

# **The Adventures of Sheila Holmes**

*Brief Cases*

**A Collection of Stories**

by

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## The Criminal as a Young Man

As a fledgling detective, Sheila Holmes spent her days attempting to emulate her renowned forebear. She pored over casebooks lining shelves above his lab table in the corner of the sitting room at 221B Baker Street, read the London *Times* from front to back each morning, and made routine treks to neighborhood shops an exercise in observation.

“It’s not enough,” she lamented aloud to no one in particular, though Edith Hudson-Thorne, her landlady, had just delivered a tray of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee for breakfast.

“What’s not enough?” the russet-haired American widow countered tersely. “This is more than I eat in a week!”

Her reverie broken, Sheila glared at the platters on the cluttered table. “I didn’t mean that.”

Edith scowled as she cleared a stack of unopened mail, moldy bags of crisps and half-full ceramic mugs of rancid tea. “Well, I mean this, Sheila: you’re beginning to get on my nerves. When I let you cajole me into signing a lease, I never intended this flat to become a trash pit.”

“I know, I know.” The tenant migrated toward smudged windows overlooking the bustling lane. “I’ve... had things on my mind.”

“Be that as it may, best get your mind in order, and this room!”

On that note, Edith made her exit, slamming the door.

Sheila sank on the basket-chair, pulling her legs into a half-lotus position. “There’s got to be more ways to expand my capacity,” she grumped. “But, how?”

A flourish of pungent tobacco smoke heralded the answer.

Materializing beside the fireplace mantle, Sherlock Holmes puffed his briar with a condescending air. “Are you so socially repressed the obvious has not occurred to you?” he scolded.

“I... don’t consider myself repressed, Uncle. I’m a normal, healthy...”

“Then, go where other normal, healthy people your age congregate to practice your skills.”

A minuscule grin crept over her thin lips as she contemplated the lanky image: shirt cuffs frayed, dark hair unkempt and stubble marring the line of his jaw. She couldn’t deny his logic, though she hadn’t made a habit of frequenting pubs or nightclubs since leaving Oxford.

“My finances are rather limited, at present,” she protested.

“You can nurse a single pint over the course of an hour without raising suspicions.”

So, Thursday excursions to Soho via the Tube became Sheila's habit - even after Johnny Watson took up residence in the second bedroom. On advice from her ethereal great-great-uncle, rather than select an establishment at random, she inserted herself as a regular at a off-beat club in order to accurately track the flow of clientele.

Watson proved an invaluable companion, with diagnostic skills gleaned from a tour in Afghanistan as a British Army medic. While Sheila could assess the clothing, posture and demeanor of the subjects she chose on any given outing, the blond amputee detected signs of drug use and symptoms of various illnesses.

The rustic blues haven attracted not only drinkers, but those who enjoyed listening to live music, and dancing. Her skills honed themselves without the aid of a notepad, her intent to blend in as much as possible.

Her casual shirts, jeans and sneakers complemented that desire. Only the black fedora crushing her brunette curls, found while rummaging through Sherlock's abandoned possessions, attracted periodic attention, it definitely not being in vogue.

She employed the wide brim to shield her eyes, however, so patrons wouldn't realize she mentally picked apart their lives as they imbibed in nearby booths or at the bar.

As weeks progressed, a certain sort of gentleman routinely offered to replenish her glass, which she refused. She'd had plenty of encounters with such pick-up artists at university and didn't wish to be distracted from her training.

Watson chuckled at her reticence. "You might wind up with a case or two if you bothered to chat them up."

"Those aren't the types of cases I want," she replied.

"What, you're hoping to make a name for yourself by besting the Scotland Yarders in solving some prominent murder or theft?"

"You know me better than that, John. Finding lost dogs or shadowing errant spouses would impede me from tackling more serious crimes..."

The words died in her throat as Sheila sighted a newcomer beneath the lintel, swirls of dense fog accompanying him from the street. He might've seemed ordinary to most: perhaps 22, tall, black shaggy mop, squarish countenance, erect shoulders, narrow waist and spindly legs in tight jeans and square-toed black leather boots. His most prominent feature, though: aquamarine eyes that bored into a soul like a laser.

She wasn't the only female to notice this attribute. Even before he settled on a stool at the curved mahogany bar, four women approached. Whether they were already acquainted with him didn't seem to matter. He began a very elaborate

rotation of whispered innuendo, trifling kisses and subtle caresses - while they supplied his drinks.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Watson grunted, realigning his prosthetic left leg.

Sheila admitted, “I’ve never seen the like.”

“It’s scored him a long line of rich spinsters and widows to bilk out of their life savings.”

His flatmate stiffened. “Eh?”

“I thought you read the papers.”

“Should do. I don’t recall...”

“Perhaps because it’s considered one of those incidents beneath your notice.”

“There’s no cause to be sarcastic, John...”

He patted her hand, stifling a twinge of jealousy. “His name is Bobby Reed. Family lives in Wimbledon. Well-to-do, though they cut him off after he got some girl pregnant, and they shelled out a small fortune for solicitors to quash the paternity rap.”

“So, he took up trolling for gullible retirees?”

“Simultaneously bedding a slew of eager beauties in their prime.”

Sheila squinted violet orbs at her companion. “You admire him for this?”

“What man doesn’t dream...”

She let the matter drop as Reed, gulping his fourth whiskey, made for the exit with two of the women on his arms, the other two sullen and left to seek their pleasure elsewhere.

The fedora flipped back on her cranium, she slid off the bench seat.

“We leaving?” queried Watson.

“It’s late, and I’m knackered.”

Together, they ventured into the pea soup so traditional in London, strolling toward the Tube station.

Sheila thought nothing more about Bobby Reed until Saturday morning, when the *Times* headlined a grisly murder in a Soho alley. The Metropolitan Police had identified the woman, who’d been strangled and her clothes sliced off her body; a photo obtained from Imperial College London, where she was enrolled as a student, graced the front page.

Not difficult to recognize the lithe creature as one of those who’d congregated near Reed two nights previous.

“John!” she shouted, causing the groggy blond head to peer from his bedroom.

“What the devil?”

“Look at this!”

Fifteen minutes elapsed before Watson joined her in the sitting room. He’d showered, slipped on a pair of green sweats and attached his prosthetic, also pouring himself a cup of coffee from the carafe Edith had delivered with their morning meal.

The article didn’t faze him in the least, which puzzled Sheila.

“It’s not the first time he’s been suspected of foul play.”

She erupted, “What!”

“The authorities haven’t been able to gather sufficient evidence against him, but his peers know the truth.”

“His peers?”

“The upper crust clubbers around our age.”

“And, none of them have gone to Scotland Yard?”

“You know how it is, Sheila. They don’t want to get involved. They’re busy with their studies, their jobs; they don’t want any adverse publicity...”

“Do you think there were actual witnesses to this... this...” She thumped the newsprint with her index finger.

“That’s anybody’s guess. He might have ditched the other gal before...”

She slumped on the basket-chair. “From what you’ve said, it doesn’t sound like he’ll feel much remorse for his actions, and probably make an appearance at the pub tonight.”

“I’ll wager you’re correct.”

She smiled broadly. “Are you up for a trip to Soho?”

“Frankly, no. In a pinch, I’d be no help if he took off running...”

“Oh, he won’t run. If he tries, I’ll put him flat on his back.”

“Good luck with that,” Watson retorted.

She sobered. “Eh?”

“He was trained by the Army’s special forces before he got the boot for having an affair with the commanding officer’s wife.”

They laughed together at the lunacy of the situation.

Nonetheless, Sheila chose a ruffle-collared yellow satin blouse from her wardrobe that evening, pairing it with grey slacks for her venture to the pub. She even left the fedora on its hook beneath the “V.R.” of bullet holes that Sherlock had created in the years he leased the rooms more than a century past.

If she’d acquired one tidbit of knowledge about men from her days at Oxford: they pursued the unattainable, even when the ready and willing hovered within reach. In contrast to the overtly promiscuous types who gravitated to Reed, she would snub him, drawing him like a fly to honey.

He might've been a salt lick for hungry deer, so many women vied for his attention no more had he sauntered onto the premises, blues melodies reverberating around the chamber. He played to their expectations for the span of two double whiskeys - neat - then glimpsed a solitary Sheila, enjoying the discordant rhythms.

She never met his gaze.

One by one, Reed rid himself of his entourage, insulting each one without compunction. Then, he crossed the floor and sank on the cushioned bench opposite her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snapped, favoring him with a harsh glare.

"You're a gorgeous woman, alone. I thought I'd keep you company until your date shows up."

Her severe contralto bit. "I *am* alone, by choice. I don't need a date... and I don't need *you*."

"Oh, I think you do." His basso profundo rattled her nerves. "Come on, let's go somewhere quiet, so we can talk."

"I'm perfectly content here, thanks."

He leveled unblinking aquamarine eyes at her. Despite the disconcerting effect, she refused to melt. His primary tactic thwarted, he lowered his chin, maintaining contact beneath hooded lids.

"There's a joint down the block where the blues are much better," he hinted.

She let him persist with his ploy, until almost last call, when he came within a centimeter of giving up on her. His suggestion the weather forecast promised a treacherous journey home, she agreed to let him escort her to the taxi stand - after he covered her tab and his own.

Outdoors, stars twinkled overhead, giving the lie to his prediction. Still, she hooked her arm through his and let him lead her along the busy thoroughfare.

Two blocks along, she slowed her pace. "The taxi stand is back at the junction."

"I thought, maybe, you'd like a nightcap..."

"I'm fine, thanks."

He seized her at the waist with his left hand and smothered her mouth with a kiss. She didn't resist, noticing his right hand extract a switchblade from the hip pocket of his jeans. Steel glinted beneath the street lamp as he swiped at her buttons.

"I'm not used to being rejected," he growled.

She batted aside the weapon and elbowed him in the ribs, forcing her release. "Of that, I'm sure. You're nothing but a spoiled child in a man's body."

When he lunged anew, she decked him with a fist to his nose, blood spurting. Kneeling on his broad chest as he lay on the cracked sidewalk, she sniggered, "Your days of treating women like toys are over."

His bravado faltered not one whit. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know who you will be: Bobby Reed, convicted murderer and confidence trickster."

At that, he wilted - momentarily. "Who are you? Some undercover police informant?"

"Nothing so grand. Just say: I'm a citizen concerned about scheming fools like you running loose."

Sirens approached from three directions, an ambulance close behind. Sheila lifted herself off Reed's prone form once the constables took him into custody, glancing up at glowing windows, where one curler-headed, pajama-clad female waved in acknowledgment - having heard the fracas and rung the police.

Sheila mimicked the gesture, then obliged the sergeant who - notepad in hand - requested her statement.

She didn't perceive, until she trudged into the sitting room at Baker Street, that red spray from Reed's fractured nose had created a polka-dot pattern on her outfit. Watson dropped the book he'd been reading and hoisted himself off the armchair beside the dormant fireplace, horrified.

"Are you all right?" he gasped.

"Must do."

The Sunday *Times* proclaimed the capture of Robert "Bobby" Reed who, under interrogation and poorly counseled by an incompetent publicly-funded solicitor - since his parents ignored his pleas for top-notch legal representation - confessed to multiple crimes, hoping to secure a reduced sentence. Sheila received credit from the enterprising reporter who defied Metropolitan Police restrictions on details to seek her out and obtain the full story.

Standing in the dock six weeks later, Reed received his comeuppance: a minimum sentence of 20 years imprisonment.

Edith Hudson-Thorne, continuing a campaign for her tenants to cleanse the detritus from their flat, grew more and more irked at the recurring knocks on the street door - day and night - seeking Sheila's aid, her reputation on the rise.

## Watson's Trauma

Johnny Watson's fingers flew across the keyboard.

Dear Edith, (he typed)

I've been trying to ring you since early this morning, but all I get is voicemail. This is too important to consign to a brief explanation, and I wanted to be the one to tell you, even by email, before you saw it in the newspaper or, worse, on the internet.

My hope, at present, is that you're somewhere in the Catskills enjoying your family reunion, without any signal on your mobile and, when you do have a chance to read this, you'll be with those who love you and can provide the bit of comfort I can't at this great distance.

Enough of the preliminaries, then. My dilemma is whether to simply state the facts, then the explanation, or relate the details chronologically. Neither is easy.

Forgive me, in advance, if I botch this. My heart - like yours, most likely once you read this - has been ripped from my chest.

Sheila is dead.

God, my fingers are trembling from creating such a sentence.

I feel, strangely, like the esteemed Dr. Watson when he had to write of Sherlock's death at the Reichenbach Falls more than a century ago. Only, this time, it's final. There'll be no resurrection for our friend.

Here's what happened:

Yesterday morning, I was roused early by banging on the street door. By the time I'd crawled from bed and attached my prosthetic, Sheila had grumped her way downstairs and invited the caller up to the sitting room. She offered him the previous day's coffee, which I confiscated and took downstairs to fill from a fresh pot.

It being cold outdoors, I didn't really pay attention to who was shrouded in a heavy wool overcoat and antiquated bowler as he seated himself on the divan. When I returned, though, I

recognized Lt. Geoffrey Nayland Smith, who'd served with me in Afghanistan in the days before... well, you know.

He shook my hand enthusiastically before accepting the cuppa. I expected to spend time reminiscing with him about those days, but he'd already launched into a narrative, Sheila totally captivated.

As the now-major continued about some plot uncovered by MI6 that threatened military readiness, I half-expected Sheila to leap from the basket-chair and grab Sherlock's fedora off its hook and rush out the door. I don't think she would've even stopped to shed the old dressing gown and change from the t-shirt and jeans she'd slept in all night.

We were on a train from Paddington within the hour. Smith had gone ahead in a car; why Sheila opted not to accompany him became clear in the first class carriage, snow falling outside the window.

"John, how well do you know Major Smith?" she asked me.

"I... never associated very closely with the officers, unless they were wounded."

"Was Smith ever wounded?"

"A couple times. Minor things: a piece of shrapnel from an I.E.D. grazed his thigh early in the campaign, requiring stitches and a few days convalescence. Then, he caught a bullet in the hand during a Taliban ambush."

She pressed me whether I knew of his ancestry, which I didn't.

"He's the great-great-grandson of Sir Denis Nayland Smith, who served as commissioner of Scotland Yard for years, after being posted in the far east for the intelligence services of the era."

An honorable man, to be sure.

Sheila's opinion of Smith's maternal line wasn't so complimentary. It seems Sir Denis had a preoccupation with criminals from the East, including a Dr. Fu Manchu. In his pursuit of that mastermind, Smith briefly married a young Asian beauty, siring his only offspring. His wife died in childbirth, and the lad was raised by relatives in the north country.

For me, that answered a nagging question: why Major Smith's eyes had a slightly Asian cast.

Regardless, Sheila acknowledged she didn't fully trust Major Smith. And, rightly so, as I know now.

Oh, God, Edith! We arrived at our destination - which I've been forbidden from revealing, though the media will leak it soon enough - and while Sheila alighted swiftly from the taxi and approached a concrete block structure, I was barely three paces behind. She'd only reached toward the door handle, when the explosion threw us all backward.

She caught the blast's full force, and shards of glass ripped into her flesh. It took a few minutes for me to recover my wits but, when I crawled to her side, she'd already expired.

I turned to where I'd last seen Smith; he and his car, which had preceded us to the site, were gone.

That I didn't understand any of it is an understatement. An ambulance arrived in due course, more concerned with my possible concussion than Sheila's corpse. I refused to accompany the medics to hospital, and I waited for the coroner to arrive, keeping vigil beside our friend.

The saddest part of this whole ordeal: the local constabulary refused to heed my claim that Geoffrey Nayland Smith had engineered the explosion. As of now, both the military and MI6 - from what I can gather via my various sources - have written off the event as a tragic accident, the result of an experiment gone horribly wrong.

I'm not certain when Sheila's body will be released from the morgue. Transporting her back to London would be... a strange irony, given her attitudes about death. She did leave a will, tucked in the wall safe with much of the cash she'd accumulated from her recent cases, directing that she be cremated and scattered on the Thames.

We can discuss disposition of the rooms when you return. I know this news has probably ruined your trip, but I could see no viable alternative.

Without adding his name at the bottom, Watson clicked "Send." He slumped on the swivel chair, exhaling deeply.

The odor of pungent tobacco swirled overhead. “Never an easy task,” boomed the ethereal Sherlock Holmes from his place near the neglected fireplace, dying embers on the grate.

“Just the thought...”

“My Watson felt the same. It took him years to muster the mental strength to record my encounter with Moriarty...”

“Which turned out to be false,” the young man grumbled.

“Embellished, shall we say?”

“That kind of... embellishment is what irks me.”

“You’ll learn to deal with it.”

The spectre dissipated, his smoking briar pipe perched on the cluttered mantle.

Such consolation did not relieve the former Army medic of a tightness in his chest. Wandering aimlessly about 221B Baker Street, he found little food in the kitchen and few clean clothes in his wardrobe. Edith Hudson-Thorne, the landlady, had been in the States for three weeks, her absence keenly felt by the pair who’d grown accustomed to her kind ministrations while they investigated cases at all hours of the day or night.

Watson felt singularly alone. At his next veteran’s group therapy meeting, he’d have a lot to unload.

The doorbell jarred him from his stupor in mid-afternoon. Major Geoffrey Nayland Smith - erect, chestnut hair cropped close, wide forehead tapering to a narrow chin, brown eyes set above a Romanesque nose - waited on the stoop, a black arm-band prominent on his left uniform sleeve.

“I’m so sorry, John,” he began after Watson waved him indoors. “My driver received a call on the radio, and he had to dash...”

The conversation lagged until they were settled in the sitting room - Smith on the red Victorian divan, his host in the armchair by the fireplace.

The latter tried to remain attentive to this guest, but exhaustion weighed heavily on his soul. Thus, he didn’t notice when figures appeared on the threshold: two Asians dressed entirely in black.

As they crossed the worn Persian carpet, however, Watson sprang into action. “What the devil!”

Smith made no move to assist when the pair grasped the trim blond’s arms and dragged him toward the window.

“Major, what’s...”

“Your death will be ruled a suicide, due to grief,” Smith announced, lounging comfortably. “Your friend, Edith, will be able to corroborate your depressed state, having read your email...”

“You traitorous bounder!”

“Traitor to whom?” Smith chuckled. “The British have always treated me like a second-class citizen, because of my mixed blood. At least, the Chinese paid me according to my worth.”

Watson shook free of his captors. “If you’re a spy, why expose yourself by requesting Sheila’s aid?”

“Because, she was already investigating the leak of information, confidentially, for the Foreign Office. She’d gotten too close...”

Unyielding hands on Smith’s shoulders startled him into silence.

“I’m a lot closer now, eh, Major?” came Sheila’s sarcastic contralto over the back of the divan into his ear.

From both bedrooms, a cadre of military police and Scotland Yard constables converged on the sitting room, weapons drawn. Smith rose, to be shackled along with his comrades, and led to a nondescript lorry parked at the curb.

The general who appeared last on the scene offered Watson a cigar before lighting his own.

“Excellent work, Miss Holmes,” the portly official praised. “You, too, Sergeant Watson.”

“Thank you, sir,” the pair chorused glumly.

“One question: how did you know your emails were being monitored?”

Watson replied, “I regularly run security software on the computer, and when a recent scan report showed an aberrant program operating...”

“Ah!”

“It was easy enough to bypass...” added the disabled veteran.

Sheila noted, “Until such time as we needed the villains to read what we planted.”

“And, how did you *not* die in the explosion?” the general queried.

“I knew Smith would flee, so Watson and I took cover behind the cement flower box after exiting the cab. With no other witnesses... The only casualties were the plants themselves.”

“Very astute, Miss Holmes.” He clasped their hands, each in turn. “You’ve done your government a tremendous service, and will be amply rewarded.”

Sheila nodded her gratitude, while Watson escorted the officer to the street.

“She’s a fine one, lad,” the general said in parting. “Take care of her. Her value is...”

“Beyond measure?”

“Indeed.”

The door securely locked, Watson mounted creaking stairs. From the basket-chair, Sheila was conversing with Edith on her mobile. “You’ll be home Tuesday? Thank God!”

Activating the speaker, her flatmate heard the landlady’s reply. “If you’ve left the place a mess, I’ll have you on your knees scrubbing floors...”

Sheila snickered, “That’s *not* what I call entertainment!”

“We’ll have things sorted out,” Watson promised, almost shouting. “It’ll be like you were never gone!”

“I won’t hold my breath!” Edith quipped before disconnecting.

Watson dropped in his armchair. “I don’t want to have to hold my breath until the day when I really have to write such an email.”

“I appreciate that you were willing to do so this time. Any reward we do receive - and I won’t hold *my* breath on that account - is all yours.”

“We’ll use it to take a real holiday - all three of us.”

Before they could even discuss plans for such an excursion, the doorbell rang anew.

## Highland Fracas

Edith Hudson-Thorne marched through piles of detritus cluttering the sitting room floor of 221B Baker Street that Monday evening, russet hair in curlers, pink terry robe tied around her waist. She held out her mobile to Sheila Holmes, dozing in the basket-chair near the dormant fireplace.

“John’s been trying to contact you for the past hour,” the landlady snarled. “He said you’re not answering your phone.”

“I can’t find it,” growled the brunette, lithe tenant.

“No wonder.” Edith kicked a stack of discarded newspapers. “Here.”

With a sigh, Sheila accepted the gadget. “John? Where are you?”

“In Scotland.”

“Should do. Having a nice visit with your cousins?”

The former Army medic grunted. “I was, until we reached Inverness.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We drove up yesterday to do some fishing. Over dinner, every other table in the restaurant was occupied by... foreigners.”

“That’s not unusual. It’s tourist season, after all.”

“Packing guns?” crackled through the speaker.

“You observed this personally?”

“I did, Sheila, as well as overhearing at least twenty distinct languages.”

“Such as?”

“Russian, Chinese - or some Asian dialect - German, French, Arabic...”

“Did you approach the local constabulary?”

“Of course not! It’s none of my business, really, but I thought you might...”

“It would be quite difficult for me to meddle...”

A knock on the street door disrupted this conversation. With a promise to ring Watson later, she passed the mobile back to its owner.

Edith spun and crossed the chamber, descending to ground level and admitting a pair of middle-aged, suited officials.

“Miss Holmes?” the bald elder greeted.

She rose, tightening the belt of her great-great-uncle Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown. “Yes, sir.”

“I am Chauncey Gardiner, MI6. This is Maurice Abbingdon of Scotland Yard.”

Sheila clasped each hand in turn before offering them a seat. Gardiner chose the red Victorian divan; his companion settled in Watson’s armchair. Their host resumed her place in the basket-chair.

“How may I be of service?” she inquired.

“There is a... situation...”

“In Scotland?”

Abbington’s jet black mop stood on end in shock. “How did you know?”

“I have my sources.”

“Agents from across the globe are converging on the Loch Ness region,” noted Gardiner.

“A convention?” Sheila couldn’t suppress the quip, but her smirk quickly faded.

“Our informants have gleaned they are targeting a young woman who resides at Boleskine House on the eastern shore.”

“For any particular reason?”

“She has no criminal record,” Abbington stated. “No questionable connections...”

Their vagueness irritated the detective. “What would you have me do?”

“Go north and determine the reason for this... this...”

“Can’t Scotland Yard or the intelligence services send their own...”

Gardiner clucked his tongue. “We don’t wish to cause an international incident.”

“Ah! By sending me, you can disavow any... involvement should... the worst occur.”

