

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Crimes, Old and New

A Collection of Stories

by

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Ancestral Revelations

The dim sitting room at 221B Baker Street might have been vacant on this foggy Wednesday evening, but for the glowing bowl of a long-stem briar and shallow breathing.

Sheila Holmes being the sole human in the chamber, her lungs barely moved with the intake of air. She, frankly, didn't have the strength to budge from the basket-chair beside the dormant fireplace.

She'd remained in a half-lotus posture for more than a month, grieving the loss of Tony Downton, who'd saved her life by intercepting a bullet intended for her. Salty tears dry on her cheeks, a Pink Floyd t-shirt and jeans clung to her flesh - unchanged for days.

Leaning on a mantle cluttered with mail affixed to the surface by a jackknife, a Persian slipper filled with shag tobacco, and mouldering detritus, a translucent spectre scrutinized this image, a cloud of acrid smoke emitted from between clenched teeth as he puffed on his pipe.

"Child, this is unbecoming," remarked the cultured baritone. "Mourning to this degree wastes valuable energy that could be focused on more pressing matters."

"There are no more pressing matters," Sheila countered, her violet orbs shut.

She couldn't look upon this manifestation of her great-great-uncle, Sherlock Holmes, without her stomach knotting.

He and Tony Downton might have been twins - coming from the same bloodline - and it hurt too much to have yet another reminder of her failure...

"There are stacks of phone messages, requesting your assistance for cases ranging from the morbid to the mundane," the elder Holmes retorted. "Instead, you allow your mental faculties to deteriorate..."

"They haven't deteriorated one iota, Uncle. They're... resting."

"Your physical faculties are deteriorating, as well. You haven't eaten or slept..."

"When I sleep, I dream about that night..."

"And you will continue to do so unless you exercise some personal discipline." A firm grasp on her shoulders lifted her off the seat, suspending her in mid-air, nose to aquiline nose. "You will march to your wardrobe, gather a set of decent clothes and avail yourself of the facilities. Then, we shall talk further."

She scanned his frayed shirt cuffs and black frock coat as her bare feet touched the floor. "Talk about what?"

“Discipline, child. First, the task at hand.” He steered her toward the bedroom.

Reluctantly, she complied, returning in ten minutes, wrapped in the Great Detective’s tattered purple robe, brunette curls dripping on the collar.

A silver tray of sandwiches and large glass of milk awaited her on the hastily cleared round dining table.

“Did Edith bring that?” she asked.

“No. John invited Edith to join him at the cinema. They’re both exhausted, having solicitously tended you as you sink deeper into this stupor.”

“They needed a night out, in other words.”

Another spire of smoke ascended from the bowl. “Indeed.”

Sheila settled on the red Victorian divan, tucking her ankles beneath her. “So, what do you have to say?”

“I’m more curious as to your explanation of why you abandoned a flourishing career for this imprudent... idleness.”

“Did you never lose someone you cared about so deeply that you... couldn’t function?”

Sherlock lowered himself onto the wing-backed armchair Johnny Watson usually occupied, adeptly crossing his legs on the cushion at the last second. “I never allowed myself to care for anyone to that extent.”

“Not your father, your mother?”

A tousled dark head and stubbled chin shook negatively.

“Not Mycroft, not Sherrinford?”

“Mycroft would not have reciprocated such sentiment, had I passed before him. He and I... respected each other too much for such maudlin exhibitions of affection.”

“And, Sherrinford?”

The pipe required refilling and relighting.

Or, Sheila suspected, her lauded forebear stalled for time before responding.

The admission might have been torn from his soul. “Sherrinford considered me the black sheep of the family. We were never... close.”

Slender digits spanned the gap, cradling Sherlock’s very tangible fingers. “Few friends in school, even being bullied... turning to the study of specific sciences... perhaps where your instructors recognized your gifts...”

“A problem you did not encounter in your own academic pursuits.” As he extricated himself from this sympathetic expression, his tone sharpened.

She stiffened. “How... would you know?”

“Observation, child. The majority of your previous clients sought your services based on associations created at university, or prior. You enjoyed a degree of popularity, participated in student clubs...”

“Should I be ashamed?”

“No. This... age is different than a century ago. I had... other goals.”

Sheila gazed at his stern, chiseled features and forcibly swallowed a wave of sobs. If she had any hope of transcending this desolation, she could not dwell on Sherlock’s resemblance to Downton. His eyes scathed her; some days they smoldered brown, but this night they gleamed with a greyish tinge.

A trick of the light? she mused.

“Tell me about your life, Uncle,” she pleaded. “The accounts... your Watson published were romanticized, according to your own perspective. Was the late nineteenth century that horrible?”

His head rotated toward the grate, where flames shot from a stack of logs without the aid of a match or kindling. His profile silhouetted by the fire, wisdom radiated from his very being. “No more so than today,” he drawled. “A pall of pollution choked the air; poverty drove many to crime, or placed them under the thumbs of those who wished to profit from their suffering by manipulating them into criminal activities.” He pointed his pipe stem at the yellowed post pierced by the tarnished knife blade. “Jewelry thefts, missing spouses, random assaults... those were most of the entreaties I received. My Watson opted to sensationalize the more dramatic investigations: the murders, Moriarty, the incidents with... supernatural elements...”

“That wound up having perfectly logical solutions,” she supplied.

“Indeed.”

“What about... later?”

He echoed, “Later?”

“When you and your Watson... parted ways?”

A momentary smile, caused by the corners of Sherlock’s mouth briefly twitching upward, masked his contempt. “Watson... never relinquished his ties to this flat. His supposed marriage...”

“Supposed?” Sheila gulped.

“And the mention of reviving his medical practice in Kensington were... plot devices to draw readers who tired of my rather... detached attitude toward the limelight into which he thrust me.”

“So, when the public grew bored with his tales, he added a splash of variety to... to...”

“Correct.” He rose and dug in the Persian slipper. “My Watson had his redeeming qualities, but never acquired a thorough understanding of my methods. He... compensated with... with... excessive drama.”

“Then, tell me the truth. How did you live? How did you...”

Tall and spare, he hovered above her. “Die?”

Sheepishly, she nodded.

“Come with me.”

Despite her frazzled nerves and overall weakened condition, Sheila accepted his hand and accompanied him to her room. He opened the simple oak wardrobe in which John H. Watson, MD, had once stored his belongings and pressed a lever on the inner framework.

A panel at the cabinet’s rear popped forward.

“I... didn’t know there was a secret compartment,” gasped Sheila.

Holmes chuckled. “Neither did my Watson. That’s why I concealed my less... appealing costumes where he’d be least likely to search.”

“Brilliant!”

“Indeed.”

A cedar lining had dissuaded moths and other harmful insects from destroying garments that, rightfully, should have been consigned to a wheelie bin nearly 100 years earlier. Sherlock had prided himself on an ability to utterly transform himself with a particular disguise and, in these rags, he would have blended in well with the downtrodden of his day.

He plucked a shirt, trousers and vest off the pegs and presented them to his great-great-niece.

“What do you want me to do with these?” she queried.

“Wear them.”

Her chortle annoyed him. “You just had me shower...”

“And, you will shower again when this adventure concludes.”

That knife-like edge to his baritone brooked no opposition. Sheila discarded the well-worn robe and pulled soiled fabric over her t-shirt and shorts.

Abruptly, a dusty bowler was jammed atop her curls.

When she turned, Holmes had vanished in favor of a decrepit bookseller. His back hunched, he gazed past a weather-beaten visor at her sallow complexion.

He’d taken more than a foot off his imposing height.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” she wondered.

“After an hour or so, of course.”

“Why are we done up like this?”

Again, he offered his now-gnarled fingers. She gripped them, and her surroundings were consumed by a mist the equal of the London pea-soup beyond smudged casements.

A terrified chill enveloped her. She trusted Sherlock but, like the majority of human beings, feared the unknown.

“Hold tight to me,” Holmes warned. “Losing yourself in the eternal ether would provoke... unnecessary complications.”

For that pronouncement, she had no ready rejoinder.

When then distortion cleared, Sheila stood in this same space, only tidier and more masculine. “Your Watson’s room?”

That fleeting smile confirmed her assertion.

“The year being... 1895?”

“Very astute.”

The young woman recalled meandering through Oxford University’s theatrical costume collection, each era marked with appropriate documentation. She recognized the style of tab collar and cut of the good doctor’s suit coat in the open wardrobe.

She would have no chance to make the acquaintance of that prolific chronicler, however. “Come, child, the game is afoot!” Sherlock declared, tugging her through the sitting room, equally as messy as her own version - without the computer.

Feet jammed in uncomfortable workman’s boots scrambled to keep up with his lengthy stride, descending the narrow stairs - that creaked even then. They breezed past the flustered landlady Mrs. Hudson, a slight physical resemblance to the 21st century Edith Hudson-Thorne evident. She squealed in outrage, “Mr. Holmes! Must you bring your... foul associates through my freshly scrubbed foyer?”

Holmes did not apologize, racing toward the structure’s rear, through the kitchen and out to the alley. Rounding the corner, they emerged onto a Baker Street altered from that which Sheila frequented.

Hansom cabs, dustmen scraping manure off rutted cobblestones, waifs tussling for coppers - and a smoky haze of unchecked industrial pollution - made her shudder.

“Remember your role, child,” her companion advised. “Undoubtedly, the lurkers are on us at this very moment.”

“Where are we going?”

“Soho.”

A trendy neighborhood in her day, that area of London in the years prior to 1900 meant crime, danger and poverty.

“Who are we tracking?” she prodded.

“A dealer in stolen art.”

“Can you provide more detail, please?”

He paused at the junction of Marylebone Road to smirk at her. “This is your opportunity to see and observe.”

“You mean, to prove myself worthy of the family name?”

“If you wish to think that.”

“Be honest, Uncle: you’ve never held me in high esteem, because you deem me no better than a cheap hack, making my name on the back of your reputation.”

“We have no time for such a puerile disputation,” he snarled. “Suffice it to say: you possess a basic aptitude in this field, but have failed to hone your skills to the level of a dedicated professional.”

“And, because I’m female, you think I never will.”

“You theorize without facts.”

“You never forgave Irene Adler for besting you...”

“No such creature ever existed.”

Sheila halted, forcing Sherlock to arrest his gait. “Another of your Watson’s inventions?”

“He... wished to ingratiate himself to the publishers of *The Strand* magazine, who sought an audience among idle housewives yearning for a bit of excitement in their otherwise dull domestic routine.”

“You let him take such... literary license?”

“I... wasn’t aware he’d done so until after the submissions appeared in print.”

“You trusted him?”

“I... ignored his... aspirations to gain influence among the popular authors of the day.”

“Where is he now?” Sheila pressed.

“On holiday in the Highlands.”

Forging their own path through affluent pedestrians in no rush to their various destinations, the pair reached Soho Square by mid-day - or thereabout, given the sun scarcely penetrated a dense layer of noxious fumes. In their present attire, they fit well with those circulating from shop to shop, or patronizing the pubs.

“Describe this milieu,” Sherlock instructed from a bench in the park.

Sheila, chest heaving thanks to weeks without exercise, rested her elbows on her knees. She panted, “Unemployed laborers; mothers with hungry children, begging for pennies; prostitutes eager for a pint of ale before they... start plying their trade.”

“What else?”

“A gent in top hat, morning suit and... walking stick designed to hold a short sword, pretending to read the music hall marquee placard while monitoring comings and goings at the green grocer’s shop.”

“Excellent, my dear.” Sherlock’s even inflection conveyed about as much enthusiasm as he mustered on any given occasion.

“The grocer’s is a front for a fencing operation - stolen jewels, and other... items,” she added.

“And your source for that deduction?”

“The grocer’s watch chain.”

Holmes’ brow furrowed in consternation.

Sheila failed to restrain her laughter. “Well, hallelujah!” she quipped. “I finally stumped you!”

“Not at all, child.”

“Be honest, Uncle. You didn’t notice his watch chain.”

“I observed it, naturally, but I discounted it.”

She sniffed, “You can never discount even the smallest clue...”

“I don’t...”

“Maybe because I have the advantage of technology you lack.”

“What type of technology...”

Sheila straightened on the wooden slats. “What grocer could afford a solid gold chain? Most might pay for a gold-plated replica, at best. One of his... suppliers brought him a nobleman’s timepiece and, rather than resell it, he kept it for himself.”

“I still don’t comprehend the connection with technology,” protested Sherlock.

“That particular watch, with that specific chain, is currently displayed at the British Museum, among the collection of Lord Norrington’s effects. The provenance includes police records of its theft in April, 1895, and subsequent recovery five years later from a cache of items confiscated during a search of Abraham Morley’s Soho flat.”

“Ah, you identified the scrollwork on the case!”

She grinned. “Have done.” She stretched her legs toward the walking path. “What piece of art is he holding?”

“Michelangelo’s original sketch of the Moses.”

