright. "Tell him I'm not here."

"He's already heard you talking."

"Damn you." Scowling, she relinquished the stool. "What is it, Will?"

Comedian Will McLaurin greeted, "How are you today, missy?"

"Busy."

"Too busy to meet me at the club for dinner before my show?"

"Definitely too busy."

"There's... someone in town who'd like to make your acquaintance."

Did she detect agitation in that statement? "I told you weeks ago, I can't persist in investigating..." Even though she'd been obsessed by the lone clue every day since.

"Just a social visit, missy, I promise."

Rather than argue, she agreed to 5:00, then slammed the handset on its base.

"Consider it a form of therapy, Sheila," Watson remarked, having eavesdropped from his threshold.

"I'm not the proper remedy for his issues. I can barely navigate through interpersonal relationships myself, romantic or otherwise." Her work interrupted, she opted for a mug of tepid coffee and sank in her basket-chair. "Liam's here."

Concern furrowed Watson's brow beneath his close-cropped blond mop. "Do you think it's safe?"

“He’s undoubtedly curious what I know of his activities. Will couldn’t have been more obvious with his warning, setting up a dinner before a show, even though it’s his night off.”

“What do you know?”

“Not a blasted thing.” Sipping meditatively, Sheila felt no guilt at not revealing the truth to the British Army veteran. In fact, she’d discovered the sole clue to be a fine linen blend, used by some hotels as their official stationery. En route to the Comedy Café, she would detour to the President’s Inn and confirm the theory nagging at her brain.

Shedding her uncle’s worn dressing gown, she selected a blue henley-style shirt, jeans and sandals from the oak wardrobe. She toted an overflowing laundry basket down the former servants’ stairs to ground level, stuffing dark items into the washing machine off the kitchen pantry.

“When is Edith back from her vacation?” she asked Watson, seated at the computer, while she folded a load of towels after lunch.

“Not sure. Settling her father-in-law’s estate could take weeks.”

“I miss her.”

He chuckled. “You miss her cleaning up after you!”

“So do you.”

“I won’t deny it.”

“Put these in the linen cupboard when you have a chance, will you?” Sheila requested, snatching a black fedora off the rack beneath the bullet-hole “V.R.” insignia on the wall.

“Good luck.”

“I may need it.”

Hiking to the Baker Street Tube station, she rode to Russell Square, bustling at this hour. She mounted concrete hotel steps to the stucco-surfaced facade, approaching the desk with a pleasant grin.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” hailed a chunky, sandy-haired female.

“Question for you, if I may.”

“Happy to be of service.”

“If a customer needed to jot a note, would you be able to oblige?”

“Of course, ma’am.” The woman groped below the marble-topped counter and presented Sheila with a pad bearing the hotel’s gold-embossed address.

“May I?” asked Sheila.

“Certainly.”

At a mahogany writing desk against the lobby wall, Sheila ran the top sheet between sensitive fingertips and breathed a sigh of satisfaction - a match

with the corner Will McLaurin had found in his trouser pocket, proving his brother's fiendish activities.

Not only that, she felt impressions on the surface. "I couldn't be that lucky," she muttered, gently rubbing a pencil lead across superficial ridges.

"Diamonds, 19th, Lloyd's, Windsor," she read.

Hastily, she ripped off the page and tucked it in her hat band, glancing at the reflection in a decorative full-length mirror to assure herself she'd neither been followed nor watched.

She restored the stationery to the clerk with sincere gratitude, departing for her rendezvous with the compactly built, shag-maned McLaurin.

A fidgety attendant responded to her knock on the stage door at the former music hall theatre, pointing her toward the star dressing room. She laid a one pound coin in his palm, at which he bristled.

An eerie silence enveloped the structure, vastly different from the copious laughter which reverberated during evening performances. The staff deserved their break from oft-tedious labors, Sheila mused.

Door ajar, she entered the cramped chamber, expecting to see janitor's mops and buckets, not a lighted make-up table and trade papers strewn on random furniture.

"Will?"

"Come in, Sheila," he greeted from behind a cloth screen, more sedate than his norm. "You look wonderful."

Her violet eyes rolled ceilingward. "We look like a pair of bums, you in that ragged tie-dye, and me in these castoffs. Where'll we eat, the Savoy?"

"I ordered Chinese. I thought we could share an intimate meal without being disturbed."

"Where's Liam?"

"He had a plane to catch."

"Grand. That means we're truly alone." Two strides brought her within reach, and as he moved to embrace her, she ripped wide the left edge of his t-shirt collar.

Revealing a jagged scar partially obscured by ample dark fur. The one distinguishing mark...

"Did you honestly think you could deceive me, Liam?" she snapped.

"Where's Will?"

"How'd you..."

"He's never called me Sheila."

“My bad.” This twin dropped onto a rolling stool. “Too bad you’ll never hear him do so.”

Her mind working at high speed, the detective feigned calm. “You wouldn’t kill him. You need him. So, you’ve got him sequestered in some secluded location...”

“Which you’ll never find.”

“When your superiors at the C.I.A. learn of your crimes...”

Liam McLaurin flinched. “How’d you...” He rapidly recovered his composure. “Oh, yes. He told me you were good.”

“Good enough to determine the purpose of your frequent flights from New York to London.”

“I’m merely a low-level company courier,” he stated. “It’s not safe to use the internet anymore, not since the Wikileaks debacle.”

“But, you do more than transport sensitive documents from the States to the Foreign Office, or MI6. You’ve made the trips far more profitable.”

His pale blue eyes - identical to his brother’s - widened. “You couldn’t possibly...”

“Must do.”

A familiar voice resounded inside her skull. “You’re divulging too much.”

“For good reason, Uncle,” she responded silently, tossing her fedora on a pile of old costumes. “For good reason.”

“May you not regret it.”

Liam McLaurin’s distinctive nose, hinting of Middle Eastern origins, crinkled as he sniffed. “Who’s smoking a pipe?”

