

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

A Comic Turn

A Collection of Stories

by

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The Party

Through the closed sitting room door, Sheila Holmes heard whispers. Edith Hudson-Thorne and Johnny Watson met like this each morning, after the breakfast tray went untouched. The widowed American landlady complained to her tenant that they must engage Sheila in some activity; she'd been sitting in the basket-chair for nearly six months, staring at the walls, moving only to use the toilet and occasionally shower.

"I know, I know," Watson always responded. "I've tried to get her interested in a new case, but since Tony Downton's murder..."

"I won't have her death on my conscience."

This particular Tuesday, the Afghan campaign veteran suggested, "Isn't your brother coming for a visit next month?"

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

"You mentioned an anniversary."

"He and his wife are celebrating their tenth, which is the reason for the trip."

"Why not throw them a party, and have Sheila help in the planning?"

Edith choked, "What?"

"She's very thorough with details. You could assign her, say, arranging for the catering and place settings."

"That would take her all of five minutes."

"Not if you select a specific menu of American specialties, which would need to be imported from particular vendors in the States."

From her place in the dim chamber, Sheila didn't catch Edith's reply. She resigned herself to abandoning this protracted grief and resuming day-to-day functions. She despised the prospect.

"I never wasted my time on those who died as a result of my cases," boomed Sherlock Holmes through the gloom.

She could see the flicker of the match he used to light his briar pipe. "No, you just shot up with a seven percent solution of cocaine."

"Be that as it may..."

"Go away, Uncle. Seeing you only reminds me of... of..."

The spectral presence scowled at her wrenching sob. "You imagined the resemblance between Downton and myself, child."

"Bullshit! He was of Holmes blood, and could have been your double."

"So, I'm to be banned from my own premises..."

“They were yours when you rented them a century ago! You’ve been dead too long to still lay claim to them.”

“Very well. I shall go, and leave you to your... pitiable existence.”

An ashtray sailed through the air, striking the pipe rack and shattering the elder Holmes’ favorite meerschaum.

A second later, the desk lamp switched on; Sheila squinted violet orbs against the sudden brightness. “What the devil...”

Watson pulled aside heavy draperies, and spring sunlight flooded the cluttered space. “Come on, you. Time to get back to living.”

“Go to hell, John.”

“Should do, when I die. There’s much to be done...”

Tentatively rising from her meditative pose, the detective stretched her limbs. She noticed the finger where Downton’s signet ring - inherited from their common ancestor, Sherlock’s eldest brother, Sherrinford - had been removed. She couldn’t wear it without tremendous sorrow, thus had tucked it in her night stand drawer. “You’ll not coerce me into orchestrating some lame anniversary celebration, merely to distract me from more... morbid ruminations.”

“Morbid is right. Tony wouldn’t have wanted you to collapse in on yourself.”

“Tony didn’t know what he wanted. He thought he wanted me to be his wife, then that air-headed bitch who shot him...”

“You mean, *you* didn’t know what you wanted. If you’d decided to marry him, he’d still be alive today, and that’s eating at your soul.”

Tear-stained cheeks swiveled toward her flatmate. “Must do, John. It... was my fault he died. My fault entirely.”

Two firm hands seized her shoulders, shaking roughly. “Snap out of it, Sheila! Shit happens, people die every day. You can’t keep blaming yourself for someone else’s actions.”

“What would you have me do?”

“You’ve refused numerous offers of counseling. You won’t check yourself into a facility to deal with your PTSD...”

“You’ve stopped attending your group sessions, so you’re in no position to talk.”

“I’ve... come to grips with my issues. And surviving cancer has given me a new perspective...”

The russet-headed Edith carried in the post. “Sheila, please. I’ll need your expertise, if I’m to make the party for my brother and his wife a success.”

She managed a feeble smirk. “Liar!”

Dejected, the pair shuffled toward the threshold, and a wave of fresh guilt washed over Sheila. “All right, all right. Leave me alone the rest of today, and we’ll get started tomorrow.”

She clutched their outstretched hands, the agreement confirmed.

A tasty meal and solid night’s sleep aided Sheila in resolving herself to this repellant task. She met with Edith in the ground floor kitchen of 221B Baker Street for three hours, jotting notes on Brian and Cindy Hudson’s habits, hobbies and foibles. She then parked herself at the sitting room desk, searching the internet for ideas.

Not much progress occurred during those weeks. Self-honesty required the woman to admit she had no aptitude for organizing social events. Phone calls to a variety of venues merited no suitable accommodations at this late juncture. The notion of failure did not set well, but she reached the point where she lost what little enthusiasm she’d nurtured for the project.

“Sheila, did you have an entertainer scheduled to audition this afternoon?” queried Edith, peeking through the doorway late Friday.

“Not on my calendar...”

A vaguely familiar figure paraded into view, pinstripe suit, polka-dot tie, and close-cropped brown mop offsetting the wrestler’s physique, prominent nose and jutting chin she recalled. “My God! Will McLaurin?”

Pale blue orbs flashing, wearing a sheepish grin which hid his upper lip and displayed the slight gap between his front incisors, the comedian extended his arms, uncertain if she’d accept his embrace. “Hello, missy.”

Sheila, instead, scrutinized him from head to toe. “You look... normal. What’s happened?”

“My mother’s second cousin died just before Christmas, a staunch old bachelor. I’m now the proud owner of seven car dealerships, from Norwich to Ipswich and along the coast.”

“You poor thing!” she mocked.

“It’s better than traveling on a bus from city to city, trying to make people laugh.”

She waved him to the red Victorian divan. “Your tour went well, from what the American papers printed while I... hung out in California.”

“The reviews were complimentary, and ticket sales exceeded expectations. One of the cable television networks even filmed the show and broadcast it on pay-per-view.”

“Sounds like you’re set for life.”

“I could have been.” He leaned forward on the cushions. “The managers and agents were willing to promise me anything, give me anything - blow, booze, women, whatever - if I’d do six months in Vegas, or sign on for a couple movies...”

“So, in one regard, your cousin’s death was a blessing.”

“More than one. He had dementia, and didn’t know if it was night or day. He deteriorated rapidly after his doctor ordered he be transferred to a care home...”

“Does Liam know?”

“I’m not sure. I received a letter from Scotland Yard last year, informing me he’d been extradited to the States, after the C.I.A. finished their internal investigation of his activities and filed an indictment. The court there sentenced him to twenty years in Colorado’s minimum security penitentiary.”

She nodded.

His fingers caught hers. “I also heard about Tony Downton...”

An attempt to extricate herself failed. “Is that why you’re here?”

“No. Johnny thought I could do a set at the party Edith’s planning.”

“I’m doing most of the grunt work,” Sheila corrected. “It wouldn’t be suitable for a respectable businessman...”

“I’m only respectable Monday through Friday, nine to five.”

“You’ve been hitting the comedy clubs since... this?”

“A few.” He tugged her close. “I sent you a copy of the DVD. What did you think?”

“Edith and John laughed quite a bit.”

“You didn’t?”

“I...”

“Come with me tonight. I’m doing a benefit for the Wounded Veterans Foundation.”

She struggled against his grip. “Will, please...”

“You need to get out, missy. You’re pale, thin and depressed. Sequestering yourself in these rooms, with your fantasies...”

“Fantasies?” she bristled.

“Remember how you held conversations with your uncle Sherlock? You even asked if I wanted to meet him.”

She snorted, “I’d introduce you, but he’s... absent at the moment.”

Straightening, McLaurin released her. “You mean, you still...”

“There’s no ‘still’ about it. Uncle Sherlock’s soul permeates these rooms, tangibly so. It’s a fact, not fantasy.”

Her guest rose. “You saved my life, missy. I owe you for that. If you don’t come out with me this instant, I’ll be ringing St. Bart’s to have you committed for observation, for your own good.”

She guffawed ungraciously. “You can ask John. He’ll tell you.”

“John and I chatted on the phone last night for over an hour. He never mentioned...”

Spinning toward the computer, she preempted further dialogue with, “Damn you. Get out.”

McLaurin complied, shrugging as he passed Watson on the stairs.

“No go for tonight?” asked the former army medic.

“They’ll hold the tickets at the will call window. Convince her to change her mind.” The visitor paused, glaring at his comrade. “She needs help, John. Psychological help.”

“I know, I know.”

“I’m willing to take her straight from the theatre to Norwich. There’d be plenty mental stimulation to...”

“Let’s reserve that option until after the party.”

“You know her best.”

“And you’ve not shaken your fear of her,” quipped Watson.

“She insists Sherlock Holmes is alive and well...”

“Not alive, but well.”

McLaurin’s eyes widened. “You, too?”

“Will, don’t turn around too fast.”

The comedian stiffened. “Why?”

The aroma of pungent tobacco drifted from the foyer as Watson stated, “I’d like to present Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”

Of those who had been privileged to encounter the shaggy maned, rumpled ghost of the Great Detective, Will McLaurin handled it best. He neither fainted nor collapsed. His jaw gaped, and he said nothing, merely descending the remaining stairs and making a dignified exit.

Chuckling, Watson entered the sitting room, where Sheila again occupied the basket-chair, her blank expression most disconcerting.

“Sheila, what’s wrong?”

“Why did you bring him here?” she moaned.

“Edith’s brother is a big fan, and he’s willing to perform for free.”

“That could have been coordinated via email.”

He would have knelt beside her, had not his prosthetic leg impeded such postures. “You’re going to get off your arse, clean up and pick a nice outfit from

your wardrobe. We're going out to dinner, then to the benefit. You will behave and, if possible, enjoy yourself in the process."

"Is that an order, Sergeant?" she scoffed.

"Must do."

Johnny Watson seldom asserted himself in her presence, and Sheila respected his determination enough to obey. When the cab arrived at the front door, she joined him on the rear seat, her grey slacks and blue blouse topped off by Sherlock's black fedora. Watson wore a brown suit, gold tie and oxfords.

The show featured six bands, dance numbers and a couple humorous skits, with McLaurin - in his trademark tie-dyed t-shirt, baggy trousers and neon green sneakers - second to last on the bill. He had the audience rolling with tales of his travels across the Atlantic, contrasting Canadians and Americans, and highlighting the eclectic sorts he'd met.

Sheila did, indeed, find his craft much improved, and the absence of foul language most welcome. She let herself laugh and, when the crowd gave him a standing ovation, she allowed Watson to hug her in relief.

Dissuading her companion from congratulating McLaurin backstage proved futile. They navigated chaos, his dressing room far superior to those at the clubs he'd previously frequented.

"You've definitely come up in the world," joked Watson, wringing his friend's hand.

"Best to retire at the top of the heap."

Sheila postulated, "Then, you're hopping off the showbiz roller coaster for good?"

"In future, the venue will be my own home."

She deduced the innuendo, and caught that glint in his blue eyes. "John," she drawled, linking her arm through Watson's, "I'm quite knackered. Might we go?"

"I was going to invite Will for a drink at the Bull and Frog," objected her escort. "He's returning to Norwich tomorrow."

"We'll see him at Edith's party. You can drink all you like then."

Both men glared at her, memories of their last liquor-fueled reunion not forgotten.

"Thank you, no," snorted McLaurin.

"Cheers," Sheila said, allowing him to kiss her lightly.

He manipulated his lips against her ear. "I met your uncle. I apologize for doubting your sanity."

“I doubt my own sanity, most days,” she countered, stroking his angular jowl. “*Illegitimi non carborundum.*”

“Ditto.”

Saturday, Sheila awoke refreshed and focused. She breezed into the sitting room, the tattered dressing gown tied at the waist, just as Edith delivered breakfast. Watson perused the London *Times* in the armchair near the dormant fireplace.

“I want to tell you both how sorry I am for... being such a bitch since...” she proclaimed.

