

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Movies and Mayhem

A Collection of Stories

by

Eugenia Lucas

A Major Production

Akin to a circus.

That's how Sheila Holmes described the commotion at both front and rear entrances to 221B Baker Street. Not only journalists, but videographers, and idle curiosity seekers pressed against the panels, occasionally banging, and constantly yelling epithets toward grimy windows which the tenant never cleaned.

Edith Hudson-Thorne employed her computer to create signs proclaiming, "Sheila Holmes has gone to the country for the summer. John Watson is visiting relatives in Scotland until further notice." Hung on the door, and roundly ignored, the landlady had locked herself in her sitting room, television blaring the daily news, or whatever programming she found reasonably entertaining. External noises thus drowned out, she pretended to pass a normal Saturday.

She watched a broadcast of the scene outside, cursing the woman who had coerced her into signing a decade-long lease the past January. The two years this twenty-something Holmes had occupied the flat above, there'd been nothing but disturbances at all hours and unsavory characters haunting the corridors.

Yet, the rent was always paid on time, with generous allowances for food and utilities. Edith sighed as she fumbled with the remote. She should've stayed in the States and eked out a living in a restaurant or office after her husband died in Afghanistan.

"No one smiles anymore," observed Sherlock Holmes, manifesting in all his translucent glory at the fireplace of his cluttered sitting room upstairs, briar pipe seeking a plug of tobacco from the Persian slipper.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" his great-great-niece concurred. "All this because some idiot found another mention of Holmes, Watson and Moriarty in the same *Times* article amusing."

"Any new cases?"

She thrust a stack of printed emails toward him, without budging from the basket-chair. "Everything from finding lost cats to suspicious deaths."

"You've not responded to the senders?"

"Not until I'm sure I won't be mobbed on the street."

"That's a risk one must take when publicity is a driving factor in maintaining a reputation," noted the darkly handsome spectre, so unlike most artistic and film portrayals.

"Reputation be damned. I'm ready to chuck the whole career."

"Like Watson did?"

Sheila snorted. "He really *is* visiting relatives in Scotland. Also, getting an upgraded prosthetic leg, which should ease his pain."

"And for which you paid?"

"His share of the fees we've collected."

"And more forthcoming," her uncle announced, cocking his shaggy head slightly toward the threshold.

"Eh?"

"A special delivery parcel has been slipped through the mail slot."

And carried up the creaking staircase by Edith, whose russet hair crowned a pinched countenance. "Sheila, I must protest..."

"I know, Edith. Depending on the contents of this, I may muster the courage to step out and give a press conference. That might disperse the crowds."

A careful examination of the padded manila envelope revealed a California postmark and no suspicious ticking. Cutting through shipping tape, the younger Holmes extracted a stack of documents, the topmost reading, "Contract between Standish-Minor Productions, Inc. and Sheila Holmes."

"What on earth?" grumbled Sherlock, hovering over her shoulder.

The woman hastily read legalese phrasing and glanced up, confused. "A motion picture company has bought rights to a new script about Sherlock Holmes. They're coming to London in two weeks, and are engaging me as technical advisor, if I also permit them to film here in your old flat."

"What utter rubbish."

She exhibited a cashier's cheque in the amount of 5,000 pounds. "That's just for starters."

"The fools!"

"They're willing to pay another fifty thousand, if I agree."

Sherlock flopped on the red Victorian divan, a cloud of angry smoke rising. "Opportunists! Using my good name, and your good offices to line their own pockets!"

"A detective film is always profitable. Of course, I'd want to review the screenplay before production starts..."

"You? What about me?"

"Should do."

Dialing the long distance exchange embossed on the letterhead, Sheila confirmed the offer's legitimacy, and promised to be at the production team's disposal Friday next. They would bring the script, inspect the premises for its accessibility, and introduce her to the actors who'd signed on to play the lead roles.

Fortunately, the furor over her latest case dissipated before that appointment, thanks to more urgent crises on foreign soil. Edith wore her best black slacks and a frilled green blouse when she answered the knock, and escorted the troupe up to Sheila's domicile, where she had disposed of enough detritus from the floor and furniture to allow them all to sit comfortably.

Lagging behind, wearing a blue pinstripe suit with gold tie and Armani loafers, a Rolex wristwatch, university class ring and black onyx signet ring his sole adornments, a slender figure surveyed the foyer and the banister, badly in need of varnish. When the dark head raised to meet Sheila's violet orbs, she inhaled sharply.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she barked.

He ascended the stairs, testing their strength. "Scoping out the location."

"You should know better..."

A corpulent executive joined Sheila on the landing, cigar blazing. "Sorry, Miss Holmes. I guess you've already met our executive producer and star, Anthony Downton."

From behind, a rich baritone whispered in her ear, "Don't make a bloody spectacle of yourself."

Sherlock present in his own right - unseen to the visitors - how could his spitting image be extending a hand in greeting?

"Don't play games with me, Uncle," she hissed. Same prominent nose, thin lips, smooth cheekbones, and angular jawline missing only the stubbly beard, this Hollywood prima donna might have been the ghostly Holmes' twin.

An unintelligible response from the deceased left her to deal with the assembly.

"So, you're a blood relative of the Great Detective," stated Downton in a condescending tone.

"And, contrary to your press releases, you're a Milwaukee-born Pennsylvania Dutch-Potawatomi, Notre Dame football washout, former cowhand who got lucky."

Brown eyes widened in front of Sheila, and multiple sets behind her, distracted from their inspection of the sitting room.

Downton's baritone softened. "Damned good job of research."

"Not research. Observation."

"You've learned Sherlock's techniques well."

"Not well enough, some days."

Strong arms yanked Sheila into the midst of the gathering. A prim, ebony haired female sniffed, “Miss Holmes, however you discovered the truth about Mr. Downton...”

“Not his real name,” interspersed the detective.

“Yes, of course. You must swear to keep these details confidential.”

Sheila squinted at Downton. “You ashamed of your past?”

“Not at all. It’s customary for agents to... invent backstories for their rising stars.”

“You mean, lie so you can get the juicy parts.”

A series of throats being cleared augmented the tension in the dim chamber. Sheila crossed and pulled aside heavy, tattered draperies, letting in the mid-day sun.

“Always good to put a bit of light on the subject.”

Downton smirked, catching her insinuation, and resembling Sherlock even more.

Edith arrived with a tray of tea cups and pitchers. Steaming liquid poured and passed, eight people present settled onto seats and waited for someone to speak.

As executive producer, the task fell to Downton, who ran an elongated finger between his neck and shirt collar, loosening his tie prior to commencing.

“Miss Holmes, this project has been in production hell for ten years, because we’ve labored to secure a script which will be true to your uncle’s legacy, and as authentic as possible.”

“Which is why you want to film here?” she queried.

“Exactly.”

“What other sites have you chosen?”

“We’ve received permits to close Baker Street for three days to shoot exteriors and some incidental scenes. We’ll be at Salisbury and York, and are hoping to get permission to use Canterbury Cathedral.”

“You realize, I’ll want to read the script.”

A briefcase snapped open, a packet presented.

“And meet privately with the executive producer to discuss... specifics of the contract.”

The prim assistant objected, “Mr. Downton is on a very tight schedule. The corporation attorneys...”

A roar of laughter drowned out her words. The actor shook his head, scoffing, “I don’t date members of the production team, technical advisors included.”

“I wasn’t jockeying for a date, Mr. Downton.” Sheila rose, sensing Sherlock at her elbow by the tell-tale odor of tobacco. “Before I sign any papers, every clause of the contract will be in order.”

A greying elder hoisted himself to his feet. “We aren’t tied to using your property, Miss Holmes. Now that we’ve seen it, sketched and photographed it, we can recreate it on a soundstage...”

“Not without facing a hefty lawsuit,” she countered. “You had no permission from either myself or Mrs. Hudson-Thorne, the legal owner, to take photos or any rendering of the premises.”

Downton chuckled anew, rising. “She’s sharp as a tack, Bill. Besides, I want the actual locations, not sets. If it means suffering through a tedious dinner, I’m up for the challenge.”

He signaled his crew to follow him, Sheila replying, “It’ll be anything but tedious, I guarantee.”

“One week from today, my limousine will collect you at eight o’clock,” he declared, not turning from his route down the stairs.

“I’ll be ready.”

Delivering his parting shot, Downton spun toward her. “And, ditch the ratty jeans and t-shirt. I want to see you in a dress.”

“I don’t own any.”

“Our advance should be more than sufficient for you to buy something suitable.”

“If I want to squander my money on such frippery.”

Sherlock censured her roundly when she retreated to the sitting room, door closed. “Why dally with that fraud? You know the contract will give them all the advantages...”

“Not if things go the way I plan.”

“What, precisely, is this plan?”

“I’d rather not say at the moment.” Sheila stacked delicate china tea cups on the silver tray. “You can be positive, though, they won’t make a mockery of your reputation, or mine.”

“You won’t surrender my dressing gown, either.”

“Your dressing gown?” The sole remnant of Sherlock’s wardrobe, his great-great-niece wore the tattered garment on chilly evenings.

“It stays here. Downton can... have his costumer reproduce it.”

“I’ll comply with your request, Uncle, if you will remember to open the window when you light your pipe.” Sheila moved to the smeared panes overlooking Baker Street and raised the glass. “It stinks in here.”

A slight bow preceded Sherlock vanishing from sight.

What Sheila didn't expect to see the next morning was Anthony Downton alighting from his limousine at the curb. He clearly had not slept, the suit from his previous call wrinkled, shirt cuffs stained with blood.

"There's been a murder," she greeted him on the threshold

"How'd you know? The police swore they wouldn't notify the media..."

"They didn't. I know the signs." She ushered him to the desk chair.

He collapsed on the seat. "It was horrible. I've made a lot of movies where people are shot, stabbed, strangled... It's nothing like real life."

"Should do." Sheila perched herself on the desk's edge. "Start at the beginning, and leave out no detail."

"Can I get a drink, first?"

"I don't keep anything on hand."

"Water will do."

Fetching a tumbler from the bathroom along the corridor, Sheila watched Downton guzzle the liquid.

"Better?" she prodded.

He nodded that exasperatingly Sherlockian head, took a deep breath, and launched into a tale of meetings gone wrong at the suburban London studio where his company intended to film on specially-constructed sets. Leaving the complex well after midnight, an unknown assailant gunned down his caustic assistant on a street corner as they walked to their cars.

"She fell in my arms," Downton groaned. "I... never... blood everywhere..."

"Pull yourself together, man." Sherlock's voice, not Sheila's, nonetheless roused the actor from his emotional outburst.

Quickly, Sheila added, "What did Scotland Yard say about the incident?"

"They snapped more pictures than some paparazzi, talked to everyone on the team, then had the body loaded into an ambulance. They... didn't say anything. Not to me, anyway."

"Typical." Sheila moved to the fireplace, fiddling with Sherlock's pipes in their rack. "Being originally from Kent, Miss Abernethy may have had some enemies with long memories..."

"How..."

"As I said yesterday: observation."

"*What* did you observe - about her, about me - that led to such conclusions? I need to know, if I'm going to portray Sherlock accurately..."

“It’s not a method to be learned in a few minutes, or a few days. It takes a lifetime...”

“You’re in your twenties. Not much of a lifetime.”

“More than you think. You’ve read about my dealings with Moriarty...”

Downton chortled. “One of the script girls on the lot, knowing I’ve been reading Sherlock Holmes stories since I was a kid, showed me the syndicated article in the *Los Angeles Times*. She thought it was a scam, but I told her about Sherlock’s eldest brother, Sherrinford, who *did* have children and, obviously, grandchildren.”

Sheila found herself respecting Downton, despite inclinations to view him as a money-grubbing Hollywood hack. “What do you want of me?”

“Solve this. Fast. We’ve been given 48 hours to hand over the guilty party to Scotland Yard, or they’ll give the story to the press.”

“Why the secrecy?”

Rising, Downton cracked his neck and knuckles. “I don’t want a hint of scandal to taint this project. I don’t want to make money off sensational publicity. I want the finished product viewed on its own merits, which is why I want you as technical advisor.”

A battered black fedora - hung beneath bullet holes forming the letters “V.R.” - twirled itself atop Sheila’s curly brunette hair. “Take me to the crime scene.”

For a moment, Downton didn’t move.

“What?” Sheila urged.

“His?”

“Yes.”

In a voice similar to an awestruck child, he murmured, “May I?”

She surrendered the hat; it fit his head perfectly.

“I’d love to use this in the movie.”

“That might be arranged.”

Hesitantly, he probed, “You wouldn’t have the infamous dressing gown?”

“Must do.” The red which suddenly coated Sheila’s mouth wasn’t lipstick, but blood from where she bit her tongue, regretting her admission.

“Can I see it?”

“See it, yes. Use it, no.”

“I’ll pay you an extra thousand pounds for the privilege.”

“Not for a million.” Sheila tugged his arm. “Tempus fugit, Mr. Downton. Every minute we linger, clues are lost.”