Sheila couldn’t contain her chuckle.

“Why is that funny?”

“Inside joke,” she supplied.

“Well, I have a few inside jokes of my own.”

From behind, her arms were seized by two sets of massive paws; a black cloth bag tugged over her head. “Shit!” she swore, before a blunt object rendered her unconscious.

Breathing dank, fish-scented air, Sheila felt water droplets on her cheeks, but resisted opening her eyes. Pounding temples reminded her of the ill treatment she’d received; she apologized aloud to Sherlock Holmes for not heeding his spectral advice.

“Who are you talking to?”

The syllables seemed scrambled in her ears: concussion, she surmised. “Where am I?”

“Best guess is near the London docks.”

Her lids fluttered, and her vision gradually cleared. She gazed into the dirt-smudged 30-ish countenance of Will McLaurin, on whose lap her aching cranium rested.

“Are you all right?” she murmured.

“I should ask you the same.”

“Liam played us both the fools.”

“You got that right.” His legs shifted. “Think you can sit up? I’ve got a hell of a cramp...”

Sheila managed to right herself enough to lean against mildewed plaster. McLaurin climbed to his feet and stretched as best he could.

“Your right arm’s broken,” observed Sheila.

Gap between his teeth showing, he snickered wryly, “Liam’s revenge for the childhood tree incident. Good thing I’m a lefty.”

“Tell me everything.”

“It’s... difficult.”

“No one likes to think their own brother could be so cruel...”

“It’s not that. My last tour in Afghanistan, my tank hit an IED, and the schrapnel tore me up pretty bad...”

“And, to experience another trauma, when your recovery is progressing so well...”

McLaurin nodded.

“Suffice it to say, you met Liam at Heathrow, went to breakfast at some hole-in-the-wall eatery, and when you mentioned my involvement, things turned... sour. You were attacked by at least three unsavory sorts, contended admirably until the fracture occurred. He forced you to ring me, before you succumbed to the pain, fainted and woke up here.”

“Incredible!”

“Logical,” she countered, scrutinizing stark, gloomy surroundings. “And, as soon as I regain a bit of strength, we will escape these confines and bring Liam to justice.”

Her companion knelt beside her, his good hand caressing her cheek.

“Missy, Liam plans to execute us once he collects on his latest shipment. We only have a few hours, at best.”

“Ample time, Will. Ample time.”

He slouched, chin bowed. “I don’t want to die this way. There’ve been nights I’ve died on stage - every comic does, and it’s devastating. Bizarre how the

terms 'kill' and 'die' are used in my profession. Killing is a sign of success. To die... well."

Recalling Watson's summation of the effects of PTSD, Sheila tenderly wrapped an arm around McLaurin's damp shoulders. "You've got to trust me. We will survive this, maybe laugh about it someday when you include it in your act."

"I'd love to hear you laugh." He snuggled close, a frightened child.

"I promise, you will, once we're out of here."

She allowed him to kiss her, then withdrew, working to tear a strip from the hem of her shirt. "You need a sling for that arm." She gauged the length and knotted the ends. "Turn this way."

Maneuvering the circlet over his head proved tricky, and he yelped when she twisted the limb to jar it in place.

"Sorry."

"You pick that up from John?"

Sheila smirked. "No. My Wing Chun sifu broke his leg in a tournament some years ago, and we were miles from a hospital, so I had to improvise."

"You're beautiful, you know that?"

"What I am is filthy."

"If we get out of here, we can... shower off the dirt together."

The very idea raised a chuckle in her throat.

"You don't laugh at my jokes, but when I'm being serious..."

She patted his leg. "Let's not think that far into the future. What we know for sure is we must make our escape in haste, and get you proper treatment. Once we accomplish those goals..." Tentatively, she straightened, waiting for a wave of dizziness and nausea to pass.

Anticipating her intentions, McLaurin stood and offered her his arm, which she gratefully accepted. Fully vertical, she clutched his waist, fearing a collapse. She nestled her face against his chest until her respiration resumed a normal rate. He stroked her tousled curls, humming a soothing melody, though she felt tears cascading down his cheeks.

Adrenaline pumping, she broke from his grasp and toured what must've once served as a chemical storage closet, based on label fragments stuck to warped floor tiles, and residue on lop-sided metal shelves in one corner.

"Single window, iron bars," she noted. "Door, steel reinforced." Kicking aside a molded tarp, she smiled broadly. "Trap door, rusted lock, leading where?"

"The Thames, I think," ventured McLaurin.

"Convenient for disposing of corpses."

He shuddered.

Gazing at him, Sheila calculated options. “You can’t swim as you are, which is a liability. But, there may be a boat in the vicinity...”

“Wouldn’t it be best to see if we can pick the lock, before we...”

“Should do.” Groping through her jean pockets, she realized Liam’s thugs had relieved her of every possession. On a previous case, however, she’d concealed a knife blade in the sole of her sandal...

Perfect to manipulate the padlock’s corroded tumblers.

Not as adept at such covert activities as her uncle Sherlock in his day, the process required multiple attempts, especially since her energy quickly drained in the uncomfortable position of hunching over the hasp.

“Would you like me to have a go?” McLaurin volunteered.

“It would be of inestimable value if you would sit behind me and support my spine...”

“I’ve pretended to be many things in my performances, but never a chair.”

“Isn’t improvisation a key comedic skill?”

He wedged himself behind her, legs spread to improve his balance.

“You’re incredibly agile,” she praised.

“Blame the army. All that stretching in basic training.”

The close contact, rather than aid the situation, distracted Sheila from her task. Every time her make-shift tool failed to free the shank, she reclined against McLaurin’s musky warmth, a myriad of unrelated thoughts assailing her brain.

“This isn’t working,” he declared, extricating himself from the posture after almost a half-hour. “There’s no hope...”

Violet orbs fastened on the shelving behind him. “Yes, there is!” she exclaimed. Rising unsteadily, she crossed and wrenched off two braces, slicing open her left palm.

