

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

The New Generation

A Collection of Stories

by

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Another Holmes on Baker Street

Sign in one hand, hammer in the other, Edith Hudson-Thorne stepped through the door, an odd sight with ten penny spikes clenched between her teeth. She maneuvered the wood panel - painted "Flat to Let" - beneath the house numbers and raised the tool to strike a nailhead.

"Don't bother," came a lusty contralto from the sidewalk.

The young widow spun. "Excuse me?"

"I'm your new tenant."

An unbidden reflex, Edith spit the remaining nails past this gangly brunette, an Oxford-crested duffel slung over her shoulder. "What makes you think..."

"Two reasons. First: I intend to advance three months' rent. Second: my name is Sheila Holmes."

Edith balanced her hammer on the bannister, squinting against the morning sun. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

"No. A distant relative of mine once lived here, so there's a sentimental connection..."

"I know the legend." The building's owner smirked. "Come inside."

Sheila collected the scattered projectiles, following the landlady through a peeling portal with her backpack, a rolling suitcase and a brand new guitar, boxed. The door slammed shut; Edith's green eyes burned with anger. "My family has been plagued by the Holmes stigma nearly a century. I didn't want to publicly embarrass you, but I want nothing to do with your sort."

"My name may remain confidential. I only want to provide a bit of assistance, given what your great-great-grandmother did for... Why stand on pride? It's not your fault your husband's demise in Afghanistan didn't provide the financial security you'd hoped. You need to generate income in a hurry, which is why you've returned to London from Colorado and laid claim to this property."

"How'd you know..."

"Growing up, I developed a keen sense of observation. Your husband was a United States Marine, killed in action as denoted by the black border on the insignia pinned to your blouse collar. You wear that, but not your wedding ring, which you've pawned. Recent media stories have detailed military insurance policies being... poorly invested, costing survivors millions in death benefits. A class action lawsuit is pointless, Mrs. Hudson, because the settlement may not be finalized for years, and you are in dire straits now."

"Hudson-Thorne," Edith corrected.

Sheila extracted a wallet from her jean pocket.

The widow shook her red head. "I may regret this, but Great-grandma's story about the three traits of a Holmes made the rounds at every family wedding and funeral. You fit them exactly."

"I'm... flattered, I guess."

"The flat's up one flight."

Navigating narrow stairs, Sheila was ushered into what might've been a shrine to her great-great-uncle Sherlock. The sitting room hadn't been touched in a hundred years, nothing had been disturbed since he'd left to keep bees in Sussex, dying there.

"Oh. My. God," breathed Sheila.

"Dr. Watson made Great-grandma promise not to alter the decor. In her diary, she jotted something about turning this into a museum for tuppence a view..."

"You could've been rich."

"Not worth having people tramping in mud, smoking and making noise." Edith glared at her new tenant. "You don't smoke, do you?"

"The only thing I put in my mouth, besides food, are pen caps. Chew them to bits most days."

"Good. Hate the smell of cigarettes. Gives me terrible headaches."

Sheila drew aside thick, shabby draperies, allowing hazy light to penetrate smudged windows. Violet orbs fell upon cluttered shelves where the former inhabitant's criminal files were arranged alphabetically. The volumes on Professor Moriarty lay open.

A laugh bubbled from her throat unexpectedly.

"What is it?" queried Edith.

"You mentioned the stigma your family endured. Ours had to cope with Moriarty." She fingered pages of yellowed clippings. "Not a common name, but bizarre how many are christened James. Almost married one last summer."

A Holmes and a Moriarty wed? Edith suppressed her chuckle. "Not to presume on our short acquaintance, but why... did you break the engagement?"

"Jamie's... predilections require a wife he can parade around the dance floor at upper crust clubs. That's not me."

"How did you meet?"

"He was demonstrating how to properly swing a cricket bat for a school group. He lost his grip and the bat flew past the spectators and slammed my wrist. Daily for the six weeks I wore the cast, he sent me flowers and cards of apology."

"That's rather sweet," remarked Edith, removing the linen sheet from a Victorian-style divan.

“He feared I’d sue for damages.”

“He must’ve been charming, if you accepted his proposal.”

“More than merely charming,” Sheila admitted, closing the book and restoring it to its original position on the shelf. “His exceptional intelligence provided the mental stimulation I crave. He never bored me.”

Hesitantly, the widow asked, “What... do you do to fulfill that craving without him?”

“No worries, Mrs. Hudson-Thorne. I won’t pepper the walls with bullets, or partake of a seven percent cocaine solution. I do play classical guitar, however, and am training for the Iron Man Triathlon.”

“That’s running, swimming and cycling, isn’t it?”

“I’ve ordered a set of free weights, so I don’t lose out on rainy days. I’ll make sure to set them gently on the floor.”

“My bedroom being directly below, I’d appreciate that. I’d also request no late night callers.”

“I left no forwarding address upon leaving Oxford, so the issue shouldn’t arise.”

Edith bundled the furniture covers and toted them into the hall. “Rearrange things however you see fit. There’s a bin out back, if you wish to dispose of... the clutter.”

“For now, a bit of scrubbing, a good airing, and I should be fine.”

That this Holmes had no qualms about keeping the flat clean dispelled the owner’s doubts. She didn’t expect, descending to her own quarters, to find a uniformed teen on the threshold, bearing an oversized flower box.

“Miss Holmes?” he ventured.

“Upstairs.”

“I’m double parked, ma’am. Would you mind?”

Retracing her steps, Edith intended to prop the delivery against the unlatched door, but it swung inward to reveal Sheila, clutching an ivory-handled jack knife. Thrusting the blade into a stack of tattered envelopes on the fireplace mantle, she whirled on the intruder. “What is it?”

The widow swallowed her trepidation. “These... came for you.”

“From whom?”

“There’s no card.”

“Moriarty.”

Untying the yellow bow, Edith speculated, “Trying to reconcile?”

“Don’t touch them!” In two strides, Sheila crossed the room and batted the parcel from her arms. “There’s a likelihood the thorns are dipped in poison.”

A wildness in the Oxford graduate's eyes renewed Edith's anxiety. She left the roses where they'd fallen and retreated to her kitchen.

Sheila raced after her, contrite. "We didn't part amicably, you see, and Jamie has a violent temper. Top marks in chemical engineering brought recruiters from MI6..."

"Heavens!" Edith paused, hand gripping a vodka bottle. "How did he find you, if..."

In that instant, the tenant's mobile chirped. She showed her companion the text message, "Red roses are your favorite, aren't they?"

"He's tracking the GPS unit in my phone," surmised Sheila. She seized the hammer to smash the device.

Edith restrained her. "Too late, if he already knows..."

The younger woman's gaze fell upon afternoon traffic beyond sparkling casements. "Perhaps not." She ripped two lengths off a roll of duct tape and hurried out the door.

The landlady watched, puzzled, as Sheila waited for an opportune moment, squatting beside a black cab and securing the mobile under its wheel well. The task complete, she reentered the dwelling, washing a streak of grease off her hands with dish soap.

"He'll think I'm on the move," she snickered.

"Or, lost the phone."

"Indeed." Tea towel draped over a chair, she sidled toward the stairs.

"Well, back to unpacking."

Three days later, wilted blossoms remained in a heap. Edith disregarded the mess, and the fact Sheila hadn't borrowed a bucket, mop or broom to perform the promised cleaning. Truth be told, she hadn't unpacked a stitch of her clothing, nor showered or slept.

She sat motionless in the basket-chair, fingers steepled together at her chin, staring at the ash-coated fireplace grate.

In the long run, it didn't matter. Edith had deposited the three months' rent, and paid her most outstanding bills. The landlady would honor this recluse's privacy, leaving her to starve, if she so chose.

The doorbell chimed at seven that evening. Television news concluded, Edith had shed her clothes in favor of pink terry robe and fuzzy slippers, pouring herself a cup of lukewarm tea. She shuffled to the foyer, jerking the unoled deadbolt. If it was a salesman, or some curiosity seeker, she'd tell them where to go in no uncertain terms.

Her jaw agape, she spoke not a syllable at the sight of the trim, elegantly attired gentleman pacing the stoop. He might've been en route to a Covent Garden theatre, and seriously lost his way.

A scant two inches taller than she, his wavy light brown hair had been rustled by the breeze, one strand dangling over his smooth forehead from the left side part. Intense blue orbs, the straight nose and thin, grey-flecked mustache visibly stunned Edith, and his brows arched as he broke into a broad, enchanting smile.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he greeted in a deep, melodious register. "I've come to escort Miss Holmes to dinner."

Reflexively, Edith glanced up the unlit flight of stairs. "I... she..." Forcing her pulse to slow its syncopated rhythm, she inquired, "Is she expecting you?"

"I only discovered her address this afternoon. I'm in town from Manchester for the day, and thought I'd surprise her."

His explanation too smooth, the widow sensed a lie. "Step in; I'll see if she's at home."

Though leaving him alone in the foyer opened her to the possibility of burglary, she ascended to the flat, dark and quiet.

"Sheila?" she called through a gap in the door.

"If you value your life, Mrs. Hudson-Thorne, tell him I'm out, and give no inkling you know his identity is that of James Moriarty."

"You... heard?"

"I heard his car five minutes ago. A custom Rolls-Royce with a clogged EFI port and one centimeter puncture in the muffler. He circled the block three times before deciding to park."

"Perhaps there were no spaces..."

"There's not another vehicle on the street. His minions posted diversions at four o'clock."

"How..."

"The sounds other people ignore register distinctly upon my ears. Hurry now, or he'll suspect the deception."

Edith felt his hot breath on her neck, though how he'd reached the landing undetected, she couldn't fathom. Each of the wood planks creaked in a different location...

"Ah, here you are, my dear," he boomed. "It was wrong of you to flee..."

Ducking under the arm Moriarty had propped on the jamb, Edith excused herself.

“No, Mrs. Hudson-Thorne,” commanded her tenant. “Please, stay. In dealing with this man, a witness is an essential precaution.”

Her guest chided, “You’re frightening this fine lady, Sheila. We’re two adults who have much to discuss, of an intimate nature which may make Mrs. Hudson-Thorne uncomfortable.”

“Yes, I’m sure copious amounts of blood would disturb her mental balance...”

“You think I’m going to kill you?”

“You’ll not let me live one second longer than your pride permits.”

Edith scurried along the bannister and down to the safety of her own sitting room, locking the door and tucking the key in her bra.

She could still hear the conversation, slightly distorted, jotting “insulation” on her list of eventual repairs to the building.

“You *are* my pride, dearest. I’d hoped to prove that by letting the world see you in the diamond horseshoe’s most expensive box at tonight’s premiere.”

“Fine. I’m ready now.”

A prolonged silence prompted Edith’s giggle. Even in this era of casual garb in churches and restaurants, stained jeans and a tank top were not permissible in the legitimate theatre.

“What about that silver and blue gown I bought you for our engagement dinner?” hinted Moriarty.

“I returned it. Paid for this flat, thank you.”

“Why, you ungrateful...”

Footsteps muffled by the carpet, then a crash...

Edith took the old servants’ stairs by twos. She sprinted along the hall, stopping cold in the open doorway.