“At this stage, you needn’t be so proper. It’s Tony, please.”

En route to the street, she answered, “A murder doesn’t make us instant friends.”

“Would our dinner next Friday have done so?”

“No. Merely a more pleasant way to conduct our business.”

“You hoped to get me drunk, so I’d agree to your terms.”

“You’d agree to them without the need for intoxicants, believe me.”

A uniformed, paunchy chauffeur held the limousine’s rear door for the pair. Downton wedged Sheila into a corner of the bench seat. “What would you have offered to so entice me?”

“I’ll tell you Friday evening. For now, we’ve a murder to solve.”

“We?”

“In absence of my Watson, I thought you might wish...”

“Say no more!” Downton eagerly gave the chauffeur an address, and the sleek silver Mercedes merged with mid-morning traffic.

Strips of yellow tape fluttering from buildings and light posts proved the only signs a supposedly innocent woman had perished on that stretch of concrete in the industrial development north of London. Pedestrians scarce on Saturday, Sheila’s expletives related to shoddy police work remained minimal.

“Where were you standing when you saved her from falling?” she asked Downton.

He scanned the walkway and positioned himself facing the road. “Here.”

“The bullet hit her in the chest?”

“From behind. It threw her forward, against me.”

Sheila paced the ground. “That... doesn’t make sense. She was facing you when shot?”

“She’d turned to remind me about an appointment this morning...”

That statement altered the entire investigation. “You realize, the actual target was yourself.”

Downton’s Adam’s apple bounced as he gulped. “No way!”

“As a wise man once said, best to twist theories to fit facts, and one of the facts in this case is that you’ve been followed since you arrived at Heathrow Airport.”

“How can that be? We allowed no advance publicity about the trip...”

“Tony Downton is an international star, and thus his every movement is tracked by not just the press, but avid, oft-rabid fans. Did you not notice the throngs outside your hotel, their mobiles stuck in your face, and instantly posted on the internet? Then, there’s the grey Fiat parked half a block down this very street, its driver wielding a powerful zoom lens?”

Sherlock's double whipped around and glared at the car idling quietly 100 metres away. "Then, the media already knows about the murder."

"Undoubtedly. Which means we must solve it all the faster, to prevent a second attempt on your life. The culprit may not realize he did not hit you."

"He wouldn't have waited to see..."

Sheila snickered. "Would you? Or would you make good your escape?"

"Point made."

Calculating the bullet's trajectory, the younger Holmes strode over the road, past a bus bench into an alley. Sunlight revealed a plethora of trash and rats. Ignoring Downton, who'd pursued her, she scrutinized each dented wheelie bin, crumpled sandwich wrapper, discarded shoe and other rubbish.

"Bloody hell," she muttered eventually.

"What?"

"Was Miss Abernethy struck by a single bullet?"

"As far as I could tell, there was only one impact."

She plucked six metal casings from among the dirt. "He fired almost the entire clip, until the pistol jammed." Straightening, she sighed, "He wanted to be sure you were dead."

Downton shuddered.

"But, when we find the other bullets, we'll be able to identify the weapon."

Together, they retraced their steps to the spot where the bespectacled female had lain. A thorough examination of the nearby brick facade brought a smile to Sheila's thin countenance.

"Found something?" queried Downton.

"I came away without my pocket knife. Have you one about your person?"

The actor dug in his rumpled trousers and passed her a small screwdriver. "Will this do?"

Sheila contemplated the dwarf tool. "For tightening your sunglasses?"

"Computer connections, actually."

"Ah!" Within seconds, three projectiles were removed from the mortar where they'd lodged. "Let's crack on."

"Where?"

"I've a microscope in my flat."

"What about the Fiat?"

Pausing at the limousine's rear door, Sheila chuckled, "You could slash his tires, but he'd just find another way of shadowing you."

“True.” Downton joined her on the posh seat. “Are you certain the murderer is a man?”

“No, not yet.”

“You referred to him with masculine pronouns.”

“Force of habit. Hard to think of a woman as an assassin, unless you know of one who would like to see you dead.”

“More than one.”

“Ex-girlfriends dragged through the mud by the media?”

“Possibly.”

“Are any of them in London as we speak?”

“I can have my people check.”

“Must do. And make a list of business associates who might have grievances against you.”

“You’re not serious.”

“You, being familiar with my great-great-uncle, know his adage about the improbable and the impossible.”

Resigned, Downton confirmed, “Yes.”

“Everyone is suspect until the facts eliminate them.”

Back at Baker Street, a small lab table was rolled from its corner near the sitting room windows. Downton had indicated the impressive collection of implements to his colleagues, now realizing they weren’t antiques, after all.

He replaced the fedora on its peg as Sheila made use of a high-powered microscope.

“Whoever it is,” she related, offering him a view of the uniquely marked metal, “has expensive taste.”

“Yet, you mentioned the pistol jammed while he was firing.”

“A person can buy a custom-made weapon and not know how to use it properly. Perhaps it was purchased for show, or as a gift, but reclaimed when the... need arose.”

“Honestly, Sheila, no one hates me enough to want to kill me.”

“You ever finance any of your films through the mob?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“You’re the executive producer...”

“On *this* film. I formed my company to make what I hope will be a Holmes series.”

“Standish-Minor? Where’d you get the names?”

“My grandmothers’ maiden names.”

“Ah!” Sheila clucked. “The mob could still blame their losses on your poor performance, and wish to retaliate.”

The voice reverberated so loudly, the window panes rattled. “Stop this nonsense!”

Downton’s jaw dropped. “What on earth...”

Her visage grim, Sheila led her guest to the Victorian divan. “You’d better sit down.”

“Why?” wondered the actor, resisting.

“Because everyone else who’s encountered my uncle Sherlock has fainted.”

The tanned face blanched, and his knees buckled. “You... you mean...”

Her shrug preceded Sherlock’s materialization at the fireplace, pipe clenched between his teeth. “A woman is dead and you’re arguing about the mob.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle. I’m merely exploring options...”

“Balderdash! You found enough evidence in that alley to convict the rightful murderer.”

“You’re correct, but he - or she - needs to be identified first.”

He hinted, “The glove with powder burns...”

“Was, I concede, a man’s style, but women have been known...”

Downton could only watch the lively exchange, his brain befuddled by the appearance of his childhood idol.

“Custom pistols are only sold by specially licenced gunsmiths in Britain,” continued Sherlock. “You should be on the phone, contacting them.”

“That was my next step.”

“Good, good. I’ll leave you to it.”

As the spectre faded, Downton leapt off the cushions. “Wait!”

Two Holmeses stared at him expectantly.

His mouth uttered no sounds, however.

“When you have the list of buyers, let your mute client review the names for acquaintances. That should considerably narrow the suspect pool.”

“My thoughts, too, Uncle. Thanks.”

A tobacco cloud swirling around him, Sherlock disappeared. Sheila removed the bullet from the microscope and placed it with its mates in a plastic evidence bag. Then, she shuffled to the computer, punching in search parameters for dealers in automatic weapons.

Downton hadn’t moved, his jaw slack, brown eyes blinking in disbelief.

“Pull yourself together, Tony. Maybe I’m jaded, because I’m used to his comings and goings, but it’s not that big a deal.”

“You... he... I’ve never seen a real ghost.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t comment on your close resemblance. It quite unnerved me yesterday.”

The next hour Downton used his mobile, and Sheila a land-line phone to contact the dozen gunsmiths in England and on the Continent capable of manufacturing custom firearms matching distinct specifications.

“Two suspects, *in toto*,” she announced, concluding additional research on the computer. “John Smith, of Nottingham, while sounding like an alias, is actually a life-long friend of the man who made his weapon. Mike Jones ordered his pistol six months ago, calling for it just yesterday and paying cash. The address he provided is a vacant lot in Manchester.”

“Definitely suspicious,” concurred Downton.

“Copies of the identification documents are being emailed to me, so we’ll have a photo as reference.”

“Good idea.”

Edith brought a platter of sandwiches at noon, along with a pitcher of lemonade. The pair ate in silence, waiting for Sheila’s email account to chime with the incoming post.

Downton nearly choked on a bite of ham and cheese when the attachment opened, a grainy black and white image of a worn, emaciated young man filling the monitor.

“You know him?” Sheila pressed.

“That’s... my cousin, Fred Jacobs.”

The detective waited for him to continue.

Swallowing hard, Downton lowered himself onto the desk chair. “He’s a recovering cocaine addict. I keep him around as a favor to my mom, and for laughs. A sort of glorified errand boy. He told me he couldn’t make this trip, because his sister is getting married.”

“Obviously, a lie. What reason does he have to resent you, given he’s been planning this murder for six months?”

“It doesn’t make sense. He’s well paid for the little he does, gets to attend premieres and parties... And, why order a custom-made pistol just to kill me?”

“Because Scotland Yard, for all their technology, wouldn’t be able to do a ballistics trace on a weapon without a serial number.”

“You mean, they wouldn’t think to do what we just did?”

“Correct.” Sheila printed a copy of the email and powered down the computer. “Now, we need to find him.”

“He might be on a plane back to the States.”

“Let me ring John, and see what we can learn.”

Downton stammered. “John? Watson?”

“Due to his singular situation as a wounded veteran, he has established a wide array of contacts in many fields. He should know a travel agent willing to search flight databases for your cousin’s name.”

Watson, relaxing with his brother and extended family at a golf tournament in the Highlands, restrained himself from scolding Sheila for the unwelcome interruption. Twenty minutes later, nonetheless, he returned the call with valuable information.

Sheila wore a broad grin when she replaced the receiver in its cradle.

“Where is he?” her companion inquired.

“The Savoy.”

“Not at the moment.” Sherlock’s baritone shifted the couple’s attention toward the threshold, where the object of their discussion stood, finely tooled weapon aimed at them.

“Shit,” grumbled Downton.

Jacobs’ bony hand trembled, as did his tenor. “I missed you last night, Tony, but I can’t miss at this distance.”

“You killed Marisa Abernethy for no reason, you idiot!” Sheila restrained him from stepping toward his cousin. “You back on the coke?”

“No. Morphine. Remember when that crate of equipment fell on me?”

“An accident.”

“A broken leg, and morphine to ease the excruciating pain. You never even came to see me in the hospital.”

“I was on location, for Christ’s sake!”

“Not so much as a text message. Shows how much you think of me.” Jacobs advanced into the sitting room.

“I try *not* to think of you, Fred. I’ve wasted so much money...”

The pistol barrel raised, Jacobs directed at Sheila, “See what I mean? I’m just a waste of money.”

“Tony,” advised Sheila in an undertone. “I wouldn’t provoke him further, if I were you.”

“What does it matter? He’s expressing his true feelings for me; I can express mine for him before he pulls the trigger,” the actor spat.

Which accomplished nothing. The weapon jammed. Jacobs fumbled with the mechanism and, thus distracted, Sheila knocked him unconscious with a precise Wing Chun strike. Downton retrieved the firearm, admiring its craftsmanship.

“Something so pricy, so beautiful, shouldn’t have malfunctioned.”

“It didn’t,” retorted Sheila, rolling Jacobs onto his back.

“Huh?”

“One advantage of having a ghost on the premises...”

Downton glanced around for Sherlock, saw nothing. As realization dawned, he sank on the red Victorian divan. “You mean... I might’ve...”

“Died? Yes. He couldn’t really miss at this range, though it might’ve been a botched job, a lingering, anguished demise.”

Scotland Yard summoned, Jacobs was shackled and escorted past the russet-haired landlady, who fumed at the bottom of the staircase. “Sheila... you know I don’t like these disturbances...”

“I’m sorry, Edith, truly. I didn’t expect...”

“You never do!” With that, the woman tramped to her kitchen.

“I apologize if I’ve caused a rift between you and your friend,” Anthony Downton stated from behind her on the landing.

“She’s used to it by now. Besides, I’ve a ten year lease!”

“And a date with me Friday night, if you’re still game to be our technical advisor.”

That dinner proved most enjoyable, with Sheila wearing a cream silk blouse and grey dress slacks, Downton in tuxedo and black tie. Between the six courses, they hashed out details of the contract, including a stipulation Sherlock had added as she walked out the door of 221B.

“There can be no references, no inferences, that my uncle and his Watson were gay,” Sheila asserted. “The custom of the late 19th century was for men with limited incomes - or women - to share lodgings. It didn’t mean... what it often means today.”

In his guise of executive producer, Downton chuckled, “You have that from reliable sources?”

The odor of tobacco in the non-smoking establishment provided the answer.

“And, Watson cannot be portrayed as a blithering idiot, as in previous incarnations. He’s an equal to Sherlock, but with different interests. They... complemented each other.”

Noted in the margins of the document, Downton drained his champagne flute. “Agreed.”

Returning Sheila to Baker Street, he clasped her fingers for a prolonged moment. “Thank you for everything.”