Edith poured her a cup of coffee, beaming. “Don’t think we can’t commiserate with your heartache. When the soldiers brought news of my husband’s death, it took two years before I could pass a day without crying. And, John... I’m sure his stories...”

“Let’s not go there,” Watson interspersed, folding the sports section. “Consider yourself forgiven, Sheila, and know that we’re willing to help any way we can.”

“But, you must also help yourself,” added the landlady. “There’s two piles of unopened letters, and a stack of phone messages...”

“When does your brother arrive?” Sheila asked.

“Wednesday.”

“Then, I’ve got a prior engagement, finalizing details for the celebration.”

“There might be an opening at the Charing Cross Hotel,” supplied Watson, moving to the table and loading his plate with sausages, fried eggs and hash browns. “The society column announced the cancellation of some CEO’s daughter’s wedding, and subsequent reception.”

Sheila had the number dialed so quickly, Edith nearly dropped the silver tray. After intense negotiations, she could not abide the quoted charges, but hadn’t much choice.

“John,” she hailed, “how much is in the safe?”

The blond veteran gulped, not wishing to divulge that he’d cashed a number of cheques - late payments for her services as technical advisor on Tony Downton’s last film and royalties from DVD sales - during her prolonged isolation. “Over fifty thousand,” he admitted.

Into the receiver, she stated, “I’ll have payment in full on your desk by ten o’clock Monday morning,” and rang off.

Edith protested, “Sheila, I didn’t expect you to finance...”

“No worries. I’m glad you have a family with whom you can share joyous occasions. The expense is not important.”

Behind her back, Edith and Watson exchanged concerned glances. That the woman had bounced from sedentary and sullen to excessively generous in a short span astounded them.

Sheila vanished on Sunday, another source of consternation. They discounted an instinct to notify the police, and her reappearance bearing a slightly sunburned nose accompanied the explanation that she'd craved fresh air, and had ridden a train to the country.

Edith drew the ticket stub from Sheila's jeans while doing laundry on Tuesday. "Ipswich," she whispered to Watson while clearing the lunch dishes.

He grunted, "Will."

She dropped onto the chair opposite. "Do tell."

"Oh, that's right. You were gone, dealing with your father-in-law's estate." He related a condensed version of Sheila's initial contact with Will McLaurin and his twin, Liam. He included the unsubstantiated diagnosis of PTSD, the escape from a waterfront warehouse, and Liam's eventual arrest for smuggling.

"Why didn't you bring me up to speed about this PT thing before?" scolded the woman. "I would have encouraged Sheila to seek treatment..."

"I tried; she balked. Each person must decide when they're ready..."

"She's past ready. Her erratic moods are driving me to the edge."

"Now she's feeling better, she'll take some cases, and things will improve."

Edith plucked a discarded envelope off the floor. "This mess never improves."

"Sorry."

More papers were scattered about the sitting room as Sheila delved into the post and messages. "If people bothered to put a collar and tag on their pets, they'd save postage and frustration," the detective lamented.

"Didn't I see one from Whitehall?"

"I'm not attending any more government functions, nor those from theatrical types."

Watson shifted from the computer monitor. "What's wrong with theatrical types?"

"While their... problems are equally worthy of my attention, I tend to get... too emotionally attached..."

"You mean, like with Roderick Andrews, and Tony..."

Sheila grimaced. "And your friend, Will."

"He's out of showbiz, though. Besides, there's no case..."

“And, I wish to keep it that way.” She waved a card at him. “Here’s an intriguing little matter which will take me to Cardiff for a few days. Give my excuses to Edith, but assure her I’ll be at the party.”

“What is it? A murder? Robbery?”

She merely winked and retired to her room.

While she regretted the necessity of lying, no urgent mystery summoned her to Wales. She despised playing a role to soothe her friends’ concerns, and thought absenting herself from Baker Street would give them an opportunity to relax.

The Benedictines of the remote abbey did not disturb her hours in the cloister garden, poised on a bench, registering nil - not even the array of colorful spring blossoms. They presumed this an attitude of prayer or meditation.

They didn’t notice her tears.

The mental debate reverberating within her skull did little to promote inner peace. Despite Edith and Watson assuring her of their empathy, she could not get past the fact Tony Downton had not been meant to die. He’d saved her life, and she had no way to repay the debt.

Except, perhaps, to use her skills to expose deception in its many forms. Had that Hollywood trollop not lied to Downton about being pregnant...

On her last day within the stone walls, Sheila met with the superior in a tiny parlor. “We hope this stay has advanced your spiritual journey,” remarked the aging nun.

Sheila confessed, “Not at all. Nor, I fear, has this sanctuary inspired many of your Sisters toward holiness. Sister Raphaela, for instance, flees these confines to meet her lover on a regular basis.”

The stooped frame shuddered on its wooden chair. “What?”

“After your night prayer, during the much-prized Grand Silence, listen for the yipping of a toy terrier. That is her signal to make use of a rope ladder to scale the wall. On a different note, Sister Teresa has a fondness for the sacramental wine, refilling the bottles she steals with colored water before replacing them in the storage closet.”

“How... do you know this?”

“Examine her fingertips. They bear stains of the dye.”

The wrinkled visage tightened. “Must do.”

“Sister Daniela has been pilfering funds from the chapel poor box to buy cigarettes from your maintenance crew.”

“My God! What else?”

“Other than the presence of at least six deeply closeted lesbians - yourself among them - who have developed not into a community, but a collection of sour spinsters sharing the same dwelling, my advice to you would be to evict the lot and padlock the place.”

Sheila didn't wait for any recriminations or justifications. She had a train to catch.

The interior of 221B Baker Street had been transformed by balloons, streamers and a banner, welcoming Brian and Cindy Hudson to London for their tenth wedding anniversary. Sheila dismissed the cacophony of voices and radio drifting from Edith's ground floor rooms. Mounting the warped staircase, she deposited the duffel and fedora on her bed and rifled envelopes strewn on the quilt.

Johnny Watson joined her in the sitting room late afternoon. “Glad you're back,” he greeted.

“Glad to be back.”

“Feeling better?”

“Much.”

“You want to shower first, or should I?”

“You go ahead. I'm heading for the hotel, to check the arrangements.”

“Thanks. Edith's been worried...”

“Why?”

“She thought you might not...”

“I promised, didn't I? When, on my worst day, did I break a promise to either of you?”

Contrite, Watson lowered his tousled head.

“I'll see you there.”

“You're... not changing clothes?”

“Bring the outfit I wore to the benefit with you.” She propped the fedora atop her curls and pranced across the threshold.

The Tube to Charing Cross packed with ample subjects for observation, Sheila wished she had police authority to arrest those concealing drugs, weapons, and ill intent. She did prevent a pickpocket from plying his trade, spraining his wrist before those closest realized anything untoward had occurred.

The hotel situated above the train station boasted many amenities, each of which Sheila verified during her inspection of the dining room and dance floor. Linen tablecloths and napkins folded as fans, low floral centerpieces, china with gold borders, crystal champagne flutes and wine goblets, a decorated sheet cake... she had paid for top quality, and she pledged to get every penny's worth.

Music would be supplied by a disc jockey, who trolleyed in his equipment at 5:30. She reviewed his selections, adding polkas and waltzes to the mix.

“Young people don’t like that kind of stuff,” he declared.

“They won’t all be young.”

“If you say so.”

His condescending tone irked her; she ignored his arrogance. The wait staff began pouring ice water and setting out rolls and butter just as the guests of honor arrived. Edith favored Sheila with an affectionate embrace, tickled by the elegance.

“You could be a professional!” she gushed.

The detective quipped, “Too stressful.”

She withdrew to the kitchen, sampling the sauces and entree, approving all. Upon emerging through the swinging door, she collided with Will McLaurin, his tuxedo and black tie a shock.

“I’m not just performing tonight,” he explained. “John invited me to be your dinner partner, and maybe we’ll have a dance or two.”

Sheila’s jaw dropped. She hadn’t dressed in more formal attire so she could sneak away from the festivities.

Watson, himself in a new suit, approached, draping the requested clothes over her arm. The men laughed at her resigned mien and, teeth clenched, she opted for the ladies’ room.

The six course dinner dragged into the night, Sheila itching to escape McLaurin’s attention and the combination of background music and deafening chatter. Prior to dessert being served, a break to clear the tables allowed for dancing, with the happy couple claiming the floor alone for the first song. As others took advantage of the tunes, McLaurin rose and clasped Sheila’s hand.

“No, Will.”

“Yes, missy.”

To avoid a scene, she acquiesced. She would have preferred a fast beat, but the slow tempo gave her partner reason to draw her close.

“I have a job offer for you,” he murmured into her hair.

She flinched. Tony Downton’s proposal of marriage had started in a similar vein... “Later, Will. Let’s enjoy...”

“No time. I’m on the late train to Norwich, and I want you with me.”

She maneuvered her head to gaze into those pale blue eyes. “Why?”

“I want you to teach the sales staff at my dealerships how to read people. We’ve hit a slump, and I’d rather give them a little incentive than start closing locations.”

She chortled, resting her cheek on his shoulder. “Did John put you up to this?”

“No. I discussed it with my managers last week. They like the idea.”

“What about room and board? Or, would you have me commute?”

“You... could stay at my place.”

No response.

“It’s my cousin’s house. Six bedrooms. You’d have absolute privacy.”

“How long? Two weeks, two months...”

“We’ll evaluate as we go, if that’s viable.”

Halting in mid-step, she glared past McLaurin to the gift table. She extricated herself from his grasp, striding to where the basket for greeting cards had been picked clean.

A cursory scan of the 75 guests revealed no suspicious activity. The comedian confronted her, rumbling, “What’s going on?”

“Time for your set,” she admonished. “Have John introduce you.”

She ducked into the kitchen, blocking that exit and ordering the staff to freeze. Before the culprit, white uniform jacket bulging with his ill-gotten gains, could flee through the loading dock, she hurdled the warming table and collared him.

“Call the Yard!” she commanded the chef. “The rest of you, say nothing of this!”

Will McLaurin tailored his routine to the situation, and while two constables took the thief into custody, the oblivious revelers roared with mirth. Brian and Cindy Hudson reenacted cutting their wedding cake, and slices were distributed to the tables before Sheila restored the cards to their rightful place and slipped onto her seat.

“Where’ve you been?” hissed McLaurin.

“Averting a tragedy.”

“Well, you missed all the fun.”

She chuckled, “Depends on what you consider fun.”

“You ready to answer me?”

“I can’t jump on the train tonight. I’ve... got to pack, and consult Edith and John...”

“They already know. John stuffed some things in your duffel; it’s checked with the concierge. C’mon, missy, take a chance.”

Her violet orbs glowered at him. “I’ve done that too much, Will. That’s why I am where I am.”

“This chance doesn’t involve criminals or murder. It’ll be an exercise for your incredible brain, and an opportunity to experience a side of life unfamiliar to you.”

“Are you confident enough in your assumption to wager on it?”

He hesitated briefly. “Sure.”

“The loser pays a hundred pounds to charity.”

“With the bet being?”

“One or more miscreants will be apprehended as a result of my visit to Norwich.”

Beneath the table, they shook hands.

The music shifted from rock ‘n roll to more traditional selections as the younger guests departed for the pubs. McLaurin urged Sheila onto the dance floor for a polka and, by its conclusion, they were convulsed with laughter. In his chair beside Edith, Watson wore a satisfied grin. The landlady, distracted by her relatives, glimpsed the couple depart past midnight, and winked slyly at her tenant.

“It’ll do her good to get away,” he remarked.

“She might come back married.”

Watson shook his head. “No. Throwing two people with PTSD into a serious relationship is a recipe for disaster.”

“You and Sheila have been together for years...”

“Our... association is based on convenience, not affection.”

“My arse, John!” Edith spat. “You’ve taken care of her, and she nursed you through those cancer treatments...”

“True, true.”