McLaurin’s turn to use remnants of his t-shirt as a pressure bandage. She ignored the bright red flow and bent the metal into a primitive wedge, jerking the stubborn mechanism apart.

“Three cheers for you!” squealed the comedian, raising her and joyfully planting his mouth on hers.

Sheila responded with enthusiasm borne of impending freedom, the embrace lasting far longer than she intended.

Both flushed when they separated, McLaurin’s sedate white sneaker toeing a mound of garbage and averting his gaze. “I... shouldn’t have done that.”

Hoisting the two meter-square wooden panel a strenuous chore, she stared down at a lapping tide twenty feet below. “See what we can use to shinny down to safety.”

They had no chance to dig among the detritus and muck, hearing footsteps approaching in the corridor beyond the door. “Go!” hissed McLaurin.

“You, first. If you have trouble staying afloat, I’ll save you.”

Reluctantly, he lowered himself on the opening’s edge, inhaled deeply and pitched forward. A key rasping in the deadbolt, Sheila yanked the trap door closed as she leapt into the unknown.

The water, to their great fortune, ran at a depth forestalling further injuries, yet shallow enough for them to touch bottom and slosh to shore. Soaked, lacking identification or money, they trekked along the steep bank until the row of buildings ended at a moonlit, vacant pier.

“You think they’ll come after us?” McLaurin croaked, as Sheila tugged him level with the deserted lane.

“Not if they’re smart. You’ll be reported missing when the club manager can’t contact you, and John will be on the trail when I don’t return to Baker Street.”

“I wouldn’t technically be missing until late Wednesday, which is the next scheduled show,” he reminded her.

Sheila closed her eyes, the better to orient her addled faculties. “You’re correct, of course. I... lost track of the day.”

They wandered a maze of alleys, encountering the unique brand of East End civilization as pubs were closing. In their bedraggled state, the detective convinced one proprietor to ring Watson’s mobile, then the pair settled on the curb to await the summoned taxi.

After what seemed a lapse of hours, the veteran medic’s instinct propelled him from the rear of the black vehicle to examine the couple. McLaurin’s injury required little assessment; Watson frowned over both the congealed blood matting Sheila’s brunette mop, and the gash on her palm.

“You’re both to hospital,” he announced, preempting any protests with, “and not a word from either of you.”

The ride to St. Bart’s didn’t take as long as it would have during daylight, but Sheila realized just how far from home they’d been confined. She vowed to seek out Liam McLaurin and make him pay for his crimes.

In her heart, though, she suspected he’d fled the country upon discovering his captive’s escape, to request a transfer within the C.I.A. which would not obligate him to travel the Atlantic for the foreseeable future.

“I’m glad you thought to use the mobile number,” said Watson, attentive to her every shiver. “We’d just found your fedora in Will’s dressing room at the club...”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“The security guard and I. I sent him to notify the Yard, and he waited for them when I left in the taxi.”

“Bravo, John. Bravo.”

“Full x-rays for both,” Watson instructed the orderly when they arrived at the accident and emergency entrance.

The diffident youth demanded, “Who’s their doctor?”

“Whoever’s on staff. They’re accident victims, and need immediate attention.”

“Yes, sir.”

Through a disoriented haze, Sheila didn’t like being maneuvered from the gurney onto a cold metal table, equipment positioned within inches of her nose. Front, side and rear views were consigned to film, developed and displayed on a lighted screen in a tiny cubicle off the main corridor.

“To be blunt, Sheila, your noggin’s cracked,” Watson diagnosed. “You’ll be a patient here the next few days.”

“I... want to go home.”

“Not a word, I said. You’ll receive proper treatment for not only the wound - which will take fifteen stitches, if I guess right - but the fracture, and the concussion. And, you’re already running a fever, leading me to believe the pollution in the Thames has infected your hand, which rates another ten or so sutures.”

“Oh, stop, John.”

“Rest yourself. I’ll see how Will is doing.”

McLaurin’s radiology results showed a clean break of the ulna, which an orthopedic intern had placed in a velcro-fastened brace, not needing to reset Sheila’s impromptu efforts. He, too, would be kept for observation, to ensure no adverse side-effects to the pain medication or internal bleeding from the assault he’d sustained.

Rather than sleep on his assigned bed in a shared room, the comedian compensated for the open-back polka-dot gown by wrapping himself in a blanket and creeping down one flight of stairs to Sheila’s private quarters.

His left hand cradled her right as he sat on a utilitarian wooden chair beside the IV stand dripping antibiotics and saline. Unintelligible ramblings confirmed her hallucinations; she conducted an entire conversation with “Uncle Sherlock”, before thrashing her arms to fend off an imagined adversary.

He prevented her from dislodging the needles by quietly singing a rather bawdy song. Soon, they both slept.

Sheila woke first, hearing loud footsteps in her dreams, and preparing herself to jump into raging waters...

McLaurin's brown shag lay on the mattress near her waist.

A pink scrub-clad nurse, on her early rounds to check blood pressure and temperature, roused him by jiggling his chair. "Out of here," she grunted.

Sheila remonstrated, "Let him stay."

"It's against policy."

"Screw the policies."

Pale blue eyes bulged as the man guffawed at this turn of phrase.

"We'll see about this!" spat the woman, exiting in a huff.

McLaurin raised Sheila's unencumbered digits to his lips. "Thank you."

"I... don't understand... how I got here?"

"You don't remember John fetching us?"

"Nothing after I hit the water."

"Wow, then you're really good on automatic pilot."

"My head aches."

He presented her a cup of ice water; she sucked in a healthy portion of the liquid through the straw. The comic then recounted the previous hours prior to a besuited administrator crossing the threshold. "I'm sorry, you must return to your own bed."

Sheila would not let McLaurin release his grip. He squeezed her hand with a weak grin. "I'm right above you, and if they discharge me before you, I'll come visit."