“I’m... glad to be of service.” He leaned in; she placed a hand to his lips. “As attractive as I find you, Tony, kissing you would be like committing incest, in a roundabout way.”

“Huh?”

“You may have been too shocked to notice the resemblance between you and Uncle Sherlock, but I saw it at once. I... couldn’t...”

“Perhaps you’ll change your mind by the time I return.”

“Doubtful, especially with you wearing his fedora, and a copy of the dressing gown!”

On that note, Downton climbed into the limousine. The rotund chauffeur closed the door and, with a hopeful wave through the open window, the actor rode into the night.

Sheila Holmes mounted the steps to the door, then ascended creaking stairs to her flat. She detected Sherlock’s presence before switching on the floor lamp.

“I know, I know...”

“Incest?” he guffawed. “The man’s resemblance to me is slight, at best.”

Wistfully, she crossed to her bedroom. “I wish that were true, Uncle. How I wish that were true.”

As she fell on the oak double bed, fully clothed, she heard him strike a match at the fireplace and light his pipe.

Holmes on Celluloid

“I don’t see a need to vacate my room,” grumbled Johnny Watson, balancing two cardboard boxes on the threshold, “especially now I’m finally settled after my holiday in Scotland.”

Sheila Holmes, in ragged yellow sweats, ran twitching fingers through her brunette mop. “I emailed and left you voicemails about the dates. You never responded with any objections.”

“Because I never received the messages. Signal in the Highlands is weak, at best. My mobile was useless, and my nephew dominated the computer playing the latest zombie game.”

“Again, I apologize, John. The generous payment...”

“I know, I know! Will keep us warm and well fed for the next two years!”

“And the film should generate more cases worthy of our... talents.”

Watson nudged the round dining table with his hip in passing, causing a pile of letters to tumble onto the floor. “Instead of requests to locate lost cats and misplaced emerald necklaces?”

“Precisely.”

“I sincerely hope they don’t come pounding on the door in droves, like happens whenever our names appear in the London *Times*. Edith... doesn’t appreciate the interruptions.”

From her place in the basket-chair, Sheila sighed. “She’s made that very clear, on numerous occasions. I’m ashamed for having convinced her to agree to the ten year lease.”

“You should buy the building outright, and send her back to America.”

“I’ve offered. She refuses.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, she secretly enjoys the excitement,” affirmed Sheila. “It’s better than living as a lonely widow in the American Midwest.”

“Must do.” Watson, jeans sagging and t-shirt askew, proceeded to carry his load along the corridor from the sitting room to the servants’ stairs. He shouted, “What time is the van calling for this stuff?”

“Three o’clock! Then, it’s to Claridge’s in Mayfair for the duration of the occupation!”

Edith Hudson-Thorne had piled her belongings near the kitchen door. She, too, would enjoy all the amenities of the historic five-star hotel while a Hollywood film company captured every inch of 221B Baker Street for posterity.

“We each have a private suite, on separate floors,” she chuckled to Watson, assisting him to lower his burden. “It’ll be a true vacation for me. No cleaning, no answering the front door at all hours...”

“She is a right pain sometimes, isn’t she?”

“No doubt about it, but she’s made it possible for me to pay off all my old debts, and put aside a healthy nestegg. I can’t begrudge her strange midnight visitors on that account.”

“You don’t begrudge her signing a contract with Tony Downton?”

“A lucrative contract, Johnny. And, funny thing, the first time I let him in the door, I’d have sworn he’d been here before.”

Watson’s close-cropped blond head bowed, his brow pinched and furrowed. He’d heard about the strong resemblance between Downton and the ghost of Sherlock Holmes, who roamed his former lodgings.

Dark, wavy hair, prominent nose, thin lips framed by smooth cheekbones and an angular, stubble-marred jawline, and that damnably slender frame made Watson cringe. Sheila, too, cringed as the Holmesian spectre in dingy shirt sleeves and black trousers hovered above her in the sitting room.

“What will it take to convince you this fiasco will end in disaster?” the baritone rumbled.

His great-great-niece countered, “You seemed to approve three months ago when I signed the papers.”

“I never intimated any such consent. My praise stemmed from your handling of the murder case.”

For Sheila, having this relative haunt her days - and nights - could be a boon, at other times, a bane. “Uncle, trust me. Film is a medium which can augment a person’s reputation...”

“Film merely lulls the masses into apathy,” he scoffed. “Had you read my chronicles, you would know, in the invention’s early days, my Watson and I were featured in a two-reeler.”

The younger Holmes’ violet eyes met burning brown orbs. “What?”

“Long since disintegrated to dust, but the proof is in volume six, there on the shelves.”

A lingering scent of tobacco smoke followed Sheila to the corner shelves, where Sherlock’s files on major criminals and other interesting events had been compiled and stored. Extracting the correct book from the clutter, she flipped pages to reports from London newspapers of the early 20th century, detailing how a crew from Thomas Alva Edison’s company had sailed the Atlantic to set up their primitive equipment in Sherlock Holmes’ flat.

“Well, I’ll be damned...”

She repeated the statement when she chanced upon a folded insert from a more modern edition of the *Times*, tucked between the pages. The caption beneath a grainy black and white photo explained how Mathias Riley had traced his ancestry back to Sherrinford Holmes...

A hand-written notation elaborated on the importance of the news: “Father of Anthony Downton.”

Sheila slumped against the wall. That explained the resemblance, unequivocally. “Uncle, does he know?” she spoke aloud.

“Of course, he does.” Not Holmes’ voice, however. “When you originally deduced I am a Milwaukee-born Pennsylvania Dutch-Potawatomi, Notre Dame football washout, former cowhand who got lucky, you missed that one detail.”

Whirling toward the door, Sheila found the man in question in grey frock coat, clenching a briar pipe between his teeth, wearing Holmes’ fedora. He wagged his left hand, on which a black onyx signet ring was displayed. She wanted to slap him. “That night... when you tried to kiss me... and then laughed when I mentioned incest...”

“Sixth cousins - or thereabouts - doesn’t rate accusations of incest.”

“Regardless, I don’t sanction deception in any form!”

“In the contract, where it counts, there was no deception.”

Striding toward him, she seized his fingers, examining symbols etched on the stone. “This is the Holmes family crest! Where did you...”

“Passed from eldest son to eldest son...”

“But, Sherrinford’s eldest son had a daughter, and his other children never married.”

“That daughter had three girls and a boy, who inherited the ring.”

Downton smirked. “You have until this evening to vacate the premises, so the set decorators can get to work...”

“Nothing is to be altered...”

“They’ll not tamper with your precious furnishings, or the mess. But, the windows need to be cleaned, and green screens installed behind them, so a period backdrop can be superimposed with special effects...”

“Ah!”

He assessed his surroundings. “We can probably stash your computer in a closet...”

“I’ll pack it up, thank you.”

“Good.”

Sheila began disconnecting wires from the monitor and printer. “Anyone try to kill you lately?” she quipped.

“You’d probably like me to say yes, but I can’t.”

“Your cousin, Fred Jacobs, was sentenced last week to life in a Liverpool prison.”

“I know. I was in the courtroom.”

She squinted at the actor. “Covering your tracks better these days, eh?”

“I didn’t even inform my personal staff I was flying over early. They thought I’d gone to the mountains for a pre-production retreat.”

“To channel your inner Holmes?”

“To understand why I’m so fearful about this project, and yet so obsessed.”

“A family curse, believe me.”

Downton flopped on the red velvet Victorian divan. “Do tell.”

“You mentioned during our... last encounter you’ve been working on this film for a decade, firm in your resolve to have a script both authentic and respectful of Uncle Sherlock’s legacy.”

“Correct.”

“Why?”

“Because... because...” At a loss for words, he threw up his hands.

Sheila confronted him, for once standing above him. “Because you’re a Holmes, you cannot escape the family business, if you will. You may not be engaged in the actual occupation, but you have an innate grasp of the techniques, and you want to use them in whatever way possible.”

Their eyes met and, for an instant, Sheila thought Downton would draw her close. She recoiled before he succumbed to the impulse.

“God, you’re right,” he finally admitted. “What do we do about it?”

“Do? There’s nothing to be done. If you try to suppress the inclinations, you’ll go insane.”

The sound of a straining truck engine and worn brakes confirmed the moving van’s arrival. Sheila returned to the computer; Downton rose.

“Is there any way I can help?” he queried.

“My bag is in the bedroom,” she mumbled, avoiding his gaze. “And, don’t forget my guitar.”

He stopped short. “Guitar?”

“Yes. I’ve played for years.”

“Oh, no...”

Sheila thought he might collapse, and rushed to grab him around the muscular waist. “What now, Tony?”

“Did you perform in a concert at Oxford five years ago?”

She released her grip and retreated to the desk. “Yes. Why?”

“I was there, in the audience.”

“How?”

“I was... doing research at the British Library, and took a few days to travel by train and see the sights...” He turned slowly. “I saw your name in the programme, and tried to find you after the final curtain, but you’d disappeared.”

“I... hated publicity, even then.”

“I’d hoped... you might be a long-lost cousin.” He began to chuckle, which escalated into a frighteningly hysterical laugh.

As she’d intended a quarter hour before, Sheila slapped Anthony Downton, to restore his senses. She ushered him to the divan, and brought him a tumbler of water.

“I’m sorry, Sheila,” eventually he sputtered. “Things are getting very... surreal.”

She laid her palm on his forehead - no fever. “There’s a period of adjustment when you realize the truth about our... family. Like the first time Uncle Sherlock appeared in this room. I thought I’d gone completely bonkers.”

“That’s exactly how I feel right now.”

A commotion below drew Sheila to the front windows. Downton reached for her, but missed, so he rose unsteadily and followed her, grasping her shoulders from behind. “Don’t leave me, please,” he whispered.

“You won’t be alone.” She pointed toward a convoy of vans jockeying for parking. “Your entourage has arrived.” Pulling free, she resumed disassembling the computer.

“You’ll be here tomorrow morning?”

“As per the contract.”

“Will you have lunch with me?”

“I... think it’d be better if we didn’t... pursue this association.”

“Sheila, you’re my blood. You’re... *in* my blood. I won’t make it through this without you.”

Knuckles white squeezing the keyboard, the younger Holmes snorted, “And, you wanted to make a series of these films! Tony, you must be real. You possess a strain of unique madness which could make you or break you. Circumstances have thrown us together, but you must decide on your own where your future lies.”

“While we’re together, can we not share the madness?”

“I’ve... overcome mine, in many ways. I don’t wish to... regress to a state where... where I’m existing... on coca leaves and coffee.”

Before Downton could embrace her, the sitting room door burst open, and seven technicians carried in bundles, boxes and buckets. The actor caressed Sheila’s cheek in parting.

The Claridge’s Mayfair head doorman, in his pristine uniform, eyed the detective in yellow sweats and green sneakers suspiciously an hour later, hesitant to relieve her of the Oxford-crested duffel and guitar case as she entered the lobby. His subordinates busied themselves unloading Watson’s belongings from the rented truck, as well as Edith Hudson-Thorne’s oversized trunks.

Giving her name at the desk alleviated much doubt about Sheila’s presence in the posh, art deco hotel. “We’ll take you to the penthouse directly, Miss Holmes, and welcome,” gushed the harried clerk, presenting a keycard in protective folder.

“Penthouse?” the detective echoed. “I thought a suite...”

“Mr. Downton insisted you have a penthouse.”

She rode a lift to the structure’s summit, where the porter deposited her possessions and vanished without requiring a tip. Sheila didn’t notice his withdrawal, so stunned was she by the decor and the space.

Her entire Baker Street flat could’ve fit into the living room. The two bedrooms each had their own deluxe bathrooms, with jacuzzis and sunken tubs.

She was about to pick up the phone on the nightstand to call and insist she be assigned more modest accommodations, when the instrument rang. Snatching it off the cradle, she was about to say, “Hello,” when a masculine voice spoke the word from a different extension.

“Mr. Holmes,” a heavily accented soprano tremored. “There are three suicide bombers near your hotel at this very moment, eating their last meal. They plan to murder as many Americans as they can before midnight. One of them is my son. Please, stop them.”

A loud click signaled the broken connection. Sheila dropped the handset and rushed into the living room, meeting Anthony Downton, wrapped in a replica of Sherlock’s infamous tattered dressing gown, coming from the opposite direction.

“What are you doing here?” she steamed.

“Never mind! That phone call...”

“I heard. The main thing is not to panic.”

“The woman called me Mr. Holmes...”

“Given her thick Middle-Eastern inflection, I presume her command of the Queen’s English is sorely limited, her ability to read it moreso. She may have heard about your forthcoming film, and misinterpreted your identity...”

“To hell with saving her son, I’ve got over 300 people gathering for a special dinner and press conference downstairs...”

“Was that in the papers, too?”

“Probably. I haven’t had time...”

“Most of them American?”

Downton nodded.

“We’d best crack on, then.”

“What about calling the police?”

“Scotland Yard? Oh, please, Tony. Best to keep this quiet, notify the hotel manager to send messages to every business in a four block radius, and keep our eyes open.”

