

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Parliamentary Predicament

A Collection of Stories

by

Eugenia Lucas

An Official Request

Edith Hudson-Thorne climbed the creaking stairs, breathing labored. The silver tea tray she carried held not only china plates, cups, scones, cakes and an ornate ceramic teapot, but the business card of a caller she hadn't expected.

The landlady managed to tap lightly on the door of the second floor flat. Johnny Watson pulled the panel inward.

"What's wrong, Edith?" he puzzled, relieving her of the burden and hobbling to place it on the cluttered round dining table.

Speechless, she motioned at the tray. Watson followed her gaze, snatching up the parchment rectangle and reading the name.

"Sheila!" the Army veteran bellowed.

Tying the belt around a tattered purple dressing gown, Sheila Holmes emerged from her bedroom, brunette curls uncombed. "What's so urgent, John?"

"There's a client waiting downstairs." He thrust the card at the detective, hand trembling.

An examination of the texture and lettering failed to impress her. "So?"

"Sheila, it's the Foreign Secretary!" Edith gulped.

"To be precise, 'Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs,'" Sheila corrected. "He's a man, like any other."

"He's *waiting!*"

The younger Holmes chuckled. "All right, Edith. Bring him up. I won't be long."

As she vanished into her room, Edith and Watson gaped at each other, astounded by this callousness.

"You think her reputation has gone to her head?" the young man pondered.

"That, or she's gone 'round the bend."

Edith stepped onto the landing and signaled to the British official. Propping his damp umbrella against the wall, he held fast to a leather briefcase as he ascended.

Middle-aged, balding on his crown, the Armani-clad figure shook hands with Watson upon entering the sitting room. The wounded veteran's embarrassment at his own t-shirt, track pants and stocking feet - and the chamber's general disorderly condition - flushed his cheeks.

"Your service in Afghanistan is well known, Sergeant," came the booming compliment. "I'm honored to finally meet you."

A diplomatic ploy? Watson mused. Nonetheless, his stomach unknotted and he had the wherewithal to clear a pile of newspapers off the armchair near the dormant fireplace to offer this distinguished visitor a seat.

Sheila's reappearance resurrected Watson's knots. She wore a red flannel shirt and jeans with bare feet.

Her fellow residents of 221B Baker Street bit their lips in shock.

The Right Honorable Cole Drummond didn't seem to notice what might have been taken as a slight of his governmental position. He clasped Sheila's slender fingers before settling in the armchair as she dropped onto the basket-chair.

"How may I be of assistance?" she began, avoiding the polite inanities customary for such occasions.

Drummond glanced at the pair hovering near the threshold.

"Edith, John, will you excuse us?" Sheila ventured.

With a flurry of excuses, Watson led the landlady toward the servants' stairs.

"Would you like some tea?" Sheila offered. "It's a shame for this tasty spread to go to waste."

"I'll have a cuppa," replied Drummond.

Rising, Sheila poured steaming liquid for her guest.

"Now. Tell me what pressing matter has you so concerned you've not slept sufficiently for the past three days."

Drummond paused with the cup half-way to his lips. "How'd..."

"Observation, Mr. Drummond. Simple observation. Please, leave out no detail, no matter how small."

It might have been Sherlock Holmes speaking and, in fact, his great-great-niece felt the spectre towering over her right shoulder.

"There have always been spies, Miss Holmes, threatening the security of the Empire," Drummond began. "Organizations such as MI5 and MI6 have, up to now, been able to keep track of most foreign agents..."

"Recent developments, however..." Sheila urged.

Drummond placed the saucer on the side table, blue orbs focused on her. "We suspect a member of Parliament to be selling information to our enemies."

"You have no idea who?"

"Correct."

"Background checks have turned up nothing?"

"Correct."

"So, you want me to... look a little deeper into the habits and activities..."

"Exactly."

“Of which members?”

“All of them.”

Sheila mentally calculated the time involved in researching over 1,400 elected MPs and Lords. “An extensive inquiry?”

“Yes, including personal interviews.”

“That... would not be advisable, Mr. Drummond. If the guilty know they are being investigated, they will endeavor to conceal what otherwise might be innocuous - but telling - facts.”

“As you wish.” Drummond stood. “We will deliver the available records and reports first thing tomorrow, and will pay a rate of 100 pounds per hour for your services.”

“Very generous.”

“Money is no object when it comes to finding this traitor.”

Sheila accompanied the Foreign Secretary to the street door, ensuring he took his umbrella with him into the light spring drizzle. Then, she joined Edith and Watson in the kitchen at the rear of the structure’s ground floor.

“A case?” asserted Watson.

“Yes.”

“With which you’ll need my help?”

Sheila chuckled. “Of course! When the records arrive tomorrow, I’ll need you to compile the list of names, and have your contacts check on where they’ve traveled, in country and out, for the past five years.”

“How many?”

The detective related her estimate. Her companion’s jaw dropped.

“This isn’t a voluntary effort. You can assure them they will be paid.”

The veteran relaxed visibly. “Sounds good.”

Edith shoved a plate of chocolate chip cookies toward Sheila. “How do you intend to spend the rest of the day?”

The 27-year old assessed herself. “Shower, dress and head to the Palace of Westminster.”

She grasped that each member’s file would contain a photo of the individual, but seeing them in person might make or break the case. The slightest inflection in the voice, nervous twitch, or body language could convey more information than pages of dry documentation.

From a seat in the House of Commons public gallery, a black fedora smashing her brunette curls, Sheila Holmes confirmed her opinion that more posturing, catering to special causes, “spinning” of the truth and outright lies went

into politics than any desire to serve the best interests of the average British citizen.

She didn't really listen to the words being bandied about between the Labour and Conservative majorities; she watched the faces, considered the garments, the hair, the shoes.

Evidence of dogs, cats, limps, cigarette, cigar and pipe smoking, assorted health issues and miscellaneous random quirks filled a grid Sheila had created in a notebook.

Riding the Tube to Baker Street at the lengthy session's conclusion, she discovered Watson perusing the day's London *Times*.

"Any good news?" she chuckled, kicking off her black loafers.

He replied absently, "Egg production is up in Suffolk."

"You sound... upset."

"A friend I met in hospital died yesterday."

"While you underwent treatment for the..."

"Yes. He had a much more aggressive form of cancer."

"I'm sorry, John. Will you be wanting to attend the funeral?"

"He was cremated already, his ashes scattered on the Thames."

"Can I do anything?" Sheila murmured.

"Help me to bed."

When Watson dropped the paper in the firebox, Sheila glimpsed the empty liter scotch bottle and glass on the side table. That made navigating the short distance from the armchair to his room difficult, as he couldn't balance well on his prosthetic leg with so much alcohol in his blood.

They each handled grief in their own ways: she'd drawn in on herself after the murder of Tony Downton, and didn't handle the deaths of Liam and Will McLaurin well, though she bore no responsibility for the disease that took the twins' lives.

The blond former Army medic dozed no more than he hit the mattress. Sheila disconnected his leg and covered him with a patchwork quilt, leaving him clothed in the t-shirt and track pants.

She traversed the sitting room, dodging piles of boxes, discarded papers and other detritus, to strip off the blue suit in favor of her uncle's dressing gown.

Edith knocked on the open door minutes later. "I kept some dinner warm for you, Sheila."

"I'm not hungry, but thanks."

"Let's not start that again, my girl. You starved yourself for months, claiming to have no appetite. You've been out for hours; you need sustenance."

Rather than argue with the twenty-something American widow, Sheila acquiesced. She picked at the spaghetti and meatballs, however, ingesting not more than five forkfuls.

A mug of hot chocolate soothed her stomach as she lounged in the basket-chair, reviewing her scribblings on the Parliament members.

“A common theory is that those with... addictions or other shortcomings worthy of blackmail are the most likely spies,” reverberated Sherlock Holmes’ baritone as he materialized amidst an odor of pungent tobacco.

“To state the obvious,” his great-great-niece remonstrated, her violet eyes averted from that countenance so closely resembling Tony Downton.

“You don’t hold with that concept?”

“I don’t hold with anything, yet. Greed could be a factor, if the traitor is paid well for the information. I’ve heard of too many politicians who will sell their votes for money.”

“Indeed.”

“The field is wide open, as far as I’m concerned, Uncle. Including the House of Lords.”

“Which you’ll be visiting tomorrow?”

“If I get some sleep tonight.”

Intended as a dismissal of the ghost, Sheila raised the smudged window to dispel the smoke, inhaling cool London air, albeit tainted with smog.

Fitful slumber didn’t improve her mood the next morning, nor did Johnny Watson’s obvious hangover. He grumped about in a disheveled state and not until the aspirin alleviated his pounding headache did he completely open his blue eyes.

“Did I behave badly last night?” he queried, sipping Edith’s strong coffee.

“Not at all.”

“Good. I’m sort of hazy on what happened after...”

Heavy tread on the stairs denoted the arrival of three score boxes of Parliamentary records. The delivery van carried six men, as well, to speed the process.

Edith objected to the massive collection. “As if there isn’t enough junk in this room!”

Sheila directed the crew to stack the boxes neatly beside Sherlock’s laboratory table. Each lid numbered, six rows of ten also required shifting the basket-chair, two small tables and the computer desk.

“How long will these be here?” the landlady snarled, running angry fingers through her russet locks.

“Six months?” Sheila meant it as a joke, but Edith did not pick up on the humor, storming from the space.

Watson leaned on the red Victorian divan. “At a rate of one per week, it looks more like a year, Sheila...”

“Two boxes a week, John. Pull the names and send them to your people. When you get the travel reports, there should be three piles: those who haven’t traveled outside the UK, those who have traveled outside the UK more than once a month, and those who have traveled to the same foreign country on a frequent or regular basis. Include who paid for the trip and credit card numbers.”

“What about the others? The periodic travelers?”

“The fourth pile, possibly never to be reviewed.”

“And what will you be investigating?” Watson challenged.

“Everything the government’s background checks missed.”

“That’s a tall order.”

“Indeed.”

Starting with A, Sheila opened a file and sank on the floor, engrossed in every line of the paper-clipped printout.

Watson took frequent breaks as he rifled the files, jotting names and cities, then emailing them to those friends he’d made who had access to travel databases. Sheila, conversely, didn’t move for hours on end except to pull the next record. Her lunch and dinner went uneaten, and she dozed, propped against the wall, long after her flatmate retired.

The process continued into the weekend, with Sheila reaching names beginning with F by the time the phone rang, startling her from intense concentration.

“John, will you answer that, please?” she requested.

The persistent jangling forced her to crawl upright and snatch the instrument off its cradle.

“Hello?” she snapped, curious why Watson wasn’t working at the keyboard.

Cole Drummond relayed disturbing developments. “The MP from Devon died when his Mercedes ran off the road yesterday afternoon.”

“An accident?”

“Scotland Yard indicated the break fluid had been drained...”

“Murder.”

“Evidently,” the Foreign Secretary affirmed. “We suspect a leak about your investigation.”

“With the traitor covering his tracks?”

“It’s possible.”

“Or, it could be unrelated. What was the MP’s name?”

“Harold Jenkins.”

“Are MPs assigned security?” Sheila asked.

“Ordinarily, no.”

“Think about it. Not only would it keep them safe, but also might halt the leaks if they know their activities are constantly scrutinized.”

“I’m already hearing objections to the fees you’re being paid. The national budget...”

“Damn the national budget, sir!” Sheila raged. “A small expense now might negate a huge loss in future.”

“True. Thank you, Miss Holmes.”

“Keep me apprised of any additional mishaps.”

Drummond broke the connection; Sheila strained her biceps rearranging the boxes to locate the file on Harold Jenkins.

