

# **The Adventues of Sheila Holmes**

*Crimes of Passion*

**A Collection of Stories**

by

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## Art Crimes

Johnny Watson limped into the sitting room of 221B Baker Street and flopped on the winged-back armchair beside the dormant fireplace. He tired of dealing with challenges to disabled veterans' rightful benefits, and yearned for a willing ear to let him vent.

His flatmate, Sheila Holmes, did not occupy the basket-chair where she'd been ensconced these past weeks, however. The former British Army medic had grown accustomed to her Buddha-like posture as she persisted in mourning film producer/star Tony Downton, who'd been murdered before her at a movie premiere months prior.

When her bedroom door opened, he flinched at the sight of the lithe woman in grey slacks, cream frilled-collar blouse and black flats, brunette curls actually combed into a semblance of order.

"What the devil?" he gasped.

Confident digits reached for the black fedora on a wall hook beneath bullet holes spelling "V.R." in the wall. "I'm going out," Sheila stated.

"May I ask where?"

"The preview of a new art exhibit in Soho."

"May I ask why?"

"I've taken a job."

Watson's blue eyes blinked repeatedly as he attempted to mentally digest this declaration. Sheila hadn't budged from the basket-chair for so long, their cash reserves in the safe behind a tacky still-life had dwindled to dangerous level. She'd accepted no cases, when solving the crimes would have been a simple task and netted generous fees.

Now, she'd taken a *job*?

"What kind of job?" he sputtered.

"I'm the arts correspondent for the *Times*."

His jaw gaped.

"Really, John. We'll chat more later. I'm terribly late..." Twirling the fedora - once worn by her great-great-uncle Sherlock Holmes - she decided against it, and tossed it through the air. It seemed to gravitate toward the hook as if to its home.

She vanished down the creaking narrow staircase.

Without a coat, despite near freezing temperatures.

Watson adjusted his prosthetic left leg before rising. "Edith!"

The russet-haired landlady - a widow of war after her husband, an American Marine, died in Afghanistan - crossed the threshold, nearly in a panic.

“What’s wrong, John?” she exclaimed.

“It’s Sheila. She’s gone.”

Edith Hudson-Thorne sank on the red velvet Victorian divan, relieved.

“Why is that a problem? You’ve been trying to pry her from that chair for weeks...”

“But... but...”

Nimble fingers pulled the distraught young man onto the cushions. “Calm yourself, John. An old friend called ‘round this morning and, somehow, motivated her to move.”

“What old friend?”

“Corinna Quimp, Quimper... Something like that.”

“Did she say...”

“No, she didn’t, John.”

Watson straightened. “This is intolerable! We devise endless strategies to... to... and some chance visit transforms her into a professional working stiff?”

Edith shrugged. “That’s how it happens, sometimes.”

“Not with her.”

A trembling fist slammed the desk, rattling the computer monitor and knocking papers onto the floor. He bent to retrieve them, Edith helping, and paused over an embossed invitation.

“The MacMillan Gallery?” he read. “I thought they went bankrupt due to that forgery scandal.”

Edith glanced over his shoulder. “They’re reopening under new ownership. I saw a news report about it on the telly last night.”

The young man settled on the swivel chair. “This smacks of...”

“Intrigue?”

“Definitely.” Switching on the desktop, he began typing as soon as the search screen appeared. “She’s only *playing* journalist. This is a case.”

The landlady continued cleaning what always managed to be a cluttered mess, while her tenant grunted and cursed at the results scrolling past for various keywords.

“No luck?” she queried, a pile of newspapers, magazines and food wrappers in her arms, bound for the wheelie bin.

“Only promotions for Gordon Lampeer’s sculpture and painting exhibit.”

“Who’s Gordon Lampeer?”

“According to this, he’s a former Glasgow dockworker who discovered his artistic talent while training to be a welder and made his name with commissions to paint murals as part of a city revitalization project in Birmingham.”

The pair studied a photo posted beside the biography. A longish, wavy white mane framed wizened features, brown eyes, straight nose, mustache and soul patch, square jaw and dimpled chin.

“Do you fancy an evening out, Edith?” hinted Watson.

“John, you mean to spy on Sheila...”

“Something’s up, and it’s going to bother me until I find out what, exactly.”

The young woman pursed her lips. “You’re not just jealous?”

“Jealous? Of what?”

She tapped the monitor. “Of that.”

“Hogwash! He’s nearly sixty...”

“You know Sheila doesn’t care about age.”

He lurched upright and hobbled toward his room. “I just want to be sure she’s safe.”

With a chuckle, Edith carried her load of rubbish across the threshold.

“Give me fifteen minutes.”

A surprisingly dignified couple descended to the Baker Street Tube station, that mode of transportation being all they could afford. Watson had tucked the invitation in the pocket of a black pinstriped jacket, warmed by his Army overcoat. Edith wore her best dress, albeit not the current vogue, and a tailored camelhair wrap.

Soho had once been a hot-bed of crime in London but, these days, boasted avant-garde establishments, art galleries, music venues, theatres and pubs. The MacMillan Gallery spanned two connected buildings, extensively renovated. A vinyl banner declared the premiere of the “Gordon Lampeer Collection”.

Watson felt uncomfortable at formal gatherings, secretly believing those present paid undue attention to his prosthetic when, in fact, no one noticed.

They were too engaged with the abstract, unique pieces of artistic expression in a broad range of media.

Offered crystal flutes bubbling with French champagne, Edith and her escort began their circuit through subtly lit chambers. Eager ears listened for Sheila’s resonant contralto, or a glimpse of her brunette mop.

Lampeer’s head, conversely, could not be mistaken, towering above a fawning cluster of middle-aged matrons in satins and jewels. They prattled inanities and he, graciously, responded without any semblance of aggravation.

“This would be the perfect place for a robbery,” Watson opined, diamonds, rubies and emeralds glinting on all sides.

Edith concurred. “Maybe Sheila heard something about just such a plan...”

“She would have told me...”

“She doesn’t always confide in you until... later in the investigation.”

Watson’s shoulders sagged as they stood near what might have been interpreted as the rendering of a seascape. “I’ve never understood that.”

“She’s protecting you.”

“It’s my responsibility to protect *her*.”

“You know she’s never expected you to...”

“I expect it of myself. She puts herself in harm’s way far too often...”

Abruptly, a Nikon was thrust into his hands. Startled, he had to scramble to keep hold of the camera, or it would’ve shattered on the floor.

“What the devil...”

He spun to see Sheila grinning at him.

“Well, John. It took you long enough.” She assessed his attire. “You look quite dapper. And you, Edith, are quite the society belle.”

“Long enough?” echoed her flatmate.

“I knew you’d be curious, so I didn’t let the paper send their own photographer. You can handle those duties.”

The disabled veteran bristled. “I’m no...”

“Tonight, you are.” She bent toward his ear, whispering, “Humor me.”

Edith’s hazel eyes flashed confusion as the couple who shared the flat in her building drifted through the throngs.

As they approached Gordon Lampeer, Watson noticed the multi-colored lanyard dangling from Sheila’s neck, bearing her press credentials. They stood outside a ring of admirers chatting up the dapper artist, until Sheila caught his eye.

No one could ignore the intensity of her gaze indefinitely.

“Would ye excuse me?” Lampeer addressed his fans with a thick Scottish burr, parting them like the Red Sea and crossing to the *Times* reporter. “Ye ha’ been kept waitin’. I’m so sorry.”

“No problem, Mr. Lampeer. It’s just that my deadline for the morning edition...”

“Indeed.” Lampeer scanned the assembly, then took Sheila’s hand and tugged her toward an arched doorway. “‘Twill be easier t’ talk in private.”

Watson brought up the rear of this train, only to be blocked by Lampeer. “Please, feel free t’ photograph any o’ the pieces on display,” he growled.

Sheila slipped her arm through Watson's. "We need some candid shots of you, Mr. Lampeer. We have plenty of your sculptures."

Thwarted, Lampeer dropped his objection. In a tastefully appointed office, he and Sheila sat opposite each other in comfortable chairs, while Watson moved behind them, the camera's shutter clicking steadily.

Not that he knew the first thing about photography.

He sensed Sheila wanted him to capture the artist behaving naturally, not in poses as the other media representatives had been doing through the evening, though he didn't grasp her rationale.

For her part, she drew a miniature audio recorder from her slacks and switched it on before launching into a series of questions about Lampeer's life and inspirations.

"How does it feel to rise from the poverty of Glasgow's slums to affording a home in Belgravia?"

"I credit m' success t' bein' open t' opportunities as they presented themselves," he replied sedately. "M' grandfather knew one o' the instructors in the trade school and enrolled me in the weldin' program. Among the classes available for additional credit was a course in pottery, and I signed up on a whim. The following term, I began explorin' the wonders o' paintin' wi' oils and acrylics. I abandoned m' trainin' as a welder and the rest, as they say, is history."

After 20 minutes, the pair were escorted back to the gallery, where a gaggle of women rushed at Lampeer, thrilled by his return.

He seized Sheila's forearm in desperation as the horde converged, twirling her agilely into an embrace and planting a kiss on her mouth.

Having rejoined Edith, Watson was flummoxed by this unwarranted gesture of affection. He took three steps forward; his companion restrained him.

"Something's up," she murmured.

He grunted, "You think I don't know that?"

The admirers halted, aghast, and gradually drifted toward their own partners or cliques. As Lampeer loosened his grip on Sheila, he caressed her hands, smiling. "Thank you for saving me."

The detective discerned his meaning. She'd observed one of the females - or a male in clever disguise - drawing a pistol from a beaded clutch. "My pleasure."

"Let's get out o' here."

She resisted as he drew her toward the fire exit. "To where, exactly?"

"Anywhere."

"You promise to tell me why your life has been threatened?"

He bristled. "For publication?"

Sheila chuckled. "Completely off the record."

"As ye wish."

She permitted Lampeer to lead her away, signaling Watson and Edith to discreetly follow.

A foggy pall engulfed them as they emerged into the starry night. Strolling idly around Soho, they discovered a cozy restaurant still serving at that hour, and positioned themselves at a table where the entrance was clearly visible.

Sheila did not react when Watson and Edith took seats close enough to hear the conversation.

"I'm starved," Lampeer commented lightly, perusing the oversized menu.

"If I'd just nearly been killed, I wouldn't have any appetite at all."

"Death comes t' us all, lass. Those who dinnae acknowledge that reality cannae help but live in fear, which is nae much o' a life."

She smirked. "Not only an artist, but a philosopher!"

"Aye. M' experiences allow me t' draw on a certain wisdom..."

A prim waitress approached, taking orders for chicken alfredo and veal parmigiana with a bottle of chianti.

The menus removed, Sheila leaned across the board. "Your wisdom is shite, Mr. Lampeer. You have enemies - a considerable number of enemies - who want you dead. Tell me: why?"

"I ha' nae a clue. M' will bequeath the fortune I ha' acquired through years o' craftin' m' art t' charities, fundin' scholarships for young Scots t' hone their creative talents. I ha' nae wife, nae family..." As he spoke, his spine bent forward, so his nose almost touched hers. "Why are ye so worried about me? Dinnae ye ha' a deadline t' meet?"

"Actually, I do." She dabbed the corner of her mouth with a maroon linen napkin and rose. "Good night, Mr. Lampeer."

His massive paw clamped around slender digits. "Are ye nae goin' t' enjoy this delicious supper?"

She tossed a 50 pound note on the table. "I'm afraid not."

From their vantage point, both Watson and Edith cringed simultaneously. That amount of cash could buy groceries for a week, and on their tight budget...

Lampeer bolted off the cushion, unconcerned whether other patrons paid him any heed. He swept up the currency and tucked it forcibly in Sheila's fist.

"When I take a lady oot t' dine, I pay for the honor..."

Old fashioned, definitely, Edith mused. Not many like him around these days.

Sheila didn't argue the point. She left the establishment; her friends abandoned untouched breadsticks and water goblets and gave chase.

They caught her up on the corner, en route to the Tube station.

"What in hell was that all about?" demanded Watson.

Sheila retorted, "Did you not figure it out?"

"Figure what out?" Edith whined.

"Gordon Lampeer has a secret. Deep, dark and well concealed."

Watson grumbled, "Is that why... you went through such an elaborate... pretense?"

"No pretense, John. I truly have been hired as arts correspondent for the *Times*. The editor wants me to determine how so many fake artworks are getting past experts at posh galleries, being sold for millions at auction as the genuine article."