Within ten minutes, employees had been dispatched from Claridge’s in all directions. Sheila and her nervous companion began a methodical search of nearby restaurants. Johnny Watson had been, reluctantly, assigned to screen every person who entered the elaborately appointed ballroom for the invitation-only celebration. Edith had been sent back to Baker Street on a pretext, removing her from harm’s way.

“This isn’t very efficient,” muttered Downton as they scanned a dimly-lit establishment at the intersection of Brook and Davies Streets.

“I concur, but there isn’t time to do otherwise. Logic dictates that three young men of Arabic descent, living away from their homeland, might wish to gorge themselves on native fare, but if they grew up in England, they might desire anything from McDonald’s to steak and kidney pie.”

“Very astute.”

When their search revealed nothing after 45 minutes, they hurried back to the hotel, where Watson stood, bored, beside the arched doorway.

“Nothing,” he related.

“Could the call have been a hoax?” ventured Sheila.

A cigar-smoking, corpulent executive - Sheila didn’t recall his name from their initial meeting - waddled toward her. “In the States, we call it a publicity stunt.”

Thousands of multi-colored balloons were released from nets fastened near the ceiling, to shouts of “Surprise!” from the assembled guests.

The two Holmes descendants glanced at each other, before Anthony Downton spun and decked the man with a right cross to his jaw.

Together, they exited the chamber and took the lift to the penthouse, locking the door against would-be pursuers.

“Good thing we didn’t call the Yard,” breathed Sheila, pacing near windows granting a fantastic view of the city. “They despise me enough already because of my interference with their investigations...”

“Because you beat them to the criminals, you mean.”

“Correct. To have led them on a wild goose chase... your people would have been banned from Great Britain permanently.”

“How do we notify the businesses...”

“You didn’t notice, did you?”

“Notice what?”

“As the messengers left the hotel, they were stopped two doors down and paid off by men in decidedly conspicuous trenchcoats.”

“So, you knew all along...”

“No,” Sheila confessed. “I believed them confederates of the bombers and opted to continue the investigation.”

Downton clamped onto her left arm, halting her progress. “I sincerely apologize on behalf of my... ignorant associates.”

“How do you intend to rectify the matter?”

“I think Hank knows he’s been fired.” Flexing sore fingers, Downton managed a wry grin. “Those who colluded with him will also find themselves terminated and sent home on the next flight.”

“Won’t that disrupt production?”

“Y’know how I got my start in movies?” He sank on a black leather sofa, pulling her down beside him. “Me and a couple friends, with a camera, tripod and rough script, out on the streets of New York, making do as people passed by, totally ignoring us. As my fame increased, so did the size of the crew. I’ve never really seen the reason it takes a small army to put together a two-hour flick.”

“Amen, brother.”

He was leaning toward her when the odor of tobacco smoke caused her to leap upright. “Uncle?”

Downton composed himself, standing beside her. “Uncle,” he greeted respectfully.

“You two were so... distracted, you failed to detect the imminent danger.”

“What...” his great-nephew intended to ask, when five men in black jumpsuits and ski masks breached the lift doors, wielding assault rifles and surrounding the pair.

“Hank’s gone too far this time,” the actor proclaimed, as a beefy assailant clutched his neck and forced him to the floor.

Sheila considered resisting the attack, but Sherlock’s warning, “Those are real weapons,” convinced her to mimic Downton’s posture.

For the moment.

As the actor was bound with rope and gagged with duct tape, and the squad prepared to drag him to the exit, she heard their banter about a ransom of 50 million pounds.

“What about her?” snapped a bass underling, poking her prone figure with his boot.

“Leave her. She can’t identify us.”

Twirling on her hip, a deft sweep knocked two of the thugs on their backs, rifles sliding across the carpet. Before the third could take aim, she’d righted herself and leveled a roundhouse kick to his torso, thrusting her other heel into his knee cap.

Downton, meanwhile, disabled his two startled captors by maneuvering them into a collision. Their heads slammed together, and they crumpled across the glass coffee table, unconscious.

Weapon in hand, Sheila freed the hostage of his bonds. “Now, you can call Scotland Yard.”

He pulled a mobile from his trouser pocket, while she unmasked the kidnappers.

“I never had a chance to ask: who taught you Wing Chun?” Downton prodded.

“René Adler.”

“Five time world champion?”

“Indeed.”

“A student of my sifu, Aldo Pyke.”

“I’ve heard him mention the name.”

Downton declared, “Ah, Sheila. We are meant to be together. There are too many links between us...”

“Including dangerous ones.” She raised the smallest of the five-man team and slammed him onto one of the dining room chairs. “Who are you, and who hired you?”

He pursed his lips defiantly.

The barrel of a rifle jammed in his throat, however, made him talk.

To Downton’s horror.

Certain parties privy to the financing deal for the movie, confident there would be no chance to make a viable profit, wished the project scrubbed before too many expenses were incurred. By abducting Downton, the insurance company would pay off when production was canceled due to his post traumatic stress diagnosis.

“Bastards!” he swore.

“Looks like some others will not only be without jobs, but behind bars,” Sheila remarked as Scotland Yard detectives took custody of the quintet.

Alone again, Downton confronted Sheila. “I can’t tell you... how sorry I am.”

“Don’t worry about it. Remember the family curse? You can expect things like this to happen to you on a fairly regular basis!”

“Are you saying, attempts on my life, assaults, and I should get used to it?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“And, that’s what it means to be a Holmes?”

“You haven’t even made your bloodline public, but playing Sherlock Holmes...”

“Then, I should scrap the film, after all.”

“No. Uncle Sherlock has faith in you, and so do I.”

Downton scooped up her hands. “You do? Honestly?”

“Must do, Tony. You care a lot about getting this right. That’s more than can be said about many other Hollywood hacks.”

“Then, you’ll stay with me until the premiere?”

Sheila gulped visibly. “Here, sharing the penthouse?”

“While we’re in London. Then, it’s on to the other locations, and California, to finish shooting on the sets.”

“I thought you were going to build the interiors at the studio here...”

“We couldn’t agree on terms.”

“I... don’t see how I can leave...”

“It’s in your contract, as technical advisor.”

“Maybe, California. The part about living together...”

“Consider it a fringe benefit.”

“For whom? You?”

“For both of us. You’ll learn about film production...”

“And you’ll learn... what?”

“About being a Holmes.”

The woman contemplated city lights beyond the balcony. “What about John, and Edith?”

“They’ll survive until you return.”

“Just like that? After opening night, I simply resume my normal life?”

“Unless you prefer another option.”

Sheila grit her teeth. “I don’t like games, Tony. Speak your mind.”

“We can stay together, if you’re agreeable, or even get married.”

“Not happening. That’s not the type of celebrity I want.”

“Fine.” He approached from behind, and kissed her ear. She tried to side-step, but he trapped her with a gentle grip. They kissed briefly, interrupted by the phone.

“They still want us downstairs for the press conference,” he announced, after a lively row with the caller.

“It’s all part of the business, eh?” snickered Sheila.

“A part I’ve never really enjoyed but, with you beside me, I can tolerate it.”

Hand in hand, they descended in the lift.

Watson intercepted them in the lobby. “Where have you been?” he accused.

“Averting a crisis,” replied Sheila.

“Edith is on her way to hospital.”

“What happened?”

“I rang her to report the false terror threat, and she returned for the dinner. The bottle of wine served at our table - your table, if you and this... American would’ve attended - was poisoned. She’s fortunate I don’t drink, and was seated next to her. I gave her CPR until the ambulance arrived.”

“Did anyone else...”

“No. That executive who devised the prank left with a fractured jaw. His secretary, or whatever that black-haired trollop was, followed. We were the only ones...”

Sheila glared at Downton. “Three crimes in as many hours, Tony. Throwing the two of us together can only spell disaster, like Uncle Sherlock predicted.”

“Don’t forget, you’ve a contract...” he hinted.

“And, I’ll willingly refund the advance payment.”

“It’s not that simple, Sheila. I’ve got millions invested in pre-production, and to change locations now...”

“You’re more than welcome to use the flat for your project, Tony. I... won’t be present, that’s all.”

Watson urged, "Surely, you're going to seek out the person who poisoned the wine?"

"Must do."

"Then, I'm coming, too," offered Downton.

The Baker Street tenants both faced him. "Why?" they chorused.

"The crime took place at a party planned by my staff, and I could've been one of the victims had not... other events transpired."

"Very well," conceded the younger Holmes. "Is the bottle still on the table?"

Watson replied, "I... hid it in my suite, so no one could dispose of the evidence."

"Excellent, my friend. We'll take it back to 221B, analyze the poison, and go from there."

Downton volunteered, "I'll call my chauffeur."

"No!" cried Sheila. "In the first two instances this evening, your associates have been responsible for the crimes. We can't risk that others have some grudge against you. We'll use the Underground."

"It's nearly midnight!"

"If you're afraid, you may remain here."

"I wish to remain with you."

Watson fetched the bottle while Sheila and Downton enjoyed a breath of muggy London air. They caught the Tube from Bond Street and kept in step after alighting at the Baker Street station. The laboratory equipment remained on the wheeled table by the front windows, now covered with greenish material.

"Good thing, if we switch on the lights, no one can see from outside," observed Sheila.

The former Army medic retorted, "Nor can we see out, should anyone have shadowed us."

"Did anyone summon the Yard after Edith fell ill?"

"No. Few people noticed. The room was poorly lit and there was so much loud chatter. When I carried her out to the corridor, they must've thought she was drunk."

"Good. What symptoms did she display?"

"Numbness, respiratory distress, and heart failure."

Downton grasped the arm of the basket-chair to steady himself. "We might've... died."

"Don't fret about what might have been, Tony," grumbled Sheila. "I need you to consider who else might want you dead, or this film scrapped."

Drops of red liquid spread on a glass slide were examined under a powerful lens.

“A concentrated derivative of arsenic,” was Sheila’s conclusion. “Not naturally occurring, meaning the perpetrator had some knowledge of chemistry.”

Once more, harsh eyes fell upon Anthony Downton. “As you know from the script, there are a series of explosions we’re going to orchestrate on an old back lot at the California studio. The pyrotechnic guys didn’t come with us this trip...”

A rustling among the pipes on the fireplace mantle, and that distinctive scent of tobacco prompted Sheila’s statement, “I know, Uncle. We’re getting nowhere.” She abandoned the microscope. “John, did you have a chance to question the hotel’s kitchen staff?”

“I was preoccupied saving Edith, then went searching for you.”

“They’re probably gone by now, but we can get a list from the manager on duty...”

The Tube conveying them once more to Claridge’s Mayfair, the trio were directed to the special events coordinator, supervising ballroom cleaning. They discovered the poisoned bottle had been extra, all cases apportioned to the party filled with either empties or unused wine. It came from a different vineyard, as well.

“Careless,” Sheila sniffed. “But creative. The culprit must’ve been watching to see who was serving that particular table, then slipped on a uniform, and handed that waiter the bottle.”

Downton speculated, “If we can locate the waiter, he might be able to identify the person...”

“John, do you remember the table number?”

“Number 1, of course.”

An inquiry of the supervisor provided a name, and the waiter, opting to earn a few extra pounds by helping in the dish room.

“I thought it odd for the head table to be vacant even before the main course was served,” the ruddy elder recollected, with a hint of Cockney accent. “When the press conference began, the reporters were miffed at the star’s absence...”

“That’s not the point,” grunted Watson. “You served only one bottle of wine to that table.”

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“One of the bartenders brought it special.”

Sheila pressed, "Which bartender?"

Together, they moved into the taproom. "'e must 'ave gone off duty," said the waiter. "I don't see 'im."

"A man?"

"Yes."

"Old, young?" the younger Holmes persisted.

"Skinny, six feet tall. In 'is twenties, perhaps. A large scar on the back of 'is right hand, as if 'e'd had a tattoo removed."

"Or, chemical burns from a spill, making him potentially left-handed. Light hair, dark?"

"Balding. Odd for a kid that age."

Downton uttered a loud, "Shit!"

The others didn't bother to verbalize the obvious question.

"It's Emo," the actor groaned, dropping onto the nearest stool.

Watson repeated, "Emo?"

"Emo Pilarski. Assistant to Rick Hopewell, who's portraying *my* Watson. Like Fred Jacobs, Emo was hired as a favor to some associate producer's relative, and resents being assigned any real work."

"Where would he pick up the chemistry background?"

"They expelled him from UCLA for blowing six windows out of a science lab."

"You really need to screen your employees more closely," advised Sheila.

"Believe me, before we film one scene, every stiff from the costume designer to the animal trainer will be thoroughly checked. Another day like this, and I'll go crazy."

"John, contact the Yard, and have them arrest Emo Pilarski. Then, get yourself some rest. You must be in quite a bit of pain..."

"The leg feels pretty good," commented the wounded veteran. "This new prosthetic fits a lot better than the old one."