"If her fever breaks, she'll be allowed to leave Thursday," the gentleman estimated.

Compliantly, McLaurin shuffled to the stairs.

"What's with these blasted bandages?" barked Sheila when the nurse reappeared, sneering in triumph.

Watson, who had caught forty winks in the waiting room, rushed in as the detective commenced unraveling layers of gauze compressing her hair. "Don't!"

"Why not? I don't need to be coddled like some infant with a scraped knee..."

With surprising strength, he pinned her wrists to the bed. "You're lucky to be alive, according to Dr. Nichols. As it is, the impact to your skull may have caused major brain trauma..."

"Nonsense, John! And, that doesn't account for this!" She waved her hand accusingly. "I've heard hospitals have ways to inflate their costs, to the detriment of both patient and health system..."

“That’s in America, Sheila. And, if you don’t remember how you cut yourself, you may rate a couple extra days of treatment for amnesia.”

“I don’t have amnesia, silly. I know who you are, who I am, and that the stranger in the doorway is carrying a pistol beneath his jacket. He’s either from the Yard, or sent by Liam McLaurin to finish what he started.”

A badge confirmed the former assertion, allowing Watson to exhale loudly.

“Tom Lindstrom, at your service,” the overweight, greying Metropolitan Police inspector introduced himself. “The Comedy Café security guard reported one of their employees accosted and another possibly kidnaped...”

“Balderdash,” replied Sheila. “We were on a scavenger hunt, and got lost.”

He drew a notepad and pen from his trouser pocket. “That doesn’t match Mr. McLaurin’s statement.”

“Which Mr. McLaurin?”

“Owen William McLaurin,” he read on one sheet.

“Ah, well. Sorry, I have nothing to tell you.”

“Sheila!” Watson scolded.

Ignoring the IV tubes, she grabbed his shirt collar and tugged his ear close. “This is a matter for the Foreign Office, John, not inept police.”

Lindstrom waited, impatient. “Well?”

“I’m... afraid Miss Holmes won’t be filing any charges,” Watson remarked, straightening.

Spinning on the heels of his highly polished loafers, he caught Sheila’s deliberate insult, “There are tasty doughnuts in the cafeteria!”

Watson’s blue eyes squinted at his flatmate over this breach of decorum.

“Are you in that much agony you can’t keep a civil tongue in your mouth?”

“Go home, John. Make sure the sitting room is clean before Edith gets back from her vacation.”

“What guarantee do I have that you’ll abide by the doctor’s orders and stay put?”

“Only my word.”

“Insufficient.”

“You want to shackle me to the bedframe?”

“Should do.”

She clutched his sleeve. “I’m kidding, John, and I’m sorry. It should reassure you that I have no villains to pursue at this precise moment, so I can afford to relax and numb my brain with talk shows on the telly.”

“You do that. I’ll check in this evening.”

Rather than prolong the row, Sheila signaled her approval. She switched on the flat screen assembly mounted to the wall but, once she calculated Watson had boarded the lift, she wrenched out the IV needle, pressed her bandaged palm against the hole to absorb the blood, and glanced around for her shoes.

Her clothes tossed in the refuse, most likely, due to their condition, she rummaged in the night stand for a spare gown, pulling it on like a coat, to offset the rear view. Gingerly opening the door, she monitored the cycle of breakfast tray delivery, and bolted to the nearest stairwell when the attendants were otherwise occupied.

She paused on the landing between floors to catch her breath, silently admitting to herself the wisdom of Watson's recommendation for her care. Nonetheless, she continued her ascent, repeating the same technique to slip into McLaurin's room unnoticed. He'd managed a shower and, somehow, had combed his wavy mane to its regular shag style.

"What on earth..." he blurted, almost choking on a bite of buttered toast. "You shouldn't..."

She laid a finger on her lips. "Hush! You ready to go?"

"More than ready. This food is terrible."

"We've got to find something inconspicuous to wear..."

"John brought me a pair of sweats, and loaned me twenty pounds to get home..."

"I'll borrow something from the nurses."

Off his bed, he restrained her. "What if something happens? I won't forgive myself..."

"Here's the deal," Sheila stated. "You help me blow this ice cream stand, and I'll come to every performance until you make me laugh."

"Dinner, too?"

She considered. "Twice a week."

They shook hands awkwardly and, while McLaurin dressed, Sheila scurried past the empty nurse's station into the women's room. A pair of floral-print scrubs hung on a hook beside the shower stall; she appropriated them, hid the bandages around her head beneath a surgical cap, and emerged from the chamber two minutes later without interference from the medical staff.

"Shall we?" she urged McLaurin, lingering in an alcove.

A dense fog enveloped the street beyond the hospital doors. "You feel strong enough to take the Tube?" queried her escort.

"To your digs, or mine?"

“Mine.”

“Definitely.”

Down the stairs, tickets purchased, onto the platform, then six stops to the modest complex where McLaurin rented a studio flat. He offered Sheila the twin bed, crashing on a lumpy maroon sofa. Neither stirred until the phone rang mid-afternoon.

“Where is she?” Watson bellowed, audible across the room.

The tenant mutely consulted his guest.

“Tell him we’re having a torrid, frenzied sex marathon, and I’ll be home on Saturday.”

McLaurin, suppressing his laughter, raised the instrument to his ear.

“I heard,” grumbled Watson. “If she develops complications, Will, it’s your arse.”

“Understood, John. I’ll take good care of her.”

Disconnected, the pair gave their merriment free reign. McLaurin brewed a pot of coffee and prepared a delightful salad, but Sheila had no appetite.

“You sleep, then,” he suggested. “I’ve some new material to write.”

“I can deduce the topic.”

Tucking a cricket-themed quilt to her neck, he bent and kissed her forehead. “Rest well, missy.”

“I will, now this fiasco is ended.” She shifted onto her right side. “All that’s left to do is make a report to the Foreign Office, which can wait ‘til next week.”