Sheila had switched on an antique table lamp, which barely illuminated James Moriarty’s prone, unconscious form. “He tripped on his own roses,” she sneered, towering above him with a black iron poker.

“Should I ring the police?” Edith suggested. “Or an ambulance?”

Finally, the tenant bent and rolled him onto his spine. He might’ve been enjoying a good night’s sleep, given his tranquil countenance.

“He does cut a dashing figure,” remarked the landlady.

“Neither Michelangelo nor the best Greek sculptor could do justice to his physique. Beauty, as they’ve so often noted, is only skin deep.”

“Would there have been any harm in letting him take you to the Garden?”

“If you check his wallet, there aren’t any theatre tickets, nor a reservation for a late supper afterward. Once he got me away from this house, he would’ve seen to it I never returned.”

“You’re... blowing the matter out of proportion. A man in love wouldn’t...”

“My dear Mrs. Hudson-Thorne, James Moriarty doesn’t know the meaning of the word. During my convalescence from the injury he caused - which may have occurred to deliberately force our introduction - I investigated his past. He’s never been arrested or charged with any crime, but many of his acquaintances have not been so fortunate.”

“I don’t understand...”

“He - like the version in Dr. Watson’s chronicles - is a criminal mastermind.” Sheila rose, waving the widow closer. “Always one step beyond the reach of the law, yet involved in every aspect of each deed’s execution. He started as a pre-teen, coordinating bullies who extorted pocket change from their classmates. His percentage of various and sundry enterprises exceeds half a billion pounds per year.”

“Heavens! Why, then, would you date him...”

“Emotion subdued logic, to my eternal shame. He can be most tantalizing and, as I mentioned, his intellect far exceeds that of so-called geniuses.”

Passing Edith the poker, Sheila peered between the curtains at the deserted lane. Until Moriarty emerged from the domicile, unscathed, no car would be permitted on the thoroughfare.

A cry, a thump, then Edith watched - in a concussive blur - Sheila’s right arm being pinned at a painful angle. Moriarty whispered, almost tenderly, in her ear. “I have a disdain for spoiling my manicure, darling, and soiling my cuffs with blood. Be assured, though: wherever you go, whatever you do, having scorned me before strangers - not once, but twice now - your life is ultimately forfeit.”

“If you’re going to do it, why delay?”

“Mrs. Hudson-Thorne would also die, since she could testify to my presence. My personal code stipulates women are not to be victimized, unless they directly thwart my plans - as you have done.”

“So, paranoia is to be your parting gift? My normal routine is to include glances over my shoulder as you revel in torturing me?”

“You are but a loose cog in an incredibly complex machine, as you’ve already deduced,” drawled Moriarty. “You’ve cost me valuable time and assets; future activities will be handled by some toady working at piece rate. Unless...”

She cringed against the spasm shooting through her shoulder. “Unless?”

He spun her around, pressed his body against hers, planting his lips squarely on her mouth. She didn't resist, and Edith noticed her almost responding, when he abruptly released her.

A miniature night-vision video camera was snatched from its perch on the door's lintel. "Any plans you have to impede my professional initiatives, or report my alliances to the authorities... You will implicate yourself as an accessory, for starters, with this judiciously edited footage as irrefutable evidence."

Brushing his forelock in salute, he sauntered toward the stairs.

Sheila dashed to Edith's side; the latter moaned groggily.

"I apologize for placing you in danger," lamented the Oxford graduate.

"The result of this debacle: Moriarty shall never again set foot on the premises."

"What of his... toadies?"

"Your presence served its purpose. Whatever happens to me, won't happen within these walls. Nor will it be reported as a murder. The men in Moriarty's employ are expert at plotting... convenient accidents."

Edith allowed Sheila to raise her upright. "I couldn't live knowing..."

"Contrary to your view, I *will* live with that knowledge, and do everything in my power - use every cell in my brain - to break that man's control of the criminal element." She steered Edith into the hall. "Shall I help you below?"

"I'll... be fine."

"Good night, then."

Before the widow rounded the landing, she glimpsed Sheila run her tongue tentatively over her lips, a wistful expression betraying her enjoyment of that rogue's last kiss.

Having another Holmes as a tenant of 221B Baker Street would definitely not be dull.

Holmes Æterna

“Where’s my tobacco?”

Slumbering at an odd angle on the worn Victorian divan, classical guitar at her feet, Sheila Holmes could’ve sworn the biting harsh bass stood right beside her, rather than being part of a distorted nightmare she frequently endured.

A thick text thumping on the floor roused her abruptly.

“Who’s there?” she groaned. Attempting to sit upright, joints stiff from the sprawling position, she detected no one. “Edith? Is that you?”

“I asked you a question.”

The wiry brunette almost jumped out of her skin. When her breathing slowed to a somewhat normal rate, she gazed up - and through - a spectre rummaging around the fireplace mantle.

No question of his identity. Living in his old flat at 221B Baker Street, she’d half expected her great-great-uncle, Sherlock Holmes, to haunt the place, but he hadn’t manifested since she’d signed the lease six months earlier.

“The Persian slipper is empty, woman. Where did you put my tobacco?”

“In the dustbin. It was a hundred years old, dry and useless.”

“Did you not replenish the supply?” he boomed.

“There’s none in the house, I’m afraid.”

His eyes flashed with an eerie light. “The needle...”

“The vials have been... chucked.”

“Why?”

“I had no use for them. Neither do you. You’re quite... dead.”

“I know that. But are you aware how *boring* the afterlife is? No mental stimulation, no London *Times* agony column to peruse...”

Sheila chuckled. She often felt the same about daily life. “So, you came ‘round for a smoke?”

“And, hopefully, a bit of intriguing conversation.”

The entire situation intrigued this young Oxford graduate no end. Tall and spare, the Great Detective most resembled later drawings included in reprints of Dr. John Watson’s chronicles. He had longish, unkempt dark brown hair, smooth cheekbones marred by two days’ growth of stubble, a prominent nose - but not hawkish, in her opinion - thin lips and an angular jawline. Restless, tapered digits extended from his blue frock coat’s frayed cuffs; leather shoes scuffed and muddy, he’d died in less than affluent circumstances, it seemed.

She yawned, stretched and rose. “I’m for breakfast,” she declared. “Care to join me?”

“And how, precisely, would you explain to Mrs. Hudson that you wish service for two?”

“Edith - Hudson-Thorne, by the way - has grown accustomed to my moods. Some days, I eat nothing at all. Others, I eat like a horse.” She crossed and tugged the bell pull.

Moments later, the russet-haired landlady knocked, still wearing her robe and slippers. “It’s damned early, Sheila.”

“A busy day ahead, Edith. Rashers of bacon, eggs and potatoes, please, and plenty of coffee.”

“Right.”

The door closed, and Sherlock settled in the basket-chair. “Not at all like my Mrs. Hudson.”

“Six generations, Uncle. Furthermore, she’s had a difficult few years. An American, widowed by the war in Afghanistan...”

“What about you? Why’d you choose Oxford, of all places?”

“They chose *me*. Even wanted me to take advanced degrees and teach.” She contemplated her grubby yellow sweatsuit with a sigh.

“Why didn’t you?”

“One word: boring.”

“What occupation have you chosen for yourself, then?” pressed the ghost.

“Not sure, yet. I’ve applied to Scotland Yard...”

“Your association with James Moriarty precludes acceptance.”

Stunned, Sheila blinked violet orbs. “How’d you...”

Sherlock merely smirked.

“I thought a position as investigative reporter for the *Times*, exposing injustice and corruption...”

“You’re going to have to face it, my dear, your heritage allows for only one profession.”

“Private detectives today... are the subject of ridicule and jokes, or series on the telly.”

“Not you, having the celebrated name and traits.”

“How do I get clients? Advertise?”

“Establish a reputation. Word of mouth will have clients beating down the door.” His index finger highlighted an article in the open copy of a weekly news supplement. “Why not solve this murder?”

“I... haven’t been asked, and the police don’t take kindly to civilian interference.”

“They can’t arrest you for bringing the guilty party to justice.”

A faint tapping announced Edith Hudson-Thorne bearing a silver tray laden with aromatic platters. She waited until her tenant cleared the table of books and clutter, then arranged the place setting.

“Thanks, Edith,” praised Sheila.

“I’ll be out most of the morning. Anything you need?”

“No.”

Waiting until footsteps faded on the stairs, Sheila sat down and signaled Sherlock to take the chair opposite.

“Is she a good cook?” he queried.

“Simple fare, but palatable.”

Silently, they devoured every bite and drained the thermal carafe, sharing cutlery and china. As Sherlock dabbed his mouth with the linen napkin, he remarked, “There’s a favor I wish to ask of you.”

His great-great-niece bit her tongue.

“I would like to aid you in launching your career, honoring the family name.”

“You want to assist me on this... case?”

“In a very tangible way.”

“Problem is: you’re... not tangible.”

“I can be.”

“How?”

“If you permit me to... borrow your corporeality.”

Sheila’s knuckles whitened around the fork. “What?”

“I... cannot accomplish much without material substance. The arrangement will be mutually advantageous to both of us...”

“How advantageous to *you*?” She studied his intense expression. “Ah, one last case!”

Imperceptibly, he nodded.

“You died without the satisfaction of going out on a high note, is that it?”

Sheila prodded. “Your beekeeping in Sussex...”

“Was a blind, to lull the criminal element into believing themselves safe to resume their nefarious endeavors.”

“What... effect will this arrangement have on me?”

“None, to speak of. You will be fully conscious, though my superior intellect will have precedence.”

“Superior intellect?” jibed the woman. “I’d say we are equals, Uncle...”

“I’ll not dispute the matter. Are we agreed?”

“When... would you like to begin?”

“Now, if convenient.”

“May I shower and dress first?”

“As you wish.”

Thirty minutes later, garbed in jeans, a blue flannel shirt and sneakers, the sun full up - muted by smudged windows, however - Sheila Holmes let her hallowed relative lay claim to her agile frame.

And felt a rush of adrenaline which nearly landed her on the floor.

Excitement, bordering on agitation, perhaps even ecstatic or psychotic...

Very similar to the diet of tobacco, coffee and - illegally obtained - coca leaves she maintained during exams at Oxford.

“You died of a cocaine overdose?” she spoke aloud to the occupant of her head.

“I could never tolerate stagnation in any form.”

Heart pounding, she thought her chest might explode.

“The best remedy is to get started.”

“How?”

“You’ve read the article?”

“Yes.”

“Then, off to Charing Cross.”

From a mental perspective, Sheila felt like a spectator in her own body. Snatching her wallet from the disused laboratory table, and a battered black fedora off the coat rack - which fit her perfectly - she departed the flat, descended the stairs and emerged on Baker Street, where a spring chill penetrated her bones.

“You should’ve brought a coat,” she chided.

“I’m not cold.”

“And, what’s with the hat?”

“No English gentlemen worth his salt leaves home without one.”

She reserved a sarcastic retort.

The Tube to Charing Cross was crowded at this hour; the senior Holmes marveled at changes in technology. This excursion was, evidently, as enlightening for him as it was for her.