"Glad to hear it." She shifted her attention. "Tony, we need to talk."

Obediently, Downton accompanied Sheila to the penthouse. "You'll not be staying?" he queried, baritone dejected.

"I'll fulfill my contract, on the condition you hire reputable 24-hour security for John and Edith, when she's released from hospital. I'm willing to risk my own neck being in your company, but it's not fair if your... impulsive actions endanger their lives."

"Agreed." His Sherlockian countenance brightening, he danced Sheila around the living room.

She squirmed free. “You’ve got a lot to do in the morning, weeding out the malcontents from your staff. You should be in bed.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He made a fresh grab for her, which she dodged, slamming the door of her room in his face and locking it.

Within a week, 27 members of the production crew had been flown back to California, having violent misdemeanors or felonies in their history. Those who remained on location were required to sign an anti-nepotism addendum to their contracts.

“No more favoritism based on blood,” Downton declared the evening before filming began, relieved this latest problem had been solved.

“Does that include us?” joked Sheila, before ducking into the shower.

The water running, she didn’t hear his answer. She exhaled loudly, wondering if her sanity would survive the next six months, let alone her corporeality.

And her willpower.

Anthony Downton - a Holmes descendant playing the greatest Holmes, and filling her life with tangible adventure - might prove irresistible in the end.

Into the Traffic

In all her travels, all her adventures, Sheila Holmes had never viewed so welcome a sight as 221B Baker Street, windows damp and glistening from overnight rains. Trekking from the Tube station after a nonstop flight from Los Angeles International Airport, Oxford duffel slung over her right shoulder, she imagined her uncle Sherlock's tattered dressing gown waiting on its wall hook, and the bed inviting her to much-needed sleep.

Few pedestrians were about this early on a Sunday morning, shopkeepers absent from their storefronts until noon. Up the concrete steps and unlocking the door, Sheila entered the silent brick structure. She crept along the corridor to Edith Hudson-Thorne's kitchen, bursting across the threshold with a peppy, "Honey, I'm home."

The widowed landlady, transplanted to her ancestor's native soil from America, nearly fell off the wooden chair, where she'd been sipping coffee and reading the London *Times*. The redhead smothered this tenant in a boisterous hug, causing her to release her overstuffed burden. "Why didn't you let us know you were coming?" Edith chided. "We'd have met you at Heathrow..."

"No need," countered the young Holmes. "Besides, I wanted to slip in quietly."

"To avoid more tabloid publicity?"

On the table, Sheila noticed a stack of newspapers, her brunette-framed face prominent on assorted covers. A relationship with executive producer and actor Anthony Downton had led to some unpleasant incidents...

And, not just paparazzi swarming Hollywood nightclub entrances. While on location in Great Britain, there'd been a murder, an attempted kidnaping, and Edith herself had been poisoned.

"I'm glad it's over," sighed Sheila, dropping onto the nearest seat. "The entire process of creating a film is... ridiculously complex."

Edith quipped, "What did eating at expensive restaurants every evening have to do with creating a film?"

Smirking, the great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes filled a ceramic mug with steaming liquid.

An uneven gait approached on the former servants' stairs, and Johnny Watson's tousled blond head appeared around the corner. He was clad only in Scottish plaid boxers, not the least bit self-conscious about his prosthetic left leg. "I thought I heard a familiar voice."

Sheila favored her flatmate with a cursory wave. “You look well rested, John.”

“As well as can be expected, with Scotland Yard ringing at all hours, trying to locate you.”

“Eh?”

Watson ignored Edith’s signals to be silent. “I’m surprised they didn’t contact you in the States. These past three weeks...”

“Give the woman a chance to relax after her trip!” the widow interspersed.

“All right, all right.”

“No,” corrected Sheila. “Tell me.”

“You’d better come upstairs. There’s an envelope...”

Reluctantly, she retrieved her duffel and hauled it up narrow steps to the cluttered sitting room, very much as Sherlock had left it more than 100 years previous. Beside the computer - one of the few modern adornments - lay a manila packet.

“Give it a read,” advised Watson. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Before extracting the contents, Sheila took a moment to soak in the chamber’s atmosphere. A tell-tale odor of tobacco lingered, minimal enough to indicate Sherlock - in ghostly form - had not recently made his presence tangible.

A glance to the opposite side of the keyboard revealed a sheet of hospital letterhead bearing Watson’s name as recipient. Her knuckles whitened as she clutched the desk’s edge. “Regarding your diagnosis of bone cancer...”

No wonder he was frustrated by Scotland Yard’s incessant calls.

When he emerged, barefoot, from his room, wearing jeans and a black tank-top, Sheila sat in the basket-chair, perusing news clippings and police reports about low-income families whose daughters had vanished from schools in the London slums.

“I’m truly glad you’re back, Sheila,” he muttered, picking at the breakfast tray Edith had delivered while he was dressing. “I... missed you.”

“I’m glad to *be* back, John. Life in California isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“You’re quite tanned, and aren’t those new clothes?”

“Tony likes the beach, when time permits. And, he wanted me to impress the masses. He said I couldn’t do that in t-shirts and sweats.”

A hint of disdain crept into John’s tone. “How is he?”

“Busy. They’re editing the clips into some cohesive whole, then will be adding the score and special effects.”

“So, your work on the project is done?”

“Thankfully, yes.”

“And, you won’t be seeing him again?”

“Not if he has his way.” Sheila met John’s penetrating blue eyes. “He wants to marry me.”

“Ah, that explains the ring.”

Abruptly, the woman covered her left hand with her right. She’d forgotten to remove the 16 carat diamond set in a platinum band.

“You said yes?”

“I said nothing. He pressed this upon me and, to save a row, I accepted it.”

“You... didn’t have to wear it.”

“I didn’t want to pack it. He paid quite a sum...”

“I can see that.”

“Please, John.” She set aside the paperwork and crossed to the Afghan campaign veteran, who’d slumped on the red Victorian divan. “I don’t belong in his world, except to rescue him from the scrapes he causes. He hasn’t yet learned how to be a Holmes...”

“What if he does learn?”

“I won’t be around to know it.”

A tiny smile crept onto Watson’s thin, pale face, a distinct alteration from when he’d bid her farewell at Gatwick Airport months earlier. She changed the subject, contralto brightening. “Now, can you tell me why the Yard ignored the first ten disappearances, and have only gotten involved in the latest three?”

“Because of escalating pressure from the Middle East. Quite a few ambassadors have contacted the Prime Minister...”

“Thus, media coverage has increased, as evidenced by the column size of the clips, the inclusion of photos and the page placement.” Sheila patted his right knee. “What plans have you for the day?”

“I... have an appointment.”

Given the revelation about his health, she didn’t doubt his need for weekend consultation. “Do you mind if I go to Whitechapel alone, then?”

Still sullen, Watson replied, “I don’t advise it, but why bother to ask?”

“You have unique knowledge which I value, and I appreciate your companionship.”

“Well, thanks for that, anyway.”

Rising, Watson grabbed the closest chair to steady himself. Sheila observed the dizziness and supported him at the waist. “Have they started you on chemo already?” she blurted, before biting her tongue.

“You... know?”

“Must do.”

“Did Edith tell you?”

“No. I... saw the letter.”

“Damn you, Sheila!” He shook free of her grasp and staggered to the windows overlooking Baker Street. “I wanted to keep it secret. I didn’t want to spoil your happiness.”

“Spoil my...” she repeated. “What the devil...”

“What Edith calls the tabloids... They all claimed you and Downton were engaged. I never thought you’d come back to me...”

Sheila gently grasped his shoulders and rotated him toward her. “You know it’s never been like that between us, John. You are my dearest friend, to be sure, but there’s never been the slightest hint of any romantic entanglement.”

“When you discover you’re dying, you get sentimental,” he chuckled wryly. “I’ve come to depend on you, enjoying our banter, and the challenges we’ve overcome together. I wanted things to stay as they were.”

“And, they will. You’ll survive this cancer, if I have to spend every cent on treatment.”

Both were crying when they embraced.

Eventually, Sheila released Watson and offered him a tissue from a box on the laboratory table. A bit of noisy nose-blowing preceded the conversation resuming.

“Now, what time is this appointment?” she queried.

“Late this afternoon.”

“Good. That gives us time to get to Whitechapel.”

Changing from the black dress suit and leather boots to jeans and a Beatles Abbey Road t-shirt, Sheila dug her great-uncle’s fedora from her bag, which she’d dumped on the oak double bed. The lining still smelled of Tony Downton’s particular brand of shampoo. She hoped he’d done it justice, and the public would enjoy how he’d portrayed the famous ancestor they shared.

En route via the Underground to the immigrant settlement near the Thames River, she explained their new case to Watson. The missing girls’ parents in the 13 known cases - the police themselves noting many immigrants would not confide in the authorities due to trust issues - were from Middle Eastern countries. Beyond that, no other commonalities existed. The girls ranged in age from 12 to 16, did not live in what could be considered the same neighborhood, had no interaction with each other, despite some of them attending the same schools. They had slept in their beds prior to disappearing in the wee hours of the morning.

“Where do you begin with such sketchy facts?” puzzled Watson.

“By interacting with the people. Listening to what they have to say in unguarded moments.”

“They speak mostly Arabic down there.”

“I know.”

“Then, how...”

Sheila uttered a phrase in a foreign language, which Watson guessed to be the dialect in question.

“What does that mean?” he asked. “When I was in Afghanistan, I never had a chance...”

“Allah give you peace.”

Watson conceded, “A good way to start.”

An even better start presented itself near a magazine vendor’s stall at the Tube exit. A flock of giggling foreign schoolgirls debated who should be named the most handsome Hollywood star. One glimpsed the detective over her friends’ heads, and shrieked in delight.

“Look, it’s Sheila Holmes!”

Stunned by the recognition, she stopped mid-step, and Watson collided with her. Both were mobbed by those who’d heard the girl’s cry, curious about the ruckus.

“You dated Tony Downton!” one youngster practically wept in awe, touching Sheila’s arm.

Another squealed, “What’s he like, really?”

On and on the clamor went, with Sheila nudging toward the street. She feared the crowd might cause Watson to fall but, then, she had a thought. She turned and raised her hands for silence.

“Can we have your autograph?” a diminutive curly black head chirped.

“If you don’t mind answering a few questions.”

“Anything!” chorused her newfound fans.

“You young ladies live around here?”

Fingers pointed in every direction.

“You go to school nearby?”

Nods.

“Have... any of your friends gone missing lately?”

Three hands tentatively raised above their peers. Sheila noted their features, then accepted the first pen and slip of paper, acquiring quite a case of writer’s cramp before she’d placed her signature on everything from a shirt to one girl’s bared shoulder.

Watson, taking the lead from his companion, had intercepted the designated trio as the gathering dispersed, whispering to each that Sheila wished a special word with them. They waited patiently near a letter box, grinning broadly when their idol approached.

To chat in greater privacy, the adults ushered the girls into a coffee shop, where they ordered sodas all around. Sheila plied them at length about their missing friends - only one of which matched a name on the Scotland Yard list.

“Her family’s really poor,” concluded the darkly pretty informant. “Or, they were. After Nyla stopped coming to school, her brothers had new suits and their mother bought a kitchen stove.”

Watson eyed Sheila, suspicious. She subtly confirmed his deduction. The girls gorged themselves on pie and cake and, an hour later, the pair from Baker Street strolled toward the residence of Nyla Kadir’s family.

Their reception among the locals was cool, at best. Clearly not of Middle Eastern descent, no one would speak to them, even retreating into their crumbling - albeit well kept - rows of dwellings to avoid confrontation.

His wristwatch reading 2:30, Watson paused on a littered street corner. “Sheila, I need to get going.”

Preoccupied mulling a course of action, she responded, “I’ll see you at home later.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Eh?” Her brunette head snapped sideways.

“I’m being admitted into the hospital for a series of procedures. If I survive, I should be cured.”

Sheila’s jaw dropped. “Why... why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“I wanted to spend as much time as I could with you, and I didn’t want to impede your investigation.”

“Hang the investigation!” She yanked him from the street into an alcove. “I told you, I’ll do anything to make sure...”

Watson cupped her hand in his. “All the expenses are covered. The only uncertainty is if my body is strong enough to endure the discomfort and... pain.”

Muttering expletives, Sheila scrutinized their surroundings in desperation. “Let me put you in a taxi...”

“The Tube will drop me a block away. I’ll be fine.”

“I... want to come with you.”

“No. Stay here, and find those girls. I’ll be content knowing you’re saving lives.” With a quick kiss on her cheek, Watson strode toward the Underground station.

Frozen in place, Sheila watched her flatmate vanish down the stairs. Her heart had gone out of searching for a horde of errant youngsters, much the same as it had gone out of rushing from set to set and location to location while Tony Downton created his hoped-for cinematic masterpiece.

Tony.

Dammit, she grumbled silently, pulling her mobile from her jeans and selecting a contact number.

“Did you call to give me your answer?” Downton greeted in his delightful baritone.