“Shit!”

“A student from the Royal Academy of Arts removed it from the Casa Buonarrotti during a tour last term.”

“If he’d done that now... I mean, in my time, he would’ve been easily caught before leaving Italy,” opined Sheila.

“Actually, the culprit was a woman.”

The younger Holmes swallowed hard. “Hid it with her petticoats, did she?”

“Very likely, given that male customs agents refuse to search the luggage of female travelers.” He placed his left index finger on his lips in a gesture for silence - or meditation.

“How much is the drawing worth?”

“Estimates vary, depending on the collector: a few thousand to a million pounds.” Rifling his trouser pocket, Sherlock extracted a shilling. “Walk over and buy me an apple.”

Sheila caught the coin - unfamiliar since Britain’s change to a decimal-based monetary system - and shuffled toward the grocer’s outdoor bins of vegetables and fruit.

“Get off out of it!” bellowed the squat, bearded proprietor. “Don’t think you can be pinchin’ my goods!”

A flash of silver stifled his ire; the apparent tramp examined apples for bruises and worms, ultimately selecting two and juggling them as she retraced her steps. She tossed her noted forebear the larger, then sank her teeth into the other.

“What did you see?” he inquired.

“He keeps the windows deliberately obstructed. I did manage to glimpse a squirrely teenager with blond hair and a limp at the counter, writing in a ledger, and carrying a mantle clock and three small framed portraits past a heavy brown curtain into the back.”

Sherlock’s grey orbs twinkled with delight. “Ah, he’s taken in new stock.”

“How do you plan to...”

“Tonight, child. That is, if you have no qualms about bending the letter of the law.”

He signaled her toward a south-bound lane.

“Did Watson have such qualms?” she puffed, jogging to catch him up.

“Oh, heavens, yes, though he masked them on the pretext of making notes for his fictional endeavors. He would position himself at a distance while I... picked the lock, or hoisted myself through an open window...”

“Why did you allow him to continue sharing the flat, if he was such a... such a...”

“The payments received for his tales covered the expenses my oft-meager fees left in arrears, true enough. As a roommate, he was not totally abhorrent. His... ethics left something to be desired, nonetheless.”

“You... had many clients who did not pay?”

“They could not *afford* to pay,” he clarified as they skirted the business district. “For those in dire straits who brought me interesting challenges, I dedicated no less skill than for those who wrote me generous cheques.”

“For instance?”

“A mother whose twin daughters were kidnaped - by their own father, yet - and sold outright to a West End madam to satisfy men with... deviant fetishes.”

Sheila slowed her pace. “Does humanity never change?” she lamented. “Parents profiting off their own children, year after year, decade after decade...”

The memory of a human trafficking ring she’d recently foiled, with the assistance of Tony Downton...

Sherlock dragged her back to their current investigation with a terse exclamation.

“What?” she croaked, peering over the arm barring her progress.

“Constables from the Yard.”

“Making an arrest?”

Disdain unmistakable in Sherlock’s rumble: “They periodically sweep the streets for prostitutes and other petty criminals, to justify their inflated budget.”

“So, nothing related to this... incident.”

“Lestrade is unaware of the theft, or its implications in a murder south of the Thames. Hopkins - who has a bit more wherewithal - could be on the student’s trail, but with a rash of random assaults near the Tower of London, I doubt it.”

In trying to avoid the uniformed police squad, they found themselves detained, interrogated near a tailor’s storefront, and roughly searched for weapons. Sherlock was shoved to the ground, a knee jammed against his spine.

Media reports of brutality against peaceful protesters and the like riled Sheila. She reacted on instinct, Wing Chun techniques freeing her from the grasp of a wiry corporal who held her biceps, and repulsing the three laying into her famous relative because they didn’t “like the look of ‘im.”

She lifted the battered detective from the mud and, supporting him at the waist, ushered him into an alley and six blocks along before slumping in a millinery’s recessed doorway.

“You... shouldn’t have done that,” Sherlock wheezed, his ribs possibly cracked. “They’ll issue a warrant...”

“When we get back to Baker Street, we’ll be shed of these outfits, and they’ll be none the wiser.”

“You ruined our chances of returning to Soho this evening...”

Sheila sucked blood streaming from her knuckles. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve seen how you lived. We can end this... demonstration, thank you.”

Somber eyes bored into her.

“We can, can’t we?” she asked.

“The scenario must run its course to a logical resolution.”

“Shit!”

Sherlock unbent himself, no longer the bookseller, the difference in their height minimal. “Come, child. We have time for Mrs. Hudson to prepare us a fine dinner before we risk apprehension.”

What Sherlock might have considered a tasty meal, Sheila picked at with her fork. A slice of beef, mostly fat, and undercooked diced potatoes did not entice her depleted appetite.

“I’ll need you at the top of your game tonight, so sustenance is mandatory,” proclaimed the elder Holmes.

“You... rarely ate when in a certain frame of mind,” she countered.

“Ah, you’re relying on those dubious narratives.”

“Sorry. But, look at you: terribly underweight, seriously ill...”

“In my latter years, yes. I neglected myself after Watson died. I could finally do as I pleased without his incessant nagging about maintaining my health to preserve the exaggerated persona he’d crafted.”

“Then, you didn’t mourn him when he passed?”

That flash of a grin preceded, “Not like you are grieving your foolish Downton.”

Arguing Tony’s merits would serve no purpose, she realized, her heart thumping. She crossed her silverware on the china plate. “Let’s crack on, then.”

Rather than their disguises, they clad themselves in black trousers and coats - Sherlock’s height required Sheila to cuff the former. Balanced atop a pile of newspapers near the door, Sherlock twirled his fedora, dodging his great-great-niece when she made a grab for it.

“Not yet, child,” he scolded, lean, agile fingers combing his lanky mop off his forehead. “Your day will come.”

The hansom cab to a Soho music hall provided ample cover, alighting with others attending the bawdy revelries. Instead of entering the structure, they slipped

past the stage door and circled to the opposite end of the park, where a single gas lamp burned in the grocer's establishment.

"Evaluating his latest acquisitions," muttered Sherlock.

"What now?"

"We wait."

"How long?"

"As long as it takes."

That meant midnight, with her hands cramping due to a chill in the air and her feet tingling from kneeling behind stacked crates. After the light was extinguished, a candle illuminated an upstairs window: his flat. Another 30 minutes elapsed after that flame guttered out before they dared approach the edifice.

One deficiency in Sheila's repertoire: picking locks. Sherlock, though, boasted expert qualifications in that regard.

He could have been a consummate criminal, had he veered along a darker course in life, Sheila mused.

The deadbolt retracted, they crept inside, a primitive torch - a candle within an iron case, open on the side - casting eerie shadows on shelves crammed with miscellaneous valuables.

"Why hasn't the Yard raided this joint?" whispered Sheila.

Sherlock's spindly index finger hushed her. "The constables in this district... turn a blind eye on his activities..."

"What, free food for their children, or a few extra bob in their pockets?"

"Precisely."

A vertical rack contained assorted heavy cotton sheets temporarily fastened to wooden frames to prevent curling, and a variety of canvases. Sherlock thrust the torch at his companion, who aimed the beam at each selection in turn.

The Michelangelo was not among them.

The room's contents ran a gamut from absurd to sublime. Sheila began to question her uncle's certainty, when the discolored edges of a linen rectangle, pressed between the pages of a hand-illuminated psalter, attracted their notice.

"What more suitable concealment," noted Sherlock as he surveyed the well-preserved sketch in awe.

They spoke no more until clear of the area, a disgruntled cabby resenting that his last fare of the night took him so far from home.

"What has this artwork to do with a murder south of the river?" inquired Sheila.

"After the student thief consigned it to our green grocer, he contacted a collector to facilitate the sale. That man's valet overheard the proposition, and

decided to act on his own behalf. He let it be known to the second maid of a prominent entrepreneur that the drawing could be obtained for a modest commission but, instead of profiting on the deal, the valet was murdered while out with his master's terrier for their evening exercise."

"That's cold."

"Worse for the grocer, because the original buyer withdrew his offer, and the entrepreneur is threatening to expose the lot if his minimal bid is not honored."

"Theft, murder, *and* blackmail..."

"Nothing like a complex little intrigue," Sherlock snorted.

"So, with the drawing in our possession..."

"We return it to the administrator of the Casa Buonarotti, who patiently waits at the Charing Cross Hotel."

"And, your fee?"

"Substantial."

Sheila squirmed on the uncomfortable seat, listening to horse's hooves on the brick pavement. "Since this... ordeal is almost over, I have a couple more questions."

"You are entitled."

"Why do you haunt our flat?"

He chuckled quietly. "Baker Street, of all locations on this planet, was the one place I found contentment in life. You... have the potential to duplicate that tranquility; I wish to help in the effort..."

"But, having earned eternal rest..."

"Rest is not a word in my vocabulary."

"Ah!" Sheila bubbled. "You're bored."

"Indeed. Thrown together with pious sorts and philanthropists, there is nothing to stimulate my mind."

"And no cocaine to offset the doldrums."

"Exactly."

"But, how *did* you die?"

"I tired of the vestiges of old age. My brain continued to function; my body refused. Had I been Mycroft, who seldom stirred from his chair at the Diogenes Club, I would have not complained. Being unable to pursue the subjects of my deductions... amounted to defeat."

She trembled involuntarily. "You committed suicide?"

"I... mixed a concoction of ingredients with honey from the beehives, to make it palatable."

"I... probably would do the same, if I couldn't..." confessed Sheila.

Their meeting with the Italian curator short and concise, they burst from the hotel into oppressive humidity. The cab ride to 221B dragged for Sheila. She followed Sherlock into the gloomy dwelling, up the stairs and into the sitting room, where he lobbed the black fedora at the red Victorian divan and gravitated toward a violin case on the dining table.

The lauded Stradivarius.

“May I?” she implored.

Sherlock allowed her to inspect the instrument without touching it. “You... never learned to play,” he chided.

“Guitar, yes. Violin, no.”

“Pity.” Leaning on the chinrest, he ran the bow across the strings and adjusted the tuning. Then, as Bach reverberated between the walls, she retired to her bedroom - John H. Watson’s former room. The mist converged as she shed her great-great-uncle’s bulky attire. Once dissipated, she sank on the mattress amidst more personal... disorder.

She’d gained a fresh understanding of Sherlock’s displeasure with her casual attitude toward the cases that came her way, as well as an appreciation for the phenomenal obstacles he vanquished during his years as the world’s only consulting detective.

Tying his tattered purple robe at the waist, she returned to the basket-chair. Daylight peeked through grimy windows she’d repeatedly promised Edith would be cleaned. Adrenaline drained by this surreal experience, she settled in a half-lotus and closed her eyelids.

Edith delivered a silver tray bearing a tempting breakfast of bacon and eggs; Sheila ignored her hail.

“I would’ve sworn you weren’t here last night when John and I got home from the movie,” griped the russet-haired landlady.

Johnny Watson, the delicious aroma wafting through his door, hopped to the threshold holding his prosthetic left leg. “Me, too.”

They could never fathom where she’d been; Edith had no knowledge that Sherlock haunted the flat, and Watson would not believe their resident spectre had transported her to the 19th century, to impart his most intimate secrets.

Proof lay in the fedora propped on the divan, just where Sherlock had flung it before the 19th century morphed into the 21st.

Sherlock’s attempt to rouse her from mourning failed, unfortunately. He may have stressed the futility of grief but, simultaneously, he’d reinforced her cynicism about civilization as a whole. Beyond the advances in technology, people remained essentially greedy, avaricious and self-centered.

Ensconced thus in the basket-chair, she would avoid humanity's foibles, while immersed in her own memories of a sweet, tender soul who'd used his resources in an effort to brighten at least a corner of his world.

Production Notes

When Edith Hudson-Thorne drew aside heavy curtains that Monday morning, little actual light filtered through smudged casements overlooking Baker Street. The landlady clucked her tongue as she glared at her tenant, Sheila Holmes, who resembled a weathered Buddha statue in the basket-chair.

Feet tucked in a half-lotus posture among the tattered fabric of an old dressing gown, hands folded on her lap, the great-great-niece of 221B's former occupant hadn't eaten in weeks and, while she might appear to be sleeping with her eyelids closed, she heard every sound in the cluttered sitting room.

Including multiple footsteps on creaking, narrow stairs leading from the foyer.

Two men carried a heavy burden, with Johnny Watson - his gait unique due to his prosthetic left leg - guiding them.

Violet orbs discreetly monitored the trio as they maneuvered a 60-inch television across the threshold and propped the box against the round dining table, knocking stacks of unread magazines, mail and mouldy dishes to the floor.

Edith objected vociferously to their carelessness. "Isn't this place enough of a disaster, without you multiplying it?"

"Sorry," Watson apologized. "Once we get this set up, we'll clear away the mess."