"Ah!"

Sheila thumped his upper arm. "Feel better now?"

"I suppose."

As they descended to the train platform, Edith chimed in, "If that's the case, why waste your time at the Lampeer exhibit?"

"An honest assignment - on a trial basis, to test my cover, if you will. Once the auction house administrators start seeing my byline, they won't think twice about welcoming me through their doors."

"But, your reputation as a detective..." challenged Watson.

"Shall remain intact, John." From her hip pocket, she drew an endorsed cashier's cheque. "Here's the advance I received..."

"From Corinna Quimp?" Edith volunteered.

"Corinne Agincourt, actually."

Edith and Sheila stared at each other momentarily.

"Her Yorkshire accent makes it difficult to comprehend her, I know," the latter remarked. "When we were in the upper forms together..."

"A school chum?" puzzled Watson.

The noise of an incoming train briefly deafened them. Once over the gap, they stood around a vertical silver pole, grabbing it for support as the carriages jolted into motion.

"Yes, John. Her father is the *Times* managing editor. He'd been complaining about news stories highlighting the forgeries, and she suggested..."

Watson unfolded the cheque: 5,000 pounds. "We shall eat well tomorrow!"

"Your favorite meal," Sheila noted. "Though I won't be there to share it, unfortunately."

“Why not?”

“I’ll be trailing Gordon Lampeer.”

“He’s not part of...”

“As I said: he’s got secrets.”

Edith tittered, “And, you can’t stand not knowing everyone’s secrets.”

“Correct.”

“But, won’t that delay your investigation into the fakes?” wondered Watson.

“Perhaps. Without a clear head, however, I couldn’t focus on the main problem.”

The trio alighted at Baker Street, mounting the stairs to street level. Once the deadbolt secured the door at 221B, they relaxed; Edith retired to her ground floor parlor while her tenants made their way upstairs.

Watson lingered at the computer when Sheila emerged from her bedroom in stained blue jeans, sneakers and black leather jacket.

“Where are you going?” he called.

She smashed the fedora atop her curls. “Shhh... I don’t want Edith to hear.”

“I’ll raise the roof if you don’t answer me.”

“Lampeer should be just about finished with his meal. If I time it right, I can pick up his trail.”

“To what end?”

“Finding answers to some of my own questions, John.” She eased the door open to prevent the hinges from protesting too loudly. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Watson stood on the threshold, dejected. All too often, he waited behind for Sheila, praying she survived whatever errand preoccupied her over-active brain.

Or, as in recent days, her stubborn refusal to stir from a state of mourning.

Going for days without food or drink, he and Edith had expected her to die in the half-yoga position she’d assumed in the basket-chair. Her cheeks sallow, lips chapped, she’d lost weight and seemed unaware of any activity in the sitting room. She didn’t speak for an entire week that summer, her lungs hardly rising from intake of air...

“Damn you, Sheila. I don’t need this.” In a huff, he went to bed.

His anger would’ve increased exponentially had he eavesdropped on the exchange between Sheila and Lampeer in a shadowed close off a bustling Soho lane 20 minutes later.

“Did your friends enjoy the show?” the artist greeted her, pulling her into his arms for a passionate kiss.

Sheila couldn't respond until they parted. “They are quite stymied, to be sure.”

“They're oot o' our hair, then.”

“Let's say, they've been removed from the line of fire.”

“As ye wish.” Lampeer entwined his fingers through hers and guided her through the gloom. Mingling with pedestrians on the next street, they could have passed as an amorous young couple, except for his white mane.

The taxi he hailed drove through unusually heavy traffic to Belgravia. No more had they ascended to the first floor, than he loosened the striped red and blue tie, tossed the navy suit jacket on the sideboard, poured himself a tumbler of Bushmill's and settled on the love seat, a fire roaring on the grate beneath a carved marble mantle.

“Your past is showing,” Sheila chided, pulling the draperies together while scanning the pavement below.

The glass was drained in one gulp. “Ach, woman, leave me be in m' own home.”

“Corinne swore you stayed sober when you're working.”

“A wee tot o' whiskey does nae get me anywhere near pissed.”

“Let's hope not.” She knelt on the gold carpet beside him and rested her head on his thigh. He stroked her hair gently; her eyelids fluttered. Then, his hand maneuvered along her shoulders and inside her t-shirt.

Johnny Watson discovered Sheila sprawled on the red Victorian divan the next morning, rightfully knackered after a sleepless - but not uneventful - night. En route to the bathroom for a shower, he didn't disturb her quiet snoring.

Edith, conversely, let the silver tray on which she'd delivered a breakfast of cereal, cinnamon buns and coffee crash deliberately on the floor when she nearly stumbled on a pair of sneakers kicked off willy-nilly.

Sheila shot off the velvet upholstery. “Gordon?” she burred, half-conscious.

“Gordon?” Edith repeated. “What about him?”

With a relieved sigh, Sheila stretched cramped muscles. “Oh, it's you.”

“Good morning.”

“Mornin'.”

“Where were you until dawn?” the landlady pressed.

“On a job.”

“This... reporter thing you’re been hired to do, or something less... less... respectable?”

“Respectable?”

“I’m a woman, Sheila. I’ve been... with a man - and not just my husband. You weren’t tracking leads for a story on the forged paintings, eh?”

Sheila nodded Edith to the divan. “You mustn’t let on to John.”

“That’s an odd restriction.”

“He... wouldn’t understand.” She paced in front of the computer desk.

“*What* wouldn’t he understand?”

“My... association with Gordon.”

“Which is?”

“We’re... we’re...”

The russet-haired widow fidgeted. “How can that be? Until yesterday, you hadn’t left this room for ages!”

“That’s not... entirely true.”

“How not? I brought you breakfasts, lunches and dinners - money wasted - every day. John was in and out constantly...”

Sheila dropped on the swivel chair, rolling it toward Edith, the better to speak confidentially. “Timing was... essential to my plans. Your schedule seldom varies, and I could usually hear John telling you when he was leaving, and when he’d return. I took advantage of that...”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Five weeks.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I’m not. I’d been reading about the forged artwork in the papers...”

Edith started to object, but pursed her lips together silently.

“And, you’d be surprised how much I can hear of the television news from your parlor below. The case fascinated me, so I sent an email to Corinne Agincourt who, besides being the daughter of the *Times* arts editor, serves on the board of Arts Council England.”

Edith clucked her tongue. “I should’ve had John check your account for activity, you deceitful...”

“Hold on, hold on! I never lied to you or John about anything. You have no idea how much of a struggle it’s been to... to...”

“But, this captured your interest, so you mustered the energy...”

“Correct. At least, it distracted my brain from incessant cycles of grief.”

Sheila toyed with a frayed thread on the divan. “The Council board invited me to a

meeting to discuss the problem, with representatives there from the major auction houses, as well as better-known artists.”

“Gordon Lampeer being one?”

“Yes. Initially, he struck me as pompous and domineering. Just the sort who could serve as cover for my inquiries.”

“Then, you fell in love.”

“It’s not love, Edith. It’s...”

“Friends with benefits, as my husband’s buddies used to describe it?”

Sheila shrugged.

“God, Sheila, he’s old enough to be your father. Besides, you’re in no condition mentally to handle any sort of relationship...”

“It’s to our mutual advantage, Edith. Gordon has been a huge asset, connecting me with sources in the art world I could never have found on my own.”

“Definitely something mutual last night.”

“True.”

A wistful smile crept over the detective’s drawn features, an expression Edith felt herself mirroring. She retrieved the silver tray and strode toward the sitting room door, nearly colliding with Watson, close-cropped blond hair dripping, towel wrapped around his waist.

“Just be careful,” she advised her tenant as she trod along the corridor to the servants’ stairs.

Watson’s blue orbs flashed from Edith to Sheila. “What was that about?”

She swallowed hard. “Girl talk.”

He plucked a generously frosted cinnamon bun off a platter. “You’re not the sort who enjoys girl talk.”

“Things change, John.” She filled a delicate china cup with aromatic coffee from an insulated carafe. “Get dressed. You don’t want this food to get cold.”

When the British Army veteran approached the cluttered round table ten minutes later, blue sweatsuit covering his prosthetic left leg, Sheila had departed.

“To hell with her,” he sniffed, laying in to a filling meal.

If she’d been honest, Sheila would have admitted to fearing Watson’s interrogation of her activities over the previous 12 hours. With only 45 minutes sleep before being so rudely awakened, she would not have the wherewithal to resist his probing questions.

She couldn’t reveal this dubious affair to him. Since Tony Downton’s death, she’d become quite sensitive to his moods and his attachment to her. He’d been in bad shape, dealing with cancer treatments, when she’d flown to London after an extended stay in California - ostensibly to serve as technical consultant on

the producer/director's Sherlock Holmes bio-pic. Watson had clung to her, and she'd allowed him to do so, as the chemotherapy sapped his strength during a lengthy hospital stay.

Once discharged, she purposely became his caregiver at 221B. She'd fed him when he was too weak to lift a spoon, or chew solid food. She'd helped him to the shower, dressed him..

His blue eyes radiated gratitude - and more.

The "more" redoubled a guilt that had plagued her since she'd signed the contract obligating her to fulfill her duties on the film set - and off.

She'd initially invited Watson to share the flat when they'd met after a police raid on an illegal fight ring. His minimal pension didn't allow him to afford decent housing, and she'd just been testing the waters as a private detective, following in the steps of her lauded great-great-uncle Sherlock. They got on well together; his prowess with computers and network of veterans with access to data crucial to her cases enormously simplified her life.

That Watson wished these bonds to evolve to another level caused Sheila no little consternation. In the wake of Downton's jilted fiancé taking her revenge, killing him instead of a supposed rival for his affections, Sheila vowed to never let any man penetrate the defenses she'd erected around her emotions.

She respected Gordon Lampeer's artistic talent. His pieces, while mostly abstract, conveyed a message of beauty and far exceeded the label "original". The afternoon they'd sat next to each other at the Arts Council England's special conference, he'd exuded an unmistakable heat and perceived her temperature rising, as well.

Why she didn't quell that symptom of a primitive urge, she could not to this day explain. Their interactions rapidly grew complicated - as do those which combine business and pleasure - and she felt betrayed by her own weakness.

Lampeer breathed heavily in the king-sized bed, his feet dangling over the mattress' edge thanks to his height. Slipping off her sneakers, Sheila slid beneath the quilt. He felt the motion and rolled onto his left side. Brown orbs opened, and his grin soothed her jangled nerves.

"Back so soon?" he greeted.

"I couldn't face him."

"Ye will have t' do, eventually."

"I know."

"For now, ye are willin' t' risk the drop?"

"Aye."

A melodious roar burst from his throat. “Careful, lass. Ye will slip one o’ these days and those little bits o’ Scottish lingo ye ha’ picked up from me will escape at the wrong moment...”

She cringed; he drew her close and assaulted her mouth with his lips.

Her flesh still tingling from Lampeer’s closeness, Sheila arrived at Baker Street at 3:30. She popped into the ground floor kitchen where Edith was preparing a pot roast for dinner, hoping for a sweet treat to counter the taste of the man’s kisses.

“John’s at group therapy, so he’ll be late home,” the landlady gruffly reminded her tenant.

“Is this Thursday?”

“Yes.”

“Why so hostile, Edith?”

“Because, you’re hurting a man we both care about deeply. You left without so much as a word this morning, after suggesting you eat together. That’s cruel, even by your standards.”

“I... didn’t want to upset him.”

“He’s already upset. He was down here for over an hour, haranguing me about how unfair life is. You need to watch yourself, Sheila. A huge part of PTSD is depression, and too many veterans are driven to suicide...”

Sheila paused, her fingers reaching for a bag of donuts. “You’re not serious.”

“Very much so.”

She slumped against the counter. “Then, I’m to be forced into a certain mode of behavior under threat of John topping himself? Aren’t the sessions he attends three times a week supposed to lessen the chance...”

“No amount of therapy can mend a broken heart, Sheila. Look at how you shut down after Tony...”

Hands raised in submission preceded Sheila’s withdrawal from the kitchen.

At the sitting room computer, she typed furiously, creating a review of the MacMillan Gallery exhibit without replaying the audio recording of her exchange with its creator. She slipped the camera’s memory card into a slot, downloading Watson’s photos and selecting six to accompany the text file in the email addressed to the *Times* editor. Clicking “Send,” she rotated her aching neck.