Their quest involved a street vendor whose corpse had been propped at the base of Lord Nelson’s column. A random crime, Scotland Yard reported, except someone had severed the victim’s left hand.

Two days later, a homeless man was subjected to similar mistreatment, deposited outside the Tower of London. A third had been neatly posed inside a car on the London Eye.

Internet websites purported Satanic rituals as the motive.

“Hasn’t too much time passed to find any clues?” Sheila ventured as she trekked past pigeons and tourists in Trafalgar Square.

“The smallest clues can be ignored by police in a rush, yet remain for more observant souls to discover.”

Her neck swiveled toward Pall Mall East.

“The coroner noted no blood on the stone, which indicates the fatal blow was delivered elsewhere, his hand detached post mortem, and the cadaver transported here.”

“How...”

“Had he been attacked en route to his lodgings in the East End, his vendor cart would’ve been found with him. Since the contents of his pockets had not been disturbed, the culprit’s intent was not robbery.”

“So, if we find the cart...”

“It will long since have been commandeered by the locals. Where do street vendors congregate these days?”

“The Borough Market would be closest.” She felt very strange holding a discussion with herself. Extracting her mobile from its belt holster, she held it to her ear, pretending to talk.

“We’ll stop there after we inspect the other two sites.”

Sheila Holmes always prided herself on her organizational abilities, but Sherlock put her to shame. Traveling from location to location, he saw things she never would’ve noticed - she guessed, because the skyscrapers and vehicles were new to him. Scribbling on the back of a receipt dug from Sheila’s hip pocket, he scolded, “Never come away without pad and pencil. Being able to sketch a scene, or record valuable information, will make it easier to piece together the solution.”

Not that she could read his writing.

He plucked bits of cloth from among the rubble, a broken pair of spectacles, a shirt button and a chipped fingernail at the Borough Market, where associates of the deceased stated he had kept his stall. Striding once more along the Thames River, she longed to sit and rest, his influx of manic energy exhausting her.

“No time to dawdle,” he insisted. “On to the morgue.”

“You’re joshing, right?”

“How are we to determine the type of blade used in the amputation, or the cause of death...”

“The coroner’s reports are public record.”

“The coroner may have missed pertinent details.”

“I can’t just waltz in...”

“You’ve no connections on the staff?”

“None. Things have changed since you lived, Uncle. I can’t even sneak in. Access requires a photo ID and a key card.”

“And, I get a sense that you’d be loathe to steal someone else’s.”

“Definitely.”

A pause before the deep voice rang inside her head. “You still possess your Oxford student credentials?”

“Keep the card in my wallet.”

“Use that, then, and tell the staff you’re researching a project for a forensic pathology class.”

“It expired last June.”

“Your options are that, or a disguise.”

“Thank you, no.”

Arriving at the Westminster Public Mortuary, Sheila witnessed another murder victim unloaded and, timing her movements perfectly, slipped through the automatic glass doors before they closed.

“Excellent, excellent,” praised Sherlock.

In a utility closet, shelves boasted bundles of sterile surgical gowns, caps and masks. The woman’s fingers deftly freed a set from its confinement, and slipped arms into baggy sleeves. As with any hospital garment, securing the ties proved impossible. She emerged resembling any other medical examiner, and followed hanging signs to the newly constructed forensic suite.

“If I’m caught in this get-up, I’ll be arrested,” Sheila grunted.

“You won’t be. Trust me.”

She veered along a corridor, ducking into the room where those who’d met a suspicious demise were kept in cold storage. Each compartment on the wall unit had two doors - one at either end. Detaching a chart from its hook near the door, Sheila browsed the list of names.

“One, six and nine,” she muttered.

“Let’s have a look.”

“I... don’t think I can.”

“Why not?”

“In biology class at university, I... vomited when the teacher uncovered a tray of rats to be dissected.”

He ignored her protest. Drawers slid out, body bags were unzipped, and bluish-grey flesh inspected. Touching the icy remains did, indeed, turn her stomach; her uncle would not allow her to recoil or wretch.

“You should’ve brought a camera,” he remarked.

“There’s one on my phone.”

“Admirable. Photograph the strangulation marks on the necks, and the left wrists.”

She’d barely restored the third cadaver to its original compartment when two attendants entered with the fourth victim on a gurney.

“Who’s this?” Sheila inquired, heart racing.

The taller replied, “The latest to come in mutilated.”

“Where was this one found?”

“Seated on a bench in Regent’s Park.”

Before they could load the body into a unit, Sheila scrutinized the limbs. Same cause of death, same rough motion to remove the appendage.

She made a hasty exit from the chamber and the building, still wearing the disguise. Chunks of her breakfast decorated the sidewalk in short order.

“To Baker Street with you, and some rest,” Sherlock advised. “Then, we can solve this sticky problem.”

“How, with the little we have?”

“You claim to have a keen sense of observation, yet you did not see?”

“See what?”

“When you have recovered your strength and we have peace and quiet, I’ll review the details.”

The Tube whisked them to familiar territory, most welcoming when Edith Hudson-Thorne brought a plate of sandwiches and pot of tea to the sitting room.

“You’re a life saver,” Sheila breathed, collapsing onto the red velvet divan.

“I’ll be out for dinner, so I figured these would tide you over until tomorrow,” explained the landlady.

“If I need anything, I’ll fetch it myself.”

Edith withdrew, disregarding her tenant’s violent shudder as a sign of fatigue, rather than the result of Sherlock Holmes separating himself from his great-great-niece.

He picked at the bread on the bone china platter. “What is this bizarre delicacy?”

“It’s called bologna. A staple of existence for every university student who doesn’t know how to cook.”

“That woman could serve better...”

“She knows it’s a preference of mine, so why complain?”

“It appears to be inedible.”

Sheila took a large bite from a mustard-garnished sandwich. “It’s perfectly tasty.”

She didn't force her uncle to eat - ghosts didn't need sustenance, she surmised, though he'd partaken of the morning repast. Within the hour, her spirits had revived, and she dropped onto the desk chair, attentive to Sherlock's incessant pacing.

"Are we ready?" he snarled.

"I... guess so." She saw him bristle at her use of a word he despised.

"Sorry."

"Now, tell me what you observed at Trafalgar Square."

"Nothing unusual."

"Which means?"

"As you said earlier: the first victim was murdered elsewhere and moved, and the lack of blood stains indicates the butchery occurred after death."

"Good. And at the Borough Market?"

"Questioning Kieran O'Reilly, that ill-mannered oaf who assigns the stalls, the victim had been a regular there for the past year, caused no trouble, enjoyed decent trade selling scarves, gloves and umbrellas."

"Why 'ill-mannered'?"

"When I introduced myself, he refused my hand."

"Because..."

"Could be an OCD type, afraid of contamination..."

"Try again."

Sheila considered, as Sherlock glowered, weirdly distorting his translucent mien.

"Where was his right hand during the entire conversation?" he prompted.

"In... his coat pocket." Mentally recapping the scene, she grinned. "He was concealing bandages wrapped around it."

"Meaning?"

"He'd been in a fight recently."

"His labored breathing?"

"Broken ribs, untreated."

"Any other bruises?"

Violet eyes shut, she recounted, "His left wrist looked rope burned."

"Close, but the marks were from a metal shackle."

"How..."

"The wound wasn't roundish, as it would be from rope. The edges were even and the damage uniform."

"Ah!" Her chance to impress the spectral tutor. She foraged on the desk and pulled a section from the stack of newspapers. Flipping pages, she revealed a

Sunday feature about the recurrence of underground fighting in the city, more brutal than previous incarnations: combatants were tethered together by their left wrists on a heavy ten-foot chain, leaving right fists available to pound an opponent into pulp. Winners received a monetary prize.

“Excellent, my dear. What about O’Reilly’s squint?”

“His squint?” Sheila again racked her brain. “The broken glasses you found...”

“He was punched before he removed them. Remember this as we proceed.”

Sherlock guided Sheila through an analysis of the three remaining corpses - all had served in the latest Afghan campaign, discharged from the military with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress and unable to find gainful employment - and the venues they’d visited through the day.

“What are your conclusions?” he prodded.

“The perpetrator of these heinous acts is a former soldier participating in the illegal fighting ring to gain some ready cash. He’s taken to ending his bouts by strangling his competitors in the rage of the moment, then - lacking a key for the shackles - lops off their left hand to free himself from the fetters.”

“Exceptional deduction. Our investigation’s last facet consists of finding the bouts in progress, and leading Scotland Yard to arrest the lot.”

“How do we accomplish that?”

“You shadow our one viable lead.”

O’Reilly? Sheila shivered. “Thank you, no.”

“He’ll never suspect.”

“Oh, no. Not after we picked his feeble brain clean.”

“He fancies he covered his tracks well. Never underestimate the boldness of those engaged in shady pastimes.” Sherlock sauntered into his nearly untouched bedroom, where dust layered carved walnut furnishings and carpet. “Since my wardrobe remains undisturbed, let’s see what ensemble might suit you.”

She pursued him across the threshold. “I’ve been wondering about that.”

“How so?”

“You didn’t take these clothes - and what’s in the sitting room - with you when you moved to Sussex.”

“I had no need of them. I tasked Mrs. Hudson with disposing of things as she saw fit. Obviously, she never did.” He untangled a tattered, discolored purple dressing gown, beaming with pride. “This, I *did* miss.”

“It’s... a rag.”

“Perhaps, but very comfortable when gales rattle the casements.” He rifled an array of quaint garments. “They leak, you know.”

“Like a sieve. The heating bill is outrageous.”

“Hmm.” He assessed her critically. “A shame, in some aspects, your physical attributes aren’t more... feminine. I’m sure Moriarty would’ve preferred a bit of meat to hold onto.”

Sheila had been expecting to be censured about her erstwhile relationship with a cricketer and criminal bearing the name of her uncle’s old nemesis. “Don’t go there.”

“Why not? Surely you grasp how your futures will be entwined, given his threats against you during your last encounter.”

“His anger stemmed from our broken engagement, nothing more.”

“Don’t lie to yourself, or to me. You already suspect your initial meeting to be no accident, an opinion in which I heartily concur. His silence these past months should not dull your senses; such a void bears the earmarks of an elaborate game afoot.”

“I appreciate you passing along your neurosis,” she snorted, brushing aside the proffered, moth-eaten dustman’s jacket.

“You sound more like Watson, when I simply advocate caution.”

Replacing the hanger amidst its fellows, Sherlock ventured, “What accouterments, pray tell, would you select for this evening’s outing?”

“If your intent is for me to look masculine, then jeans, sneakers, a Manchester United jersey and knit cap.”

The ghost seemed impressed. “Yes, I noticed many on the streets in similar attire. Good choice.”

Thus, Sheila Holmes retraced her steps to the Borough Market as its vendors were packing up their wares. Kieran O’Reilly - she should’ve deduced strictly from his Irish name he’d patronize illicit fights - had collected his percentage of the till, just departing northbound.

Sherlock hadn’t invaded her body this time, but tagged along invisibly. Skulking through dim alleys and poorly lit byways, he recognized their route to Whitechapel before she did.

“I don’t frequent these parts,” she countered when he stated as much.