“Precisely.”

Violet eyes rolled skyward. “No, gentlemen. I’m afraid I’ll have to decline your request.”

“But...”

“I’m sure you can find your own way out.”

Reluctantly, the pair departed, with Gardiner pausing on the threshold to make one final plea.

Sheila merely shook her head.

She listened as they trod creaking stairs and slammed the door upon exit. Then, she scrambled about the sitting room, desperate to locate her mobile.

The aroma of pungent tobacco interrupted her hunt. She watched Sherlock Holmes materialize near the fireplace, wreathed in smoke from the briar clenched between his teeth. She’d grown accustomed to his shaggy dark hair, worn shirt cuffs and piercing grey eyes in the years since she took up residence at 221B, along with the nuggets of wisdom he occasionally shared.

“Uncle?” she greeted.

The baritone boomed, “You were right to reject their offer.”

“How so?”

“In my experience, nature has always determined its own course, separate from that of humans. This... this... violates that code.”

Sheila studied the Great Detective’s pinched features. “What violates that code?”

“There is a peculiar convergence of nature and humanity near Loch Ness, and you are well to steer clear of it.”

“But, those agents...”

“The risk is theirs. It needn’t be yours.”

“It’s a unique opportunity...”

His jowls sagged. “Then, you’ve made your decision?”

“Should do. I won’t go at the behest of officials who would cut me loose at the first sign of trouble, but I’ll go to stand with John and learn the truth.”

“So be it.”

The elder Holmes’ dissipated, leaving Sheila to raise the window pane and air the chamber. Then, she resumed her search, finding the device buried beneath the unread post beside Watson’s computer.

“John, I’ll be on the Caledonian Sleeper tonight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll be at the station.”

Hurriedly stuffing a few t-shirts and jeans in a duffel, pausing at the wall safe to extract sufficient funds, and smashing Sherlock’s black fedora atop her disheveled curls, Sheila rushed from the building with a shout to Edith that she’d be gone for a few days. A taxi transported her through London traffic to Euston Station, where she purchased her tickets and hopped aboard as the conductors were securing the doors.

She slept fitfully in her cabin, the train rocking on the tracks with no set rhythm. Seeing Watson’s grim countenance on the platform as the conveyance reached her destination, she screwed a smile on her lips and joined the queue alighting in the still, humid air.

A terse introduction to Watson’s maternal second cousin, Nicholas MacTavish, preceded their trek to a rusted blue Ford Anglia.

“What’s this, then?” Sheila wondered.

Watson held the passenger door open for her. “There’s been a mass exodus toward the loch.”

“Within the past hour?”

“Every bus and taxi.”

“How many?”

MacTavish gulped with a slight burr, "Four score, minimum."

"Incredible!" Sheila exhaled.

Behind the wheel, the Scot shoved the transmission in gear and sped off toward what, on an ordinary day, would be a very picturesque landscape. South of a small village called Dores, a line of hired vehicles braked to deposit their fares, who set off on foot through the underbrush for... where?

"Boleskine House," declared Sheila.

Watson muttered, "Eh?"

"These agents are bent on doing harm to the resident of an old mansion once occupied by the likes of Aleister Crowley and guitarist Jimmy Page."

"But, why?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Nor do MI6 and Scotland Yard - or they weren't willing to divulge what they *did* know."

A helicopter, bearing the logo of a tour company, roared overhead in the same direction.

"We'd better hurry," Sheila urged.

MacTavish pressed the accelerator, barely avoiding a collision with one of the black taxis.

The Anglia veered onto a gravel drive, parking before a brick, ranch-style dwelling. "We walk from here," advised the young woman, setting off at a brisk pace past a corral and barn toward the tree line.

On the trail ahead, Sheila heard blows being exchanged and the occasional "pop" of a pistol fitted with a silencer. Whoever these men represented, they shunned the concept of mercy.

Within ten minutes, the trio reached a rise which provided a suitable vantage point. Sheila even hoisted herself onto the branches of a sturdy oak, while Watson - his prosthetic leg limiting his agility - watched from the ground.

On a hillock less than 50 meters away, a slender female fought a crush of assailants using only her fists and feet. What Sheila recognized as a variant of her own preferred Wing Chun served this woman admirably.

Then, the helicopter unloaded a hail of bullets from above.

An Asian figure dragged the object of this exercise behind a damaged picnic table, then...

Sheila blinked once, twice. Blobs of gelatinous black liquid - melted metal from the semi-automatic rifles - rained on the grass. The aircraft rotated and churned toward the horizon.

A boisterous row reached her ears as an unintelligible babble. One lone opponent remained to face this... witch? Sheila mused. The Asian flexed his

muscles beneath a red skin-tight shirt, laying into the much thinner figure with the ferocity of a tiger.

Tempted to intervene, Sheila swung from her perch and jogged toward the clearing. In the process, she glimpsed a black-clad figure monitoring the scene with a high-powered camera.

“What the devil?” she hissed, halting short of impact. “Is this some badly choreographed movie?”

The videographer heard her voice and whirled, pistol poised. She kicked it from his grip and laid him out with a spinning backhand.

Sheila might have been mirroring the defense of the only other woman in the vicinity who, as the detective witnessed, sent her last rival rolling into a stand of heather, apparently dead.

Metal projectiles sprayed in all directions - what power did this mere slip of a girl command that she could pluck bullets from the dirt and, in essence, return them at high speed to their senders?

The sound of glass cracking - camera lenses, to be exact - reached Sheila’s ears.

A bruised, knackered figure trudged from the site as Sheila stepped from her concealment. Long auburn locks, tied in a pony tail, swung toward her, hazel eyes uncertain.

Sheila raised both hands in a gesture of non-interference, replicated by the willowy combatant.

The two nodded an acknowledgment to each other.

Sheila made no attempt to pursue her down the hill.

“John, did you notice her palms?” she queried.

Watson caught his flatmate up near a pile of rotting wood that might have once served as a picnic table. “Just a glimpse. They appeared... badly scarred from third degree burns.”

“Indeed.”

“Should I offer my aid?”

“I... think not. Her technique did not seem... adversely impacted by the wounds.” Sheila meandered toward carnage strewn in the tall grass: necks broken, skulls shattered, shot from behind.

One severely injured participant in this fiasco groaned from the thorns. MacTavish and Watson jerked him upright as Sheila scrutinized his bloody attire.

“Who are you, and what’s happened here?” she demanded.

Dark hair framing brown eyes, a wide forehead tapered to a narrow chin, a prominent nose, with a lean physique, he cursed her in Russian.

Receiving a slap across his cheek for the effort.

“The girl,” he finally stammered as the cousins exerted pressure on his limbs, “is known as Lady Elizabeth Neville. She is... she is... a weapon of infinite potential.”

“A human being, a weapon?” echoed Watson.

MacTavish chuckled, “Sounds like something from a superhero movie.”

When the Russian crumpled in a heap at his feet, the Scot recoiled, collapsing in the tall grass to vomit.

“Executed for failure to complete his mission,” Sheila postulated, staring at the bullet hole near the deceased’s spine.

In the forest beyond, rustling indicated more activity; corpses being retrieved and, from what Sheila could observe, loaded on a lorry for disposal.

“Maybe we should take a bunk,” hinted Watson.

“Must do.” Retracing their route, Sheila linked arms with her companion, MacTavish bringing up the rear. “What else did you hear about this Lady Elizabeth Neville since you’ve been in Scotland?”

“Nothing in particular. Speculation about unexplained weather anomalies in this vicinity, testing of secret military equipment...”

“A peculiar convergence of nature and humanity,” she repeated Sherlock’s statement. “What would it be like to be young and to control such... power, John?”

“Frightening, at any age.”

“To be sure. Luckily, it was just a rumor blown out of proportion.”

“She defended herself with exceptional skill...”

“Which frees me of the necessity for further investigation. She faces no danger, if she can fight like that!”

“What’s next?”

“Dinner with you and Nick, and the sleeper back to London.”

“Stay for a few days. It’s beautiful country...”

Sheila patted his hand. “Thanks, John, but no. You came here for a rest and I... I...”

“Am a workaholic,” he sniggered.

Sliding into the Anglia, the trio drove in silence toward Inverness.

## The Unblinking Swordsman

Johnny Watson pulled open his bedroom door late that November Wednesday morning, clad only in red plaid boxers. When he saw his flatmate, Sheila Holmes, deep in discussion with a slender, tawny matron sporting a diamond bracelet, matching earrings and pendant, seated on the red Victorian divan beside a harried gentleman in a navy blue Savile Row suit - presumably her husband - the British Army veteran immediately closed the panel.

Not that he didn't listen to the conversation through the unlatched transom.

"I don't understand it," the woman whined, near sobbing. "We've taught our daughter right and wrong, sent her to this exclusive school..."

"There, there, dear," soothed her companion in a hoarse tenor. "If Miss Holmes takes our case, we'll get to the bottom of this tragedy."

Sheila's stern contralto affirmed, "Indeed."

Watson knew she abhorred weepy females, and smiled to himself as he imagined her facial expression.

"I shall be in Devon by tonight," she continued.

The sound of ripping paper reached his ears, a "Thank you" in unison, then the sitting room door hinges creaking.

"It's all right, John!" Sheila called. "They're gone!"

When he emerged, red sweats providing a warmth the dwindling fire on the grate lacked, his sheepish grin matched her own.

"Do you want to know?"

He replied, "Should do."

She presented him a cup of steaming coffee from the carafe on the breakfast tray left by their landlady, Edith Hudson-Thorne, and waved him to his favorite armchair. She stirred the embers with an iron poker and added a log before taking up her position in the basket-chair.

"The Davenports have retained my services to discover how their daughter - a student at Millet's Chase Academy in South Molton - got herself pregnant and, consequently, expelled from that posh girl's school."

Watson gasped at the amount scrawled on a Bank of England cheque when she passed it to him.

"What's more, two of Wilma Davenport's classmates have suffered similar fates this term."

"Wilma?" he echoed, cringing.

"Named after her grandmother, I suspect."

"Poor kid."

“In more ways than one, John.” Sheila rose, tightening the belt of the tattered dressing gown once worn by her renowned great-great-uncle Sherlock Holmes. “Will you be coming along?”

Watson sipped from the ceramic mug. “Afraid not. I have a veteran’s group session tomorrow, and a doctor’s appointment Friday.”

She expressed no remorse regarding his statement as she whisked to her room.

The amputee recognized in her demeanor that she’d rather travel alone in this instance. After all, having a man limping around a girl’s school on his prosthetic left leg would draw an inordinate amount of attention...

The train to Exeter that afternoon arrived in good time, with Sheila hiring a car to transport her the remaining distance to South Molton or, more precisely, an estate two kilometers west of the settlement.

“What a waste!” the detective murmured as the Mercedes deposited her at the base of a winding gravel drive. She told the driver, “Be back in an hour.”

“You’ll pay for the down time,” he growled.

“Indeed.”

No more had the silver sedan steered onto the pavement, than Sheila glimpsed a procession of girls in expensive winter coats migrating through the wooded perimeter of the school property. In the twilight, she couldn’t see their faces, but heard their disheartened chatter.

“I wish we didn’t have to do this,” grumbled one.

“We don’t have a choice, do we?”

“If you hadn’t botched that prank on the headmistress...”

“How was I to know Miss Featherstone is such a conniving bitch?”

Following at a discreet pace, Sheila received an impromptu tour of the district. The teens trod a concealed path running parallel to the road, stopping at a country house 500 meters beyond the academy’s fence line. Lights blazed in every window, and sounds of males reveling in liquor and music penetrated the facade.

The troupe entered and didn’t emerge for three hours - well past their designated curfew, Sheila estimated.

She’d monitored the dwelling from a tree stump near the unkempt front lawn, using her mobile to ring the car hire and inform the driver to await her instructions.

Periodically, a visage shrouded by shadows peered between heavy drawn curtains on ground level. A shaft of moonlight augmented one distinguishing feature: extraordinarily intense, unblinking eyes.

The dozen - outfits rumpled, hair tousled - trudged along the path; Sheila remained on her perch until the men responsible appeared. They had driven to this destination in assorted high-end coupes, but she didn't need to shadow them to their point of origin, towering over the valley and clearly visible in the moonlight.

A boys' school catering to the scions of wealthy families.

"Randy bastards," commented Sheila.

Picked up on the roadside, she spent the night at an inexpensive bed and breakfast in the town, rising early to shower, don a Pink Floyd t-shirt and jeans, her parka shielding her from chill winds on the hike back for a daylight view of the improvised brothel. There, she found a white-haired servant sweeping the stoop.

"Good morning!" Sheila hailed from the frostbitten flower-lined walk.

A sweet soprano responded, "Are ye lost?"

"Not... exactly."

"Would ye like a cuppa to warm your bones?"

"Most kind."

The obliging elder escorted her visitor to the kitchen, filling a delicate china cup with Earl Grey. Sheila declined milk, lemon and sugar as she slid onto a wooden chair at a table once suited to the full staff such a domicile required.

"I'm Monica Banks," the woman introduced herself.

"The caretaker?"

"Housekeeper, actually."

"You live in?"

"Oh, no. I come out from town three days a week to clean up after..."

Sheila waited and, when nothing further was forthcoming, prompted, "After?"

"I don't know how to describe it," Monica confessed. "Some type of party. I find empty bottles strewn about, spills on the carpets, half-eaten packages of crisps and other food."

"A party?"

"More than that. Upstairs..."

"Upstairs?" repeated Sheila.

"There are ten bedrooms, and every one is trashed. It takes the better part of the afternoon just to make up the beds."

"Would you... like some help?"

Monica chuckled. "I'd be that glad of it, dearie. I didn't sleep so well last night. Bad dreams."

"I'm in no hurry, and I've got a strong back." And a strong desire to assess the condition of the rooms for clues.

Her conclusion: the males amounted to no better than pampered slobs.

“Who owns this house?” she asked as they changed the sheets on a king-sized mattress in what must’ve once been designated the master bedroom.

“I don’t know. My services were contracted through an employment agency, and they pay my wages.”

“You’ve never seen...”

“No one comes around during the day, and I’m gone by five.”

What better way to keep a secret? Sheila mused.

She, however, would uncover that secret - to satisfy both her clients, and her own curiosity.

Arriving at Millet’s Chase after dismissal of classes, she breezed into the deserted grand hall, availing herself of free access to the cloak room.

One advantage to searching a girl’s school: garments had laundry markings that identified the wearers. Two of the coats clearly indicated a venture through thick underbrush - of the sort en route to the nocturnal rendezvous.

Sheila would seek out those young women.

Not without some difficulty, though.

Carol Jackson involved in archery practice, it was necessary to wait until the arrows stopped flying before she could be drawn aside for a quiet conversation. Green eyes red from excessive weeping, there could be no mistaking she’d been part of the Wednesday night trek.

“You can confide in me,” Sheila assured her. “No one will ever know...”

“They all know!” claimed the girl. “The only one who’s still in the dark is the headmistress. Miss Featherstone promised us...”

When the words died in the teen’s throat, Sheila pressed, “Promised you what?”

“We wouldn’t be sent down, if we did as she said.”

“Which is?”

The athletic ginger blushed. “Let the boys from Nob Hill have us.”

Sheila grit her teeth, stifling her disgust. The basest form of human trafficking: forcing girls to have sex under threat of exposure. “Where can I find this Miss Featherstone?”

Carol panicked. “Oh, no!”

A comforting hand on her arm did little to assuage this eruption.

“You can’t! We’ll all be...”

“No, you won’t. I swear.” Sheila sent Carol off alone, to not arouse suspicion among the other students or faculty. Then, she skirted the property and made a grand spectacle of entering the sprawling 18<sup>th</sup> century mansion.

“May I help you?” greeted a prim spinster with ebony tresses pulled tightly into a bun at the nape of her neck, clad in a basic black frock.

“I’ve come on behalf of my parents - they’re on the Continent, you know - to see if this school would be suitable for my younger sister.”

The prospect of a new enrollment - and the associated tuition - transformed narrow features from pinched to pleasant. “Please, come to my office...”

“Thank you, Miss...”

“Featherstone. Ursula Featherstone.”

No more had the teacher ushered Sheila into the art-lined nook than the detective shut the door and turned the key in the lock.

Ursula demanded, “What on earth?”

“What on earth, indeed, *madam*,” scolded Sheila. “For that is what you are: the madam of a horde of prostitutes.”

“How dare you!”

The London resident retorted, “How dare *you*! Ruining the lives of innocent children...”

Ursula reached for the desk phone; Sheila ripped the cord from the wall jack. Then, the teacher attempted escape through a partially open window, but Sheila slammed the casement home.

“The only way you’ll escape without facing prison is to tell me everything,” she snarled.

“I won’t! I... can’t!”

Seizing her shoulders, Sheila pinned her on the leather upholstered swivel chair. “You *will*, at once!”

Staring briefly at her interrogator, Ursula finally slumped on the seat and buried her head in her hands. “Do you guarantee me immunity?”

“Your name will never be mentioned in any official reports.”

She recovered her composure as Sheila sat opposite. “It all began two years ago.”

“Please be specific and leave out not the slightest detail.”

“I’d just transferred here from a school in Birmingham, to be closer to my ailing mother. Within three months, she died, and I was asked by the headmistress to move in and take charge of the dormitories.”

“So, you got to know the students fairly well.”

“Too well, if you ask me. I caught supposedly well-bred young ladies in the most foul behavior and, it being my duty to turn them in...”

“But, you didn’t.”

“They offered me bribes: money, trips, jewelry. One of them, whose brother attends Nob Hill, up on the ridge, set up a date for me with their physical education teacher, David Gardiner. He... got me intoxicated and into bed that first night. To my eternal shame, some of his boys had set up a camera and snapped photos...”

“Blackmail.”

The bun bobbed stiffly. “David threatened to publicly humiliate me if I didn’t supply his boys with... suitable company on a regular basis.”

“Which you did, from the selection of students...”

Ursula inhaled gradually. “I employed the same tactic David used with me: those girls who merited severe reprimand, I convinced to participate in these outings, or be denounced for their infractions and risk expulsion.”

Rising, Sheila leaned across the blotter. “You will tender your resignation by end of day.”

“But...”

“If you do so, the headmistress will be none the wiser, and supply you with a glowing reference. If you delay, when the media circulates the story of Mr. Gardiner’s heinous crimes come tomorrow, you won’t be so fortunate.”

“I... shall do as you ask.”

“Good.”

Sheila unlocked the door.

“What about David?”

The twinge of sentiment in Ursula’s trembling voice irked Sheila.

“He will pay for what he has done.”

Though she meant a sentence of many years behind bars, she learned Gardiner would not be so compliant.

One of the victims of this plot must’ve rang Nob Hill to alert them of Sheila’s intent, for a squad of angry lads barred her entry. Instructed in the dying practices of gallantry, nonetheless, when she strode into their midst, they refrained from assaulting her.

Not so, their ringleader. Boldly proceeding with a fencing lesson in the gymnasium, he dismissed his pupil as she approached the mat, swiping his foil within centimeters of her cheek.

“Do you really want to go there?” she challenged.

His basso profundo boomed, “Do *you*?”

Their eyes met - Sheila’s violet scrutinizing Gardiner’s broad shoulders, bull neck, squarish features and heavy brow over brilliant aquamarine orbs that didn’t blink.

Stunned by the ferocity of his gaze, she gulped.

As she shed her parka and draped it over a bench - the entire student body filing into the chamber - she whispered, "Uncle Sherlock, this is your forte, not mine."

Accustomed to the Great Detective haunting the Baker Street sitting room, she had allowed him to take control of her corporeal being on rare occasions. Within her skull reverberated, "As you wish."

Mentally, she watched herself snatch an épée from a rolling rack and test its weight. Gardiner tossed his current weapon onto the varnished floor, stripped off the protective padded, quilt vest worn during practice over his crested track suit, and selected an equivalent blade - the heaviest version used in the sport. They saluted each other and assumed a scorpion-style attack posture.

Though more than 100 boys congregated on the fringes of the confrontation - soon joined by girls who'd raced from Millet's Chase - no sound other than the clash of steel disrupted the eerie hush. Skilled lunges, parries and ripostes took the combatants off the mat with Sheila backing toward a row of lockers until she twirled inside Gardiner's reach and jammed the hilt into his ribs.

He stumbled backward, rapidly regaining his footing while his eyes never left her, never blinked.

If he meant the trait to intimidate, Sheila conceded its effectiveness.

He rushed at her, dodging a thrust and slicing her left bicep.

She muffled an expletive of anguish while her wrist flicked without her conscious direction, etching a horrific gash on Gardiner's right cheek.

The battle waged on, exceeding a quarter hour. Well bloodied, Gardiner tired visibly, though Sherlock - his ethereal nature beyond such fatigue - kept hacking at this opponent.

The final blow wrenched Gardiner's épée from his hand and drove him to his knees, his unblinking eyes still burning furiously. At that precise moment, the elder Holmes relinquished his possession and Sheila, too, collapsed.

Gardiner groped for the pommel, to be surrounded by a cadre of constables before his fingers could hook the knob.

Raised to his feet and shackled, he growled, "Who *are* you?"

"My name doesn't matter. Bringing your defilement of innocent youth to a halt does."

As she shuffled toward the bleachers, Carol Jackson tossed her a towel to mop red splatters and perspiration from her arms and face. Sheila winked at her, the crowd reluctantly dispersing.

Medics from an ambulance summoned by witnesses wheeled a gurney through the doors, precluding Gardiner's transport to jail. "Some of these wounds are deep and must be sutured," announced the intern examining the prisoner.

His partner tended to Sheila, who tried to ignore his insistence that she also seek treatment at the local hospital for the mutilated flesh of her upper arm.

"It's just a scratch," she countered.

"Left on its own, it'll soon be a badly infected scratch."

Conceding the dispute due to her exhaustion, she permitted herself to be guided to the white vehicle and consigned to a seat. Gardiner, freed of the handcuffs, prone and strapped on the rolling bed, was maneuvered in beside her.

White uniform dotted with congealed fluids, the younger medic joined them, his associate climbing into the cab to drive them over dark, winding roads. No space available for a constable to squeeze in, the responding squad formed a motorcade with their cruisers.

Neither patient in need of life-saving assistance, the men chatted through an access port cut in the metal bulkhead. Thus distracted, neither noticed when Gardiner slipped his right hand from the yellow nylon restraints, extracting a dagger from a sheath inside his zippered school jacket - of the type used in medieval fencing to complement a duelist's sword.

Unblinking orbs fixed on Sheila, the blade arced; she pressed herself against a secured medical cabinet beyond his range, shifting at an angle to drive her fist into that barrel chest, knocking the wind from his lungs.

As her assailant struggled to breath, he released the dagger, and the medic resumed his duties, checking the gauze across Gardiner's midsection that oozed a fresh stream of blood.

Sheila lowered her head to her knees, the exertion making her faint.

Once the ambulance braked at the Accident and Emergency doors, she alighted from the compartment and walked away, an annoyed medic shouting after her.

She favored him with a rude gesture and vanished in the gloom.

Disembarking at London's Paddington Station Friday morning, the detective took a taxi to St. Bart's, where she requested a doctor friend of Johnny Watson stitch together the nasty laceration near her shoulder.

"There are torn muscles and damaged ligaments," he diagnosed. "You'll need surgery."

She objected, "To hell with that."

The physician withdrew from the cubicle; she overheard him ring Baker Street. Simultaneously, Watson and Edith crossed the threshold before the LED wall clock ticked off the hour.