She might be able to solve the case of the fake art, but finding a solution to her personal dilemma would be far more elusive.

## Street Crimes

Enthroned in the basket-chair that sunny winter Tuesday, Sheila Holmes contemplated eight oil paintings - supposed old masters sold by British auction houses as genuine, but which had later been exposed as copies.

Edith brought a carafe of fresh coffee, pausing near the round dining table to express disgust at debris piled on the wooden surface. "What is it with you two? There's ample space in the trash basket..."

Her tenant did not reply.

"You haven't been out to see that artist bloke in over a week," continued the russet-haired widow .

Absently, the contralto drawled, "He's up in Scotland for a family wedding, also collecting materials for a few sculptures he's doing on commission."

"You should invite him 'round for dinner some evening."

"I'm nae daft."

A mug of steaming brew hovered within reach. Sheila stolidly accepted it.

"You've picked up some of his burr," Edith noted. "Don't let John..."

Johnny Watson appeared on his bedroom threshold, half-awake; the women fell silent.

"So, my ears weren't burning in vain," he mocked, snatching the coffee from Sheila's grasp and draining the contents in one gulp. Viewing the oversized canvases, he added, "What's this? Are we diversifying into interior decorating?"

Sheila attributed his rudeness to lack of sleep. She'd heard him tossing and turning while she sat vigilant through the wee hours in the sitting room, pondering the state of her affairs.

A flushed Edith hastily withdrew.

"I require your help, John." The young Holmes pointed from painting to painting. "These are all fakes. I've taken scrapings of the oils and varnish, and sent them for analysis, to see if the chemical composition can be traced to a specific source. It would be that grand if you could compare these to the originals and assess the flaws ."

"I'm no expert..."

"No need to be. An ordinary collector can easily research the provenance of each piece, yet they choose to ignore the facts in favor of an invented tale of theft or restoration."

"Sheila, I don't get..."

She patted his shoulder. "Sorry. I'm asking you to find me the whereabouts of the originals of these through your network of computer gurus, then you can -

detail by detail - compare them with the copies. It shouldn't be that difficult in this modern age."

"What will it prove, though?"

"Extreme deception on the part of those hired to authenticate them, or the auction administrators themselves."

Watson plucked a slice of crisp bacon from among stacks of toast and munched it quietly. "I'll get on it once I pull myself together."

"Much appreciated."

"Have you eaten?" he prodded.

"Not yet."

"Join me, please."

The inflection in his tenor should have signaled caution for Sheila; she ignored the tensing of muscles in her lower back and sat opposite him.

Watson slathered marmalade on a browned slice of whole grain, then scooped a pair of eggs cooked over-easy onto his plate. He tore into the meal as if he hadn't seen food in days, while his companion nibbled a blueberry muffin.

"I've been meaning to chat you up about something for quite awhile," came rather garbled from a full mouth, blue eyes focused on his cutlery.

"You know you never have to..."

"Don't interrupt, please, or I won't get through this."

She nodded compliance to his request.

He inhaled deeply. "Ever since you came out of your funk last month, you've not been... yourself. Your actions have been... decidedly unprofessional and... and... discourteous to both myself and Edith."

Mute acknowledgment of this declaration.

"You haven't volunteered any information about why your demeanor has so dramatically altered, so I'm asking you now" - his teeth visibly clenched, a fragment of bacon stuck between his lower incisors - "what the *hell* is going on?"

Sheila's hand extended toward his; he retracted it.

Remaining unflustered despite this rejection, she responded, "You're clearly upset, John. I apologize for any... discomfort I've caused these past few months - both in my mourning, and in my recovery from that self-imposed melancholia. My only explanation is this: watching someone you care about to the core of your soul being killed in front of you, and being totally helpless to keep him alive... changes a person."

"I'll grant you that," he said evenly.

"Thank you for understanding. I'm sure you saw it in Afghanistan..."

“Not as frequently as in past wars, but many good men still died without a real cause,” confirmed the former British Army medic.

“As a result, I find myself unable to muster the same enthusiasm for my work as I had before...”

The smell of acrid tobacco caused her to stiffen. Watson instinctively left the table and raised a smudged window pane overlooking Baker Street.

“Good morning, Uncle,” greeted Sherlock Holmes’ great-great-niece.

The lean, shaggy-haired spectre scowled. “From this maudlin conversation, I doubt there’s anything good about it.”

“Sherlock, I’d be most gratified if you’d mind your own damned business for once,” Watson growled, to Sheila’s combined shock and amusement.

Her flatmate had never before stood up to the former tenant so forcefully.

“Then, stop endeavoring to be diplomatic, boy,” the elder Holmes retorted. “Be frank with her about your wounded pride and unrequited affection.”

Watson slouched in his seat; Sheila bit her lip to muffle an outburst of laughter, drawing blood.

Sherlock had never been an asset to any social gathering due to a tendency toward unmitigated bluntness.

He grunted, briar pipe immobile, “You’ll never get the truth from her if you insist on maintaining a semblance of polite friendship. In my day, murders occurred almost on a daily basis because too many men allowed themselves to be cowed by lying women who carried on with their paramours while demanding absolute fidelity from their spouses.”

“And, vice versa,” Sheila interspersed. “Honestly, Uncle, men were - and are - just as prone to extra-marital dalliances as women, with the same outcome - death for one, prison for the other.”

Watson’s rage escalating, he lurched upright, nearly toppling the dining table. “Get out, Sherlock!” he bellowed.

A slight inclination of his chin preceded the Great Detective’s dissipation in a cloud of smoke.

Sheila approached Watson, wrapping her arm around his shoulders. “Calm yourself, John. He really means no harm. He doesn’t... know any better.”

“He knows more than you’re willing to confess, evidently!” He sank on the wooden chair, despondent. “Who’s the man you’ve been seeing, Sheila?”

She drew the swivel chair from the desk. “There’s no cause for jealousy, John. The relationship you and I enjoy...”

“That’s the problem! I don’t *enjoy* our relationship! You treat me the same way I treat that computer: a tool in pursuit of knowledge!”

“That’s not true at all! Our situation may have started as one of mutual financial cooperation, but I’ve come to value your company, your insights into human nature - which I lack - your kindness...”

“Maybe I’ve been too kind, too tolerant of your... eccentricities. Maybe I should have...”

As his voice trailed off, Sheila flinched. “If you’re implying our arrangement has somehow matured into that of a cohabiting couple, I don’t think Edith would approve.”

“Edith be damned, along with your uncle,” he spat.

“I... didn’t realize you felt so passionately about...”

Watson seized her wrists with astonishing strength, causing pain to course up her arms. “I don’t *want* to wear my heart on my sleeve, Sheila, but every time I think about you and... and... Well, it gets my blood up.”

Sheila could not shake free. Her violet orbs met his seething blue eyes.

“What do you expect of me?”

“Respect.”

“You have it. You always have.”

“Understanding.”

“Ditto.”

“Compassion.”

“As you have shown it to me, I’ve always tried to do likewise.”

The disabled veteran fumbled, lowered his gaze. “I... I... don’t know.”

His companion discerned the depth of this internal upheaval, and regretted being unable to reciprocate his feelings.

Nonetheless, she wanted to comfort him, to hug him and let him cry on her shoulder, as close friends do. She’d seen enough sappy movies over time, though, to predict the gesture would be mistaken as an overture to a more intimate scenario.

Herself not always cognizant of proper social norms, she didn’t consider if the offer she’d just devised would irreparably alienate Watson or repair the damaged trust.

“John, what if - when I clear up the forgeries case - we use the fee toward your own flat? Then, you wouldn’t have to be burdened with my... abnormal moods and late hours.”

Tears brimmed over in that instant, cascading down his cheeks. They weren’t an expression of gratitude, either.

“Now that you’ve shoved the blade into my heart, Sheila, why not give it another twist?”

His words themselves sharp as a knife, she rolled the chair away and, with an anguished sweep of her arm, deliberately cleared the desk of an accumulation of printouts, newspapers, magazines and unopened post. Aiming for her bedroom, she paused with her fingers on the doorknob. "Will you look up the originals of these paintings?"

Tersely, "Of course."

She fell asleep, fully clothed, on the oak four-poster bed, the pillow damp from her own weeping.

Watson was absent when she emerged in late afternoon; a cloying fog had rolled into London, and the open casement permitted that chill humidity access to the sitting room.

"Oh, damn," the detective swore through the haze, scattered piles on the floor untouched.

One aspect of her life had perpetually been the subject of procrastination: cleaning. She couldn't leave this clutter for Edith. The monthly rent covered occupying the flat, not housekeeping services - though the landlady did cook for them of her own volition.

Sheila moved the trash bin within reach and sank on the worn Persian carpet. Each handful of detritus was inspected before being consigned as rubbish; she discovered unpaid mobile invoices, two summons from the Old Bailey, and an invitation for Watson to travel with a group of veterans on a holiday cruise.

The prior week.

"What's wrong with us?" she lamented. "We've so removed ourselves from day-to-day reality..."

An hour on the phone clarified her appearances as a witness in court had been, ultimately, unnecessary, since the defendants in both cases changed their plea to guilty before trial. Digging her cheque book from the muddle in the desk drawer, she tucked payments into their respective envelopes and fumbled for stamps, in vain.

She resolved, going forward, to review the post as it arrived, and deal with matters promptly. That included a stroll to the Royal Mail office, affixing the required squares - featuring 20<sup>th</sup> century British authors - on the upper left corner and popping them into the letterbox.

Without a coat.

She met Watson on the steps of 221B. He wore his Army overcoat and, when he saw her shivering, nobly removed it and draped it around her.

"You're a singular woman, Sheila," he chuckled, unbolting the door and preceding her into the foyer.

“Feeling better?”

“Much. Relationships were the topic at group today, so I was able to... vent a bit.”

“You can always vent to me, John,” she assured him. “We’re friends. That’s what friends do.”

“I see that now. I’m... sorry for this morning.”

“Never be sorry for speaking your mind honestly.” Mounting the stairs, they entered the pristine sitting room; Watson gasped, astonished.

“Edith?”

She draped his coat over the red Victorian divan. “No. Me.”

“I wondered how long it would take until you got disgusted by all the... the...”

“You mean, you left it on purpose?”

He chortled, “You’ve got to remember, Sheila, I spent years in the military. We weren’t allow to live in a pig sty.”

“You should have said something!”

“You kept promising Edith you’d clear everything...”

Her nose twitched playfully. “I still haven’t washed the windows.”

The former medic settled in front of the desktop computer. “My search for these paintings turned up a few facts - and a lot of myths.”

“Do tell.” She sank on the basket-chair.

“Six of them were part of thefts from Paris galleries during World War II, officially never recovered. They were stored in a bunker near a site that was heavily bombed by Allied forces in 1945, and it’s suspected they burned in the fires that destroyed the town.”

“Good work, John! What about the others?”

“They’re bogus. Neither Van Gogh nor Rembrandt painted such subjects.”

“As I suspected.” Rising, she scanned the dusty mantle. “I’ll have to do something about this!”

Watson wasn’t certain whether she meant the accumulation of dirt, or the paintings. It didn’t matter.

“What now?”

“It’s rather complicated. It falls to me to gather additional information about whether those responsible for authenticating the paintings did so for their own financial gain or out of sheer incompetence. That will determine whether the auction house is liable for the error, and their insurance must pay compensation to the buyers, or the reputed experts will be prosecuted for criminal activity.”

“How will you accomplish that?”

“I’m going to Scotland.”

Blue eyes blinked repeatedly at this announcement. “What’s in Scotland?”

Sheila bluffed, “You remember Gordon Lampeer?”

“Sure. The geezer at the Soho gallery whose bizarre art was on exhibit.”

“He put me onto the chief curator at the National Galleries in Edinburgh.

Five of those paintings, according to the auction programs, were owned by Scottish business magnates. She should be able to share records of how *they* acquired the canvases, and we’ll see how far back the ownership trail goes.”

“You could do all that online, you know,” explained Watson.

“It’s better if I show up on the gallery’s doorstep in person. They can’t ignore me that way. An email, they can delete, and this needs to be wrapped up by end of the month.”

“How so?”

“The deadline for insurance company claims is January first.”

“Better crack on, then.”

Sheila almost caught herself saying, “Aye.” Instead, she strode to her room to stuff a few clothes in her Oxford duffel.