“You should, if you plan to be a detective. Society’s lowest element thrives here.”

“In your day, maybe. The current population is primarily eastern immigrants.”

Distracted by this exchange, Sheila almost bumped into O’Reilly, who had stopped on a corner to chat up a cabby in traditional black taxi. Recovering quickly, she kept walking, diverting into a pawn shop so she could track him

through the storefront window. When he skirted traffic and vanished into the Tube station, she cursed aloud.

Fortuitous timing enabled her to leap the gap between closing doors on the Victoria-bound train. O'Reilly's massive cranium could be seen towering above others clutching straps in the next car. Six stops later, he shoved his way to the exit which, given the press of bodies, also proved a tactic necessary for Sheila.

Bumping into her prey in the crush on the platform.

"Oy, idiot, watch yerself!" O'Reilly barked, crooked teeth clenched. He favored Sheila with a piercing gaze as they were jostled by harried commuters. "Ain't I seen you somewheres?"

She shrugged.

His grip on her shirt unyielding, she accompanied him to street level, thus avoiding a scene and losing her chance to locate that night's brawl.

Finally, she tired of being dragged and shook free. "Leave off, asshole!" she growled.

"Oy, you wanna 'ave a go?" he teased, sinking powerful digits into her shoulder. "Come w' me."

In the evening gloom, and increasing pain, she lost track of her whereabouts - a potentially fatal error, she knew. He steered her through a narrow wooden door and down a crooked flight of stairs. Glaring lights greeted her when they emerged in a low ceilinged storeroom, a peculiar assortment of testosterone-fueled males already present.

"What's this, Kieran?" shouted one, sizing up fresh blood.

"Little shit's been tailin' me."

"We'll show 'im 'ow we welcome uninvited guests!" Sporting a swollen black eye, this crusty individual brought forward a set of steel cuffs connected by a chain. "The Beast'll take care of this punk."

As the manacle snapped into place - albeit far too big for Sheila's skinny wrist - a squat, bald, bare-chested figure appeared from a make-shift bar, flecks of beer foam coating his twisted lips. He sneered greedily.

"You takin' wagers, Casey?" queried O'Reilly.

An apparent official guffawed. "Sure, I like collecting easy money. Hundred to one on the kid."

Bills and coins accompanied shouts from those placing bets. Sherlock Holmes' bass echoed in Sheila's head. "What currency is this?"

"I've got better things to concentrate on right now than explaining how the British monetary system changed in the past century."

"You want to win?"

“I don’t feel like dying today, thank you.”

“Who’s ‘e talkin’ to?” muttered the Beast, circling the gangly challenger.

“‘E’s prayin’!” O’Reilly roared.

The deep voice continued, audible only to his niece. “Do you trust me, woman?”

“Do I have an alternative?”

“In my prime, I defeated many attacks using the ancient martial art of baritsu.”

“I belonged to the Wing Chun club at Oxford, but we never...”

“Focus. Watch the chap’s eyes. He’ll telegraph his movements before he makes them. Make note of his natural weaknesses...”

“He’s one solid muscle!” she protested.

“Carrying his war wounds for all to see.”

“Eh?”

“His copious tattoos tell a compelling story.”

Indeed, they covered both arms and ran from his navel up his neck.

She’d decipher the designs later.

The Beast drained another pint of ale before being fitted with his cuff. Spectators vacated the impromptu ring, distinguished by chalk marks on the warped floor. A cowbell signaled commencement of the first round.

Sheila didn’t ask the rules; she presumed their absence. Dodging the Beast’s jab to her face, she perceived only madness in his bloodshot orbs.

The madness of a murderer.

Yet, the boisterous rabble in attendance shared complicity in the deaths, given they endorsed the deeds and did nothing to prevent them. Why deposit the corpses throughout the city, however?

She blocked an incoming strike, and pain ran up her right arm. No time to dwell on it; he let loose a haymaker, which she deflected.

The Beast’s growing anger at repeatedly missing his target generated an accelerated momentum. Intent on breaking her nose or blinding her, he aimed high and, finally, lost his balance when she evaded a backhand swing.

As he stumbled past, she entwined her fingers and leveled a blow square between his shoulders. He hit the floor with a thud; she drove her knee into his spine, grabbed his left arm and twisted it so his knuckles touched his scapula.

Increasing the pressure, she heard the Beast muffle a groan; finally, he gasped, “Uncle!”

A hush enveloped the room. The bookie swallowed hard; he’d have to make good on longshot odds. As he crept toward the stairs, the others gave chase.

Sheila rose, releasing the Beast, who hoisted himself upright. She easily slid from her confinement, eliminating the issue of being shackled together.

“If ye got out so easy,” said her adversary, “Why didn’t ye flee?”

“It was a matter of honor.”

Flummoxed, the fighter sidled to the bar, snatching a towel to mop his perspired brow. As sirens blared above, Sheila turned to see one other soul remained in this basement - young, serious and blond.

“You don’t plan to collect your winnings?” she inquired.

“I...” He extended a stubby hand. “They call me the Dustman.”

“So, all the contenders have nicknames?”

“Our... identities are kept private, for a variety of reasons. I don’t get into the ring, which is why they delegated me to take out the trash, as it were.”

Sheila understood. “Including the dead?”

He nodded.

“You did tours in Afghanistan?”

“Twice. The bloke who keeps the books, he’s a PTSD counselor at the veterans’ hospital. Thought it’d be grand for his patients to release their inner rage in a constructive way. Things... got out of control, to say the least, and he dared not put an end to it. When the Beast started killing his opponents, I was assigned to dump the bodies in convenient wheelie bins.”

“But, you decided to bring attention to the deaths,” she interspersed.

“These men have endured tragedy and broken lives; they shouldn’t die unnoticed.”

She clapped him on the arm. “Good for you.”

Two uniformed bobbies shuffled down the stairs, apprehending the Beast, and threatening Sheila and the Dustman.

“You the one who pocket dialed us?” accused the shorter.

“I...” She’d forgotten about the mobile in her jeans. “Yes.”

“We owe you a debt of thanks, to be sure. Been tryin’ to catch these reprobates for months.”

His lanky partner scribbled in a notebook. “Your name?”

“Sheila Holmes.”

Both men gaped. She pulled off the knit cap, revealing curly brunette locks.

With a sniff, the second officer addressed the Dustman. “And, you?”

“Johnny Watson.”

“Are you joshing?” demanded a brusque sergeant, perched on the stairs. “Holmes and Watson?”

Sheila chuckled, “Just coincidence, I assure you.”

“Well, whoever you really are, we need you at the station to make statements.”

“We’ll be there on the hour.”

Left to themselves, Sheila and Johnny gazed at each other, before erupting in fits of laughter. “Watson, with war wounds from Afghanistan!” commented Sheila.

Watson lifted his left trouser leg. Very real war wounds, as evinced by his prosthetic.

Sheila sobered instantly. “I’m... sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve often cursed the damned thing, but it kept me from being arrested this time!”

Together, they ascended to the street. Clouds obscured the stars, and fog engulfed them. They parted at Victoria’s Tube station, and only in the morning, reading the early edition of the *Times*, did Sheila realize the event had taken place in the basement of Westminster Cathedral.

“The last place authorities would suspect, a church,” said Sherlock Holmes. “You fought well...”

Sheila warned, “Don’t say, ‘for a woman.’”

He bit the elongated pipe stem. “As you wish. Though a successful conclusion to the case, your slipshod methods will be refined with experience.” Those elegant fingers held a taper lit from the fireplace grate to the briar bowl.

“Where’d you get the tobacco?”

“I have ways.”

“So, what next?” his great-great-niece pondered from the basket-chair.

He tossed her the open newspaper. “You’re prominently mentioned as having led the police to the site. Clients will soon call for your services.”

Sheila rubbed her sore arm, bruised from its contact with the Beast’s powerful blows. Uncertain whether to place herself in danger’s path, she gazed out the window.

“You have doubts?”

“I...”

“Fear not. I shall be with you.”

She spun, but Sherlock had vanished.

Edith Hudson-Thorne carried in a tray of bacon and eggs, coffee and toast.

Sheila had lost her appetite.

Johnny Come Lately

The incessant knocking frayed Sheila's nerves by the second day. She sat behind the draperies, strumming her guitar and peering stealthily through filthy windows as a parade of journalists - some hoisting Steadicams, others boasting conventional equipment - came and went from 221B Baker Street.

Edith Hudson-Thorne didn't appreciate being interrupted at her cleaning every five minutes, either. She'd never imagined, by allowing a Holmes to occupy the upstairs flat of her great-great-grandmother's London home, her life would be turned upside down.

"Sheila, you must end this!" she complained, climbing the stairs with a broom.

The tenant responded from the basket-chair. "Once the Beast is found incapable of standing trial, due to his mental condition, my name will vanish from the papers."

Indeed, each time the Beast - real name Cyril Bentley - came before the bench for a hearing, the three paragraphs recounting his capture in the basement of Westminster Cathedral as part of an illicit fighting ring were reprinted.

Another pounding on the heavy wood forced Edith to reverse her steps. She'd adopted the habit of slamming the door in the visitors' faces; not this time.

Sheila listened intently. Her landlady claimed the man to be lying to gain access, stirring his emphatic objections.

"Invite Mr. Watson in, Edith!" hailed the Oxford graduate from the landing.

The close-cropped blond head bobbed a salutation, and he limped slowly upward. "Thanks."

"Fortunate I recognized your voice. Edith is at her wit's end." Sheila led Johnny Watson into the sitting room and signaled him onto the red Victorian divan.

"I've been watching this last hour," he admitted, settling on the cushions. "Humorous, really."

"And annoying. I was hoping for a bit of publicity to bolster my career, but it's getting ridiculous."

"Your career?"

"Detective. Like..."

Watson chuckled. "Taking advantage of the name?"

"I'm related by blood."

His young, tanned features darkened. “No way. Neither Sherlock nor his brother Mycroft sired any children...”

“Their elder brother did.”

“I... didn’t know.”

“Great-great-granddad Sherrinford is the least known of the Holmes boys, because he contented himself being a country squire, before dying in a hunting accident.”

“Leaving his wife and sons...”

“Two sons, three daughters.”

“Ah!” Watson’s blue eyes flashed. “I apologize for accusing you.”

“Perfectly all right. I’m used to explaining the association.” As he stretched his left leg, Sheila recalled his situation. “Can I... get you anything?”

“No, thanks. The knee gets stiff...”

“Otherwise, you seem to function normally.”

“Pretty much. It’s more people’s attitudes which cause the problems.”

“How so?”

“Being on disability, I have to prove I deserve the funds, over and over...”

“Shameful!”

“And, it’s not much when the bills pile up. One practical aspect of the fights: the counselor paid me twenty pounds a night to clean afterward, and if I bet wisely, I could go home with a hundred in my pocket.”

Sheila grasped the implication. “Because you brought attention to the murders, from the goodness of your heart, you’ve lost your extra income.”

“Exactly.”

Sadly, she could spare little to help him.

“I’m not here for a handout,” he assured her. “My thought was...”

Yes, the flat encompassed two bedrooms and the sitting room, but...