Rather than listen to their tirade, Sheila submitted to the recommended procedure, and the pair accompanied her home when she awoke from the anesthesia. Resting in her room, she cursed the pain, the inconvenience, and their wry smiles.

In the days ahead, administrators of both Nob Hill and Millet's Chase schools managed to avoid publicity regarding the scandal, instead notifying the parents of all students that David Gardiner had been terminated from employment. The boys who, pledged to their school's Honor Code, admitted their participation in the untoward events were provided psychological counseling. The female victims of the sex trafficking ring were offered full scholarships to other institutes of learning, as well as extensive recovery services.

Sheila received a stream of cheques from not just the Davenports, but other families grateful for her intervention in the debacle. Full function of her arm soon restored with the aid of physical therapy and her flatmate's dutiful care, she enjoyed a celebratory dinner with Watson and Edith at their favorite bistro, tucking the residue of the cash in the safe behind a cheap still life on the sitting room wall.

## A Brush with Death

Sheila Holmes prided herself on not being easily distracted. As she waited in the bookstore queue, however, a title on the nearby display caught her eye. She plucked the hardcover volume from among assorted new releases and flipped open the cover, fedora-topped brunette mop bent to read the dust jacket synopsis.

That's when she collided with the young man ahead of her.

The book hit the floor, and both stooped to retrieve it, bumping heads.

They laughed simultaneously, and Sheila apologized for her clumsiness.

"No problem," replied the lean figure - attired in jeans, square-toed black leather boots and matching trenchcoat - as he ran deft fingers through a longish black mane.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry, picking up an order for a friend who's laid up in hospital," she explained. "I thought few people read actual books these days."

"Yeah, technology seems to have taken over." The accent definitely American, she deduced. "I still like the feel of one in my hands, though."

"Good for you."

Only two customers ahead of them, Sheila replaced the book on its rack and extracted her wallet from her jeans. She glimpsed the title this chance acquaintance was set to purchase: *Dance Fads of the 20th Century*.

"You like to dance?" she ventured.

He blushed. "This? It's a gift for my boss' daughter. She turns twelve tomorrow, and aspires to the Royal Ballet." Presenting the book to the clerk, he added, "But, yeah, I like to dance, with a good partner." Cash and change exchanged hands. "Growing up in a huge family, we were always going to weddings, where I had to dance with cousins, aunts, and the bride's attendants who hadn't brought their own dates."

"The polka's always been my favorite."

"That takes a *really* good partner." He spun and their noses almost touched. "I know a club in Bristol where the bands specialize in waltzes, polkas and the odd foxtrot on Saturday nights."

With Edith Hudson-Thorne, the owner and landlady of 221B Baker Street - and a friend to Sheila and her flatmate, Johnny Watson - confined to St. Bart's after an emergency appendectomy, traveling out of the city would be impossible. "I... couldn't," she lamented, taking her turn at the counter.

"Why? Because we just met?"

“Oh, no. I already know enough about you to see you’re reliable and trustworthy, here from Chicago on a job sharing program in automotive engineering.”

Brown eyes widened. “Wait a minute. You’re not... oh, no, you couldn’t be. You’re not Sheila Holmes?”

She nodded as the tawny, lithe employee gasped at this revelation.

“You made quite a splash in the States... but you probably don’t want to talk about it, after...”

A chuckle escaped her lips, accepting the wrapped parcel and moving aside for the next in line. “Tony’s death... unnerved me, to be sure. That’s past now.”

“Good! Then, I’ll pick you up Saturday at noon, and we’ll take the train, grab some dinner, and dance the night away.”

Before she could repeat her refusal, he’d departed the shop. Sheila detected everyone in the queue staring at her; she adjusted her great-great-uncle Sherlock’s fedora self-consciously, squared her shoulders and strode from the quaint brick structure onto Marylebone Road.

At least, she knew the man’s name: John Paul Hauser. She’d read it off a credit card in his wallet when he paid the clerk.

Dismissing the incident for the moment, she rode the Tube to St. Bart’s, where she met a disheveled, anxious Johnny Watson in the lobby.

“What’s happened?” Sheila demanded.

Chest heaving, the disabled British Army veteran sank onto a nearby sofa. “Edith... had a bad reaction to the pain medication,” he huffed. “The nurse injected it into her I.V. bag and left the room without a second thought. If I hadn’t noticed her difficulty breathing and swollen tongue, and summoned the staff, she might’ve... died.”

Sheila dropped on the cushion beside him, wrapping her arm around his slumped shoulders. “Good thing you were a medic, John. I never would’ve recognized the symptoms.”

In a private room on the third floor, Edith slept when the pair looked in on her. They trekked back to Baker Street, preparing a simple supper of fried bologna and cheese sandwiches, crisps and milk. They ate in the downstairs kitchen, washed the dishes, then mounted the servants’ stairs to their sitting room.

“We really should clean this up while Edith is gone,” Watson hinted, dodging discarded newspapers and detritus.

Sheila agreed. “It would be a pleasant surprise for her homecoming.”

“If all goes well, that should be Friday.”

The detective hesitated at this announcement.

“What’s the matter?” the blond amputee queried.

“John, would you be averse to keeping an eye on Edith Saturday if I head to Bristol?”

His blue eyes squinted. “I don’t believe it! You go on an errand to fetch a book, and wind up with a case?”

She bit her lip, allowing him this assumption.

“Well... I guess I could spare you.” His grin convinced her he’d merely feigned the anger. “What’s it this time?”

“I’m... not quite sure, actually. Would you mind researching a man named John Paul Hauser?”

“The Cleaner?”

“Eh?”

“Not that there’s only one person with that name, but the John Paul Hauser I’m familiar with is known as the Cleaner. He’s a professional hitman. Did a four-year hitch as a sniper with the American Marines, then set himself up as an independent contractor.”

Sheila crumpled an advert atop the day’s post. “It can’t be...”

“You mean, you’re ashamed at how you misread him,” came the rumbling baritone of a ghostly Sherlock Holmes, accompanied by the odor of pungent tobacco.

“No, Uncle. I didn’t misread him. There isn’t a person on the planet who can hide their true self so completely...”

“Except, you were captivated by his brimming brown eyes and casual flirting.”

Watson interrupted. “What’s this all about?”

The two Holmes’ chorused, “Never mind.”

“Sorry,” their companion apologized, skulking to his bedroom.

Sheila pursued him, clutching at his flannel shirt sleeve. “No, it’s I who should be sorry, John. You have every right...”

“I don’t, actually. You’re entitled to a private life, as am I.” He shook free. “There’s no ties between us in that regard.”

“I know, but... this has nothing to do with some romantic interlude.” She shot a glance at her long-dead relative, silencing him before he exposed her indiscretion.

The elder Holmes shrugged compliance.

Watson’s door closed, leaving them alone. Sheila crossed to the computer on the cluttered desk, plopped on the swivel chair and wiggled the mouse to

restore the monitor's power. She typed Hauser's name in the internet search engine, and gulped at the scrolling list of results.

"So, what will you do?" Sherlock growled.

"If he's so well known, why haven't the authorities apprehended him?"

"Because, when the need arises, he takes their contracts, too."

"Government sanctioned murder?"

"An age-old tradition, my dear child."

"Shit!"

On that note, he dematerialized, the lingering stench compelling her to cross the room and raise the window pane.

Not that the London smog smelled any sweeter.

Frustrated, Sheila retired to her room, though slumber eluded her.

Memories of Tony Downton, the filmmaker who'd died in her arms less than a year previous, mingled with the reports on Hauser's activities.

Once he'd recognized her in the queue, why had he invited her dancing? Didn't he suspect she'd bring him to justice? Did he believe he could charm her into being lenient when she discovered the truth?

Or, did he just enjoy playing mind games for the challenge?

All in all, the woman didn't sleep for 72 hours, laboring through the days to make 221B presentable for their returning landlady, washing the bedsheets and towels from Edith's downstairs flat, carrying sacks from the grocer's to restock the cupboards with tasty treats, and spending nights lounging in the basket-chair, trying to forget her own stupidity.

Watson escorted Edith from the hospital in a taxi, at Sheila's insistence, using some of their savings - tucked in a safe behind a still life - to cover the expense. A fresh floral arrangement adorned the night stand, as well.

"Thank you, both, for being so attentive," the young widow gushed as she settled on the love seat in her parlor. "I'll be fine, truly."

"The doctor gave strict instructions you're not to lift anything over two kilos for the next three weeks," Watson admonished, hanging her jacket in the wardrobe. "Climbing stairs should be limited, too. Anything you need, you let us know."

"I will."

"I'll be out tomorrow evening, but that shouldn't be a problem, eh?" Sheila remarked.

"Of course not. You've got your work..."

Watson grunted. "Right. Work."

Not that Sheila relished the journey come Saturday mid-morning. She wished to crawl beneath the quilts and sleep for a month by that point.

She dressed in black slacks and a sky blue frilled blouse - borrowed from Edith's collection - leaving the fedora on its peg near the "V.R." made of bullet holes in the sitting room wall. Racing down creaky stairs, she pulled open the street door before Hauser could ring the bell.

He reminded her of a U.S. Central Intelligence clone in the Ray Ban shades on a straight nose, black suit, white shirt and black tie - except for the designer label she spied inside the jacket.

"Well, a gal who's on time!" he chuckled. "That's a new one."

In no mood for idle chatter, she slid into the taxi and let him prattle the entire distance to Paddington Station.

A first class carriage boasted comfortable seats and drinks delivered by the conductor.

"You arranged for this?" Sheila wondered.

Hauser smirked. "Doesn't hurt to enjoy the amenities while watching the countryside breeze past."

"You only purchased one-way tickets."

"It'll be late by the time the dance is over, so I booked a suite at the Berwick Lodge."

"I... promised my flatmate I'd be home before morning."

"Is he that jealous?" the Cleaner chortled.

"It's... not like that between us."

He sipped his whiskey. "Don't take him for granted, Sheila. John Watson is in love with you."

"You don't..." Sheila stared into her glass of white zinfandel.

"When you were in the States, a reporter caught him on the Tube, after his cancer diagnosis. He wasn't... thinking clearly, I suspect, and talked out of turn, as they say. The article ran in the scandal sheets the following week. I don't think he ever saw it, nor did your friend, Edith, because he'd checked into hospital by then."

"You do know a lot about... my living conditions."

"No more than what can be read in the papers or viewed on chat shows."

"I never..."

Hauser gazed out the window. "The Brits are funny that way. If an individual they want to grill won't appear on a particular show, the hosts round up whoever's willing to dish the gossip about that person. You'd be shocked to hear

what they had to say about your engagement to Tony Downton and your... behavior in the States or, worse, their criticism after he died.”

“Damn them!” she stormed. “I never knew!”

“Better you didn’t. Then again, some enterprising lawyer might’ve scored you a bundle in damages had a libel suit been filed. I’m surprised nobody approached you.”

“Ah, that’s understandable. When I returned from California, John was still recovering from his cancer, and I was too preoccupied to do more than take a couple cases. After what happened with Tony... I didn’t see anyone for months.”

Why she felt comfortable confiding her secrets to this... professional assassin, Sheila couldn’t be certain. He seemed... ordinary enough. Could Watson, and her uncle Sherlock, have been wrong about him?

The trip lasted 90 minutes; they strolled from the train station to a cozy bistro for an early dinner. Eating their chicken marsala, Hauser dropped his napkin and, bending to retrieve it, Sheila noticed the pistol tucked in a shoulder holster.

She bit her lip, conflicted whether to prolong the interaction or simply excuse herself and secure passage on the next train back to London.

Better not to make a scene, she determined, knowing Hauser would object to an abrupt departure and chase her, if necessary, down the sidewalk. Instead, she finished the meal in silence.

Paying the bill and leaving a generous tip, Hauser hailed a taxi, which deposited them near Castle Bridge at a refurbished warehouse with a neon sign reading, “Jazz Licks.”

Sheila paused on the threshold. “I thought you said...”

“Friday and Sunday are jazz nights.” Hauser slipped her arm through his. “Saturday is... a combination of everything up to and including the 1960s.”

To confirm his assertion, the sound of a lively two-step wafted through fabric-paneled doors to the inner chamber.

“Should do,” she acquiesced.

They were ushered to a small round table, adorned with green linens and daisies in a cheap vase, on the edge of the dance floor. Hauser gallantly held Sheila’s chair as she sat, then ordered champagne.

“Is consulting on auto designs so lucrative you can afford such... extravagance?” she prompted, angling to force a confession.

“My family wasn’t exactly poor,” he admitted. “When my father died last year, I inherited a substantial sum.”

“But, while he was alive, you were on a small monthly allowance, which is why you enlisted in the Marines?”

He bristled. “How’d...”

She grinned in silence.

The waiter delivered a bottle, precluding further discussion while he uncorked and poured a sample of the carbonated liquid. Hauser sipped from the crystal flute, signaled his approval and let both glasses be filled.

The 14-piece orchestra, complete with accordion and clarinet, struck up a polka. Extending elongated fingers toward Sheila, Hauser led her amidst the crowd and whirled her across the waxed wood until the last strains left her breathless.

“Oh, God, that was glorious!” she panted when she practically collapsed on the chair, clutching for the water goblet.

Hauser’s smile exposed straight white teeth. “Glad you had fun.”

“I... haven’t had so much fun in years!”

“Downton never took you dancing?”

Sheila nearly choked mid-gulp. “He... didn’t have time. Bad enough, when we would slip out for a nice dinner, the paparazzi dogged us, snapping photos every second. It got to be quite annoying.”

“Which is why you broke the engagement?”

Brunette curls shook sideways. “Our personalities were... incompatible.”

“What about ours?”

“Eh?”

“You and I seem quite compatible.”

“You’re... easy to talk to - a good listener.”

“Thanks.”

The couple emptied the bottle over the course of three hours, frequently interrupting their conversation to join others twirling to the music. Well before last call, Sheila’s feet ached from the exertion and her lack of sleep sapped her energy.

“Ready to go?” Hauser suggested, noticing her fatigue.

“Definitely.”

The five-star, historic Berwick Lodge had served as a private home for many decades, a school and a hospital. The restored structure stuck Sheila as almost too luxurious.

All she wanted was a bed and a pillow for eight uninterrupted hours of slumber.

Oddly enough, Hauser allowed her that. He made no romantic overtures when she opted for the suite’s north bedroom, merely bidding her good night and informing her that pajamas and such had been laid out on the divan.

“Damn, you thought of everything!” she sighed, kissing him on the cheek before slipping through the door.

No dreams disrupted her rest on the carved four-poster bed; even the birds chirping with the coming dawn served as nothing more than a serenade to her recuperation. Violet orbs didn't open until after 10:00...

To find two Glock 9mm pistols aimed at her face.

Instinct prompted her to scramble from beneath the quilt; the cocking of the weapons preempted that action.

"What the..." she stammered.

Hauser grimaced, not a pleasant expression for his lean countenance. "I'm sorry, Sheila. It's my job."

"What's your job?"

"Certain parties resented your... interference in their business dealings back in Los Angeles, so they put out a contract..."

"How much?"

"Three million."

She swallowed hard. "Impressive."

"A collaborative effort, actually. Once word of the pending hit circulated, other... parties contributed to the fund." He positioned himself on the mattress edge, lowering the weapons.

"I have to ask: why go through this elaborate hoax, wasting so much of your take? You could've done the deed right there in the book store queue." She contemplated his forlorn gaze. "Or, was that a set-up?"

"I'd heard so much about you, I was intrigued," Hauser stated. "I don't usually bother to personally acquaint myself with a target, but when I saw you... It was fun, wasn't it?"

"Except I don't think I could get out of bed if I had to," she snickered.

"Yeah, my legs hurt, too. It's been ages since I've danced that much." The gun barrel in his right hand urged her toward the open door. "Breakfast?"

"Are you kidding?"

He awkwardly passed her a robe. "There's nothing wrong with being civil."

"Why should I eat, when my stomach won't have a chance to digest it?"

"It's no ordinary breakfast. Piping hot chocolate, bacon... all the foods the scandal sheets claim you like."

"God, you'd think they camped out on the terrace!"

"I wouldn't put it past them."

Sheila reached for a glass on the oak night stand. "And, I'd expect you to have more reliable sources of information."

"While much of what those rags publish is trash, if you read between the lines, a great deal can be learned."

A sip of water preceded the remainder being sloshed in Hauser's face. Seeing him thus disconcerted, the woman rolled into a fighting posture, aiming deft Wing Chun strikes at his wrists and knee.

The Glock's bounced out of reach across the carpet; the Cleaner yowled and crashed into the wardrobe, stunned.

Aware of his background, Sheila grasped the futility of summoning local police. They might arrest him; other, more senior agencies would secure his release in a matter of hours.

She could, rightly, claim self defense in any investigation that subsequently transpired. Tragic, though, to damage an exquisite hotel's reputation with an untimely death.

This interior debate occurred in scant seconds. She couldn't give Hauser an opportunity to recover his wits - or his balance - and fulfill his contract.

"You could've done anything with your life. Why this?" she puzzled.

He struggled to right himself, legs unable to support his weight. "The first time I killed a man, considered an enemy of my country, I found I enjoyed it. I tried to stop, but it's worse than the worst drug addiction."

That, of itself, warranted his execution.

"Though this ordeal may lead to a lot of irksome interrogation, I did enjoy last night," she commented.

"So did I." A wistful note colored his baritone. "If I had someone like you constantly by my side, I might be able to..."

She interspersed, "I know this much: relying on someone else to break you of an addiction is only a temporary fix. The desire has to come from within one's own self."

The move anticipated, when he lunged for the nearest pistol, her roundhouse kick caught the left side of his skull, propelling him into the column at the foot of the bed. No differently than being hit with a baseball bat, the impact would be described as blunt force trauma on the coroner's report.

Sheila dressed and made her exit through the old servants' quarters, leaving the staff to find the corpse when they came to tidy the suite. She'd been settled in the basket-chair at 221B most of the afternoon before Watson inquired about the news reporting Hauser's demise.

For their part, the Metropolitan Police never sought her out for a statement; she didn't volunteer her knowledge of the case. Officials acknowledged Hauser must have been killed while attempting to execute a contract, the intended victim only preserving his own life.

Laughing at the inanity of the media narrative, the detective pondered the generalization only a man could have defeated Hauser.

A puff of tobacco smoke caused her to exhale loudly. “Yes, Uncle, I know. But, I did enjoy the polka.”

## Grave Vengeance

Sheila Holmes stepped onto the stoop of 221B Baker Street, a thick morning fog swirling along the sidewalk. The day would be humid, she predicted, tucking the Jethro Tull t-shirt into her jeans; best to finish her errands early.

Turning south, a shaft of sunlight broke through the haze, illuminating a figure approaching from the Tube station. Sheila halted, unconsciously holding her breath.

As the man neared, the fog enveloped him anew, and the detective recovered her composure after a few moments. She didn't like the thought that her mind continued to play tricks on her in the wake of Tony Downton's death.

The image so vivid, her skin still tingled: his dark wavy hair, intense eyes, athletic build.

Yet, the vision might not be an illusion, given Downton's resemblance to the spectre of Sherlock Holmes which regularly haunted her.

"Uncle Sherlock, don't toy with me," she muttered, proceeding toward the grocer's for the milk and bread Edith Hudson-Thorne had requested.

"I hate those wireless earpieces," came a heavily accented baritone from the opposite direction. "It's impossible to tell whether a person is talking on their mobile or just plain barmy."

Abruptly face-to-face, Sheila stared at the tangible replica of the late filmmaker Downton, promptly collapsing in a faint.

Her violet eyes fluttered open much later, the ceiling of a familiar sitting room above her. The blond dome of Johnny Watson hovered near the red Victorian loveseat where she'd been laid, along with the russet-framed visage of their landlady.

Behind them both, Downton.

"What the hell..." she gasped.

Edith responded. "I've sent for the doctor. I told you to rest, but you insisted..."

"There's nothing wrong with me that he can't remedy." Sheila thrust a trembling finger toward the uninvited guest.

"Calm down," Watson advised. "All in good time."

A mug of steaming coffee presented, Sheila maneuvered herself upright and gulped the brew. She scrutinized the man leaning on the desk where Watson's computer hummed idly, his green windbreaker jacket, jeans and hiking boots not Downton's customary attire.

"Get on with it," she demanded.

He grinned, bushy black mustache and soul patch twitching. “Good thing I was coming to see you, or you might’ve cracked your head on the concrete.”

“No time for conjecture. I want the facts. Who are you, and how are you related to Tony Downton?”

That chiseled mien contorted with confusion. “How’d you know...”

“Never mind. Get on with it.”

“My name is Robbie Stearne. Me mum’s mum was Tony’s mum’s mum’s twin sister.”

“Yet, he was born in Milwaukee, and you come from Surrey.”

Brown orbs widened. “The two old gals married pilots after V-E Day, one American, the other R.A.F.”

“So, what are you doing here?” queried Watson, his gold gym shorts revealing the prosthetic left leg.

“Me mum was assaulted and robbed on the Tube two nights ago. The constables wouldn’t even take a report when I was able to track one down. Seems they’re all assigned to a security detail for the American president’s visit.”

“Ah, yes. Big doings,” Edith muttered, tying the apron strings around her floral print house frock. “His first trip since the election.”

Sheila rose, testing the strength in her legs. “And you want me to find the person responsible?”

“Aye,” Stearne replied. “Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be concerned, but mum’s life savings was in her purse, as was a very important file.”

“What compelled her to carry...”

“She was on her way to the bank, to deposit the cheque from me dad’s life insurance settlement, and tuck the envelope in a safe deposit vault.”

A glance at Watson and Edith confirmed their doubt about Stearne’s tale. A bit of light deduction, for an extended relative of sorts, could prove more stimulating than a jaunt to the grocer’s, however.

“After lunch, we’ll be off,” she stated.

That meal of sugared ham, boiled potatoes and salad passed in tense silence, Sheila studying Stearne, Watson eyeing his flatmate and Sherlock Holmes standing behind the near carbon-copy of his own features.

The chamber’s former occupant repeatedly shook his shaggy mane, a warning his great-great-niece ignored.

Over slices of a three-layer chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream, Sheila began her questioning. “What prompted you to seek me out to help you with this... problem?”

“Cousin Tony told me about you when mum and I visited him in California...” Stearne nearly choked on a bite of the delicious concoction. “Two weeks before he...”

Watson cringed, empathetic to the trauma Sheila still endured from Downton’s tragic demise. He grasped her slender fingers.

“It’s all right, John,” she assured the Army veteran. She returned her gaze to their guest. “Why travel all that distance...”

“By special invitation, an engagement party,” Stearne noted.

Edith overheard the declaration as she brought a tray to gather the dishes. Her eyes rolled heavenward in dismay.

“What’s wrong with you?” puzzled Stearne.

Fortunately, a mobile rang at that precise moment. Sheila rose to retrieve the device from her bedroom. Edith followed and closed the door.

She and Watson confronted the stranger.

“Tony Downton proposed to Sheila while filming...” the latter stammered.

Edith corrected, “She broke it off before flying back from the States. Then, he... hooked up with that bimbo...”

“Who shot at Sheila, but Downton stepped between them.”

“Sheila blames herself for his death, to this day,” the widow continued.

Stearne leaned back on the wooden chair. “Ah, now I get it.”

“So, please, don’t mention Tony Downton in Sheila’s presence...” admonished Watson.

“I won’t.”

The young woman emerged from her room, smirking.

“Anything important?” Edith asked.