“We’d best be off.” Corralling her tipsy relatives from the hall took a bit of effort.

A luggage cart loaded with gifts and leftover cake trundled to the curb, conveyed into an idling limousine. The four toasted the evening with a final glass of champagne en route to Baker Street, while Sheila and Will McLaurin dozed side by side in a deserted north-bound first class train car.

The Sales Game

What a week!

Will McLaurin and Sheila Holmes drove from the Norwich train station to his six bedroom, two-story home on a quiet cul-de-sac as dawn broke Sunday. His silver Jaguar parked in the attached garage, they entered through the kitchen door.

“Edith would love this,” the brunette detective commented, running a finger over the black marble counter and stainless steel appliances built into an island.

The dining room with its French Provincial furnishings led to the main hall, off which a parlor, living room and billiard room opened.

“This was the sixth bedroom,” explained McLaurin. “My cousin liked to shoot pool, a habit he picked up from American soldiers when he was a foreign correspondent in Vietnam.”

“If he never had a family, why did he buy such a large house?”

“Status, I suppose. I never really knew him.”

A compact apartment at ground level rear had once accommodated the live-in maid. Sheila hoisted her duffel on her shoulder and mounted the servants’ stairs.

Of the four options on the upper floor, three boasted king-sized beds and private baths. None were decorated with especially feminine accouterments, not that Sheila preferred such styles. She tested the mattress in the chamber with east and south exposure, and grinned at her host.

McLaurin ordered Chinese take-out for lunch, and both slept much of the afternoon, following their travels and the anniversary celebration for Edith Hudson-Thorne’s brother and sister-in-law the previous night.

Monday saw the former comedian wearing a cuff-sleeved dress shirt, grey trousers and a green tie. A clump of his close-cropped brown hair stuck up from the crown of his head and, as Sheila brewed a cup of coffee with the expensive machinery, she chuckled.

“It’s not my fault I have a cowlick,” McLaurin protested. “When it’s longer, it lays better.”

“Then, why did you cut it?”

“In the business world, the hippy look doesn’t garner much respect.”

“Bullshit.” Sheila tapped the side of her head. “It’s what’s in here that counts, not your clothes, or any other physical trait.”

Assessing her jeans, red polo shirt and sneakers, he could only concur. Her superior mental faculties would enable his employees to improve their sales skills, so they would all benefit.

They toured the Tinley Motors Land Rover dealership that morning. Staff gathered in a quasi-military formation near the glass showroom's reception desk, feigning interest as McLaurin introduced Sheila and his plans.

Collectively, they bristled at the command, "Sound off!" Starting on the far left, each individual announced his or her name, and position within the organization. On a yellow pad, Sheila jotted notes as she scrutinized them, occasionally asking one to turn slowly, or display his hands.

"Dismissed!" McLaurin proclaimed, and the group scattered to the water cooler, break room or other location to discuss this bizarre ritual.

The owner, Sheila, and Philip Davidson, dealership manager, met behind closed doors for an hour, with rumors flying that terminations would follow.

"A motley assortment," began the woman, legs stretched out from the uncomfortable metal chair. "Will, didn't your cousin perform background checks on new hires?"

"I... don't know."

Sheila eyed the flustered, paunchy Davidson.

"Mr. Tinley leaned toward utilizing friends of friends, or relatives of acquaintances. The process was fairly lax."

"I can tell." She shifted her position, slamming the pad on his blotter. "You have two drug users out there, three alcoholics, a convicted car thief, four so deep in debt they've pawned their wristwatches, and one who's actively involved in identity theft."

Both men stiffened. "What?"

The details of her observations, while simple as she related them, horrified the executives. "I'll arrange for a job fair next week, and we'll screen the applicants thoroughly," announced Davidson.

"No need. Part of the training Will has asked me to do will be revealing what I know in a one-on-one session, and offering them an opportunity to clean up their acts. The local constabulary should be notified immediately about your accounting clerk, who's stealing your customer's names, addresses and vital data."

"Must do," McLaurin remarked.

The manager stammered, "She's..."

Sheila waited.

"Phil?" prodded his boss.

“She’s my daughter’s best friend.”

“All the more reason,” breathed Sheila.

Similar assessments occurred at McLaurin’s other six locations, which offered Jaguar, MG, Honda and Nissan automobiles to the general public. Of the 100-plus on the payroll, only three faced discharge. Sheila could not avoid the occasional snicker at the lack of qualifications held by others; she determined to rectify the situation and give Will McLaurin a viable future away from the stage.

Friday evening, having paid calls at two Ipswich locations, they shared a pizza in a quaint Italian restaurant. Imbibing a bit too much chianti, McLaurin had not the wherewithal to drive. Sheila confiscated his keys and ushered him down the lane to a modest hotel, the sole vacancy containing one double bed.

Too knackered to argue with the clerk, Sheila paid the exorbitant price and steered her companion toward the elevator.

She didn’t recall McLaurin snoring, from the time he and Johnny Watson had combined beer and whiskey in an all-nighter, or from when she spent a few days recuperating in his London flat. He rivaled a buzz saw that night, despite her best efforts to position him on his side.

At least, no trips to kneel before the toilet were involved, as during their original encounter. He woke early, hangover well in evidence, but a cold shower and large black coffee eased his misery.

“I’m sorry, missy,” he grumbled, emerging shirtless from the bathroom, toweling dry his ample dark body hair.

“Say no more, Will. I’m ready for a weekend off.”

“Will you... be going to London to see John?”

She studied his solemn mien. “Not my intention.”

Pale blue orbs twinkled, his upper lip disappeared when he smiled - showing that slight gap between his front teeth. “If you’d like a car...”

“My driver’s license expired while I was” - she shuddered involuntarily - “in the States. I... never bothered to renew it.”

Without thinking, he embraced her, and she buried her face in his chest. Memories flooded her brain, though she fought the tears. Contrasting Tony Downton - his black mop, brown eyes, handsome features, and tall, athletic build - and Will McLaurin at a solid 5’7”, with that exceptional nose and prominent chin...

What would happen to the latter, if her association with him continued? she mused.

James Moriarty had died, criminal activities sealing his fate; Roderick Andrews had been so distracted by her supposed beauty, he stepped into oncoming traffic. And, Tony... had taken a bullet meant for her.

“Are you okay, missy?” McLaurin murmured.

She sniffed loudly and managed to raise violet eyes to meet his. “My turn to apologize, Will.”

“What say, when we get home, we rest a bit, then tour the countryside? Ol’ Tinley liked bikes even more than cars. There’s sixteen in the shed behind the house...”

“I haven’t ridden in ages, but I’d like that.”

He escorted her to the restaurant parking lot, where the Jaguar awaited. “We’ll stop for dinner somewhere, and maybe shoot some pool...”

“Which reminds me,” she interspersed from the passenger seat, “you owe a hundred pounds to charity.”

He paused while shifting gears. “Eh?”

“I’ve already solved one crime, and you bet none would arise.”

His tenor guffaw echoed off the buildings as the vehicle pulled into traffic.

Sheila awoke late afternoon to find currency covering the debt beside her bed. They elected to cook a light meal and take advantage of the billiard table, leaving the bicycling until Sunday. The back roads and villages entranced the visitor and, each time she glanced at McLaurin on his 18-speed titanium-frame racing model, he wore a playful smirk.

They relaxed in the jacuzzi that evening, muscles sore from unaccustomed exertion. Sheila discovered her host had wide-ranging knowledge and, prior to joining the British Army - receiving his injuries in Afghanistan - he’d interned at London’s Museum of History.

“Tomorrow, we start the training,” McLaurin sighed, tying his terry robe at the waist.

“What are your thoughts on that?”

He deliberated. “I hope it goes well.”

“What about from the administrative side? Have you ever thought of changing the entire dynamic?”

“How so?”

“Most of the your team’s time is currently spent narrowing down a mutually agreeable price for the vehicle. It’s a game, and the best players win. What if you eliminate a need for the game, and make the experience less stressful for the customers?”

“Go on.”

“Having dealt extensively with deception in my profession, I suggest an honest approach. Let the customers see the true price you pay the manufacturer for the cars. Be frank about the necessary overhead and mark-ups. Furthermore, eliminate the commissions.”

“What?” McLaurin flinched.

“Pay your people a set wage. Base their annual raises on performance evaluations, like most other companies. This way, they won’t have to worry about paying their bills, and will have a more positive attitude toward their duties.”

“This isn’t why I brought you...”

“I know, Will. Implementing these ideas, though, will enable the training to be more fully integrated into the sales model.”

He glowered at his guest. “What makes you such an expert on corporate business practices?”

“Common sense, detached observation and deductive reasoning.”

“Your uncle Sherlock teach you that?”

She averted her gaze. “He... has assisted me in various capacities.”

“Why does he haunt?”

“His craving for cerebral stimulation did not die with his body, I suppose. It has kept his spirit alive these many decades and I, being a direct heir engaged in the same career, am his contact with the tangible realm.”

“Wow, that’s deep.”

“And unpleasant, sometimes. He has the capacity to smoke his pipes, and the tobacco...”

“I smelled it that night...”

“Did you talk with him?”

“No. After John announced his presence, I got the hell out as quickly as I could.”

“For the best, perhaps.” Sheila stretched. “I’m to bed.”

“Me, too. Cheers.”

Twenty sales people packed into a conference room at 8:00 AM, paper coffee cups providing fortification against the rigors of Sheila’s instruction. She’d contacted a temp agency, who sent over six candidates - paid a full day’s wages to stand for a quarter hour at the head of an oblong pine table.

Her students were given five minutes to observe each faux customer and write down their deductions. They volunteered their theories during the next five, then Sheila enlightened them before having the subject confirm or deny the assertions.

“While clothes can ‘make the man’ as the old saying goes,” she cited, “do not be fooled by a couple who appear to be affluent, when they’ve actually borrowed their attire from relatives or friends specifically to make a good impression. You must read the face, the body language, the stride, the hands. An accent, or slang terminology, can indicate a person’s origins, but cannot guarantee their ability to pay a note or the likelihood they will default on their obligations.

“Do not dissuade someone who inquires about luxury models based on your cursory assessment of their financial standing. Treat every individual with courtesy and respect, patience and forthrightness. Follow through until it’s absolutely certain the sale cannot be finalized. Then, offer them any assistance available to find an alternative.”

“Why should we miss the chance to make a quick sale, if we know someone is just... browsing?” grumbled a young, stylishly dressed female.

“By disregarding the browser, you may alienate a dozen or more serious customers. A person who is ‘shopping around’ - as they say - may wish to gain the best deal possible for his hard earned cash. A friendly word, sincere diligence, may not only bring him back after he’s viewed what other dealers have to offer, but also his friends, co-workers and relatives.”

Will McLaurin viewed the proceedings from the corner, stunned at Sheila’s tactical advice. She might’ve been bred to this line of work, so comprehensive her grasp of the techniques.

At the session’s conclusion, he thanked her for her input, and informed the pupils they would gain the benefit of her insights in the coming days. “The schedule of times you’ll be partnered with Miss Holmes will be posted on the bulletin board before we open tomorrow.”

Two of her apprentices voiced their dismay when she listed the mechanical issues on an older model in which a teen and her father expressed interest. They swallowed their impulsiveness, though, when she secured signatures on a contract for a newer, more expensive sedan.

“Any father who cares enough about his daughter to accompany her buying her first car wants to be reassured it is safe and won’t strand his little princess some night on a dark and lonely road. The girl, naturally, liked the sporty design and cheaper price of the two-seater - both to ease the strain on her pocketbook and her father’s wallet - yet she recognized how much he loved her in signing for the additional expense.”

From his vantage point behind the glass of the accounting office, McLaurin kissed two fingers of his right hand and stretched them toward Sheila.