“Amen to that.” The comedian moved a molded plastic kitchen chair to the reclaimed school desk, breaking out lined paper and a pen. He scribbled ideas until dusk, chuckling to himself, for the first time in months actually feeling lighthearted.

Kill or Die

A sullen Johnny Watson stood on the threshold, backpack slung over his left shoulder, when Will McLaurin answered the knock that Friday afternoon. The men stared at each other awkwardly for a moment - an odd duo, with McLaurin's prominent nose and solid albeit fit physique, Watson blond, slightly taller, thin, sporting a prosthetic leg. The comedian stepped aside, allowing his guest access to the flat.

"You should keep that arm in a sling," Watson advised, noting the brace on his right forearm.

"I do, but I just got out of the shower."

His wet brown mane confirmed as much.

The veteran army medic set his burden on a rectangular kitchenette table, continuing, "How are you, otherwise?"

"Sore. Liam's boys gave me a good going over."

"You taking any meds?"

"Ibuprofen."

"What about her?" Watson gazed at the rumpled twin bed, where Sheila Holmes dozed. "Has she been eating?"

"She claims to have no appetite. I know she's suffering, because she tosses and turns in her sleep. She hasn't complained about any pain, though she acts delirious, holding extended conversations with someone, about the weirdest subjects."

"For her, that's sort of normal."

McLaurin grimaced, displaying the gap between his upper incisors. "John, is she... right in the head?"

"Only a professional could diagnose her, for certain. My guess would be PTSD, given that - in the brief time I've lived with her - she's witnessed the deaths of James Moriarty and Roderick Andrews. With this latest incident..."

"It would explain a lot."

Watson unzipped a pocket of his pack, extracting two plastic cards. "Here's your new ID."

"How'd you..."

"I've connections in many government departments."

"I was going down to get it replaced next week... Thanks."

From the main compartment, Watson tugged a bundle of Sheila's clothes. "I thought she'd need something to wear home."

McLaurin's pale blue orbs widened. "I loaned her some of mine."

“Good of you.”

“John, is that you?” muttered Sheila, lifting her bandaged skull off the stack of pillows.

“Yes, Sheila.” Drawing out a small medical pouch, he crossed the studio’s unwaxed wood floor. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit.”

Assessing her appearance - tie-dyed t-shirt and sweatpants, almost identical to McLaurin’s - and the stained gauze covering wounds on her head and left hand, Watson scowled. “I’ll stay long enough to change your bandages.”

She squirmed in discomfort. “Why?”

“You and Will are entitled to your privacy...”

Violet eyes blinked. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“If you and he choose to be lovers...”

“Oh, John!” she guffawed, suddenly grabbing her temples in anguish.

“That was a bad joke.” She crooked her finger; he leaned forward. She whispered, “Like the ones in Will’s act.”

“I heard that!” the performer remarked whimsically.

Watson unraveled the material tangled with Sheila’s brunette curls, reserving comment on the relationship issue. “Did you hear about the dustcart which exploded on Marylebone Road Wednesday?”

“I haven’t switched on the telly or my computer since... this happened.”

“A small parcel, addressed to Sheila, was delivered in the post that morning. It supposedly came from the Salisbury Novelty Company which, searching the internet, I discovered does not exist. So, I tossed it in the wheelie bin, right before the collection. Evidently, when the truck compacted its load, the bomb detonated.”

This tale propelled the patient upright, her interest piqued. “Will, have you brought up your mail?”

“Not since Monday. What with prepping a new segment for last night’s show - which went quite well, mind you - I haven’t thought about the little things.”

“Fetch it now. We’ll see if Liam had comparable intentions for you.”

Unhooking his key ring from a nail in the door frame, McLaurin excused himself.

Left alone, Watson settled on the edge of the narrow mattress. “Sheila, how are you, really?”

“I’ll be right as rain in a day or two, John. Seeing you angry with me, though, doesn’t lift my spirits.”

“I’m not... angry. In fact, I have some good news.”

“Which is?”

“The stationery from the President’s Inn, tucked in your fedora...”

“The copy of Liam’s note about the diamond drop?”

“If that’s what it was, yes. I checked with a contact I have at Lloyd’s Windsor branch. On the eighteenth and nineteenth of last month, their safe deposit signature cards show expertly forged names for a recently acquired box.”

Sheila seized Watson’s shirt sleeve as a wave of agony consumed her. Through grit teeth, she directed, “John, in Uncle Sherlock’s old files... I hid the private phone number given to me by the Prime Minister during that debacle with Mac Andrews. Find it, and call him on my behalf. Tell him everything.”

“Will he believe me?”

“You have sufficient proof to convince him.”

McLaurin returned, a stack of bills tucked in his sling, and a shipping paper-wrapped shoe box under his arm. “Is this what you’re thinking is a bomb?”

“Do you recognize the return address?” queried Watson.

“It’s from my mother.” He dug a pair of scissors from the desk.

Sheila, feet shoved into a pair of her host’s shower shoes, rose unsteadily. “Don’t open that, Will! What better way for Liam to fool you into thinking it some innocuous collection of cookies or other trinkets?”

He retreated from the desk. “You really think...”

“One way to find out. Call the Yard.”

Watson objected, “I thought you didn’t want them involved.”

“It’ll give their bomb unit practice.”

“As you wish.” McLaurin lifted the phone from its cradle.

“Arrange to meet them in Regent’s Park, don’t bring them here. Have them clear the area, and set it off with you watching.”

“Why on earth...”

“More proof for the Prime Minister to place a call to Washington.”

“What about you?” Watson pressed.

Sheila sank on the bed. “I’m staying right here.”

Thirty minutes later, Will McLaurin departed, delicately transporting the suspected explosive. Watson, finished cleaning and dressing Sheila’s sutures, presented her clothes and ID.

“I’ll come for you tomorrow. You’ll rest better in your own room at Baker Street,” he announced.