“Scotland Yard... Excuse me, the *Metropolitan Police*. A rash of phony life insurance cheques have been passed at various banks...”

She glanced at Watson, who squinted at Stearne.

“Yes, John, they were all drawn on the same company’s account.”

Stearne shifted on his seat. “What did I miss?”

“The cheque stolen from your mum is being used in a forgery scheme,” Sheila announced, snatching a black fedora from the wall rack and smashing it atop her uncombed brunette curls en route to the door. “You coming?”

He crumpled the paper napkin and dropped it on his half-eaten dessert plate before making chase.

Her rapid gait forced Stearne to jog along Baker Street just to keep up. Finally, he grabbed her arm, forcing a stop.

“What’s your hurry?” he panted.

“As my great-uncle Sherlock used to say, ‘The game’s afoot.’”

“You see this as a game?”

She chuckled. “No, Robbie. Just an expression.” She resumed her pace.

“Now, tell me what happened.”

“We were on the platform at Charing Cross. I stepped away to buy a paper moments before the Tube arrived. In the press, mum ended up in one car and me in another. From what she told me, two stations later a man stole her purse and jumped off before she could react.”

“Where’s mum now?” Sheila pressed, turning east at the junction.

“Surrey. She insisted on returning home. Said she’d never come to London again. I put her on the train at Waterloo Station last night.”

“You saw nothing of the theft?”

“No, and I feel guilty as hell.”

The young Holmes veered into a sidewalk café, directing her companion to a table near the wrought iron perimeter. “You should,” she hissed, signaling the waiter to bring a pot of tea. Deft fingers then jerked the false mustache and soul patch from Stearne’s face. “Who put you up to this?”

A single bead of perspiration trickled from the imposter’s forehead past his pierced left ear and along his neck. “I don’t...”

“Whoever paid you to distract my attention didn’t do his homework, as they say in the States. Tony Downton’s ancestry includes no grandmother with a twin sister. In fact, he combined his two grandmother’s maiden names for his production company: Standish-Minor.”

“How could you possibly...”

“When you live in close proximity to a man for six months or more, browsing his family photo albums and important records fills many a quiet evening.” She allowed the waiter to lay the spread on the linen cloth before sipping the chamomille. “Besides, Tony’s real name was Mathias Anthony Riley, Junior. A real cousin would have known that.”

The dark wig lifted to expose a shaved bald cranium. Despite the transformation, Stearne’s face retained a resemblance to Downton.

Through grit teeth, Sheila snarled, “Tell me your real name and who hired you, then get the hell out of here. If you leave the city before nightfall, I won’t press charges.”

“It’s not me you need to worry about, Miss Holmes.” The accent vanished and his tone hardened. “I’m just a struggling actor performing a role. The instructions I received through channels lead me to believe you’ll be seeing ghosts

of Tony Downton around every corner. Someone knows your weakness, and plans to keep you doubting your own sanity until he achieves his goal.”

As Stearne rose, the latex mask peeled off, revealing a middle-aged, pock-marked countenance. With a jaunty salute, he hurdled the barrier and sauntered toward Marylebone Road.

Sheila inspected the remnants of the illusion. “Professionally created,” she muttered. The netting of the wig seemed to bear a mark of some sort; she tucked it in her jean pocket, paid the bill and retraced her steps to Baker Street.

“John! We’ve work to do!” she hollered as she mounted the creaking, narrow steps to the sitting room.

“Eh?” he mumbled, roused from a nap in the wing-backed armchair near the dormant fireplace.

Tossing her great-great-uncle’s fedora onto the peg beneath the letters V.R. spelled with bullet holes, Sheila strode to the lab table in the far corner. She switched on the microscope, tearing a section from the wig to slip beneath the lens.

“What happened?” Watson demanded, hobbling on his prosthetic to his flatmate.

“I allowed myself to be deceived. I should have paid attention to Uncle Sherlock’s warning.”

“Sherlock’s warning?”

“Didn’t you see him, standing behind Stearne as we ate, shaking his head?”

Watson sniffed. “I thought he was warning you about taking on a case before you’d fully recovered your health.”

“That, he would never do, especially when he, himself, undertook many cases in... less than perfect condition.”

“You mean, under the influence of a seven percent cocaine solution?”

Sheila didn’t reply, instead focusing on the magnified hair and netting. “See? There’s a type of brand stitched into the weave.”

She slid off the stool to allow Watson to peer through the eyepiece.

“It looks like a G and a F.”

“Very good, John. Now, we just have to trace a theatrical wigmaker with those initials.”

“With all the theatres in the West End? Impossible!”

“That, along with a fifty-something unemployed actor whose face resembles five miles of rough road.”

Watson’s blue eyes flashed. “Huh?”

“Someone is hiring actors to dress up like Tony and mess with my head. In the meantime, his minions are attempting to pass phony insurance cheques at London banks, stumping Scotland Yard.”

Shifting his weight, Watson limped to the computer desk. “By the way, this arrived by special messenger while you were gone.”

The young woman tore open the end of the large manila envelope. Inside, photo stills from bank surveillance video showed grainy images of those presenting the forged cheques.

“Damn!” Sheila swore, tossing the collection amidst the clutter on the floor.

“What?”

“The mastermind behind this caper is laughing at me. They’re all made up like Tony.”

Watson gathered some of the prints, studying them. “What do you need me to do?”

“Send a message to your contacts. Find out who’s been mass producing Tony Downton face masks and wigs.” She marched toward her bedroom, then paused. “Even if it’s a Halloween costume company. I want a list of every source, as soon as possible.”

The door slammed before Watson could reassure her.

Dejected, the disabled British veteran dropped onto the swivel chair and typed a string of parameters on the keyboard.

Edith tapped lightly on the sitting room door before carrying in a tea tray. “Did I hear Sheila come in?” she wondered.

“Yeah.”

“Upset, as usual?”

“Frightened, I’d say.”

The russet-haired landlady stared at her tenant. “How can you say...”

“The prospect of seeing a dozen, or a hundred, images of Tony Downton has her petrified.”

“But, how...”

Watson shrugged, his fingers composing missives to colleagues he relied upon to search information in various restricted databases.

Edith poured a cup of tea and placed two scones on a china plate. She carried them to Sheila’s room, knocking.

Receiving no answer, the woman maneuvered the knob. She discovered the heir of Sherlock Holmes standing in the middle of the floor, staring at a platinum signet ring.

“I brought you...”

“Out!” Sheila bellowed. “Leave me alone!”

A wood panel in her face, Edith glared at Watson.

“I’m not going through this again,” she said, shuffling in the direction of the servants’ stairs.

Sheila emerged from the bedroom an hour later, red rimming her eyes. She crossed to the mantle, where her famous forebear’s pipes lay scattered among the debris.

Watson had learned to ignore her mood swings in the months since Downton’s death. He hailed her from the desk. “I found something rather odd,” he remarked, knowing the speculation would rouse her from her reverie.

Within moments, he felt her at his shoulder. “An employment advert from the *Times*?”

“Male actors, slender, two meters tall, 20-50, needed for public relations campaign,” he read on the screen. “The address isn’t a talent agency or theatre. It’s a warehouse near the river.”

“The casting call took place last Friday, making the timing...”

The blond head nodded.

“Who placed the advert?”

“A John Smith.”

“Phone number?”

“A call box in York.”

Sheila sank on the red Victorian loveseat. “York? For the casting call to take place here in London, that would mean...”

Watson munched on a buttered scone while her extraordinary brain processed the details.

“The women’s penitentiary is near York,” the consciousness stream began. “Among their current inmates are Michelle Ormand, the black widow killer, Geraldine Frazier, the bank robber, and Amanda Tarlington, on a life sentence for killing Tony.”

Bare feet paced the length of the sitting room.

“How much do you know about prison psychology, John?”

“Not much.”

“As a research project during my last term at Oxford, I spent a month inside. Women in prison have a different hierarchical structure than men. Women form a family-style unit, with a mother who cares for her children. If one of these children expresses a need, the mother will see it is fulfilled.”

“Meaning?”

“Whatever caper they concocted, distracting me using images of Tony had to be Amanda’s contribution.” She stared through smudged window panes overlooking Baker Street. “Now, if we had the list of others in the same cell block...”

A few quick clicks brought up the inmate roster for the York facility. “Does the name Desiree Camacho-Ramirez strike a chord?”

“Wife of the Mexican drug lord?”

“I guess.”

Sheila crossed to the lab table and examined Robbie Stearne’s wig. “Check the roster at the Nottingham men’s penitentiary. I think that’s where he’s awaiting extradition to the States.”

In less than 30 minutes, a flurry of activity had been initiated, including cell searches at both prisons and a Metropolitan Police raid of the empty warehouse.

Mobiles and contraband confiscated, guards placed on suspension, associated convicts faced additional charges for coordinating illegal activities from within the walls.

Over the course of six days, newspapers and television broadcasts exposed corruption and elaborate schemes. A multi-million pound yacht was boarded by Royal Navy crews at the mouth of the Thames, two tons of cocaine and heroin in the hold.

Dining at their favorite bistro that Saturday, Sheila related the details to Edith and Watson.

“Eduardo Ramirez had a huge drug shipment inbound from the Continent. The yacht was set to be offloaded at a small private dock upriver, and he feared constables might get wind of the activity. To concentrate their attention elsewhere, he devised the cheque scam, fleshed out by his wife and her ‘family’, with Amanda Tarlington adding a pinch of personal revenge by having all the participants made up like Tony, to prevent me from catching on to their real plot.”

“But, she underestimated you,” Edith muttered between bites of roast beef.

“Should do,” snickered her tenant.

Watson interspersed, “Geraldine Frazier created the wigs...”

“Not exactly, John. She placed the order with the costuming firm, which is why the initials were sewn into the netting, so they wouldn’t be confused with other projects. Ormand, a computer expert on par with yourself, manipulated the mobile a guard had been paid to smuggle in his lunch pail to reflect the call box number when placing the advert. Truly an impressive team effort.”

“But, not enough to outwit you.”

“No, only the Yard.”

Edith puzzled, "Have the police stopped by to thank you for your assistance?"

"No, and they won't. I allowed them to take the credit for breaking the case, with just one proviso."

"Which is?" Watson prodded.

"A little trip to York next week."

Refusing to answer any more questions, Sheila delved into a steak and kidney pie. Thursday morning, however, a constable arrived at 221B Baker Street with Robbie Stearne in tow, appearing once more as Tony Downton.

She allowed Watson to accompany her on the train to York, where a local police vehicle drove the quartet to the women's penitentiary. Through a tinted window, they observed the Hollywood producer's daughter, Amanda Tarlington, seated behind security glass in the visitor's room, fail to control her emotions when Stearne sat opposite.

"You're... dead!" she squealed, pounding the metal counter. "You can't be..."

Two female guards approached to restrain her violent reaction.

Watson cringed as Sheila allowed the fiasco to continue far too long before revealing herself.

Then, Amanda really blew her cork. Expletives, and a physical struggle against her captors escalated until she broke free and slammed herself against the glass. Stearne slid backward, fearing for his life, while Sheila's thin lips curved in a smile.

The major players in the crime spree found themselves in solitary confinement from that day onward, cells tossed daily, recreation and visitation limited, with all outside contact via letter and phone call closely monitored.

Thus assured by the warden of these arrangements, Sheila boarded the London train with Watson. Charges against Stearne dismissed, thanks to his cooperation, left the actor free to travel as he chose.

"I never would have believed you to be so vengeful," Watson remarked in the first class carriage.

Sheila tugged the black fedora's brim lower over her eyes. "Not so much vengeance, John, as proof that her attempted revenge failed against me. Yes, Tony's death nearly unhinged me, but I can't - I won't - let sentiment prevent me from thwarting criminals at every turn and protecting the country from those who would bring harm."

As she dozed, Watson watched the landscape fly past, realizing her intentions were honorable, albeit naive.

The Holmes signet ring on her index finger gave evidence her emotions in this matter would trouble her for a long time to come.

## Dream vs. Reality

Sheila Holmes sat in half-lotus position on the basket-chair. Curtains drawn, a single shaft of daylight penetrated a moth-hole in the heavy damask fabric, illuminating dust motes and clutter strewn on the sitting room's furnishings and floor. Among the detritus: platters of uneaten food, tumblers with mold growing on rancid liquid, assorted envelopes, periodicals, and unread newspapers. On the fireplace mantle above her, Sherlock's famous Persian slipper contained surprisingly fresh shag tobacco, surrounded by dottles of ash, and the ivory-handled jackknife securing yellowed papers to the wood. The rolling lab table nearby boasted two microscopes - representing 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century technology - and an open package overflowing with oval-shaped green leaves.

Johnny Watson on holiday at a veterans' reunion, landlady Edith Hudson-Thorne had absented herself from 221B, tending to errands throughout London.

The haze clouding her brain allowed the detective to recall little else.

A whiff of acrid smoke made her nose twitch.

"Uncle," she greeted the spectral manifestation of the Great Detective flatly, not glancing up.

She couldn't look at his aquiline features, framed by the disheveled dark mane and chin-stubble. He closely resembled Tony Downton, and those memories remained far too agonizing, even so long after his untimely murder. She focused on the red Victorian divan cushions instead.

The gruff baritone chided, "Child, you must get hold of yourself. You'll accomplish nothing in this state."

"Does it matter?"

"It should, with the Empire in peril."

"Let Scotland Yard handle it."

"You've said yourself, on numerous occasions, that lot consists of nothing but idiots. There's work to be done, and if you won't do it of your own volition, I have ways..."

"What, commandeering my body?" she scoffed.

"If need be."

"Leave it, Uncle. Leave me to my misery, at least for another day."

He glared at her stained yellow tank top, torn jeans and taut visage. "I'll give you until this evening to recover your wits. If you're not back at it by then..."

"Appreciated."

Holmes dissipated; even the lingering scent of his briar pipe - a source of irritation for his great-great-niece - could not prompt her to rise and raise the window casement in her current state. Violet eyes closed as she concentrated on her respiration.

Whether she heard the hall door creak inward, she couldn't be certain. The figure backlit beneath the lintel smacked of the familiar.

"Tony?" she whispered.

Since that night at the premiere of his Sherlock Holmes bio-pic, she'd seen the actor/director/producer in unexpected places and inopportune moments, awake and asleep. The ache in her heart redoubled as the shadow approached, sidestepping obstacles.

"Christ, woman!" exclaimed a disgusted basso profundo. "What are you about?"

She drawled, "I knew you'd come. I've been waiting."

"This place is a disaster, as are you." Powerful hands jerked her off the woven seat. "You need a shower and a good meal."

Her knees buckled; sturdy arms caught her waist as she slumped against her visitor's barrel chest. For lack of an alternative, Sheila felt herself scooped off her feet and carried to her bedroom, where Sherlock's tattered dressing gown was yanked from the wardrobe and tossed over her midsection. Then, she was transported along the hall to the bathroom and set beside the sink.

"Do you need me to turn on the water for you?" came the gruff query.

Her forehead resting on the cool porcelain, she managed, "I'm not an invalid, Tony."

"All evidence to the contrary."

The door latched and she fumbled to the tub; cranking the knobs shot waves of pain through her shoulders. She stripped off perspiration-drenched clothes, dumping them in the corner before stepping beneath the steaming flow.

Every muscle convulsed as she bent to retrieve the soap when it slipped from her grasp. She groaned a series of expletives, drawing her attendant to reappear.

"Are you hurt?"

"More accurately, every inch of me hurts."

"It's your own fault, behaving like a lunatic."

Rinsing shampoo from her brunette curls, she deactivated the stream and jiggled the frosted panel, strength insufficient to roll it along the metal track.

An oversized bath towel flew at her over the gap. She shook it free and tried to wrap it around her shoulders; fingers ignored her mental commands.

The glass slid aside. Modesty not a priority, she allowed herself to be hoisted from the tub, shivering. Thick terry rubbed her torso vigorously. The motion quite stimulating, she gazed up at her companion, vision still not registering except for a broad, tight-lipped, rather evil grin, like that of childhood illustrations of the Christmas-hating Grinch.

Still, "Oh, Tony, that feels marvelous, but I'm still cold!"

She didn't resist when abruptly pinned to the wall tiles, flesh pressed against her generating more than heat: raging flames ignited her every nerve.

Ten minutes later, bundled in the mottled dressing gown and once more enshrined in the basket-chair, the computer lamp's bare bulb suddenly flooded the chamber. Squinting in the blinding light, Sheila distinguished two vague images, and stacks of rubbish being swept off the dining table so shopping bags and parcels could be deposited on the surface.

"How long have you been here, Ivan?" Edith inquired.

That bass register responded, "No more than a half hour. You said you'd be back by three o'clock..."

"The Tube was jammed. I had to wait fifteen minutes just to get on the platform."

The pair shared a brief embrace, then switched their attention to Sheila.

"That's the first time she's budged from the microscope all week," observed the landlady.

Bull Lukaster presented her with the contents of a mangled box. "Your tenant does not seem to abide by the lease she signed."

"Oh, damn... what are they?"

"From the look of them, coca leaves. Quite illegal."

"I guess I should be glad she's not shooting up, like her renowned ancestor."

"One of these days, you'll bring up breakfast and find her dead. She's an addict and needs treatment, my dear."

Edith squeezed his solid forearm. "When John comes home Friday, he'll take care of her. He's the only one who can shake her from these doldrums."

Together, the couple exited the sitting room, Lukaster's remark - dripping with sarcasm - suspended on the dank air. "Oh, I don't know about that."

Before departing for dinner, Edith delivered a tray of sandwiches. "Please try to eat something, Sheila. I won't be late."

A stoned mutter: "Tony called in today. Being near him again..."

"Only a dream." The russet-haired American widow clucked her tongue. "The state you're in, it's impossible for you to judge fantasy from reality."

A minuscule smile played across the detective's mouth. "For a dream, it felt awfully real."

Edith shook her head on her way out, pitying the brilliant yet troubled woman. Listening to the street door close below, Sheila rolled up both dressing gown sleeves. No dream could create bruise-like impressions of fingers on her biceps from where she'd been restrained, albeit briefly.

And she could still taste his lips.

## A Casino Fling

“John, we need a holiday.”

Sheila Holmes stretched her legs beneath the tattered dressing gown as she tossed a crumpled London *Times* toward the ash-coated fireplace grate. Rising from the basket-chair, she glanced toward windows overlooking Baker Street, unsure whether the smudged glass or dense fog beyond obscured her view.

“You don’t have time.” Johnny Watson clicked “Send” on an email to his therapist, confirming attendance at a veterans’ group session Monday week.

“I’ve no cases pending.”

“I’m no fortune teller, but if Edith’s tone is any indication, you will.”

Their landlady, a russet-haired widow, did seem to be grumbling as she ascended creaking stairs from the foyer. A heavier pair of shoes followed her.

Two raps preceded the door opening and a middle-aged, trim, brown-haired figure in black pin-stripe suit crossed the sitting room threshold.

Watson bristled as brown eyes behind silver, round wire-rimmed spectacles assessed the detritus scattered about the floor and furnishings.

“What may I do for you?” Sheila greeted, ignoring the mess.

“You’re Sheila Holmes?” countered a gravelly baritone.

“I am.”

He pulled a billfold from his inside pocket, flashing a badge and printed credentials. “I’m Charles Faulkner, Interpol.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” She indicated her flatmate at the computer. “This is John Watson.”

The men clasped hands.

“Sergeant Watson?” queried Faulkner.

“Yes, sir.”

“I served in Afghanistan, too. My captain praised you highly after he was hit by a sniper’s bullet...”

“Ta.”

Faulkner focused on Sheila once more. “Might I have a private word?”

“You can speak freely in front of John.”

“Very well.”

His hostess waved him to the red Victorian divan. “Have a seat.” She resumed her place in the basket-chair, and Watson swiveled the desk chair toward the pair.

“I’ve been authorized to offer you a case,” Faulkner declared.

“An assignment you attempted to refuse, but your superiors insisted.”

Amazement flashed across tanned features. "How'd you... oh, never mind." He adjusted his gold tie with nervous, elegant fingers. "It all comes down to a distinct lack of manpower in our agency. I've been tracking this fugitive for years..."

"Not exclusively, however," supplied Sheila.

"Yes. More or less on my own time."

Watson shifted on the cushion, his prosthetic leg uncomfortable. "Must be quite important."

"Depends on who you ask."

"Please, Mr. Faulkner, start at the beginning, and leave out nothing," prompted Sheila.

"Fine. About eight years ago, I had a run-in with a young woman - she was about eighteen at the time. She'd been wandering the British Museum when an explosion occurred..."

"I remember reading about it," interspersed Watson. "The explosives misfired, and no one was injured."

"Indeed. This kid, an American, was in the country illegally..."

"How so?" asked Sheila.

"Her passport showed her arrival in Scotland two years prior, but she'd never reported her whereabouts to the authorities..."

"Ah. Go on."

"I trailed her to Paris, where she exhibited... unusual abilities."

"Details, please."

"A local tried to embroil her in one of the extortion scams popular with tourists and, after he pinched her and she slapped him, when he tried to shake her down, she turned every inch of his skin green."

"You witnessed this?"

Faulkner nodded, his brown waves static. "What was more... intriguing: she spoke only English, but those who heard her did so in their own native tongue."

"Sounds like some witch out of a fairy story," chuckled Watson.

"That's what I thought, Sergeant. At the Casino de Monte Carlo, she rolled dice at the craps table, winning over \$200,000, before boarding a yacht to Greece."

Sheila squirmed. "I don't see..."

"She tried to make me forget ever meeting her, Miss Holmes. For over six months, I struggled with a cloud of uncertainty, nearly losing my position and

suffering debilitating panic attacks. Intensive treatment with a psychologist resurrected those confusing memories, and I resumed the hunt.”

“But, you haven’t been able to locate her?” Watson puzzled.

“Oh, no. We know she lives in Scotland, an estate called Boleskine House near Loch Ness.”

Sheila snapped upright, as did Watson. In the months prior to her escapades with filmmaker Tony Downton, the pair had encountered the Mistress of Boleskine as she decimated agents from more than a dozen countries in a clearing near that historic structure.

“Have you interrogated her there?” wondered Sheila.

“No. That’s... out of my jurisdiction. What is of continued concern is how she periodically visits the casinos on the French Riviera, amassing a considerable fortune, without ever passing through customs at the airports or train stations.”

“Explain.”

“Ignoring the tax implications of her activities, most notable is her *modus operandi*.”

The tenants of 221B waited while Faulkner visibly shuddered, then composed himself.

“On the days in question - for which there is no pre-arranged schedule - a lightning strike on Loch Ness’ eastern shore is recorded by the meteorological service in Inverness, with another almost simultaneously reported along the Mediterranean. The young woman appears at one of the casinos, dominates the crap table for roughly an hour, receives her winnings in cash, then another lightning bolt cuts across the cloudless sky, synchronized with one at the loch.”

“Preposterous!” spat Watson.

Faulkner acknowledged, “I’ve been told by my colleagues that I’m insane to give credence to such nonsense.”

“And removed from the investigation?” Sheila speculated.

“Precisely.”

“You wish me to pursue the matter?”

Their guest smirked. “By my calculations, a trip to replenish her dwindling funds is in the offing, within a fortnight, no more. You will be housed at the Carlton Hotel in Cannes...”

“You have a list of the casinos she... frequents?”

“She visits a different establishment each trip, to avert suspicion. Only the Casino Barriere Cannes Les Princes is left.”

During the pregnant pause, Watson doubted Sheila would accept Faulkner's offer. Her steepled digits remained motionless, then she leapt from her seat.