Nice clothes, for nights out at posh restaurants in Glasgow - her real destination.

Where Gordon Lampeer had his summer home, temporarily open while he was visiting family and gathering driftwood, remnants of decommissioned ships and rocks for his work.

The idea for an impromptu holiday arose on her outing with the post. She couldn’t remain in close proximity to Watson without exposing the truth - as that repressed “Aye” almost had.

Hopping the Tube to Kings Cross Station, she boarded the evening train to Glasgow, paying for a first class seat with a plan to get a few hours’ sleep away from the raucous chatter in the other carriages.

She didn’t care that left her only ten pounds in her pocket.

Lampeer had more money than he could disburse in a lifetime, and he’d already spent substantial sums on her, though she refused to let him furnish her with rings or other jewelry, or designer gowns and wraps.

“For one,” she’d admonished him, “that sort of stuff isn’t my image. Two: such extravagant sums could be used to house and feed the homeless. Three: raising animals just so some woman can wear their fur defies even my skewed sensibilities. Four: if John ever found out...”

“Ach, forget John!” Lampeer had countered in his resonant Scottish burr. “He’ll ha’ t’ grow up sooner or later.”

“He’s been through so much in his young life, though...”

“Ha’ nae we all? I will nae forget livin’ on the streets, stealin’ bread t’ stay alive, fightin’ for every scrap o’ civility...”

Blackness beyond the glass as the train bounced through the English countryside lulled Sheila, mercifully, into an uneasy slumber. Braking at each station roused her, as did the alterations in speed.

Less than four hours after she’d departed London, she stepped onto Argyle Street without a clue what to do next.

Providence provided that clue, however. To her left, beneath the overpass, sounds of an altercation. She jogged in that direction, rounding the corner to see three men beating and kicking their victim, who cowered on the ground, arms ineptly protecting his face.

“If ye are nae a beggar, then ye are just plain takin’ the fuck,” growled a bass in the midst of the blows, “Ye should ha’ the dignity t’ pay what ye owe, rather than ha’ it collected from your family!”

In the diffused light of a distant street lamp, she detected a flash of white and another of silver... The lead thug had a switchblade.

Sheila’s Wing Chun training served her well. Her stealthy approach went unnoticed, and when she ambushed a beefy, squat assailant, he landed on his back in the street, stunned motionless.

His comrades, caught off guard, halted their attack - but only for a fraction of a second. A wiry lad lunged toward her; she easily flipped him over her shoulder and he crashed into the brick wall, sliding down to the pavement, unconscious.

The third - and his blade - scarpered.

Not before he’d punctured his target’s left lung.

Gurgling from the wound could not be mistaken.

Emergency services arrived in a matter of minutes; Sheila rode to the hospital with the severely battered husband and father who, for whatever reason, clutched a photo of his wife and five children in his right hand.

His tormentors had threatened them...

A skilled paramedic, white uniform splotted red from this and previous calls, inserted an intravenous needle in the patient’s arm, hooking up plastic containers of blood. Thus distracted, he didn’t see Sheila remove the man’s wallet from his torn trousers, memorizing his name and address before tucking it once more within the cloth.

Suddenly, fingers encompassed her wrist. “Thank ye. Thank ye,” came the barely audible croaking. “Ye saved m’ life.”

“My pleasure,” she pledged.

“The Collector... will nae rest until all debts are paid...”

“No worries, friend. I’ll make sure your family is safe.”

“Nae them. I mean... aye, them, but ye. He’ll come after ye.”

“Then, good luck to him. I’ll see him in prison or, if it comes to that, I’ll not go down without one hell of a fight.”

Arriving at the Accident and Emergency bay, she scrambled from the ambulance and watched from a distance as the gurney was wheeled through sliding glass doors.

So accustomed to wandering London, Sheila seldom made use of Sat-Nav functions on her mobile. In the gloom, she tapped the app and typed in Angus MacCready’s street and number.

A mere seven blocks distant.

The woman arrived on scene a quarter hour later, aware other eyes also surveilled the modest yellow brick dwelling in a row of connected structures. Her casual gait gave the impression of a late-night reveler, or early morning employee headed to work.

Except, the brownish spatter on her t-shirt belonged to the tough with paper napkins jammed up his broken nose, crouched in a recessed doorway with a view of the MacCready’s front door.

She heard the click of a revolver being cocked and felt the barrel contact the back of her skull, but didn’t wait for the customary instructions to raise her hands. She ducked and spun, aiming her sneaker at the attacker’s jaw.

Making contact, he stumbled backward and landed in the gutter.

His companion, fearing additional damage to his face and body, limped away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Sheila traversed the road and banged on a warped wooden panel until a bleary-eyed mother unlatched the bolt. The visitor stepped through the gap, glancing around.

“Who are ye?” squealed the resident.

“My name is Sheila Holmes. Your husband is in hospital this minute, near to death. You need to pack the essentials for yourself and your children and come with me.”

“We’re nae goin’ anywhere wi’ ye...”

“Unless you want the bastards who attacked Angus to do the same - or worse - to you, you must trust me.”

Pressed against the wall, curlers falling from her short black mop, the mother sobbed, “I cannae trust anyone. Angus told me to ne’er go oot wi’oot him...”

Sheila grabbed the woman's shoulders and shook her roughly. "What was Angus into that these ruffians..."

"When our youngest bairn was born, we could nae stay in the one bedroom flat where we'd been livin'. We needed dosh to pay the deposit and rent on this place..."

Realization dawned. "He went to a loan shark..."

"Aye, he's known as the Collector. When Angus could nae pay back the sum..."

Sheila shoved the woman along the hall. "Get packed. You have five minutes."

In less than ten, each of the five children - including one still in diapers - had backpacks stuffed with clothes and a few small toys. Their mother wheeled a suitcase from the rear bedroom.

"Where are we goin'?" she queried.

Winging it, Sheila surrendered her return ticket to Kings Cross. "Glasgow Central Station. You'll board the train for London; the children travel free."

"I cannae..."

"You must. Do you want to see your little ones hurt, or have them traumatized by watching you be beaten, or raped?"

"'Tis that serious?"

"And more. Now, hush, all of you." She pulled the door inward, stepped onto the stoop and scanned the street. Then, she signaled the others. "Let's go!"

The early train to London departed within 15 minutes of the MacCready clan boarding the first class carriage. That task complete, Sheila dropped on a bench in the waiting room, utterly drained of adrenaline and hungry.

And skint.

She'd tucked her last ten pound note in Mrs. MacCready's coat pocket, so she could, at least, buy the youngsters a bit of food.

"John," she mumbled into her mobile after dialing Watson's number.

"Sorry to wake you at this ungodly hour, but I need you to contact Scotland Yard and have them connect with whatever agency handles victims of violent crimes. There's a family coming in on the 5:30 train from Glasgow to King's Cross that needs shelter and assistance. Their father was nearly killed a few hours ago."

"What the devil are you doing in Glasgow?"

"Never mind that. I'll see you in a few days."

She disconnected the call, heart racing. Then, staring at the blood-flecked screen, she recalled having input Gordon Lampeer's details in her contact list - knowing Watson never used the device and would not accidentally find it.

His home was located in Glasgow's West End; she steeled herself to the journey and hiked away from the rising sun.

At the curb in Woodside Terrace, a black Porsche struck Sheila as weirdly appropriate. She envisioned Lampeer's wavy white mop framed by the polished metal as he sped along the road. Circling the vehicle, she admired the design then, her sneaker untied, bent to rectify the matter. She mounted the steps and rang the bell, only then realizing the hour: not yet 7:00.

A rather casually-attired butler with dark hair and skin tone must've assumed the interruption to his routine to be a package delivery, jerking wide the etched glass door with no little force. Expletives died in his throat, but his tone didn't lose its harshness.

"May I help you?" British with an Indian inflection.

"Who are you?"

"Manu Patel."

"Is Gordon in?"

"You are?"

"Sheila Holmes."

She was allowed across the threshold.

"Wait here."

The servant sedately ascended carpeted stairs, entering a room on the left side of the balcony. Sheila couldn't help but overhear Lampeer: "Bloody hell! I told ye nae t' wake me until noon!"

A pause - the butler explaining.

"What? Who? Here?" his employer roared. "Gi' me m' robe."

Sheila had seen Lampeer first thing in the morning on a number of occasions. White mane tousled, mustache matted, his brown eyes still burned with a striking intensity as he descended to ground level, tying a paisley robe over vertically striped green and yellow pajamas.

A vibrant red patch on his cheek puzzled her.

"Sheila! What on earth!" He embraced her, the butler observing from above. "What are ye doin' here?"

After a light peck on the lips, she smirked. "Looking for a free meal."

Lampeer's confusion obvious, he guided her into an antique-furnished parlor. "Ye are welcome, of course, but why dinnae ye ring me?"

"It was a spur-of-the-moment trip."

"Trouble wi' John?"

"Very perceptive."

Her host's head cocked to the left. "And I thought it might be because ye missed me."

"You have no idea how much." She stroked the mark on his face. "What happened?"

Self-consciously, he rubbed his stubbled jaw. "Slept wrong on the pillow, I guess." She kissed the discoloration, then rested her weary head against his chest. Agile digits stroked her brunette curls. "Ach, that's better."

Then, a stickiness gave him pause. He studied his fingertips, sniffed; his brow furrowed.

"How do ye come t' have blood in your hair?"

Sheila's lips pursed, then she snickered. "I got into a fight last night."

Lampeer deposited her on a Louis XVI sofa. "Tell me everythin'."

She recounted her journey, concerned as Lampeer grew more and more agitated. Finally, she demanded, "What's wrong?"

"Ye could ha' been killed!"

"It's nothing that hasn't happened before - and probably will again."

Sternly, Lampeer sandwiched her hands between his. "Ye must promise me ye will ne'er more do anythin' so foolish."

"You know I can't do that, Gordon."

"I will nae see ye in a coffin..."

Sheila rose and stretched. "Look. I'm tired, I could do with a hearty breakfast, then I want to go to bed."

Her emphasis on the final phrase, coupled with a playful grin, soothed Lampeer. His arm encompassing her, they left the parlor, navigated a lengthy corridor to the kitchen, where a toque-topped chef prepared kippers and eggs.

The guest's verdict: "Delicious!" She washed down the meal with cappuccino, then let the owner of this posh home lead her to the master suite.

She never grasped the need for king-sized - or even queen-sized - mattresses. If anything, they encouraged distance between the occupants, not closeness. Yet, the couple made extraordinary use of the space, finally collapsing side-by-side on the pillows, sated.

"How was the wedding?" Sheila ventured in the afterglow.

"Like most weddings. The ceremony lasted less than fifteen minutes, the reception lasted 'til dawn, wi' dancing and drunkenness, fabrications and fights."

"Fabrications?"

Lampeer raised himself on one elbow, gazing at her. "Ye know what I mean. Family and friends who ha' nae seen each other in years, lyin' t' make themselves look more important than their mundane lives merit."

“That’s rather harsh.”

“‘Tis a harsh world, woman.”

“No lie, there.”

He drew her against his bare, grey-haired chest. “How long do ye plan t’ stay?”

“Until I find out who did Angus MacCready the dirt.”

“Oh, bloody hell!”

She recoiled a few inches. “Don’t you want to see justice done for him and his family?”

“Aye.” Reluctantly. “But, ha’ ye stopped t’ consider he deserved a good trouncin’?”

“Bullshit. If one man has a grievance against another, they can stand before the bench and have the matter judged by their peers. You don’t just drag somebody down a dark street and beat the crap out of him.”

“And, why nae? ‘Tis faster, simpler, and makes the point absolutely clear.”

“Ah, let’s forget it.” Sheila rested her chin on his bicep.

Lampeer’s broad grin and hearty guffaw eased the tension. “Ready t’ go once more?”

So much so, she almost convinced herself that her life in London amounted to little more than a dream. Trifling cases - even more serious investigations - Edith, Watson... she could live in perfect contentment without any of that.

While she slept, Lampeer departed with his staff, leaving no indication of their destination.

She woke up alone, befuddled and determined to find out precisely into what cesspool of intrigue she’d been dumped.

## Cash Crimes

No time like the present.