She patted his trembling hand. “You’re too good to me, John, but I can’t put you in harm’s way.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’ll take time to get Liam out of circulation. Until then, if he knows his attempt to kill me - and Will - has been foiled, he’ll try again.”

“Then, why not let him think you *are* dead?”

“It might have been simple for Uncle Sherlock to fake his demise at Reichenbach Falls, but today... no. Reports about the first explosion will already be available on news websites - probably attributed to terrorists, though Liam will recognize the location as near our digs, and write off the failure.”

“You’re overcomplicating the matter...”

“Not at all, John. Not at all. Liam McLaurin operated a thriving business, carrying stolen jewels across the Atlantic to be fenced in Europe - for substantial remuneration, of course. My... interference only put a temporary crimp in his routine, as evidenced by his efforts to annihilate us.”

“What can we do?”

“It’s up to the Prime Minister. There’s one more piece of information you can provide him, if you will. Search the American news sites for any mention of sizeable jewel thefts in the past two weeks. I’ve an idea Liam is gearing up for a really big take, the key reason he refuses to cease and desist.”

Sheila reclined on the bed; Watson plumped her pillows and straightened the quilt over her exhausted limbs. He settled on McLaurin’s battered sofa, afraid to leave the woman unattended.

The tenant returned late in the evening, complications with the Metropolitan Police delaying the explosion. “She was right, John,” he greeted, rummaging in the kitchen cupboard for a whiskey bottle and taking a long drink from the spout. “Damn that brother of mine!”

Watson stretched, rising. “I’ll be off. Got a lot to do.”

“Wait a mo’,” protested McLaurin. A coffee can on the counter opened, from whence a twenty pound note was conveyed to Watson’s hand. “I owe you this, and a lot more.”

“Don’t give it another thought.”

McLaurin blocked his exit. “There’s nothing serious between us. She’s... out of my league.”

“Honestly, I don’t think so. You’re a creative genius, and she’s a logical genius. You uniquely complement each other.”

“If we both have PTSD...”

“Is it okay if she stays here ‘til Monday?”

“Could do.”

“Don’t let her exert herself - even mentally. I’m worried about her.”

“So am I.”

The pair shook hands before Watson withdrew. McLaurin briefly contemplated Sheila’s sleeping form before selecting a chicken dinner from the freezer and sliding it in the oven.

Nightmares plagued the detective’s slumber, a scenario which had been repeated on at least six occasions since her abduction by Liam McLaurin and his cohorts. She cried out to her uncle Sherlock, beseeching him to dispel gory visions of men she’d known since childhood being torn apart by ravenous beasts as she fought to escape shackles binding her to a dungeon wall.

“You’re battling demons within your own mind,” the elder Holmes droned. “You must either face the truth that death is part and parcel of life, moreso in this profession we share, or go mad.”

“I’m already mad!” she shrieked aloud, which caused McLaurin - exhausted from his performance at the Comedy Café - to tumble off the sofa.

“You stand on the precipice’s edge; you’ve not yet taken the determining leap. There is hope for you, if you forego becoming attached to those who seek your assistance.”

“What’s left? A recluse’s existence, friendless, driven by the latest cerebral stimulation?”

“Exactly.”

“Bullshit!”

McLaurin nudged her shoulder, begging her to wake. “Missy, for Christ’s sake!”

She saw him in the recesses of her torment, bathed in blood, an executioner’s axe aimed to decapitate him.

She shot upright, screamed, and slumped in his arms.

For a second, he believed her dead. Then, she drew a deep breath and opened her eyes.

“What the hell...” Palsied digits wiped perspiration from her throat, as moonlit surroundings came into focus. “Oh, God, Will. I’m sorry. Did I startle you?”

He held her close, her heart pounding against his chest. “It’s all right. You’re safe.”

“Physically, perhaps. Mentally... I’m not sure.”

“It’s a problem shared by those with PTSD.”

She met his gaze. “I don’t...”

“John thinks you do, and I’m near agreeing with him.”

“How so?”

“He told me what you’ve been through. My story would be different, with the same outcome: corpses at our feet.”

She snickered sarcastically. “Maybe I should start coming to the group therapy sessions.”

“It would prove you’re not alone in this.”

“Yes, I am, Will. You, and the other vets, endured hell in a foreign land. For me, it’s London, right outside my door. And I’m charged with eliminating the danger so my fellow Brits can enjoy a modicum of peace.”

“Sounds like whoever you’ve been talking to in your dreams has laid a load of guilt on you. You need to let it go and get on with your own life.”

“You want to meet him?”

“Who?”

“Uncle Sherlock.”

McLaurin stiffened, the knowledge a lunatic rested in his embrace sending shockwaves of terror through him.

The ringing phone provided a reason to extricate himself. “Who would be calling at this ungodly hour?”

Watson dispensed with customary greetings, announcing that an associate at Heathrow had seen Liam’s name on an inbound flight’s passenger list, arriving that day, in the wake of a huge jewelry heist in Chicago. “The Prime Minister is willing to authorize protective custody for you both, until MI6 can apprehend your brother,” he concluded.

“John, Sheila’s certifiably insane.”

His train of thought broken, the wounded veteran stammered, “What makes you think that?”

“She offered to introduce me to Sherlock Holmes.”

What might have been a cat coughing up a hairball caused McLaurin to distance the receiver from his ear. Finally, Watson spoke. “Trust me, Will. She’s... eccentric, but not dangerous. Grab the first taxi you find and get out of the city. Call me when you’re settled, but use a public call box.”

“What about my show?”

“You won’t get any laughs if you’re dead and, with luck, Liam will be behind bars by nightfall.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The tenant replaced the instrument in its cradle, sat at the desk and glared at his slumbering guest. He had no idea where to take her, or how to transport her without impeding her recovery.

He crept to the bed and touched her cheek. “Missy, you’ve got to get up.”

“Why ‘missy’ to my face,” she stated, totally coherent, “and Sheila when speaking to John?”

“I...”