That week, the Norwich area Tinley Motors team had their preconceptions about automobile sales shattered and reshaped, albeit kindly. Offers were made to those with substance abuse issues to receive company-funded counseling and treatment, while others, anxious over money shortfalls, were given low-interest loans to meet their needs.

Word leaked to the media about the compassionate shift under McLaurin's ownership. The positive press brought more customers through the doors - a trend which trickled down to each location where Sheila applied her "magic."

At least, that's how her host described it. She assigned a more accurate definition: understanding human nature.

"You've earned your wages, and a bonus," McLaurin remarked over dinner of roast beef, buttered potatoes and beans the Friday which marked a month sharing his home.

She countered, "I didn't know you were paying me. I thought this was a grand... device of John's to get my mind off... well..."

"John confirmed what I proposed, that's all."

"What about my proposal to revise your pricing matrix?"

"If we do that, every dealership in the country - the world - will have to follow suit," he chuckled.

"Would that be a bad thing?"

"Comedians wouldn't be able to use dishonest sales people as the butt of their jokes..."

"Which doesn't affect you in the slightest, does it?" she pressed.

His chin drooped.

"What aren't you saying, Will? Are you thinking of going on the road again?"

"At the management meeting Tuesday, an offer was made to buy me out - to dissolve the parent organization and let the employees own and operate each dealership as a separate entity."

"You'd be quite wealthy."

He snarled, "Hell, missy, I already am. Ol' Tinley bequeathed me his businesses, and his savings, to the tune of three million pounds."

"Damn!" she muttered. "Then, why even consider..."

"For the high I get every time a club fills with laughter. For the energy generated by the applause. For the challenge of using the right jokes in the right venue, so I kill rather than die."

"You're hopeless, Will."

“So are you,” he chided, fetching a container of wild cherry ice cream from the refrigerator. “Not a day passes that you aren’t logical and blunt...”

“I exerted every effort to treat your staff with polite firmness.”

“My staff, yes. Me, no.”

“What the devil...”

“At each juncture, you’re criticizing what I do, and how I do it.”

“Bullshit!”

Pale blue orbs smoldered. “Admit it, missy: you conceived my latest nickname, ‘The Yid,’ which is circulating with fiendish glee through all seven offices.”

“I did not! I’m fully aware you’re not Jewish; you may have a touch of Middle Eastern blood in your heritage...”

“Which explains my nose?” he taunted.

“Only a geneticist could explain that, and your... naturally occurring fur coat.”

The ice cream scoop clattered on the floor tiles. “Ah, ha! I overheard one of the receptionists using that exact phrase on the phone not two days ago!”

“Which accounts for your other nickname: The Gorilla.”

“Precisely.”

Unflustered, Sheila bent to retrieve the utensil, washed it at the sink, dried it on a tea towel and replaced it in McLaurin’s trembling fist. “You want the truth, Will?”

“Absolutely!”

“You’ve got far bigger problems than a couple of humorous attributions. Your managers want to buy you out, because they don’t want you to unearth how they’ve collectively been skimming off the profits into... less than desirable enterprises.”

He halted, plastic wedged in the carton. Slowly, his countenance lifted; his expression could have melted the frozen treat into mush. “How...”

“Your corporate accountant, Leo, has loaned me a laptop now and again to check my email. John sends greetings, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“I noticed an odd network link on the task bar, and sent him the pertinent details. Through his sources, he discovered a complex series of electronic transfers to banks headquartered in the Cayman Islands.”

“In whose name?”

“The seven, equal shares.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since before your cousin died. He... absented himself from supervisory duties for quite a period...”

“His dementia kept him in the house for three years.” McLaurin’s teeth clenched. “Do they realize they’ve been exposed?”

“No. I’d hoped John could arrange to surreptitiously reverse the deposits; he’s had no luck in that regard.”

“Good. Tell him to stop trying. I’m going to see these bastards nailed to the wall for this, if it’s the last thing I do.”

She clutched his tense bicep. “Will, you can’t storm in and make unsubstantiated accusations. Notify the police, and let them take the facts to the courts.”

“But...”

“A premature revelation will only give them an opportunity to flee. You want seven sets of handcuffs waiting at the exit when they bolt.”

His hirsute fingers covered hers. “You’re an angel, missy.”

“I’m a detective. It’s my job.”

“You mean, if you were acting at the behest of a total stranger, the outcome would be no different?”

“Correct.” She tried to extricate her hand, in vain. “Will, emotional attachments are... fatal in this career. What you and John believe about me battling PTSD... could well be accurate, given my failure to shield myself from getting too close to... specific clients.”

He pulled her into an embrace. “You talk a good line, missy. Have you forgotten the day Liam came to my flat in London? You’d... invited me to shower with you...”

“You had a broken arm, and needed help with the soap. I... had to keep the spray off stitches in my head and palm. There were mutual advantages to such a collaboration.”

“Even though we...” He pecked her cheek.

“I fully expected to die at your brother’s hand. We were lucky to survive.”

“After your improvised explosion, you attacked him like a tigress.”

“Adrenaline kicked in, because I let myself get... pissed off.”

They chuckled together.

“Pissed, because Liam had caused us both pain?” puzzled McLaurin.

“Pissed at myself for mistaking him for you on that run to Heathrow. Had I been as observant as Uncle Sherlock encourages me to be, I would’ve trusted you.”

“Vomiting all over your bathroom didn’t establish me as a reliable source.”

“Amen, brother.” She squirmed; he held fast. “Will, please.”

“Look, missy. You saved my life, and vice versa. We’re permanently bound together. We might as well enjoy it.”

“We can, tomorrow. A bike ride north, with a picnic lunch.”

“Cold chicken and beer?”

“You and alcohol... are a bad mix. I don’t want to end up staying in some remote bed and breakfast, because you’re too wobbly to pedal home.”

“Might be fun.”

“You snore.”

Their amusement sealed with a platonic kiss, they retired to their respective rooms.

Persistent repetition of classical chimes roused them early Saturday. Sheila, clad in a baggy flannel nightshirt, watched from the balcony while McLaurin descended the marble staircase to the main hall, his robe hanging open over a t-shirt and gym shorts. The arched double doors parted inward at the touch of a switch, revealing Johnny Watson on the stoop.

The wounded army veteran glanced from the sergeant he’d treated on the Afghan battlefield to his erstwhile flatmate. “Don’t you two look domestic,” he quipped.

“You walk around Baker Street in your boxers, John!” chided Sheila. “So you’ve no room to talk!”

He bowed in mock remorse. “Guilty as charged.”

“What are you doing here?” McLaurin wondered.

“I brought the printouts.”

The detective flew down the steps, drawing Watson into the hall and relieving him of the backpack slung over his shoulder. “When did they come in?”

“Special delivery last night.”

“And you hopped on the train... you dear soul.”

“Yes, dear soul,” repeated McLaurin icily. “So much for our outing.”

“What?” Sheila snapped. “John is capable of riding, and you’ve plenty of bicycles.”

“That is, if he doesn’t have other plans.”

Watson replied, “Edith’s not expecting me ‘til tomorrow afternoon.”

“Grand, John!” squealed the woman. “We can review these, and if there are any questions, you can email your contact...”

“They’re fairly self-explanatory,” he stated. “The depositor’s name at the top of each page, and the amounts of each transfer...”

McLaurin queried, “How much, total?”

“Over ten million.”

The business owner staggered, as if struck a mortal blow. He dropped onto a gold velvet upholstered armchair. “Those fucking bastards.”

“Calm yourself, Will,” soothed Sheila. “In 48 hours, they’ll be behind bars, one and all.”

“I want it done today.”

“It’s the weekend, unfortunately. Warrants will need to be prepared...”

“I don’t care!” McLaurin bellowed. “Bad enough, they treated me like an idiot in every meeting we’ve had, after putting the screws to Frank...”

Watson supplied, “While I couldn’t get the transactions reversed, Will, I did manage to freeze the accounts temporarily. Involving the authorities will make the freeze permanent, until the funds are released back into your hands.”

“Thanks, mate.”

“What about our ride?” hinted Sheila. “It’s a beautiful day...”

“What about some breakfast?” the former medic urged. “Last night’s dinner is long gone.”

“Must do,” breathed McLaurin, recovering his composure. “Everybody in the kitchen.”

While McLaurin’s intent for the tour and picnic had been to soften Sheila’s resistance to his more than friendly advances, he contented himself with participating in the sarcastic banter between the Baker Street residents. The fifty kilometer round trip wearied the trio, and Watson sacked out in the bedroom adjacent to Sheila’s upon their return, while McLaurin rummaged in the vast pantry for a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

Restoring the wicker basket to its cupboard, Sheila whirled on her host clutching the bottle. “Oh, no, you don’t,” she warned. “None of that, Will.”

“Why not?” he growled, snatching a tumbler from a shelf above the sink. “This day was a disaster, and I’ve been so damned blind...”

“What are friends for? You saved my life, and I’ve saved your bacon.”

“Again.”

“I’m not counting, why are you?”

“Because, it’s ingrained in my psyche. Growing up, Liam and I competed in everything, and if I won more than he - at whatever the imaginary contest - I paid for it dearly.”

“That’s done and over. You’ve made me quite comfortable here in your own house, and that’s payment enough...”

“Beyond your wages, and the bonus I promised.”

“I don’t want it.”

“You deserve it. No less than a hundred thousand pounds.”

Sheila tottered. “No way, Will. I couldn’t accept.”

“An equitable reward for recovering ten million. Any insurance settlement would match it.”

She considered. “True.”

“All I ask is one favor.”

“I don’t like how your tenor dropped to the bass range.”

He chortled, and shrugged.

“Well?” she prodded.

“When this is over, we... take a shower together.”

As she could have predicted, given his sly grin. “I make no promises.”

She might have also predicted the Crown Prosecutor’s response to the files presented him early Monday morning: “We’ll place the suspects in custody to prevent their flight. A comprehensive investigation will be necessary prior to filing charges, however. That could take weeks.”

“Shit,” swore McLaurin.

Sheila whispered, “He could’ve said months.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“It means I’ll be staying in Norwich longer.”

He squeezed her hand. “Good. Then, you can be part of the search committee to find seven new executives for the dealerships.”

“What? I know nothing about hiring and firing...”

“You didn’t know anything about car sales, either, and you accomplished miracles with the teams.”

“Will...”

“We’ll hash out the details once this... crisis is resolved.”

The pair accompanied five police vehicles to the Norwich Land Rover location mid-morning. The respective managers had been emailed on Sunday to take part in a 10:00 meeting finalizing the transfer of ownership. They chatted merrily among themselves in the conference room, chilled champagne poured freely, until Sheila appeared at McLaurin’s right.

“Ordinarily, I’d riff awhile to lighten the mood,” the comedian began, unbuttoning his grey pinstripe suit jacket. “At this moment, though, I want to wring each of your bloody necks. You got away with your foul scheme while

Frank Tinley's illness consumed him, and thought you were safe continuing the racket due to my lack of business acumen. Well, you were wrong."

In mid-sip, two of the offenders sprayed carbonated beverage across the table. The others rolled their leather chairs back, ready to break for the door.

"I should have figured out the plot much sooner," confessed Sheila. "You're all living far beyond your means, with wives, mistresses, and other foul, expensive habits. While I taught your staff the intricacies of observing the human condition, I failed to notice the obvious signs you were criminals in your own right. As the saying goes: 'Better late than never.'"

Bob Gannon, from Ipswich, yanked a pistol from inside his tweed sport coat, aiming it at McLaurin's head. "You've got nothing on us," he barked. "And we're leaving without any interference from either of you."

Sheila restrained McLaurin, rage causing his muscles to twitch violently. "Let them go," she advised, nudging him away from the exit.

"Gents, we're done here!" Gannon directed.

In lock step, seven felons filed past the pair. Coyly, Sheila tripped Philip Davidson, second in line, who slammed into his predecessor, collapsing in a heap. The third sustained a side kick to the ribs, which pitched him into a plant stand. The next three cowered against the wall, while McLaurin dove over the pine table and wrenched the weapon from Gannon.