"I've heard that before!" admonished the russet-haired American widow as she withdrew from the chaos.

Assorted power cords and wiring emerged from within the cardboard, and the duo in tan boilersuits assembled a metal stand on which the screen would be mounted. Within a quarter hour, the flat possessed its own in-home theatre.

Sheila remained silent. She grasped the purpose of this endeavor: to distract her from the intense mourning she felt for the late Tony Downton. The ploy smacked of desperation; even in her best mood, she seldom paid heed to ridiculous fare broadcast on the telly.

As Edith delivered a silver tray loaded with French toast, butter, syrup and a carafe of coffee, the technicians made their exit with cheery farewells. Watson toyed with the remote control, aiming it toward the device partially obscuring the "V.R." of bullet holes made decades prior.

"Batteries not included," his flatmate drawled.

Two sets of eyes swung toward the detective, who managed a wry grin.

"I was beginning to think you were dead," grunted Watson.

Edith flashed him a warning glance at his mention of death.

“It’s well past time she shook herself from this funk,” he retorted.

Sheila concurred, “Indeed. Still, a marathon of classic movies, or puerile comedy skits won’t elevate my spirits.”

“That’s... not...”

“Then, what is it, John?” Edith interspersed. “You told me just last week that finances are getting tight, since Sheila has taken no cases these past few months. You surely can’t afford such... extravagances.”

“I didn’t buy it,” explained the disabled British Army medic. “It’s a gift.”

Sheila sighed. “From whom?”

“The BBC.”

Both women’s brows furrowed in confusion.

Watson relieved Edith of the tray. “Come on, let’s eat while it’s hot.”

Between the two, they rearranged detritus on the table to make room for platters and plates. Sheila did not join them.

“I have to pride myself on keeping this secret,” Watson boasted as he doused three slices of egg-encrusted bread with maple sweetness.

“What secret?” queried Edith.

“At our last PTSD group therapy session, one of the gals announced she’d finished her apprenticeship in television production and had been offered a paying job with the network.”

“Congratulations,” Sheila muttered.

“She rang me a couple days later, wondering if I’d be interested in reviewing some potential series pilots for murder mysteries.”

“For authenticity, accuracy, that type of thing?” Edith interspersed.

“Should do.”

Both noticed Sheila’s involuntary shudder. Her present state of existence stemmed from an agreement to serve as actor/director/producer Tony Downton’s technical advisor for a Sherlock Holmes biographical film.

“This may not have been a wise decision...” warned the landlady between sips from a steaming mug.

“Nonsense.” Watson swiveled toward the basket-chair. “Your input, Sheila, would be most welcome, but it’s not required.”

“Then, you shall have it, and be done.” She launched into a tirade, more words than she’d spoken since Downton’s murder, denouncing how - on a historical level - television detective series failed to present either the crime itself or the investigation thereof in realistic fashion.

“When the crime - and the criminal - are revealed in the first act, the degree of suspense decreases exponentially. Viewers know the detective will make an arrest before the final credits; the rest is academic.”

“True,” Edith admitted.

“Conversely, plodding through the scenario, dragging it out to a full six or eight episodes, means padding the number of suspects, inserting false clues and diversions. In an era when few people have more than a two-minute attention span, can they be expected to remember the key players from week to week?”

Watson swallowed the last bite of his French toast. “I’ll.. keep that in mind.”

“Do, please.” Eyes closed once more, she relaxed. “And, perhaps, move that ungainly contraption down to Edith’s parlor, where I won’t be disturbed.”

“Absolutely not,” stated the blond veteran. “If you don’t wish to be disturbed, you can take yourself elsewhere.”

Edith’s fingers grabbed his slightly sticky hand. “John, don’t...”

“No, Edith. I have as much right to the sitting room as she does. My pension pays half the rent...”

Sheila scowled. “Your assertion is invalid, John, as you’re well aware. The rent’s paid years in advance.”

Crossing his silverware across the virtually spotless plate, Watson shrugged toward Edith. “Hey, I tried.”

“I would appreciate if you would try and leave me alone,” Sheila grumbled.

Edith shook her head, their efforts again thwarted.

Watson decided not to capitulate. “I’ll be back from my doctor’s appointment by three o’clock and, whether you like it or not, Sheila, I’m going to fulfill my end of the bargain.”

“For my part, I insist you shower and change clothes,” Edith added. “I’ll bring you a couple bin liners, and you’d better have this place tidy by tonight, or I will invoke the clause in your lease to have you forcibly evicted for destruction to personal property.”

Sheila did not respond, cognizant that - in the end - Edith’s resolve would buckle and she’d rid the chamber of the excess rubbish, as she did whenever her tenants went off to pursue a case.

A shower, though, might enable her to recover a modicum of energy.

She might even go for a walk, though the excuse of getting some fresh air really didn’t apply in the heart of London. Compared to the lingering stench of old tobacco that permeated the rooms - thanks to Sherlock’s pipe, when he deigned to visit them in spectral form - any change in scenery would be an improvement.

Left to herself, she stretched her legs and wiggled toes numbed by lack of exercise. A few steps were required before she steadied herself and hobbled to her room, raiding the wardrobe for a Beatles t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

From the kitchen below, Edith and Watson heard water running in the bathroom, and smiled at each other.

“If you ruffle her feathers enough, she’ll stir,” he chuckled.

“Think, though, how much time we’ve spent devising ways to spark her interest...”

“It may seem like a waste, Edith, but I owe it to her. She stayed with me through my cancer treatment and recovery...”

“When she finally found out, after you made me promise not to tell her.”

Watson leaned against the laminate counter, clutching a tea towel. “She was in California. She had a chance for an exciting life. I didn’t want to ruin that for her...”

“Maybe, if she’d cut short that trip, things would be different now,” countered the landlady.

“Every choice we make has consequences.”

Finding her fully clothed when he mounted the servants’ stairs, he paused at the sight.

“Are you going out?” he asked.

“I thought... I might accompany you to the Tube station, then stroll through Regent’s Park.”

“I... don’t have to leave for an hour yet. We can see what’s happening at the park together, if you like.”

“That would be grand, John. Just grand.”

“I’ll be a minute.” Watson ducked into his room and snatched a light jacket off the chair beside his walnut four-poster bed.

On their way out, they called to Edith, who nearly dropped a cast iron skillet she’d been scrubbing at this sudden development.

The sky a peaceful blue dotted with wispy clouds, temperature suitable to autumn, the pair adopted a leisurely pace among pedestrians rushing to their places of employment or schools. Watson beamed, content that Sheila might survive her prolonged grieving, after all. Her complexion sallow and her muscle tone deteriorated from months of inaction, even the smallest step could lead to the next, and the next...

Preoccupied by this reverie, he’d veered into the path of an oncoming couple. Sheila tugged him aside at the last second, avoiding an outright collision,

but his prosthetic jerked sideways, causing the unsuspecting woman to trip and nearly fall.

Watson caught her, holding her arms until she resumed an upright stance. That's when the veteran glimpsed her face.

"Olivia!" he acknowledged.

A soprano titter preceded, "You really need to be more careful, John."

"I'm really sorry. I was..."

Introduced to Sheila as a member of his therapy group, the detective discovered this to be the fortunate trainee who'd taken a job at the BBC. With her, J.D. McDonald, a Scot starring in one of the pilots Watson would soon be critiquing.

Sheila might have seemed possessive, firmly grasping Watson's forearm throughout the incident; when he retreated from Olivia, his leg slipped and only her hold prevented him from landing on the pavement. McDonald on the opposite side, they helped him to a table at an outdoor café, where he settled on a chair to adjust the artificial limb.

"Would you like a cuppa?" suggested Sheila.

"That would be lovely," Olivia replied.

Hailing the waiter, they ordered a pot of tea and scones.

"Quite a learning opportunity, your new position, from what John tells me," the detective remarked.

"Oh, yes. Studying textbooks and working in a mock-up are great, but when you get your hands on the actual technology..."

"Do you work on live transmissions, or recordings?"

"I'm... just a junior assistant in the production office. Maybe someday..."

Sheila, not meaning to sound facetious, noted, "Maybe Mr. McDonald will be able to..."

Olivia blushed to the roots of her ebony mane.

The unusually thin Scotsman, with an uncombed sandy mop, flashing amber orbs and stubbled chin, resembled more a homeless drug addict than a respected actor. "I'm in Livy's debt, t' be sure," he growled with a thick, nearly incomprehensible burr. "The opinions o' those who'll be watchin' the pilot will ha' a major impact on whether we sign a contract for a full series..."

Their tea served, the conversation lapsed for barely a moment.

"What's the plot?" inquired Sheila.

McDonald preened. "A murder takes place in a village outside of Manchester..."

She grit her teeth. "You intend to do a series - or more - in this setting?"

“Aye.”

“It won’t work.”

Watson chided, “Sheila!”

“No, John,” Olivia interrupted. “Let her go on. This is exactly what we need.”

McDonald squirmed on scrolled metal. “Aye. Such *expert* feedback ‘tis essential.”

Sheila ignored his derisive tone. “This village where you’ve set the action, will the population be three thousand or fewer?”

A reluctant, “Aye.”

“Then, you’ve immediately lost any hope of realism.”

“How so?”

“Even if the crime rate in such a community reached ten percent, far fewer would actually be murders, unless a certifiable lunatic resided among the citizenry. With each episode, as the inhabitants watch their neighbors being arrested and convicted of heinous felonies, there would be a mass exodus...”

McDonald sat stock still, glaring at Sheila beneath thick eyebrows, while his companion praised, “I see what you mean.”

“A huge part of your job in production, Olivia, should be the history of television programming - both here and abroad. In the States alone, mystery series that experimented with the small town format were either cancelled outright, or expanded to allow the protagonists to travel elsewhere. The best investigations take place in large cities, which allows for broader parameters to the formula.”

“Gawd, woman, where did ye acquire such knowledge?” snapped McDonald.

Watson sensed Sheila’s hesitation, set aside his china teacup and clasped her hand. “Besides being an internationally respected detective in her own right, she... consulted for a production crew from Hollywood.”

“Ah, the Sherlock Holmes...”

Olivia’s dark glance silenced McDonald.

Sheila extracted a 20 pound note from her jeans and tucked it beneath her saucer, rising. She’d progressed 100 meters along the block before Watson blustered an apology and hurried to catch her up, leaving Olivia and McDonald gazing after them.

“It’s tough to excuse your rudeness sometimes,” the former medic scolded as they came in sight of Regent’s Park.

“It’s not your fault, John. This outing was... a mistake.”

“Balderdash! If I had my druthers, you’d be out every day for at least two hours. It’d put some color back in your cheeks.”

“But, I’m not...”

“Don’t try that ‘I’m not ready’ business with me. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve been ready for ages!”

“You sound like Uncle Sherlock.”

“For once, he and I agree.”

Slowing their pace, they reveled in the birdsong, the landscaped greenery and children squealing with delight as they played. Watson’s wristwatch pinged the hour, and they veered toward 221B.

“Will you be game to watch some of the videos with me later?” he prodded, leaving her on the stoop.

“We’ll see. If that... Scot is any indication of the quality of the acting, I may have to restrain myself from assaulting the screen with a cricket bat.”

Her feeble chuckle reassured him as he proceeded toward the Baker Street Tube station.

From across the pavement, intrigued amber eyes observed this parting.

No more had Sheila latched the deadbolt, than a knock compelled her to reverse the motion. Outside, the tall, scruffy McDonald mustered an engaging smile, upper lip curled over his gums, teeth white and straight.

“Where’s Olivia?” the woman puzzled.

“I dropped her at the office.”

“How long are you going to use her before you move on to your next victim?”

“Eh?” protested the Scot.

Tempted to seize his charcoal-colored cotton henley and yank him inside, she drew aside the wooden panel and allowed him to enter. She signaled him up the stairs to the sitting room, where he settled on the red Victorian divan.

Edith hadn’t yet cleaned, and he growled, “What a pit!”

“I can imagine your accommodations, but that’s neither here nor there.” Sheila flopped on the basket-chair. “You and your partners haven’t had much luck selling your little project, so you’ve been exploring other options. Olivia is an eager, vulnerable - and attractive - individual. You... cultivated her acquaintance and, realizing her indirect connection to others who could further your scheme, convinced her to solicit a range of opinions that could influence the executives in charge.”

“Ye be quite the cynic.”

“And, you’re quite the con artist - which is, I suppose, the core element of any actor.” She caught a whiff of acrid tobacco, indicating the ghostly Holmes’ proximity. “Being a regular reader of prominent trade publications, you were familiar with my name and reputation, and my association with John. Olivia’s chance mention of his name in regard to her PTSD therapy group provided the link you needed...”

“So, ye think I’m fishin’ for an endorsement...”

“Aren’t you?”

McDonald’s arrogance never wavered. “Only partially.”

“Then, I recommend you be totally honest with me, or your future will be no better than a series of canned soup adverts.”