"Well, John, are you up for a holiday?"

Faulkner got to his feet, as well, relief smoothing his furrowed brow.

"Thank you, Miss Holmes."

"Do you have a description of this young woman, or a photo?"

The Interpol agent extracted a black and white surveillance image from his wallet. "This is what we've been able to capture. Her hair is alternately ginger or black; she tends to dye it on a whim. The debilitating scars on both her palms, though, she makes no effort to conceal. She's approximately 26 years old, slender, strong and quite outspoken."

"Eh?" Sheila snorted.

"She's nearly caused more than a few international incidents with off-handed remarks."

Watson opened his mouth to comment; Sheila silenced him with a scowl.

"Her name?"

"In her passport, the name reads, 'Elizabeth Candida Duryea.' Discreet questioning of her neighbors confirmed she uses the alias 'Lady Elizabeth Neville.'"

Watson's blue eyes met Sheila's hazel orbs.

"We'll be on the next flight," the great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes assured the Interpol agent as she escorted him down the stairs.

"The airline reservations are in your name, as are the hotel accommodations."

"For two?"

"Yes. I... planned to accompany you myself, but Sergeant Watson will do well in my stead."

Sheila secured the deadbolt once Faulkner slid onto the rear seat of a waiting taxi and returned to the sitting room.

"Pack your bag, John. We're off!"

"You're willing to... go toe-to-toe with that..."

"Of course! It's a fantastic chance to resolve the unanswered questions that have gnawed at me since our jaunt in Scotland."

"And if it comes down to her martial arts skill against yours?" pressed the disabled Army veteran.

"I'll let you sell tickets."

Twirling toward her bedroom, she shed her great-great-uncle's dressing gown as the door closed.

Before noon, they rode toward Heathrow on the express Tube. Sheila limited herself to her overstuffed Oxford duffel and the black fedora Sherlock had left in his former residence, crammed atop unruly brunette curls. Watson maneuvered his rolling valise, dapper in a gold polo shirt and jeans.

"Did you hit the safe for spending money?" he prodded.

She gripped the steel pole tighter as the train rounded a curve. "No need. Faulkner texted me that Interpol has set up a line of credit for us at a rate of one thousand pounds per day, plus travel and lodging."

"Brilliant! Caviar and filet mignon for dinner!"

"Whatever your heart desires, John. You deserve it."

"And you don't?" he squinted.

She stiffened. "If you're referring to the... turmoil of recent cases..."

When Watson averted his gaze, Sheila realized the former medic hadn't meant Tony Downton's murder and its aftermath.

"Sorry, John. Let's just say we both have earned a bit of relaxation, even if it's blended with work."

"Amen."

First class privileges on a nonstop British Air flight to Cannes proved pleasant enough, as Watson remarked. "Better than on those military hops when deploying."

A vintage silver Rolls Royce limousine chauffeured them to the vast International Carlton Hotel with its signature domes on each corner, directly across Boulevard de la Croisette from the Carlton Beach Club and the entrancingly blue Mediterranean.

"I wonder how much Interpol is paying for this," Watson gasped as the vehicle braked near the famous structure's columned portico.

Sheila chuckled, "We're considered VIPs, evidently. I imagine Faulkner would've been consigned to a two-star hovel for the duration, making it understandable how much he wanted out of this investigation."

"To wait around in a locale like this, filling my days with sun and glamour... I'd take lesser accommodations."

"I think, John, Faulker has... a more ambitious streak than you."

Approaching the registration desk across a marble floor, Watson ogled the furniture and fixtures while Sheila detected something amiss.

A buxom matron chatting with the clerk had set her voluminous purse on the floor beside her Jimmy Choo stiletto heels. A well-dressed, middle-aged man

with wavy chestnut hair parted on the left, a broad forehead tapering to a narrow, bearded chin, prominent nose and flashing grey eyes paused directly behind her and squatted on the pretense of tying his shiny black oxford. Instead, he reached into the tan leather bag and extracted a thick pink clutch.

Deep in conversation, the wallet's owner never noticed the thief straighten and stride toward the exit.

Sheila, however, veered into his path, seizing an unyielding handful of his pinstripe lapel. Of the same height, she angled her lips toward his ear as she deftly slid the purloined item from his pocket.

"You've got five seconds to take a bunk, or the gendarmes will be all over you like a fly on honey," she hissed.

His understanding of her threat registered in widened orbs and, when she released her grip, he doubled his pace, vanishing into the afternoon crush of tourists.

Sheila joined Watson, queued to sign in, restoring the woman's valuables just as the victim concluded her business and reached for her luggage.

"May I help you?" oozed the robust, balding concierge.

Skilled fingers tapped the computer keyboard, and his smile broadened as he scanned the information on the screen beneath Sheila's name. "Welcome, Miss Holmes. We are so glad to have someone with your stellar reputation stopping with us."

Watson playfully nudged his flatmate in the ribs. "He must read the scandal sheets."

"Oh, shut up," she whispered.

On the fourth floor, a spacious one bedroom suite gave both London residents pause.

"I thought Faulkner said..." muttered Watson.

"He did. Unless he planned to share a bed with me..."

"Not someone with your stellar reputation?" the blond veteran scoffed. Her scathing glance sobered him. "So, what do we do?"

Sheila tossed her load on the posh sofa. "You take the bed, and I'll sleep here. Plenty of room." Before he could object, she raised her hands. "Let's not have a row on the point. Go, get changed, and we'll take a walk along the beach."

Trudging toward the adjacent chamber, Watson sniffed, "I thought you didn't like the seashore."

"To locate the casino we'll be staking out, silly," she chided.

"Must do."

Not that he altered his already casual appearance. Sheila shed her dark green business suit in favor of a blue Beatles t-shirt, cut-off jean shorts and Birkenstock sandals. Mingling with others enjoying a stroll on the sand, warm waves splashing in a pleasant rhythm, they appeared a young honeymooning couple.

They chanced upon the neon-lit facade of the Casino Barrière de Cannes before moving 100 meters along the coastline.

“Convenient,” remarked Watson.

“When Faulkner rings me about the tell-tale lightning strikes, we’ll be ready and waiting for this Lady Neville...”

“Do you think she’s really a noblewoman?”

“By marriage, perhaps, though she looked too young to be married when...”

“Besides, Faulkner said she’s American.”

“That doesn’t really mean anything these days. Edith was married to an American...”

“True.” Watson turned toward the Carlton, but Sheila studied pedestrians traversing the walkway near buildings over the road. “What’s wrong?”

“Didn’t you see it?” she queried.

“See what?”

“The flash.”

“What, a camera?”

“No. The hills above the city.”

“Lightning?” Watson breathed.

Every nerve of Sheila’s frame tingled with anticipation; her taut features beamed. “Not to mention, that bungling pickpocket I ousted from the hotel just walked into the same casino.”

“So much for a holiday!” he moaned.

Retracing their route, Sheila patted his arm. “We’ve plenty of time to grab a bite and change into evening clothes.”

“Evening clothes?” Watson stumbled. “I didn’t...”

“There’s a tailor shop in the hotel. We can buy you a tuxedo, and I can pick a dress from the boutique.”

He brightened. “Interpol’s paying.”

“Correct.”

“But, if the lightning struck here...”

“Far enough that, on foot, it’ll take her an hour to reach the casino.”

“Wouldn’t she hail a taxi?”

“If she wishes to be inconspicuous, no.”

Soup and a salad in the Carlton’s own restaurant to sustain them for the adventure ahead, a far more refined couple whisked into the casino to find the supposed Lady Elizabeth Neville poised at the bustling craps table. Her attire consisted of blue dress slacks and a white satin blouse, which augmented her auburn tresses and solemn gaze.

Less than two meters away, the pickpocket, studying the young woman with equal intensity.

Sheila drew Watson along, positioning herself between the two at the crowded, oblong structure.

“Why does she choose to wager on this?” Watson murmured to the detective. “Aren’t the odds...”

“Whatever technique she uses to manipulate the dice - be it substituting loaded cubes or some other method - this is by far easier than blackjack or roulette.”

The current shooter lost his last chip, abandoning the effort. Lady Neville scooped up the ivory cubes - her palms blackened, as if charred by branding irons - and caressed them almost lovingly.

“Watch, John,” Sheila warned.

The first roll: 4.

Bets were accompanied by excited chatter in diverse languages. Sheila realized why the American chose a different casino to fill her coffers on each excursion: the crowds were unaware of her previous success, so the casino still made money off those who wagered against achieving the point.

She placed a 20 Euro chip beside Lady Neville’s stack, planning to eventually leave the building with exactly that amount.

The shooter, on the other hand, steadily increased her assets over the course of fifteen minutes. Then, as she shifted her stacks to the “7” line, the dashing pickpocket - who had inched his way along the raised edge to sidle up on her right side - deliberately brushed her hand as he deposited a five Euro chip, shrugging with feigned innocence at his forced clumsiness.

Sheila watched a grin illumine what might be described as an angelic face, not at the man, but at the seven settling on the green felt.

As the thief reached for his winnings, he surreptitiously added a portion of the young woman’s growing hoard to his own.

Moving to collar him, Sheila stopped short when a collective gasp rose from the onlookers.

Plastic disks melted in his palms and would have burned his flesh had he not dropped the mass on the floor, splattering his trouser legs and shoes.

“What the devil?” he shrieked with a Spanish accent.

A quiet contralto pledged, “Try that again, and you won’t get off so easy.”

He recoiled, terror contorting his tanned countenance.

Sheila inserted herself in the vacant spot. “Maybe he’ll get the point, after being caught twice in one day,” she snickered.

Another seven scored Lady Neville additional chips. “I saw what you were about to do on my behalf,” she commented. “Thank you.”

“You... seem well able to handle your own problems.”

“He made me angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

Sheila watched yet another lucky roll. “As when dozens of spies trespass on your property?”

Hazel orbs whipped toward her. “Oh, hell.” Teeth grit, then eased their pressure. “I thought I’d seen you before.”

“We’ve never been properly introduced.”

“Given your accent, if you’re Interpol, I’d rather not, thanks.” Abruptly, she signaled a croupier to cash her in: 150,000 Euros.

In less than 30 minutes.

Sheila roused Watson from his position, having been unaware of her technique to win and lose, yet break even. His take: over 50,000 Euros.

“We won’t argue about it,” she mumbled, en route to the door.

Unexpectedly, an uproar erupted in the main casino, where every slot machine simultaneously poured coins onto the floor. Patrons initiated a mad scramble to reap the fruits of the malfunction, distracting employees from their regular duties.

Avoiding the crush, Sheila and Watson collected their own bounty at the cashier’s cage. Providing Lady Neville with her winnings in cash involved a time-consuming operation. She instructed the staff to deduct whatever taxes would be owed, thrusting the remaining wads of bills in a faded backpack that had been held in the cloakroom.

The pair from London weren’t the only witnesses to this process. Concealed in the lobby’s shadows, the pickpocket loitered, perplexity commingled with rage.

As Lady Neville set off toward the Cannes outskirts, the thief fell in stride, wielding a switchblade. He steered her, without any resistance, onto a deserted side street. Sheila, herself curious about the means of transportation this American

used, observed the abduction. She sprinted after them, leaving Watson limping on his prosthetic leg, dialing the police on his mobile.

Rounding the corner, Sheila halted.

Lady Elizabeth Neville, though slim and only medium height, had her captor pinned against a brick wall, suspended three feet above the ground without even straining her biceps. He'd obviously wrestled her backpack off her shoulders; it lay on the cement, zipper torn and loose cash swirling in the breeze. His pleas for mercy would have gone unheeded, Sheila suspected, had not Lady Neville glimpsed her.

"Put this... thing behind bars, permanently," she advised.

Sheila guffawed, "Not a bad idea. I'm sure the gendarmes will comply when they arrive."

"You're not..."

"No, milady. Interpol contracted me to... apprehend you on trumped up charges of tax evasion and illegal immigration. From what I saw, though, you pay the taxes due and your... residency status is none of my concern. Therefore, I shall not detain you."

"I can go?"

"I'm sure you would, even if I tried to stop you."

"Damn straight."

Lady Neville's burden crumpled into a semi-conscious heap when her fingers retracted. Saluting with a slight inclination of her head, she retrieved her possessions and jogged into the night.

Officials swarmed the space in short order; the arrest of gentleman crook Marcello Vanucci rated global coverage by the media. Some distance away, Sheila's peripheral vision noted the flash of lightning, resigned she might never learn Lady Elizabeth Neville's secret.

The formalities of the apprehension occupied the Brits until well past midnight, repeating details to the gendarmes and their superiors. When Sheila reported as much to Charles Faulkner the next morning, he chided her for wasting Interpol's generous funds.

"You were supposed to take Lady Neville into custody, not some two-bit thug."

Her account refuting his presumption that the American failed to pay proper taxes only frustrated him further.

"Give it up, man," she remonstrated. "She's nothing more than a... very unique individual who only defends herself against the ignorant, greedy and foolish."

With an expletive, Faulkner disconnected the call.

Powerful thunderstorms cancelled flights from Cannes the entire weekend, allowing Sheila and Watson to spend more time along the Cote d'Azur, though indoors at the museums and restaurants. They perused newspaper accounts of the stolen goods cached in Vanucci's flat, which police had little hope of restoring to their owners after his 15 year career.

The travelers returned to Baker Street late Monday, settling in the sitting room once Watson stashed his winnings in Sherlock's old wall safe. Edith had cleared mounds of clutter in their absence.

"She didn't clean the windows," Watson stated.

"That's because I promised to do it years ago, and never have. It's a point of honor."

The pair laughed.

"It's not funny," remonstrated their landlady, delivering a silver tray loaded with teapot, china cups and cakes.

"Tomorrow, first thing," Sheila swore, crossing to the table.

Edith groaned. "I won't hold my breath."

Especially when the doorbell presaged a new case.

## Keeper of the Secret

The adverts had been running in the London dailies for weeks, on the telly, and even popping up on internet sites.

Johnny Watson clicked the mouse in frustration, tired of seeing the images on the monitor at the cluttered desk in the sitting room of 221B Baker Street.

“Why did you ever agree to this?” he snapped at his flatmate, Sheila Holmes.

Perusing one of her great-great-uncle’s files at the old lab table in the corner, the young woman glanced at the disabled British Army veteran. “It’s for charity, John.”

“I understand that. I just don’t see how encouraging people to make wagers on whether you or some Scotland Yarder will solve their proposed mystery before a set deadline will score them a decent amount of funds...”

“Win or lose, the organization receives twenty percent of the wagered amount up front. It’s all to help homeless mothers and their children find shelter and food.”

“And who are you up against?”

“I’m not sure yet. The police commissioner is selecting his best inspector, supposedly. I’ll find out tomorrow.”

Watson rose from the swivel chair as Edith Hudson-Thorne, the landlady, entered with a tray of bologna sandwiches, creme soda and crisps for lunch.

“I still think it’s... unorthodox,” he grumbled.

Sheila crossed to the dining table, brushing piles of detritus onto the floor to clear a place for the food.

“I wish you’d stop doing that!” the russet-haired widow scolded as she deposited her burden on the wooden surface.

“I’m sorry, Edith. I’ve really been meaning to clean...” her tenant apologized.

“There’s a bin in the hall, a broom and a mop bucket. It’ll be done by end of day or...”

Watson squinted his blue eyes at the woman. “Or?”

The trio laughed as they sat together to enjoy the simple meal.

They labored together to clear the discarded newspapers, unopened post, hamburger wrappers and drink cups through the afternoon, dusting, sweeping and scrubbing most exposed surfaces, except for the fireplace mantle where many of Sherlock Holmes’ own possessions still remained on display.

“Why don’t you get rid of those pipes?” Edith queried as the evening progressed.

Sheila winked at Watson, unable to divulge how the ghost of the Great Detective periodically made use of the heirlooms when he manifested in ghostly form.

“What about the windows?” came the next question, as Watson carried the bucket to dump the blackened water.

Sheila shrugged. Since the day she moved in, she’d been promising to remove layers of dirt from the glass panes, and never completed the task.

“If I win the competition tomorrow, Edith, I swear I’ll hire someone to do it.”

“I wish I had a bible handy.”

Ordering Chinese take-away for dinner, the three retired to their rooms for a good night’s sleep before the Saturday ordeal.

A sizable crowd had gathered at Trafalgar Square, where a platform had been erected with a podium and sound system. Bookmakers - of the legitimate sort - had set up booths nearby to accept any last-minute bets.

The microphone squealed when a trim female in turquoise wool business suit approached. She greeted the assembly, introducing herself as Amelia Chasten, executive director of A Welcoming Table, the event’s nonprofit beneficiary.

“I want to welcome you all to this, our first ever, unique fundraiser,” she began. “When my board members voted on the proposal, I was shocked, I must admit. But I have come to see how Brits enjoy a friendly wager and, in the end, the hundreds of women and children who will be housed in the course of the next year are the real winners.”

Amelia signaled to the left; Sheila and a well-built, middle-aged, bronzed figure of medium height ascended to the stage.

“These two noted detectives will provide our entertainment today.” The woman extracted a set of notes from her skirt pocket, consulting them briefly. “Over the past five years, Sheila Holmes has made headlines not only in London, but in America and throughout Europe, solving cases ranging from murder to computer hacking. For his part, Metropolitan Police Inspector Wilfred Richards has been nominated to participate in our challenge for being, as his superiors wrote, ‘The most innovative and thorough member of the force.’”

Applause for both met with little response. Richards sized up his opponent - clad in a black Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and a purple windbreaker - with unmistakable disdain. Sheila didn’t need more than a glimpse of his navy blue

pinstripe suit, white turtleneck and shiny oxfords to rate him as a stickler for rules, craving adulation.

“And now, for the task at hand,” Amelia continued. “Starting with the clue concealed in this envelope, each of you will have three hours to locate an individual in possession of a distinctive item belonging to the prime minister - taken with his approval, of course. You may avail yourselves of whatever form of transportation you prefer to move through London, but you must return here - with or without the item - by noon.”

She presented the pair with unmarked white business envelopes. “When the clock strikes the hour, you may begin, and good luck.”

Silence swept over the gathering as Big Ben tolled from Westminster. As the last chime wafted through the humid air, Sheila tore open the envelope and scanned the folded white sheet.

In the front row, Watson and Edith observed her amusement. Richards, conversely, leapt off the platform and jogged toward a waiting taxi, headed for destination unknown with a BBC reporter toting a Steadicam in pursuit.

Sheila joined her companions, smiling casually.

“You’ve less than three hours,” Edith warned. “Why aren’t you more... more...”

“Because, I’ve already got the matter solved.”

Watson bristled. “What?”

“Have you been told the answer?” Edith pressed.

“No, no. There’s no cheating or collusion involved. It’s just: while Richards is chasing north to south and every kilometer in between, I have but one site to visit.”

“What’s that?” Watson asked.

Sheila moved toward the Charing Cross Tube station, her pseudo-entourage keeping pace. “Amelia Chasten - her married name - has a singular birthmark on the left side of her neck, which I remember seeing when I was a student at Oxford. She would visit her younger sister, a classmate of mine, on weekends. They liked to picnic on the quad, or engage in other... activities, as sisters will do.”

“Ah!” Watson breathed.

“Indeed, John.” Down the stairs to the sparsely populated waiting area, they boarded the next train for the West End, settling on bench seats. “It is only logical, when planning this... debacle, that Amelia would use available contacts to access the highest levels of government for support. One of those is her sister, Pamela Marchand.”

“Who we’re en route to visit?” Edith speculated.

“Should do.” Sheila sucked air. “She... operates an exclusive club...”

Watson glared at his flatmate. “A brothel?”

“Very good, John!” she praised. “Catering to the upper class, with tight security that is nigh impenetrable - except on occasions such as this.”

“So, she is in possession of whatever the prime minister contributed to this effort?”

“If she isn’t, she knows who is, because she would have served as intermediary in the matter.”

“Brilliant!” Edith remarked, bracing herself as the train slowed.

Emerging into the sunlight, Sheila bore right, tourists and shoppers well in evidence on the pavement. Down a side lane, the structure harkened from early in the previous century, no number or plaque to indicate ownership.

“You must never divulge your knowledge of these whereabouts,” Sheila hissed, pressing the bell.

“Agreed,” Edith and Watson muttered simultaneously, excitement flushing their cheeks.

The massive creature who drew the carved oak door inward might have emerged from a cheap horror film. His shoulders filled the frame, the crown of his tawny head touched the lintel.

“May I help you?” he boomed.

“I’m here for Pam Marchand,” Sheila announced evenly.

“Madame is... occupied at the moment.”

“I have an appointment.”

The scowl revealed straight white teeth, quite menacing. “Follow me.”

That Sheila embraced the buxom, ebony-tressed, pink satin robed entrepreneur shocked the bystanders, hovering on the threshold of an elegantly appointed office.

“You’ve made quite a name for yourself, kid,” Pamela commented, waving toward a gold teapot on a polished sideboard.

“No, thanks, Pam.” Sheila dropped onto a purple velvet armchair, nodding Edith and Watson toward a matching sofa. “You’ve kept your name out of the papers.”

“It’s not easy, these days.” Revealing lace-trimmed undergarments and silk filigreed hose as she moved to the window, she chuckled. “When I took over the family business, I never would’ve guessed...”

“Back at university, when I learned how your family had made their fortune...”

“My mother, and her mother, never believed in marriage. They preserved their integrity among the... clientele, which is why we’re still successful.”

Watson sniffed self-consciously; Edith lowered her chin.

“So, what did the prime minister give you to hold for him?” Sheila shifted from idle chatter.

Pam poured herself a cuppa. “You know, I recommended you to Amelia for this shindig.”

“Because you knew I’d deduce the truth?”

“And show up the police, arrogant gits that they are.”

“They’ve been... harassing you?”

“Trying to catch us *in flagrante delicto*.”

“Then, you took quite a risk for a bit of revenge.”

“Oh, they’ll never penetrate our defenses,” Pam boasted. “Even if that berk Richards unravels the clues he’ll find along the way, he’ll never make it this far.”

Sheila rose. “Good for you! Now, where’s the item?”

From the top left desk drawer, an apple-shaped paper weight of blown glass emerged.

“I’ve... seen that in photos of the prime minister’s desk,” Watson noted.

Pam smiled at him and winked enticingly. “Which is why he donated it to the cause.”

The bauble wrapped in a brown paper sack, the trio made their exit. Rather than return to Trafalgar Square and wait for the noon finale, they rode the Tube part way, then disembarked with the intent of enjoying brunch at a sidewalk café. As they mounted the stairs, tie askew, perspiration dampening his wide brow, Wilfred Richards bounded down the adjacent set, the videographer close behind.

Recognizing his opponent, the Scotland Yarder halted, nearly causing a collision. “Well, well! You think you’ve outsmarted me?” he accused, the right corner of his mouth rising at an angle.

The camera shifted toward Sheila, who smiled at the lens, red light blinking. Watson tucked their parcel inside his windbreaker, feigning innocence, while Edith pretended to study graffiti on the tile walls.

“All will be revealed at noon, Freddie,” Sheila chirped with a cheery salute, before resuming her trek.

“The Metropolitan Police will be a force against crime long after you’ve given up playing detective!” the inspector bellowed. “No differently than that supposedly renowned great-uncle you claim to emulate!”

Watson gripped Sheila’s arm, noticing her lips forming a biting retort. “Let it go. He’s blowing smoke.”

“I’d like to blow some smoke up his...”