Constables invaded the space at the commotion, with the men shackled in short order. Led through the showroom in disgrace, they were heckled by loyal employees, who'd already heard about their misdeeds.

Will McLaurin's arm encompassing Sheila's waist, they lingered near a new Land Rover until the last siren faded in the distance. Then, he spun toward the others. "Beer's on me!"

Sheila could only shake her head and laugh.

For the Children

“She won’t go for it, Will,” came Johnny Watson’s baritone through the wire.

Will McLaurin countered, “She’s been shockingly amiable about everything else.”

“Sheila doesn’t like being near children. They irritate her no end. If I were you, I wouldn’t bother to ask.”

“Ask what?” Sheila Holmes ambled into the kitchen, clad in tie-dyed t-shirt and jeans, a cordless handset to her ear.

McLaurin, her host in the Norwich domicile, dropped his extension. “I...”

“John,” the woman addressed her London flatmate, “how are you and Edith faring without me?”

“Quite well. There’ve been a few inquiries from potential clients...”

“I’ll be at Baker Street by Friday next, so if any wish to make appointments for a consultation...”

“Brilliant, Sheila.” Watson cleared his throat through the line. “Don’t go too hard on Will. He’s doing his best to...”

She taunted, “To what? Handle me? Understand me?”

“Both.”

“And you, who have more expertise in these areas, think he shouldn’t ask me...”

McLaurin relieved her of the instrument, aiming a cursory “Cheers, John,” at the mouthpiece before switching off. “To the park groundbreaking this afternoon.”

“The presence of youngsters being an issue.”

“Supposedly.” His pale blue eyes studied her. “You’ve been in my bedroom.”

“Pulled these from the laundry basket while my clothes are in the washing machine. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I’d love if you’d spend more time in there.”

She noticed his playful wink, and swallowed a caustic retort. A mug of coffee awaited her on the table, along with eggs, bacon and toast. “I thought it was my morning to fix breakfast.”

“I was up early and got hungry.”

“Nervous about the presentation?”

He nodded.

Sheila couldn't repress a smile at his appearance. Close-cropped brown hair stuck into the air from his crown, thanks to a cowlick. A prominent nose dominated his countenance, coupled with a jutting chin and, when he grinned - as now - his upper lip vanished, displaying a minor gap between his front incisors. Wearing a black tank top and gym shorts, he might've been mistaken for a werewolf, arms, chest, back and legs covered with dark fur.

Between bites of jam-coated bread, McLaurin mumbled, "You didn't object when I suggested using the money my former managers stole to partner with various charities, including one right in the city, which builds recreational spaces with safe, modern equipment. Yet, you're reluctant to attend an event where those funds will make a real impact."

"Just down the street from your home."

"Kids from both affluent and poor neighborhoods will benefit."

Sheila patted his hand across the board. "I'm proud you've dealt with what could have been a disaster so well. I... simply prefer not to accompany you to the gathering."

His jaw opened; she raised a warning finger.

"Monday is the preliminary hearing for your band of thieves," she reminded McLaurin. "Once I'm positive the evidence is in place for a conviction, I'll be hopping a train back to London."

A sadness claimed his face, and he averted his gaze.

"This has been a grand couple months, Will. I'm eternally grateful for your hospitality, your wit, and the mental stimulation which allowed me to... put other matters in perspective."

Dabbing a bit of egg yolk with the last crust, he ventured, "Remember the favor I mentioned, before you left..."

"The shower?" she snickered.

"Right. Well, instead of that, come with me today, and I won't make any other demands on your time."

A bizarre choice: either join McLaurin in a repeat of an erstwhile impulse, or tolerate hordes of unruly preteens for an hour.

"I'll be ready at half-ten."

Leaving him to clear the dishes, she wandered into the billiard room, transformed from the sixth bedroom by the home's original owner, Frank Tinley. Selecting a cue from the wall rack, Sheila randomly aligned the balls and calculated angles for complex shots.

She'd discovered this exercise enabled her to free her brain from the constant cycle of morbid thoughts surrounding the death of actor/producer Tony

Downton, to whom she'd briefly been engaged. She could also suspend her concerns about Will McLaurin's continued affection for her, which all her bluntness could not diminish or dissuade.

No doubt existed, for instance, that he would again hint at the shower scenario. Those suffering from PTSD - McLaurin, Watson and herself, evidently - relished small, comforting interludes as a break from the ongoing turmoil which occupied their days.

And nights.

Her particular nightmare, watching Downton's chest ripped open by a bullet meant for her, occurred less frequently in recent weeks, but it still jolted her off the mattress with an anguished scream. Her room on the opposite side of the house from McLaurin's, at least she didn't rouse him. Decidedly awkward, to have him rush along the hall, then try to convince him to return to his own bed.

Converging at the arched double doors, Sheila saw he'd changed into a blue dress shirt - which accented those twinkling eyes - khaki trousers and brown oxfords. She grabbed her fedora off the sideboard and smashed it atop her brunette curls.

"We make a lovely couple," McLaurin quipped, ushering her to his Jaguar.

"The odd couple. Logical genius and comedic genius. Isn't that how John phrased it once?"

He dropped his solid frame behind the wheel. "How'd you know about that?"

"Observation, Will."

From the cul-de-sac, the vehicle drove a kilometer to a vacant lot dotted with century-old trees, which would soon feature a variety of playground equipment encompassed by a 1/8th scale mediaeval castle. Architect drawings of the layout were propped on easels beside the hastily constructed stage, where the Norwich mayor tested the microphone.

Adults comprised the audience, their offspring romping around the grassy expanse. McLaurin joined the officials set to speak, while Sheila struggled - in vain - to dismiss the joyous shouts and chatter of the rambunctious children.

Her attention drawn to them, nonetheless, she didn't like what she saw. Most were normal, healthy, energetic. The few... the few...

She pressed her eyelids closed, teeth clenched. Her breathing slowed, she next scrutinized the parents applauding each pronouncement about the value of these natural treasures. McLaurin received a gold key for his generous donation to the project, and expressed his gratitude in two sentences.

Gold-painted shovels turned clods of earth, cameras snapping media photos. When McLaurin joined Sheila, en route to the car, she didn't budge, glaring at the families reuniting to depart.

"What's wrong, missy?" he puzzled.

"Three of those poor kids are being physically abused, and another sexually exploited." She spun toward the parking lot, disgusted. "By their own blood."

McLaurin gulped, "Are you positive?"

She flashed him a scowl.

"Say no more. I trust you." Opening the passenger door, he added, "What can we do?"

"Gather the proof, and have them arrested."

"How?"

"Leave that to me."

"What about Monday?"

"There's no conflict with the court proceedings. In fact, I'll be able to confer with the prosecutor while I'm there."

The silver Jaguar navigated along the lane and into the garage, where McLaurin switched off the ignition, otherwise not moving. "Why are you so passionate about some random cases of abuse?"

"They aren't 'random', Will. The latest statistics show a quarter of the world's children are abused - and that's the so-called civilized countries. In the third world, it's almost impossible to estimate. Abuse, in any form, is a tragedy, and it creates a chain perpetuated generation to generation. The cycle must be broken. It's no fuckin' way for a kid to live."

Blue orbs widened. "Wow, missy. Never heard you use that language before."

"When it fits the situation..."

"You've got to chill. My dad smacked me around when I was little. That's how Liam paid me back for being better than he was at tree climbing, or wrestling. He'd wait until Dad got drunk, then lie to him about something that happened, and I'd quickly be covered with welts from his belt."

"Did no good to tell the truth, did it?"

"Nope."

"That history puts you at a much higher risk, if you ever became a father, to abuse your own children," declared Sheila. "And, deal with alcoholism."

He smirked, exiting the vehicle. "That's a shot at me getting drunk the other night, isn't it?"

“You definitely don’t hold your liquor well.”

They’d eaten dinner at a pub on Norwich’s main thoroughfare, where McLaurin had ordered two double whiskies, against Sheila’s better judgment. She had to drive him home, though she lacked a valid license.

“At least, I didn’t make a mess in the loo.”

“No, you passed out on the parlor floor.”

They chuckled together and dropped the subject, filing into the kitchen, ready for lunch.

“How ‘bout riding to the lake for a swim later?” suggested her host over ham sandwiches and milk.

“Yes to the ride, no to the swim.”

“Why don’t you like water, missy?”

“Mutual respect, if anything. It is a force of nature with which I will not contend.”

Fifty kilometers on expensive racing bicycles, and a picnic supper, made for a delightful summer outing. McLaurin sensed Sheila’s distraction, however, her violet eyes focused on the horizon, rather than his feeble attempts at idle banter.

Ruminating about how best to track the young abuse victims, school not in session during the warmer months, sent Sheila’s grey cells on numerous tangents in rapid succession. Early Sunday, she trekked to the new park, then meandered through the residential developments to narrow her search.

Mistreatment of the innocent wasn’t confined to the lower class, or uneducated masses, she understood. The wealthy could afford the drink and drugs which lowered their inhibitions and made striking a defenseless family member acceptable. They were more likely to disdain psychological help for mental illness or anger management, other factors which contributed to abusive treatment of those closest.

So, poor and rich, she trod the sidewalks, observing the minute details most passersby missed.

Including the exodus of a boy, older girl and their parents to morning services. Sheila recognized the tow-haired lad, confirmed by the wallop he took on the ear when his father found him in possession of mud-coated earthworm.

She noted the address and proceeded around the corner.

Memories of a school friend - hiding bruises under her uniform, and lying to protect her mother - suddenly absent, searchers locating her battered corpse dumped in the woods behind her home...

“Will, how much money is left from the embezzlement?” she asked, joining him on the deck overlooking a landscaped back yard.

“Your share, and a couple hundred thousand more.”

“Well, use my share and the rest to start a domestic violence advocacy group here in Norwich.”

He leaned forward on the chaise lounge, his robe falling open. “You’re serious?”

“Absolutely. The best use for it.”

“I’ve no notion where to begin...”

“Start with the hospitals. They refer victims to available services. See what’s already out there, and augment it.”

“Will you stay and help?”

“No. I’ve... imposed on you too long already.”

“Imposed? You’ve solved crimes, enabled me to hire worthy managers to mind the store, as they say, and to become a major philanthropist.”

“That last was your own idea.”

“You inspired it. You don’t care one jot about whether you have cash in your pocket or not, do you?”

“We both know it’s better to have than not,” breathed the detective.

“We’ve scrambled to make ends meet, and been blessed with surplus. If we can assist others in meaningful ways, why shouldn’t we?”

“You’re indisputably right. I’ll have Judy, down at the office, ring some agencies tomorrow.”

“While I visit with the constables.”

“You found the kids?” queried McLaurin.

“One. I’d bet, though, reports have been filed about the others, and more.”

“That’s a wager I won’t take.”

“Wise man.”

Sheila retreated to the kitchen, pouring herself a bowl of bran cereal and orange juice. Eating in silence, she felt those smoldering blue eyes upon her from the French doors.

“Did you see John’s email?” she asked.

“Haven’t checked my account since Wednesday.”

“He sent a link to a London *Times* article, announcing a new comedy club opening in Soho.”

“And?”

“Why’d you release your agent, Will?”

“I’m so busy with board meetings, and supervising the dealerships, I no longer have time to sneak in and do a late set.”

“Nonsense. Making people laugh is your one love; you’ve said as much. You’re not cut out to be a businessman.”

He slid onto the chair beside her. “What the devil is your point?”

“Sell all this, and go back where you belong.”

“On the road?”

“You’ll have the crowds, the women, whatever you desire. You’d be happier.”

His lips curled in an unpleasant sneer. “You think I’m unhappy?”