“John!” she shouted, receiving no response. A cursory glance at pages recounting the elderly Labour MP’s brief career featured a scheme expanding health care for cancer patients. His wife had died of brain cancer the previous year, his son of pancreatic cancer a decade prior.

Sheila poked her head into Watson’s bedroom: empty. Shuffling to the former servants’ staircase, she called, “Is John down there?”

Nothing.

“Dammit!”

The younger Holmes might not have qualms about keeping a Foreign Secretary waiting, but when she was forced to wait, her temper flared.

Hinges on the street door squeaked, and she hurried to the front of the structure. “John?”

“Yes, Sheila.”

“Where have you been? I need you...”

He snickered, mounting the stairs gingerly. “Well, it’s nice to be needed.”

“I need travel information on Harold Jenkins as soon as you can get it.”

“But, the J’s won’t be...”

“He’s dead, John. Could be murder. Word has leaked out...”

“I’ll get on it.”

Bi-weekly airline flights to Switzerland, for both Jenkins and his wife, filled the second sheet of a two-page email. The first listed more recent jaunts to Rome, Athens, Berlin, Warsaw and Jerusalem.

None of it related to Parliamentary business.

“For a grieving husband, he’s out and about,” Sheila muttered to herself, curled up in the basket-chair.

Edith answered the phone when it rang that evening. She’d brought a dinner of fried chicken, biscuits and gravy, corn on the cob and tossed salad, hoping Sheila might eat.

The cordless handset was presented to the detective.

“Yes?”

Drummond’s voice conveyed his disappointment. “When police went to search Jenkins’ home, they found the kitchen lock forced and the rooms ransacked.”

“Anything taken cannot be identified, because no one knows...”

“Not so, Miss Holmes. Jenkins’ daughter-in-law lived in the house while he was away from London. A safe filled with 30,000 pounds was untouched, but all the papers in his roll-top desk are missing.”

“Was the desk locked?”

“Yes. As were three of the inside drawers.”

“The incriminating evidence is, therefore, gone,” Sheila surmised.

“Yes, and we thank you for your assistance. A cheque covering the total...”

“Wait, Mr. Drummond. You don’t want to stop now. Jenkins is, probably, not the only one involved in this fiasco. He may have been a minor figure, which is why he was eliminated. The death will frighten others into being more circumspect in their dealings, and those traitors must be found.”

“Are you positive?”

“I’m positive of nothing, having barely made a dent in reviewing the records. I’ll travel to Devon tomorrow to view the crime scene...”

“It’s already been turned over to Jenkins’ daughter-in-law.”

“Damn!” Sheila wanted to throw the device at the fireplace. She exerted every ounce of energy to control her tone. “If... a similar... incident happens... please instruct the police... to touch nothing until I arrive!”

“Yes, Miss Holmes.”

Watson had begun eating before Sheila concluded the exchange. She replaced the phone on its base and spun toward him.

“What do you need to know?” he inquired.

“If any other members of Parliament traveled with Jenkins on his latest trips.”

When the veteran continued gnawing on the corn, Sheila’s left eyebrow raised in disapproval.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that imperative!” he grunted.

“It is.”

Wiping his fingers on a paper napkin, he hobbled to the computer and began typing.

Sheila understood a network of spies among the MPs an unlikely prospect. If others had decided to betray their country - whether under the duress of blackmail or motivated by greed - they would be unknown to each other.

Making it more difficult to determine their identity.

Upending Jenkins' file in its original location, she restored the stacks and resumed the alphabetical review.

The majority of MPs, whether Labour, Conservative or other political parties, kept their noses clean, Sheila found, especially in an era where the least misstep could be disseminated via the internet at a moment's notice. Those who faltered fell primarily into two categories: close to retirement or new to the House.

More experienced politicians worried for their future, wanting to provide well for spouses, children, grandchildren. Newcomers could be duped into making poor decisions, being unfamiliar with Parliamentary procedures.

As data poured in on a daily basis, Sheila matched frequent travelers with their files. Government-sanctioned excursions required distinct authorization codes, eliminating many line items. An unpatterned assortment of flights to Berlin and Warsaw, though, caught Sheila's attention.

The next MP with reservations to Poland departed from Heathrow that very evening, she discovered. Seizing Sherlock's fedora from the wall rack, she rushed out the door without telling Watson her destination.

The Tube made it possible to bypass traffic near the airport, and she arrived at the international concourse well in advance of her quarry. Timothy Dudgeon might have been described as a quiet Parliamentarian of the Labour Party, voting with his fellows and rarely speaking.

Sheila's interest in what the pockets of his suit and overcoat contained could be confirmed when he passed through the security checkpoint. She positioned herself with a view of all the lanes, waiting until the sturdy, former rugby coach with close-cropped brown hair wound his way through the queue.

There! He removed the black wool coat and folded it in a bin. Then, he emptied his pockets, drawing a plain white business-sized envelope - unmarked - from inside his suit jacket. Using a miniature telescope once the property of her great-great uncle, found among the clutter on his laboratory table, Sheila was able to see the screen being monitored by uniformed personnel; that envelope contained a small computer flash drive.

No way for her to contact police and have him apprehended prior to his flight. At least, she knew how information was being transferred.

Back at Baker Street, Sheila kept Watson occupied, tracing tidbits of information about the credit card holders paying for trips to eastern Europe, and the hotels where the MPs stayed, to determine foreign influence. If it came to scouring the guest lists of those lodgings on specific dates, to determine any commonalities, she would escalate the search to that level.

Cole Drummond's phone call well past midnight roused the woman from the basket-chair, where she'd dropped off over the box of Mc files.

"Another mysterious death?" she speculated.

"I've sent a car to fetch you. The MP representing the West End was poisoned at Claridge's."

"Has Scotland Yard secured his residence?"

"They're on their way."

"And will be too late, I'm sure."

Sheila hastily changed clothes, having worn the same t-shirt and jeans for days. She heard the engine idling at the curb as she ran a brush through her hair, creeping down the stairs so as to not waken Edith.

The black limousine raised a laugh in her throat, a royal crest emblazoned on the paint. The chauffeur opened the rear door; she climbed inside and, seconds later, they sped through deserted streets.

Intruders at the MPs home - one in a row of similar dwellings - made no effort to hide their work. A crowbar had jimmed the deadbolt, ripping wood framework from the wall. They'd been in no hurry, rifling every drawer in each room, clearing book shelves and wardrobes.

A safe behind a Van Gogh original held 30,000 pounds. The amount struck a chord with Sheila.

"Are the bills genuine?" she directed at a pock-marked police lieutenant.

"That would be for a bank to determine."

"Then, ring the bank!"

"At this hour?"

"Absolutely!"

The official waved his companion to use a mobile to search for the nearest bank and summon the manager.

"Fingerprints?" Sheila wondered.

"Nothing."

"Briefcase or files?"

"None we've seen."

“The MP’s name?”

“Maurice Timmons.”

Sheila not far enough through the boxes, she knew nothing of the deceased.

The police sergeant approached, mobile extended.

“Who’s this?” she asked. “The bank manager?”

“No, ma’am. The Foreign Secretary.”

Snatching the device, she barked, “Yes, Mr. Drummond?”

“I just wanted you to know: beginning Friday at 7:00 a.m. each member of Parliament will have a 24-hour security detail.”

“Then, you’d best prepare for more murders in the next two days.”

“That’s the fastest the personnel can be mobilized...”

“I understand, sir.”

Nothing like a tight deadline to motivate the detective. The culprit behind the murders knew of her investigation, killing minor players in this game of espionage - and those with names she had not yet reached in the boxes.

Sheila scolded herself for her stupidity. So many possibilities existed of how someone could have discovered her methodology and sought to thwart it... even one of Watson’s supposedly trusted contacts might have divulged...

She started with an inquiry to the moving company that had delivered the file boxes no more had the sun risen. Some very real threats about losing their business license were employed before the names of the six were forthcoming.

Only five remained on the payroll.

“The last?” Sheila pressed.

“Died of a heart attack a fortnight ago,” the secretary stated.

Or, what resembled a heart attack, the young Holmes surmised.

She had his name and address, and could set Watson to pulling up his background...

“You’ve never been so... agitated, Sheila,” he complained.

“I despise dishonest politicians, but this exceeds dishonesty and must be stopped.”

Lincoln York’s work history ran the gamut of occupations, from nightclub musician to store clerk, freight hauling to chemistry teacher.

In not just England but a number of eastern European countries.

“Dammit!” Sheila grunted.

“Another dead end?”

“The mastermind behind this enterprise equals Moriarty for genius.”

Watson suggested, "Could it be someone affiliated with Moriarty before his death?"

"Doubtful. Moriarty's demise scattered his boys, and they wouldn't have had sufficient time to organize a network so intricate..."

"Then, what?"

Sheila leveled her gaze on the veteran. "I truly don't know, John. But there's one thing I might be able to do..."

She grabbed the phone and punched a series of numbers on the keypad. "Cole Drummond, please. Sheila Holmes calling."

In no uncertain terms, the woman demanded the Foreign Secretary call a mandatory special session of both houses of Parliament for that evening, then lock down the building until morning.

"By then, I should have an answer to this conundrum," she concluded.

"You're mad, young woman," Drummond remarked harshly. "I can't do that..."

"Even if it means their lives and national security?"

Silence on the line, then, "Don't fail me, Miss Holmes, or we'll both have to leave England, permanently."

Intent on continuing her research, a pounding on the sitting room door made Sheila jump. Watson left the computer to admit the visitors: two men in police constable uniforms.

With pistols drawn.

A third dragged Edith up the servants' stairs, kicking and swearing.

"What the devil..." Watson demanded.

"Sit yourselves down, and no one'll get hurt," ordered the individual wearing sergeant's stripes.

Sheila tried to calm Edith as they plopped on the divan; Watson resumed his place at the computer desk.

"What's this about?" the detective queried.

"Half a mo'."

Speaking into a microphone clipped to his collar, the sergeant advised all in order. "You may come in now, sir."

On the floor below, the door squeaked open, closed firmly. An even pace ascended the creaking stairs.

What appeared beneath the sitting room lintel elicited a curse from Sheila's lips.

Edith glanced first at her tenant, then at a black cashmere overcoat draped over massive shoulders, bearded features briefly in shadow. "Who..."

Watson sighed, recognizing the slicked-back salt-and-pepper mane, high forehead, prominent nose and imposing height from almost daily news coverage. “The Home Secretary.”

Constables shooed from the chamber, the Right Honorable Francis Kendall apologized for the fright in a cultured basso profundo. “We had to be sure this meeting is secure.”

“Because the phone lines are being monitored?” Sheila hinted.

“Precisely. I don’t see how you could allow it, Miss Holmes.”

“John - may I introduce John Watson, Mr. Kendall? - has installed jamming technology, so no one listening is able to hear more than elevator music.”

Watson’s eyes widened at this declaration, but he didn’t dare refute it, unsure of Sheila’s ploy.

“Ah, I see.” Kendall strode toward the window, unable to view Baker Street through smudged panes. “You know why I’m here?”

“To stop Mr. Drummond’s investigation.”

“Exactly.”

“Why?” Watson interspersed.

“It’s become a public scandal. Poking around in the lives of every MP and the House of Lords... It’s not cricket.”

“I have every reason to believe he’s correct in his assumption that members are providing intelligence to foreign operatives,” Sheila proclaimed.

“Be that as it may, MI5 and MI6 are fully equipped...”

“Obviously not, Mr. Kendall. Only after I accepted the commission did... suspect individuals begin being killed.”