Once they reached street level, they found seats within a make-shift white picket fence and ordered their meal, except Sheila found her appetite spoiled by the confrontation.

“He *is* rather good looking,” Edith acknowledged.

Sheila rolled violet eyes skyward. “Attractive physical attributes with such presumptive hubris, while lacking sufficient analytical intellect, are... a waste.”

Watson paid the bill in due course. Even with Saturday traffic, they arrived at Trafalgar Square well before a defeated Richards trudged onto the stage at 11:59 am.

Declared the victor, Sheila received a modest trophy and cheers.

The Sunday *Times* announced the charity’s take from the event: over 150,000 pounds.

“Brits like a friendly wager, to be sure,” Watson scoffed after reading the article.

Watching news coverage on the computer, Sheila snorted, “But, Scotland Yard won’t be liking me for the foreseeable future.”

The others joined her, a posh baritone narrator denouncing footage of Richards’ futile meanderings through Limehouse, the South Bank and Hyde Park as indicative of police ineptness.

“Was the whole thing really a set-up?” wondered Edith.

“Not at all. Even though Pam volunteered me, she and I hadn’t seen each other since graduation. Neither she nor Amelia had any idea I’d make the connection so quickly.”

The video concluded with the inspector’s glower as he retreated from the awards ceremony; the landlady prodded, “And Richards?”

“Oh, he’s livid. As we parted ways, he swore to have me roundly discredited.”

“Good luck with that!” Watson snickered.

Edith cleared the breakfast dishes and strode toward the servants’ stairs. “Roast beef for dinner?”

Sheila pulled Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown tight at the waist, licking her lips.

“After which, you’ll call to have the windows washed?”

Their laughter reechoed onto Baker Street.

## The Club Date

Johnny Watson shivered as he opened his bedroom door. A bitterly cold draft from the sitting room of 221B Baker Street both chilled and startled him.

Peering through the dimness - the sole illumination flames from the fireplace - he saw both windows open, Sheila Holmes seated in her basket-chair.

“What the devil?” he snapped. “Did Sherlock pay a call with that damned stinky tobacco?”

His flatmate replied quietly, “No, John.”

“Then, why turn our digs into a deep freeze?”

“I’m running an experiment.”

The former British Army medic limped across the worn Persian carpet, unceremoniously lowering smudged glass panes. “To see how long it takes you to catch pneumonia?”

“No, to study how insects react to extreme temperatures.”

Groping to the radiator, Watson cranked the thermostat. The contraption popped and wheezed, but soon generated comforting heat.

“So, you’re telling me tomorrow, or the next day, you’ll turn this room into a sauna?”

“Could do.”

On one hand, the disabled veteran was glad Sheila had found something to engage her brain, after a prolonged period of inactivity and lethargy. Conversely, he suspected an ulterior motive...

“You haven’t hidden another stash of coca leaves on the premises,” he ventured.

She rose from her yoga-style position. “I promised I’d stop, didn’t I?”

“Addicts can’t always control...”

“You know me better than that.”

“I know something’s bothering you.”

“Besides recurring waves of grief, you mean?”

“Indeed.”

Sheila shuffled, barefoot beneath the tattered dressing gown, to the round dining table, stacked with newspapers, unopened post and two days’ worth of uneaten food. She thrust a missive from the top of one pile toward her companion, who squinted at the sheet.

Resigned, he switched on the goose neck lamp beside his computer, to better read the typed print. “Another case?”

“One to spark my interest, for sure.”

“You’ve already met with Vale?”

“Yesterday, while you were at your group session.”

“He came here?” gulped Watson.

“Not the first occasion we’ve been paid such an honor.”

“But.. he usually summons you to his office at the Yard. To pay a call in person means it’s a matter of utmost...”

She interjected, “Discretion?”

“I was going to say ‘importance’.”

“Both, naturally.” She picked through a selection of leftover pastries; nothing appealed to her. Wiping her fingers on a soiled napkin, she sank on the wooden chair, gazing up at the close-cropped blond head. “There’s been a rash of disappearances linked to a club on the South Bank. The Yard’s inspectors have failed to make any headway, because their attempts to infiltrate the premises are always thwarted.”

“They have a mole on the force?”

“I doubt that. The club’s security prides itself on being very observant, barring access to officials from any government agency.”

Watson chuckled. “What, did you clone yourself?”

“They’re better than me, by far. From what I’ve been told, they either have x-ray technology concealed at the entrance to expose weapons and badges, or they’ve received excellent training from a military source.”

“Damn!” Blue eyes scanned the sheet again. “What’s the name of the joint?”

“The Vampire Club.”

Watson dropped onto the desk chair, which swiveled sideways, almost toppling.

“John?” Sheila puzzled.

He swiftly recovered his composure. “You know its history, don’t you?”

“I haven’t researched it yet.”

“I wrote a paper on it for school when I was a kid.”

“Why?”

“The assignment was to pick an obscure historic site. I’d seen an article in the *Times* - which my father had been reading - about the club having a new owner. The name caught my fancy, so I scoured the library for information.”

“Coming up with what?”

Watson detailed how an 11th century castle had fallen into disuse after the last of the noble line died in 1680, later purchased by a conglomerate of investors. The club opened as a tavern in the first half of the 1800s, around the era when the

writings of gothic authors became the rage - Mary Shelly, Edgar Allan Poe and the Bronte sisters. It catered to unsavory sorts off incoming ships or those dealing in contraband and stolen goods. Murders and assaults - as well as opium use and prostitution - became so common, the constables stopped responding to reports.

“No bodies were ever recovered; no clues pointed to commission of a crime. Whoever managed things, they thoroughly cleaned up after every incident.”

“Amazing,” breathed Sheila.

“Every twenty years or so, the club changes hands, and there’ve been renovations to modernize both interior and exterior, but the general reputation has remained consistent for almost two centuries.”

“Did you receive high marks for your paper?”

“Not as high as I expected. The teacher disapproved of the morbid details I included.”

Sheila leaned forward and patted Watson’s right knee. “Well, I award you a gold star for being so informative.” She rose and stretched, a glint of sunlight visible beyond the buildings over the road. “I would ask you to accompany me, but I must go alone.”

“What?” Watson stiffened. “I wouldn’t go down there with less than a dozen, fully armed!”

“The Yard’s purpose is to learn what takes place inside those walls. Since they can’t get their own people past the front entrance, they’ve asked me...”

“What makes you think they won’t...”

“Because I’ll have the ideal disguise.” This relaxed demeanor irritated her flatmate. “In addition to raising suspicion about the disappearances, the club has a problem retaining employees, especially the housekeeping staff.”

“So, you’re going to hire on as a broom jockey?”

“They’ve used a number of employment agencies, and I’ve been recommended by one.”

“Already?”

“I have an interview mid-morning.”

“Using falsified credentials?”

“Must do.”

Watson spun toward the monitor, fingering the keyboard. “What details will you need going in?”

“None.”

“Eh?”

She hovered over his shoulder. “I’d rather have a blank slate, so my observations will be untainted by preconceived notions.”

“If that’s how you wish it,” he muttered, dejected. “Just do me one favor.”

“Anything.”

He didn’t have a chance to elaborate. Edith Hudson-Thorne, their landlady, appeared at the door, groggily assessing the state of the premises.

“I was hoping you two were up early clearing away all this trash...” she grumbled.

The pair smiled at her sarcasm.

“Don’t think I’m fooling!” Edith persisted. “I want this mess gone by noon, or I’ll file eviction papers.”

Sheila approached, gently shooing her from the room. “You know we have a ten year lease.”

Edith made certain her parting edict penetrated the varnished panel. “And, I’ll make you pay for the exterminator, when you complain of mice!”

Trudging to her bedroom, Sheila abruptly halted.

Watson anticipated her request. “I’ll hunt up some liners and haul things to the bin while you’re gone.”

“I get the feeling I’ll be doing likewise, on a much grander scale.”

“I give you two days before you’re ready to scream.”

“It’s a wager.”

They clasped hands to formalize the agreement, with Watson not releasing Sheila’s fingers.

“What is it, John?”

“My favor.”

“Oh, yes. Anything.”

“Don’t let your guard down for one moment, and don’t trust anyone.”

She caressed his cheek tenderly. “You’re the only one I trust. You know that.”

“Sometimes, I wonder.”

“Don’t. You’ve been an asset and a treasure since the day you moved in.”

“Thanks.”

Aware no physical disguise would fool her potential new employer, Sheila selected a blue-grey janitor’s boilersuit from the recesses of her wardrobe. She’d worn the outfit in a stage production at Oxford in her early days on campus.

Watson had retired to the bathroom by the time she left, so he didn’t see her scuffed work boots and utility gloves slung from the cracked leather belt. That the shirt cuffs were frayed and stained added to the effect.

Sherlock’s black fedora remained on its peg beneath the “V.R.” created by bullet holes in the wall.

Riding the Tube to the South Bank, Sheila cursed Metropolitan Police Superintendent Dermot Vale for his manipulation of the truth. He'd indicated the Vampire Club was south of the Thames, but failed to mention just how far.

Not a part of the established entertainment district popular with tourists, featuring the Eye, an aquarium and theatres, she was forced to hail a taxi to transport her the additional five miles to a limestone castle complete with turrets and a capped tower.

More a museum, Vale had stated that relatives of MPs had vanished, as well as a distant cousin to the royal family.

Maybe they'd gotten lost in the dungeon.

Hiking the gravel drive, she grasped a tarnished bronze knocker in the shape of a wolf's head and banged it against the left half of double oak doors. Two minutes passed before a bleary-eyed flunky responded to the knock.

A thick Cockney. "Whaddya want?"

"I have an interview."

She was scrutinized from her brunette curls to her feet, then ushered indoors.

"He's waitin' in the office."

Sheila followed the hunched figure, reminded of Quasimodo - a badly wounded veteran from any of the recent global conflicts? Violet orbs required 30 seconds to adjust to the absolute darkness of what must've been the grand ballroom, not even a hint of daylight penetrating encrusted windows.

Edith would have a fit, she mused.

Waving her to a rickety bench, he grumbled, "He'll be right out."

"Ta."

She detected a faint glimmer beneath the closed door of a small room. Tables and chairs stacked around the perimeter projected bizarre shadows, some artist's abstract creation.

Hinges creaked as a singularly pale individual hailed her from the threshold. Clean shaven, with exceptionally high cheekbones, a straight nose and longish black hair, his navy blue three-piece suit and gold striped tie presented a business-like persona. She resisted an inherent claustrophobia in the cramped chamber, with a disorganized antique desk and two plastic chairs.

"Have a seat," he instructed as he resumed his place. "I'm Barnabas Clements, majority shareholder in the club."

"Nice to meet you, sir," she twittered in a higher pitch than her normal contralto.

"There's just one or two things to go over before you get started..."

“You mean, you’re hiring me?” She feigned excitement.

His matter-of-fact baritone belied any qualms she entertained. “The agency performs a thorough screening, sending us only suitable candidates.”

“I... thank you.”

“If I may continue: the club opens daily at sunset and closes at sunrise. You are expected to arrive at eight o’clock each morning, remaining until complete order is restored.”

“Order restored?”

“Some of our... patrons are a bit exuberant. Glasses get broken, drinks are spilled. That sort of thing. To maintain the historic décor, your attention to detail must be exceptional.”

“Oh, it is.” No lie, there.

“Next: your predecessors - a series of skittish types - lasted a few days, as little as an hour, in some cases. The age of this castle, and its condition, generate a variety of noises. If you’re going to be traumatized by every screech and groan, you may leave at once.”

“I don’t see it as a problem.”

“Good.” Clements reached for a ledger, a silent dismissal.

Sheila made her exit, instantly approached by the attendant.

“I’ll show you the supply cupboard,” he announced, and she followed him along a side corridor toward the kitchen. “You are to confine yourself to cleaning only the ground level. We have... other contingencies for the upper floors.”

“Does that include the staircase?”

“No, you will scrub the stairs and polish the banister, going no farther than the top step.”

“Sounds like union rules,” she quipped.

“Think what you like. Violation of these instructions will warrant immediate termination.”

“I understand.”

Actually, Sheila understood very little at that moment. In a locked closet, new sponge mops, brooms, buckets, steel wool and dusters - too new - were complemented by containers of disinfectants and scouring powder, still sealed.

Her predecessors must’ve not even gotten around to using the equipment, she surmised.

Three massive crystal chandeliers - converted to electric - hung from the raftered ceiling, revealing how much the ballroom, now used as a bar and dance hall, needed that equipment. By 11:00, Sheila had scrubbed a mere ten square foot

section of the marble floor, periodically delayed by minute discoveries such as odd patterns of blood droplets, human hair and tissue embedded in the baseboards.

Clements assessed her progress at noon, clicking his tongue but saying nothing.

By late afternoon, Sheila had lost count of how many buckets she'd emptied and refilled, the filth pervasive. And, yes, she heard the noises, ignoring them except to mentally map their origins - the upper floors, possibly the bedrooms from which she'd been banned.

Could the missing be confined there, beaten, near death?

To what purpose?

Winter sunset occurring around 5:00 pm, the attendant plodded to the north corner where Sheila used a toothbrush to loosen muck built up against the stones at 4:30, ordering her to knock off for the day.

"But, I'm not finished," she protested.

"You've accomplished more today than others managed in months. Go home."

"What about the windows?"

"Tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

Whether addressing him so formally stroked his ego, or he would be glad to be rid of her and go about his duties for the evening, the rather asymmetrical visage twisted in a grin. Reorganizing the shelves after rinsing the rags and bucket, she ached to get a glimpse of the clientele before starting for the city.

No luck, but a different type of bonus advanced her investigation considerably. She tried to hang a towel damp from repeatedly washing chemicals off her hands on a wooden peg, only to have the protrusion flip downward, releasing a spring that unlatched a stone panel.

"This is too good to be true!" Sheila mumbled, snatching a torch from a crate of tools.

Behind the secret door, the narrow beam lit a corridor with a spiral metal staircase at the far end. Electrical conduit and water pipes ran along the ceiling - the access had probably been used by workmen updating the facility years earlier.

She slipped through the gap and secured the bulkhead, creeping on tip-toe past cobwebs and rubbish, determining the circular steps unsafe due to rust and deterioration. A branch of the corridor took her into the bowels of the castle; reaching a dead end, she groped for a lever of some sort.

Her fingers, instead, clamped onto something slimy and, when she shifted the torch, the decomposing face of a woman caused her heart to skip a beat.

“Shit!”

Retracing the route to the supply closet, Sheila leaned hard against the hatch to force it open. By the single bulb, she battled violent muscle spasms as she restored order in the cubicle.

“How soon will you be leavin’?” reverberated from the corridor.

“Two minutes!” she croaked.

Outside, the sun had vanished to the west; she meandered past the castle’s façade and sank on the unmown grass until she ceased shaking and her legs could properly support her.

She’d viewed corpses before, including Tony Downton, who’d died in her arms. The difference this time: the woman wasn’t newly deceased. She’d been in that condition for at least six months.

Who would’ve killed her and stuffed her there?

Or, Sheila reasoned, had she been exploring the hidden corridor and become trapped?

Old castles were notorious for their secret passages, some due to the need for caution when noble lords or ladies wished to dally with the servants, others to facilitate political intrigues or quick escapes.

Had the others listed as missing met a similar fate?

From this vantage point, a hedgerow prevented arriving customers from seeing her, though she could readily view their upscale attire. She recognized a number of the faces. Come morning, she’d ring one or two.

Tumbling onto her mattress after the taxi and Tube ride to Baker Street, her brain couldn’t stop scrolling the mental footage of her cadaverous discovery. If she hadn’t gotten a whiff of acrid smoke a second prior, she would’ve jumped off the bed when the spectre of Sherlock Holmes sank on the edge.

“You realize there’s more to this,” he stated, briar pipe dangling from his lips.

She propped herself on one elbow, rebuttoning her shirt. “Of course.”

“In my time, rumors circulated about that club. Scotland Yard wouldn’t touch it then, either.”

“Did they give a reason?”

“Fear, pure and simple. The majority of human beings fear the unknown, especially when it’s accompanied by inexplicable bumps in the night and howls amplified by the wind.”

“That doesn’t apply to us, though, does it, Uncle?”

His mouth a grim slash across the ghostly mien, a chill shot up her spine.

“What do you know?” she prodded.

Silence enveloped the chamber.  
“Uncle... you’ve got to tell me.”  
“Your oath to confide this to no other living soul.”  
She straightened. “Absolutely!”  
He rose, pacing the carpet in agitation, trying to formulate his phrasing.  
When he faced her, the glint in his grey eyes renewed her trepidation.  
“Is it that bad?” she drawled.  
“Far worse than I care to recall.” He sat within inches of her. “You are aware, of course, that I had two brothers...”  
“Mycroft and Sherrinford, yes.”  
“The three of us often discussed how our mother and father never... well, their relationship as man and wife was not...”  
“They didn’t get on with each other?”  
He sniffed. “Blunt, but accurate.”  
“Sorry.”  
“Our mother... strayed... sought affection elsewhere.”  
Sheila’s throat constricted. “Not at the Vampire Club?”  
The elder Holmes nodded grimly.  
“Is that how - where - she... died?”  
A repeated affirmation.  
“My God!”  
“Her body was found on the lawn by a squire whose dog had slipped his tether. She’d managed to escape the confines of the castle at first light, when the...”  
His great-great-niece’s eyes widened. “You’re not claiming there are real vampires?”  
“The marks on her neck...”  
“Shit! That’s not possible!”  
“As Shakespeare wrote: ‘There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’”  
“So, the staff... Barnabas Clements... could be the same ones who...”  
“Indeed, if tales are true about that sort’s longevity.”  
“But, he was out and about in the daytime!”  
“With not a visible ray of sunlight, they can operate at any hour.” The pipe generated a pungent cloud. “The windows were covered, correct?”  
“Totally coated by dirt.” Another oddity bothered her. “What about the... Quasimodo clone?”

“Undoubtedly, caretaker of the lot. Not undead himself, but manipulated by their power.”

Troubled by Sherlock’s insights, she sandwiched his long digits between both her hands. “Their reign will be ended, Uncle. They will pay for what they did, not only to our family, but to all those who fell victim to their insidious scheme.”

“Thank you, child.” His shoulders squared. “You must not be overconfident, however. There are certain ways...”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I wouldn’t want you to meet the same fate.”

“Trust me.”

His form dissipated; the tobacco odor lingered.

Even without the cloying stench, she couldn’t have slept after that.

Her phone calls in the wee hours netted positive results. They also precipitated wearing a second disguise under her boilersuit. She spent her shift climbing up and down metal ladders, scraping dried ash, paint flecks and - again - blood spatters off glass casements.

No more had she completed that task, than the attendant drew together dusty red velvet draperies suspended above each window.

The futility of housework confirmed, in Sheila’s mind, and the justification for the state of the sitting room at 221B.

She vacated the premises, as directed, crossing the lawn into a stand of trees where she shed the starched cotton work uniform to expose a mauve blouse with frilled collar and black slacks. From within knee-high hose, she tugged a pair of black flats to replace her boots.

Maury Albertson’s vintage silver Jaguar trundled along the gravel drive at 6:00, braking momentarily so Sheila could dash from her concealment into the passenger seat.

“I really appreciate this,” she greeted the dapper veteran services administrator.

“Hey, no problem. I’m out here quite a bit.”

“Could I ask why?”

“I’m writing a thesis for my doctoral degree on the detrimental impact of alcohol consumption on social interaction. I sit, drink ginger ale, and watch how people behave.”

“Have you... seen anything unusual?”

“Well, it’s more than just a nightclub, if that’s what you mean.”

“How so?”

The car slowed, waiting in a lengthy queue to reach the entrance. “Privacy can be had to indulge one’s... proclivities, for a price.”

“A brothel?” Sheila gulped.

“To put it mildly.”

“Anything else?”

Albertson considered. “The former dining room features every manner of gambling imaginable.”

“And?”

“Drug deals.”

“You’ve witnessed this?”

“Hey, I’m not getting sucked into any criminal prosecution!”

“If anyone from the Yard asks, I never saw your face.”

“Ta.” Three cars ahead of them. “Yeah, if the cops could get inside, they’d have a field day.”

“What about... more unusual pursuits?”

“Like what?”

Sheila realized her companion would think her daft if she mentioned her theories. “Never mind.”

A liveried valet helped her alight, then dropped behind the wheel to park Albertson’s car. Her escort offered his arm, and they breezed along a red carpet and beneath the castle’s portal.

She struggled to hide her satisfaction upon overhearing comments about the cleanliness of the floor and fixtures from those imbibing champagne and cocktails. As the night progressed, it seemed the lights steadily dimmed; she’d nursed a glass of red wine, circulating at a leisurely pace so no one noticed the glass never emptied.

Barnabas Clements interacted with the crowds, the women drawn to him in a strange fashion. He wasn’t especially handsome - rather gaunt and intense - but if his deliberately cultivated reputation included mentions of wealth, some females would gravitate to a dog.

Or, perhaps, some inherent animal magnetism...

There!

Her proprietary knowledge of the establishment enabled her to detect anomalies most people wouldn’t give a second thought. She’d already disregarded three surreptitious exchanges of cocaine for cash, and the stream of men and women - as well as men in pairs and women in pairs - up and down the grand staircase could be discounted as nonviolent crimes.

Later, she viewed men carrying women to the upper level - overlooked by the majority as inebriates in need of sleep - except she also glimpsed fresh splatters of blood on the marble. Victims already subdued!

Forcing her nerves to cease tingling, Sheila paralleled Clements as he guided a buxom chestnut-haired female into what had, in the castle's past, served as a library. That very afternoon, she'd peeked in to view the ceiling-high wooden cases lined with tomes the value of which she could only guess.

Sheila didn't think he intended to show his consort a book.

Avoiding scrutiny, she pretended to admire a potted flower, bending to the keyhole. The pair were nowhere to be seen, however. She risked turning the brass inlaid knob and pushing the polished wood forward an inch, glimpsing a secret panel sliding shut on the east wall.

He was taking the woman to the castle depths!

Admittedly, such an excursion could be a special promotion: fifty quid gets you a private tour. Sheila contemplated this option while she nonchalantly stepped inside, pretending to examine a huge, ancient tapestry suspended from tarnished rings. When the panel opposite rasped open, she ducked behind the moth-eaten weaving.

Limited wattage from wall sconces showed Clements, alone.

A flash of lightning paused his trek toward the exit. Tall French doors burst inward, as if jarred loose by the wind. As Clements spun, Sheila swore his lips dripped blood.

Her stomach rebelled, and every ounce of strength combined to prevent her from vomiting. As she focused on regulating her respiration, the shadow of a slender, auburn-haired figure - about her own age - in jeans and a fur-trimmed parka, marched beneath the lintel and confronted Clements.

"Who are you?" he snarled.

"It won't matter when you're dead."

Definitely American! Sheila gasped.

Clements, vocal register deepening, warned, "You are trespassing on private property!"

"Says the conscienceless murderer," she retorted.

"You wield no stake, no cross, no pistol loaded with silver bullets. You can do nothing..."

"Wrong."

She didn't twitch a finger, uttered no additional statement. Sparks originated at Clements' feet; within a split second, the blaze consumed his legs, torso and head.

His shrieks froze Sheila's blood.

She rushed toward the intruder. "What are you doing?"

"He killed a friend of mine!" shouted the woman.

"So? The courts will mete out punishment!"

"You'd know better, if you had any idea what he did to her. I knew he wouldn't stop, and this was the only recourse."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a vampire. So are most of his... minions."