“Not this time. I... have a question.”

“No date’s been set for the London premiere.”

“That’s not it. I... need a film crew.”

“What for? We won’t be doing retakes for another month.”

“There’s a situation here. Missing children, from the same area of London, and less than exemplary schools. The parents won’t talk, because I’m not an Arab. But, the girls are movie-crazy. They mobbed me because they’d seen me in photos with you, and nearly tore off my clothes. If they think we’re doing a documentary, I won’t be able to shut them up...”

“Two Steadicams be enough?” inquired Downton.

“Should do.”

“I’ll put them on the plane tonight. They’ll meet you at Gatwick in the morning.”

“Thanks, love.”

“Anything for you, sweets.”

Sheila arrived at 221B in time for Edith to drop an additional pork chop in the skillet, serving them with buttered noodles and candied carrots in the downstairs kitchen. “No need to carry a tray upstairs,” her tenant remarked. “Besides, I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“John?”

“Of course, John. He’s so young, and been through so much... How did this happen?”

“About a month ago, his shoulders and spine started hurting. He thought the new prosthetic might need adjusting, so he went to the veterans’ clinic. When the doctors didn’t find any mechanical malfunctions, they took an x-ray. Next day, they called him in for an MRI.” Edith poured coffee in two mugs. “I will say this: he took the news like a true soldier. Late that night, though, I could hear him sobbing in his room.”

Her fork picking at the meat, Sheila bemoaned, “I should have been here.”

“That’s what he said. He spent the better part of two weeks cursing you for gallivanting around the globe, without a care in the world.”

“It wasn’t all fun and games,” admitted the younger female. “Sixteen hour days on a stuffy set, under scalding lights... Then, obligatory parties, when I would’ve much rather gone to bed...”

“You’re not a party animal, that’s for sure,” Edith chuckled. “It’s good you’re home to stay.”

When Sheila didn’t reply, the landlady glanced up from her plate.

“You *are* home to stay, aren’t you?”

Flashing the oversized diamond, Sheila shrugged.

Edith’s worn countenance broke into a wide smile. “So, Tony Downton *did* propose?”

The next half-hour reminded the sleuth of being peppered with questions about Hollywood by the Whitechapel youth, only the American widow far surpassed their excitement.

“Edith, please! My ears are ringing!”

With a final giggle, the kitchen fell silent. Dishes were transferred to the sink, where soapy water would soak off the stains.

“There’s a new version of Dicken’s *Great Expectations* on BBC4 this evening.”

“Thank you, no. I’m out first thing tomorrow, solving this case before any other girls vanish.”

Bidding each other good-night, the women parted.

Upstairs, Sheila wrapped herself in Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown and settled on the sitting room divan. The rack of pipes on the fireplace mantle had been undisturbed since the film crew had concluded capturing every inch of the room on celluloid. “I’m surprised you weren’t here to welcome me, Uncle,” she spoke aloud to the empty chamber.

“I’m always here, whether you see me or not,” came the ethereal voice, accompanied by a faint odor of tobacco. Deft fingers extending from frayed sleeves selected a briar; pungent shag from the worn Persian slipper was inserted in the bowl. A match struck, and smoke billowed around Sherlock Holmes’ translucent head. “These past hours have been sufficiently filled with turmoil, you didn’t need me skulking about.”

“Why would you be skulking about?”

“Because you’ve decided, once this case is over, and Watson dead, that you’ll return to the States and marry that fool.”

“Fine tribute to your great-great nephew.”

“Anyone who precludes you from pursuing your career...”

Righting herself on the red velvet upholstery, Sheila protested, “A person has the right to change her mind...”

“Trading honest work for babies and house slippers?”

“Tony’s not like that, and you know it. In California, I can solve just as many cases...”

“And possibly tarnish his image? He’ll never permit it.”

His great-great-niece inhaling through grit teeth, she withheld her retort, proclaiming instead, “Besides, I’m not the sort to marry. I can’t live in close quarters with anyone for a prolonged length of time...”

“Unless he’s of a certain temperament, like your Watson, or mine. Stimulates the brain, and knows when to be silent.”

“Amen, Uncle.”

“Get some sleep.”

Not that Sheila closed an eye. She alternately paced the floor, worrying for Watson, or sat near the corner shelves, reading old articles from the *London Times* bound in thick volumes, which Sherlock had saved a century earlier.

“You look terrible,” came the surprising observation when Anthony Downton descended steps from a sleek G5 aircraft shortly after 8:00 Monday morning at Gatwick Airport. His clean-shaven face still bore an uncanny resemblance to the stubble-chinned Sherlock Holmes; a sky blue polo shirt clung to his healthily muscular torso, and khaki slacks required no belt.

She recoiled on the tarmac. “What on earth...”

“I’m your film crew.”

“You offered two...”

“I forgot I’d given the boys three weeks’ vacation. They’ve dispersed to the four winds.”

Flexing her fingers to release her anger, Sheila spat, “Let’s just get this done, then.”

A white limousine transported the couple to one of the Whitechapel schools listed in Scotland Yard’s reports. Alighting with their equipment, they were bombarded by the bewildered stares of 150 children, waiting on the sidewalk for doors to be opened.

A gushing, buxom matron in loud, flowered frock met them on the threshold, blathering about how honored, delighted, and so on, and so on. She escorted them through the dilapidated complex - paint peeling off walls, desks not safe to sit in, chalkboards so stained, no new information could be written upon

them. Downton pretended to record the scene, while Sheila plied the administrator with questions.

Worst of all: the supposed gymnasium. A class of pre-teens, most wearing green shorts and white t-shirts, exercised in dim lighting, accompanied by the sonorous counting of an undeniably British instructor. A lone figure huddled on a bench, her attire different from her classmates.

“What’s this?” prodded Sheila.

“Her family... can’t afford the designated uniform, so she is not allowed to participate,” the older female explained.

“That’s a rule which could easily be changed.”

“Sadly, not. Mr. Benton is very strict on the point. He won’t budge on the issue, claiming if he does it at this institution, he must do it at all...”

“All? He teaches at other schools?”

“Six, in total. Funds are so short, we must share teachers in many subject areas.”

Her mind racing, Sheila feigned sympathy. “How tragic. The girl’s name?”

“Aalia Ghazali.”

As if the moment were scripted, Tony hoisted the Steadicam off his shoulder. “That’s all we need from this school,” he announced.

Sheila clasped the administrator’s hand before departing, inadvertently shuddering as they emerged into the midday sun.

“Pathetic,” Downton spoke her thought. “Children should have a chance at a future...”

“As our talkative guide commented, it’s difficult to convince the parents of these girls to even enroll them for classes, given how they are mistreated in their native countries. As for the boys, they will merely serve as menial laborers once they’ve completed this sorry excuse of an education.”

“What next?”

“We drive Miss Ghazali home after dismissal, and confront her parents.”

“On camera?”

“Didn’t you notice how her eyes lit up when she recognized you? If they believe there’s fifteen minutes of fame in the prospect, we might learn some valuable information.”

And, so they did. During the trip in a posh Rolls-Royce, Aalia, age 12, supplied details of her daily routine, and her father’s inability to find meaningful employment. Her mother worked part time in a neighborhood laundry, but there were nights when the family rejoiced to have a loaf of bread and some runny cabbage soup. They’d been threatened with eviction from the rented domicile, too.

“After Mr. Benton came to the house last Friday, though, we feasted like on holidays,” she prattled.

“What did Mr. Benton tell your parents?” Downton cajoled, Aalia clinging to his arm on the broad bench seat.

“I don’t know. Father made me leave the room.”

Over the black tresses, the adults frowned.

They did more than politely confront the Ghazali elders. Sending Aalia off with an autographed photo, they closed the door to the tiny parlor and demanded a confession from her parents, with Sheila speaking Arabic and translating for Downton’s benefit.

The mother broke down in tears first. “Mr. Benton offered to pay our debts, and give us five thousand pounds if we would relinquish our rights to Aalia.”

“You sold your daughter, in other words,” scoffed Downton.

Mr. Ghazali puffed out his scrawny chest. “Yes, and why not, if it will bring peace to our troubled home? What use is a girl, anyway?”

“In England, it’s a crime to sell your children, and I’ll not permit it,” Sheila stated.

The mother whined, “We’ve already spent the cash advance on clothes and medicines. He’s coming tonight to collect Aalia and pay the rest.”

“If I match Mr. Benton’s offer - or double it - will you put an end to this nonsense?”

“If you double the amount,” hissed the father.

“Sheila!” Downton scolded.

She waved off his objection. “Trust me.”

“I do, but...”

To the immigrants, she continued, “You will have the money before nightfall. There is one condition: you leave this house until tomorrow morning, and do everything in your power to love and respect your daughter from now on.”

Harsh terms, in the father’s opinion, but he acquiesced, motivated by greed.

Downton lambasted Sheila once outdoors. “You’re throwing away your money on... that?”

Playfully, she toyed with his shirt collar. “Tony, you know how many children and teenagers are basically dumped by their parents and become victims of human trafficking around the globe?”

“Thousands.”

“Aalia Ghazali will be among those numbers if we don’t stop this and, if all goes well tonight, we may be able to get to one source of the problem.”

Downton reluctantly asked, “What’s your plan?”

By 7:00, they had taken temporary possession of the decrepit residence, the actor made-up as a reasonable facsimile of the Ghazali patriarch. He sat in the parlor, waiting, while Sheila donned quirky print pajamas and retired to Aalia’s bedroom.

Lemuel Benton, his ex-military demeanor and sleazy smirk turning Downton’s stomach, brought a shipping paper-wrapped parcel of 20-pound notes, and threw it on an unbalanced end table before striding to the rear of the structure, pulling a flask of chloroform and handkerchief from his jacket pocket.

Wanting to warn Sheila but stuck in his role, Downton could only linger in the corridor.

When Benton came crashing through the door, slamming into the plaster wall, the American realized there’d been no need to worry. Sheila’s Wing Chun training had served her well - again - and the culprit of multiple heinous kidnappings hadn’t a chance to perform another.

She had reclaimed her jeans and Beatles t-shirt when she joined her confederate in binding Benton’s limbs, after confiscating the latter’s jacket. A call on her mobile to Scotland Yard preceded a unique departure: Downton, the pretend kidnapper, carrying a supposedly unconscious victim outside.

A plumber’s van idled at the curb. Downton opened the rear door and climbed in, laying Sheila on metal floorboards, beside four other girls, bound and gagged.

“Everything go okay?” barked the driver, facing forward.

“Yeah, get goin’,” Downton responded, doing a passable impression of Benton.

Go they did, to Gatwick Airport, where a gold-striped Cessna jet was being prepped in a hangar far from the commercial terminal. Hiding his features as best in could behind the collar of Benton’s coat, Downton helped load the human cargo, finding even more girls handcuffed to the seats, eyes betraying their fear and despondency.

Leaving Sheila’s restraints unfastened, he took a seat in the rear of the cabin, securing his seatbelt when the pilot taxied the plane toward the runway.

Patience proved a virtue on the long flight. Recognizing Los Angeles when the craft decreased its altitude, Sheila timed her move for immediately after the landing gear touched down. Subduing one of six men acting as guards with a deft blow and seizing his pistol, Downton did likewise, and the two convinced the

remaining thugs to surrender. They were confined with their own shackles, while the prisoners were freed.

“This doesn’t get us the leader of the trafficking ring, though,” said Downton.

“Once the local police take over, I’m sure these brutes will cough up a few names.”

“But...”

“Scotland Yard had a car tail us to the airport. They notified your federal aviation authorities to track this plane.” The hatch opened, steps flipped outward, and a cadre of uniformed officers presented themselves, red lights flashing on their vehicles.

In a secluded maintenance shed, social workers, counselors and Red Cross volunteers took the girls in hand and treated them with extreme delicacy.

Downton, touched by the scene, whispered to Sheila that he would use part of his wealth to create a foundation to aid other victims of this horrendous crime.

“Good idea,” praised his would-be fiancée. “It’ll keep you out of the nightclubs, too.”

He snickered, “I don’t know about *that*... if you’re on my arm.”

The diamond ring slipped onto his palm. “Words cannot express how much I appreciate the offer, Tony, but it wouldn’t work between us. You’ve learned to deal with your share of the Holmes curse in your own way; I deal with it in mine. The two aren’t compatible for more than short periods at a stretch.”

“You just left here three days ago. You haven’t had a chance to really think it over.”

“God knows, I could love you - I *do* love you. You wouldn’t be comfortable as Mr. Sheila Holmes, and I can’t be Mrs. Anthony Downton. Not in Hollywood. I hate, as it is, when the press comes beating on the door at Baker Street after a successful case rates a little publicity. I’m not cut out...”

“I could move to London...”

“And the paparazzi would follow you. Please, Tony, let’s part ways with our dignity intact.”