“Upstanding representatives of the British people!”

“If you give me another week or so...”

“No!” Kendall raged. “This investigation ends now, and I will have a truck here within the hour to remove these highly sensitive documents...”

Sheila raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. “So be it.”

“Thank you.” From his inside pocket, he pulled a billfold, extracting a cheque, which he laid atop piles on the table. “Good day to you.”

The departing contingent, so heavy on the stairs, shattered already weak boards on the third step from the bottom.

“Son of a bitch!” yowled one, possibly due to his injured ankle.

The door slammed, leaving the residence in silence.

Sheila rose, stretching her limbs. “So much for that!”

“Are you going to pay for the repairs?” Edith demanded, “And for the stroke I almost suffered when those idiots broke into my kitchen?”

“That’ll be no problem,” Watson chuckled, staring at the table. “The cheque’s for a million pounds.”

“Better cash it before they void it,” Sheila instructed. “John, get on some decent clothes. You, too, Edith.”

“Why?” puzzled the landlady, calmer.

Nimble fingers snatched the black fedora from the wall rack beneath the large “V.R.” made with bullet holes. “We’re going to Claridge’s for dinner, of course!”

Defying Authority

Dozens of file boxes spread their contents on the sitting room floor at 221B Baker Street, annoying Edith Hudson-Thorne no end.

She'd grown somewhat accustomed to cleaning detritus from the chamber occupied by tenants Sheila Holmes and Johnny Watson, but two months having the stacks amassing dust pushed her patience to the limit.

British Home Secretary Francis Kendall had told Sheila a truck would remove the boxes after her investigation into members of Parliament was suspended weeks earlier.

Sheila had promptly whisked her compatriots to Claridge's for a sumptuous dinner, locking the doors against unauthorized access to the flat.

After six unsuccessful attempts to retrieve the load, the residence unoccupied, the trucking firm tore up the work order.

Leaving the detective to peruse page upon page of documents about the country's elected representatives.

From the first half of the alphabet, she had discovered nearly 50 MPs who might be in a position to be blackmailed, or need funds desperately enough to sell secrets to foreign agents. That didn't include those who allowed themselves to be bribed by special interest groups and might be more anxious to acquire additional sums of cash.

Nor did that number include the two men who'd died under mysterious circumstances prior to Foreign Secretary Cole Drummond arranging for continuous security - following a contentious overnight lock-down in both houses.

The phone conversations - tapped or not - lacked even the basic pleasantries in the days after that debacle. Where Drummond and Kendall, as government officials of the same party, should have been working in tandem on the matter, they seemed at odds.

Drummond's wish to preserve national security, Sheila fully comprehended. Kendall's wish to sweep the entire matter under the carpet, she didn't.

Nor did the latter's arbitrary payment of one million pounds assuage her suspicion, when she'd not earned half that, according to Drummond's offer of 100 pounds per hour.

The funds did allow her to generously compensate Watson's many contacts, who'd provided a plethora of data about the travels and activities of members already reviewed, simultaneously encouraging them to put forth additional efforts.

Had Kendall's intent been for her to surreptitiously proceed, though publicly rejecting the investigation to placate detractors and mislead the spies?

Sheila hadn't spoken to him long enough to deduce the truth and, with three constables aiming pistols at her, she'd not bothered to observe his demeanor and clothing beyond his height, powerful build and hazel eyes.

The full, greying beard hid much of his face, after all.

A delightful aroma preceded Edith's appearance with a dinner tray loaded with steak, baked potatoes, glazed carrots and chocolate cake. Watson emerged from his room, where he'd been trying to avoid Sheila's almost constant muttering as she read the printouts.

Both he and the russet-haired landlady realized Sheila not only leaned toward the eccentric, but embraced the Holmes family traits wholeheartedly.

Watson knew, too, that Sherlock Holmes haunted the rooms, interacting in almost tangible form on frequent occasions.

Shoveling cubes of tender beef into his mouth, he hoped the odor of tobacco would not spoil this particular meal.

"Sheila, eat, please," Edith urged, not daring to step on the scattered files.

"Later."

"That's what you always say, but never do," Watson scolded between forkfuls. "I swear, if you don't get up and clear these platters, I'll turn on the fan and blow those papers out the window!"

Brunette curls turned, so sallow features met her flatmate's expression. Recognizing the seriousness in blue orbs and pursed lips, she laid aside the file and climbed to her feet.

"You're becoming a right tartar, John," she stated.

"When you become a stubborn git, I have no choice. You've lost two stone, if you've lost an ounce, and you need to eat."

Placing the paper napkin atop her jeans as she sank on the wooden chair, Sheila inhaled. "It does smell incredible."

"Should do," Edith replied, withdrawing to her kitchen below.

A pleasant silence engulfed the sitting room for a few minutes before Watson spoke. "Do you want the latest update?"

"You know the sensationalized tripe on the telly or in the *Times* doesn't interest me."

"The Home Secretary has announced an initiative to streamline approvals for experimental cancer treatments."

"Harold Jenkins' proposal?"

Watson nodded.

Jenkins, a healthcare advocate representing Devon, had been the first MP murdered after Sheila began her investigation. He'd driven off the road, brake fluid having been drained from his vehicle.

"What about the cost?" Sheila asked.

"Oh, there'll be a corresponding hike in taxes..."

"The people will never approve."

"Kendall thinks they will."

"And, when the opposition starts their inevitable uproar, we'll see a new election..."

Watson glanced up from scraping every crumb off his plate; Sheila stared blankly at the far wall.

"What is it?" he pressed.

"Kendall is trying to force an election. If another party takes the majority, or even if his gang wins again, Drummond can be replaced without... undue scandal."

"Ending the investigation for good."

Sheila spoke through grit teeth. "When is a vote on the proposal scheduled?"

"Friday next."

"That gives me eight days..."

"You've got twenty boxes to wade through yet. It can't be done!"

"That's not what I meant. Eight days to convince Kendall that Jenkins' idea should be tabled."

"Good luck!"

Luck wouldn't have any role in Sheila's scheme. She abandoned the files for the evening, hoping for a decent night's slumber before donning a blue business suit, ivory silk blouse and heels, brushing her hair into a semblance of order, topping it with Sherlock's fedora and riding the Tube to Westminster Station.

Entering the Home Office on Marsham Street and bypassing security, a gruff male attendant greeted her in the Home Secretary's suite. She ignored the anticipated objections about not having an appointment, Kendall's scheduled meetings and heavy workload. Maintaining her poise - not easy for someone with her temper - she bent over the desk so her nose almost touched the pudgy administrator's flattened proboscis.

Stunned by the gesture, he didn't notice her finger activate the intercom system.

"Tell Mr. Kendall that Sheila Holmes wishes five minutes."

The door marked "Private" swung inward, activated by the Home Secretary himself.

Her reception, however, was not polite. Francis Kendall's salt-and-pepper beard twitched as she traversed the gold shag carpet to where two wing-backed brown leather armchairs were positioned near a roaring fireplace.

"You've thwarted every attempt to retrieve the Parliamentary files..." he hissed in a low bass register.

She quipped, "Can I help it my services are in great demand, keeping me out at odd hours?"

"With your maid and your... boyfriend in tow?"

"Edith is my landlady and my friend. John is my friend and associate, nothing more."

"That's neither here nor there," Kendall grouched. "The waste of taxpayers' money..."

"The million you paid me is a greater waste, unless you meant it as an incentive for me to keep working..."

Long, tapered fingers silenced her forcibly. Standing a full head above her 5'10", he whispered, "These walls have ears."

Buttoning his shirt collar and straightening a polka-dot tie, Kendall slid her arm through his and paraded her from the room. "Ben, we're going for a quick cup of coffee," he declared as the astonished clerk watched.

Francis Kendall guided Sheila through the building's main entrance, along bustling lanes to Victoria Tower Gardens and the Thames River.

"So, you *did* expect me to proceed..." Sheila hinted.

"The constables who accompanied me to your flat were specially chosen due to MI5's surveillance indicating their... unsavory activities."

"You *wanted* them to believe..."

"Precisely. The killings ceased." He paused along the railing, ostensibly studying two swans on the water. "What have you learned?"

"I can get you a list of names..."

"No electronic or telephone communications of any kind. Your lines aren't the only ones being monitored. Mobiles have been cloned, email accounts hacked..."

"It's that extensive?"

"If I had my druthers, I'd bring you in and have you go through every nook and cranny. Security has been so lax, it's ridiculous."

"I could always send John. He's better at the technological aspects than I."

“The decorated Army vet? With his prosthetic leg, we could use the excuse he’s consulting on ways to make the building more accessible to the disabled.”

Sheila flashed a grin. “Very creative, sir.”

“Deceptive, you mean. How pathetic when a public servant must use devious methods to achieve a positive result.”

“As with the falderal about Jenkins’ cancer proposal?”

“So, you saw through that ploy, as well?”

“Given the circumstances of his death, you would be lauded for paying some tribute to his service, cognizant of it being a futile gesture, those voting in favor likely to lose their seats in the upcoming.”

“You have the mind of a politician, Miss Holmes. Have you ever thought of standing for Parliament?”

“Lord, no!”

Resuming their stroll, Kendall advised, “On your way now. Any updates on your investigation should be delivered to me in person, without having to so blatantly trick my assistant. There will be a standing order that you be admitted immediately, should you call upon me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kendall.”

They parted at the intersection nearest the Home Office. Sheila waited until her companion vanished through the main door, then trekked toward the Tube station.

Passing a familiar figure trying to hide his identity behind a popular scandal sheet.

“Sad when the Foreign Secretary must do his own surveillance,” she addressed Cole Drummond, pausing to admire a shop display.

“I saw you with Kendall on my way from a meeting, and wanted to be sure...”

“Sure of what?”

Discarding the newspaper, the balding, middle-aged figure clutched her elbow and steered her into a nearby alley. “Are you still on the case?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell him as much?”

“Yes.”

“You fool!”

Sheila scanned his worn features and sunken eyes. “You’ve not been sleeping, or eating. You know more than you’ve told me...”

“I only suspect. You’re the detective; you should have uncovered the truth by now.”

“What truth?”

“That Kendall is the one selling us out to the highest bidder.”

“Eh?” Sheila sniffed.

“When he closed down the investigation, he paid you, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

She hesitated. “Enough.”

“From that, I take it more than enough. Whatever the sum, it came from his own private account.”

“Not... government coffers?”

“Do you think the accountancy office would authorize a voucher for such an enormous sum without a flurry of questions?”

Sheila felt an absolute idiot. She should have directed Watson to pull the MPs’ financial records, to see who might have been making unduly large deposits into their accounts. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Drummond...”

“Make no further reports to him, or to myself. When the time comes that you have collected solid evidence against the traitors, go straight to the Prime Minister. Don’t let anything dissuade you.”

“I won’t.”

He shoved her toward the street but, before she rounded the next corner, she glimpsed three men in constable garb divert into the alley. Retracing her steps, she saw Drummond already on the ground, blood streaming from his face.

The Foreign Secretary’s “mugging” and subsequent death was spread not only across British newspapers, but international media.

Sheila rested in her basket-chair, frustrated and confused, as Watson read the articles aloud on the computer screen.

“Were they the same trio who came here?” the veteran asked.

“I didn’t see their faces. If it is Kendall orchestrating the operation, he could have scores of hitmen at his command.”

She deliberated at length. She’d previously estimated the mastermind of this scheme to be a genius, and Kendall had shown definite tendencies in that direction with the plans he’d outlined to her that very afternoon. By convincing her to report developments in person, he prevented her from sharing information with anyone else who might impede his activities.