Sheila Holmes meandered through an empty Woodside Terrace dwelling in Glasgow's West End, discounting the spooky feeling of solitude in someone else's home. Gordon Lampeer's exit had been spontaneous, unplanned - his Indian butler had no opportunity to perform the customary duty of covering the furniture with dust sheets. One sofa in the drawing room boasted an oversized white cloth; others lay in a heap on the woven, faded carpet.

"John," Sheila spoke into her mobile as she gazed through French doors at the pristine garden stretching down a gentle slope. "I need you to get on to your contacts and track a black Porsche."

Watson's yawn reminded her of the late hour. "And, exactly how do you suggest I manage that feat of magic?"

"There's a GPS transmitter attached to its front wheel well, on a frequency of 106.9 megahertz."

"Ah!"

"The number plate is Lima-Echo-zero-three-Delta-Bravo-Tango."

"You want the police to intercept it?"

"Not yet."

"Who's driving?" queried her flatmate.

"Gordon Lampeer."

She detected a series of angry, shallow breaths on the line. "Damn, Sheila! I thought you were done with that geezer."

"Not quite, John. Trust me." A rabbit bolted across the manicured lawn, activating security lights. "Are the MacCreadys safe?"

Dejection altered his tone. "Yes."

"Thank God."

"I'll... ring you when I have something."

"Thanks."

The detective migrated to the library, where a large carved oak desk was positioned at an angle and a Steinway grand piano took up a substantial amount of space. From what she knew of him, Lampeer possessed no musical talent. Perhaps the expensive ornament was intended to impress affluent guests.

Fingers ran across the keyboard to test if the instrument was in tune. No sound emitted from within the case. She plunked individual white and black ivories - nothing.

Examining the piano, a custom padlock secured the lid, concealed on the bookshelf side. Tantalized, but not experienced as a cracksman, she confiscated a steel letter opener from the desk and wrenched the hinge from the wood. Professional repairs would be required to mend the damage caused by hefty bolts being torn free.

She didn't care.

Raising the lid, she discovered the box lacked standard components - strings, hammers and such - instead containing stacks of files marked with names in a semblance of alphabetical order.

Selecting a few at random, she sank on a leather recliner near the ash-stained fireplace and flipped through the contents.

Affixed with staples to the left side, a loan contract, but not issued by any legitimate financial institution. Squinting at the fine print, she cringed at the mention of 75 percent interest and how the debtor would be liable to "appropriate consequences" if payment in full was not delivered by the date stated therein.

Handwritten notations on the margins detailed some of those consequences. One man's mother had been raped and her home burned to the ground. Another's son had certain parts of his anatomy removed.

Only a few were marked, "Paid."

Mixed in with these records, Sheila found a large padded envelope filled with forged passports from various countries. The photo in each was Lampeer, but with a variety of hair colors and names.

A battered cigar box, wedged beneath the soundboard, was stuffed with thousands of pounds in cash.

Sheila tucked two bundles in the hip pocket of her jeans - more than enough to get her back to London *after* she spoke with Angus MacCready.

A taxi transported her to Glasgow Royal Infirmary; the victim of the previous night's assault remained in the Intensive Care Unit in the wake of surgery to treat six snapped ribs, both lungs punctured, a ruptured spleen, cracked jaw, broken left radius, and compression fracture of the skull.

"I really shouldn't allow this," stated the charge nurse on the room's threshold, except she'd recognized Sheila's name. "But since you helped my brother-in-law with his... little problem last year..."

"I'll be just a minute."

Amidst the pinging and beeping of the monitors, the young woman crept to the bed's right side. The patient's eyes were open, his chin pointed toward windows where the sunrise painted the sky shades of pink. She couldn't be sure he actually registered the view, his cranium wrapped in bandages.

“Angus?” she whispered.

His neck swiveled toward her. “Aye.”

“I’m Sheila Holmes.”

“Aye, the lass who saved m’ life.” He attempted to extend his hand, but intravenous lines prevented the motion. “I’m that grateful.”

“I wanted to let you know your family is safe from any retribution the Collector might have planned.”

“Where are they?”

“Better you remain ignorant of their location, in the event...”

“Aye.”

“I have one question for you.”

“I’m willin’ t’ answer a dozen if it brings that bugger t’ justice.”

“How does the Collector work his scheme?”

MacCready’s breathing shallow despite oxygen tubes in his nostrils, he required a few moments to summon sufficient strength for his reply. “Ach, it seems everyone in Glasgow knows someone who knows the Collector and his crew, and vice versa. So ‘tis nae a surprise when a body is down on his luck that he’ll be approached and offered the dosh t’ get by on.”

“That’s what happened to you?”

“Oh, aye. If ye agree t’ the offer, the contact takes ye t’ see the Collector, who’s a right toff. Ye sign a paper, get the cash... then the trouble begins.”

“I can imagine.” She assessed swollen bruises around his eyes and mottling on his exposed right forearm. If she hadn’t intervened, he would’ve been found hours later, dead. “Can you describe the Collector?”

MacCready deliberated briefly. “‘Tis funny, lass. At our first meetin’, no light shown on his face, so I could nae see him clearly. The same when his boys jumped me. They were in the dark, so there’s nae a way I could identify them in a police line-up.”

“Any little detail will help me, Angus. Did the light reflect off a ring or a wristwatch, maybe? Could you make out the color of his hair?”

Angus lay momentarily, bloodshot eyes closed as if fighting an all-consuming pain. The nurse appeared in the doorway. “I’m afraid the doctor’s on his way...”

Sheila lightly patted MacCready’s hand.

His eyes shot open; he clutched her fingers. “White,” he croaked.

“Eh?”

“White, lass. His hair was white, and long - like back in the hippie days. It reminded me o’ a snow-covered mountain.”

“What the hell?” stormed the lab-coated physician, shoving past the nurse. “I left strict instructions this man was not to have any visitors - not family, or even the police.”

The blue scrub-clad employee’s chin drooped. “Sorry, doctor.”

As one of the monitors signaled MacCready’s increased heart rate, they rushed forward; Sheila withdrew as other staff members came to lend their aid.

Her slow gait along the corridor mirrored her tortured soul. Gordon Lampeer was, by no means, the only man in Glasgow to sport long white hair. Yet, as she recalled her initial view of the altercation, she could not deny a niggling recognition of his voice as he threatened the husband and father, and the street lamp glinting off his colorless head.

Self-revulsion that she’d permitted such a heartless scoundrel to put his hands on her propelled her into the nearest toilet, where her frame convulsed with dry heaves, little food in her stomach to expel.

Recovered after that ordeal, she trekked to the train station, boarding the express to London seconds before the doors closed. The police would not have the gratification of apprehending this criminal.

As he had tortured so many others - given the plethora of files in his piano - she would personally exact payment from him, with interest.

She dozed in the first class carriage when her mobile chirped; she scrambled to dig it from her jeans. “John?”

“Over the past 20 hours, the Porsche has made stops in Lockerbie, Blackpool, Liverpool and Manchester. It’s presently on the M6 headed toward Birmingham.”

The detective sucked air. “He’s on a collection run.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ll explain later, John. I’m due at Kings Cross in three hours. I’ll meet you at Baker Street shortly thereafter.”

Watson grunted facetiously, “You bringing him home for dinner?”

“I’m having him *for* dinner.”

The former Army medic caught the statement’s implication and chuckled his approval. “Glad to hear you’ve got your head on straight again.”

“See you soon.”

The problem with living in close proximity to another human being, Sheila mused, was that such a one’s objective view proved more accurate than an individual’s subjective evaluation.

In other words: Watson was right.

She'd been blinded - and not for the first time - to the truth of the situation. Gordon Lampeer posed as a respected, charming - and talented - sculptor by day, when darkness exposed him as a conscienceless, violent predator.

A stray thread coiled itself around her consciousness: could this thug also be involved in the art forgeries?

Untangling that conundrum, after all, was her priority.

Priorities shift, she reasoned. While buyers of the bogus paintings were outsizeable amounts of money, preventing troubled souls or those they held dear from being beaten within an inch of their lives outstripped that task in urgency.

She tapped "redial" on her mobile.

"What now, Sheila?" sighed Watson.

"I need details on reports to local constabularies of violence related to loan sharks from the last three years."

"That could be a... massive list."

"I know, John. But, once it's printed, I'll ram it down Gordon's lying throat!"

"It'll be ready when you get back."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"I mean it, John. You're invaluable, indispensable."

She would probably never come closer to expressing her true feelings for the disabled veteran than in that exchange.

Alighting at King's Cross Station, she descended to the Tube platform and exited the crowded car at Baker Street. Edith Hudson-Thorne had prepared a delicious supper of ham, yams, freshly baked bread and green salad; the three cleared platters and scraped bowls of vanilla ice cream in congenial silence.

Once their landlady removed the dishes, Sheila fielded Watson's rapid-fire questions.

His disappointment at her failures regarding Gordon Lampeer were visible in his expression.

Voiced in no uncertain terms by the spectre of Sherlock Holmes, leaning on the fireplace mantle, long-stemmed briar pipe clamped between his teeth.

"This is the primary reason I never trusted women," the Great Detective concluded his tirade. "A man's attentions reduce their brains to mush."

Sheila quipped, "Quite unpoetic, Uncle."

"You deny this truth?"

"No..."

"Then, when will you learn to steel yourself again such subterfuge?"

“You’re asking me to predict the future, when you - existing in ethereal realms - cannot?”

“Bah!”

Dissipating in a puff of acrid tobacco smoke, he left his great-great-niece to cross the sitting room and open the window, despite the December chill.

“He’s got a point,” Watson opined. “Your inherent romanticism will be your undoing.”

“This wasn’t... anything close to romance.”

He smirked. “I know, I know.”

“Edith...”

The close-cropped blond head nodded.

“Damn her!”

“You can’t expect her to keep your secrets when you don’t keep them yourself.”

“Eh?”

“Ever since that first time you sneaked out of the flat, thinking Edith had gone shopping and I was at therapy, I’ve known what you’re about.”

“You... weren’t?”

“I had my dates mixed up, so I returned sooner than you expected. I saw you come in, beaming like a lighthouse on a clear night. I’ve only seen you that way once before...”

Sheila averted her violet orbs. “With Tony.”

“Indeed.”

“Which is why the jealousy started building and came to a head...”

“Not jealousy, precisely. Call it a... protective instinct.”

Her left eyebrow arched, curious.

“The grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence, Sheila. You jump into unknown waters far too easily, without any inkling how deep it is. You’ve said people can’t be trusted, yet you invariably gravitate to those unworthy of yours.”

“This whole thing started because of Corinne Agincourt...” she rationalized.

“Each time she’s called to check your progress, you’ve been...”

Sheila flinched. “You never mentioned...”

“Unlike the Metropolitan Police, she’s content letting you handle the matter in your own good time. When she popped by this morning, though, she wanted you to know that another forgery has slipped through the authentication process and brought a million seven at auction.”

“Bloody hell!”

Watson reached across the board and cradled her hands in his. “Please, Sheila. Find your way back to... to... common sense.”

“Common sense?” she repeated, chuckling. “Common sense dictates that, if we embarked on a relationship of... a deeper nature, the time would come all too soon that we’d part company. I cherish you too dearly to risk that eventuality.”

“I feel the same.”

“You do?”

“Of course.” He released his grip and leaned back on the wooden chair. “Too many of those in my therapy group have shared about their troubled relationships, unable to handle such intimacy because of their PTSD. I’m lucky to have you as a friend, and I don’t want to lose that. It would be my undoing.”

“And mine.” She rose and circled to the computer desk. “Do you have the printouts?”

He tapped a hefty stack.

“You warned me.”

“I even cross-indexed the reports to find common elements.”

She glanced at him, smiling. “And?”

“The victims referred to their assailant being in league with someone called the Collector, described as a tall man with white hair.”

“Though they never saw his face.”

Watson did not hide his amazement. “How’d you know...”

“I interrupted this Collector thrashing one of his victims two nights ago.”

“Was it Lampeer?”

She sank in the basket-chair, sheaves on her lap. “I’m not positive. I didn’t see his face, either.”

“But, you suspect him.”

“I found... evidence at his house that links him to... to...”

“What were you doing at his house?” he demanded.

“Making a fool of myself, obviously.”

“The last ping on the Porsche showed it parked in Belgravia, in case you’re interested.”

She extracted a folded sheet from her jeans. “These are the names of the Collector’s clients in London. Find out what you can about them.”

“You think he’s...”