“That’s harsh, woman.”

She’d crossed the room in less than three seconds and opened the door, the exchange concluded.

“Ach, hold on,” he pleaded, contrition possibly genuine. “‘Tis another matter, t’ be sure. A real murder...”

“The drone camera operator struck in the woods outside Reigate...”

McDonald stiffened. “How could ye know?”

Sheila secured the door with a snicker. “The extent of my network would boggle your feeble mind.”

“We kept the reports from the media...”

“Leaks are not uncommon, when the bribes are lucrative.”

“Who grassed?”

“I neither know nor care.” She resumed her seat. “Tell me everything.”

McDonald recounted the events of a Thursday morning six months prior. Though the footage being staged would be used in the opening montage, its filming didn’t take place until well toward the end of location shooting. A drone with a high resolution camera eliminated the need to hire aircraft for aerial angles - and the independent producers placed a high priority on reducing expenses.

“Did that include ignoring safety protocols?” wondered Sheila.

“Nae, nae. The drone pilot had the proper trainin’, and the drone itself was programmed with sensors t’ prevent mid-air and ground collisions. Initially, we thought a random gust o’ wind had thrown the beastie off course...”

“But, the local constabulary confirmed no such anomalies were recorded at that time, on that day.”

“Aye.”

“No one else witnessed the incident?”

“We only went searchin’ after the director stopped receivin’ a live feed. The coroner listed the cause of death as blunt-force trauma t’ the back o’ the skull.”

“Did a qualified technician examine the drone for defects or malfunctions?”
Sheila persisted.

“I’m... nae sure.”

“If you were... serious about making a go of this series, you’d immerse yourself in every aspect of the related investigation. You’re just doing it for the paycheck, though.”

McDonald spouted defensively, “I went through citizens police training in preparation...”

“So, you may have been instructed how to handle a firearm without shooting yourself, or watched pumpkins explode from a safe distance. There’s nothing equal to getting your hands dirty on an actual case...”

“Show me.”

“I’m... not...”

“Why?”

She shot off the basket-chair, nerves on edge. “That’s none of your bloody business, Mr. McDonald, and this interview is terminated.”

“But...”

“No buts.” She dismissed him. “If your portrayal of a detective is half as lame as your grasp of the concept, I’ll probably fall asleep before the video runs five minutes.”

He faced her, en route to the exit. “Miss Holmes, the life savin’s o’ many people are invested in this series. If it fails, they may lose their homes, their cars...”

“That’s nothing to do with me. A hundred other such ventures meet the same fate every year.”

“Aren’t ye the least bit curious, after hearin’ the tale?”

“If I’d been the least bit curious, I’d have traveled to Reigate to investigate the matter personally.”

He inched toward her. “What if I bring ye the complete file?”

“You want a free lesson on being a detective?”

“Didn’t ye offer as much t’ Tony Downton before he signed ye t’ advise on his film?”

Her rage escalated. “Don’t...”

“Or, did ye just shag him in lieu o’ bona fide references?” he taunted.

And got his face slapped.

“Get out,” she hissed.

When Watson arrived mid-afternoon, he found a note scribbled on a jagged scrap of paper taped to his computer monitor. “Gone to Reigate.”

Whatever her reason, at least something spurred her from these musty confines.

He raised the windows and unrolled the empty bin liners, filling both and two more before hauling them down to the wheelie bins in the alley.

“How’d Sheila cajole you into doing her chore?” Edith pondered as she prepared a steak and kidney pie in the kitchen.

“She’s gone.”

“Gone?” the landlady echoed. “All I heard earlier was an argument, then silence.”

“Argument? Who...”

“I only got a peek at him when she let him in. I didn’t know she was back and I was going to answer the knock. Tall, extremely skinny, reminded me of a starving weasel.”

Watson shivered. “McDonald!”

Retrieving his mobile in the sitting room, he rang Olivia at the BBC offices. On any ordinary day, the veteran wouldn’t have worried about his flatmate, but in her present state of depression, he feared what might transpire.

As his only source of information, he selected the hand-labeled DVD case and popped the disk into the TV’s built-in player. He could find nothing significant in the visuals, and the storyline left much to be desired. Overall, Watson’s opinion of the pilot ranked quite low - even lower than Sheila’s, and she had only deduced the outcome from an oral summary.

Her clothes scented by country air and sporting a weary smile, she trudged up creaky stairs at dusk, a canvas pack stuffed with evidence slung over her left shoulder.

“What the devil?” Watson challenged.

She unloaded disorganized files, flash drives with drone recordings and the drone itself, detailing the process of obtaining them from Reigate officials.

“Nothing the constables hate more than unsolved murders.”

“So, you took a case?”

“Oh, no, John. I’m simply... scratching an itch.”

Replacing the BBC disk with raw recordings, the pair scanned images until Edith brought a late supper of hamburgers, fried potatoes and green salad.

“I didn’t see anything of value,” confessed Watson.

“Ah, but you did, John,” Sheila countered, ignoring the food as he tore into his sandwich. “From the moment the drone went airborne, the camera faced away

from the operator. In other words, it was always ahead of him. And, not once in any of the clips did a gust of wind displace its predetermined trajectory.”

“Meaning...”

“The drone wasn’t responsible for the injury that killed its pilot.”

“So, the death was staged to look...”

Sheila nodded brunette curls. “The coroner’s documentation verifies McDonald’s account that blunt-force trauma, inflicted from the rear, caused the operator’s demise. One of the constables obliged me by driving to the site but, naturally, all the evidence had been eradicated in the months since the murder.”

Watson recognized her coy smile. “Except...”

“A fist-sized rock, embedded at the base of a tree near the field where filming took place, had no business in that area, being from the west country. The bottom protected from rain and other damage by a layer of moss, the forensics investigator tested for blood residue, finding enough to run DNA profiles.”

“More than one?”

“Indeed. Both the drone operator and his attacker were injured in the fight before the fatal blow was inflicted.”

“What motive...”

“If you review the clips, you’ll see a few frames captured of a couple in a... compromising embrace at the tree line. The man - a secondary lead in the project - is married, and the girl is not his wife. Release of the clip to... unscrupulous sorts would make him the subject of blackmail or, worse, public ridicule and a nasty divorce, ruining his career.”

Watson scratched his close-cropped head. “So, realizing he’d been seen, he tried to force the drone operator to delete the footage?”

“Footage that would require an extra day to replace, at substantial expense. The operator had been dead at least fifteen minutes before the drone automatically landed at its original launch site, and the winds later tossed it about the landscape long after its battery lost its charge.”

“So, the guilty party...”

“Will be apprehended in due course,” Sheila concluded.

“And, the series?”

“Bad or good, there’s not a chance of it ever being broadcast. Network executives don’t sanction promoting the commission of real murders.”

A text message to Olivia invited her to 221B the next morning. She lamented that McDonald could not be reached; his mobile number was no longer in service.

Sheila had confided to Watson her deduction that McDonald's attentions toward the junior assistant had been less than honorable. With the murder's resolution front page news that Tuesday, the actor would realize not even rave reviews would rate his project a contract.

"Bastard!" Watson swore.

Sheila patted the distraught Olivia's arm. "There are far too many in the world today."

The detective gravitated toward the basket-chair around noon; Watson prevented her from taking a seat.

"C'mon, we're going for a walk," he announced.

She dodged his grasp. "Not if it means running into another of your many acquaintances!"

"I promise, we won't talk to anyone. You need to get active again..."

"Later, please. My energy reserves are drained."

"All right," acknowledged the blond veteran. "But, I'll hold you to that."

He fetched the carafe from the table, a refill in the offing. No more had he vanished along the corridor, than Sheila arranged herself in the basket-chair and closed her eyes.

"'Tis that how ye spend your days?" the Scottish burr cut the silence less than a minute later.

She replied evenly, "None of your business, McDonald."

"I s'pose I should thank ye for... followin' up on our little chat yesterday."

"No trouble."

"For ye, perhaps. For me, bankruptcy. I thought solvin' the murder would boost our notoriety with the public, and our success would be a given..."

"Next time, you'd be wiser to vet your associates more thoroughly." Sheila still hadn't opened her eyes.

"If there ever *is* a next time. For now, I'm a laughin'stock in the actor's union..."

"Worry more about how your moral center got so skewed. Human beings who wish to be respected by others must first respect themselves and take responsibility for their actions. You... lack those traits."

"'Tis dog-eat-dog in this field, woman."

"You're welcome to your opinion. I've known others..."

The words caught in her throat. Tony Downton - and most of his crew - lived to make the world better by entertaining the masses with light-hearted, escapist fare. Money had little to do with the process...

“Just ye wait, Sheila Holmes. In your darkest hour, I’ll be there t’ drive the final nail int’ your coffin.”

“Oh, go to hell.”

She heard the fireplace poker being freed from its stand and, for a scant second, believed he might attack her - and she in no physical condition to defend herself.

Instead, the metal shattered the television screen before the implement hit the floor and the door slammed shut.

When Watson returned, he assessed the damage, perplexed. “What the devil...”

“Good riddance to that contraption,” Sheila mumbled toward the shattered plastic. “And to the man who destroyed it.”

The Rabid, Starving Weasel

A sensation of cold moistness against Sheila Holmes' left knee roused her from a dozing contemplation in the basket-chair.

The tenderly whispered, "There you are, you naughty boy!" betrayed Edith Hudson-Thorne's presence.

One violet eye opened, to see the landlady rubbing the belly of a furry black puppy as it squirmed on the floor. Then, she clipped a leash to his collar and tugged.

"What the hell..." Sheila called after her. "A dog? Now, we have a *dog*?"

The slender American widow reversed course. "It's not *our* dog; it's *my* dog. Or, at least, I'm watching it for a friend."

"Watching it do what?"

"Watching it while they're on holiday."

Sheila gazed at the ceiling. "God, help us."

"Sorry he disturbed you," Edith grumbled as she swept the tiny animal in her arms and toted him toward the stairs.

The tenant of 221B Baker Street didn't hear her confide to Johnny Watson, "I told you this wasn't a good idea."

"Nonsense," replied the former British Army medic. "Despite all her protestations, she has a soft heart. She'll be in love with him by tonight."

"I bet you a tenner you're wrong."

"Done."

Watson limped into the sitting room, the London *Times* beneath his arm. "Good morning, lazy bones!" he greeted his flatmate.

"Why are you so cheerful, John?" she groaned. "The doctor give you a clean bill of health?"

"Nothing so mundane. It's a gorgeous day, perfect for a jaunt in the park."

"Oh, God..."

He strode toward her, prosthetic left leg nearly undetectable beneath his jeans. "Get yourself up, shower and change, and we'll be on our way."

"I..."

"No protests, Sheila. The puppy must be walked, so you might as well come."

The great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes struggled to contain her temper. "All right, all *right*!"

These regular outings - another of Watson's attempts to banish her doldrums after Tony Downton's untimely death - did, at least, expose her to fresh

air and allow her powers of observation to be honed anew, after months of inactivity. Still, an unrelenting knot in her stomach spoiled any inkling of enjoyment.

As when the untrained spaniel veered back and forth on the pavement, like a carpenter's level bobbing between adjustments. Its nose planted firmly on the concrete, it sniffed and yipped eagerly, stopping too often to add its bodily fluids to layers already dried on parking meter and traffic signal poles.

That degree of energy drained Sheila's reserves far too quickly, though she definitely noticed their trek did not pass unobserved by furtive eyes.

She relegated the animal to Watson and Edith just within the boundaries of Regent's Park, sparsely populated this early on a Saturday. Vendor tents were being raised for some type of festival, and sport enthusiasts huddled over rules for a rugby tournament.

"You'll be okay?" Watson hinted.

"Sure. Take a turn or two around the Serpentine, and meet me here in an hour."

Idle chatter - or, more precisely, encouraging platitudes meant to lift her spirits - annoyed her no end. She preferred to sit quietly, analyzing life in all its complexity as it transpired around her.

On a wrought-iron bench beneath a massive maple, her nerves untensed briefly. Sunlight filtered through leaves far advanced with shades of autumn. Youngsters jumped in red and gold piles, much to the chagrin of the landscape crew who'd yet to mulch those already fallen.

Yet, the adults laughed at displays of such innocent entertainment, recalling their own youth.

Plaid blankets spread on the lawns provided boundaries for crawling infants and toddlers, out with their mothers. Dogs fetched sticks, balls or flying discs for their owners, mostly ignoring others of their species.

A welcome tranquility enveloped Sheila, except for that gnawing realization of probing eyes upon her. After their initial lap of the park, John and Edith brought the puppy to the bench, requesting their companion allow it to sleep on her lap.

"Tired, so soon?" she quipped.

Edith smiled. "At this age, they go in bursts."

"Fine. Take your time."

No more had they retreated than a child of six or so wandered toward Sheila, in tears. Not the sort to deal with emotional outbursts of this nature, the woman flinched.