“I just can’t believe it,” she murmured.

“If you’d used the powers of observation you’ve practiced, you wouldn’t have to believe. You’d know.”

Sherlock Holmes, hawkish features framed by unruly dark hair and stubbly whiskers, puffed his briar pipe contentedly from the armchair.

“Don’t you think I’ve been browbeating myself for failing, Uncle?” Sheila countered. “If I’ve placed the country in danger, I... could never forgive myself!”

“If you revise your methods, there should be no need for such drastic consequences,” noted the elder Holmes. “Get some sleep, and start fresh in the morning.”

“Says the man who stayed awake days on end when involved in a case,” Watson joked.

Two sets of eyes glared at him.

He shrugged and resumed typing search parameters on the keyboard.

Sheila, for her part, sought freshness via an open window, after her great-great-uncle dissipated in a swirl of pungent smoke.

“John, did we receive the report from Scotland Yard about the thirty thousand pounds found in the murdered MPs’ safes?”

“At least two weeks ago.” He rummaged around the desk, drawing a folded sheet from the clutter. “You really need to get organized.”

“Is there a way to do it?”

“Organize you? Sure. Spreadsheets, a database...”

Sheila eyed the boxes. “Do you think you could organize the information on these MPs?”

“As much as you’ve gathered, it’s already done.”

“Really?”

She joined Watson at the computer. He opened a spreadsheet, where each member’s name was listed, along with categories such as travel, finances and family.

“You get a fifty thousand pound bonus for this, my friend,” Sheila praised.

At the end of each row, a total indicated the likelihood a particular individual qualified as an espionage suspect. “Scores over 15 are your most likely candidates.”

“Does that list match mine?”

Watson highlighted the grid and sorted tabulations in descending order. “I have three more than you do.”

“Is Kendall included?”

“No.”

Sheila’s eyebrows arched; she paced the carpet. “It could be he’s cunning enough to cover his tracks.”

“Someone with his connections could set up foreign bank accounts using false names...”

“And no way to find them.”

“Could do.”

“Meaning, we’re stuck. There are just too many suspects, too much data, and too few hours in a day.”

“What about the constables who came here with Kendall, and killed Drummond?” Watson suggested.

“If they really *are* constables.”

“There would have to be surveillance video of them, from either event.”

“Could your contacts hook us up?”

The blond Army veteran shrugged.

“Try, please.”

“If we can find them, we can sweat the truth out of them.”

Sheila swallowed. “I... wouldn’t want to use force.”

“Oh, yes, you would,” her companion countered, rising and yawning. “I can see it in your eyes.” He shuffled toward his bedroom. “I’ll get on it, first thing. You should take Sherlock’s advice, too.”

The door closed, leaving the woman to secure the window overlooking Baker Street and retire, slumber unlikely.

Long strides brought Sheila Holmes to the reception desk at Metropolitan Police headquarters shortly after 8:00 AM. Hours staring at the ceiling confirmed Scotland Yard would have some record of the trio that accompanied Kendall - if he’d told the truth.

If he’d been lying, the men would not be traced through official channels.

The detective demanded to see the person in charge of assigning constables to special details. A disenchanted sergeant escorted her to a conference room along a narrow corridor, where she waited more than 30 minutes.

“I’m Inspector Oglesby,” stated the trim gentleman who finally joined her. “How may I be of service?”

Sheila detailed her request, concluding, “It shouldn’t be difficult to get the names.”

The tow-headed Oglesby peppered her with inane questions and drew on excuses of confidentiality and time constrictions to refuse.

She rose from the green buttoned leather chair and leaned across the table. “When your lack of cooperation comes to the attention of the police commissioner, what excuses will you use to defend yourself?”

Five minutes later, she departed New Scotland Yard with an envelope containing not three constables' names, but eight. Five had been stationed outside 221B Baker Street during Kendall's visit for added security.

Progressing from bluff to bluff was not her preferred tactic, but if she confronted each man separately, she might be able to convince him she knew the entire story, so he would divulge whatever facts he possessed.

Eight would be simpler than dealing with scores of Parliament members any day, she sighed, boarding the packed Tube for the jaunt to Baker Street.

Watson's internet background searches on the constables pared it down to six within an hour of her arrival at the flat.

"They both died of brain aneurysms within the last ten days," he stated, sending the obituaries to the printer.

"Young men?"

"In their early 30s."

Sheila plucked the sheets from the ink jet's tray, studying the photographs. Both deceased had been in that very room only weeks previous. "Murdered, because they knew something I'm not supposed to find out."

"Then..."

"The other six are in equal danger." Pacing anew, the woman contemplated options. "Who do we know that could round up these men and bring them to a safe location?"

"Some of the vets from the clinic might be willing to help," Watson offered, snatching up the receiver.

Sheila swatted his hand from the device. "No, John. If what Kendall said is true - that our lines are tapped and our mobiles have been cloned - you'll need to ring them from a restaurant or pub blocks from here. Have them collect the constables by force, if necessary. Bring them to..." she rifled her memory for neutral sites, "the stage entrance of the Lyceum Theatre at midnight. That will give me time to arrange accommodations while we interrogate them."

In the guise of holding an elaborate conference, an entire floor of the Amba Hotel Charing Cross was reserved for two days using a good portion of the one million pounds provided by Home Secretary Kendall. During the wee hours, a furtive stream of men crossed the lobby and rode the lift to the fifth floor, each constable sharing a room with one of their veteran guards.

First priority for Sheila: identifying the remaining constable who had aimed weapons at the Baker Street residents in Kendall's company. The rest were asked a list of cursory questions before being released.

They - as the detective had surmised - had no insights into the reason for the raid, remaining at the intersections and the dwelling's entrances to prevent unauthorized ingress and egress while the Home Secretary conducted his business.

Settled in a comfortable suite, Sheila and Watson chatted up their sole prisoner, plying him with whiskey to loosen his tongue.

Jeremy Trotter had been with the Metropolitan Police for nine years, supporting a wife and two young children. His son diagnosed with advanced leukemia, the incidental costs ate up most of the family's reserves. He resorted to taking bribes from organized crime operatives, looking the other way when arrests should have been made, or informing the miscreants when raids were scheduled.

"Why were you detailed to Baker Street with Francis Kendall?" Sheila prodded.

"I was told a pair of dangerous criminals were holed up there, and it would mean a promotion if they were captured alive," Trotter drawled, well in his cups.

"Nothing more?"

His tousled black mane wagged lazily as he drained his glass.

"What about the afternoon you followed Cole Drummond into an alley near Parliament and beat him to death?"

Trotter's mouth moved, but no sound emerged for some minutes. "We were responding to a drug deal. When we arrived, we found Mr. Drummond already dead."

The constable slumped on the sofa and, initially, Sheila believed he'd passed out from the liquor.

Watson scrambled to his side, awkwardly bending to check his pulse. "He's dead."

Another bullet whizzed through the open window, from a vantage point over the road.

"Get down!" Sheila cried, pulling her flatmate onto the carpet, accidentally disconnecting his prosthetic leg. She'd knocked the phone off the side table, as well, yelling for the concierge to summon the police.

Five minutes passed without further gunfire. Sheila crawled to the window, peeking through the torn screen. Then, she followed the trajectory to where a projectile had lodged in the far wall.

"This is too much!" Watson groaned as he reattached his leg. "No more than a handful were privy to... this arrangement."

"Yes, it's getting farcical, isn't it?" A small penknife freed misshapen metal from the paneling. "Looks like a semi-automatic rifle."

A squad of constables, inspectors and medics invaded the suite moments later, suspending any exchange between the pair. Sheila didn't exactly divulge the true purpose of their presence in the hotel, and Watson echoed her statement that Trotter was an old acquaintance they'd met on the Tube and invited up for a drink.

The fact five other constables had been - basically - kidnaped and questioned against their wills never came up; each had been gifted with 1,000 pounds for his silence. Watson's veterans had received a like amount for their assistance.

"You're going through that money like water," Watson snarled at Sheila as she paid the bill before they departed.

"Yes, that was a waste. I wanted to keep him safe, but..."

Boarding the Tube in the station below the hotel, he grumbled, "You'd think MI5 or MI6 would be all over this mess, if information is being leaked so... blatantly."

"Ah, dear John, the world views members of Parliament as sacrosanct, above suspicion. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the intelligence services *are* investigating; they can, at least, maintain a tight grip on their procedures without the media or unsavory sorts learning of it." Jerked sideways as the car rounded a curve, Sheila clutched the overhead strap tighter, still bumping Watson off balance. Their eyes met, and she flashed a sardonic grin.

"What?" her companion puzzled.

"My God! All this time, we've been used as a mere distraction, while the culprits are being sought through official channels..."

"How can you be certain?"

"Think about it, John! Every move we've made has ended in tragedy. We've been watched or, better, subjected to high-tech eavesdropping, as a way to take the heat off the real investigation." She braced herself as they squealed to a stop. "It's not just our phones and computer that have been hacked. Our sitting room is bugged!"

"But, how?" Watson objected. "No one's been in there..."

"Except while we were at Claridge's after Kendall paid his untimely call."

"And threatened to reclaim the boxes."

"Which hasn't occurred, despite his agents having keys to the building."

"Are you positive?"

Sheila smirked. "The next money spent will be to change the locks."

"Edith won't like it."

"She won't mind, as long as she doesn't have to pay for it."

Stepping across the gap, they trudged toward the stairs.

Edith Hudson-Thorne, clad in a pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, shuffled from her sitting room on the ground floor when she heard the door. “Where the devil have you been?” she complained.

“You didn’t need to wait up,” Watson stated.

“I didn’t need to, but the phone has been ringing off the hook...”

Sheila asked, “Who?”

“Newspapers. Television, of course. You’ve been implicated in another murder...”

“Disconnect the damned thing,” Watson advised. “Go, have a good lie-down.”

“You both look quite knackered, yourselves.”

Hushing the landlady, Sheila led the way up the creaking flight to the sitting room, where she switched on every light.

“Aren’t you going to bed?” Watson queried.

Her lips against his ear, she replied, “Not until we find the bugs. Then, I’m going to write a little radio-style drama to throw whoever’s listening entirely off the track.”

Plucking the London *Times* from the magazine rack, she rustled the pages as if reading, while moving around the chamber searching for wireless transmitters.

One discovered in Sherlock’s Persian slipper among the shag tobacco, another had been clipped to the lampshade beside the computer. A third was wedged among the detritus cluttering the laboratory table, partially obscured by the stacks of file boxes.

“Cheers, John!” Sheila called, deliberately slamming her bedroom door.

“Night.”

The lights were extinguished, except for a small faux-candle on the mantle. Sheila parked herself at the dining table with pen and paper and began scribbling dialogue.

“We’ll perform this at breakfast,” she whispered. “Get some sleep.”

“How can I, when they might be listening to me snore?”

Repressing a laugh, she waved Watson to his room.

Platters of eggs over-easy, bacon, hash brown potatoes, toast and marmalade, with a steaming carafe of coffee had replaced piles of discarded envelopes and other trash on the round table. With a finger to her mouth, Sheila shooed Edith from the sitting room, positioning herself and Watson near the closest mic.

“How’d you sleep, John?” she began reading.

He cringed at the sappy lines. “Not too well. I had the strangest dreams...”

“Don’t you have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon?”

“Um... sure. Just to be sure the cancer is still in check.”

“Do you want me to come along?”

“No need. I know you’re busy finishing with the MPs’ files.”

“Oh, I’m finished with that. An absolute dead end. Once the truck comes to haul away the boxes, I’m going to use what’s left of the money to take the boat train to Paris for a week or so. You and Edith are coming with me.”