Bundles of 50 pound notes fell on the floor boards from her other pockets. “You don’t make this kind of dosh carving wooden sculptures.”

“His?”

“Aye.” Sheila bit her tongue. “Sorry.”

“Why don’t you shower and get some sleep. We’ll deal with this in the morning.”

“No, John. The Collector works nights, and so will I until he’s stopped.”

“Without Scotland Yard?”

“Without the Yard.”

“Some of these accounts mention knives, pistols...”

“I’ve faced Moriarty, along with a host of other violent types, and survived. Don’t worry about me.”

Watson scowled. “I wish you wouldn’t say that. You know I do.”

Smashing the black fedora atop her unruly brunette mop, she complied with her flatmate’s request that she wear his wool Army overcoat against the cold. Fastening the embossed buttons, she made her exit.

The detective deduced the Collector - if, indeed, Gordon Lampeer - would not personally make the rounds of the city, where he might be recognized. He had his position to maintain as a prominent celebrity in the arts community. Using a convenient lamp post opposite his Belgravia residence as concealment, she staked out the property over the course of three consecutive nights. She saw his silhouette through sheer draperies in the first floor study; he must’ve been engrossed in a suspenseful novel, because he didn’t move from 8:00 until well past midnight, when the light switched off.

Remaining on her vigil until the wee hours, no one approached his door, either.

Not at all what she anticipated.

Sheila slept through the days, Watson intercepting callers and messages. Over an early dinner Friday, she voiced her exasperation regarding the futile effort.

“Let it go, then,” advised the former medic. “Maybe the geezer’s not this Collector, after all.”

Dabbing frosting from her mouth after a substantial portion of Edith’s triple chocolate cake, she retrieved the fedora from the wall hook. “One more try. If nothing happens tonight, I’ll spend the whole weekend in bed.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Besides near-freezing temperatures after a brilliant sunset, the wind whistled around the square, adding to Sheila’s misery. Lampeer sat in the same position - any book that could hold his interest for such an extended period would be worth her reading.

Removing thin knitted gloves to blow warm air on her fingers, she shuddered when an arm encircled her waist from behind.

“What the...”

Lampeer’s Scottish burr droned in her ear, “Ye are angry wi’ me, and I dinnae blame ye one bit.”

She felt blood rushing from her head as she shifted her gaze from the image in the window to this man, inches away.

“You... that...” she stammered before the truth cracked through her brain like lightning.

Lampeer had deceived her with a ruse employed by her own great-great-uncle in a tale penned by Sherlock’s Watson - *The Empty House*.

She shook from his grasp. “Damn you, Gordon!”

“Come in the hoose,” he invited. “Ye must be frozen t’ the bone.”

Sheer curiosity urged her across the pavement. If Lampeer *wasn’t* the Collector, why did he need to pretend to be sitting beside his study window?

Her patience was taxed while he brewed a pot of coffee for her and poured a “wee tot o’ whiskey” - himself chilled by venturing out in the cold. Once settled with their respective beverages on antique chairs facing each other in the parlor, she could wait no longer.

“Spill it, Gordon.”

“Given that ye ha’ nae stood outside m’ hoose before these past few nights, ye nae would ha’ known aboot m’ double. I set it up weeks ago so those tryin’ t’ kill me would think I was safely home.”

“Who’s trying to kill you?”

“Remember, at the MacMillan Gallery exhibit openin’, the admirer who pulled a pistol in the midst o’ the crowd?”

Sheila’s tongue ran across her lips at the recollection of his spontaneous kiss that silenced the gathering. “Aye.”

“At least, I can sleep soundly - the nights we’re nae together, mind - knowin’ they will nae break int’ the hoose while that is visible from the street.”

A sound assertion... perhaps.

“But, who wants to kill you, and why?”

“I ha’ nae the slightest notion.”

“Someone you’ve offended or... hurt?” She phrased the question deliberately.

“I ha’ always tried t’ mind m’ own business, woman. Just as, after we first... connected t’ pursue our mutual satisfaction, we agreed there would nae be any strings, no questions about what we do or who we see when we’re nae together.”

Sheila's youthful features flushed, a redness Lampeer observed even by the dim illumination of a single bulb.

"I dinnae mind, lass," he confessed. "Ye ha' a right, I s'pose, giv'n how I left ye the other mornin'."

"To be honest, I was quite... quite..."

"Vexed?"

"Aye."

"Ye ha' my apologies for that, lass. I got a text just past noon that an electrical fire had started in the gallery's basement, spreadin' t' the upper floors. I raced back t' the city, t' be sure m' art was nae damaged."

Ah! She'd caught him in the lie, at last.

Angled forward on the sofa, her sneer dripped scorn. "If that's the case, then why did you stop at Lockerbie, Liverpool, and other points along the route?"

"How the devil would ye know that?" he bristled, then brown eyes widened. "Unless..."

"Never mind the how. I want to know the why."

"I noticed the needle on the Porsche's oil pressure gauge dropping about thirty kilometers into the drive, and found a nasty leak when I checked the undercarriage. Since I could nae get the repairs done on the road, I stopped at regular intervals t' buy oil and refill the reservoir so the engine would nae be permanently damaged."

Plausible, she acknowledged mentally. The key would be to verify the MacMillan Gallery fire...

"Are ye still annoyed wi' me?" he prompted.

"I... guess not."

"Then, come here."

She rose and backed awkwardly toward the door, colliding with a square mahogany table and knocking two porcelain angels onto the carpet. This was not how she intended her surveillance of Lampeer to end. "I can't stay, Gordon," she sputtered. "I've got so much to do in the morning, and I've got to get some sleep."

He intercepted her in four strides, ignoring the broken figurines. "Ye always sleep soundly after..."

Sheila felt ever so much the fool as he embraced her and smothered her lips with his. Fires stoked against the cold could have burned no hotter than their passion as they moved through the residence: parlor, study, kitchen, master bedroom.

Every inch of her pulsed with delight as she lay on the pillows gazing at ornate cream-painted tin ceiling tiles. Lampeer, propped on one elbow, stared at her, a grin animating his features.

“Ye are a marvel, Sheila,” he praised. “Even when I was a lad, I ne’er felt so... so...”

“Invigorated?”

“Aye,” He kissed her bare shoulder. “I would nae resist if this cycle o’ wantin’ ye, takin’ ye and findin’ pleasure wi’ ye continued indefinitely.”

“Except, the responsibilities of real life...”

“Ach, always logical, lass.”

“It’s who I am, Gordon.”

He drew her close. “Sleep now. I’ll wake ye at noon.”

“God, no!” she giggled. “I need to be up at six.”

“Why, for Christ’s sake?”

“Those forged paintings are still a problem.”

“Ha’ ye no luck wi’ the National Gallery curator?”

“I... never got to see her. I was distracted by...”

His tender caresses relaxed her; soon, they both dozed.

A text notification on her mobile roused Sheila at 4:00. She rolled off the king-sized mattress and groped for her jeans, reading the message, dumbstruck.

“Two more Collector attacks overnight,” Watson wrote. “At 9:30 and 11.”

She typed, “Thanks, John. Any news on a fire at the MacMillan over the past week?”

A few second later: “Lead story in last Wednesday’s *Times*. By the way, I forgot to tell you your editor wants you to do a story on Gordon Lampeer’s reaction to losing most of his sculptures. Where R U?”

“Making a fool of myself.”

She powered off the device.

Yearning for peaceful slumber, the gears inside her skull would not be powered off. Lampeer had made his presence known to her shortly after 11:30 the previous night - plenty of time to thrash whichever client refused to pay what he owed, or some member of the family.

Pulling his paisley robe from a hook inside the closet door, she crept from the suite and down carpeted stairs to the parlor, where their clothes lay tangled together near the sofa. A table lamp illuminating the garments, she inspected his shirt and trousers for any indication...

Blood. Lots of blood, in fact - though almost indistinguishable on the black sock. It practically dripped, and the inside of his left loafer was damp.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” she muttered, flopping on the Louis XIV armchair. That’s where Lampeer found her when he descended to ground level well past 7:00.

“I thought ye had sneaked oot on me,” he greeted, bending to kiss her. She shoved his face away.

“What the devil...” he scowled. “Really, lass, the rapidity wi’ which your mood changes makes me wonder if this... association is worth the trouble.”

“My feelings exactly.”

Lampeer threw up his hands. “Ach! Here we go again!”

His outburst merited him a swift round-house kick to the jaw - scoring him an identical imprint as Sheila noted when she saw him in Glasgow. He crashed into the sideboard, a selection of decorated plates jarred from their stands, crashing to the boards.

Cognizant of his viciousness with reluctant clients, she scooped up her clothes and raced up the stairs, locking herself in the bathroom so she could dress in peace.

Lampeer pounded on the door, pleading. “Sheila, I dinnae know who ye think I am, but I ha’ done nothin’ wrong...”

She didn’t respond - couldn’t respond, her heart throbbing in her ears and rendering her brain non-functional. Her goal was to escape the building alive, meaning she’d crawl through the minuscule window over the bathtub and shinny down the drainpipe.

Fortunately, her thin frame made that a feasible plan.

She couldn’t summon the police; no evidence of the sort necessary to prosecute Lampeer existed - except files in the Woodside Terrace piano in Glasgow, and those would be destroyed before the authorities could secure a warrant to confiscate them.

Trudging into the sitting room at Baker Street mid-morning, no welcome awaited her. On Saturdays, Edith did the grocery shopping. Watson liked to stroll up to Regent’s Park to watch a rugby match or pick-up game of basketball. As she gathered a clean set of sweats and headed toward the corridor for a shower, Sherlock Holmes blocked her egress.

“What *is* it, Uncle?” she huffed.

Swirls of nauseating smoke issued from his briar pipe. “This internal battle you’re waging between logic and emotions will bring you to ruin.”

“You’ve made that abundantly clear, time and again. You’re quite ready to accuse me of... conduct unbecoming a detective, but did you never find yourself torn...”

“Never.”

“Bullshit. Something transpired in your younger years to twist you into an emotionless stiff.”

“So, you’ve fully devolved into the realms of crudity.”

“Think what you may.” She folded herself into a half-lotus position in the basket-chair. “I can’t understand why you, and Edith, and John, persist in thrusting guilt upon me, just because I want to revel in being a woman and not a computer on legs.”

“As a woman, you cannot see the truth standing in front of you, and have placed others in danger because of that failure.”

“How so?”

“This Collector: what is his *modus operandi*?”

“If someone cannot pay - or refuses to pay - what is owed, he targets those closest.”

“Do you not suspect he will do likewise if he thinks you will turn him over to the authorities?”

Sheila grit her teeth. “Gordon Lampeer is *nae* the Collector.”

“And your faculties are not compromised,” chided Sherlock.

“Uncle, *his* life has been threatened. I saw the pistol with my own eyes.”

“You have deluded yourself into believing that.”

Breathing deeply, she bowed her head. “Damn you.”

“You have damned yourself, and your friends, unless you do as I advise.”

Her nose twitched.

He thumped the stack of papers listing the Collector’s victims. “Talk to them.”

“All of them?”

“As many as you must, until you find one who has seen his face clearly. Only then can you be positive.”

“The Yard’s reports indicate...”

“Those documents are written hours after an interview takes place. The constables find it easier to omit certain details...”

“It’ll take weeks, or months. In the meantime, more people will be hurt.”

“Your only other option is to have Lampeer arrested, and see if the assaults stop.”

Sheila squirmed on the seat. “I... couldn’t do that.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

The fog of smoke so thick, she began to cough, Sheila unbent her limbs and shuffled to the window, throwing open the casement. When she turned, Sherlock was gone.

## Felony Crimes

“Sheila, look at this.”

Johnny Watson summoned his flatmate from a meditative position in the basket-chair, but she didn't budge. Over the past week, she'd descended once more into a maudlin frame of mind similar to what had consumed her in the months following Tony Downton's death - not eating or drinking, speaking or moving.

The former British Army medic had received results of comparisons between the original artworks Sheila had asked him to research, and the fakes that still cluttered 221B Baker Street's sitting room, along with a chemical analysis of the paints used to produce the forgeries.

She could finally solve the case, and collect the fee promised her by Corinne Agincourt of Arts Council England.

Watson abandoned the swivel chair at the desk and crossed to her, seizing her left arm and dragging her from the half-lotus pose. She didn't react swiftly enough, and wound up prostrate on the worn Persian carpet.