Bloodshot eyes beamed at him through the darkness. “You’re scared of me, aren’t you?”

“A bit.”

“More scared of Liam, though.”

“John’s arranged for official protection.”

“To hell with that. There’s enough paranoia in the world; I’ll not live in fear.”

“What do you suggest?” McLaurin challenged.

“Stand and fight.”

“You’re too weak...”

“Bullshit.” She stripped the gauze off her left palm, then ripped the spiraled mass from her hair, wincing when strands stuck to the adhesive. She crawled from beneath the quilt and rotated her neck, cracking noises causing McLaurin’s jutting chin to twitch.

“Liam wants us dead, er... Sheila.”

“I don’t suppose you own a pistol.”

“Sorry, no.”

“In that case, we’ll have to rely on our wits.” She strode toward the kitchen, stumbling over the sofa. “Turn on the lights, eh?”

McLaurin switched on the ceiling fixture and a brass floor lamp.

“You... don’t have much in the way of resources, do you?” Sheila critiqued.

“I only moved here three months ago, after a year in a homeless shelter.”

“Apologies, Will. We’ll make do.”

“And, if we survive this fiasco, you’ll abide by our bargain?”

“Bargain?”

His bare foot stomped petulantly. “You forgot!”

“For a comedian, your sense of humor is sadly lacking,” she quipped.

“You have my word: I’ll be at the club every night.”

A thorough inventory of tools, utensils and liquids in the flat resulted in a peculiar collection stacked on the desk.

“You think Liam will simply rap on the door?” McLaurin puzzled.

“He might send a couple guys through the windows, if there’s a decent ledge.”

“None at all.”

“Good. That reduces his options.”

“Are there others?”

“If he makes it this far, he won’t intentionally create a disturbance. His objective will be high-tailing it to the airport for an outgoing flight, a verifiable alibi. He might employ a silencer, knife, garotte, or noose - staging it as a suicide.”

“A double suicide?”

“Unlikely, yes, but we can’t discount his motivation.”

The comedian flopped on the nearest chair. “You’re damned good at this, aren’t you?”

“Not by choice, Will. When you encounter someone who truly wants to kill you, it... changes you.”

“Don’t I know it! One night on guard duty, a kid, for Christ’s sake - maybe 14 - walked up to me, bumming a cigarette in sign language. I reached for my pocket, and he confiscated my rifle. I had less than a second to weigh the consequences; I snapped his neck before he could unload the clip into my gut.”

Impressed, Sheila declared, “We might be able to use those talents...”

“He’s my brother, Sheila!”

“Fine. I’ll handle him, and you concentrate on any confederates he brings along.” She selected a can of stout lager. “You quit smoking?”

“That very day.”

“Good for you. Nasty habit. Uncle Sherlock uses an awful smelling shag...” She glimpsed his horrified mien. “Forgive me.”

The man admitted, “That type of chatter petrifies me.”

“John and I are accustomed... Never mind.” She resumed grouping items by category. “Did the army offer you any training with explosives, by chance?”

“Only recognizing IEDs, and that wasn’t comprehensive by any means. As soon as we were able to track one kind, they changed the configuration.”

“Which is what we’re going to do.”

“Eh?”

“Improvise.” Sheila located a large bowl in one cupboard and emptied beer - and an ample portion of whiskey - into it. Unraveling a spool of heavy blue thread, she tied one end to the doorknob and looped it over an exposed rafter. A wooden matchstick was secured in place against the matchbox, so when the door opened, the two would make contact, the flame dropping into the alcohol.

“Thus distracted, we can take them out,” she concluded.

“How?”

“Wing Chun for me, and your skilled reflexes.”

McLaurin glanced at the alarm clock. “We’ve got three hours until his plane lands.”

“And another sixty minutes for his transit.” The detective assessed her appearance. “A shower is in order, and the fresh clothes John delivered yesterday.”

“Mind if I join you?”

En route to the bathroom, Sheila peered over her shoulder, smirking playfully. “If you’re not kidding, come ahead.”

Pale blue orbs flashed disbelief, but he followed her into the tile and porcelain chamber, removing the brace from his fractured right arm.

Awareness that, after the imminent chaos, she would never cross paths with Will McLaurin again - combined with the fact her contrivances might fail and they’d wind up in the London morgue - letting him fulfill his fantasy would do no harm. That she enjoyed his left hand massaging her aching back with soap, while avoiding wetting her scalp wound, and he obviously relished the mutually amorous kisses and having his shaggy mane shampooed, voided any regrets.

“I cannot get past some genetic anomaly manifesting in all this body hair,” she chuckled, scrubbing his taut chest muscles with a loofah.

“It’s as much a mystery to me as it was to my mother. When Liam and I were delivered, the doctor had to check twice it wasn’t a gorilla on the gurney.”

“Who’s older?”

“Me, by twelve minutes.”

“Does he resent that?”

“He resents a lot of things, which is why he went for the scholarship: his big opportunity to prove himself superior.”

“Not the first whose inferiority complex lands him in prison,” Sheila noted, reaching for the faucet.

“Don’t. Five more minutes.”

She acquiesced, recognizing in his eyes a rationale identical to her own. Eventually toweling each other dry, in light of their respective injuries and limitations, they clung to each other until McLaurin’s stomach rumbled.

“A little breakfast before the battle?” he ventured, strapping on his brace.

“Between the two of us, we should be able to cook some eggs, toast and coffee.”

“Perfect.”

By 8:30, plates, mugs and skillet had been washed and restored to their shelves, the flat straightened, the garbage emptied in the janitor’s closet

receptacle along the third floor main corridor. Sheila delicately engaged in stretching exercises, while McLaurin paced nervously.

“Similar to launching an offensive in the field, eh?” she mused.

“Too similar.”

“An hour from now, it’ll be all over.”

“That’s what pisses me off.”

“Me, too.”