The confirmation Sheila required. "The captives upstairs..."

"Kept just alive to feed them."

"Bastards." Jaws clenched, the detective shinnied up a ladder providing access to the higher bookshelves and rolled it toward the carved mahogany fireplace. She wrenched one of the crossed broadswords off its mounting above the mantle, then leapt to the floor. With an Errol Flynn-style flourish, the blade arced horizontally, severing Clements' skull from his neck.

His cries died amidst the crackle of burning flesh.

"Smart move," praised the intruder.

Sheila tossed the bloodied weapon on the antique sofa. "Never hurts to be sure."

Flames spread from the ashes of what had been Barnabas Clements to the carpet, then the tapestries and books. Sheila grasped this angel of vengeance would reduce the castle to no more than a stone shell.

Within the ring where the pair stood, the air remained free of smoke and fire. The narrative continued, "Esther was a paranormal investigator, writing a history of British ghosts. I met her while she engaged in some research at Guthrie Manor near Loch Ness a couple years ago. Last week, I received a package from her. She'd worked her way south to check out this pile, finding evidence that... Clements had been at his dirty business for decades. He'd reinvent himself periodically, to divert suspicion."

"Incredible!"

"Before she delved further into the matter, she left the letter and evidence with her solicitor, to be delivered to me in the event she didn't contact him by a certain date. Since I have an... affinity for the supernatural, she wanted me to resolve the matter once and for all."

Sheila scanned the youthful features. "I know you!"

"Forget me," she countered.

"What about all the innocent people within these walls?"

"They'll escape, unharmed."

“And, the others... like Clements?”

“Rendered immobile.”

“You have... the means?”

“Trust me, but don't make me explain.”

A second lightning bolt blinded Sheila, striking within a foot of her position. When she recovered her vision, the redhead had vanished.

Sirens resounded, announcing the arrival of emergency crews. Sheila fled through the French doors, circling the castle and mingling with frightened patrons wondering where their car keys had been stored.

Not that they could leave. Constables organized stations on the grounds where statements could be dictated, printed and signed, while hoses futilely shot water at the relentless inferno.

Instinctively, Sheila knew no effort would succeed against the conflagration until every stick of furniture, every guilty entity was consumed.

Remains of those aberrant creatures dissipated well before the inspectors slogged through the rubble. What they did find in narrow, hidden recesses - identified though DNA testing - were the missing individuals who had prompted her involvement in the case, and another 16 recently dead - each bearing the marks of fangs on their necks - with 83 more skeletons dating to the mid-1800s.

Nestled in the basket-chair the next morning, Sheila read reports in the *Times*, shuddering at each paragraph. Watson observed her reaction from his armchair near the cozy fire, fearing a relapse into her senseless isolation.

“We can go to Scotland,” he hinted. “We can find her...”

She smirked weakly. “No, John. Whoever - whatever - she is, it's best to leave her to her own devices. I've a feeling she wreaks havoc on any who disturb her” - her volume dropped - “as I've previously witnessed.” She tossed aside the newspaper, rising. “As Shakespeare wrote so long ago: ‘There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’”

“What if Vale rings?”

“He won't.”

With that, she retired to her room. Watson heard the key turn in the lock.

## Broken Bones

Johnny Watson had mulled his decision - with the counsel of Edith Hudson-Thorne - for more than a week. They agreed Sheila Holmes could not be allowed to remain isolated in her bedroom, partaking of the coca leaves she'd stored in her night stand.

The British Army veteran didn't bother knocking on the door that Thursday morning. Edith held a tray of eggs, bacon and toast; they whisked into the musty chamber simultaneously.

"Up and at 'em, Sheila!" Edith announced, setting the food at the foot of the mattress while Watson pulled aside thick draperies.

"Go 'way," the detective grumbled, huddling beneath the quilt.

"We're not going away," her flatmate declared, grasping the Amish-sewn material with both hands and yanking it onto the floor.

Sheila jolted upright. "What the devil are you two about?"

"We've had enough of your... pouting," commented the russet-haired landlady. "You need food, fresh air and something to occupy your mind."

"As a Dame of the British Empire..." Sheila drawled.

"Don't give me that rubbish! You'll get up this instant, eat your breakfast while it's hot, get showered and dress in an appropriate manner."

"Appropriate for what?"

Watson spat, "A visit from Scotland Yard."

"Oh, God." Sheila reluctantly threw her legs over the mattress' edge. "What's Dermot Vale want now?"

"Not him, but two of his detectives," Edith stated. "They rang thirty minutes ago."

"Well, then... if they're so desperately in need of my assistance..."

Edith and Watson exchanged glances. Neither would confess their machinations to convince the Metropolitan Police this intervention would, most likely, save their friend's life.

The pair who arrived at the top of the hour had no idea their visit had been prearranged. One ruddy and tall, his partner squat and fair, they sat on the red Victorian divan, nervous as cats.

Sheila studied their youthful faces from the basket-chair, attired in a Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and bare feet. "So, what's this case on which you need my help?"

"A series of bank robberies," began the smaller.

"Details, please."

His associate sniffed. "Each has taken place over the past three weeks at Barclays branches across the Midlands."

"How is Scotland Yard involved?"

"With Barclays' main offices in London..."

Sheila grimaced. "And the various local constabularies unwilling to collaborate in their investigations?"

Both detectives nodded.

"Have you the security footage?"

A wired external computer drive appeared from inside the thickset official's grey suit. Watson accepted the device and plugged it into the desktop computer. Sheila and the two men hovered over his shoulder as he scrolled through the files, playing each in turn.

"Stop!" Sheila ordered as the sixth series of images played.

Watson complied.

"Back it up about ten seconds."

The cursor moved on the screen, clicking the timeline.

A figure attired completely in black, with a ski mask and heavy gloves, stood at the teller window, where an employee could be seen stuffing British currency into a deposit bag. The woman evidently complied with the thief's request at a slow pace, hoping the authorities would arrive to apprehend him. He grew impatient, grabbing the bag and scooping the remaining bills into it. The gloves, however, prevented him from closing the zipper. The group watched as he removed his right glove and performed the deed.

"Freeze it, John," Sheila instructed.

"That doesn't tell us anything," griped the crimson-cheeked Yarder. "It's not like he left any fingerprints behind, since he took the bag with him."

Sheila grit her teeth, swallowing a caustic remark. "Can you zoom in on his hand, John?"

The image expanded to where the visible digits appeared ten inches long, only slightly pixelated.

"What are you looking at?" the pale observer rumbled.

"You honestly don't see it?" puzzled Sheila.

They chorused, "No."

"The man's little finger has been broken at some point in the past, and never properly reset."

They gazed at the screen closely, then gasped in awe.

"Possibly better than fingerprints, if you ask me," Watson ventured.

Sheila concurred, "Not many people to be found with a finger misshapen that way."

"We'll run it through our database," promised the smaller of the duo.

As Watson disconnected the drive, Sheila chuckled, "Should do."

Edith met the detectives at the base of the creaking staircase, showing them to the street. Watson hadn't moved from the desk, glaring at Sheila.

"You don't think they'll catch that devil?" he speculated.

"Not in a million years."

"Why not? You gave them the lead they need..."

"But, they won't find any matches in their precious database. This man has never been arrested before."

"How do you know?"

"Remember I studied Wing Chun with René Adler?"

"Up at Oxford, of course."

"A lot of the guys in the classes, who weren't so careful, ended up with broken fingers all the time."

Watson stiffened on the chair. "You know who it is!"

"I have an idea."

"So, you're going..."

"On a jaunt to the Midlands. Want to come along?"

Edith, standing in the doorway with a tray of cold cuts, bread and condiments, chuckled. "Glad to hear it!"

Sheila and Watson spun toward her, laughing together.

Less than 15 minutes later - enough time for Sheila to create a quick sandwich, slip into socks and sneakers and run a brush through her unruly brunette mop - she and Watson were in a taxi headed for Euston Station.

"Why Shrewsbury?" Watson queried as the cabby navigated through mid-day traffic.

"One of René's better students set up his own school in the town, after he graduated from Oxford."

"We're not taking any luggage. What if this takes longer..."

"Trust me, John."

With a shrug, he settled in for a silent journey. He followed Sheila from the curb, through the ticket queue, along the platform and into a first-class carriage, where she promptly fell asleep for more than two hours.

He noticed the perspiration on her forehead and temples as the time passed. A former medic, who'd lost his left leg to an IED in Afghanistan, he recognized

the signs of withdrawal from addictive substances. Tenderly, he used his handkerchief to dab moisture from her skin, not disturbing her slumber.

They disembarked in the historic city, Sheila's lips parched. Watson directed her into a shop, purchasing bottled water and insisting she drink. On the sly, he asked the clerk for directions to the nearest hospital, anticipating his companion's physical strength would be exhausted in less than an hour.

Sheila surprised him, however. Refreshed by the cool liquid, she set off at a brisk pace along the street, veering into a picturesque alley where a hand-painted sign above double metal panels indicated the Wing Chun training facility.

"Very professional," Watson grunted.

"Practitioners of the martial arts rarely accrue vast fortunes," countered Sheila. She gripped the tarnished handle, pushing the left section inward.

Watson restrained her, referencing a smudged notice. "They don't open until four."

"So?"

"This could be considered breaking and entering."

"We haven't broken anything. The door is unlocked."

Within the former warehouse, dimly lit by sun penetrating grimy windows high on the walls, a formal dojo had been created. A long figure, in black, executed a kata in the center of the padded floor, tall mirrors reflecting his expert movements.

Sheila waited until the series ended before speaking. "Hello, Mike."

The muscular sifu, sweat dripping from tawny locks, twirled toward the voice. He confidently strode toward the wall, flipping a switch that activated fluorescent lights suspended from the ceiling.

Watson blinked at the sudden brightness, catching Sheila when she staggered backward.

"Well, I'll be damned!" greeted Mike, snatching a towel from a rack and wiping his lean face. "Haven't seen you, Sheila, since Oxford - except in the papers, of course."

They clasped hands.

"You seem well, Mike."

"Well enough, given the current state of affairs."

"Tough going?"

Mike signaled them to accompany him into a lounge, where a pot of coffee waited on a warming plate. "Have a cup?"

"Please," Sheila replied.

Watson accepted the cheap ceramic mug when Mike presented it, as well. They sat on tattered furniture without actually relaxing.

“You wouldn’t come all this way just to check out my digs,” Mike remarked. “What’s up?”

Watson observed Sheila’s vain attempt to conceal her shivering by shifting on the cushions. “I was hoping to find Dan.”

“You’re not still feeling guilty about...”

When Sheila didn’t respond, Watson interspersed, “Guilty about what?”

“She never told you?” asked Mike.

“Nope.”

“God, it was beautiful.” As Mike recounted his story, Sheila blushed and visibly weakened. “Sifu Adler didn’t usually allow his female students to spar with the men. There was too much of a... weight and height differential. Sheila had been nagging him all term to let her take on Dan, who was already a second degree black belt. The rumor among the students was that they’d had an... unhappy love affair, and Sheila wanted revenge for him cheating on her.”

Watson squinted at the woman, slumped beside him.

“Finally, Sifu Adler gave permission. Now, Dan was a twig, but he stood nearly two meters tall, so he had the reach on Sheila. She impressed everybody, though, when she got inside and pummeled him mercilessly. All too soon, he was half-conscious on the floor. She’d wrenched his shoulder out of its socket and nearly crushed his right hand.”

“Leaving him with a broken little finger?” inquired Watson.

“Three doctors tried over a course of years, and they could never set it right.”

“So, where is he?” Sheila croaked feebly.

“He’s taking the kids class this evening.”

“We’ll wait, then.”

Watson objected. “Like hell, we will. You’re in need of serious medical attention...”

“What’s wrong?” Mike muttered.

“She’s coming off a... binge.”

“Coca leaves?”

The veteran flashed a look at the martial artist. “You know?”

“She’s been on and off the stuff since Oxford. I’ve never seen her like this before, though.”

“Her recent cases have...”

“Yeah, she pushes herself too hard. Gets on a tangent and becomes obsessed.”

Watson rose and offered Sheila his hand. She refused, appearing to anchor herself on the sofa for the duration.

“Sheila, please. If you don’t...”

She drained the coffee mug, perking up temporarily. “The only thing I need is a bit of exercise to... work out the toxins.” Teetering slightly as she got to her feet, she inhaled deeply, forcing a smile. “C’mon, Mike. Let’s go a few rounds.”

“You’re in no condition...” the sifu remarked.

“Must do.”

Sheila strode from the room, kicked off her sneakers and peeled off her socks, crossing the mats and taking up a defensive stance.

“You’re barmy!” Watson hissed.

Mike snickered, “She always was!”

Combatants facing off, Watson positioned himself near the row of mirrors, worry clouding his brow. Somehow, Sheila managed to fend off Mike’s strikes, pain evident in her expression. That she hadn’t practiced her skills in some time, and the sifu spent every day honing his expertise, made the match unequal from its inception - even with Mike pulling his punches in deference to their friendship.

Her kicks hit their target repeatedly, nonetheless. Mike praised her for such accuracy, just as she sent him airborne with a coffee-grinder sweep. When he crashed to the floor, she leapt on his chest, leveling her fist at his nose.

“Uncle!” he shouted, laughing. “You’ve still got it!”

Her focus unshifting, though, Sheila did not relent. Watson violated dojo protocol by approaching and yanking her away, without removing his shoes, but he didn’t care in that instant. Supporting her at the waist while shaking her back to alertness, Mike remained prone as they noticed their activities being watched from the shadows.

Twisting onto one elbow, Mike hailed, “Hey, Dan! Look who’s here!”

“I... see,” came the hesitant baritone.

Watson paused in his ministrations, allowing Sheila the dignity of the moment. As she brushed off her jeans, Dan joined them: gangly, a black mane framing angular features and solemn expression. The former Army medic mused whether Sheila had also been responsible for Dan’s previously broken nose.

“How was work today?” Mike asked, climbing upright.

Dan murmured, “Same old, same old.”

“Robbing banks using a rather tired technique can get pretty boring,” Sheila spat.

Mike's eyes widened as Dan retreated slowly. "What the hell..."

Watson withdrew, making a circuit of the mats to block Dan's egress.

"I've known you two were a couple since university," Sheila explained.

"Even though you tried your best to be discreet. With the... chaos that ensued after last year's massive system hacks, and the school threatened with eviction, it's not surprising you would do anything to keep Mike's dream afloat. If you'd have kept your gloves on, you might've gotten clean away."

Dan bristled, exposing his right hand with its malformed digit. "You can't say you recognized me by this!"

"Fortunately for you, I did. Scotland Yard didn't, and they have no way to trace you, if you stop now."

Watson grumbled, "You're not..."

"While a crime of passion is still a crime, John, some latitude must be given..."

"Because they were your friends?"

"No. Our country will never be the same. Those who are trying to teach youngsters honor, integrity and discipline should be allowed to continue, so future generations will be able to make the world a better place."

"Very eloquent, Miss Holmes." The squat, fair Scotland Yard detective declared.

Dan spun toward a badged trio, immediately behind Watson.

"You followed me?"

"On Superintendent Vale's instructions. He knew you'd find the culprit long before we could."

"Damn you!" Dan yowled.

His powerful side kick propelled Sheila into the mirror, shards flying in all directions. In the seconds she required to recover, he lunged at the police, who could not fend off his virulent assault. Then, Dan turned his attention toward Watson, who gestured in surrender, his prosthetic negating the prospect of defense.

Mike joined Dan, shoving him toward the exit. "Just, go! I'll... take care of this!"

Before the bank robber could escape, Sheila came up on his blind side, wrenched his arm and flipped him onto his back. Shrieking in pain, Dan writhed on the mat, unable to break Sheila's hold.

"You dislocated my shoulder - again!" he howled.

"That'll teach you to have more respect for the law," she quipped, summarily releasing him. "You'll both need to leave the country, now they've seen

your faces, and never return.” She extracted a wad of cash from her jeans and thrust it toward them. “Take the next flight to the States. You can... get lost there, if you keep a low profile.”

Mike helped Dan to his feet and they shuffled toward the door.

“There’s a Wing Chun master in Los Angeles - Aldo Pyke - he may be able to help you,” Sheila shouted after them.

Mike waved his thanks as they vanished into the daylight.

Watson directed a harsh gaze at Sheila, towering over the prostrate Yarders.

“You’ll... be charged with accessory to assault for this,” he predicted.

“Not a chance. I’m a Dame of the British Empire!”

“That doesn’t give you carte blanche to circumvent justice!”

“I’ll make nice with Superintendent Vale, and it’ll all blow over.”

“You hope.”

“C’mon, John. Help me get these idiots up.”

The pair from Baker Street woke the intruders and assisted them from the structure. Sheila treated them to a quiet dinner in a posh restaurant before the train whisked them back to London. In that time, she diplomatically convinced the diminutive detective he should look elsewhere for the bank robber.

Deposited by a taxi at 221B, Watson assisted Sheila up the narrow staircase to their sitting room. She collapsed on the red Victorian divan, knackered.

“You need a lie-down,” Watson advised. “By now, Edith should’ve cleared out any remnants of coca leaves you may have stashed about the place.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I have just one question: why did you fight Dan all those years ago? It couldn’t have been a romantic tiff, if you knew he and Mike...”

Sheila smirked. “Dan asked me to set it up. He’d... lost confidence in himself after coming to the realization of his true sexuality. He figured, if he could best me, he was still man enough...”

“But, he didn’t win.”

“He came closest of the guys in the class, though René only sanctioned that one match. The rest... happened when he wasn’t around.”

“What, on the university quad, or some dark alley?”

“I had a key to the dojo. The hard part was cleaning up afterward. For them, it was explaining their injuries.”

“How bad?”

“Broken arms, broken legs. Missing teeth, miscellaneous bruises.”

Jerking herself up, Sheila winked at Watson and trudged toward her room.

## The Connection

“You’re wearing the ring.”

Johnny Watson’s quiet remark from his bedroom threshold paused the triangle of buttered toast half-way to his roommate’s lips, but only for a second.

Sheila Holmes sat at the round table in the midst of a cluttered sitting room, perusing the London *Times* over a breakfast of bacon and eggs. She tapped the front page with the index finger on which an etched black onyx was fitted in a platinum band.

Watson limped across the carpet, blond mop matted, blue eyes bleary from a terrible night’s sleep. He didn’t need to focus to read the sidebar headline:

“Where would Tony Downton be today, if he hadn’t died?”

“Ah, another anniversary,” mumbled the British Army veteran.

Sheila continued chewing in silence.

“You can’t allow every mention of his name to remind you...”

“As much as I’d like to take Uncle Sherlock’s advice, it’s not just a matter of flipping a switch, like turning off a lamp.”

Watson sank on the wooden chair beside her, scooping a helping of scrambled eggs onto his plate. “What you need is a holiday.”

When she didn’t reply, he glanced at her. Violet eyes stared blankly at the wall, where the letters V.R. - formed by bullet holes - remained proof of the Great Detective’s erstwhile presence at 221B Baker Street.

“Sheila?”

A wry grin gradually transformed her taut countenance into a mask of satisfaction.

“You’ve got an idea?” Watson prodded.

She beamed at him. “What say you to a jaunt in the Highlands?”

“Scotland?”

She nodded.

“I... can’t this week. I’ve got appointments...”

Her silverware crossed atop uneaten food. “Would you mind if I went myself?”

“Not at all.”

“Ta.”

Without further explanation for the abrupt decision, she shuffled to her room and began stuffing random clothes into her Oxford duffle.

Ten minutes later, she'd vanished down creaking stairs and out the door. Edith Hudson-Thorne, the landlady, breezed in to clear away the leftovers, flashing her other tenant a puzzled scowl.

"Off on another case?" queried the russet-haired American widow.

Watson bit a slice of bacon in two. "Search me."

On the northbound express that noon, Sheila herself couldn't really explain the inspiration that sent her toward Loch Ness. In recent months, chance encounters with a young woman of baffling abilities periodically gnawed at her. She'd impressed Sheila with an innate detachment in tenuous situations; perhaps she might reveal how she suppressed her emotions, the knowledge facilitating an ultimate conclusion to Sheila's lingering grief.

The summer sun peeked over the western horizon when the taxi deposited her on a stretch of deserted roadway south of a village named Dores. The property's gate had been ripped from its hinges in recent years, given the amount of rust tarnishing the metal. A gravel drive led through dense forest; light rapidly fading, Sheila accelerated her pace toward the unknown.

And yet, not unknown. She'd trod the grounds of the sprawling 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgian mansion called Boleskine House before, during a bizarre escapade where the object of her visit had battled scores of intruders from many lands, and bested them single-handedly. That, in itself, denoted her exceptional status in the territory, as did subsequent incidents involving random lightning strikes.

To her right, horses milled in a corral, beyond which a bulb eerily illuminated the interior of a barn through a single window. Sheila heard two voices - an American contralto and a German-accented baritone - chatting, their words indistinguishable.

Approaching the large sliding door, Sheila discovered an auburn-haired female hoisting fresh straw into a stall with a pitchfork, alone. Hesitantly, she greeted, "Excuse me..."

"Oh, hell..." came a frustrated curse as the head whipped toward the intruder.

Both stopped, jaws agape. Recovering her wits, the youthful figure in t-shirt, jeans and sneakers set aside the farm implement and moved toward the uninvited guest.

"I apologize for trespassing," stammered Sheila, awed by the tranquility radiating from hazel orbs.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'm... on holiday, and was just taking a leisurely hike..."

“No, you weren’t. I recognize you; our paths have crossed a few times. We’ve never been formally introduced, but I know you’re some sort of a detective from London, and your natural curiosity brought you here to resolve the mystery that’s been nagging at you all these months.” She whisked outdoors. “Give me a hand, will you?”

Sheila gulped, following. “Of course.”

Together, they guided six magnificent horses - roans, bay and Arabian - from the corral to their stalls, where cool water filled the troughs and buckets of oats awaited them. Thus contented, the massive panel slid closed.

“Have you eaten?”

Sheila responded, “Not since breakfast.”

“I make a mean grilled cheese sandwich.”

In the surprisingly modern kitchen, stainless steel appliances almost new, Sheila accepted a seat at the dinette table while her hostess prepared a simple meal.

“You live here by yourself?” she wondered.

“By choice.”

“Because of your... situation?”

The tangled pony-tail snapped toward her. “How so?”

“In my line of work, observation is essential. I’ve noticed...”

“I had a sense you’d... caught on.”

Exquisite china plates set before them, with tall tumblers of milk, the conversation lapsed briefly. Then, dishes carried to the sink, she spoke while contemplating the dusk beyond the window.

“You know my name?”

“Lady Elizabeth Neville is your alias, as I recall,” supplied Sheila. “You used a different moniker in America.”

“It’s complicated. My birth certificate from the hospital in Helena, Montana, reads, ‘Elizabeth Candida Duryea.’ For the safety of those hereabouts, I felt it better to change it.”

“Because of your...”

“My grandfather was Jack Parsons. He used to live here, thanks to the FBI.”

“I recall his involvement in the early space program, from my studies at university.”

“His head was full of all sorts of secrets, occult and mundane, as they say. His death was staged in California in 1952, and the Feds relocated him here, to keep him from being...”

“Ah, I see. So, two generations later, you’re facing the same conundrum?”

“He died seven years ago.”

Sheila sipped from the glass. “Must’ve been quite old.”

“He looked the same as the day he left the States, thanks to...”

Thin lips pursed. “Chemical experiments?”