“It’ll be good to get away after so many weeks stuck in this hole.”

Sheila eyed Watson, who had ad libbed that line. “Have some more bacon, John.”

“This is delicious.”

Finishing the meal, they descended to the kitchen and stepped out the rear door.

“Are you serious?” the Army veteran demanded.

“Of course not. I want them to believe I’m no longer investigating, so they’ll pack up and go.”

“You mean...”

“I’m no longer investigating espionage accusations against members of Parliament.”

“Then, what will you be investigating?” Edith interspersed, dumping rubbish in the wheelie bin.

Sheila grew wistful. “I’m not exactly sure.”

Averting Scandal

The locksmith's cordless drill tightened the last screws on the new deadbolt at 221B Baker Street as a humid dawn lit the sky.

In the sitting room above, Johnny Watson sat beside the open window, relishing a cool breeze while monitoring activity on the street.

"Anything unusual?" Sheila Holmes asked from the round dining table, where she sipped coffee and munched a slice of buttered toast.

"All clear."

"Good."

The choice of locks had been a major decision for the domicile's residents. One of Watson's fellow Army veterans brought an array of options, from numeric pads to fingerprint scanners.

"The more intricate the technology, the more likely it will be hacked," had been Sheila's conclusion.

Installing an unobtrusive security camera above both front and rear entrances another suggestion, Edith Hudson-Thorne, the building's owner, quashed that notion. "I'll not live in Fort Knox, with my comings and goings recorded."

Three new keys and a spare in hand, Watson paid his comrade generously and in cash, according to Sheila's instructions. Once the laborer departed, the spare was tucked into Sherlock's infamous Persian slipper among the tobacco, where a wireless microphone had previously eavesdropped on conversations.

The day after 60 file boxes were loaded on a lorry - to Edith's great relief - Sheila destroyed the bugs which had been surreptitiously installed by parties unknown.

She would have nothing further to do with tracking down members of Parliament who might be selling sensitive information to foreign powers.

Or, so she thought.

Two weeks passed without incident, no additional murders affiliated with that case. Sheila debated traveling to the Continent for a vacation, until a special messenger delivered the envelope one sunny afternoon.

Edith signed for it at the door, then carried it up the creaking staircase. "The lock needs oil, or something," she told Watson. "It sticks when I turn the bolt."

"I'll call Dave," he replied, inspecting the missive.

"Where is she?"

“Having a lie-down, catching up on the sleep she missed these many weeks.”

“No, I’m not.” The gravelly voice penetrated Sheila’s bedroom door.

Edith retreated at the sight of the emaciated form bundled in a tattered dressing gown that shambled across the carpet.

“You... should see a doctor,” the russet-haired widow advised.

Watson ventured, “Another bad dream?”

The detective nodded, claiming the parcel and ripping it open. Blurred violet orbs scanned typewritten text. “Shit!”

“What?” Edith and Watson chorused.

She thrust the sheet toward them and retraced her steps to her room.

Edith retrieved the letter from where it fell. “Miss Holmes,” she read, “meet me at the Victoria Memorial, 4 PM today. Wear blonde wig and sunglasses.”

“An assignation?” Watson muttered.

Edith showed him the signature. “With Francis Kendall?”

Sheila left her uncle Sherlock’s black fedora on its hook beside the door when she departed, suitably disguised as an ordinary shop clerk - her description of the fringed, layered wig, floral print dress and heels. It not yet the evening rush hour, she had no problem boarding the Tube at Baker Street and riding to Victoria Station, walking the remaining distance to Buckingham Palace.

Her Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Right Honorable Francis Kendall, approached from the general direction of Marsham Street, his stride and bearing almost military. Tall, with salt-and-pepper hair and matching full beard, he could impress other politicians and dignitaries before ever opening his mouth to speak in a booming baritone.

“What’s on your mind?” Sheila greeted.

Kendall did, indeed, treat the meeting like a romantic assignation. Bending over her hand, he then draped it through the crook in his arm and escorted her to a bench opposite the statue of the 19th century British queen.

“You’re being followed?” came the deduction.

“Yes.”

“Do you know by whom?”

“Not a clue. It started about a week ago.”

Sheila chuckled.

“There’s nothing humorous...”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, sobering. “You realize you’re in the middle of one hell of a complex situation.”

“How so?”

“First, let me say this much: I didn’t appreciate being your personal red herring in the matter. Six lives - at least - were lost because you purposely distracted the traitors, whoever they may be, from the real investigation being conducted by military intelligence.”

“A half dozen lives, in exchange for national security is... an acceptable loss. It wasn’t my doing, initially, at any rate,” Kendall asserted. “That fool Drummond concocted the idea without consulting anyone...”

“Because MI5 was unable to break the case?”

“I suppose.” Kendall’s hazel eyes shifted, taking in their surroundings. “If I suddenly kiss you, don’t be offended.”

“They’re here, now?”

“Positioned at my three o’clock and ten.”

At those angles, Sheila couldn’t readily see them. “I need you to get me in with the intelligence boys.”

“Why?”

“They’ve obviously bollocksed up the job...”

Powerful arms abruptly encompassed her in an unyielding embrace and Kendall’s lips assaulted hers mercilessly. Trying to appear as if she responded in kind, Sheila heard camera shutters clicking from a short distance to her left.

When Kendall finally released her, he whispered, “Meet me at the Red Lion Pub tomorrow at noon.”

Her cheeks flushed in spite of herself, Sheila gulped, “I’ll be there.”

He strode toward the Thames, not glancing back.

Sheila restored her respiration, observing any unusual movements in Kendall’s wake. Two paparazzi, cameras slung from their necks, and four black-suited operatives shadowed the official.

Bulges beneath their jackets confirmed the quartet’s armed status.

They weren’t a regular security detail, either.

“Shit,” the woman grumbled, rising for the trek to the Tube.

That expletive was repeated when the evening papers printed a full-color photo of the couple’s kiss on the front page. A 20-second video of the encounter, captured by a curious tourist evidently, went viral on social media.

No privacy anymore, Sheila lamented.

Watson enjoyed a good laugh over the incident. He didn’t voice the quip he devised: how Sheila had finally recovered from the death of actor Tony Downton, to whom she’d been briefly engaged.

He knew such a remark would upset her.

The ghost of Sherlock Holmes didn't care if he upset his great-great-niece. "You didn't notice any distinguishing features of that squad?" he scolded.

From her seat in the basket-chair, Sheila grunted. "New shoes, new suits - off the rack - plain ties, no rings or jewelry, conservative haircuts..."

"Meaning?"

As if a fog in her brain cleared, she leaned forward. "They're just in on a boat or train, without any luggage."

Watson interrupted, "Why not a plane?"

"For a plane, identification is mandatory. It's still possible to cross the Channel in a private craft, land in some isolated cove, and ride a train to London without papers."

Sherlock smiled his approval.

"These men didn't have so much as a wallet in their trousers," Sheila continued. "Only pistols in shoulder holsters."

"Foreign agents?"

"Must do."

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

"Tomorrow, I'll let Kendall reach the Red Lion Pub first, then question one of the men trailing him."

"Very good."

A good idea, certainly, but repeatedly running the scenario through her head kept Sheila awake that night. Her stomach rebelling against food, she skipped breakfast and parked herself at the dressing table, deciding on a curled black wig, large loop earrings and gypsy broom skirt with scoop-necked blouse.

From the intersection nearest the Red Lion, Sheila saw Kendall's limousine deposit him half a block away. As he entered the tavern, another nondescript vehicle braked 50 meters along, four men alighting on the sidewalk. Their leader signaled positions to this detail, posting himself directly over the road.

While he would've been the preferred choice, Sheila opted to breeze past him, round the next corner and collar his dark-complected associate.

He was shoved into a lingerie shop, past mannequins and displays, into the stock room, the sales clerks' mouths wide.

Sequestered in a changing room, Sheila's forearm compressed the man's throat. "Answer my questions and you'll go free. If you lie, I'll know, and you're a dead man."

Her prisoner did not comprehend the statement. She translated into French, Italian and German.

No response.

Her Russian only passable, she muddled through a couple statements in Arabic. A light flickered in his dark eyes and, when two constables burst in, she surrendered him to them, instructing he be held in isolation until the commissioner could be contacted by the Home Secretary.

Sheila straightened her clothes in the mirror, departing the shop for the Red Lion Pub.

Kendall awaited her at a small square table in the far corner.

“Sorry I’m late, but you may get some answers, now one of those puppies is in custody.”

“Puppies?”

“The men who’ve been dogging your steps. Middle Eastern, possibly.”

A waiter approached, and they ordered coffee.

“Allow me to apologize for the undue... publicity our meeting caused yesterday,” Kendall stated.

“First, a red herring, now a mystery lover. I hope your wife wasn’t angry.”

“I’m... not married.”

“Your file...”

“She died three years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” Their coffee delivered, Sheila sipped the foul brew and cringed. “You’ll want to ring Scotland Yard from a public phone and give them instructions how to handle the prisoner. I’ve a feeling his comrades will disappear...”

“I appreciate your efforts. It’s very... disconcerting to realize every move is watched.”

“What about hooking me up with military intelligence?”

Kendall scowled, barely visible with his beard. “The director claimed to not require your assistance. They have the matter well in hand.”

“Including tracking the MPs’ foreign bank accounts and common affiliates?”

An eyebrow arched, the Home Secretary impressed. “I’m positive they’ve taken those factors into consideration...”

“But, you didn’t believe I would?”

“How you could possibly have access...”

“The network of connections I’ve developed in recent years would boggle the mind.” Shoving the ceramic mug to the center of the table, she rose. “If I solve this before MI5, I want another million pounds.”

“You’ll deserve every penny, if that happens.” He clasped her hand before she could escape. “I’m sorry again about the kiss.”

The words slipped out as she withdrew. "I'm not."

Despite noontime crowds on the street, Sheila detected the other three foreigners gone from the scene before she turned toward Baker Street. Another crew would be deployed, undoubtedly, but Watson could warn his connections to post watches along the coast for unauthorized boats landing on remote beaches.

She stripped off the disguise and fell onto the oak double bed for a nap.

Which didn't last long.

"Sheila?" Edith jostled her tenant's shoulder gently.

"Go 'way."

"I'm sorry, Sheila, but a sealed file was just delivered for you."

The detective rolled onto her side. "What time is it?"

"Not quite three."

"Shit."

The manila envelope, sealed with a blurred crest in red wax and marked "Top Secret", contained a summary and complete transcript of the suspected Arab's interrogation by police. A cover letter on Metropolitan Police stationery explained what transpired.

"In collaboration with Interpol, it was discovered the individual, who had been issued at least six passports with different names, came from Tehran," Sheila read. "He confessed to having been sent by the Iranian government for the express purpose of shadowing - and possibly kidnaping - the Home Secretary. His confederates had also been assigned to follow the former Foreign Secretary, Cole Drummond, but upon learning of his death, focused on Francis Kendall, as well."

The inspector assigned to the case concluded, "The prisoner hanged himself in his cell using his own trousers shortly after the interrogation concluded. Travelers discovered his associates shortly after 1:30 PM dead of gunshot wounds in the loo at St. Pancras Station in what appears to have been a murder-suicide."

"Shit!" Sliding off the mattress, Sheila stumbled to the wardrobe, searching for a pair of jeans.

"Don't bother," Edith said from the threshold. "You didn't throw your laundry in the basket, so I collected it while you were asleep. It won't be ready for a couple hours."

"Sorry. It's been so crazy..."

The russet-haired landlady sniffed. "Even on the worst day, a person can find a minute to gather a pile of clothes and place it in the bathroom hamper."