Dejected, he subjected himself to interrogation by the police, his gaze never leaving Sheila’s exhausted mien. Assured the current victims would receive proper treatment and, potentially, asylum in the States - since their parents could be deemed unfit for selling them - the young Holmes made her way to LAX’s main concourse ticket counters, hopeful of booking an overnight flight to Heathrow.

Downton intercepted her before she passed through security. “You’re still coming to the premiere in London?”

“When the date is set.”

“I’ll... text you.”

“We’re still sixth cousins, Tony. We don’t need to be strangers.”

“I... wouldn’t...” Pulling her close, he kissed her passionately, then rushed toward the doors, his entourage gathered in a convoy of vehicles.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit,” Sheila grunted, not looking forward to another lengthy flight, or the explanations due Edith and Watson at the end.

“It’s for the best,” rang Sherlock’s wisdom in her head.

“Ma’am, there’s no smoking in the terminal!” shouted a TSA official.

And, indeed, tobacco heavily scented the air around her as she shed her sneakers, awaiting screening. She threw up her hands in resignation and laughed.

Back in London, headlines proclaimed Lemuel Benton a major criminal, responsible for brokering the sales of 187 girls, sent to 16 countries as part of a huge trafficking ring.

Watson, hospital gown askew, read the *Times* in his hospital bed. Too weak from medical treatments to hold the sheets upright, they were spread on his lap. Sheila brought him an insulated cooler filled with Edith’s bologna sandwiches, raising her left hand, not in greeting, but to display her unadorned ring finger. As she pulled a cold metal chair toward her friend, both had tears on their cheeks.

Of Rings and Repercussions

Sheila Holmes plumped the pillows supporting Johnny Watson's stubbly blond head. Though stronger by the day, two months after a series of cutting-edge bone cancer treatments, the Afghan campaign veteran still experienced bouts of weakness which confined him in the carved walnut four poster bed for prolonged periods.

He sipped ice water through a straw, breathed a sigh and settled back to sleep. His flatmate set the glass on the nightstand, waiting until his muscles relaxed beneath the quilt.

"How is he?" asked Edith Hudson-Thorne from the threshold.

"He shouldn't have gone walking in Regent's Park this morning. It was too much for him."

"Do you think he'll want something to eat when he wakes up?"

Ushering the russet-haired landlady into the sitting room, Sheila shrugged. "Soup and chocolate milkshakes are about all his stomach can handle, still. Every time he's eaten solid food, it..."

"I've heard him in the bathroom." Edith hovered near the round wooden table, cluttered with unopened mail and discarded food wrappers. "And, you cleaning up after him. From what he told me, his benefits would allow for a full-time nurse..."

"It's not like I'm busy these days. Cases have been few and far between since..."

"Filming on the movie wrapped?"

Sheila smirked, staring absently out the windows overlooking Baker Street. Having worn the same jeans and black t-shirt for two days, she wanted a shower. "I got the wrong kind of publicity on that one, and now I'm seen as an airheaded opportunist."

When her companion offered no response, she glanced over her shoulder, to see the American drumming her fingertips on a folded newspaper.

"All right, what is it?"

Edith raised the tabloid so the color photo and oversized font were clearly visible. The too-familiar face of Anthony Downton leaned toward an extremely young and lithe actress. On her left ring finger, prominently displayed for the camera, shone an impressive diamond set in a platinum band.

The ring Downton had given Sheila when he proposed to her less than a year earlier, probably resized to fit the twig of a digit.

The headline: “Rebound: One recent romance soured, megastar Tony Downton to wed Hollywood hopeful Amanda Tarlington.”

“You expect a reaction?” queried the detective.

Smiling sympathetically, Edith rolled the publication and tossed it toward the fireplace grate.

“They’re here for the premiere on Saturday, and I’m sure he believes marrying an associate producer’s daughter will rate him some good press,” Sheila remarked. “If it makes him happy, I’ve no resentment.”

“Will you be wanting any dinner?”

“I’d love a thick steak and loaf of warm Italian bread.”

“Coming up.”

“I’ll come down, instead,” clarified Sheila, not wishing to disturb Watson, or upset his stomach with the aroma of real food.

The women ate in silence, Edith occasionally glancing at her tenant, whose lean features framed by brunette curls showed no emotion.

“There’s strawberry pie in the refrigerator, if you’d like some,” she offered.

“No, thanks. I didn’t realize how knackered I am until I sat down. I think I’ll have a bit of a lie-down.”

“If you want me to check on John later...”

“No, Edith. He’s my responsibility.”

“I wish you wouldn’t keep saying that. He’s lived here almost as long as you have, and I care about him, too.”

“I know you do. But, you’ve plenty to do just keeping up the place. I can handle this.”

Mounting the old servants’ stairs, Sheila’s footsteps faded along the corridor as Edith tied an apron over her tan broom skirt, gathered the plates and carried them to the sink.

Toward midnight, a typical city stillness had fallen, but Sheila dozed fitfully. She’d successfully masked her feelings about Tony Downton’s pending nuptials - scheduled as a grand conclusion to the promotional tour for his Sherlock Holmes movie - but lacked confidence that she could attend the London event and keep any caustic comments to herself.

Rolling onto her stomach, the box springs groaned, echoed by a creaking door. Sheila remained motionless, two sets of shoe leather traversing the sitting room.

“Stay back,” whispered a male voice. “She’s a sound sleeper, and waking her is like rousing an angry tiger.”

The hand came within inches of touching her arm; Sheila flipped and seized the wrist, jerking the intruder across the double mattress. She dropped to the floor in a crouch, using feet and fists to defend herself against a hail of precise blows. The darkness prevented her from seeing her attacker, though she felt the air move as he attempted to subdue her.

Scooping away a strike at her midsection, a knife-edge thrust contacted her opponent's throat, eliciting a howl of anguish. His backhand was caught in her firm grip, and she twisted until he sank to his knees.

A round-house kick over his head landed on the wall, activating the ceiling light. That's when Sheila realized the damage done to Tony Downton and his expensive blue suit.

Releasing him, she snarled, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I... came to see you." Rubbing what would soon be limbs discolored with bruises, the actor straightened hesitantly. "Good to know you're keeping up your Wing Chun skills."

"While you've neglected yours. Sifu Pyke would not be pleased. Is it your custom to call in the middle of the night, like a thief?"

He dangled a leather fob before her. "I still have the key you gave me when we started production, so you can't charge us with breaking and entering."

Sheila's head snapped toward the door, where a contrite and frightened Rick Hopewell cowered. The cinematic Holmes and Watson paying a call on a true Holmes descendant.

Not that she'd forgotten Downton shared the bloodline to Sherlock's eldest brother, Sherrinford Holmes, making them sixth cousins. She didn't believe him worthy of the connection, at the moment.

"What do you want?" she demanded, leading them into the sitting room as she wrapped herself in her great-great-uncle's tattered dressing gown.

"Calm down already," scolded Downton. "This isn't some kinky social ritual. Rick's brother-in-law has vanished."

Adrenaline still pumping, Sheila didn't sense the serious edge to his baritone. "So?"

Tanned and tawny-haired, Hopewell ventured forward. "My sister, Kelly, and her husband, Bob, live in Edinburgh. Bob came down to London on business three weeks ago, got on the express to head home Saturday morning, and hasn't been heard from since."

Watson's door open, she tiptoed over and drew it closed, so the conversation wouldn't disturb him. "Have you reported this to the police?"

"No," replied Downton.

“You afraid of the publicity?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“You weren’t afraid of ruining my reputation by letting paparazzi sell photos of us to the scandal sheets.”

Downton reached for her, she recoiled. “It was never my intention to cause you harm.”

“Or, make me a laughingstock?” A tell-tale odor of tobacco caused Sheila to grit her teeth and inhale loudly. “I know, I know, Uncle. I’m sorry.”

Hopewell eyed Downton uncertainly. “Who’s she talking to?”

“Uncle Sherlock.”

Neither he nor Sheila wasted a second thought on how Hopewell would digest the news that Sherlock Holmes haunted, sometimes in tangible form, his former lodgings. Their banter persisted while he blanched and his knees buckled.

The British actor fortunately landed on the red Victorian divan, saving himself injury, but succumbing to shock.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Sheila apologized, ignoring the scene behind her. “I’ve had a bad time of it, what with John’s cancer...”

Downton’s intense expression - almost identical to his lauded ancestor - softened. “I thought he’d gone into remission.”

“He has, but it’s going to take a long time for him to regain his strength, to lead a normal life again. And, not working... you know how my mind gets.”

“The same with me. I’m sorry. I should have phoned, but our schedule is so tight...”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Rick got the message from his sister while we were doing the British media press junket. He took a few days off and went to Edinburgh himself, but didn’t find any useful information.”

“Has Bob’s mobile, or credit cards been used?”

“Not that we’re aware.”

“Had he any reason to commit suicide?”

“From what I’ve heard, he’s a loving husband with four young sons, a prominent barrister. No affairs, no addictions...”

Sheila towered over the catatonic Hopewell, chuckling. “You had to tell him about Uncle Sherlock.”

“Why should I lie?” Downton countered.

“Don’t you believe in family secrets?”

“I... didn’t think of that.”

“Like you didn’t think to let me know you’d decided to marry someone else?” she couldn’t resist the urge to drive home her point. “And use the same engagement ring to seal the bargain?”

Downton flushed, swallowed hard, and coughed. “Can we get on with the case?”

“I didn’t say I’d take the case.”

“There’s ten thousand pounds in it for you.”

The younger Holmes sniffed. “Salving your guilty conscience, Tony?”

Powerful fingers gripped her shoulders and spun her around. Brown orbs bored into her violet eyes. “There’s an old song which goes, ‘If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.’ I couldn’t have you, so I consoled myself with Wally’s daughter, who made herself more than available. She served as a nice bit of arm candy, and didn’t mind being hounded by the paps. In fact, she loved it. She was enthusiastic about... many things.”

“Which is why she’s pregnant?” Sheila snorted.

Downton freed her instantly. “How’d you know?”

“You know my methods. What I don’t understand is why you’re marrying her, when single motherhood no longer carries the stigma of times past.”

“Her father insisted. If I refused, he threatened to expose very specific facts...”

“Now, that’s a case I’ll take.”

“What?”

“Blackmail. Sounds like another toady who wants to profit from your success.”

“If you could get me out of this mess, I’d pay you a hundred grand.”

“I’ll do it for nothing, if you grant me one favor.”

“Name it.”

“Later. After I find Rick’s brother.”

“Deal.” He kissed her on the lips.

She didn’t reciprocate, her attention focused on reviving Hopewell from his stupor.

Attired in red boxer shorts, Johnny Watson tugged open his bedroom door, scowling at the gathering as he manipulated a pair of ill-fitted crutches, his prosthetic not attached to his lower left leg. “What’s the ruckus?”

“Sorry, John,” gushed Sheila, hurrying to his side. “We... have visitors.” “I can see that.” He maneuvered to the divan, scrutinizing Hopewell’s blank mien. “I take it Sherlock’s been about?”

Downton supplied, “Indeed.”

Dropping onto the cushions, the former Army medic felt for a pulse, and tested his patient's pupil reaction. "Get some blankets, and prop up his feet." He addressed Downton. "Do you know if he has any heart ailments?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, he may have one now."

Once the color returned to the young man's cheeks and he'd emptied a tumbler of water, the trio moved to other topics.

"Will you be okay by yourself if I go to Edinburgh in the morning?" Sheila asked her flatmate.

"I see no difficulty, if Edith will be here."

"I don't want to burden her..."

"I'm feeling much improved after a decent lie-in. What's up?"

She explained the situation to him.

"Instead of taking the train, why don't we fly? It'll take less than an hour..." suggested Downton.

"That would... make it easier," Sheila admitted. "While we're gone, John, would you be willing to do a little research on the computer, with your many contacts?"

"About the disappearance? I don't see how..."

"No, a different matter. I want you to find out all you can about Walter Tarlington, associate producer, and his daughter, Amanda."

"Financial, medical, or what?"

"Everything you can lay your hands on."

Watson grinned feebly. "Extortion?"

Downton nodded.

"I'll have it ready when you get home," the cancer survivor promised.

"To bed, then," directed Sheila. "Tony, I'll meet you at Gatwick at eight."

The actor commented, "No sense in you hiring a taxi, when my car's outside."

"What are you implying?"

"I can crash here for a few hours, if you don't mind."

"We don't have a spare room."

"We've shared a bed before, Sheila. Would you object..."

Watson managed a snicker as he withdrew from the fray.

"I won't argue with you, Tony, but I will add to your injuries if you..."

The dark, handsome replica of Sherlock Holmes raised his hands in surrender. "I'll be on my best behavior."

That involved him borrowing one of his host's oversized t-shirts in the morning, to replace his torn shirt and jacket. His co-star made do with the rumpled brown suit in which he'd arrived.