The little boy, nonetheless, plopped on the bench beside her, wiping his nose on his sweatshirt sleeve.

“What’s wrong, little man?” she asked. “You lost your parents?”

A ruffled tawny mop shook in the negative. “I lost my baaaalllll!” he howled.

Sheila clenched her jaw. “Did it roll somewhere you can’t reach it?”

Again, the shaking head, and a scrawny hand thrust upward at the tree.

“How’d it get up there?”

“A man, a mean man, grabbed my cricket bat and hit the ball very hard, on *purpose!*” he whimpered.

“Mean, indeed,” Sheila agreed. “That’s deplorable.”

The lad, knees of his trousers muddied, dirt embedded in his palms, maneuvered himself to stand on the slats, groping at the low branches, far beyond him.

“Why don’t you bring your mommy...”

“She’s at the swings with Billy.”

Sheila felt trapped. “Do you want my help?”

“Pleassssse!”

She gently lifted the snoring spaniel off her lap and set it on the grass. In her present physical condition, she didn’t trust herself to balance on the uneven surface, and stared upward, seeing no evidence of a ball wedged in a crevice.

In fact, she hadn’t heard any impact that would confirm its presence prior to the boy’s approach.

She motioned the child away, in case she toppled off this perch but, no more had she set her right foot on the slats, an agile pair of hands fastened around the puppy and fled.

The boy, too, had vanished.

“Shit!” Sheila swore, spinning 360 degrees to catch this miscreant’s route of escape.

Oddly enough, the wiry felon bolted directly toward where Watson and Edith stood, chatting with friends. Sheila didn’t have the capacity to make chase.

“John!” she shouted. “Incoming at eight o’clock!”

Without redirecting his attention, Watson extended his left arm at shoulder height. At a full sprint, the perpetrator slammed into the barrier and flipped backward onto his spine. The puppy, involuntarily released, squealed in dismay as it bounced on the packed earth. Edith retrieved it and cuddled it to her bosom, muttering soothing assurances of safety in its ear.

Stunned and winded, the thwarted criminal blinked in confusion. Before he could recover, Sheila parted the converging throng and planted her sneaker atop his gaunt chest.

Violet orbs scanned beyond the ring of onlookers. Those not interested in the excitement had moved on: mothers corralled their offspring away from the danger, sports teams resumed their play.

Except for one person, a motionless, spindly figure with an unruly ginger mop, garish purple duster and red high-top sneakers. He leaned his spine casually against a sturdy oak, sharp chin bowed, amber eyes staring straight at Sheila beneath thick eyebrows.

A trio of constables arrested the teenaged canine thief in short order. Through a babble of voices, key details narrowed the pool of witnesses to Edith and Sheila, who provided their statements into a hand-held recorder for future transcription, once the masses had dispersed.

Watson, on a signal from the detective, furtively monitored the lurker until they were cleared to depart. “Definitely not trying to be inconspicuous,” he remarked as they trudged along Baker Street.

Sheila chuckled, “Not in that outfit.”

“He wanted to be seen,” concurred Watson.

“But, not always.”

“Eh?”

She sneered, “He’s been posted near the flat, off and on, for at least a month.”

“Then, you were aware...”

“Should do.” She pretended to stop and tie her own footgear. “As soon as we get inside, you and Edith need to pack a bag and leave by the kitchen door. I won’t have you caught in the middle of this.”

“In the middle of what?”

“J.D. McDonald’s revenge.”

The medically-retired veteran instinctively glanced over his shoulder; his companion restrained him.

“Leave it be, John.”

“But, how...”

“Today, he deliberately exposed himself, meaning he’s ready to instigate a plan which, he believes, will trigger paranoia, fear and desperation. He has no clue I’ve been preparing for him all along.”

“How so?”

“Don’t concern yourself. Just be sure to get Edith, the dog and yourself to safety.”

“I’d much rather stay...”

“No. Having to worry about you, as well, would be an unnecessary hindrance.” At his downcast expression, Sheila squeezed his arm. “I... phrased that badly, John. I’m sorry. Knowing you’re out of harm’s way will... free up my mental faculties for the battle to come.”

A feeble grin confirmed his resignation. Edith had unlocked the door and loosed the spaniel across the threshold; Watson, last inside, secured the deadbolt.

Alone within the hour, Sheila had cast off her jeans and t-shirt in favor of Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown. She puttered in Edith’s kitchen, preparing a formal tea. She hadn’t revealed that she’d taped a scripted invitation in McDonald’s preferred hiding place along the row of shops over the road, in order to expedite a positive climax.

“Why the hell are you a ginger now?” she greeted from the basket-chair when he ascended creaking stairs at noon and passed beneath the sitting room lintel.

He assessed the surrounding clutter and countered in a thick Scottish burr, “Why the hell don’t ye clean up this rubbish?”

He’d shed his garish attire for more subdued tones, flinging himself on the red Victorian divan as if in his own domicile.

“Help yourself to tea or coffee, since I didn’t know which you prefer.”

“Ta.” He filled a gold trimmed china cup with the latter and reclined once more. “How long ha’ ye known?”

“That you were skulking in the shadows?” she retorted. “More than a fortnight.”

“Liar!”

She thrust her arm toward the window. “In the odd moments when I would rotate my neck to eliminate kinks in my upper spine, I couldn’t help but see you, usually with your mobile to your ear.” She tucked her legs into a half-lotus posture. “What perverse ideas ran through your skull while you stood there, pretending to be a statue?”

The disdain infused in his tenor chilled her. “A thousand ways t’ kill ye.”

“Any top contenders?”

“A handful.”

“Anything creative?”

“There be possibilities.” He drained his cup. “Ye dinnae seem...”

“Frightened? I’m not.”

“Why?”

“You’re not a killer, just an unemployed actor.”

He bragged, “I’ve played quite a number o’ villains in m’ career.”

“That doesn’t make you one.”

A switchblade instantly at her throat indicated otherwise.

“Rather unoriginal,” she critiqued.

“But final.”

Swiftly gripping his wrist, she twisted mercilessly sideways. The knife clattered on the boards and he stumbled backward, massaging the painful joint with exceptionally long fingers.

“Bitch!” he moaned.

Sheila refused to let McDonald see how these minimal activities exhausted her. “Oh, sit down.”

He complied hesitantly.

“I’ve no doubt some in your profession have difficulty reconciling their roles with real life,” she droned. “But, for God’s sake, stop with the psychotic madman schtick. It doesn’t work with that face.”

“What’s wrong wi’ m’ face?”

She snickered, “A friend of mine described it as akin to a starving weasel.”

Tentative digits stroked the high cheekbones and stubbled chin. “I dinnae think...”

“That’s your problem.”

“Eh?”

“You don’t *think*.” Feeling her temper rising, she closed her eyes and concentrated on regulating her breathing. “Do you remember that night when you trashed the telly with my fireplace poker?”

“Must do.”

“You thought I’d ruined your career as an actor.”

“Ye did. I ha’ nae had an audition - stage or screen - since.”

“Not through any fault of mine.”

“But, ye... ye...”

“Your co-star on that ill-fated series is to blame, for murdering the drone operator.”

“Well, aye...”

“For your part, you could have reinvented yourself, launching an entirely new career...”

“Stop talkin’ in riddles, woman!” he protested.

“You and an enterprising video editor could have taken the footage, inserted a reenactment of the crime, added interviews with fellow cast members, and pitched quite a unique style of reality show to the BBC.”

“True crime series are a blight on the schedule.”

“The ones based on set third-person formulae, yes. But, you were filming a fictional mystery not half a kilometer from where an actual murder occurred... and you had the courage to seek out the truth, putting your own future at risk. That... personal connection...”

Sheila glimpsed a menacing transformation behind McDonald’s eyes in that instant, and gulped.

He rose slowly, fingers flexing. “Ye are toyin’ wi’ me, confusin’ me so I won’t make good on me promise...”

“Why would I welcome you into my home, if I thought...”

“Ye are recordin’ this; there’s a camera hooked up somewhere...”

As her guest roamed the chamber, upsetting stacks of unopened mail, newspapers and dirty dishes in search of hidden electronic devices, Sheila puzzled, “Why would I do that?”

“All it would take is a video confession for me t’ be locked behind bars, and you t’ land a fat contract wi’ your own reality format...”

Who, after all, exhibited symptoms of paranoia? mused the detective.

If only she *was* recording this exchange! The courts would authorize commitment papers immediately upon verification of McDonald’s unhinged behavior.

Unhinged, indeed, but calculatedly so? Did he surmise this to be some sort of secret audition...

“McDonald... what do they call you? John?”

Rearranging test tubes, flasks and pipettes on Sherlock’s lab table, he whipped toward her. “David.”

Sheila understood: J.D. equaled John David, and he used his middle name.

“David, have a sandwich. Relax. You’re at least twenty pounds underweight...”

“‘Tis what happens when a body dinnae eat regular.”

“Let’s go out for a real meal, then. Whatever you like, wherever you like.”

His response: that transcendent lapse, where he stood perfectly still, propped against the wall, hands behind his back, amber orbs boring into her. He considered the suggestion, features brightening for a second before ominous clouds darkened his mien anew. “Nae.” He vented freely as he shuffled to the window. “Dinnae ye see? ‘Tis not about food, or money, or even a posh mansion

in the country. 'Tis about power. Reputation. T' ha' a voice that commands respect, where passion projects can be approved wi' the snap o' m' fingers..."

The comment slipped out before Sheila could swallow it: "At least, it's not about some perverted obsession with women and sex."

That ginger-crowned head rotated so quickly, the speed could have snapped his vertebrae. "What the divil do ye mean?"

"Haven't you noticed how villains in modern dramas all want to control others according to their own fetishes - with sex drawing the largest audience? The plots of these... puerile efforts are little more than rehashes of older scripts - extended to ten or even thirteen episodes and driving the viewers mad with pointless twists just to fill the hours - not worthy of versatile actors such as yourself."

His burr lost its threatening edge. "Very... insightful." His internal storm regained its strength, nonetheless. "Unless ye are a liar, like I said before. John mentioned ye don't watch telly, as a rule, and aren't familiar wi' the current offerings..."

"John doesn't know everything about me." She rose awkwardly, right foot asleep. When she pitched sideways, McDonald caught her at the waist. "C'mon," she directed, leading him into her bedroom.

She repressed a shudder when he closed the door. Opening the oak wardrobe, she debated snatching Sherlock's pistol from the shelf for her own protection but, instead, pulled a small, battery-powered television from beneath a pile of unwashed laundry. "I watch quite a bit of telly," she bluffed.

McDonald smiled broadly, lips curled above his gums, teeth white and straight.

As Sheila restored the remnant of an earlier era to its place, her belt unknotted, the dressing gown revealing a red tank top and black running shorts.

Her companion's grin widened. "Together, we would make a marvelous team," he drawled. "Ye would be an incredible judge o' scripts, pushin' for rewrites, top salaries, and improvements t' the production values..."

Typical, she surmised, and her contralto conveyed unmasked sarcasm. "I'd handle all the details, while you just... act?"

His backhand across her cheek landed her on the rumpled mattress. Any attack of a physical nature - even by such a scrawny physique - would have overpowered her scant defenses.

To preclude that eventuality, the barrel of the Smith & Wesson pistol aimed at McDonald's chest.

He'd taken one pace forward, immediately recoiling with his hands raised in submission. "Ye... would nae..."

"You want to wager your life on that assumption?"

If she had no better reason to motivate herself back to an active lifestyle after this extended period of grieving, it would be that she missed her natural agility. She felt herself quite the clutz as she regained her feet and, when the end of the long belt caught around her ankle, she went down hard on her right knee.

McDonald lifted her by the elbows; she gazed up at wild amber eyes a second too late...

He trapped her in an embrace, his body wedged against hers, his lips assaulting her mouth.

A wave of emotions - diametrically opposed to the depression with which she'd been dealing - tightened her muscles. She marshaled the last of her strength for a shot to his groin, when he abruptly released her, wearing a self-satisfied smirk.

"Aye, we'd make phenomenal partners!"

"I've no desire to be your agent, your publicist, or whatever else you need to make a success of this business you've chosen."

"I'm an actor. If I'm t' focus on m' craft, others must..."

"Others, David. Not me."

He lunged for her; she retained her grip on the pistol, and used it.

She couldn't repel another attack.

As the shot rang out, Watson burst into the sitting room, scanning for damage. He hobbled toward the closed door; Sheila pulled the panel inward as he reached for the knob.

"What's... happened?" he cried at the blood splattered across the fabric of the dressing gown.

"McDonald happened. He's not just a starving weasel, he's a rabid, starving weasel."

"Barmy?"

"Delusions of grandeur."

"Dead?"

"No, but he won't be walking for awhile." She collapsed in her flatmate's arms, and he ushered her to the basket-chair. "Why... are you here?"

A self-conscious chuckle. "I forgot my wallet."