Watson joined Edith in the doorway, parchment envelope in hand. "This arrived for you a few minutes ago."

The hasty scrawl on a half-sheet instructed, "10 Downing Street, 5 PM, come as the blonde." The initials "F.K." confirmed the sender.

Snatching the faded purple dressing gown, Sheila aimed for the shower. She'd have to look her best - even disguised - for the British Prime Minister.

Trekking from the Tube's Embankment station to London's most well-known address, the detective ached to kick off her shoes, even with heels of medium height. She preferred sneakers - and slacks - rather than feminine attire.

A crew of technicians set up a podium and microphones outside the entrance at 10 Downing Street. Peering over the rim of her oversized sunglasses, Sheila queried, "What's all this?"

"A press conference is planned for six o'clock," replied a distracted electrician.

Not odd, actually, given the Prime Minister's position as spokesman for the government. She dodged the plethora of wires and rang the bell.

A staid butler escorted her to a drawing room, where not only Francis Kendall waited - distinguished in white tie and tails - but squat, white-crowned Prime Minister Horace Evans, assorted assistants and a Catholic priest in cassock, lace-trimmed surplice and gold-fringed ritual stole.

"You look like you're on the way to a wedding," Sheila quipped.

Evans closed the door. "The wedding is to be here."

"Then, let's be about this business, so you can crack on."

Kendall gazed at Evans, and Sheila caught their expressions.

"What the devil?" she snapped.

The Prime Minister signaled the underlings from the chamber. "Have a seat, Miss Holmes."

She refused, albeit politely.

"The photograph circulated yesterday by the media has caused... unwarranted complications in a very sensitive matter," Evans stated, hovering near the marble fireplace. "We need your cooperation to negate the scandal, so the government can proceed..."

"Stop being evasive, Mr. Evans. Say what you must, so I can refuse and go home."

Kendall crossed the carpet in two strides, hazel eyes pleading. "It will be a marriage in name only, for a period of six weeks to two months..."

"Are you out of your bloody mind?" Sheila shrieked.

Evans retrieved a sheaf of papers from his polished mahogany desk. "We've created a persona for you, which the media will believe. Your real identity will not be involved, your reputation as an intrepid detective unscathed..."

Sheila grabbed the sheets, flopped into an antique armchair and scanned the type. "This is ludicrous!"

For the purposes of the marriage license - attached with a clip - her name would be Jennifer Blythe, age 29, from Birmingham. She supposedly met Kendall when he taught at Cambridge before venturing into politics, and they renewed their acquaintance after his wife died.

"This way, we can explain the kiss near the Victoria Memorial as the result of his proposal, and today's wedding as the wish to not wait for some elaborate church service months hence," Evans noted.

"Then what?" Sheila mumbled.

"You'll move into my town house," said Kendall. "It's quite large. We'll probably never see each other."

"What happens in the meantime? My work..."

Evans interrupted, "Your work will be acting this role, exclusively. You'll be well compensated..."

"What about the espionage?"

"That matter is well on the way to being solved."

"Bullshit! Every lead has ended up dead. You're needing to unearth a genius, and it'll take another genius to do so!"

"A genius like yourself?" Evans scoffed.

"Should do!"

Kendall grasped her arm with elegant, tapered fingers, his baritone low and persuasive. "Sheila, please. There are aspects of this... matter of which you have no knowledge. Let those with more... experience guide you..."

"If you hadn't botched this whole mess, we wouldn't be here now! How can you claim experience?"

"For that, I apologize. I knew I was being followed by the... agents, but not cameras."

She snorted. "In your prominent position, you should never forget cameras will dog your every movement. If you traveled with your assigned security detail, they could monitor..." She paused in her diatribe. "By the way, where was your security detail, yesterday and today, at the Red Lion?"

Loosening his collar, Kendall gulped. "When I take my... daily constitutional, I ask them not to accompany me."

Evans glared at his associate. "Frank, you know that's not permitted. The whole purpose..."

"I know, Horace, but it's very stifling not being able to take a step without being watched."

“A guiltless soul would have no qualms about doing so,” Sheila remarked.
“Is it wrong to want to behave like an ordinary person for an hour a day, rather than some endangered species?”

Evans did not respond.

“Sheila, will you marry me?”

The woman, in lieu of running trembling digits through her brunette curls - remembering the blonde wig - contemplated her uncomfortable shoes. “You’re far older than I. Won’t that cause a whole different scandal?”

“What have you in mind?” Evans inquired.

“Give me ten minutes to revise this biography, make it more plausible... and innocent. Then, we go through the ceremony, hold the required press conference, and be on our way.”

Both men sealed the bargain by clasping Sheila’s hand. Evans then led her to a laptop computer, where she opened a blank page and began typing.

Jennifer Blythe went from 29 years of age to 36, a professorial assistant at Cambridge who interacted with Kendall in the course of their daily routines on the campus. They met again after Kendall’s wife died, at a party held by a mutual acquaintance from the university.

“Far more realistic,” Evans praised, perusing the printout.

Sheila rose, slipping aching toes into her footgear. “There’s one more thing you must do, my dear Francis.”

Kendall squinted at his intended wife. “What?”

“Shave off the beard.”

Hazel orbs widened and he spun to the Prime Minister. “Horace... I’ve had this beard for 15 years!”

“It makes you look sixty,” Sheila said. “You’re 45. If nothing else, trim it down to a mustache and goatee.”

Evans laid a hand on the Home Secretary’s shoulder. “It’s a small price to pay for national security, especially if she’s giving up her life.”

Intercom activated, the butler presented himself. Kendall accompanied him into the adjacent bathroom, where scissors, shaving cream and a razor transformed the politician’s visage.

“Much better!” Sheila observed when he emerged. High cheekbones now visible, the square jaw solid, he presented a younger mien.

“Are we ready?” Evans hinted. “It’s closing in on six, and I don’t want to keep the press waiting. They have deadlines...”

“Oh, hang their deadlines,” the woman scoffed. “Let them think a loving couple is enjoying their first moments together.”

Fetching the priest and witnesses, Evans left the pair alone briefly.

“You understand, we’ll have to make quite a show for the public,” Kendall announced. “A kiss at the podium, attendance at various functions...”

“I’ve seen the old movies of political liaisons.” She peeked through sheer curtains at the gathering throng outside. “I’ll need to notify John and Edith, otherwise they’ll have Scotland Yard hunting for me high and low.”

“That wouldn’t do,” Kendall agreed. “I can have a messenger deliver a note that you’ve been called to the Continent on an important case.”

“They wouldn’t believe it. I have to see them in person.”

“And tell them what?”

“That I’m married.”

“What... if they make the connection...”

“They won’t. You see, I’ve been rather... reclusive since Tony Downton was murdered through my negligence...”

“Yes, I recall the coverage.”

“More recently, two other men died - no fault of mine - but I still grieve their demise. Knowing I was responsible for the murders of the MPs, Cole Drummond and others... They’ll accept that I’ve decided to leave the profession and go off to some remote estate where I can tend roses.”

As the drawing room door opened, Kendall assured her, “It shall be arranged.”

Fingers entwined, the couple greeted the group processing into the rustic space, including secretaries, servants and an official photographer.

The priest made short work of the ceremony, skipping scripture readings and commentary. Vows exchanged, a simple gold band slipped on a reluctant finger, the requisite kiss complete and marriage certificate signed, Horace Evans led the newlyweds out to the press.

Of greatest import to the journalists: Kendall’s reduction of facial hair. They included editorial comments in their reports of the relationship being “true love” if the Home Secretary had shaved his trademark beard.

Sheila anticipated as much. Her age increased from the original, she didn’t see the need to act a flighty, immature girl. She stood as Kendall’s equal, her arm hooked through his, a tiny bouquet of violets in her other hand.

She hadn’t noticed who thrust it at her just prior to the service.

Evans provided a statement, then Kendall answered a few questions, with Sheila chiming in some “forgotten” details about their courtship.

“I apologize for my undignified behavior yesterday,” Kendall proclaimed. “Jenny’s acceptance of my proposal so overwhelmed me, I allowed my emotions to override good judgment!”

“And, having known each other so long, we saw no reason to delay the marriage,” Sheila added. “Mr. Evans was kind enough to expedite the process...”

“What about a honeymoon?” someone shouted.

“We’ll be taking an extended vacation when the current session of Parliament ends,” Kendall answered.

The headlines proclaimed it a “love for the ages” with assurances the couple would be left to adjust to their newfound status for, at least, a day or two.

Withdrawing into 10 Downing Street, another hour passed before the street cleared and they could make a quiet exit to Kendall’s West End domicile. As the minutes elapsed, they concocted a means by which Sheila could sneak away, resume her true identity and visit Baker Street to deliver the sanctioned tale to her friends.

The Right Honorable Francis Kendall resided on Park Place, a red brick structure with bay windows attached to a row of modern and traditional homes. Sheila heard a few cameras clicking as they alighted from the Prime Minister’s Rolls Royce and mounted concrete steps to the arched entrance, the door held open by a portly housekeeper.

“Good evening, Mr. Kendall,” she hailed with a hint of Irish brogue. “We heard the news, and we’re all happy for you. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gandy.” He shed his overcoat and passed it to the woman. “My dear, I’d like you to meet Mrs. Gandy. She keeps this place organized. Mrs. Gandy, this is Mrs. Kendall.”

Dropping a slight curtsey, Mrs. Gandy smiled with genuine pleasure and yellow teeth. What Sheila deduced in that brief encounter, she dared not speak.

“Dinner will be ready at half-seven, Mr. Kendall,” Mrs. Gandy stated.

“Perfect. That’ll give us time to freshen up.”

Odd for Sheila to climb a flight of stairs without concern if the planks would creak or split outright. These were stone, the bannister hand-carved of similar speckled material. On the second level, two bedrooms overlooked the main hall. Kendall directed Sheila through the second door.

“We’ll have to sleep in the same bed for at least a week,” he asserted.

“The problem won’t be where I sleep, but whether I’ll be able to close an eye with this stupid wig.”

“You can take it off at night.”

“What if Mrs. Gandy should come in early and see me without it?” Sheila reasoned.

“True.” He considered. “You could bleach your real hair.”

“Not bloody likely.”

“Then, tell her you dyed it a darker shade to dispel the ‘dumb blonde’ theory.”

“That’s a decision for another time.” She discarded her shoes for a pair of fur-lined slippers, noticing the assortment of clothes and lingerie in the wardrobe.

“Where’d all this come from?”

“When Horace and I decided on this course, arrangements were made...”

“Will they fit?”

“They should. Your... measurements are similar to my wife’s.”

Sheila muttered under her breath, “The things men notice!”

Kendall didn’t need to change his suit for dinner, but Sheila shed the calf-length frock for a blue chiffon formal. The meal matched the most expensive restaurants, and Sheila felt she would burst by the time the chocolate mousse was served.

Past 9:00, she also worried about getting to Baker Street. Dismissing the servants for the night, the couple returned to their room, where Kendall pulled a set of pajamas from a chest of drawers.

“A taxi will be waiting on St. James in fifteen minutes,” he informed her. “Go out the servants’ entrance and stick to the shadows. Come back the same way.”

“I’ll be no later than midnight.”

As carefully as she crept from the building, *sans* wig and wearing a stylish grey striped jumpsuit, to where the black vehicle idled, Sheila sensed eyes upon her. En route to Baker Street, she scrutinized other cars and, when she paid the driver near Marylebone Road, she executed a complete circle to ensure no one hid in recessed doorways or along the alleys.

Watson leapt from the armchair near the fireplace when she breezed into the sitting room of 221B. “Where the devil have you been? And, what’s that get-up?”