“I sleep in that one,” Sheila pointed to her left, “and the other one is... storage.”

Where Great-great-uncle Sherlock’s personal effects lay mouldering.

Watson rose unsteadily. “I’d gladly pay half the rent. That much I can afford...”

“I...”

Her guest spun toward the exit.

Sheila burst into a raucous laugh.

“You needn’t demean me...” he protested, hand on the brass knob.

“It would be even more hilarious, having Holmes *and* Watson together again on Baker Street!”

He stared at “V.R.” written with bullet holes in the wall. “Don’t expect me to chronicle your escapades.”

“God forbid!” She crossed the worn Persian carpet and clasped his trembling hand. “You can... move in this evening, if you wish.”

“Tomorrow will be fine.”

Sheila realized, after Watson departed, he’d been in more dire straits than he’d admitted. A glance at the calendar confirmed it to be February 28, meaning he’d been threatened with eviction, being unable to pay his March rent.

She mused whether Uncle Sherlock would evict her for desecrating his *sancto sanctorum* by disposing of his treasured belongings.

“If you retain my dressing gown, my pipes and provide a steady supply of tobacco, I shan’t object,” rang his distinctive bass in her ears.

“That dressing gown is a disgrace. It’s falling apart at the seams!”

“I did more thinking...”

“All right, all right.”

“And the leaded riding crop. You’ll need that for your own defense.”

“Riding crop?”

“Weighted. It’ll knock out an opponent with one well-placed blow, but no permanent damage.”

“Thank you, no.”

The amount of dust circulated when Sheila commenced emptying the lop-sided wardrobe made it necessary to open both front and rear windows, adding a decided chill to the effort. When Edith brought lunch on a silver tray, she shivered, nearly dropping her burden.

“What on earth...”

Spider webs adorned Sheila’s brunette curls when her head popped above the stripped double mattress. “Did you know there are, at least, a hundred pairs of shoes under here?”

“I... never looked.”

“I’ll need plenty of boxes, or bin liners.”

Edith arranged platters of cold-cuts, bread and condiments on the table, secretly pleased the cleaning promised when Sheila signed her lease almost a year previous was finally in progress. “Coming up.”

Rather than stuff discards in a wheelie bin outside the kitchen door, Sheila rang a charitable thrift shop, who sent a truck to load 15 large bags and seven crates for distribution to the poor. Bucket after bucket of soapy water removed a century of caked-on dirt from pine floors, faded wallpaper and carved walnut four-

poster bed. Freshly laundered sheets and blankets blended with the floral scent which had replaced the musty odor.

“While I’m at it, can I ditch the test tubes and criminal scrapbooks?” she prodded her translucent flatmate.

Sherlock advised, “You will need them soon enough.”

“Not a client has called since the Westminster incident.”

“If you gave interviews to the press, they would.”

“I... hate talking about myself.”

“Then, let Watson do the interviews on your behalf. He witnessed the fights...”

Sheila grit her teeth. “He might implicate himself, given his role in the crimes.”

“A role he used to stop the carnage. He’ll be touted as a hero.”

“Fine. If he’s agreeable...”

“He owes you a favor; I doubt he’d refuse.”

Refuse, Watson did. He arrived in a foul mood with a duffel and two rolling suitcases, having dragged them to and from Tube stations. A columnist from *The Sun* had waylaid him on the stoop, peppering him with questions about his relationship with Sheila.

“I told him where to go!” he hissed, flopping onto the desk chair.

“Good for you. Next time...”

“There won’t be a next time! I want to live in peace, unbothered by the world.”

“A recluse?”

“Exactly. The only reason I’m going to leave this flat is for appointments with my doctor or the veterans’ benefits reps.”

“A daily dose of sunlight...”

“Don’t start with me, Sheila. I was a medic in Afghanistan, and I know precisely how much sun a body needs to stay healthy - and how little.”

So much for that idea.

They ate lunch in congenial silence, Edith Hudson-Thorne not overly pleased by the new occupant.

“I’ll not tolerate a couple living in sin,” she scolded Sheila, confronting her on the stairs.

“He’s sleeping in Uncle Sherlock’s room, and I in mine.”

“People will talk...”

“These days, people talk whether it’s warranted or not. Two females sharing a flat are branded lesbians, two men, gay. I disregard such gossip wholesale.”

“Well, I don’t,” snapped Edith.

“So be it. If you hear anyone commenting that Johnny and I are... misbehaving, we’ll leave.”

“You’d honestly...”

Sheila raised her right hand in a gesture of pledge. “I swear.”

Unfounded rumors proved the least of her troubles. She’d grown accustomed to the lean, shaggy-haired Sherlock Holmes puffing his pipe at odd hours in the sitting room. Jolted from sleep that night by masculine shouts of terror, she crawled from beneath the quilt, grabbed the ratty dressing gown - slightly long for her wiry 5'10" frame - and burst from her room.

“What...”

Johnny Watson stood in his doorway, horrified by the shimmering spectre seated beside the fireplace, ringed in aromatic tobacco smoke.

Switching on the floor lamp, Sheila stepped between him and the ghost. She spoke soothingly, compelling him to focus on her face. When she led him to the divan, his trembling fingers clutched hers like a child fearing a menacing dog.

“I forgot to mention our... other resident,” the woman repeated. “I’m sincerely sorry.”

“But... but...”

“He doesn’t... interfere, usually.” She squinted at her relative. “Uncle Sherlock, you should’ve known better. Johnny suffers from post traumatic stress, and undue shocks only aggravate his symptoms.”

“How would you know?” accused the dead detective, stroking his stubbly chin.

“I... read up on the subject, to comprehend why those veterans would engage in fights.”

“So, you’ll mollycoddle him, and neglect your career...”

She barked, “I’m neglecting nothing. Have you seen one client come through that door?”

“One is coming up at this moment.”

Redirecting her attention, Sheila heard Watson’s exasperated breathing, and the tell-tale creaking of an ill-maintained staircase. She glanced at the mantle clock: 3:15 AM.

“A burglar?” she whispered.

“No. A client. He’s been loitering across Baker Street since yesterday afternoon; you should have noticed. Seeing a light in the window now, he’s decided to prevail upon your presumed insomnia.”

“He must’ve picked the lock...”

Sherlock clucked his tongue. “I didn’t say he was a model citizen, merely a client.”

Far from a model citizen, in fact. Hinges squeaked as a thick, tattooed hand pushed the door inward. Garbed in black t-shirt, leather jacket, tight jeans and square-toed boots, Sheila puzzled where he’d parked his motorcycle.

He sported colorfully-inked images on his squat neck and bulbous head, which brushed the lintel as he crossed the threshold.

“Miz ‘Olmes?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry for this... intrusion, but I need yer ‘elp.”

“Have a seat, Mister...”

“Jes’ call me Leo.”

“Very well, Leo.”

Johnny Watson continued to stare blatantly at the elder Holmes; Sheila ignored him for the moment, offering her visitor an armchair near the fireplace.

“How can I be of assistance?” she pressed.

“Me an’ the boys...”

Sheila echoed, “The boys? The other gang members?”

“We’re not a gang,” Leo snarled. “We’re a club. Respectable-like. Live within the law, as much as possible.”

“Glad to hear it. Go on.”

“We’re bein’ charged by the cops w’ stealin’.”

“Stealing? What have you supposedly stolen?”

“Money. Lots o’ money.”

“From whom?”

“Ol’ folk.”

Sheila did not really feel like playing 20 questions at this hour. “What old folk?”

“Oo knows?”

“Hold on, there, Leo. Let’s start over and take it slow. You’ve been accused by the police of stealing from old people. Robbing them on the streets, or how? Be explicit.”

“Computers.”

“Eh?”

“It started with our computer at the ‘all. Cops say we used it to drain scores of ol’ folk’s bank accounts dry.”

“Ah!” Now, she understood. “Someone broke into your network.”

“Ain’t no network. Jes’ an ol’ computer ‘ooked up to a phone line.”

“Interesting.”

“You may think so. Then, it started ‘appenin’ to our mobiles.”

“Your mobiles were affected, too?”

He nodded.

“How much are we talking about?”

“Over a million pounds.”

Sheila swallowed hard. “A... million?”

“Uh-huh. You can see why we need yer ‘elp.”

She recovered her composure quickly. “Did the police mention who currently has possession of these stolen assets?”

“They were transferred electronically into the club’s account, then disappeared.”

“Who’s authorized to withdraw from that account?”

“The club council.”

“Of which you’re chair?”

“Vice-chair. Benny’s the chair, but ‘is ‘ealth ain’t so good. This mess ‘as put ‘im in ‘ospital.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Sheila shuffled to the fireplace, where Sherlock stood, pipe dormant, observing.

“Get his particulars,” instructed the deceased. “Tell him you’ll meet him at the club hall this afternoon.”

She did as advised, and Leo departed, reasonably appeased.

Watson chuckled, a pleasant sound after the earlier disturbance. “So, that’s how you make your living? Stalking hackers and thieves?”

“And murderers,” she sniffed.

“As long as you’re quiet about it.”

His tone irked her. “Who are you to dictate...”

“I’m simply making a request. A lot of noise...”

“Yet, you frequented rowdy and illegal fights only months ago...”

“For the scratch.”

“Fine. With your bedroom door closed, you should enjoy plenty of quiet.”

Watson rose and stormed from the chamber, slamming the door so hard, it rattled the window panes.

Edith Hudson-Thorne voiced her displeasure when she delivered breakfast that foggy morning. "What unholy row went on in the wee hours?"

"A small disagreement, is all."

"Small? Knocked clean off my mattress, I was!"

"I apologize."

"I give Mr. Watson a week. If things don't calm down, he's out - and you with him!"

Sheila wasn't in the mood to dispute further. She slouched on the divan, violet eyes aching for sleep.

"So, tell me your assessment of this new case," prompted Sherlock Holmes from the basket-chair.

"Not now, Uncle."

"Yes, now. The culprit has already absconded with over a million pounds, from one set of victims. No doubt, he has others..."

Righting herself, Sheila glared at him. "You think so?"

"Any criminal of intelligence - and it seems to take intelligence to infiltrate these computers - will have more than one iron in the fire, as it were. This avenue of illicit income has been cut off; naturally..."

"I've heard a lot of these scammers operate out of Nigeria."

"This individual would be domestic."

"What makes you..."

"From what you've told me about increased security in the banking sector, due to suspicions regarding terrorists, it would be impossible for someone overseas to withdraw large sums from a British bank without presenting himself in person."

"Not so, if the transfer was completed via the internet."

"The transfers in, yes. The transfers out... he doesn't want the authorities to track that, like they did his activities through the club's computer."

"Makes sense."

"Of course, it does! It is also logical, with the inception of video monitoring, that he would wear a disguise and use a false name and expertly forged identification."

"If I didn't know better, I'd try to pin it on Moriarty," Sheila sighed.

"Why do you know better? Such intricate deception was his forte."

"Yours, not mine."

"Can you afford to be so positive?"

"You're hinting I keep an open mind."

"Indeed, and always. Never try to twist facts to fit theories. Twist theories to fit facts."

“Wise words, Uncle.” Lids fluttered shut. “Thanks.”