“What the hell, John!” she squealed, as if suddenly awakened from sleep - though her eyes had been open, albeit unfocused, all morning. “Are you trying to break my legs?”

He towered over her. “I'm trying to get you back to work.”

“Ach, work! A waste of energy!”

His hands hooked beneath her armpits, he raised her from the floor to her feet. “Your clients rely on you to function in a semi-normal manner. Whatever funk you've devised for yourself, shake yourself out of it!”

Violet orbs scathed him; she shuffled to the round dining table and filled a stained ceramic mug with stale coffee, draining the contents in a single gulp, then gagging. “Nasty dreck!”

At last fully conscious, she hovered over Watson's shoulder at the computer, studying images, charts and text scrolling on the monitor.

“Incredible!” she gasped.

Watson concurred. “It's positively mind-boggling. Someone went to a lot of trouble just to... to...”

“Score themselves loads of cash.”

“You've got to notify Scotland Yard.”

Twirling a wooden chair away from the table, she sank beside the blond amputee. “This exceeds the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police, John. This is a matter for Interpol.”

“You'll ring them?”

“If you’ll be so kind as to save these files on a flash drive, I’ll deliver it to their offices personally.”

“After you shower and change clothes, I hope,” he hinted.

She smirked and nodded, before withdrawing into her bedroom and closing the door.

Sprawling on the double mattress, she dozed briefly, her brain too knackered to really process the conclusions she’d formed from the reports. Roused an hour later by horns creating a cacophony on the street below her window, she bolted upright with one thought: “One down, two to go.”

She would entrust Interpol with the task of apprehending the art forgers and their accomplices, concentrating her efforts on discovering who wanted Gordon Lampeer dead, and the identity of the vicious loan shark known as the Collector.

She hadn’t seen the sculptor since their last encounter at his Belgravia residence. Some elusive aspect of that event continued to bother her, an obvious tidbit she’d ignored, like a child peeking around a fencepost during a game of hide and seek.

It hadn’t helped that her great-great-uncle Sherlock had ripped into her - again - for unprofessional behavior.

As she carried clean clothes to the bathroom, Edith Hudson-Thorne appeared on the servants’ stairs with a tray of cold cuts, bread and crisps for lunch.

Jeans, t-shirt and underwear scattered on the floorboards.

The landlady halted, petrified by her tenant’s stony features. “What is it, Sheila?”

“We were alone!” she burred in an excited contralto. “There were no servants!”

Taking umbrage with this statement, Edith objected, “I’m *not* your servant!”

Shaken from her reverie, Sheila clutched the young widow’s arms and danced her in a circle. “Of course, you aren’t, Edith! You’re a beacon in the darkness of my soul!”

Wriggling free before platters on the tray dumped their contents, Edith’s lips pursed. “There are days when I believe you’re certifiable, Sheila.”

“You’re probably right, but it doesn’t matter now!” Gathering her clothes, Sheila slipped into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Hot water through the shower head cleansed her flesh of perspiration, and her head of cobwebs. She resurrected scenes from Lampeer’s Glasgow home: the Indian butler in open-collared shirt and khaki trousers, the toque-crowned chef...

When Lampeer departed on his emergency trip to London, they scarpered. The usual practice would have been for them to be transported to the Belgravia location, fulfilling their duties there. She'd seen no indication of them as the couple... made the rounds of the structure.

Unless they were temporary employees.

Her brunette curls wrapped turban-style in a towel, she sat on the oak four-poster bed and dialed Corinne Agincourt's number.

"Sheila? Have you any news?" came the cultured soprano. "There's been another forgery exposed..."

"You'll have the full account by end-of-day, Corie. Right now, refresh my memory: your family has a house in Scotland, right?"

"Near Inverness."

"How do you get your servants when you're on holiday there?"

"There's a very good agency..."

"That's what I suspected." Sheila plucked a pen from the night stand drawer and, not finding any scraps of paper, poised it above her palm. "What's their contact information?"

Disconnecting that call, she tapped the keypad and spoke with the manager of the office familiar with the Agincourt estate. Transferring her to their Glasgow location involved a half-minute of irritating music, the subsequent conversation clarifying a disturbing point.

She migrated to the table in the sitting room, spreading pages around the plate on which sat a ham and cheese sandwich, a glass of milk beside it. Her index finger ran down columns of names, in date order rather than alphabetical, until she found what she sought.

And, an address.

Wiping flecks of bread from her lips, she passed Watson on the narrow steps, fedora atop her still-damp head.

"You're not going out without a coat!" he chided.

"It'll be warm on the Tube."

"But, between here and the station..."

"Don't worry, John! Soon, we'll be in clover!"

Without an idea what she meant, he ascended the remaining stairs as the front door closed.

Sheila regretted her lack of outer wear when she hit street level at the Canning Town station. Walking to the Newham borough street scribbled on her skin, biting winds chilled her bones and froze her fingertips. Raising her hands to

grab the tarnished brass knocker on the door with its peeling green paint proved downright agonizing.

She recognized the dark haired man, clad in undershirt and worn brown slacks who pulled the panel inward.

“Manu Patel.” Not a question.

He spat, “Sheila Holmes.”

Nonetheless, he ushered her indoors. The ground level flat included a tiny sitting room, kitchen and bedroom. Toilet facilities were along an unlit corridor.

“You’ve come to arrest me?” he queried, serving the uninvited guest tea near the bay window in a cracked china cup.

“I don’t have that authority.” Her scrutiny of the crumbling chamber wrenched her heart. “As far as I’m concerned, if you’re never prosecuted, it’s fine with me.”

“You know all?”

“Aye.” The detective shuddered, reminding herself to eliminate the Scottish lingo from her speech patterns. “But, tell me your story.”

He sipped the steaming brew tentatively. “You see where I live. Can you not guess?”

“Please.”

Patel began with a heavy sigh. “Four years ago, I was an accountant working for a bank in the city. My parents, proud of my success, pledged me to marry a beautiful woman from Mumbai. I paid for her flight, and the ceremony was attended by many friends. It was the happiest day of my life.”

“That happiness didn’t last?” prodded Sheila.

“For many months, it did, especially when I learned my wife was pregnant. I watched our child grow inside her but, then, the doctor informed us my wife’s health was not good, and she would be lucky to survive the birth. Due to these worries, the accuracy of my work declined, and I was terminated from my job. My wife was ordered to stay in bed, and soon we had no money to buy food or pay the bills. By the time she went into labor, we had moved to this... hole.”

“She died?”

“Yes. My son, as well.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” A few moments passed before Patel composed himself. “In order to keep a roof over our heads those last months, I was offered a loan by a man called the Collector.”

“Which you couldn’t repay.”

He nodded his tousled black mane.

“He threatened your family?”

“Indeed, yes. I could not imagine my wife suffering further at his hand, nor my parents, so I delivered myself into service as a way of paying off the debt.”

“In his household?”

“Wherever I was required. At least, the arrangement has allowed me to travel widely - the French Riviera, Rome, Vienna, Amsterdam...”

“And enjoy the various arts and cultures?”

“Yes.”

“Like at Soho’s MacMillan Gallery?”

Her host flinched.

“Where’s the pistol, Manu?”

“At the bottom of the Thames.”

“Why did you want to kill Gordon Lampeer?”

No response.

“Because he’s the Collector who threatened those you love?”

“Oh, no, Miss Holmes!”

This denial flabbergasted her. “He’s... not?”

“I... don’t believe so.”

Hope unknotted her stomach. “You’re not certain?”

“I’ve... never seen the Collector’s face.” He gazed wistfully at the wood stove in the sitting room’s corner, devoid of fire. “Meeting him is quite a theatrical experience, if I may be so bold.”

“Explain, please.”

Patel recounted being fetched from Russell Square in a nondescript black sedan to what smelled like the London docks though, being blindfolded, he had no view of the building’s exterior. He was escorted inside and, from the threshold of a small office - very much resembling a stage set from a West End play or television series - he saw the outline of an imposing wooden desk, and a tall man in a high-backed chair.

“Three spot lights shown from behind him, his face a blur,” he ended the narrative.

“Would you recognize his voice if you heard it again?”

“Oh, I’ve heard it again - many times.”

“Eh?”

“The sum I owed was to be repaid in a month. When I did not do so, I was snatched from the pavement and dragged into his presence. All politeness had drained from his tone.”

“It was a Scottish accent?”

Patel refilled his cup with tepid tea. "Would you like more?"

Sheila covered her cup with her hand.

"I'm grateful you listened to my story, Miss Holmes, and will not be... involving the police."

A dismissal, but Sheila ignored the hint. "Manu. If Gordon Lampeer *isn't* the Collector, why dress in a woman's clothes and try to kill him at the MacMillan opening?"

Patel solemnly set aside his drink, elbows resting on his knees. "He dishonored my younger sister."

It didn't take much for Sheila to imagine that scenario.

"Your second attempt was to be made in Glasgow?"

"It was my only logical option, Miss Holmes. You see, my sister had accompanied this dog to Glasgow twice and, as a sign of his trust, had been given a key to his home, which she had no opportunity to return when he cast her away like so much rubbish. In the days leading up to his exhibition, I hired on as temporary help at the gallery, which made it possible for me to steal an invitation, and learn about his cousin's Scottish wedding. He'd mentioned to the curator that he didn't have time to interview servants so, when you thwarted my plan at the MacMillan, I concocted a story about a gallery employee notifying a fictitious agency who assigned us to his service."

"Us?"

"Myself and a cousin who has worked as a cook in some very upper class restaurants."

"Why did you... abandon your post so hastily while I was there?" asked Sheila.

"I heard footsteps coming down the stairs around noon, and thought my assistance might be required. When I traced the noise to the library, I witnessed Lampeer browsing through some files stored in the piano. The pistol was in my jacket pocket, but when I aimed it at him, he laughed."

The detective could visualize that scene, too - all too easily.

"He seemed upset by the files and threatened to summon the constables, swore he'd have no trouble convincing the police I was responsible for whatever crimes were listed there."

"So, you ran?"

"Not before I pulled the trigger." Patel quavered on the wobbly chair. "The noise really frightened me."

"You... missed him?"

“Oh, no. The bullet struck him in the left arm. That’s when I ran, my cousin on my heels.”

Sheila had seen no bandage on any wound when she’d last... Could Patel be wrong about his aim?

“Better to be charged with art forgery than attempted murder,” she pronounced.

His head cocked to the left.

A slender thumb waggled toward the partially open closet, wherein were stacked a selection of unfinished canvases.

“In your free time as an accountant, you dabbled in... still lifes and landscapes?”

Patel flushed. “A friend of my father, who certified the authenticity of the paintings, assured me the percentage of the auction price I would receive after their sale would erase all my debts.”

“If the truth had not been unearthed, that might have been true, Manu. Your mistake was using specially blended oils from your home country.”

“Ah, my uncle, the chemist...”

“I suggest you take those outside the city and burn them - along with any paints and varnishes - and don’t even leave the ashes where they might be found.”

“Yes, Miss Holmes.”

She thanked him for the tea and departed, ruminating all the way to Baker Street over the Indian’s observation that Lampeer had been puzzled by the files in the Steinway.

“John!” she shouted up the stairs no more had she stepped into the foyer.

Resigned, he folded the copy of the *Times* he’d been reading and tossed it on the fireplace grate. He smiled placatingly at her as she breezed into the sitting room.

“Do you have a contact in the public records office?”

“What, specifically, are you wanting to know?”

She waved him to the computer desk. “Who owns a property on Woodside Terrace in Glasgow.”

“Do you have the house number?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then, I can expedite that personally.”

Gleefully, she hugged his chest from behind as he sank on the swivel chair and began typing.

A combination of relief and dismay tempered Sheila’s reaction to the information that Gordon Lampeer did not own the residence where they’d... spent

time together in Glasgow. A legal contract dated ten years previous allowed him to stop there when he traveled in Scotland.

The sculptor, not being musically inclined, may never have realized the piano held its own secrets...

Except for the passports.

After she notified Corinne Agincourt of the artwork authenticator's deliberate fraud - omitting Manu Patel's role - that left her with one case to unravel: the Collector's identity.

Yet, questions unrelated to that investigation hounded her.

Early Wednesday evening, she rang the bell at Lampeer's Belgravia residence. The bust he'd placed near the upstairs window to deceive would-be assassins had, mercifully, been removed.