“John, please sit down.”

He obliged, and she pulled the desk chair closer to him. “You’re not going to like this,” she stammered. “You’ll probably be deeply hurt and offended.”

“The only thing that would offend me is if you told me I have to pack up and move.”

She sighed. “Well, that’s good to know. As it is, you’re welcome to live here as long as you like. The rent is paid through the end of the ten-year lease, thanks to Kendall’s generosity...”

Watson stiffened. “What are you saying?”

The wedding ring reflected crackling flames. “I’m married.”

Blue eyes widened and, quickly, filled with unbidden tears. “How? When?”

“This afternoon. I’d been doing a lot of thinking...”

The fabricated story, embellished by Watson’s own knowledge of his flatmate’s mental state following Downton’s death, was not disputed.

“Are you going to tell Edith?” he prompted.

“She’s in bed, isn’t she?”

From the doorway, “No, she’s not.” The American widow had heard much of the narrative, scowling. “How could you be so low as to not confide in us?”

Her own cheeks wet, Sheila sniffed, “It wasn’t planned. I hadn’t even considered the possibility. But, when he asked me, I heard myself accept, and we ran straight away to the registrar’s office.”

“It takes almost a month to arrange a marriage,” Edith countered.

“Not when...”

Watson pressed, “You haven’t told us his name.”

Sheila grit her teeth. She and Kendall hadn’t discussed that tidbit. Drawing from her memory of the aristocracy, she bluffed, “He’s the second son of Lord Willoughby: Richard Arlen.”

Rising, she hurried into her bedroom. “I just came to pack a few things. We’re off on a world cruise, a wedding gift from Rick’s father.”

Before her companions could protest, she stuffed jeans and t-shirts in her Oxford duffel and fled the scene.

Edith pursued her, halting on the stairs as the door slammed.

Pungent tobacco saturated the sitting room, accompanying the harsh criticism, “She didn’t take the fedora.”

Watson,, wiping his face with his t-shirt sleeve, glanced up at the imposing figure of Sherlock Holmes, puffing his briar pipe near the mantle. “She’s left us all behind.”

Dealing with Intelligence

Sheila Holmes hadn't slept so well in months. Down comforters kept her warm, and goose-feather pillows relieved stress-related pains in her neck.

Mrs. Gandy brought her breakfast long after Francis Kendall departed for Parliament each weekday, and they chatted about generalities while the housekeeper straightened the room and laid out Sheila's clothes.

The life of a politician's wife involved paying calls on other politicians' wives, hosting teas, and participating in charitable events. Not much brains involved, and Sheila's only consolation was that she was being well paid.

While explaining to Mrs. Gandy that she'd dyed her "blonde" hair a darker shade, she continued to wear the blonde wig on public occasions, to divert the media. She never saw a newspaper, because Kendall tucked those delivered to the Park Place residence in his briefcase before leaving. The house, surprisingly, lacked televisions or radios.

"The master rarely has time to watch telly or listen to music," the housekeeper explained.

"Don't you or the other servants have one below stairs?"

Mrs. Gandy nodded her greying head.

"Would it be a total breach of protocol for me to come down and watch the news?"

The woman bristled.

"I'll take that as no."

"It's not that, Mrs. Kendall..."

Sheila prompted, "Then, what?"

"Mr. Kendall made me promise to keep you content because of your delicate health. News of murders, burglaries or terrorist attacks would only upset you."

"Delicate health?" stormed the detective. "How did he describe my ailment?"

A hesitation. "High blood pressure and a faulty heart valve."

Her blood pumping frantically in that moment, Sheila's face flushed. Her hands clenched and unclenched with frustration. She'd been royally screwed by the British Home Secretary - with whom she'd seldom interacted since their "marriage" except for formal dinner parties. He'd woven a web of lies around her to prevent her from grasping the situation in the outside world.

"Get me a computer, or a mobile with wi-fi capacity," she instructed.

"Mrs. Kendall, I..."

“Do it!”

“Yes, ma’am.” The rotund female scurried from the bedroom, returning in short order with a somewhat outdated laptop.

Sheila spent hours pouring over news reports from various sources about an influx of foreign terrorists and suicide bombings, as well as unsolved murders and escalating crimes.

A headline from the previous Thursday’s London *Times* asked, “Where is Sheila Holmes?”

The article’s author had interviewed Johnny Watson, Edith Hudson-Thorne and Scotland Yard sources in an attempt to determine the cause of Sherlock Holmes’ great-great-niece’s disappearance.

“After claiming she’d wed the fictitious Lord Willoughby’s second son, she vanished from Baker Street for a reputed honeymoon cruise and has not been seen or heard from since, nor is there any proof she actually left the British Isles.”

The dignified woman who entered the Home Secretary’s Marsham Street chambers that afternoon cheerily greeted the clerk in the outer office and was buzzed through the locked door, finding Francis Kendall on the phone.

He grumbled into the receiver, “I’ll ring you later,” before breaking the connection.

Rounding his cluttered desk, he made a show of kissing Sheila’s cheek before securing the door.

“What brings you here, my dear?” the baritone snarled with feigned kindness.

“I was taking a constitutional, and thought you might like to join me for tea.”

“There’s not a free minute in my schedule...”

Sheila hissed, “Now, my love. We have much to discuss.”

Both aware the office was monitored via electronic bugs, Kendall snatched his black cashmere overcoat off the rack and escorted Sheila toward the exit.

“Mr. Kendall, your appointments...” protested his assistant.

“Offer my apologies. I’ll return shortly.”

Rather than take tea, the couple strolled through Victoria Tower Gardens to the Thames, as they had on their first meeting months earlier.

“How dare you embarrass me so!” Kendall scolded, pausing near the railing to view the churning water.

“How dare *you* play games with me! The country has descended into chaos, and you’ve kept the information from me!”

“Only because I knew you’d renege on your agreement and put us all in danger!”

“Put who in danger? The MPs? What about the citizens you’re supposed to represent? Hundreds have died, with the inept police unable to capture any suspects...”

“What would you have me do?” Kendall growled.

“Kill off Jennifer Blythe and let me resume my life.”

“That’s impossible!”

“No, it’s not. When you return to the office, you can share I’ve just notified you of my pregnancy. Due to my ‘delicate health’ I’ll need to be confined to the house and, in a couple weeks, I can die of complications.”

“What then?”

“I’ll track down the mastermind behind the espionage, and as many of the other criminals as time permits.”

“The Prime Minister won’t sanction...”

“Damn the Prime Minister! If he refuses to consider the welfare of the nation, he can be exposed for the career-minded arse he is!” Sheila glimpsed tourists with mobiles filming the exchange, Kendall’s unmistakable public face well known internationally. Calming her contralto, she urged, “Come on, kiss me this last time, take my hand and walk me to the taxi queue.”

The Home Secretary balked. “You have no idea how this will complicate processes already in place...”

“Ineffectual processes, my dear Francis. I asked you some weeks ago to arrange a meeting with military intelligence, and you came up with this hair-brained scheme instead. If you don’t cooperate now, I can’t guarantee I won’t move from Park Place to Baker Street and let the media have a field day. There’s no time to be lost!”

“All right, all right.” Pretending enthusiasm at joyous news, the broad-shouldered, salt-and-pepper maned Kendall clutched Sheila at the waist, lifted her, twirled her in a full circle, then smothered her with genuinely affectionate kisses.

He kissed her again as he assisted her into a taxi, muttering, “We’ll discuss this further at dinner.”

The BBC, London *Times*, and wire services spread the word about Kendall’s forthcoming heir so quickly, Mrs. Gandy welcomed Sheila with effusive congratulations no more she entered the residence.

“We’ll take excellent care of you, Mrs. Kendall,” she promised. “My daughter’s obstetrician...”

“No need for that, Mrs. Gandy,” interrupted Sheila. “I’ll be traveling up country to my family, where I’ll have peace and quiet.” She slowly ascended the staircase, in keeping with her supposed fragility. “Please, help me pack.”

When Kendall arrived late that evening, Sheila had departed, leaving behind the simple gold wedding ring and the clothes he’d purchased for her.

“Mrs. Gandy!” he roared from the landing. “Where’s my wife?”

Her revelation did not please him, and she could only watch as he raged around the chamber, destroying furniture and bric-a-brac, shredding bed sheets and canopy, and tossing dresses still on their hangars through the shattered French doors, over the balcony onto the sidewalk.

Realizing his mistake, he immediately ordered the servants to retrieve the piles and clear the debris.

Too late.

Johnny Watson normally verified newspaper accounts with postings on a variety of internet feeds. When the next morning’s *Times* accompanied Edith Hudson-Thorne and his breakfast, however, he devoured the lead article with relish.

“Too bad Sheila’s not here to see this,” he chuckled, fastening his prosthetic leg into place. “She’d have a good laugh.”

“I already have,” the detective remarked from the sitting room, comfortable in Sherlock’s tattered purple dressing gown.

Her companions rushed to embrace her.

“Where have you been?” the landlady chided. “We’ve been trying to locate you after we discovered there is no Lord Willoughby...”

“You’ve lost weight,” commented Watson.

“Bring coffee, Edith, please,” Sheila directed. “Then, sit down, both of you.”

Mugs in hand, the three engaged in an intense conversation, beginning with Sheila’s account of her “marriage” to Francis Kendall and his suspicious behavior.

“You let him set you up?” Watson concluded.

She nodded meekly. “I was the biggest fool since... since...”

Below, the doorbell chimed. Edith excused herself to answer it.

Sherlock materialized amidst swirls of tobacco smoke. “The biggest fool since Edward VIII abdicated to marry a divorcee.”

“Uncle, it wasn’t my idea. The Prime Minister...”

“Is another fool. As you said, he’s career-minded and played into Kendall’s hands.”

Watson puzzled, “How so?”

“Every action Kendall has taken since discovering the late Foreign Secretary Cole Drummond hired you to investigate suspicions of espionage among members of Parliament had been to one end: to sidetrack you from a truth right before your very nose. He deliberately summoned you to the Victoria Memorial, unaware he was being followed by foreign agents, but fully cognizant of the media presence, since he’d leaked the assignation himself. The kiss was a ploy, forcing the Prime Minister to approve the bogus marriage to stave off additional scandal. He held you a virtual prisoner - and it took you far too long to grasp as much - with his housekeeper an unwitting accomplice, shielding you from any disruptive influences while believing that nonsense about your fragility.”

“Yes, Uncle, I failed miserably. Going forward...”

Edith returned at that moment, and Sherlock vanished.

“It took ten minutes to convince the grocery delivery boy he had the wrong address!” she complained. “What is this world coming to?” She settled once more on the red Victorian divan. “Did I miss anything?”

Watson supplied, “No, Edith, I...”

The bell chimed again. The flatmates rolled their eyes simultaneously.

“Don’t say another word until I return!” Edith insisted.

Sherlock did not reappear, but Prime Minister Horace Evans did, preceded by the daunted landlady.

Sheila and Watson rose respectfully.

“Good morning, Miss Holmes,” Evans began, scanning the cluttered sitting room with distaste. “May we have a private conversation?”

“Of course, sir.”

As Edith gathered the coffee mugs, Watson grabbed the breakfast tray and followed her toward the servants’ stairs.

“Have a seat, Mr. Evans,” Sheila offered.

The wispy white-domed official chose the swivel chair at the desk. “You’ve seen the news?”

“Bits and pieces.”

“Mr. Kendall has shown... a streak of unreliability which cannot be tolerated in the position of Home Secretary.”

“Will you be replacing him?”

“He’s been asked to resign, but is refusing.”