The tread of three sets of boots exiting the lift - which pinged on each floor it serviced - grew louder as the pair held their breath in anticipation. McLaurin had left the deadbolt unlocked, eliminating the need for Liam to force an entrance. Nonetheless, the panel slammed inward, setting off the explosion, and before the smoke cleared, burly henchmen lay on the floor unconscious, Liam pinned on the sofa, Sheila’s knee pressed against his sternum.

His twin collected the pistols, which had fallen from the defeated assailants’ grips, and secured them in the refrigerator.

“You’ve got ten minutes to confess the whole scheme before you’re hauled in for the real interrogation,” Sheila barked.

His white blazer askew, black scoop-necked shirt rumpled and white trousers torn, Liam retorted, “Then, why should I tell you anything?”

“Because, I’ll kill you if you don’t.”

“Why...”

“A crazy idea I have, let’s say.” She pinched his right ear between her thumb and index finger and twisted - hard.

He yowled. “Okay, okay!”

She didn’t relinquish her posture, Will hovering over her shoulder.

Liam recounted his start at the American Central Intelligence Agency: “Decent salary, but crap duties.” He rambled about his initial assignments, and how five other operatives offered him a share of their take if he’d help them fence stolen jewels. “One of them held a post where he could promote me to courier. From there...” He tried to shrug, unsuccessfully.

“With such an extensive network, why involve Will?” Sheila prodded.

“A couple of the intermediaries got nabbed for drug possession, disrupting our schedule. I thought it’d be simple to plant the directions on Will, so they could be passed up the chain.” Liam’s watery blue eyes shot daggers at his captors. “He had to drag you into it and ruin everything.”

Johnny Watson preceded a team of helmet-clad, heavily armed intelligence agents into the flat at that moment, their arrival well proclaimed by wireless radio static.

“Bloody hell, Sheila!” the former army medic cried, assessing the scene.
“What have you done?”

“My job, John. My job.”

A unyielding grip wrenched her off the smuggler. “Your only job is to get in bed and stay there for a week!”

“From three in the morning ‘til three in the afternoon, yes.” Noticing a fresh stream of blood flowing from the gash on her left palm, she snatched a tea towel from the sink. “I have an engagement every evening.”

“What ‘engagement’?”

Her response was to caress McLaurin’s cheek in parting and lead Watson to a taxi idling on the street below.

“Edith’s not home from vacation?” she queried when they marched into the sitting room at 221B Baker Street, seeing stacks of moldy dishes and piles of newspaper on the floor.

“Settling her father-in-law’s estate is taking longer than expected. His step-children are contesting the will.”

“I pity her that ordeal.”

“I changed your bedsheets while you were gone, so you can head right in and have a lie-down...”

“I’m too edgy to sleep, John.”

“You ready to explain about this nightly engagement?”

She dropped on the red velvet Victorian divan. “I promised Will I’d see his show until he makes me really laugh.”

“That’s ludicrous! After we pay your hospital bills, there’ll be barely enough to buy food and pay next month’s rent...”

“The companies insuring the jewelers who were robbed will be very glad to have Liam McLaurin and his accomplices off the streets...”

“Rewards?”

“You should be able to search for the police reports, which will list the firms...”

Sheila extracted her sole tie-dyed t-shirt from the bedroom wardrobe after a cursory dinner of grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. Wearing that, jeans and sneakers to the Comedy Café, she and Watson occupied the same booth as on their previous visit.

Much of Will McLaurin’s monologue had changed in those ensuing weeks, including an extended bit about pursuing an “unattainable woman” and how men and women handle romance differently. He’d not foregone the habit of repeatedly flipping brown hair off his forehead, however.

“The authorities, and society in general, condemn a man who abuses his wife or girlfriend. Police tend to throw him in jail, and let the other inmates abuse *him* awhile.”

The description - coupled with some lewd body movements - elicited a wave of hysteria from the packed establishment.

“When a woman uses certain... techniques on a bloke who she wants to get out of her hair... or get to agree with her during some trivial row... Just the thought gets me hard.”

Two dexterous fingers of his left hand brushed his mouth, extending toward Sheila, concealed in the shadows.

“Thing is, this gal I was after had martial arts training and could’ve *killed* me, if she’d been in the mood - especially at a specific time of the month. Got to watch your step, in the event she’s had a bad day at the office, or mixed it up with some jewel smugglers. One wrong word and you’re done, literally. Broken neck” - he simulated that affliction - “or broken arm.” He pointed to his sling.

More laughter.

Sheila did not go backstage after the curtain fell, fulfilling her promise by occupying the reserved seat every Wednesday through Saturday for weeks. McLaurin constantly tweaked his delivery, without garnering so much as a chuckle from that direction in the house.

“I’m leaving on tour Monday,” he notified the audience to commence his final performance. “If folks in Canada and the States find me as funny as you have in London, I may not see you again for a long, long time. There’s one goal I must achieve before my plane leaves: an extremely wonderful lady needs to break out of her shell and favor me with one laugh. So, here goes...”

McLaurin accelerated his pace over the course of ninety minutes, and had the entire gathering in stitches. Sheila remained aloof, though, until he threw in a final zinger: “So, we’re standing there, me holding the skillet handle with my good hand, her trying to flip the hamburger with the spatula in hers. Instead of going straight up, the meat flies across the room and sticks to the telly, giving the bald chat show host a toupee of a whole other kind.”

Despite herself, the images this narrative evoked struck Sheila as humorous, and her distinctive chortle echoed around the chamber.

The comedian plowed between tables, lifted her off her seat and twirled her until she felt quite dizzy.

“Put me down, silly!” she squealed. In complying, he peppered her face with kisses, landing the last on her lips. She reciprocated, then lightly pushed him away. “You killed tonight, Will. Best of luck on the tour, and safe travels.”

“Greetings to your uncle Sherlock,” came his jest.

Johnny Watson awoke the next morning to find Sheila relaxing in the sitting room basket-chair, grinning ear-to-ear.

“He did it?” speculated her flatmate.

“Indeed, he did.”