“I think you believe I could make you happy. You find the way my brain works... exciting, even erotic somehow. You’ve got to realize, I’m gone on Friday, and our paths may never cross again.”

“It’s the PTSD thing, isn’t it? Any relationship between us is doomed to failure...”

“Because I’m a Holmes, and that implies a certain type of madness, an inability to interact socially with others for a prolonged period. Uncle Sherlock could tell you.”

“Fine,” McLaurin murmured. “But you need to make up your mind, missy. One second, you’re telling me to start another charity, the next you’re telling me to abandon everything I’ve created.”

“You supply the funding, and the charity will run itself through hired experts and its staff. You don’t need to be actively involved, so you could hit the clubs.”

Rising, he snorted, “I’ve figured out your game! This is a diversion you and John concocted so I’ll rejoin the group sessions at St. Bart’s...”

“No, Will. In my opinion, you don’t need counseling on that level. You need to follow your heart.”

Wrong choice of words, she realized once the syllable had been uttered.

Rather than listen to his plea, she dumped her dishes in the sink and scurried up the marble staircase to her bedroom.

“We can’t let you review our files!” stormed a uniformed corporal Monday afternoon. “All reports are confidential!”

“What I want to know is whether they are properly investigated or not,” hissed Sheila, inches from his mustached face.

“Of course, they are!”

“Arrests made? Convictions? Where’s your data, mate?”

Bloodshot orbs scanned his cluttered desk. "I... I... don't have it at my fingertips."

"Then, get it!"

The constable's superior, in black suit and blue tie, approached the pair. "What seems to be the problem here?"

"Child abuse is the problem, sir! Innocents in your own city are being harmed by their parents..."

"There, there, ma'am," soothed the man. "We're well aware of the issue."

"Aware and taking action are two different things."

"What's your name?"

"Sheila Holmes."

The officials glanced at each other. "From London?" stammered the corporal.

"I've been in Norwich the past two months, on various cases."

"The... Tinley Motors scandal?"

"Yes."

Abruptly, her hand was wrung by six individuals. "So very honored to meet you, Miss Holmes," said an inspector, emerging from his cubicle. "Please, come with me."

Their discussion lasted an hour, with positive results, while Will McLaurin paced the lobby of the court building, anxious for her arrival.

She breezed in ten minutes after the hearing commenced, and they made a furtive entrance into the chamber where a wigged gentlemen sat on the bench.

Philip Davidson, Bob Gannon and five other former employees occupied rearranged tables with their respective barristers. A mere formality, the couple's presence; the Crown Prosecutor had compiled an admirable and damning amount of evidence against the suspects. A motion to try the defendants separately denied, the date was set for three months hence.

Sheila deliberately positioned herself in the center aisle as the criminals passed, leveling her gaze upon each. She detected embarrassment more than remorse, except for Gannon, who clenched his fist and shook it under her nose.

"Rubbing it in?" quipped McLaurin when she met him at the Jaguar.

"I predict five of the seven will plead guilty to reduced charges prior to their trial."

"Bob won't."

"Bob won't," she echoed.

The constable from her earlier visit to the police station hailed her from over the road.

“You want me to wait?” McLaurin wondered.

“No, this could take awhile. I’ll... catch a taxi.”

“Dinner’s on me tonight.”

“No alcohol,” she cautioned.

He placed his right hand on his heart, dropped onto the bucket seat and sped from the lot.

“How can I be of service, corporal?” she greeted, falling into step with the uniformed young man.

“We dug into the files and came up with three prior tips related to the address you provided. Two from the boy’s teacher, and another from a neighbor. A patrol has been dispatched to apprehend the father. We’d like very much if you would identify him when he arrives.”

“Must do.” She settled on a bench against the peeling wall. “What about the others?”

“Any reports not flagged as closed or unsubstantiated will face new review.” In an undertone, he added, “Thanks to you.”

“I want no thanks. I want the bastards who inflict pain on those who cannot defend themselves to receive just sentences and viable treatment, so the offenses aren’t repeated.”

“The thanks is personal, Miss Holmes. I... was abused, myself. It’s what prompted me to join the force.”

She clasped his hand with a polite grin. “Good for you.”

No taxis in the vicinity, Sheila strolled north, pausing to glance in shop windows and relish the delightful aroma wafting from a bakery. From the alley extending behind the three-story structure, a terrified shriek and the sound of running feet preceded the sight of a fleeing teenaged girl, shirt torn and shoeless, pursued by two males of the same age.

The woman sprinted after them, fortunately not colliding with any pedestrians. The girl stumbled on a curb and pitched onto the asphalt, a lorry slamming its brakes and swerving into the intersection. Panting, the boys halted and made a grab for their prey, who rolled further into traffic. Sheila clipped the pair from behind, knocking them into a utility pole, giving her a fraction of a second to rescue the girl and emerge unscathed on the other side.

“What... did they do to you?” she heaved, slumped against a brick storefront.

Fumbling with the shredded material of her top, knees and elbows bloodied, the diminutive female took a series of deep breaths. She finally

responded, "We were going to an early show at the cinema. The guys stopped for a smoke and... decided to..."

Sheila wrapped her arm around narrow shoulders and steered her charge toward the police station. "They'll pay for this."

"Oh, no!" croaked her companion. "I couldn't grass..."

"You must. Do you want the same thing to happen to someone else, maybe one of your closest friends?"

"They wouldn't..."

"They would, and they will, if they're not taught a lesson about respecting themselves, and others."

Her pimpled mien a mask of doubt, the blonde nonetheless accompanied Sheila to register a complaint. When they departed, three news crews accosted them, questions overlapping and incomprehensible.

"Show a little dignity, for Christ's sake," the detective swore. "Quit behaving like idiots!"

Wide angle lenses shoved at the victim, Sheila blocked them with her palms. "You want answers, talk to me! The identities of abuse victims should be protected, to prevent retaliation by those responsible."

When the crush did not ease, agile fingers glided around the equipment, disconnecting the live feeds. Robbed of their scoop, the journalists and videographers gazed after the women, scurrying toward an idling taxi.

"Sorry about that," apologized Sheila. "We'll take you home."

"No, I..."

"You're afraid to tell your parents?"

"My... mom is working, and my dad... doesn't do much of anything."

The detective grasped the import of the remark. "Except drink?"

"He was terminated two years ago from the knackers. Hasn't really tried to get another job."

"Does he beat you, too?"

"I... hang out with friends, so I'm not around as much as my little sister."

Sheila sucked air through grit teeth. "Give the cabbie an address. You must tell your mother what happened, though, before the police contact her."

"I will. After Dad passes out watching the news."

"If you need me, I can be reached through Tinley Motors until Friday."

"Thanks, Miss Holmes."

Tucking a twenty pound note in the driver's fist, Sheila remained motionless while the vehicle eased into the turn lane. Her second attempt to reach McLaurin's offered no detours or delays.

Her host had taped a note to the front door: "Surprises inside. Be back soon."

Dreading the unexpected, she sought relief in her lack of a deadbolt key. She circled the vast dwelling, scaled the deck, and contented herself with relaxing on the porch swing.

Until it started to rain.

"Shit!" she muttered, tucking the fedora under the cushion. The steady stream of droplets soaked through her scoop-neck blouse and linen slacks. As the downpour increased in intensity, waves of hysterical laughter bubbled up from her soul, erupting in uncontrolled bursts.

Will McLaurin discovered her in that state when he arrived home at 5:30.

"You're drenched to the skin!" he admonished, dragging her into the kitchen, puddles on the tile floor easier to clean. "The door wasn't locked."

"I... wasn't ready for your surprises," the muffled contralto penetrated a towel draped over her head.

He occupied himself in the living room while she discarded the wet clothes. His terry robe absorbing any remnants of water, she sidled to where a vase of red roses, box of assorted chocolates and a jeweler's box lay on the coffee table.

"Will..."

"You've refused the hundred thousand pounds; you can't deny me the pleasure of rewarding you with a couple trinkets." He extracted a folded document from the hip pocket of his jeans. "Besides, I'm grateful to you for this."

She reached for it; he withdrew.

"If you're not going to show me..." she sniffed.

"It's a bill of sale for this property."

"What?"

"Well, not exactly. I'm donating it to the Domestic Violence Coalition. It will serve as their headquarters."

Sheila smiled. "I'm proud of you."

From inside the first, he revealed a second. "This is a contract for me to headline at the Comedy Café next month."

Violet orbs squinted. "Why not at the new club?"

"According to my agent, the investors aren't too stable. Better opportunity to reestablish my reputation with the old crew."

"What are you talking about, 'reestablish'? You've been off the stage less than a year."

"The public is fickle, missy."

She shivered and sneezed.

“It’s the shower for you,” he commanded, clutching her arm and leading her to the stairs.

“I...”

“If you don’t go of your own volition, I’ll have no choice but to get in the tub with you and make sure you’re thoroughly warmed.”

Sheila broke from his grasp and took the steps in pairs. “That won’t be necessary.”

Blue eyes flashing, he chuckled as she slammed the bathroom door.

A devoted father or elder brother could not have more solicitously tucked her into bed that evening, after a bowl of chicken noodle soup and mixed green salad. He’d prompted her over chocolate sprinkled cream puffs to open the blue velvet box, and she gasped at the silver angel dangling from a delicate chain.

McLaurin offered no explanation, simply fastening the clasp at the nape of her neck, and planting his lips atop it.

She hoped, dozing beneath the quilt, he’d come to grips with his future. While she’d staunchly profess she required no psychological treatment for her own... eccentricities, those with confirmed PTSD could live in relative normalcy under proper care. Immediate audience feedback would be for McLaurin much the same as her reaction to the police clamping handcuffs on a criminal at the conclusion of a case.

Friday morning, a decided uptick in arrests of domestic violence suspects and paedophiles making local headlines, the comedian drove Sheila to the Norwich train station. He unloaded her duffel from the Jaguar’s boot, and set it at her feet. She’d tried to preempt this farewell scene by opting to walk the distance; he would not take no for an answer.

“Good thing I’m moving to a flat,” he rambled, blue eyes scanning the crowds. “The house won’t be the same without you.”

“It’s too spacious for one person, and the coalition needs the room.”

“Will you come to any of my shows while I’m in London? I can arrange tickets for you and John... and Edith.”

“I’ve got a lot of catching up to do. New clients whose cases may take me north, south, east or west.”

“Sheila, I...” His tongue tied, he pulled her into a tearful embrace and kissed her gently. “You’ve changed my life in more ways than you’ll ever understand, and I’m eternally grateful.”

“Be true to your dreams, Will, and rest assured, you’ve had an equal impact on me.”

He grinned, an expression not even a photograph could imprint more deeply on her mind. Definitely unique, this one.

Loudspeakers blared the arrival of the 11:24 bound for London. Sheila hoisted her bag and raced for the turnstile, glancing back to see McLaurin place two fingers to his mouth and extend them in her direction, reminiscent of his on-stage tradition.

Flopping into the last vacant seat in the fourth carriage, she felt dampness on her t-shirt, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Then, she drew the fedora's brim over her forehead and tried to sleep.

Transferring to the Tube and disembarking at Baker Street, the memory of her previous homecoming - from California - jarred her to the core. Her knees weak, she stopped to compose herself. Trembling fingers stroked the pendant resting on her sternum, and she acknowledged McLaurin being her angel, while she may well have also been his. Exhaling her tension, she strode toward 221B.

Edith welcomed her on the stoop, and escorted her up the warped stairs. The decorations from Brian and Cindy Hudson's anniversary had long since been removed. "There've been other changes," announced the russet-haired landlady.

With irritating trepidation, Sheila allowed her companion to shove open the sitting room door. Johnny Watson sat at the desk in a chamber totally organized and spotless.

"What the devil..." the tenant grunted.

"I've trained John not to be a slob, and I expect you to train yourself. Any papers on the floor, or dirty dishes not carried down to the kitchen, and I may evict you both!"