Three hours' slumber didn't improve Sheila's mood, nor did the turbulent takeoff and landing in Tony Downton's posh Gulfstream. Rick Hopewell hired a taxi to drive them to Bob and Kelly MacDougall's modest dwelling in the heart of Scotland's capital. Hazel eyes swollen from days of weeping, Kelly answered the knock in the midst of blowing her nose.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Downton. It's an honor to meet you, Miss Holmes." After clasping their hands, she embraced her brother.

"No word?" he inquired.

"Nothing." She signaled them to seats in a spacious living room. "If he was alive, he'd have found some way to contact me."

Sheila declared, "If he was abducted, contact might come in the form of a ransom note."

"Who would do that? We're well off, but not wealthy by any means."

"The firm which employs him..."

"Bob has his own practice. He decided, when he passed the bar, he wouldn't let anyone mold him into a corporate flunky."

"Admirable sentiment. Does he employ others, who might bear a grudge about some alleged slight?"

Kelly considered at length. "No. Bob does his best to encourage and coach new talent, and some have surpassed him in their own careers."

"What about disgruntled clients?"

"None."

"You've canceled his cell phone and credit cards?"

"He doesn't carry them. When he's not in the office, Bob doesn't like to be disturbed with business, and his people respect that. Another quirk is that he will only pay cash for his purchases."

"Then, I fear he met with some untimely accident, and we will do our utmost to locate him." Sheila rose, the men followed suit.

Out on the sidewalk, Downton prodded, "That's all?"

"The woman was forthcoming and honest with her answers, meaning she genuinely knows nothing about her husband's disappearance. If he experienced some health emergency on the train, the commotion would have been marked by witnesses, and his wife notified. What we must do now is check the hospitals along the express route, to determine if a man matching Bob's description found

his way to the accident and emergency ward, without identification, after being robbed and thrown from the moving train.”

Pulling his mobile from his leather jacket, Hopewell interjected, “I’d be more than happy to handle that assignment.”

“Good,” Sheila praised. “Let’s get some lunch, before we fly back to London.”

Over a hearty meal, ignoring the haggis on the restaurant’s menu, the itinerary was changed to Leeds. An obvious crime victim, skull fractured, right arm broken and otherwise bloodied, lacking wallet or cash, had been brought in by a farmer who found him in a ditch near the train tracks more than a fortnight earlier. He remained comatose, unable to give his attendants a name or any details about what had transpired.

Kelly flew with the group and, at the sound of her voice, Bob emerged from his stupor, puzzled why his head was bandaged and his arm in traction.

Downton and Sheila left Hopewell and his relations to their tender reunion, intent on solving the next pending case.

The younger Holmes expected Watson to be hunched over the computer keyboard in the sitting room of 221B, gleaning data from his varied sources. Instead, his unconscious form sprawled on the Victorian divan.

“Poor thing,” she muttered, poking around the desk for printouts. “He wants so much to get back to his old self, but his body is resisting.”

A tray of sandwiches Edith had delivered remained untouched on the round table, the carafe of coffee cold.

“Bologna and American cheese?” puzzled Downton, biting into mustard-coated white bread. “Where does your delightful landlady shop?”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Sheila replied absently. “But, John’s acquired a liking for the taste.”

Distracted by her tone, he prodded, “You find something?”

“More than something. This won’t only get you out of your engagement to the promiscuous Miss Tarlington, but might land her father in prison.”

He joined her at the desk, but she folded the sheets before he could read them.

“Why so secretive?”

“You’re an actor; when we confront these fraudsters, you need only play your role as suitably wronged party.”

“Sheila, no,” Downton almost whined. “I... must have the proper motivation...”

“You’re no method actor. In fact, you improvise better than some comedians I’ve seen.”

He swallowed the rest of his sandwich in one gulp. “All right, all right.”

“Do you think Mr. Tarlington is at Claridge’s Mayfair?”

“The entire cast and crew are booked there for tomorrow night’s premiere.”

“Let’s crack on, then.”

The Tube deposited them near Brook Street, and the couple strolled through heavy pedestrian traffic to the five-star historic hotel. The head doorman greeted them far more cordially than the last time Sheila had visited the art deco establishment - on this occasion, she wasn’t clad in a grubby sweatsuit. She’d changed into a grey pinstriped business suit Downton had bought her to impress the Hollywood movers and shakers.

Provided Tarlington’s suite number by the desk clerk, they rode a lift to the fourth floor. Sheila didn’t knock, but caught the door as it closed after the butler removed a tea cart. She whisked into the airy chamber like a woman without a care in the world, meeting associate producer Walter Tarlington’s scowl with a pleasant smile.

“How are you this fine day, Wally?” she drawled, bending to grasp his daughter’s limp right hand. “Amanda, darling, how marvelous you’re looking, despite the bulimia!”

Downton loitered near the mirrored foyer, waiting for the fun to begin.

“What the hell are you doing here?” barked Tarlington, his complexion beet red with rage, matching his terry robe, wisps of white hair standing on end.

“My original intention was to congratulate you on selecting such a naive cash cow for your son-in-law.”

Amanda, her bleached tresses flowing over a green spaghetti-strap blouse, leapt upright. “Why, you...”

“Oh, sit down, you silly child,” their visitor interrupted. “You’re not the victim in this little drama.”

His bluster still reigning, Tarlington spat, “Drama? The only drama here is how Tony would have mistreated and abandoned my precious girl, if I hadn’t intervened.”

A deliberate cough smothered Sheila’s utterance of, “Bullshit!”

“Excuse me?” Tarlington propelled his bulk from the expensive armchair. “How *dare* you invade our privacy to make baseless accusations...”

That’s when a bundle of folded papers appeared from the inside pocket of Sheila’s suit jacket. “Do you really want to go there, Wally?”

“Go where?”

“To your stock broker, for instance.” Sheila pretended to read columns of accounting notations. “You’re into him for more than three million dollars, because you’ve invested badly...”

Tarlington snatched at the documents. “Where’d you get...”

“Thanks to technology, nothing is private anymore,” she chuckled, sidestepping him easily. “The list of your financial malfeasance is quite extensive.”

“It still doesn’t change the fact that my daughter...”

“Is as much a liar as you are.”

“You bitch!” shrieked the girl.

“I’d rather be an honest bitch than a gold-digging con artist. Your alleged pregnancy was concocted because you knew Tony loved another, and had no intention of marrying you.”

Amanda Tarlington’s jaw hung open; fury numbed her tongue.

“You can’t substantiate such a claim,” her father asserted.

Sheila summoned Tony forward, enjoying the scene. “Under what circumstances, Mr. Downton, would you have asked Ms. Tarlington to become your wife?”

“The thought never entered my head,” he stated flatly.

“You were convinced by Mr. Tarlington, after you learned of her supposed pregnancy?”

“Correct.”

Tarlington hissed, “So what? It doesn’t change the fact...”

“Except, the fact isn’t a fact,” snapped Sheila. “Your daughter is no more pregnant than the Queen.”

The producer shifted his gaze from the unwelcome guests to his offspring. “Amanda? You wouldn’t deceive me!”

“She doesn’t have to admit her ruse, as I can see she won’t. Filling her prescription for oral contraceptives a day before you boarded the plane for London - as well as the prior three months - is proof she isn’t carrying Tony’s child.”

The Tarlingtons took a few moments to digest Sheila’s declaration and adopt appropriately crestfallen expressions. The exposé of the deception grinned at Tony Downton, who bent slightly to kiss her forehead.

“You mean, her?” Amanda squealed, further confirming Sheila’s deductions.

“She’s a hundred times the woman you are,” remarked Downton, approaching his now-former fiancée and yanking the 16-carat diamond off her finger.

The pair retreated, holding in their laughter until the lift doors closed, startling the attendant with their eruption of levity.

“That’s such a load off my mind,” gasped Downton as they emerged in the hotel lobby. “I’ll cut you a cheque in the morning...”

“You make it sound like we’re going to spend the night together... again.”

“Well, we need to celebrate, don’t we? Dinner, a show...”

Sheila shook her brunette curls. “My bed is calling my name, because - if you recall - I didn’t get much sleep last night. You need your rest, too, with the rigors of a premiere tomorrow.”

“You’re my date tomorrow night, y’know.”

“Since when?”

Posing in a thoughtful stance, he proclaimed, “I seem to remember a contract...”

“Fine, fine!” she sighed. “Dinner, then the premiere, but the first time you mention any... extended relationship... I’m out the door.”

His index finger traced a cross over his heart. “I promise.”

On that note, she strode from the building, leaving him to return upstairs to his penthouse.

Watson had awakened during her absence, and nibbled on a biscuit between spooning drops of chicken broth into his mouth. She breezed into the sitting room, noticing the odor of tobacco and stopping short.

“Are you okay, John?”

“Sherlock popped in to check on me.”

“Did he... say anything?”

“He let me know you found my research.”

“And, I have to thank you for such a phenomenal effort. Wherever did you get the records of Amanda Tarlington’s prescriptions?”

Watson patted his chapped lips with a cloth napkin. “While the Americans pride themselves on comprehensive medical privacy laws, a Navy corpsman I served with in Afghanistan is now a pharmacist, with ready access to nationwide records...”

“When you get to feeling better, I’m taking you out for the biggest steak...”

“Don’t worry about that. My prescription for you is eight hour’s undisturbed slumber. In the morning, I’ve an appointment with my oncologist, and if you can accompany me...”

“Of course. Anything.”

The flatmates retired to their respective rooms, and Sheila heard nothing from the second her head hit the pillow.

The doctor’s prognosis for Johnny Watson encouraged the patient, though the rain which fell on their way back to Baker Street dampened his spirits anew. Edith Hudson-Thorne, on her weekend errands, had purchased a large chocolate shake for him, and he sipped the thick mixture gratefully while Sheila fumbled through her closet for something to wear that evening.

“You still have plenty in the bank, why don’t you buy a dress?”

“Waste money on frills and frippery I’ll only wear once?”

“You could borrow one of Edith’s skirt and blouse outfits.”

She flashed a smile at him from the threshold. “Brilliant idea, John!”

Though not a formal gown, the calf-length black velvet skirt and white lace-trimmed blouse fit Sheila well and gave her a feminine air, despite the fedora smashed atop her hair. When the tuxedoed Tony Downton called for her, she couldn’t read whether he was pleased or not.

Nor did she really care.

This would be the last time they’d see each other, and she wouldn’t have to fret whether he’d pop up without warning, or offer her a case to solve for some ridiculous fee.

Following a strained meal in a quiet bistro, their limousine transported them to a line of similar vehicles near the Odeon Leicester Square, with its tinted glass tower and huge screen above the doors allowing spectators on the fringes to view the live action. Lesser cast members paraded along the red carpet first, anticipation escalating for the stars’ arrival.

“Ready?” queried Downton as the squat chauffeur opened the door.

“For anything.”

She stepped from the silver Mercedes, trying to steel herself against the screams and whistles when Downton joined her, tenderly slipping her arm through his. They strolled toward the theater together, no differently than if they were alone on a California beach.

Cameras flashed like strobe lights, and journalists representing entertainment programming of questionable taste hailed them, in vain, to grace their microphones. A BBC reporter shoved his way to the front of the pack, shouting his questions above the fray.

As Downton played to the crowd with his disarming charisma, Sheila glimpsed movement near barricades erected to prevent the masses from accosting

the Hollywood elite. A familiar female argued with the security guard about the validity of her pass - Amanda Tarlington.

“Tony, here comes trouble,” she murmured in her escort’s ear.

Graciously, he excused himself from the interview and proceeded toward the entrance.

Too late.

“Hey, bitch!” bellowed Amanda, positioned in the middle of the red carpet.

Sheila spun, and noticed the raised pistol.

Downton saw it, too, and dove in front of his date as the shot rang out.

The bullet caught him directly in the chest, and he continued falling, dead before he hit the concrete.

Guards had Amanda in tow before she could empty the Glock’s clip. Sheila knelt beside her sixth cousin, stroking his dark mane and regretting her actions. She deftly transferred the Holmes family signet ring from his finger to hers. Cameras captured the spectacle, the images printed on front pages around the globe within hours, and footage broadcast on overnight news telecasts.

The premiere itself was canceled, fans dispersed when constables converged, summoned by no less than 100 emergency phone calls.

Once more, Sheila sequestered herself at 221B Baker Street, incessant beating on the front door driving Edith to distraction. John actually managed to chortle at the chaos, his appetite gradually recovering.

A guffaw of disbelief escaped Sheila’s throat three weeks later, when a registered letter arrived from a California lawyer, which included a cheque for \$100,000. Anthony Downton, the communication revealed, had bequeathed Sheila Holmes his 5% share of the gross profits in his final movie.

“You’re set for life,” was Watson’s reaction, plopping beside her on the divan.

“No. The rest of his wealth, Tony left to a foundation working to eliminate human trafficking. They should have this, too.”

“But, all he put you through...”

Sheila plucked the phone from its cradle to make the long distance call. “He was family.”

A cloud of tobacco smoke swirled near the fireplace.

“I know, Uncle.”

And, for the umpteenth time since Downton’s tragic death, she broke down in tears, her head on Watson’s shoulder.