They laughed together, almost to the point of hysteria, until Edith appeared on the threshold, holding the squirming black spaniel. She assessed the room's disarray. "You'll pay for the repairs, Sheila."

Her tenant sobered. "Every penny, Edith. I swear."

Watson rang the Metropolitan Police, who dispatched an ambulance to transport McDonald to hospital, guarded by a team of constables.

"You're for bed, after a decent meal," he advised the knackered female.

"I'm not hungry."

"None of that, now. None of that. If you were a petrol tank, you'd be registering empty." He cleared away the tea and sandwiches. "Roast beef, salad and... just to recoup some energy, chocolate cake."

Edith mumbled to herself as she descended the servants' stairs to the kitchen. "I was so looking forward to a holiday..."

Muscular damage to McDonald's left thigh extensive - caused by being shot at extreme close range - he endured a six-hour surgery and the ensuing grogginess from the anesthetic without serious repercussions. When the attending physician allowed investigators to question him the following day, however, he ended up being strapped to the bed due to persistent violent agitation.

He was confined to the psychiatric ward shortly thereafter.

Watson read Sheila the London *Times* article as she lay in her own bed, no amount of sleep reviving her depleted reserves. McDonald was described as a "promising actor" in his youth, who'd been given the boot from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for blatant misconduct - RADA administrators did not respond to inquiries seeking comment. Hailed as a minor hero for requesting Sheila's assistance with the cold case on the set of the failed series pilot, his subsequent aberrant behavior alienated him from his agent and casting directors.

Watson folded the paper and tossed it on the night stand. "How was he involved in the dog-napping scheme?" he queried.

"He'd read about the rash of pet thefts around the city and, having seen Edith bring the puppy home, thought such a crime a step toward his own redemption. His motley band of actors believed it a birthday prank. If you hadn't been so... efficient in clotheslining the culprit - who has been released and the charges dismissed - David would have stepped in to play the hero. It would have garnered him some positive publicity and, supposedly, my endorsement for the reboot of his acting career."

"He told you this?"

"No need, John. He'd concocted a dual fantasy in that twisted brain: he'd either use me in his quest for success, or kill me in retaliation for destroying his prospects. The reason I lured him here was to prevent innocent bystanders from being harmed. His mental state exposed, he had only one target for his rage."

"You were nearly raped."

“It wouldn’t have come to that.”

“That’s a rare bit of optimism.”

“Should do. David’s primary goal was fame. A minor consequence of that is, undisputably, a sense of entitlement in romantic pursuits, a notion I... forgot, thanks to my overtaxed brain.”

“You weren’t afraid...”

With a sheepish grin, she replied, “Petrified.”

Tucking the quilt to her neck, Watson rose. “Get some rest.”

“John, there’s one more unanswered question about all this.”

“What?”

“You may have to seek assistance from your sources.”

“Certainly. What it is?”

“Why the hell did he dye his hair ginger?”

Even if she’d been in perfect health, Sheila never could have predicted how that information would become available.

Edith had cajoled Watson into a trip to the grocer’s Thursday afternoon. Now that Sheila had started eating daily, the need for additional staples required extra hands for the purchases. Confident Sheila could manage without constant supervision, they veered south on Baker Street just as the clock above the stove chimed two.

Sheila carried a mug of coffee up the stairs, pausing when a knock summoned her to the front of the domicile. Two uniformed constables on the stoop baffled her.

“May I help you?”

“Miss Holmes? We came to notify you that John David McDonald escaped from custody six hours ago.”

Her eyebrows arched as she waved the pair into the foyer, closing the door behind them. “How?”

“He was being transferred to hospital for a follow-up examination of his injuries when he subdued his guards, unlocked his wrist and ankle shackles, and bolted,” explained the robust, balding corporal.

She mulled, “He’s become very much the magician.”

“He’s also armed, and should be considered dangerous.” his partner noted.

The mug shattered on the floor, spraying hot liquid in all directions, including on the officers’ polished shoes. They gaped in awe as she took the stairs by twos, swinging into the sitting room by grasping the door jamb. The day’s newspaper, spread on the dining table, was practically shredded as she rifled the pages.

A full-color quarter-page advert near the theatrical listings offered the services of lauded magician John Davies for birthday and holiday parties, weddings, corporate functions and other events. The photo: McDonald with a short ginger mane and purple coat.

“Shit!” she gasped.

Panting, the constables glanced over her shoulder.

Missing pieces to this puzzle fell into place. Sheila realized popularity as a stage illusionist had only aggravated the actor’s egoistical drive for success. He’d changed his hair color to prevent himself from being associated with this lower class of entertainment on the eventuality his star would soon ascend to the heights.

His arrest had cost him this second occupation, redoubling his need for vengeance.

“We’ll remain here until he’s apprehended,” declared the corporal.

She refused the gesture. “No need. He wouldn’t dare...”

“He’s insane, ma’am.”

“Must do. Post men at the nearest junctions, if you like, but not indoors.”

They acquiesced to her stipulations, making their exit after they fortified themselves against chill autumn breezes with a generous portion of coffee.

Sheila, for her part, fetched a broom and dustpan from the cupboard and swept shards of broken clay off the foyer tile, dumping them in the bin outside the kitchen door.

She heard the commotion before she saw it. Edith and Watson, toting six bags between them, argued loudly as they entered the alley. Not a dispute between themselves, but with their captor: John David McDonald.

He held them at gunpoint, hostages to gain his freedom.

Her joints aching, Sheila squatted behind the bin. She listened intently to the footsteps - Edith in the lead, followed by Watson’s distinctive gait. They passed her as she motioned for silence with a finger to her lips, entering the structure with their burden and halting beside the rectangular wooden table.

McDonald’s prison slipper on the first step, Sheila rushed him. They tumbled together over the neighbor’s bicycles, arms flailing for control of the semi-automatic service pistol he’d commandeered from his prison guard.

“Sheila, no!” Edith shrieked from the doorway, Watson blocking her egress.

The detective awkwardly flipped McDonald onto the stone pavers and straddled his chest. Her left knee pinned his right wrist to the surface, despite his efforts to aim the weapon. Her right fist assailed his face with repeated blows.

Blood streaming from his nose and mouth, he spat a glob in her eye, temporarily blinding her. He rolled from beneath her, leveling the sidearm at her forehead.

She raised her hands, knuckles coated red. “Do what you want with me, David, but leave them out of it.”

“Oh, the plans I ha’ for ye...” he oozed. “There’s an abandoned shop not a block from here, wi’ a rat-infested cellar. There, ye’ll be chained and locked in total darkness until ye offer me anythin’ t’ release ye.”

“First things first, though. You need a doctor...”

An ever larger stain turned his grey prison trousers maroon, from where surgical sutures had burst in their struggle. He glanced down and, dismayed at the amount of lost fluids, crumpled to the ground.

The force of his fall, while his finger was inserted in the trigger guard, discharged the weapon into his own ribcage.

A Metropolitan Police squad assembled in the cramped space, guns drawn. Edith and Watson welcomed Sheila into the building, while constables secured the perimeter, confiscated the stolen pistol and collected evidence.

Draining a tumbler of water, Sheila suddenly jerked her head toward the stairs.

“Where’s the puppy?” she demanded.

“In my parlor,” replied Edith.

At the landlady’s nod, Watson limped along the corridor and freed the whimpering animal, whose nap had been interrupted by the mayhem. He had a bit of trouble getting traction on the tile, before galloping beneath the table and leaping onto Sheila’s lap, licking her perspiration-and-blood stained cheeks.

From her back pocket, Edith extracted a ten pound note, slapping it on Watson’s palm.

The Black Hole

Crimes against women appeared daily in London papers, print and internet editions, with more serious incidents also broadcast on radio and telly evening news programmes. Calls for continued vigilance by the Metropolitan Police - including among their own officers - filled editorial pages and the halls of Westminster during sessions of Parliament.

Even before the latest rash of disappearances.

Sheila Holmes had been approached, on more than one occasion, about joining a task force created to assess and address violence of this nature; each time, she declined.

“I don’t have the patience to sit around a conference table and natter on about the problem. I believe in taking action,” she declared to Johnny Watson after the latest exploratory tea at The Clermont, Charing Cross that August Friday. “I understand the situation is critical, but where are the boots on the ground, apprehending these bastards who believe they can lay hands on their wives, girlfriends, daughters - not to mention total strangers - with impunity?”

From his wing-backed armchair beside the sitting room’s dormant fireplace, the blond disabled veteran repressed a grin. “What would you suggest? Wholesale beheadings?”

“A system of justice that protects the victims - *believes* the victims - would be a start, instead of waiting for battered bodies to make their way through Accident and Emergency services or, worse, the morgue.”

“Should do, Sheila, but you’re only one person...”

“With a unique set of qualifications to track these monsters.” Unscrewing the cap of the carafe on the round dining table, she swirled dark liquid within, a film congealed across the surface. Scowling, she set it aside. “Edith’s not home yet?”

“She rang an hour ago. All flights from Paris are grounded due to storms.”

“Brilliant.” The young sleuth flung herself on the basket-chair. “What are you in the mood for tonight?”

“Asian take-away would suffice.”

Plucking at the frilled cuffs of her satin blouse, she kicked off black leather flats. “I’ve got to get out of these clothes. I feel like I’m strangling.”

Before she could retire to her bedroom, Watson tossed her a folded section of the London *Times*. “Speaking of which...” he hinted.

She glanced at the three-column headline, announcing that a woman who’d been reported missing the previous Saturday was found in a clump of trees just off

the A1 near Bedford by a motorist repairing a puncture. The preliminary cause of death: strangulation.

“Just dumped there like a bag of rubbish?” Sheila scoffed.

“That’s the sixth one this year.”

“A serial killer?”

“So the similarities indicate.”

Nimble fingers seized her shoes. “And not a peep from any of the movers and shakers at the tea. Strange.”

“The police commissioner has advised women to stay home after dark going forward.”

“An admirable gesture of futility.” She shuffled toward her room, pitching the footwear at the far wall as she slammed the door.

“I guess I’m ordering dinner, then,” her flatmate grumbled, reaching for his mobile.

They were devouring sweet and sour chicken over white rice, egg rolls, and fried dumplings when the doorbell forced them to abandon their wooden chopsticks. Sheila took the creaking steps by twos, eliminating the need for Watson to limp down on his prosthetic left leg. On the stoop waited the middle-aged Lady Harriet Mannerly, her make-up and sandy hair impeccable, prim tweed business suit unseasonably warm.

“This is an honor,” Sheila greeted. “But, our business concluded just a couple hours ago.”

“The planning committee adjourned into executive session after the main meeting. We’ve approved a proposal to engage you in regard to these deaths.”

Escorted to the sitting room, the wife of an investment banker twitched her pert nose at the clutter strewn on the Persian carpet. Watson removed magazines from the red Victorian divan, providing her a seat.

“Not to sound flippant, Sheila, but most of the time, the women who are subjected to abuse aren’t... of a social class that merits our concern,” Harriet began.

A statement which brought both tenants to their feet, disgusted. Watson opened his mouth to scold their guest for this narrow-minded opinion; Sheila laid a warning hand on his forearm.

“From the poorest to the wealthiest, no woman deserves such a fate...” she drawled.

Harriet squirmed on the cushions. “I... apologize if I’m phrasing this badly. It’s just: one of the recently killed is my cousin.”

“Strangled?”

“Yes.”

“Is she still at the morgue?” Sheila pressed.

“Yes.”

“I’ll need to see the body.”

The task force chair bristled. “Why?”

“There’s a huge difference between a woman randomly snatched, beaten and discarded, and one whose abduction and death is premeditated.”

“You’re saying...”

“It’s vital to learn whether she had alcohol in her blood, struggled with the aggressor, and so forth.”

Harriet rose, adjusting her skirt. “My car is outside.”

Watson opted to remain at 221B; Sheila would be needing all available data on the victims.

The detective hadn’t set foot inside the Westminster Public Mortuary since her early days in London, when the ghost of Sherlock Holmes had subsumed her physical form as part of a murder investigation. Not much had changed, except she was welcomed by the staff and had no need to disguise herself in medical scrubs.

Pulled from a refrigerated unit and laid on a gurney, Harriet Mannerly’s ginger-maned, athletically-built cousin might have been sleeping, except for the blue tint to her skin and singular ligature marks around her neck. Sheila reviewed the postmortem results: a low percentage of alcohol, no poisons, no drugs - prescription or illegal - no broken fingernails indicating resistance, no bruises.

“She knew her assailant,” Sheila pronounced, rejoining her client in the waiting room.

“Can you be sure?”

“Have done.”

The pair returned to the idling Mercedes.

“He used some sort of necktie to kill her,” the younger woman continued. “Not silk, but some woven material with a shiny coating.”

“How...”