She dozed for two hours, abruptly roused by multiple sirens blaring in the street below. A cadre of Scotland Yarders bolted past Edith’s frustrated grievances, bursting into the sitting room with pistols drawn.

“Whoever you seek, you’re out of luck,” Sheila greeted.

“We have a report from an anonymous informant that Leo Carnehan is hiding here,” stated the uniformed sergeant.

“Leo Carnehan?”

“Don’t deny he’s here, Missy.”

“I *will* deny it, but you can search if you like. Have you a description of my supposed guest?”

“Big guy, tattooed, rides a BMW Roadster.”

So, her client’s surname was Carnehan. “What’s his crime?”

“Fraud, theft, and other assorted infractions.”

“He’s not guilty, you know.”

“That’s what they all say.”

Once the squad vacated the premises, prey unlocated, Sheila watched their six vehicles maneuver along Baker Street. “He must be considered quite dangerous to merit that massive a response to an anonymous tip.”

“You don’t read the papers, do you?” grumbled Watson from the doorway.

“Sundays, mostly.”

“The Dogz, as they are known, because of their headquarters on the Isle of Dogs, came under suspicion when a special audit turned up irregularities. They responded to the summons by burning their papers and fleeing the city. Forensic specialists collaborated with the banks, though, and arrests were ordered.”

“You sat through my chat with Leo last night, and didn’t think it pertinent to mention this?”

“I... your uncle, the ghost...”

“Who ordered the audit?”

“The journalist kept mum on that.”

“Meaning: the same nameless informant who orchestrated our little raid may have been seeking vengeance against the Dogz for many months.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, my dear,” Sherlock reminded her. “Best get to the Isle of Dogs, meet Mr. Carnehan, and begin the investigation logically.”

“You coming?”

He replied, “Yes.”

So did Watson.

Stunned by this reversal of her flatmate's vehement preference for seclusion, Sheila nonetheless snatched a black fedora off its coat hook, buried her brunette curls beneath the brim, and strode out the door.

Riding the Tube from Baker Street to Canary Wharf, they arrived at the address Leo Carnehan provided - a former council home - shortly before noon. Though quite conspicuous in his appearance, the Dogz vice-president had concealed himself effectively in a recessed archway over the road.

"I didn't think you'd come," he confessed, swiftly ushering them into the brick structure.

Sheila asserted, "I've taken your case, and intend to prove you innocent."

"Thanks." Ground level consisted of a large meeting room - former kitchen and dining room - a smaller parlor and the office. Police had trashed the latter, dumping file cabinets and drawers on the floor. The desk sat empty, the sole evidence a computer had occupied it being loose wires dangling over the edge.

"You said you hooked up through a phone line?" Watson queried.

"Right. We'd check email once a week or so, because we used our mobiles most of the time."

"And you didn't make bank transfers via the web?"

"Connection was too slow."

Impressed, Sheila murmured, "Johnny, where'd you pick up all this knowledge?"

"Classes for veterans after my... leg came off. I thought of doing electronic repairs, but sitting too long bothers me as much as standing."

"What do you think?"

"Leo's correct that using a basic modem would make most functions difficult, much less penetrating strangers' bank accounts and nicking their cash." He sat at the desk, essentially staring at the wall. "Each computer has a unique signature, so to speak, allowing transactions to be traced to their origin. If the thief somehow cloned the Dogz's, there's no telling where he might be located."

"Could it have been a random crime?" proposed Sheila.

"Not likely. He cloned this specific computer to make deposits in the Dogz's bank. He had to know..."

Carnehan and Sheila waited for him to continue. He didn't.

"Well?" Leo insisted.

Watson ventured, "There are underground sites where... unsavory sorts can buy the kind of personal details which lay the groundwork for identity theft. Did any of your members ever have his wallet stolen?"

"Not recently."

“Did you issue membership cards?”

“Years ago. Just for fun.”

Sheila grasped Watson’s train of thought. “That would be enough for an enterprising soul to make a profit. Then, the purchaser could use it to his own advantage.”

“But, he’d have to be awfully clever to duplicate the computer’s signature...” Watson admitted.

Sheila interspersed, “Unless Scotland Yard didn’t trace the crimes *by* the signature...”

Simultaneously, the pair finished the sentence: “But simply because the money was found in the Dogz’s bank account.”

“From what Benny tol’ me after the coppers broke into the ‘all, they wanted the computer to validate their suspicions...” offered Carnehan.

“The crime could’ve been committed from any of a billion computers, then,” Watson breathed.

Sheila mumbled, “Which leaves us where we started.”

Her companion pulled a mobile from his shirt pocket and dialed a number. “I’ve a friend in the tech department at Barclay’s, where some of the funds were withdrawn, according to the papers. She can pinpoint the source computer, since the police didn’t.”

More and more, Sheila’s admiration for Watson grew. Where she hadn’t yet established a network of contacts in various professions, he’d been put through his paces chasing disability payments and untangling a spider’s web of discrimination levied against those whose limbs had been left on the battlefield.

The hushed conversation took Watson into the parlor. Five minutes later, he returned, beaming.

“Success?” Sheila probed.

“Of all places, public library computers.”

“Eh?” puzzled Carnehan. “ow...”

“Easily. Too easily,” retorted Watson. “Anyone with a login and password could do it.”

“And not get caught?”

“Oh, he’ll get caught.” Sheila’s chance to shine. “A small item of note in the *Sunday Times*: all libraries within fifty kilometers of London have installed security cameras to catch thieves.”

Watson chuckled, “This is probably one thief they didn’t plan to catch.”

Carnehan accompanied the pair to the Tube station, prepared to join them in their quest. Sheila explained to him it could take days to narrow down the field

of suspects; his determination to clear the club members' names could not be shaken.

"Peg is texting me a list of locations, dates and times the transfers were initiated," Watson announced as they emerged at Baker Street.

Sheila added, "We'll simply have to establish a pattern..."

"Keep your Watson close," Sherlock's voice boomed inside her cranium. "He's a true gem."

A city map tacked to the wall obscuring the infamous "V.R." sported its share of holes - pinholes - marking the libraries which played a role in incriminating the Dogz.

The selection seemed utterly arbitrary, not dependent on proximity to Tube stations or other transportation concerns.

"Whoever he is, he's covering his tracks well," remarked Watson.

"Not well enough," Sheila disputed. "We can request photos from the security cameras..."

"Most o' those places don't save the files," Carnehan supplied. "Unless something unusual 'appens."

"We'll try, anyway."

Exhausting days followed, during which Carnehan vanished whenever they sighted police. The grainy resolution of the prints they did acquire from semi-cooperative administrators didn't aid them much - no two faces were alike.

"All the logins are from accounts dormant more than a year, meaning he's found a way into the library database," summarized Watson, during a hearty dinner in the sitting room of 221B.

Sheila concurred. "He seems to be an excellent make-up artist, as well."

Their eyes met, and they broke into wide grins.

"What?" choked Carnehan, mouth jammed with succulent potatoes.

Sheila tossed her napkin atop her plate. "You know anyone at the theatrical union?"

"No." Watson's face fell.

Carnehan offered, "I do."

"Ring him up, and get a list of experts in the field who've been out of work more than six months," Sheila instructed.

Watson chimed in, "And headshots, if available."

Of those highly regarded for their skills with latex and cosmetics on London's West End, six had permanently fallen from grace with producers and directors. Gambling problems, alcoholism, or general unreliability were noted as causes.

The trio stared at black and white images positioned on the sitting room table.

“We can eliminate the drinkers,” opined Watson.

Sheila countered, free weights straining her muscles, “Why?”

“Their mental processes wouldn’t be sharp enough for this project. They’d be more worried about where to get the next bottle.”

“Good point.”

Carnehan commented, “The gamblers wouldn’t wait ‘til such a pile ‘ad built up in the account, but would grab it as soon as the transfer went through, and place the next bet.”

“True.”

Four photos were discarded on the floor.

“Let’s go.” Sheila folded the remaining two and tucked them in her jean pocket.

Sherlock hovered on the threshold, blocking her path. Watson shuddered visibly, and Carnehan gulped in disbelief.

“What is it, Uncle?” the woman snapped.

“Why waste your time pursuing useless leads?”

“These men...”

“You’re wrong. The quality of their theatrical work may meet the criteria, but do they have the proper technical education to commit the crimes?”

Sheila’s shoulders drooped, and she retraced her steps, retrieving the discarded photos.

Only one had earned degrees in both theatre and computer science.

And a considerable list of arrests.

Walter Valentine, a raging drunk, prone to instigating bar fights.

“He must be crack on when he’s sober,” remarked Watson.

Paperwork on the two false suspects pitched in the fireplace, she groaned, “We’re going to find out, I guess.”

Trolling the Irish pubs Valentine frequented, according to police documents, they found him at the dimly lit Finnegan’s, regaling disinterested patrons with tales of his creations for erstwhile revivals of *The Lion King*, *Wicked* and *Don Giovanni*. They stood him drinks to silence the slurred tirades.

Sheila had witnessed similar behavior on numerous occasions, in Oxford residence halls and elsewhere. Drunks who sought attention were the most dangerous to approach.

One wrong word...

Carnehan plowed through the crowd, menace lighting his brown eyes. Watson intercepted him at the last second, inadvertently shoving Sheila into the bar, upsetting Valentine's whiskey.

"Clumsy bitch!" their suspect bellowed.

She shook out her dripping flannel sleeve. "Sorry, I...."

"Damn straight, you'll buy me another!"

"That's not..."

"You saying you won't..."

"I'm not saying anything!"

A squeal rose from Sheila's throat when Valentine seized her by the collar and lifted her off the floor. He wasn't much taller than she, but his arms had a deceptive strength.

She kicked his left knee; he released her to crash against the nearest bar stools.

His fists clenched and she grit her teeth - a glance at Watson and Carnehan affirmed they wouldn't intervene.

"Hoy, Tommy!" bawled Valentine to the green-clad musician performing on a small corner stage. "Fiddle me a lively tune I can beat this fool's ass to!"

Bow scraped strings, and the violin struck up an Irish jig.

Sheila muttered an expletive, musing how this newfound career always seemed to land her on the receiving end of violence.

Valentine's level of intoxication worked against him, fortunately. Deflecting his cursory jabs, she sensed his unsteadiness, managing a coffee-grinder spin-kick which knocked him off his feet.

Pinning her beneath him on the grimy boards.

Carnehan's tattooed head wore an asinine smirk when he lifted Valentine off Sheila's prone form. "What do we do wi' 'im now?"

"We take him home," suggested Watson, also grinning. He offered the crushed female a hand. "Not the best technique, but you always seem to emerge victorious."

She clasped his fingers. "Oh, shut up."

Too dazed to resist, Valentine was escorted onto the street, and driven in a taxi to a posh Regent's Park address. Watson dug a key ring from the man's peacoat, unlocking the front door and hustling him inside.

"First impressions would lead me to believe he has a plentiful source of ill-gotten gains," stated the Afghan war veteran.

Sheila corrected, "He's taken possession of the place within the past few days." Pointing to the main parlor, furnishings stood draped with sheets. "When was the withdrawal made from the Dogz bank account?"