A new element had been installed, however. She responded to the bell wearing only a thigh-length pink satin kimono - a tanned, voluptuous, ebony-haired model, clearly just awakened from a sound sleep.

For a second, Sheila thought she'd mistaken the house. When Lampeer appeared behind his latest paramour, that doubt evaporated.

The artist did not pursue her when she set off, fuming.

Stipulations of their agreement gave her no cause to be angry - except with herself. She should have suspected Lampeer had numerous lovers, not just over the years. That he cycled women through his master suite on a daily basis shouldn't have shocked her.

She heard the rapt of gunfire as she neared the junction, whirling immediately and sprinting back along the row of identical dwellings. Lampeer's door stood wide, his legs dangling over the stoop.

On the staircase within, the woman cowered, shrieking like a banshee.

Sheila knelt on the threshold beside the bleeding figure; he'd been struck directly in the heart. Those magnetic brown eyes, while open, saw nothing.

He would never regain consciousness.

She glanced in both directions; no sign of any fleeing assassin on the street.

Trembling digits summoned emergency services and, in the interim, they unbuttoned the maroon silk shirt and slid the sleeve down his arms. Why hadn't she noticed the bullet wound in his left bicep, still unhealed?

He'd not abandoned her in Glasgow because of the MacMillan Gallery fire, but to seek medical attention.

Lifting his left trouser leg, she saw imprints of what could not be mistaken for anything other than a vicious dog bite. A neighbor's pet could have attacked him, thus the blood soaking his sock and shoe that last night she'd shared his bed...

She rifled Lampeer's trouser pockets, finding his wallet and scraps of paper with barely legible names and addresses. Four had check marks beside them.

Three Metropolitan Police vehicles converged on the site, spilling constables onto the pavement. They cordoned off the scene, snapped a series of photographs, then assisted paramedics with removing the corpse, before commencing their investigation.

The half-clad female thrust a red-lacquered mitt toward Sheila. "She shot him!"

Allowing officials to search her, that accusation was discounted when they found no weapon and no powder burns on her Beatles Abbey Road t-shirt or jeans.

A female detective accompanied the woman upstairs, instructing her to dress. An incessant stream of expletives and allegations against Sheila and random individuals resonated around the structure, some of those piecing together the incident shaking their heads in disgust.

Sheila gave her statement, though she understood she'd have to repeat the process at Scotland Yard, where the document would be printed and signed before witnesses. Once released, she strode to the corner and hailed a taxi, giving the first address on Lampeer's list to the cabby, with a detour to Baker Street.

Arriving in a less than respectable neighborhood on the East End, Sheila could have guessed what she'd find within the clapboard-patched structure. The couple and their four children huddled around an electric stove for warmth in the kitchen as they chatted. The wife tried to hide the bandages around her wrist where something - someone - had cut her.

"The Collector?" she prompted.

The husband confessed, "Yes'm. I was stupid enough to take a loan..."

From beneath Watson's Army overcoat, Sheila revealed a roll of 50 pound notes, which she pressed into the man's fist. "Your debt is paid in full."

The mother was weeping against her man's chest when their visitor departed.

Sheila had decided, whether or not Gordon Lampeer was the Collector, she would do right by those who had been victimized by the loan scheme. Watson had watched from his winged-back armchair near the roaring fireplace as she divided the cash she'd lifted from the Woodside Terrace domicile into equal stacks, then secured them with rubber bands.

She also contacted the Scottish real estate agent who had the arrangement with Lampeer to occupy the house, advising him of the stash in the Steinway. The files and passports were to be delivered to the police, while the cash - hundreds of thousands of pounds in total - would fund restitution to the Collector's clients, the

list Watson had obtained from his connections giving the names of those who had been attacked.

The story broke in the *Times* and other media outlets, and Sheila, lounging in the basket-chair that January Friday, had no regrets about ignoring the arts and entertainment assignments Corinne Agincourt's father offered. She had better things to do than cater to the overt curiosity of readers who had no other excitement in their lives than to devour other people's scandals.

Metropolitan Police reports leaked to beat journalists detailed an investigation of Gordon Lampeer's long time preference for young girls, including a few who were underage. The passports Sheila had discovered in the Steinway had been used to travel overseas to indulge his bizarre fetishes. His artwork - what remained after the MacMillan Galley fire - while garnering critical acclaim and a sizable post-mortem increase in value, vanished before a planned spring auction.

The MacMillan never reopened after the building was consumed by flames, the cause being ruled arson. The insurance company refused to pay the claim, suspicions raised against the owners neither confirmed nor disproved.

Just who murdered Lampeer remained unsolved well into the summer. Sheila was subjected to periodic interviews by detective inspectors, detective sergeants, and even a chief inspector over that span of months, as fresh eyes reviewed facts of the case.

The homicide team, while given copies of the names found in Lampeer's trousers, and the full list Watson compiled - with only one redaction - never interrogated any of those people. This oversight, Sheila determined, cleared her of any responsibility to pursue the matter.

Nonetheless, she paid a late autumn call on Manu Patel, who she'd read on the *Times'* financial page had been hired as assistant vice president of internal audits by the same bank where he'd previously served as accountant. He and his new wife had set up housekeeping in Kensington, where a nursery was being decorated for their twins, due to be born in December.

"You fulfilled your duty to your sister, didn't you?" Sheila wondered over a cup of tea, this time in elegant china cups with matching saucers, served by a uniformed maid on a gold tray in an expensively appointed sitting room.

Slyly, he professed, "Someone beat me to it."

"You'd thrown the pistol in the Thames, as I recall."

"Indeed, yes, Miss Holmes."

"Or, because you pitched it in shallow water, inside a plastic bag, when your sister waded in to recover it, she had no reason to worry that it wouldn't

function properly, if she ever needed it. And, she did, only moments after she answered my ring, before returning it to its watery grave.”

“Oh, dear, dear...”

“No more lies, Manu. I understand her motive perfectly. Lampeer was very attractive, in his own way, and excelled in his... chosen avocation. Rather than keep the relationship... platonic... she made the mistake of falling in love with him. She believed they were an exclusive couple, but when she saw me on the doorstep, she realized...”

“You have no proof, Miss Holmes.”

“There, you’re wrong. When she opened the door, all ten of her bright, shiny fingernails were intact and capable of scratching my eyes out. Not five minutes later, when she bared her claws, the nail on her right index finger was chipped. It happened when she squeezed the trigger.” Sheila shook her head somberly. “I found the fragment when I bent to check Gordon’s pulse.”

“You have it still?”

“Of course.”

A Colt .45 revolver appeared from inside Patel’s suit jacket. His pleasant tenor dropped to an ominous bass. “You will deliver it to me.”

“Not bloody likely.” She grinned contentedly, finishing her tea.

“I have no qualms about putting two in your skull, or that of the cripple who preys on your charity.”

“I don’t doubt it. Anyone who can pound a man’s face to pulp or slice a woman’s cheek, strangle a child or throw an elderly grandfather down a flight of stairs, wouldn’t waste a thought on me.”

Straight white teeth shone when he sneered. “Very perceptive, Miss Holmes.”

“Actually, I fault myself for not reaching this conclusion months ago.” She lounged on the sofa, ankles crossed. “*You* own the house on Woodside Terrace - and innumerable other properties - through a dummy corporation called M.P. Enterprises. The files Gordon found in the piano belonged to you. He had, actually, been trying to retrieve the collection of passports he used for... his own ludicrous endeavors - which you’d stolen from his luggage while you unpacked his clothes, hoping to blackmail him and, when he refused to pay up, you hatched the plan to kill him at the MacMillan.”

“He deserved to die.”

“When I browsed through the files, I noticed the script in the margins on some pages wasn’t... typical British schoolboy penmanship. Someone took great pride in his accomplishments, even of an illegal nature. You mastered a Scottish

accent, to throw victims off your trail, and even hired a burly thug to grow out his hair and dye it white, so police would suspect Gordon if any description was given after an assault.”

“Though I was quite miffed at the damage you caused prying the lock off that fine woodwork, your theories won’t hold water.”

“Oh, you ably maintained the pretense of abject poverty, and even took commissions forging paintings to divert attention from your other... felonies. As we speak, Scotland Yard detectives are executing search warrants on your holdings from Plymouth to Aberdeen. If even one of your fingerprints is identified as being on the loan documents, you’ll rot in prison.”

“Bold words, Miss Holmes.” He rose, signaling her with the pistol’s barrel to do likewise. “But, I have the gun.”

Retracting her feet, Sheila’s sneaker hooked the end table leg and flipped it toward Patel. Startled, he leapt backward; she lunged at him and, in the process of wresting the weapon from his grip, a bullet was discharged. It grazed her right arm and lodged in the bookcase beside a carved maple fireplace.

Distracted by the blood trickling past her elbow, Patel would have nipped her had she not side-stepped at the last instant and leveled a double-fisted blow to his spine that landed him prone beside a floral-print armchair.

She held the Colt on him until a cadre of constables arrived twelve minutes later.

The paramedics, she ignored.

Their diagnosis of the criminal’s injuries: concussion, broken bones in his foot and assorted abrasions. Handcuffed, he was transported on a gurney to St. Bart’s Accident and Emergency.

Johnny Watson and Edith Hudson-Thorne emerged from the landlady’s ground floor parlor when Sheila shuffled in the door of 221B Baker Street three hours later.

“You’re all over the news,” proclaimed her flatmate.

Edith noticed the blood on her shirt and jeans. “You’re injured!”

“A scratch.”

Watson clutched the gashed appendage and inspected the wound. “This needs to be cleaned and bandaged at once!” Clasp ing her left hand, he tugged her toward the stairs. “Don’t try to make any excuses.”

Meekly, she accompanied him up the creaking flight, even complying with his directive that she retire to her room for a good night’s rest.

The next morning, autumn scents wafted through the sitting room's open casements. Still knackered, Sheila ached for a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs and blueberry muffins.

Coffee restored her to full consciousness, enabling her to feel the dull throbbing beneath the gauze encircling her arm.

"Can you fill in the blanks for me?" Edith pleaded, refilling her tenant's ceramic mug.

"What blanks?"

"In the news stories."

Sheila clucked her tongue. "Ask away."

"Gordon Lampeer was..."

"Nothing more than a damned fine looking, albeit aging, lecherous sculptor with a gaggle of women at his beck and call."

"You include yourself in that description?"

"Aye." Exhaling dramatically, she slapped her own cheek.

"It takes awhile to break some habits," Edith tittered. "And this Manu Patel?"

"Clever is the best word for him, but he wasn't alone in his ambitions. His father and two brothers were involved, with his sister aware of their... activities. She believed, if they could break their cultural taboos by victimizing the less fortunate, she would face no repercussions if she indulged in her own personal pleasures."

"She was wrong?"

Sheila scowled. "More than just wrong. After she killed Gordon, they locked her in the dungeon of a crumbling Welsh castle, feeding her only bread and water and beating her repeatedly with a bamboo cane. She would have died if she hadn't escaped."

"How *did* she escape?"

"The lucky assigned to guard her during the day knew her from primary school. He'd had a crush on her since they were thirteen. She... seduced him and, when he unlocked the cell door to take her up on her offer, she clubbed him on the head with the kerosene lantern and ran like a scared jackrabbit across the sheep pastures until she found a house where she could use the phone."

"She rang the police?"

"Oh, God, no. She rang her mother, who told her father, who sent her brother to fetch her. Knowing she'd be killed for daring to raise her hand against a man, she then rang me."

“And, you arranged for her to be placed in protective custody?” Edith presumed.

Sheila chuckled, “She’s cut and dyed her hair, gone conservative with her clothing style and is living safely far from where we’re sitting.”

“Good for her.”

“As a murderer, she should rightfully be incarcerated.”

“Has her brother been charged with Lampeer’s death?”

“He’s facing no less than four dozen felony charges. One more won’t make a difference.”

Watson joined them, still groggy from a fitful night’s slumber. He selected an envelope from beside the computer and passed it to Sheila. “This came for you by special messenger.”

A check in the amount of 25,000 pounds would keep them in food for the foreseeable future.

“About time the insurers ponied up the reward,” grunted Sheila.

Edith prodded, “What reward?”

“For investigating the artwork fraud.” She waved the check toward Watson. “Half of this is yours, John.”

“Eh?”

“It was you and your crew who dug up the facts. I just assembled the jigsaw puzzle.”

“Then, what say we enjoy dinner out tonight at The Pelican?”