“Fibers were embedded in the skin, according to the paperwork. The coroner had the wherewithal to keep a few fragments after submitting the rest to the police.” She sank on the vehicle’s leather rear seat. “Furthermore, she was strangled from the front, not behind. I can almost see her, face-to-face with the man as he draped the cloth over her shoulders - as if admiring how it looked on her - then wrenching tight and knotting it right over her larynx, maintaining pressure until...”

Harriet sobbed, and Sheila realized this pillar of society, good intentions notwithstanding, had no stomach for such gruesome details.

The passenger deposited on Baker Street once a pledge to maintain contact was confirmed by a polite handshake, the expensive sedan merged with traffic. Sheila mounted narrow stairs, dropping on a straight-backed chair at the table, twirling her chopsticks in the air before attacking the left-overs.

“Don’t you want to warm that in the microwave?” Watson squinted from the desk.

“It’s neither here nor there,” she mumbled between bites. “What have you learned?”

“The... strangler has no preferred district for acquiring - and dumping - his victims.” A printed map was marked with the locations where each victim had last been seen, a corresponding colored dot denoting the site of her discovery. “No set age group, body type...”

“How many, so far?”

“At least two dozen fitting this *modus operandi*.”

“Dating back how far?”

“Three years.”

“But, scant on the evidence.”

“Definitely,” Watson affirmed.

“And, no witnesses.”

“A few of the victims were with friends, but were alone when they vanished, as if into thin air.”

“Good work, John.”

Watson selected a fortune cookie, snapping it in half and extracting the thin slip. “One thing I don’t understand,” he said, crumpling the paper.

“What’s that?”

“None of the public accounts mention the women were raped.”

“Rape would imply an altercation of some type, or use of a drug to render them incapable of resistance. No, this blackguard doesn’t need to force himself on his victims. He attracts them through guile, seduces them and uses them for his own gratification before disposing of them.”

“How can you be so positive?” prodded the former Army medic.

“He reminds me quite a bit of Moriarty: feels himself superior to others, invincible. Where Jamie tended toward the dramatic, though, instilling paranoia in his subjects before inflicting the fatal blow, this bloke... is utterly heartless. He draws energy from his captives’ attention, revels in watching their reactions, their

expressions, even as he's choking the life from their bodies. He has no conscience, and believes himself above the law, the police incapable of catching him."

"That's quite harsh, Sheila."

"He is, John. He is." She broke the chopsticks and tossed them in an empty container. "He would not hesitate to treat anyone who crosses him just like that."

"How do you plan to stop him?"

She licked sweet and sour sauce from her fingertips. "I haven't the foggiest."

"Maybe a good lie-down will clear that fog."

"I hope you're right."

Watson extracted a bin liner from beneath the armchair, and shook it open.

Sheila's violet orbs widened. "What the hell..."

"I figured we'd clean up our mess, rather than have Edith scold us for negligence when she returns."

They laughed together as plates and cups were collected, unopened post and assorted detritus scooped into the bag. The blond Army veteran's nimble fingers tied the drawstring as he moved toward the corridor. Sheila followed, content the dishes she left on the kitchen counter would be washed on the morrow.

Long before she awoke, actually.

Watson had retired, leaving his flatmate to pore over the map he'd created, jotting down addresses of a tavern, a library, a West End theatre and a cozy bistro. Recordings from security cameras in those areas on the nights the women went missing might yield some clues.

Enjoying a lie-in meant breakfast of toast, oatmeal - albeit tepid - and juice awaited her when she wrapped herself in her great-great-uncle Sherlock's tattered dressing gown and trod on bare feet through the sitting room.

The taxing and lengthy process of studying grainy footage acquired from various establishments, completed over the course of a week, netted little in the way of useful information. In a span of 15 minutes prior to the victims emerging from the respective buildings to 15 minutes afterward, no common threads could be identified: not the same car in the vicinity, nor any individual who approached them for two blocks in either direction.

None of the females hailed a taxi, or strolled to a nearby car park to retrieve their personal vehicle. Nor did they avail themselves of convenient Tube stations - which would have required another stack of consents to obtain those webcam feed backups.

Watson's frustration at the stream of expletives while Sheila scrolled through files on the desktop computer increased as the days passed. He

volunteered for a jaunt to New Scotland Yard on Tuesday, to obtain copies of police reports on those who'd gone missing over the past half-year, and the murder victims' residential addresses, solely to escape the confines of the flat.

Wednesday saw him scrambling through the city's neighborhoods and council offices for more recordings, to confirm or discount Sheila's suspicion that the four subjects she'd selected were abducted from their homes.

They lived nowhere near each other, came from diverse cultures and economic backgrounds. Sheila struggled to motivate herself to embark on this second phase of her investigation, eyes weary from staring at the monitor, when the image pixelated and went black for a minute and 47 seconds before resuming normal operations.

"John," she muttered. "I need you."

No response.

"John?"

Silence.

The detective rose and poked her head into his empty bedroom, then shuffled to the corridor.

Eerie, she mused. He'd been drinking coffee...

"Edith!" she bellowed. "Where's John?"

The russet-haired landlady appeared at the base of the stairs. "He's in the shower!"

Concentrating, Sheila could hear water running at a distance. "I thought I was going barmy!"

The American widow plodded toward her kitchen. "Going? You're already gone!"

Resuming her seat at the desk, Sheila waited for her flatmate, who hobbled in on his prosthetic left leg, wrapped in a blue terry robe with a towel draped around his neck.

"What's wrong?" he grumbled.

"I need your eyes."

"You've got two of your own."

"Should do, but yours are more familiar..." She replayed the damaged section of the file. "Is this normal?"

Watson waved her off the chair, sinking on the cushion. He maneuvered the mouse to enlarge the clip, scrutinizing its quality. "This isn't a random equipment malfunction or caused by an electrical outage. The signal has been deliberately jammed."

"Meaning..."

“Check the other recordings. You may have found how the murderer prevented himself from being seen.”

“Ta.”

Wiping a trickle of water from his temple, he proceeded to his bedroom.

“John?”

He paused. “Eh?”

“Who would have access to the kind of technology that could... trigger such a malfunction?”

“Anyone with ill intent and seedy connections.”

“So, it’s nothing top secret...”

“No, but it’s pricey.”

Sheila flexed her fingers over the keyboard. “Something you could build at home?”

“Not easily.”

“Ta.”

Every flash drive contained similarly sabotaged footage, regardless of the angle. Sheila slowed the playback speed of moments preceding those points, catching brief glimpses of each woman walking along the pavement at her leisure. Subsequent frames showed lanes devoid of pedestrians and traffic.

“Convincing an individual to go off willingly in less than two minutes... quite a feat,” she murmured. “Across this many cases, someone must have seen something, heard voices...”

A niggling sensation at the base of her neck spurred her to run through the list of addresses again. Tennant Drive in Ealing struck a chord, a vague memory of a perplexing news item. Rather than disturb Watson, she pulled up the search engine and typed furiously.

On the BBC’s website, she perused the brief summary of a man’s body found dead on the steps of his residence - the same morning one of the women was reported missing when she didn’t show up to work.

Sheila was out the door, mumbling to herself, before Watson realized she’d left.

The Tube conveyed her to the London suburb in less than 30 minutes. Brisk winds signaled an oncoming storm; she held tight to Sherlock’s black fedora as she navigated curved lanes to the row of houses suitable for young families.

Wearing jeans, an AC/DC t-shirt and red sneakers, she felt terribly underdressed among the posh dwellings, but detoured up to an etched-glass door and pressed the bell.

A white-haired housekeeper greeted her sternly. "The family is gone on holiday."

"I'm not..."

"If you're soliciting..."

"No."

"Then, what?"

Sheila sucked air, jaw clenched, then identified herself. "I'm looking into the disappearance and death of your neighbor."

An abrupt change in demeanor softened the servant's features. "Come in, please."

In a kitchen fit for a French chef, they sat in the breakfast nook over a cup of tea. "That night still haunts me," recounted the matron, adding that she'd been up late, reading in the small parlor facing the road, when she heard footsteps and a conversation on the pavement. Her husband, the butler, was awakened by sounds unusual in an area known for its quiet. Fearing burglars on the prowl, he grabbed a cricket bat from the cupboard and stepped onto the stoop.

"He never came back inside," she wept. "When I went to check on him, he lay in a puddle of blood among the roses."

"Did the police investigate thoroughly?" queried her guest.

"I have no way of telling. From that day to this, I've never heard a word. The family was so traumatized, they packed up and moved within a week."

"Did you see anyone when you went outside?"

"A couple strolling toward a car well down the block."

"What type of car?"

"An old, fancy job, with a chauffeur."

Sheila persisted, "You didn't, by chance, get the number?"

"It was dark, sorry."

"Would you know the car if you saw it again?"

"It drove past as I was kneeling beside Tom. I think so."

Draining the floral-painted china cup, Sheila rose. "Thank you."

"Will you be able to find who killed my husband?"

"I'll do what I can."

The widow conducted her to the door, wiping moist cheeks with an embroidered handkerchief.

The detective loitered on the walk, scanning a manicured lawn. If the same individual who coaxed the unsuspecting victim to her doom had killed the butler, would not the former have raised the alarm, or fled?

Had there been a second miscreant, charged to eliminate any witnesses or interference with the plan, who delivered the lethal blow?

Such complex organization denoted another feat worthy of admiration, except for the results.

A feat repeated, evidently, with Friday's *Daily Telegraph* front page lamenting the latest body dumped near Windsor.

Lady Harriet Mannerly spoke at length about the tragedies on both radio and television chat shows throughout the day. Raising awareness of the danger to gullible females, she advised, "Don't go out alone after dusk. Stay in groups. If you see anything unusual, call the police at once!"

She continued rambling about the efforts of the Women's Task Force to curb domestic violence, and how they'd retained Sheila's services to track this murderer. One of the programme hosts asked whether any progress had been made to that end.

"We're only days away from having this maniac in custody," declared Harriet.

Sheila cringed on the swivel chair. "Shit!"

Snatching her mobile from beneath a newly acquired heap of unopened post, she rang Scotland Yard, requesting permission to view the current crime scene.

Denied.

Raiding the wall safe behind a cheap still life, extra cash allowed her to hire a taxi, instructing the driver to head for the royal enclave beyond the city.

Yellow tape wasn't the only sign of where the corpse had been found. A half-dozen police vehicles were parked along the macadam, constables and inspectors searching the underbrush.

Sheila alighted from the black cab and stood beyond the barrier, listening. She gleaned that the victim's mobile, purse and keys had been pitched further down the incline - the personal effects of the others discarded in like fashion - aiding in the deceased's identification.

They squad had trod over and around the site, destroying any useful impressions or, possibly more vital, tire tracks. No wonder they couldn't investigate their way out of a paper bag.

A fragment of cloth, however, snagged on thorns in a cluster of scraggly bushes to her left, sparked hope in her soul. The maroon, intricately patterned, unidentified material didn't match the constables' uniform fabric or the plain-clothed detectives' muted tones. She inched sideways and untangled the swatch, stuffing it in her jean pocket.

“Oi! What’re you about?” barked a fresh-faced rookie, cleaning a spider’s web off his helmet.

She replied, “Just curious.”

“Well, get off out of it. Authorized personnel only.”

Repressing a snide retort, Sheila sidled back to the taxi - glad she’d asked the cabby to wait. She also noticed, in soil softened by recent rains, a deep, absolutely smooth footprint: no tread of any kind, not even a slightly raised heel, as on many dress shoes.

Yanking the mobile from her gold hooded jacket, she snapped a photo before sliding onto the worn bench seat and jerking the door closed.

“What do you think of this?” she prompted Watson upon returning to 221B.

He squinted at the small screen, before expertly transferring the image to the desktop and, dropping on the chair, enlarging it. “It... reminds me of old science fiction shows on telly, where the primitive robots had flat metal feet.”

Sheila chuckled. “Might do. It’s not a standard trainer, boot or dress shoe.”

“Definitely not.”

She patted his shoulder. “Could you send this to your network and get their input?”

In the interim, she ventured onto Marylebone Road, popping into a tailor’s shop with the torn remnant.

“There’s only one designer in London who uses such customized goods,” the stooped elder announced, having inspected the threads and weave through thick spectacles. “I’ve no doubt he’d remember who made the purchase - if you can get an appointment to see him.”

She tucked a scrap of paper with contact information in her jean pocket; if needed, she could pursue that lead.

Within an hour of her settling again in the basket-chair at 221B, a eight responses to Watson’s email hit his inbox. Seven were humorous observations, to which he replied with equal sarcasm. The last, though, intrigued the pair.

“I’ve seen this before,” wrote one of the members of the PTSD therapy group. “I hired on to program software for an engineering firm in Norwich last winter; they’re creating androids to teach at the grammar school level, what with the shortage of instructors.”

Watson typed swiftly, “What’s the company name?”

No answer was forthcoming.

Sheila made a decision before whisking to her room. “We’re off to Norwich first thing.”