"A month, now," replied Carnehan.

Personal belongings overflowed cardboard boxes at the foot of dusty stairs. Easing the half-conscious Valentine onto a wing-backed chair, they rifled notebooks and binders, finding incriminating evidence in startling quantities.

"It wasn't jes' us," Carnehan grumbled. "More than twenty groups 'e used for 'is scheme."

"And twice that number of accounts where he dumped the stolen funds." Watson whistled. "Scotland Yard will love this."

So engrossed were they perusing the lists, Valentine's rising went undetected, until he stood over them brandishing a pistol.

"Scotland Yard will never know," the criminal drawled.

Carnehan reeled, blasting Valentine with a powerful right cross. The weapon discharged into his chest, propelling him through the balustrade.

Sheila's legs turned gelatinous at the sight of so much blood. Watson's service as an Army medic kicked in; he ripped off a length of the furniture coverings to use as a pressure bandage.

"Grab my phone and ring for an ambulance," he ordered Sheila.

She fumbled with the device, but managed to raise the authorities.

They arrived too late.

Johnny Watson supported Sheila as they hiked to Baker Street in a pre-dawn fog. They'd been interviewed at length by the police, who placed Valentine in custody and loaded his boxes in the boot of a sergeant's vehicle.

Of course, they were subjected to hearty laughter when they gave their names.

"Holmes and Watson!" guffawed the constables.

Sherlock's stern features wore no smile when they stumbled up the stairs to 221B. "Getting your clients killed is not in the best interest of..."

"Not now, old man," interrupted Watson. "She's in no condition..."

The elder Holmes scoffed, "Fainting at the sight of blood! What nonsense!"

Before her flatmate could cover her with the quilt, Sheila slept on the red divan.

"She'll disgrace the family name," persisted Sherlock.

"It wasn't her fault. I stopped Carnehan at the pub, but his anger got the best of him."

“I’d dispute that, but you’re stubborn as a mule, so we’ll see if this debacle draws more clients to the door.”

“The Dogz have been cleared of wrongdoing. I don’t call that a debacle.”

“If I hadn’t...”

“She might’ve wasted a few hours, but she would’ve figured things out. I’ve faith in her.”

Disconcerting, meeting the harsh gaze of a shimmering ghost, but Watson stood his ground, before bidding Sherlock good night and retiring to his room.

Shaking his head at his great-niece, the spectre grabbed his favorite briar from the fireplace mantle and struck a match, filling the room with pungent smoke.

A Confrontation with Death

Johnny Watson and Sheila Holmes burst into their flat at 221B Baker Street, collapsing onto the red-upholstered Victorian divan, toweling perspiration from their faces.

“That’s the second time in a week you’ve nearly been struck in traffic,” the Afghan veteran huffed. “Monday, the taxi, and today, the bicycle. You’ve got to be more careful.”

Sheila grunted. “Thanks for pulling me out of its path. I... wasn’t thinking.” A lie, to be sure. The great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes had been thinking a lot lately, in light of frequent attempts on her life. Near misses as she strolled London streets, and on her morning jogs with Watson...

The bicyclist he thought accidentally plowed toward his companion had been wielding a wicked sharp switchblade.

An ominous phrase resounded inside her skull: “You’ve cost me valuable time and assets; future activities will be handled by some toady working at piece rate.”

James Moriarty - nearly two years after he tracked her to the city from Oxford, where she’d broken their engagement - had set his toadies upon her.

Why the delay? she mused.

“I’m for a shower,” Watson interrupted her reverie, rising.

Sheila shook herself into the present. “Call down to Edith for brunch first, eh? Anything you like.”

Chest still heaving, he pulled her off the cushions, kissing her cheek lightly. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For giving me my life back. These daily runs, and the recent cases...”

“The ones where I didn’t end up with someone’s fist in my face?”

He grinned.

“The industrial espionage investigation set us up for the next few months,” she chuckled, “but successfully rescuing the Dutch kidnap victim had a more fulfilling element, on a personal level.”

“Working together has shown me...”

“Don’t get sentimental, John. Especially when I’m dripping with sweat.” She shooed him toward the door, and crossed to her bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, she smelled Edith Hudson-Thorne’s delightful cooking, set aside her guitar and emerged wearing her uncle’s shabby purple

dressing gown over jeans and an AC/DC t-shirt. Watson joined her, shock of blond hair damp, in a dress shirt and black trousers.

“You heading for an appointment?” Sheila prodded.

“With my counselor.”

“Ah!”

He opened the folded London *Times* tucked beside his plate, scooping a bite of sausage into his mouth. He thumped the paper. “Have you seen this?”

“More murders, more burglaries.” Sheila sipped her orange juice. “We’ll never get ahead of the game.”

“No. This.”

He shoved the front page toward her, and she took in a four-column photo upside down. She didn’t need to read the caption.

James Moriarty had snagged himself a rich nobleman’s daughter, wedding scheduled for the coming weekend.

The answer to her earlier question.

Her continued existence presented difficulties for him, should she and his bride-to-be meet.

Sheila knew too much about his... secret life, the equivalent of Mafia mob bosses so popular in American films. Moriarty engineered murders, drug deals, collected protection monies from houses of prostitution, fences, and criminals of every ilk. He chemically engineered, thanks to his university studies, explosive devices which left no traces of their components.

Yet, he maintained the outward semblance of a cosmopolitan gentleman, a member of exclusive clubs, attending the opera and receptions for the Queen.

“Bastard,” she muttered.

Watson ventured, “That’s your...”

She nodded grimly.

“Nice looking chap.”

“Beauty is only skin deep, John. He’ll have me dead before Saturday, and never spoil his manicure.”

Blue eyes glared at her. “You wouldn’t pull an old soldier’s prosthetic leg now, would you?”

Her solemn expression conveyed the unspoken reply.

“Then, you should stay put, not go out...”

“Nonsense! Qualifying for the Iron Man Triathlon is three weeks off. I won’t alter my routine for... for...”

“Sheila, your language!” Watson discarded his linen napkin. “Let me ring the clinic, and I’ll change my session. That way, I’ll be here to protect you...”

“Since when do I need protection?”

“Sure, you can handle yourself in a fight, one-on-one. But this boy doesn’t play by the rules...”

“You’ve got that right.”

Abruptly, the young man burst out laughing.

“What’s so humorous?”

“It just occurred to me: you’re Holmes, I’m Watson, we’ve got Mrs. Hudson and Moriarty. We’re just missing Irene Adler...”

Despite the situation, Sheila smiled. “René Adler was the Wing Chun Club sifu at university...”

Tears streamed down their cheeks by the time they recovered their composure.

“So, tell me, what do you intend to do?” queried Watson.

Sheila grit her teeth. “Take the fight to him, of course. Expose him as he truly is.”

“Will the old man approve?”

“Most heartily.” The “old man” - as Watson called the ghost of Sherlock Holmes - made his presence known in a cloud of tobacco smoke.

“Good morning, Uncle,” Sheila greeted. “Hungry?”

“No, thank you. The problem with Moriarty will be acquiring sufficient evidence for a conviction.”

His great-great-niece spun in her chair, activating the computer. A file clicked open, revealing collected articles documenting heinous crimes.

“I thought you didn’t read the papers, except for Sunday,” said Watson.

“Remember the search parameters I asked you to set up to comb British news feeds according to very specific references?”

The elder Holmes praised, “Admirable.”

“None of them mention Moriarty’s name, though,” observed Watson.

“They wouldn’t. He’s extremely diligent about distancing himself from the actual deed.”

“Then, how...”

Sheila abandoned the last of her toast in favor of the window overlooking Baker Street. “We start with *him*.”

Her flatmate joined her, peering at the bustling crowds below. “Who?”

She indicated a grubbily-clad teenager chatting on his mobile, leaning against a light post over the road. “He’s been there every day for the past month. Keeping an eye on us, I suspect.”

“I wondered if you’d noticed,” interspersed Sherlock.

“Even if I was blind, I’d have noticed.”

“And the other lurkers?”

“Planted at the Tube station, the bus stop, and so forth?”

Her uncle affirmed with a sniff.

“So, we put the screws to one, and get him to crack...”

“At risk of his very life?”

Watson shuddered. “His life?”

“Indeed, my boy. Moriarty is expert at eliminating anyone who reveals details of his operations.”

“So, we put him in protective custody,” stated Sheila.

“You’ve made connections at the Yard...”

“A few. As I told you before, they consider my investigations a joke.”

“But they are gradually coming to respect your methods.”

“I don’t have the distractions they endure, case after case dropped in their laps, the public howling for justice.” She peeled off the dressing gown, tossing it on the basket-chair and facing Watson. “You ready?”

“For what?”

“I’ll walk south a block or so, then duck into an alley. When you see him follow me, you give chase, and we’ll... rough him up a bit and see what he tells us.”

Sherlock suggested, “I’d recommend taking the pistol my Watson kept in the desk drawer...”

“I... don’t carry,” objected the younger namesake.

The ghost's tapered fingers combed unkempt brown hair, eyebrows arched over grey orbs smoldering with disdain.

Sheila raised a warning hand. “It’s... his condition, Uncle. Many who’ve returned from deployments in Afghanistan can no longer bear the sight, feel or smell of firearms.”

The stony countenance, augmented by two days’ stubble along the jawline, relaxed. “Ah!”

Pulling the black fedora over her brunette curls, Sheila scrambled down creaking stairs and out into the chill autumn air. The two men - one tangible, one spectral - monitored her progress on the sidewalk, and saw the shadow break from his vantage point to dog her steps.

“Go,” Holmes directed.

Watson complied. “I won’t let her get hurt.”

“She can handle herself.”

“Sometimes.”

When Watson rounded the corner into the alley he'd glimpsed Sheila precede him, she already had the youth spread-eagle with his hands against the brick wall, blood dripping from his broken nose.

"Who's your boss?" she barked in his ear.

He didn't respond, and she applied her heel to the back of his left knee, buckling his leg with a howl of pain.

"Who's your boss?"

"A guy named Parker," he finally panted.

"How's he built?"

"Short, dumpy, black hair, missing a front tooth. Reminds me of a dwarf wrestler."

"How do you contact him?"

"At a news stall outside the Charing Cross Hotel, after my shift."

"What about that mobile in your pocket?"

"The number could be traced."

Sheila pressed, "When's your shift end?"

"Half-three, before the evening rush."

"Who relieves you?"

"A dude called Snarky."

"What'd they call you?"

"Corey."

Pulling a length of rope from her jeans, Sheila bound Corey's wrists and dragged him toward Watson. "Take him home, John. Hold him until I find this Parker."

"You going alone?"

"Last time Moriarty came 'round, I'll admit, he thoroughly intimidated me. He intends these fresh threats to reinforce that previous message, expecting me to simply roll over. The last thing he'll anticipate is me showing up on his doorstep."

Gripping the prisoner by his shoulders, Watson applied pressure to halt his struggle. "I'd recommend a disguise, at least."

"No time. It's almost three o'clock." Sheila scanned Baker Street, seeing no other lurkers in the vicinity. Reacting to Corey's muttered expletives and ongoing resistance to his captivity, she raked his crimson-stained cheeks with a powerful backhand strike. "Go the back way, so no one knows what happened."