Whether a joke or not, Sheila laughed heartily. She hugged Edith, then crossed to squeeze Watson's shoulder. "I'm so damned glad to be home!" she exclaimed, tossing the duffel toward her bedroom and sinking in the basket-chair.

Pale Blue Enigma

“You made the front page,” announced Johnny Watson, tossing the Monday edition of the London *Times* toward the basket-chair. He missed his intended target - Sheila Holmes’ lap - knocking over her guitar.

Quick reflexes caught the instrument by the neck before it hit the floor. “Careful, John,” the detective scolded.

“Sorry.” The blond army veteran pointed at a plate of French toast and bacon. “Are you eating this morning?”

“Pour my coffee. I’m almost done with the post.”

Sheila had returned the previous evening from Manchester, where she’d aided the authorities in apprehending key players of an extensive car theft ring. A bold-type headline proclaimed the fact; she merely glanced at the four-column photo of three men in handcuffs.

“I know your methods,” stated Watson when she joined him at the round sitting room table. “And even I can’t figure out how you nabbed those blokes.”

“Vigilance, pure and simple. Six vehicles were stolen from Marty Winetraub’s used car lots in two weeks. From the evidence available, I deduced the culprits had been monitoring operations for months prior to the thefts, aware of security lapses. So, I arranged for the locations to be discreetly watched by my own people, and tracked their latest acquisition to the garage where they altered the identification numbers, created false paperwork, and repainted the body before shipping it to Scotland, for transport to the Continent.”

“Brilliant!”

“Logical,” she countered, slicing through syrup-coated bread.

Watson resumed perusing the second section, sipping orange juice while flipping pages. When the glass shattered on the boards, Sheila snatched away the paper to view his horrified expression.

“What the devil...”

“Liam McLaurin escaped from prison last Wednesday.”

His flatmate scanned compact print for the article mentioned. She devoured the item reporting how Ian William “Liam” McLaurin had accompanied a news team interviewing officials at Colorado’s federal minimum security prison off the property and vanished.

“Had they been legitimate media, he would’ve needed a weapon to take them hostage and make good his flight. No such scenario is mentioned, meaning he’d arranged this beforehand.”

“Do you think Will has been notified?” queried Watson.

“Hopefully. It’s highly unlikely Liam could cross the Atlantic, having no passport, and with security screenings at every airport.”

“Sounds to me like getting a passport would be easy, with his connections.”

The comment sparked an idea in Sheila’s brain. “Get in touch with your contacts, and see if any urgent passport applications have been processed fitting Liam’s description.” She was off her chair, shedding the tattered dressing gown which had once belonged to Sherlock Holmes, marching into her bedroom.

“Right.” He shouted after her, “Where are you going?”

“To find Will.”

“Since his gig at the Comedy Café, I haven’t heard from him.”

She peered around the partially open door. “You *did* catch his act.”

Averting his gaze, the wounded medic admitted, “Should do. He’s a good friend.”

Her smile relieved his tension.

Five minutes later, Sheila strode through the sitting room in a green flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers, snatched her black fedora off the wall rack, and flew down the stairs.

Settling at the computer, Watson muttered, “Good thing she knows what she’s doing.”

Sheila’s sole lead involved Will McLaurin’s agent, with offices in Piccadilly Circus. Emerging from the Tube station, she veered along a narrow lane, a tarnished brass plaque affixed above a doorbell designating the proper structure.

“Mr. Brewster isn’t taking new clients,” snapped an overdressed receptionist when Sheila entered the suite.

“I’m here to discuss Will McLaurin.”

“All information about Mr. Brewster’s clients is strictly confidential.”

“My name is Sheila Holmes.”

It still amazed the woman how her name elicited such awe in the months after tabloids declared her the fiancée of Tony Downton. The actor/producer’s murder increased those reactions exponentially.

“Please, go in, Miss Holmes,” burred the employee.

Nolan Brewster’s nose seemed to precede the rest of his pear-shaped frame when he swiveled his desk chair toward the visitor. Even more prominent than McLaurin’s, Sheila had to consciously bite her lip to keep from laughing. Old jokes about Jewish agents were certainly based in truth.

A minimal Cockney accent peppered Brewster's baritone. "'ave a seat, Miss 'olmes. 'ow can I be of service?"

"I need to find Will."

"Might I ask the reason?"

"It's personal."

Brewster placed thick fists on his blotter and leaned forward. "While I'm grateful for your role in encouraging Will back into comedy, I'm afraid..."

"As a detective, my clients expect confidentiality also, Mr. Brewster. I wouldn't be here if this wasn't a matter of life and death."

The rotund agent considered. "Let me ring 'im, and tell 'im to get in touch with you."

"I've an alternate plan. You ring him, and let me talk with him now."

Lips pursed, Brewster agreed. He plucked a mobile from the top desk drawer, searched his contact list and selected McLaurin's name.

"Dammit, Nolan, I'm still asleep," crackled through the speaker.

"Will, Sheila Holmes is 'ere with me."

The sound of metal bouncing off wood raised a chuckle in Sheila's throat. She could visualize McLaurin scrambling from his bed to get a grip on his phone. "Missy?"

"Good morning, Will," she greeted.

"Hi..."

"First, I want to thank you for recommending my services to your fellow car dealer, Marty Winetraub."

His tentative response, "A pleasure."

"Have you seen today's *Times*?"

"No."

"We need to talk."

"I..."

Brewster interrupted, "She says it's life or death, Will."

"Really?"

Sheila commandeered the agent's device and toted it out to the corridor, no one within earshot. "Liam's escaped from prison."

"Shit!"

"Where are you?"

"I took a flat on Gower Street."

"You still performing in the City?"

"I'm... weighing offers."

"Meet me at Baker Street in an hour."

“Missy, I don’t want to get you involved if…”

“We’re both involved, Will, like it or not. If Liam wants revenge - and, from what you told me, that’s been a primary motivation his entire life - he’ll target both of us for bringing down his smuggling operation.” Retracing her steps, she placed the phone in Brewster’s fleshy hand. “See you shortly.”

A perfunctory nod expressed her gratitude to the agent, and she departed in haste.

Brewster concluded the conversation with, “Any decisions on those contracts, Will?”

“If I live until Sunday, Nolan, I’ll ring you Monday.”

The line went dead, and Brewster muttered, “What in bloody ‘ell does that mean?”

Sheila took the stairs at Baker Street by twos, violet eyes fastening on Watson, who held a printed sheet in her direction.

“Damn, damn, damn!” she cursed, reading the U.S. passport application for “Owen William McLaurin”. Using his twin brother’s name, Liam had falsified a claim of stolen documents at the British Consulate in Denver. “Did you notify them of the ruse?”

“Too late. He landed at Heathrow six hours ago.”

“Will should be here any minute. He’s been living on Gower Street.”

“Less than a mile from here?”

“When he could’ve taken a posh suite at some hotel.”

Watson squinted. “Something’s not right.”

“Amen, brother.” She diverted into her bedroom, retrieving a silver chain off a hook inside her wardrobe. The angel pendant lay atop her shirt when Edith ushered the shaggy-headed Will McLaurin into the sitting room.

He shook Watson’s hand solemnly, and kissed Sheila lightly on the mouth.

“Have a seat,” Watson invited, motioning him to the red Victorian divan. “How’ve you been?”

“Busy. What about you?”

“Keeping out of trouble. You’ve heard about the new veterans benefit model?”

“The letter probably got lost in the post.”

“You’re done in Norwich, then?” prodded Sheila.

McLaurin replied, “I closed the sale of the dealerships yesterday. A load off my mind.”

“And, here, I’m adding another.”

“Not your fault, missy. When the Brits released Liam from a life sentence in Dover Prison to serve an easy twenty in the States, I had my suspicions.”

“He’s... in London as we speak,” said Watson.

Pale blue orbs flashed at Sheila. “Shit! Really?”

She nodded.

“Impersonating you,” added the former army medic.

McLaurin buried his singular face in hirsute hands.

“We can’t let emotions cloud our logic,” Sheila ventured. “We face a very tangible danger, and must take all necessary precautions.”

“Give me pistol, so I can shoot him.”

She laid soothing digits on his trembling shoulder. “None of that. Scotland Yard should be informed, so their patrols can report any sightings.”

“Would he rent a car?” hinted Watson.

“You can check under Will’s name. Hotels, too. It’s not likely he’d sleep rough.”

“Where would he get the price?”

“If he can manufacture an almost foolproof escape, he can secure some ready cash to cover his expenses.”

McLaurin grumbled, “Must you be so analytical?”

“Yes.” Sheila sank on the cushion beside him. “My theory - albeit unsubstantiated - is that Liam has spent the hours since his arrival organizing his resources. He’s on a tight schedule, his apprehension imminent. He’ll come here, because my residence is no secret. Which means a change of venue is in order - for all of us.”

Watson cringed. “I’m not in this.”

“He’d put you in it, John. Squarely in the middle. Edith, as well. He’d torture you both, until you revealed our whereabouts. The man has neither heart nor conscience.”

“I’ve the scars to prove it,” McLaurin chuckled wryly, rubbing his right forearm.

“Fifteen minutes, we scatter. John, pull a couple thousand from the safe, and divide it equally, so we can buy food and clothing wherever we end up.” She stroked Sherlock’s favorite briar in its rack on the fireplace mantle. “If you and Edith go north, to your Scottish relations...”

“I’ll ring them...”

Sheila knocked the receiver from Watson’s grip. “No! You’ll leave, then she’ll meet you at the Tube station five minutes later. It must look unplanned and

casual. No advance tickets, just spur of the moment.” She patted her flatmate’s stubbly cheek. “It’s for your own good.”

In the mad scramble which ensued, Will McLaurin remained motionless. Once her friends had departed, Sheila approached him. “You ready?”

“I’m not running, missy.”

“*We’re* not running. We’re taking a leisurely stroll to Gower Street, where we will deal with Liam in due course.”

“What about Nolan? He’s the only person with my new address...”

“Some collateral damage is inevitable in every perilous situation. Based on Liam’s history, I predict he’ll pretend to be you, call on Nolan, and use some pretense to get the desired information.” Sheila rummaged around the desk for the passport application Watson had printed. The photographic image Liam had submitted showed him with brown hair much shorter than his brother. “He’ll have to explain the haircut...”

“Unless he covers his head with a cap.”

“I’ve never seen you wear...”

“Just a thought.”

“A plausible one, Will. The last photo Liam would have seen of you, on the American tour, had the longer style. He has no way of knowing...” She reached for the fedora, then changed her mind. An heirloom, should anything untoward transpire, it should remain as a tribute to Sherlock Holmes.

McLaurin followed her down the old servants’ stairs, through the pristine kitchen and out the back door. They split up, traversing the alley in opposite directions. Sheila detoured through Regent’s Park while McLaurin’s limited height enabled him to blend with the afternoon bustle on Marylebone Road.

The Gower Street flat, two flights above an off-license shop, rivaled Baker Street for cleanliness and comfort. “Edith will evict me anyway,” quipped Sheila, flopping into a leather recliner. “I’m a firm advocate of the sentiment, ‘A clean room is a sign of a sick mind.’”

“Too bad you didn’t catch my show at the Comedy Café. Or, maybe it’s good you didn’t.”

“Why?”

“I riffed a lot about you. Your habits, personality...”

“By name?”

“No. The routine began, ‘This gal I’m shackled up with.’”

“Oh, God,” Sheila croaked.

“Well, in the technical sense, we were... cohabiting.”

“Not in the same bedroom!”

“They don’t know that. And, you’d be amazed how many women threw themselves at me, finding the idea of me cheating on you quite seductive.”

“Did you cheat on me?”

McLaurin sank on the matching sofa. “After you, one night stands aren’t the least bit attractive.”