“I... can’t,” her companion countered. “I have two appointments tomorrow.”

“At this late stage, I can wait a day...”

“Go, and don’t fret about me. You can’t risk any delay that might get another woman killed.”

Sherlock’s great-great-niece despised rising early, and dozed on the train from Kings Cross. She purchased a double shot of espresso in the Norwich station, jolting her to full alertness, before setting off to find the elusive factory producing artificial life forms.

Which, fortunately, occupied a seemingly abandoned warehouse less than two kilometers along the tracks.

No signage, no security at rusted gates hanging askew from loose hinges, but the number of autos in the car park testified to plenty of activity. A laundry delivery van passed her on the access drive; she hopped on the rear running board, then ducked behind the loading dock when the driver braked at the ramp.

Peering over a concrete abutment, she could see beyond steel receiving doors to workstations where mechanical arms, legs and torsos were being fitted - by hand - with wiring and circuit boards. These were prototypes, Sheila presumed, not yet ready for mass production.

And the hands building them: android.

Human personnel, attired in white, antiseptic coveralls, accepted the pallet of clean gear, however, and signed the receipt. In such a disguise, Sheila could wander the facility unchallenged.

Not difficult to commandeer a sealed package from the rolling rack near the employee entrance.

Five minutes later, she was envying Watson’s aptitude with computers; she had a lengthy list of questions about the components and how the androids would impersonate human traits to engage the students in their charge.

Without being too intrusive, she examined latex and titanium appendages being fitted into shoulder and hip joints - no differently than replacing the cartilage and bone versions. The soles of block-molded feet matched the mark near the crime scene, though she couldn’t believe a mechanical being could commit murder.

Didn’t Isaac Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics - wherein such constructs could not willingly harm humans - apply?

Or were those concepts truly fiction?

Wandering past a break room, she scolded herself for not postponing the trip an extra day to bring Watson on this journey. He could have eased her confusion...

Outdoors once more, Sheila shed the biodegradable outfit and marched toward the road. Her mobile rang; she exhaled sharply. A minute earlier, and she might have been exposed as a fraud, especially after glimpsing posted signs banning electronic devices on the production floor.

“John? I have a lot to tell you...”

His terse baritone confounded her. “Lady Harriet just called ‘round, Sheila.”

“Should do. Did she leave a message?”

“A warning to stay out of London for at least a week.”

“Why?”

“After the... publicity about the murders, members of the Women’s Task Force have been receiving threats: via post, email and phone. Their children are targeted, as are their homes.”

“If it keeps them from speaking out of turn, all the better. Has anything arrived at Baker Street?”

“Not yet.”

Sheila grimaced. “So, Lady Harriet wants me to go into hiding, but still make short work of bringing this monster to justice?”

Watson didn’t need to answer.

“I’ll be back tonight,” she assured her flatmate before disconnecting.

Whirling toward the factory, Sheila used the mobile’s camera to capture a few photos before hiking back to the station.

Ahead of her at the self-service ticket machine, a distinguished, slender figure in black Joshua Kane tailored suit and gold tie made his purchase, the slip fluttering from the dispenser to the floor. As he fumbled with his billfold, she squatted to retrieve the errant chit, noticing his footwear: flat-soled dress boots.

Straightening, she scanned his abnormally stiff posture and perfect brown hair combed back from an unwrinkled forehead.

She’d seen variations of that face - and the attached pieces - being assembled.

Some type of test run? Sheila puzzled.

He thanked her for her courtesy as he strode away, with a surprisingly even gait.

For all intents and purposes, he could pass for human, except for the feet. And, who looked at a man’s shoes, anyway?

She trailed him at a leisurely pace, boarding the train to London and sitting beside him among assorted commuters.

“Do you mind?” she queried.

“Not at all.”

Countryside flew past; the sleuth paid little attention to the scenery. She anticipated some producer with a Steadicam perched on his shoulder would pop into the aisle, announcing she'd been stitched up for some show on the telly as part of a scripted joke.

Androids couldn't be walking among British citizens, entirely unnoticed.

Then, again, she was constantly amazed by how little ordinary people registered of their surroundings.

Sheila exchanged snippets of polite, yet mundane, conversation with the traveler; she learned he'd been assigned to new duties for his employer in London.

“It'll be your first time in the city?” she asked.

His head swiveled a bit stiffly. “Yes.”

Another aspect of his appearance that set him apart from flesh and blood: the pupils of his blue-green eyes did not contract when the setting sun shone straight at him through the window.

Preparing to disembark at Kings Cross station, he saw nothing odd in Sheila tagging along and climbing into a waiting taxi with him. He gave the driver an address in Mayfair, and the vehicle swerved away from the curb.

Of the more affluent London neighborhoods, Mayfair ranked highest. When the android alighted before a massive dwelling in Brick Street, she stepped onto the pavement, as well.

Three stories, no less than 15,000 square feet, the rugged stone structure must boast at least twelve bedrooms, she estimated. Through sheerly curtained windows on the ground floor, a backlit swimming pool was visible, adjacent to a game room with billiard table and an Italian marble fireplace.

The occupants must live on the upper floors.

“I have enjoyed our time together,” came the android's rather stilted compliment. “Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?”

“Very kind. Ta.”

The taxi pulled away as the arched front door swung inward. A twin of this creature, only tawny-haired and clad in a suit of a different cut but equally unique fabric, signaled them over the threshold.

Obligatory greetings were exchanged, but no small talk. Sheila felt herself grinning as these glorified robots attempted to imitate human behaviors.

“Who's this?” The crisp tenor reverberated from the top of a wide mahogany staircase. “I didn't know the servants were permitted to invite strangers into my home.”

Bathed in shadows, this tall, thin image wore a quilted red smoking jacket with gold brocade, grey trousers and slippers. Dark hair was combed from a left part across his brow, framing a pair of smoldering eyes that glinted in the faint light from a wall sconce six steps below.

“Apologies, sir. I was repaying a fellow traveler...”

The deceptively youthful resident’s descent almost ninja-like in its agility, he halted well above the granite floor to assess this guest. Sheila surmised he deliberately adopted a position denoting his control over the situation, but she beheld both recognition and trepidation in his brownish-gold orbs.

“Sheila Holmes,” he oozed, toying with a glittering silver scarf dangling from his neck. “To what do I owe the pleasure...”

Conscious she held the upper hand, the visitor repressed a chuckle. “As your man explained, we sat together on the train from Norwich and were going to share a cuppa before parting ways.”

“Tea is so... bland.” He extended his arm toward her. “I have a fine assortment of whisky, port, sherry...”

Sheila did not hesitate to accept the gesture, realizing the android had no emotions that would enable him to feel hurt or jealous at being thus rejected. She mounted the stairs with uncharacteristic grace - given her jeans, t-shirt and sneakers - and accompanied her host into an opulent sitting room.

The contemporary furnishings must’ve cost in excess of a million pounds, with original artwork lining the walls to the tune of five million more, at least.

She grit her teeth to muffle an exclamation of revulsion.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” stated this spindly individual. “Finally, you can satisfy your curiosity about how I live.”

Sheila didn’t grasp the rationale for his assumption.

“Don’t play the innocent. I’ve been privy to your every move over the past six weeks, and you still have no concrete evidence to present to the police.”

She sank on a pristine white sofa. “And, why should I need such evidence?”

“Because you believe me guilty of some random crime that will impugn my reputation.” In the center of the room, he spread his arms like one anticipating crucifixion. “My detractors are relentless in their efforts to discredit me, and you’re being paid to dig up the dirt.”

Since he’d brought up the subject...

“Should do. You may have covered your tracks quite well, but your androids weren’t so careful.”

He'd migrated to a collection of decanters and liquor bottles adorning a mahogany credenza, stiffening at this pronouncement. "How do you know they're androids. My closest friends aren't even..."

"I watched a few of them being built this afternoon." She casually crossed her ankles atop a highly polished coffee table; its owner's brow furrowed in disdain. "Rumor has it, they'll be engaged as instructors in the schools, but not wearing suits costing more than three thousand quid."

Tapered fingers held a liter of Talisker toward her. She nodded, and he filled a tumbler nearly to the brim. "They are my dutiful servants, causing no disruptions to the household because of family emergencies, or dissatisfaction with their wages and hours. They only need one set of clothes, so why can't it be... top of the line, like all my possessions?"

Sheila did not shift her legs when he brought the glass, compelling him to veer around the table to reach the matching armchair. By deliberately provoking him - having inferred that he insisted on total compliance with his every whim - she hoped to rattle him into a revealing his darkest secrets.

She didn't drink the whisky, though she doubted he'd try to poison her. A man who always got what he wanted, thanks to his wealth or an innate charm, didn't need to resort to desperate measures.

"Does part of this servitude include ditching dead bodies?" she bluntly inquired.

His corresponding frankness stunned her. "Rubbish removal, pure and simple."

"That's how you see women? Rubbish?"

Monogrammed slippers bumped her sneakers atop the wood as he mimicked her relaxed demeanor. He would not allow her to usurp his supremacy. "Lovely, but shallow. When they see my name on the calling card borne by my factotum, they are lured by the prospect of my favors, and eagerly submit to my... Ah, well, you have a vivid intellect; you can deduce the nature of our relationship. Their expectations quickly become irksome, however. To preclude tedious entanglements, they are summarily dispatched."

"You are, even now, entertaining a similar resolution to this... encounter."

He smiled broadly, his thin upper lip curling above a row of straight, white teeth. "Not before I have my fun with you. I've seen your photo in the papers and on the telly, but you've always been presented as a tad priggish. After the sanctimonious Lady Harriet mentioned they'd engaged you, I began devising ways to bring you to your knees. The fact you walked willingly through my door, rather

than forcing me to send my minions to collect you, displays an adventurous nature I find... quite enthralling.”

“Dream on, mate.” The Talisker doused his face at the exact moment her right sneaker shifted under his calves and flipped him backward. Startled, he did not immediately react, and she pinned him on the carpet, straddling his chest, her fist aimed to fracture his prominent nose.

Rather than resort to fisticuffs, he seized her waist and rolled her onto her spine. He pressed himself atop her, his mouth smothering hers, while practiced digits unbuckled his wide leather belt and lowered his zipper.

Sheila’s Wing Chun training not exactly geared toward such a predicament, she bit his lower lip and, trapping his left wrist, bent it at an awkward angle to shove him sideways.

She scuttled into a crouch, ready to repel further assaults. Pure rage lunged at her, only to be restrained prior to contact by unyielding, inhuman hands.

He wriggled futilely against the iron grip of two androids.

“What the devil!” he bellowed. “Release me at once!”

“No, sir,” they chorused evenly. “You shall not harm this woman.”

The pair did not retract their fingers until Sheila so instructed them, after constables from Scotland Yard stormed the dwelling and handcuffed the murderer.

“How... did you override their programming?” he hissed over his shoulder as a squad ushered him down the staircase.

She smirked, “It helps to know someone who knows a software engineer.”

En route from Norwich, she’d rung Watson, who patched her through to his informant. Via the train’s wi-fi connection, the latter linked his computer to the android and its cohort, rescinding the amoral directives.

Police officials debating how to manage the androids, Sheila retraced her steps to the sitting room and poured herself a generous measure of Talisker, swiftly draining the glass. Breezing to ground level, she caught sight of the day’s post on the foyer’s console table: business envelopes addressed Drake Burlingame, Esq.

Owner of a European-wide five-star hotel brand, gourmet restaurants and specialty stores.

“Shit!” she snarled.

Such a conscienceless git, among the richest men in the country.

Outdoors, Sheila circled the property, peering into a six-stall garage behind the domicile. No wonder Burlingame needed so many androids, she determined. A driver in designer livery stood beside each vintage auto: a classic black Bentley,

white Rolls, maroon Jaguar, a deep blue American Shelby Mustang accented with wide white racing stripes, a red Ferrari and a bronze Lamborghini.

Through confidential back channels, she would later discover every one of the computerized brains contained its own unique programming, two of which were detailed to... acquire feminine companionship for their master, per specific criteria.

Once a particular female ceased to captivate Burlingame, the silver neck scarf became a weapon, yet another android disposing of the corpse.

Exposition of the Norwich warehouse garnered global news coverage. A technology start-up in Central America acquired the equipment and pledged to wipe the androids' existing code. Those machines spent their life spans assisting poor farmers to plant and harvest crops badly needed in third world countries.

Drake Burlingame naturally refused to enter a guilty plea when he appeared in the dock. His privileged attitude rankled his fellow prisoners long before the scheduled trial date; he was found dead in his cell on a chilly Friday morning, his specialty coffee laced with arsenic.

Watson played the video news report for Sheila as she nibbled on a breakfast of bangers and mash.

“Good riddance to a veritable black hole - taking, taking, taking, and giving nothing positive to the world,” she muttered. “There are too many like him, John, and we need to do more to get them off the streets.”