En route to their destination, Watson puzzled about Sheila's uncharacteristic use of violence. "What'd you do to piss her off, man?" he asked Corey, shoving him forward.

“At the first opportunity, I was supposed to put a shiv between her ribs, but she slapped the shit outta me.”

“It’s called Wing Chun, and she’s an expert.”

The landlady shrieked when Watson maneuvered the teen through her kitchen door. “What on earth...”

“We promise not to bother you any more than necessary, Edith,” Watson puffed. “Would you mind preparing a few sandwiches?”

Prior to Mrs. Hudson-Thorne carrying her silver tray up to the flat Sheila shared with Watson, the young detective clasped a pole in the London Tube, bound for Charing Cross. The hotel of the same name rose above the station, near Trafalgar Square and streets lined with posh shops. Tucked in the entry way, a glass-encased stall where she guessed Parker loitered, awaiting news of her movements.

She recognized the diminutive figure from Corey’s description, the same moment he caught sight of her and attempted to make himself inconspicuous.

The ploy failed.

Sheila had commandeered Corey’s knife - meant for her ribs - and flashed it beneath Parker’s double chin. “Let’s have a friendly chat, shall we?” she oozed.

The door locked, she flipped the sign to read, “Closed.”

“Oy, you can’t do that!” Parker spat. “The papers...”

“Can wait, you Aussie dingo, until you tell me where Moriarty is.”

“He’s livin’ at Kentwood Hall, w’ her ladyship.”

“You report to him there?”

The Australian flushed. “Oh, no... the likes o’ me...”

“Then, where?”

“I...”

Increased pressure from the blade against Parker’s windpipe.

“South Bank, near Parliament. The Montague Building. An ol’ office complex...”

“Where’s your mobile?”

Trembling digits unclipped the device from his belt.

Sheila smashed electronic components underfoot, and ripped the land line from the wall socket. “Do I have to bind and gag you, or will you stay put?”

Parker lied, and received a clout on the head for his troubles. He lay, unconscious, behind the counter until well after Sheila departed.

“You’re quite out of control, woman,” her great-great-uncle’s booming bass echoed inside her skull as she marched toward the Thames. “Employing the villains’ tactics smacks of desperation.”

“Twice today, I’ve almost been killed. I jolly well have a right to get rough with the assholes responsible.”

“Including Moriarty?”

“My Moriarty isn’t your Moriarty. He’s... brutal, vicious, deceitful...”

“You’re saying he lacks the element of genius?”

“No, but he lets his emotions get in the way of logical thinking...”

“Therein opening himself to error.”

“Indeed, Uncle.”

“So, if he has foreknowledge of your arrival...”

Sheila shivered in a gust of wind. “You think his boys...”

“I would estimate they are three deep on any assignment he gives them, so when one is incommoded, the next steps in to assume his duties.”

“Shit.”

“You did not consider such possibilities?” chided Sherlock.

“Honestly, no. The skeleton crew he directed at Oxford...”

“Has grown exponentially, my dear. His name, regardless of his ancestry, carries with it a certain awe among the society’s lower echelons.”

“Thanks for the insights, Uncle.” She exhaled loudly, half-way across Waterloo Bridge.

The London Eye rotated slowly as she passed, allowing tourists an unparalleled view of the city. Museums and restaurants did volume business from foreigners seeking culture or an early dinner. Sheila dodged these crowds, devising a plan of action for her entrance - and egress - at the Montague Building.

The uniformed security guard - a stooped senior undoubtedly supplementing his retirement pension - attempted to waylay her at the circular reception counter, lit by full-length windows overlooking the river.

“‘oo are ye ‘ere t’see?” came the Irish accent.

The flower box she’d plucked from a wheelie bin, and her quick perusal of the tenant directory, made the bluff seem truthful.

“Take the lift on yer left up to three,” the wrinkled septuagenarian instructed, logging her in as “delivery”.

Instead, as the doors slid shut, Sheila pressed five - the penthouse suite. Four pistols were aimed at the car when it slowed; the men wielding them saw no target.

“Somebody playin’ a prank, boss,” called one of the beefy quartet to the inner office.

Where Sheila Holmes confronted James Moriarty with a sarcastic smile, playfully twirling the fedora .

“How in hell did you...” he hissed from behind a carved teak desk with brass accents. Blue eyes flashed fire, thin lips pursed in a hard line. His straight nose twitched, along with the grey-flecked mustache. A strand of his light brown hair dangled over the furrowed brow from a left side part, merging with thick eyebrows.

As handsome as ever, Sheila conceded silently, an unpleasant edge, though, to his melodious baritone. Aloud, she professed, “You trust your custodians too much, Jamie.”

“I trust no one.”

Behind her, the detective heard a Colt revolver’s hammer cock, and a clip loaded into a Glock 9mm pistol. Her heart pounding, she maintained a semblance of calm, propping her hat on a miniature Venus di Milo. “Grand digs, these. Fireplace, bar, and the latest technology. Perfect for organizing all manner of criminal activities with your underlings, monitoring balances in foreign bank accounts, and” - she tapped her knuckles on densely paneled walls - “executing your enemies, uninterrupted.”

A side door opened, and in sauntered another familiar face, to Sheila’s dismay.

“René Adler!” She didn’t miss the irony: Watson’s statement just hours before about throwing an Adler into the mix.

“Hello, Sheila,” the 6’4" African-born Wing Chun instructor hailed.

“What...”

“Mr. Moriarty kindly financed my London location, if I agreed to perform occasional services for him.”

“Such as?”

Moriarty supplied the answer. “Kill her.”

Adler hesitated, a good sign for Sheila. When the bodyguards raised their weapons, however - pointing them at the martial arts sifu - she gulped.

She’d never beaten him in practice, because he had a superior reach, based on his height. He also outweighed her by five stone, and worked out in the gym four days a week. Her hours spent with the free weights paled by comparison.

Men converged, unbidden, clearing the office’s central area of furnishings. This would not be a private fight; her demise would be confirmed by multiple sets of eyes.

From his comfortable leather chair, Moriarty activated a stopwatch. “You have five minutes, Mr. Adler. If you do not accomplish the task in that time, you also will die.”

Adler clasped right fist beneath left palm and bowed to Sheila. She mirrored the gesture, then assumed a defensive stance.

“I’m sorry, Sheila,” trembled her opponent. “I didn’t know...”

“If you’d have asked, I could’ve told you.”

His right arm lashed out, contacting the side of her head, leaving her ears ringing and sight blurred. She successfully blocked his next strike, and decided to launch an offensive.

If she won the battle, they’d both be eliminated, and if Adler did kill her, he would lose his life shortly afterward. As she moved inside his range, pummeling his torso with blows, her brain churned with ideas.

None of which would lead to escape, especially with two dozen bodies packed into the chamber, obstructing doors and windows.

“C’mon, Uncle. Give me some help, here,” she muttered, reeling from Adler’s elbow to her sternum.

Bouncing off the ring of spectators, Sheila felt the blade rip into her flesh. She sank to her knees, narrowly avoiding Adler’s heel kick, aimed at what would have been her head, had she been upright.

“I told you, no blood!” bellowed Moriarty, wrenching a Beretta from the drawer and firing at the offender. “This is to look accidental, so when we dump her corpse in an alley, the coppers’ll think she was robbed and brutally beaten.” He signaled those closest to the dead man to clear away the body.

At this break in the action, René Adler retreated to the fireplace. He commiserated with his former pupil’s pain, especially when she raised an anguished mien toward him.

“If you want to survive this, disarm Moriarty!” Sheila groaned.

She might’ve been the sifu and he the student in that moment. With lightning moves, the native Nigerian had the crime lord in a choke hold, pistol barrel aimed at his right temple.

Their leader thus overpowered, the thugs dropped their weapons at Adler’s command. Sheila gingerly rose and gathered the assortment of knives and guns. Piling them on Moriarty’s blotter, she hefted a solid crystal paperweight and, pleased with its bulk, chucked it through the double-paned window behind his desk. She followed the shards of glass with a rain of weapons.

“That should bring the police post-haste,” she declared, collapsing against the wall.

The assembly grasped her meaning, bolting toward the exit like a stampeding herd of cattle. Within moments, only Adler, Moriarty and Sheila remained.

“Use his belt and bind him to the chair,” the latter directed, struggling to breathe.

Adler complied, Moriarty too frustrated to balk.

Sheila hovered over her former fiancé, gripping the upholstered arms for support. “You thought the third time would be the charm today, didn’t you, Jamie? You’d have me dead before your wedding... but now, there’ll be no wedding, because you’re prison bound!” Reaching her right arm around her midsection, she soaked her fingertips in blood, smearing it along Moriarty’s clenched jaw. “Once, you worried about soiling your cuffs with blood, and predicted my life was ultimately forfeit. May those words haunt you until you die!”

She proceeded to rifle the files for one particular item - a disk containing incriminating footage of Moriarty kissing her.

“Would I be so foolish as to keep it here?” he scoffed.

Groping for a concealed compartment, she dislodged the plastic case.

“Yes.” She turned to a stupefied Adler, retrieving her fedora with a flip-and-twist motion. “Where does that lead?”

“To a private lift,” he replied.

“We’d best crack on.”

They hurried out the door through which the Wing Chun master had arrived, and descended, unimpeded, in a sumptuously appointed elevator. Sirens could be heard approaching from the south as they emerged into a light evening fog, leaving the elderly security guard befuddled and palsied.

“I’ll drive you to hospital,” Adler volunteered, when Sheila stumbled again.

“No, take me home. Watson was a medic...”

He chuckled. “You never did seek treatment for injuries sustained in class. That broken nose I gave you...”

“Gave my face character, so they say,” she snickered weakly.

Adler supported her at the waist as they walked to the carpark. A Triumph motorcycle roared past, its helmetless rider unmistakable with blood staining his cheek: Moriarty.

Two police cars intercepted him at the end of the drive. When he didn’t stop, they shot out his front tire, and he flew over the handlebars, shattering the windscreen of an idling taxi.

The pronouncement of James Moriarty’s tragic death occupied most of the London *Times* front page the next morning. A sidebar listed those arrested fleeing the Montague Building. Corey, the young lurker, had been placed in custody separately.

A statement issued by the patriarch at Kentwood Hall denounced Moriarty as “no gentleman” and a “rogue of the lowest order.” He applauded Sheila Holmes for unmasking him and saving their family from additional scandal.

For her part, Sheila recuperated in her oak double bed the rest of that week, Watson having bound up the ugly gash below her shoulder blade. “Two inches lower, and you would’ve been as dead as Moriarty,” he scolded.

“To end his reign would’ve been worth it.”

“Will René Adler be summoned to court?”

“He’s gone back to Oxford; Scotland Yard believed my tale of his innocent involvement.” She smirked. “He’s learned his lesson.”

“Have you?” Sherlock’s voice from the threshold, tobacco smoke curling ceilingward from his briar pipe.

“That I’m still an amateur, compared to you, Uncle?”

He nodded.

“You’ll never let me forget!”

Sheila closed her violet eyes and slept.