She tossed an embroidered pillow at that mischievous grin, the gap between his front teeth displayed.

As the evening wore on, they snacked on potato crisps and soda, the strain of their predicament negating their appetites. Sheila paced the carpet; Will sought distraction in a recap of sporting events on the telly.

“Do we sleep, or keep vigil?” he asked, 10:00 blinking on the oven’s digital clock.

“We rest in shifts. I’ll take first watch.”

“Let me. I didn’t get out of bed until noon, so I’m still wide awake.”

“Should do,” scoffed Sheila, ambling into the bedroom. “Wake me in a couple hours.”

Once McLaurin heard her steady breathing, he pulled the door closed. Then, he angled the armchair toward the flat’s unbolted entrance.

The knob spun just past midnight, and Liam slipped inside.

Except for the differing length of hair, the twins were identical: same prominent nose, thick jowls and jutting chin, same dark fur-like coat on arms, legs and torso. A scar on Liam’s shoulder could confirm his identity, concealed beneath a gold striped polo shirt.

“What do you want?” prompted Will in an undertone. “Make it quick.”

The pair held a hushed conversation lasting less than ten minutes. When Sheila emerged from the bedroom at 6:00 AM, mad as a hornet, the comedian sat, lost in thought. An empty whiskey bottle lay at his feet.

“Why didn’t you...”

His blue orbs met her gaze, devoid of their usual sparkle.

She grumbled, “You need some sleep. Get in there...”

“I... want some coffee. I... don’t ever want to close my eyes again.”

“You got smashed, dozed off and had a nightmare?”

“No such luck.”

Sheila rounded the formica counter creating an island in the kitchen, running water into the metal coffee pot. “What happened?”

“Not what you expect.” He rose and stretched listlessly. “I’ll grab a shower while that’s brewing.”

“Must do. It’ll clear your head.”

Shuffling to the bathroom, he mumbled, "I don't think so."

Cracking eggs into a skillet and warming sausages in the microwave, Sheila didn't hear a quartet in trenchcoats cross the threshold, their weapons holstered.

Cheers, Sheila," hailed Liam McLaurin. "I like mine sunny side up."

The detective's years of Wing Chun training kicked in; she whipped the cast iron pan at the intruder's smirking mien. When he ducked, and his comrades shielded themselves from the hot grease, she hurdled the counter and dashed to the bathroom, securing the lock.

Jamming a small chest against the door, she hissed, "Will! Liam's here."

"I know."

Water streaming from the shower head, the woman doubted her ears. "What?"

"He told me he'd return at sunrise."

She slid aside the frosted glass. "When was this?"

"Last night."

"And you didn't bother to tell me?"

Somberly, he clasped her hand and pulled her into the tub. "Would it prevent the inevitable?"

She shoved him against the tiles and, dripping wet, rushed the door full-force. The hinges gave way, sending the panel into two of the thugs. Liam and his third associate jumped clear; Sheila disarmed the latter, but he trapped her arms and wrenched, tearing ligaments and eliciting a series of anguished expletives.

Liam had his pistol barrel tucked beneath her chin within seconds. "You are a right pain, Miss Fuckin' Nosy Holmes, worse than my dear brother on his best day. Putting a bullet in your brain will be a true pleasure..."

She reared back against her captor, knees bent, striking Liam's groin with crippling accuracy. The Glock sailed from his grasp. Stunned, the confused flunky loosened his hold. She decked him with a round-house kick and dove for the weapon.

Raising Liam upright by his coat collar, she mimicked his tactic, the trio of subordinates on the floor, moaning in agony. "You're a right fuckin' pain, Ian William McLaurin. You *and* your brother. Whatever your game, I'm not playing."

"Sheila, stop!" cried a naked Will from the doorway.

"I'm not moving until you summon Scotland Yard." she snarled. "If *he* so much as belches, I'll subdivide his skull with hot lead."

"He'll die in prison."

“That’s the whole point.”

“But...”

“But, hell! He’s twice tried to kill us, and you want to be merciful?”

Liam choked, “He has his reasons.”

“I don’t care what they are, either. Get on the phone!”

Will did as instructed. True to her word, Sheila did not shift her rather awkward, soggy stance one millimeter in the ten minutes it took a cadre of constables to arrive. Will had, at least, donned a terry robe, preoccupying himself in the kitchen.

Two sets of pale blue eyes met, one pleading for assistance, the other moist with resignation.

Led toward the stairs in handcuffs behind his cohorts, Liam hollered, “See you in hell!”

Sheila slammed the door, whirling toward Will. “Now, do you mind explaining...”

The deed done and no recourse, McLaurin crossed the living room and scooped her over his shoulder like a flour sack. Though she fought against this fresh captivity, he carried her into the bathroom and set her in the shower. “You’re soaked. Ditch those wet clothes, so you can relax.”

“I won’t relax unless you’re honest about what...”

His robe tossed over the sink, he stepped into the tub and roughly relieved the woman of her shirt, buttons clattering on the porcelain. The angel pendant lay between her bra cups. He burst the zipper on her jeans; they slid to her ankles.

He passed her a bar of soap. “Or, do I have to treat you like a child?”

“If I understood...”

“Understand that, owing you so much, I bargained for your life, but you spoiled the deal by refusing to listen...”

“Bargain? How could you bargain with a smuggler, a murderer?”

“He’s my brother, and he has a right to die a free man.”

“You’re not making any sense, Will.”

“How can I, when you’re here, so close...”

Shaking free of him, she exited the cubicle, commandeering his robe. A towel tucked around his waist, he chased her into the bedroom.

Rifling a chest of drawers, she selected a tie-dyed t-shirt and sweat pants. “Get out of my way, Will, or you’ll end up as sore as Liam.”

“Sheila...”

She dressed hastily in the corridor and descended the stairs to Gower Street, hailing a taxi to drive the distance to her flat. She needed peace and quiet to assess what had transpired, glad Watson and Edith were bound for Scotland.

They'd be monitoring internet news sites for Liam's arrest, and could return at their leisure.

Her legs folded in half-lotus style on the basket-chair, the detective closed her eyes and regulated her respiration. "Uncle, your assistance, please."

A whiff of pungent tobacco assailed her nostrils. "Last we conversed, you didn't wish to see me."

"Apologies. I... hadn't come to grips with Tony's death."

"Death is a part of life. You should have come to grips with that truth before you embarked on this career."

"I didn't choose..."

The elder Holmes boomed, "You cannot deny yourself, or your blood."

"I don't want to argue frivolous inanities. The past twelve hours..."

"Critique number one: never trust a client so completely you place yourself in jeopardy."

"Meaning?"

"You left Will McLaurin on guard, and he violated the parameters of that duty."

"He met with Liam without my knowledge?"

"Precisely."

"Will mentioned bargaining for my life."

"And Liam intended to honor that deal, which is why he didn't draw his weapon until you showed yourself the aggressor."

Sheila's fists clenched. "How was I supposed to know?"

"Had you observed the subtle alteration in Will's demeanor..."

"I observed it! I assumed he was drunk."

Sherlock voiced no comment.

"And this bullshit about Liam dying a free man..."

Again, silence.

"Uncle?" she prompted.

"You've ignored some key facts, such as what occurred in the States."

"The States? Liam was extradited, his case tried before their courts..."

"Prior to that."

"Prior?" She culled her memory. "Will had gone on tour."

"Did he mention visiting Liam in prison?"

"No, but I never asked."

“Perhaps you should have.”

She bristled. “Are you implying Will helped Liam arrange his escape?”

“I’m implying nothing. How, though, could Liam use Will’s identity to secure a passport, if Will hadn’t provided the necessary documentation confirming that identity?”

“Liam is conniving enough to obtain forgeries...”

“You hesitate to suspect Will, because of your emotional attachment.”

“Dammit, Uncle, don’t go there!”

His darkly handsome face tilted slightly.

“Will hadn’t seen or heard from Liam since his original arrest. They... never got along as children, and it was only natural for Will to believe Liam would seek revenge...”

“You believed it, and imposed your belief on Will.”

Recalling the mobile exchange from Nolan Brewster’s office, she uttered a curse. “What an idiot I am!”

“Liam had learned something in prison, coordinated his escape, and flew to London with falsified ID to relate said information to Will - something which couldn’t be done by phone or post.”

“If Liam had rung his flat, Will would have doubted anything he said.”

“Excellent. It being a serious matter, the twins had to meet face to face.”

Slowly, Sheila’s jaw dropped. “Will wanted Liam to die a free man, because Liam had discovered he’s dying!” Her legs straightened, and she rose. “Liam came not for revenge, but reconciliation!”

“Don’t be maudlin, child.”

“No wonder Will acted so depressed! Being told your twin awaits the grim reaper is sufficient to spoil anyone’s mood!”

On that note, Sherlock Holmes dissipated in a swirl of pipe smoke.

Beneath a stack of newspapers, persistent ringing compelled Sheila to scrounge around until she located the phone. “Hello?”

“Sheila?”

“John?”

“No, it’s Will.”

“Will? You... sound so different.”

“I... wanted to apologize for my behavior, to thank you, and to say good-bye.”

“You owe me no thanks. I screwed up, royally. I should have left well enough alone.”

“You followed your heart. Isn’t that the advice you gave me awhile back?”

She chuckled. "Yes."

"Liam... is better off where he is."

"Perhaps." The young woman blurted out the next before logic could prevent her: "Would you like to have dinner with me this evening?"

"I'd love to, but I can't. I've got some things to settle with Nolan."

"The new contracts?"

"This... is tough, as it is, missy."

"What's wrong, Will? You..."

"Good-bye, my angel."

The line went dead.

Sheila stood, staring at the receiver, when uneven footsteps on the stairs announced Watson's return. Edith followed, both collapsing on the red divan in relief.

"What the devil..."

"We... got here as soon as we could," panted the landlady.

"Why?"

Watson heaved, "Will texted me an hour ago."

"In Scotland?"

"We never left London."

"Against my directions?" stormed Sheila.

"My relatives are on the Continent for two weeks, so we took rooms at the Savoy."

Edith murmured, "Are you all right?"

"Confused, but fine," replied her tenant.

"Liam?"

"Behind bars."

"Not according to Will," stated the wounded veteran.

"Eh?"

"Liam's in the morgue."

Sheila gasped, "Shot by the police?"

"Natural causes."

"Bullshit!"

"The coroner will confirm he had an extremely rare blood disorder, incurable and untreatable, caused by a genetic anomaly. I can't pronounce the Latin for it, but he was lucky to live into his thirties."

"Will told you this?"

"In his text."

"Yet, he wouldn't tell me?"

Watson caught her hand. "He didn't want to worry you."

"Worry? About Liam?"

"About Will," supplied Edith. "One brother with a deadly disease..."

"And twins," Watson added.

Sheila slumped on the desk chair, clutching the angel pendant.. "Oh, God."

"There's nothing you can do, and no reason to blame yourself."

"If Liam learned his fate less than a week ago, how is it Will believed himself..."

"He saw a specialist at St. Bart's after you... ran out on him. The blood test results were irrefutable."

"How much time does he have?"

"Liam was given ten days. He lasted twice that."

"Did Will say..."

Edith begged, "Why torture yourself, Sheila?"

She wrenched upright. "Because I had it *wrong*! Because I didn't laugh with him, or let him make me laugh like he longed to do. Because" - she groaned loudly, rattling the bric-a-brac - "I got emotionally attached, and it blinded me to the truth!"

Thursday's *Times* contained Owen William McLaurin's obituary across two columns, the comedian touted as a rising young star before his body betrayed him. Comedy clubs throughout Britain dimmed their lights in his honor on Friday. His parents had both their sons cremated, with private services held in their Welsh hometown. Sheila did not attend, honoring the pair in her own way, then unclasping the silver angel on its chain, and placing it in the night stand drawer beside Tony Downton's signet ring.