“Nothing of the material realm, and that’s the only explanation I can offer.”

“As Shakespeare wrote, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth,  
Horatio...’”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“So, your residency here, your pseudonym, are not only for your own protection, but that of the neighbors?”

A piece of straw mingled with soap bubbles when the ponytail bobbed in affirmation. “My friends call me Mustang.”

“Indeed?” Plucking a tea towel off the rack, agile fingers dried the utensils. “Like the gentleman I heard in the barn?” Sheila reached to restore a bowl to its shelf. Mustang grabbed her hand, studying the signet ring.

“I’ve seen this before,” the latter whispered.

Sheila sensed a deliberate distraction, but stiffened, all the same. “Where?”

“Do you play chess?”

“I... used to. Why?”

“Come with me.”

Water draining from the sink, Mustang ushered Sheila into a cozy living room, fireplace on the far wall dormant, a cane-backed rocking chair positioned beside an inlaid chess table, a game in progress.

Sheila propped herself on the arm of the green sofa opposite. “Who’s your opponent, or do you play solo, just for the challenge?”

Mustang, settling in the rocker, didn’t answer, arranging the pieces at their starting points. She slid the king’s pawn two spaces forward.

Sheila moved the queen’s knight.

“On a warm July day a few years ago,” came the recollection, “I was in the barn grooming the horses when we all were spooked by the sound of a low-flying aircraft near the house. I ran out to see what kind of fool would be so stupid, and saw a helicopter landing on the hill...”

“Where we first met?”

Mustang smirked. “Usually, I don’t mind people roaming around, given this place’s history, but I ran up there to give the pilot a piece of my mind. Not that I cared about damaged grass so much, but disturbing the horses...”

Sheila’s stomach knotted at the prospect of how this prelude would develop.

“Once the blades slowed, out stepped quite a fine specimen, a movie producer scouting locations for his next film.”

“Tony Downton.”

Mustang’s rook halted in mid-air. “How’d you know?”

“Logic, pure and simple. He wore this ring before I took possession of it.”

“Then... the two of you...”

“It’s a long story.”

“So is mine.”

This confounded Sheila even more. “Please, go on.”

“That original confrontation didn’t go well. At least, I convinced him - if he returned - he should use the farmer’s fields near Dores as a landing field for his chopper, then ride down on horseback...”

“And... did he?”

“In total, six times.”

“You noticed the ring during those visits?”

“Yes.” Mustang squinted. “You’re annoyed. Why?”

Sheila exhaled. “He never told me.”

“Were you... married?”

“Engaged, temporarily.”

Mustang resigned the game. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? His actions... were his own. You’re not at fault.”

“I... encouraged him.”

“What do you mean?”

“During his second location scout, he was climbing around the rocks on the shore, using a contraption to determine the best angles to film the loch. He slipped on some moss and fell in the water. It was cold; he was soaked. I invited him to take a warm shower and wear one of my sweatsuits while I washed his clothes. He made himself at home.”

Sheila bolted upright. “Are you saying...”

“We grew rather friendly, is all. For me, intimate relationships are downright dangerous. Have you heard of Thomas Burton?”

“The Irish actor?”

“Welsh, in fact. The first time he kissed me in a drunken stupor, an earthquake nearly destroyed the house.”

“What’s has that to do with...”

“I found Tony very down-to-earth, and intelligent.”

Sheila scoffed, “And not unattractive.”

“That can’t be denied. We would sit here of an evening, playing chess...”

“He regaled you with tales of winning Oscars and BAFTAs...”

“Beyond that initial debacle, I never saw an ounce of ego in the man.”

“Next thing you’ll tell me is you fell in love with him.”

Mustang averted her gaze.

“Or, he fell in love with *you*...”

“Love isn’t an option for me, as I said. I’ve been known to do horrible things when I’m angry, but any emotional reaction wreaks havoc.”

“So, emotions *did* play into it...”

She shrugged. “We were walking in the woods one afternoon. He was trying to figure out how to rewrite a scene where a couple... well, the process of experimenting with ways a shy man could approach a tremendously confident woman was disrupted by ground tremors uprooting trees, a severe storm drenching the countryside, microbursts of wind knocking us off our feet...”

“His bio-pic of Sherlock Holmes included no such scene,” grumbled Sheila.

“This was for his next project, set in California, with a female lead named Sheila...”

“Stop! Please!”

“What’s wrong?” drawled Mustang.

“My name is Sheila Holmes.”

“Oh, hell...”

In that moment, all the affection Sherlock’s great-great-niece had entertained for Tony Downton dissipated. That he had toyed with her, all the while seducing this... this...

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re mistaken. Because of my... situation, men are naturally drawn to me. I can’t count how many have accused me of radiating light like a beacon...”

“Most women would consider that a compliment,” snapped Sheila.

“To me, it’s pure torment. After what almost happened, I made certain he’d forget me, or ever being here...”

“You drugged him?”

“No. It’s just...”

Sheila flopped on the sofa. If Tony had no memory of... being unfaithful - even to a minor degree - did that absolve him of infidelity? she pondered. “If only you could make me forget *him*...”

“Why, if you care for him so deeply? He’s a phenomenal talent, kind, funny...”

“Because every time I dream of him, or think of him, my heart aches.”

“So it is with all lost loves.”

Violet eyes scanned Mustang's innocent features. "You... don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Tony Downton was murdered two years ago today."

Mustang's turn to display shock. "I... don't get the papers."

"It was on the telly, radio, internet..."

"I don't have access to any of that."

"You never wondered..."

"Once someone forgets me, it's... irreversible."

Did that resolve the crisis? Sheila mused. "I suppose you'll make me forget all this."

"You're aware of my secret, and involved in what some might deem law enforcement. That makes you a threat to me."

"Yet, after our previous dealings, you imposed no such sanctions."

"In fact, I did, that night at the Vampire Club. I can't guess why the directive wasn't heeded... which troubles me." Rising, she shambled toward the foyer, halting in terror at the spectre beneath the lintel. "Oh, hell, I did it again!"

Sheila, joining her, chortled at the sight.

"This isn't funny!" croaked Mustang. "Manifesting the dead has caused me more problems..."

"You didn't manifest him," her guest soothed. "This is my great-great-uncle, Sherlock Holmes."

The tall, gaunt image, clad in tattered Victorian garb, with stubbled chin and shaggy black hair, sniffed at the pair in disdain.

Mustang promptly recovered her composure. "That explains it, then."

"Explains what?" rumbled the elder Holmes.

"Your status as your niece's ethereal protector preempted the effectiveness of my command to nature that she forget..."

"Indeed."

Sheila couldn't quite fathom the connection. "You mean, I'll never forget..."

"Wishing to forget is a sign of weakness," her uncle reasoned. "Every ounce of knowledge is a chance to learn and grow, to master the self."

"So I've been told, many times," chuckled Mustang.

"You... truly have... conjured the dead?" Sheila countered.

"You heard me talking with one such earlier."

"How do you not go absolutely barmy?"

"Some people think I have."

"Enough of this nonsense," Sherlock interrupted. "Time to go."

Their leave-taking awkward, both women realized they were fated to keep each other's confidences. News of Sherlock Holmes' ghostly existence would be just as damaging to Sheila's reputation as the revelation of Lady Elizabeth Neville's supernatural proclivities would expose her to unwanted publicity.

On the London-bound train the next morning, Sheila deliberated how to expedite healing from this fresh wound. In the end, the episode proved Tony Downton as fickle as any man; she would never again allow affection to get the better of her.

Arriving at Baker Street, the Holmes signet ring was once more consigned to the drawer of her night stand, never again to be worn.

## A Monster in the Forest

Seated in his armchair beside the roaring fireplace, prosthetic leg detached, Johnny Watson chuckled over the London *Times* as Sheila Holmes emerged from her bedroom that November morning. Crossing to the cluttered round dining table, the young detective plucked a cheese Danish from a silver platter deposited earlier by landlady Edith Hudson-Thorne and bit into flaky pastry.

“What’s so funny, John?” came the garbled question.

The main section hastily folded and tossed across the sitting room, the British Army veteran snickered, “Read for yourself.”

The exposed page not the daily funnies - as she heard them described during her erstwhile stay in California - her curiosity prompted setting aside the impromptu breakfast, wiping sweet stickiness from her fingers with a linen napkin, and perusing columns beneath a blurred photograph, brow furrowed.

The article recounted statements by six witnesses who’d seen a “large green brute” roaming Sherwood Forest near Nottingham in recent weeks.

The description caused Sheila to envision Robin Hood mutated by steroid consumption, and she stifled her own giggle.

The image had been snapped by one of those named in the narrative, using a mobile’s camera while in a moving car. A pixelated green blob between bare branches could have been just about anything, in her opinion.

Abruptly, she stiffened, fingers automatically tightening the belt of her great-great-uncle Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown.

“Visitors?” Watson queried, observing her motion.

Her sideways grin augmented the snorted, “Dermot Vale, if I’m not mistaken.”

This frazzled Metropolitan Police superintendent didn’t wait for Edith to announce him, bursting across the threshold while that russet-haired American widow remained in the foyer below. She shrugged and trudged back to the ground floor kitchen.

“Have a seat, Mr. Vale,” invited Sheila, another chunk of Danish between her teeth.

Brushing snowflakes from his suit, he snapped, “No time, Miss Holmes.”

“Why the urgency?”

Vale’s pudgy digit thumped the newspaper among assorted detritus.

“This... creature has killed a man!”

Attempts to conceal her excitement failed. “And you’re requesting my assistance?”

“Frankly, yes. My squads have more important assignments, and can’t be wasted roaming the greenwood in search of ghosts.”

“But, obviously, not a ghost,” she countered. “It takes a tangible being to commit murder.”

“I... didn’t say it was murder, Miss Holmes.”

A gulp of coffee enabled her to swallow the contents of her mouth before speaking again. “Then, what...”

“The poor sod had a weak heart and, on a wager, ventured into Sherwood Forest to see if he could roust out this... He suffered a massive heart attack and was found dead six hours later.”

“So, to prevent mass panic...”

“We need you in Nottingham to expose whatever’s going on.”

Sheila eyed her flatmate. “Well, John?”

“I can’t leave the city. I’ve appointments the next three days...”

“Do you mind...”

Watson smirked. “Go ahead, if you’re so inclined.”

“Should do.” She accepted Vale’s outstretched hand, sealing the agreement. “I’ll be on the afternoon train.”

“Thank you, Miss Holmes.”

The police official departed in no less haste than he’d arrived. Once Sheila closed the sitting room door, she settled cross-legged in the basket-chair opposite Watson, the flames’ warmth soothing.

“What was that all about?” speculated the blond amputee.

“I haven’t the slightest clue. At most, a sergeant could have brought the request, or one of the inspectors rung me up. For Vale to come personally...”

“The Queen, you think?”

“Perhaps.”

Without being asked, Watson attached his prosthetic left leg and hobbled to the messy computer desk. Wiggling the mouse, the screen flashed and he began typing search parameters on the keyboard.

Scrolling through online news feeds, he leaned back on the swivel chair in short order, beaming. “The ‘poor sod’ with the bad heart to whom Vale referred was, in fact, the Earl of Winchester. He’d been visiting cousins in Nottingham and, being quite drunk at a ball in his honor, meandered outdoors. His relations believe he got lost in the dark and, wearing no coat, most likely froze to death.”

“Then, Vale falsified the tale...” drawled Sheila.

“No, according to these reports, the locals concocted the story, sharing it with the medics when they came to retrieve the body.”

“Ah!”

“You’re still going?”

“Must do,” the woman remarked. “It’s been too quiet in London the past few weeks. I need a little mental stimulation.”

“You consider sloshing through icy muck stimulating?”

“It may never reach that point, John.” She straightened and shuffled toward her room, emerging ten minutes later in an Oxford sweatshirt, jeans and hiking boots. Twirling the knob on the wall safe, she plucked a bundle of ten pound notes from a dwindling stack and stuffed them in the pocket of her quilted jacket. Sherlock’s black fedora flipped off its peg atop her brunette curls.

“You’ll need a sturdier hat than that, given the weather,” advised Watson.

“If so, I’ll stop in one of the local shops.”

“And pay tourist prices.”

“This time of year?”

“You didn’t read the last paragraph of the *Times* report.”

Retracing her steps to the table, Sheila squinted at the newsprint. The journalist noted how, due to the bizarre nature of the sightings, an influx of curiosity seekers was bringing unseasonable affluence to hotels and restaurants in the region.

“If this turns out to be no more than some marketing firm’s publicity stunt, I’ll be sorely disappointed,” she scoffed.

Watson grinned broadly. “I can see the headline: ‘Sheila Holmes exposes hoax.’”

“Tomorrow’s first edition!”

Breezing from the chamber, she descended creaking stairs and yelled to Edith she wouldn’t be present for dinner before slamming the door and sauntering toward the Baker Street Tube station.

The train from St. Pancras arrived in historic Nottingham mid-afternoon, depositing a crush of humanity on the platform. Bundled in thick layers, enterprising sorts hawked maps to the locations where what they’d dubbed the “Sherwood Sasquatch” had been sighted, doing ample trade.

Sheila avoided such scams, despite the realization scores of footprints would have eradicated true indications of whether this creature did, indeed, exist.

Veering off the main thoroughfare, she meandered side streets, pausing periodically to feign admiring window displays while listening to the locals’ casual conversations. Concerns ran high about whether the forest’s elusive resident would venture into the city at some point to wreak havoc on the populace.

At least, the ordinary folk had no knowledge of any ruse, she mused.

Strolling along Bridlesmith Gate near the Waterstone book shop, the detective glimpsed a decidedly odd individual - coatless, shirtless and barefooted, jeans shredded - huddled in a recessed doorway to avoid chill winds. Bronzed hair disheveled, left cheek freshly bruised and a nasty gash on the back of his right hand, he might've been proof the crush of tourists generated an increase in crime.

She'd no more decided to approach him with an offer of aid than a tall, husky figure with a long sandy mane and lamb's wool-lined suede jacket emerged from the clothiers opposite with an overstuffed shopping bag. Leading the shivering man into an alley, this Good Samaritan unloaded sneakers, socks, trousers, shirt, peacoat, knitted cap and insulated leather gloves.

Sheila hovered behind a tall packing crate, watching furtive brown eyes scan the lane as he hurriedly pulled garments over deeply tanned flesh. The bag was ditched in a wheelie bin as the two tramped onward; nimble fingers plucked the receipt from crumpled plastic as she pursued them at a discrete distance.

They weren't difficult to follow, the one who might have been a body-builder or professional wrestler, a full head taller than most everyone on the street. He'd purchased the outfit with cash - nearly 500 pounds in total. Why would someone so well off financially assist a man who appeared to be a vagrant? Sheila pondered.

This guardian had a bellow that could stop traffic, as well - literally. Rounding a corner to escape the press of bodies, his "You, cab!" was audible from Sheila's vantage point 100 meters away. Jogging to catch them up, she heard him direct the driver to Sherwood Forest.

Using the "follow that taxi" ploy never her intent, Sheila had little choice if she wanted to sort out the meaning of this odd relationship. Fighting both pedestrian and vehicle traffic, the journey took more than 30 minutes, but she managed to track the men toward one of the primary trails when they alighted near a stand of ancient oaks.

Fortunately, Sheila encountered no difficulty blending with the masses coming and going along packed dirt tracks. When the men ventured onto a narrower path, they weren't alone until much farther into the remote - and swiftly darkening - interior. Three more diversions ended with them settling near a sturdy lean-to anchored by three massive trunks.

Still chilled, a blanket was wrapped around the battered gent's trembling shoulders. He settled on a fallen log beside the campfire his companion revived from smoldering embers - dangerous in an area where a stray spark could lead to the destruction of more than 1,000 acres.

Coffee was brewed in a dented saucepan; unlabeled cans of beans were heated on a grate. Eggs crackled as they fried in a cast iron skillet. The weaker of the pair ate hesitantly.

“You need nourishment, Banner,” insisted the basso profundo, his whisper reaching Sheila’s ears.

An uncertain baritone responded, “I... don’t understand any of this. It’s been so long, and now...”

“Fear, plain and simple. You cannot shake the guilt caused by your latest experiment’s failure, and the fact the police would arrest you on sight...”

“But, it’s never happened this way before...” He sipped from a metal mug. “I always had to be angry for the transformation to occur, or in extreme pain.”

“Frostbite can be a source of incredible pain. It’s been uncommonly cold since we arrived in this foul realm.”

“How long will we stay?”

“Once you recover your strength, we shall take our leave. If I can get us to Norway...”

“That’s even colder!”

“Not where I will take you.” To the left, rustling in the underbrush distracted him. He rose, warning, “Remain quiet. I shall return.”

His lengthy gait removed him from view; Sheila took advantage of his absence to creep closer to the fire, nearly frozen herself.

“Who’s there?” croaked the hunched figure, scrutinizing his surroundings.

She could’ve maintained her concealment, but wanted the experience concluded in timely fashion. She stepped into the clearing. “A friend.”

“I have no friends.”

“All evidence to the contrary.” She squatted beside the flames. “May I trouble you for some coffee?”

Dismissively, he hissed, “Help yourself.”

She poured steaming liquid into the misshapen aluminum and dropped onto the log beside him. “Are you okay, Mr. Banner?”

Brown orbs widened. “How do you know...”

“I heard your... associate...”

His chin drooped.

“You didn’t answer me. Are you okay?”

“Anything but.”

American, Sheila determined. “This really isn’t... a sanctioned camping site.”

“I’m fully aware of that.”

“You’ve evidently spent considerable time outdoors. Are you poachers?”

“No.”

“Then, why...”

“Long story. Finish your coffee and take off.”

“There are monsters in these woods, you know,” she proclaimed.

Viewed from the side, Banner’s sneer resembled something diabolically ethereal.

“You’re not afraid?”

“Not of any rumored monsters.”

“Only of being tracked here by the constables?”

His shoulders squared as his head whipped toward her. “You the police?”

“No.”

“Then, how would you know...”

Gently, she stroked the bruise on his face. “Who did this to you?”

Banner brushed away her digits. “I... did it to myself.”

“Slipped in the shower?” A joke, but ignored.

He stood, unsteady. “Leave, before I make you go.”

As he swayed, she caught his waist for support. “Not until I’m positive you’re well enough...”

Just as the taller man reappeared between the trees, Banner’s pupils shrank and his irises altered to an abnormal white. She released her grip as he jolted backward, his physiognomy expanding like a flat tire being pumped full of air. Cloth and sneakers rent asunder, she marveled at the mutation.

“Oh, Banner, not again!” rumbled the bass from behind her. “What triggered you this time?”

As he dragged Sheila away from the imminent danger, she confessed, “I’m afraid it was me.”

“You pose no threat.”

“He suspected I might.”

The enraged roar of a green behemoth flexing his biceps, eerily lit by the fire, reechoed through the forest, silencing cries of birds and other wildlife.

“Stay still,” she was instructed.

The great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes countered, “Who are you blokes?”

“That is not your concern.”

“Should do.”

Powerful arms uprooted trees and pitched them across the expanse as they watched.

“We are fugitives from our respective homelands.”

“That, I already grasped.”

Glancing down, his expression conveyed awe. “You are not the typical female I’ve chanced upon in this century.”

“To say the least.”

“I am Thor, son of Odin. He, in his human form, is David Banner.”

Sheila swallowed in disbelief. “If you refer to Doctor David Banner, the scientist and researcher, he died decades ago.”

“He wishes the world to think so, until such time as he resolves...”

“But, he’d be seventy years old, or more!”

“A mutation of his cells has preserved his relatively youthful condition, as he explains it.”

“Then, *that* is the monster people have seen and reported to the news media?”

“Indeed.”

“You’ve got to get him out of here, out of the country, out of...”

“That is my intention. Without passports, however, it is difficult to breach the borders...”

“How’d you manage to flee the States?”

“We stowed away on a freighter.”

His energy spent, Banner sank beside a felled oak and gradually devolved into his normal size, again shirtless and shoeless.

“Your clothing budget must be outrageous,” gasped Sheila. “Twice in one day...”

“We keep a spare supply. Last night, however, the troll roamed into the city, and it took me hours to locate him. I had no choice but to buy new from the shops.”

“Ah!”

Together, they knelt beside the bereft David Banner. Thor raised him off the frozen ground; Sheila enveloped him in the blanket as they steered him toward the heat source.

After 15 minutes of strained silence - while Thor extracted garments from a stockpile inside the shack, Banner dressed and Sheila attempted to mentally digest what she’d seen and heard - the Viking deity voiced their dilemma: “Will you help us, and will you keep our secret?”

The woman laughed outright. “If I tried to explain any of this to the authorities, they’d lock me away.”

“Join the club,” grumbled Banner.

“As for providing assistance, let me make a few calls...” She pulled a mobile from her jacket; Thor snatched the device.

“You’ll not tell anyone where we are!”

Exerting her limited patience, she didn’t strain to reclaim the phone. She spoke evenly, “Not at all. You’ll need resources, and I know who can access them.”

“No names...” Thor insisted.

“I promise.” Punching numbers on the screen he laid in her palm, she waited until the ringing ceased. “John? Get on the computer and search for cargo ships leaving port today for Norway.”

“What the devil?” barked Watson through the speaker.

“Trust me.”

“How soon...”

“It’s of the utmost urgency.”

A pause, then her colleague supplied details of an undocumented craft leaving at midnight from a cove ten kilometers south of Newcastle. Sheila didn’t bother to challenge his tactic of polling contacts from his veterans’ programs. She broke the connection and relayed her plan.

Stamping out the fire without concern for scorching his fur-lined footgear, Thor retrieved an oversized Rune-engraved stone hammer from the ramshackle dwelling, along with a frayed backpack. The trio marched at quick pace to the forest’s perimeter, where a taxi was hailed.

Deposited at the Nottingham station, they boarded the last northbound train without incident. En route, she explained their transport was not sanctioned, so their lack of proper paperwork should not be disputed.

“We will remember your solicitude always,” pledged Thor, straddling the gap and offering Sheila his hand as she exited the car.

Banner remained moodily uncommunicative, the bag slung over his slouched shoulder as he traversed concrete toward the taxi stand.

Sheila drew him aside, muttering, “Will you answer my question?”

“Is there an answer?”

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“I’ve died many times, kiddo. This... creature inside me won’t let me rest.”

“Is there any hope for a cure?”

“After so long? Who knows? I try to keep my hopes alive with the continual advances in medical technology, but I’ve endured failure after failure...”

Thor signaled from the idling vehicle. “We don’t want to be late!”

Banner jerked from Sheila’s grip.

“Will you be all right?” she persisted.

Calloused digits caressed her cheek as he flashed a sad grin. “Your... kindness to a couple of strangers opens up that possibility.”

She watched the black vehicle accelerate down a mostly deserted street and merge with the night. Consulting the digital schedule on a wall-mounted LED display, she dropped on a molded plastic bench to await the 4:00 AM London express.

Limbs beset with muscle spasms caused by extreme exhaustion propelled Sheila up narrow stairs at 221B Baker Street well past noon. Johnny Watson monitored her arrival from his armchair, smirking playfully.

“Did you catch the monster?” he quipped.

“He’s safely on a ship to the Continent.”

Watson’s posture shifted. “You mean, it was real?”

“Improbable, but accurate.”

“My God!”

“God had nothing to do with the fate of that poor soul.” She detoured toward her bedroom. “Science can create its own form of hell.”

Before the door slammed, Watson shouted, “Would you clarify that?”

He heard, “No,” before the latch clicked and the key turned in the lock.