Sheila perched herself on the edge of the dining table. “How may I be of assistance?”

“You’ve been privy to the background of not just Kendall, but all the current MPs. Your unique... skills make you a vital asset, and military intelligence would like to consult with you...”

“I’ve been requesting to consult with them for months, but Kendall failed to arrange it.”

Evans’ wrinkled face blanched. “When I suggested this course to him weeks ago, he swore you would have nothing to do with that department.”

“Sir, I’m afraid Francis Kendall is a pathological liar, intent only on lining his own pocket and securing his own future.”

“Meaning, the leaks to foreign governments...”

“If he’s not directly responsible for handing off the documents, he coordinates the transfers.”

“Have you proof?”

“That’s where MI5 fits into the picture. They have the authority to access information my... connections lack.”

“Would it inconvenience you to come with me to their headquarters?”

Evans hinted.

“I’m at your service.” Shedding the dressing gown, she wore a Pink Floyd t-shirt and jeans.

Ignoring her garb, the Prime Minister drew a business-sized white envelope from his brown suit’s breast pocket. “You were promised payment for your participation...”

Sheila placed the cheque on the desk, grabbed Watson’s data on the MPs and escorted Evans to the door, snatching Sherlock’s black fedora off its hook.

The Rolls Royce limousine idling at the curb gave the woman a chill; the last time she’d ridden in it had been her “wedding” day. Her stupidity would haunt her far longer than any memory of Tony Downton or the McLaurin twins.

Bullet-proof metal and glass could not protect the pair from gunshots fired as they approached the vehicle. Sheila heard the crack from above and practically threw Horace Evans to the ground.

The chauffeur - actually a security guard - ducked behind the rear quarter panel, pistol drawn. Though no more bullets assaulted them, the trio remained motionless until a squad of constables arrived five minutes later.

Sheila and Evans were hustled into a patrol vehicle, giving statements at New Scotland Yard before resuming their trek to the military intelligence complex in alternate transport.

Neither had to speak their thoughts to the other. Francis Kendall would have been the only person with knowledge of Sheila's whereabouts after forsaking his Park Place domicile.

"Before he taught at Cambridge, was he not in the Army?" Evans wondered.

She replied, "He served with distinction as a sniper on tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan."

"Where he met and, possibly, established relationships with the very agents he now supplies with our most precious secrets?"

"Indeed."

"Did you ever come across a cache of weapons while living in his home?"

"As a matter of fact, only once did I trespass on his *sancto sanctorum* while he was present - he called it his office - on the structure's ground floor. A bookshelf leading to a hidden room had not closed properly and, through the gap, I saw quite an assortment of guns on display. I didn't think twice about it at the time, knowing how some men are partial to collecting firearms."

Evans gnarled fingers plucked the phone from the sideboard. "A search warrant will be issued within the hour."

They arrived at Chicksands in Bedfordshire within that span. Assorted officers in green berets and starched uniforms had gathered in a large conference room in the headquarters facility, leaving seats for Evans and Sheila.

The assembly might have turned into nothing but a series of redundant harangues, except Sheila bypassed the chain of command and took control from the outset.

"Ladies and gentlemen, time is of the essence. You must provide the missing pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, so the intricately designed espionage network can be shut down immediately."

A leather-faced brigadier general squinted at Horace Evans, whose slight inclination of his head confirmed the detective's authority.

"What do you need to know, Miss Holmes?" the officer inquired.

"How many members of Parliament do you presently have under surveillance?"

A brawny lieutenant answered, "On a daily basis, thirteen. Another forty primarily when they travel abroad."

"To Warsaw and Berlin?"

"Yes, definitely," said the brigadier, amazed by her level of knowledge.

"On those trips, they receive an exorbitant amount of spending money?"

Confusion among the personnel affirmed Sheila's suspicion of lapses in their investigation.

"They... are allowed the standard per diem, Miss Holmes," Evans noted. "Hotel, meals, taxis, airfare."

"As much as twenty to thirty thousand pounds?" she countered.

"Never! It would be illegal for them to take that much cash out of the country, even on a diplomatic mission."

She leaned back on the metal-armed chair. "Well, they have been doing just that, quite frequently. And the funds have been provided directly from Francis Kendall's personal account."

"How do you know this?" demanded the brigadier.

"While living in his house, I wasn't entirely idle. Kendall habitually left for Parliament by half-six. His housekeeper would not bring my breakfast until nine. That span, I used to go through every drawer and safe in the place."

The group waited, rapt.

"Francis Kendall is a brilliant man, even a genius. His understanding of how computer files can be copied or hacked - as I myself have learned, and others should take to heart - prompted him to secure his darkest secrets within his own walls. That included a number of account books from Swiss and Middle Eastern banks. He regularly deposited vast amounts, then doled out portions of those funds to MPs traveling on the Continent, instructing them to use the 'expense money' freely and keep any they didn't spend."

"Outrageous!" a young captain gasped, quickly clamping a hand over her mouth.

Her comrades echoed the sentiment, chuckling at her breach of decorum.

Sheila smirked, then continued. "On a rotating basis, Kendall would include plain white envelopes among the papers the MPs carried on their persons. Upon arrival at their destination, these envelopes would systematically disappear. Some reported the theft, others remained silent for fear of reprisals."

"Do you know this to be fact?" Evans asked.

"Politicians' wives like to talk. I, fortunately, like to listen."

The brigadier urged her onward. "What about Cole Drummond?"

"That's where Kendall made his major mistake," Sheila responded. "At the last election, he wanted to be named Foreign Secretary, but things didn't go as planned. As Home Secretary, he could still be involved with travel arrangements, but Drummond suspected the espionage through his contacts with ambassadors and heads of state. They were discussing policies and plans of which they should

have had no knowledge. That's why he initiated my investigation. He knew going through channels would only muddy the water."

"What about MPs Harold Jenkins and Maurice Timmons?" Evans wondered.

"Respectable men used as red herrings to divert suspicion from the guilty. The money found after their murders was planted - and counterfeit."

She detailed how Kendall selected Metropolitan Police constables with questionable records for the jaunt to Baker Street, bribing them generously for their silence, then killing them when she showed an interest in their activities.

"Did they murder Drummond?" asked the female captain.

"Oh, no. Every murder which has transpired has been committed by Kendall himself. He didn't trust anyone, really, and wanted to be positive the voices that could incriminate him were effectively silenced."

"Does that include the three Arabs found at St. Pancras?"

"Of course. Kendall got wind his... contacts in Jerusalem were growing aggravated with the quality of information being passed along. They sent the men to convince him the millions they'd paid deserved better. When I apprehended the one, Kendall had to eliminate the others."

"The scoundrel!" Evans muttered.

"Should do. Yet, his genius is to be admired, though directed improperly. His technique is very much like an expert chess player, thinking moves in advance how to capture his opponent's king. He might have continued for years if he'd not dismissed his security detail at convenient moments - while requiring other MPs to maintain 'round the clock protection. That omission indicated confidence he faced no danger, which raised red flags for me."

"Leading you to consent to the marriage?" hinted Evans.

"Correct."

"Excellent work, Miss Holmes."

The brigadier interspersed, "What do you need from us, then?"

Sheila drew a sheet of paper from the file - a list of names in Kendall's own hand. "These are his connections. It's up to you to... handle them."

The meeting adjourned, Horace Evans accompanied Sheila to a freshly washed Mercedes limousine for the drive back to London.

"Do you think Kendall has fled the country?" he speculated.

"My first thought was, after he fired on us, he would take John and Edith hostage, weighing them against his freedom. It's too late for that, though, and he would realize as much. No, he's planning his final vengeance against me and - unfortunately - you."

Lowering the glass between them and the chauffeur, Sheila leaned forward and yanked the cap and black wig from the driver's head.

Kendall, cranium and face clean shaven, hazel orbs hidden behind silver-rimmed sunglasses, flashed a sly grin as he peered over his shoulder.

Evans gulped, "How..."

"As my uncle Sherlock used to say, 'You see, but you do not observe,' Mr. Evans. While we were giving our statement at Scotland Yard, your limousine was impounded as evidence and this one replaced it. You hadn't called your office to make those arrangements. The seals on the doors - in the shape of the Home Department's crest - were hastily removed, the glue residue nonetheless visible."

Still on base, the vehicle steered along a lane toward a training facility, parking behind the cement block structure beyond the view of any passing patrol. Kendall climbed from behind the wheel, a 9mm Glock poised.

"Out, both of you," he boomed.

Evans emerged first, nerves on edge. He offered his hand to Sheila, who squeezed his fingers reassuringly. "Don't let him see your fear."

Her own trepidation very real, her mind raced, devising options.

"Why, Frank?" Evans asked, genuinely curious about his colleague's motivation. "You would've succeeded me when I retired..."

Kendall guffawed loudly. "What do I care about that? You're an impotent puppet, scrambling to please everyone and accomplishing nothing."

"What have you accomplished through this... this... traitorous behavior?" the Prime Minister countered.

"Wealth beyond Croesus. From here, I can go anywhere, live how I choose..."

"You'll never get past the gate," Sheila asserted.

The Home Secretary scoffed, "I see through such childish games."

"Even the game where the GPS on Mr. Evans' mobile is, this very minute, being tracked by a platoon of heavily armed soldiers?"

Kendall towered threateningly over the Prime Minister. "Give me your phone, Horace."

"It's... in the car."

Backing toward the limousine, Kendall felt for the handle and pulled the rear door open. "Sheila, fetch it out."

Evans' terrified expression followed her. He had lied; the device rested in his breast pocket.

Sheila had seen him check his messages when they left the meeting, and watched him slide the mobile inside his suit. As she bent to reach into the rear compartment, Kendall kept his eyes on her hands, but not her legs.

She thrust her left foot out and upward, contacting his groin, causing him to lose his grip on the pistol. The weapon bounced on the macadam; Evans had the wherewithal to retrieve it.

Commandeering it from the Prime Minister's trembling digits, Sheila leveled it at Francis Kendall.

"Make the call, Mr. Evans," she instructed.

"Pardon?"

Chuckling, she corrected herself. "Oh, right. There's no need for that."

Six jeeps and a squad of soldiers on foot converged on the site.

Kendall twirled, horrified. "How..."

"How?" Evans echoed.

"I added a note to the list of names I gave the brigadier," Sheila explained. "It read, 'Kendall is driving the limousine.' They trailed us - at a discreet distance - when we departed."

Shackled and led away, Kendall remained defiant.

Sheila comprehended a genius could do no less.

Horace Evans, gradually recovering his composure, approached the vehicle.

"I wouldn't, sir," the woman cautioned.

"Why not?"

Signaling him to the boot, they squatted and peered beneath the bumper. Kendall's lack of remorse stemmed from the quietly ticking explosive device fastened to the metal.

"He activated it via a remote in his trouser pocket before they handcuffed him," she explained.

"My God! How did you know?"

"As I said, he thinks moves in advance. Being apprehended a distinct possibility, he devised a contingency plan. He is hauled to the brig and we go on our way, only to be killed when the bomb explodes fifteen miles down the road."

She turned to a sergeant hovering nearby. "Better call the ordinance detail to defuse this contraption."

He saluted before jogging to his jeep. "Yes, ma'am."

The brigadier drove up in his staff car, congratulating Sheila on her insightful work. "Any time you wish to join our team..."

"Thank you, no, sir. I work better... alone."

Or, at least, with Johnny Watson, who she trusted implicitly.

A second staff car arrived to transport Evans and Sheila to London.

Comfortable on the rear seat, the Prime Minister related, "The Queen shall hear of your heroism and brilliance. Appropriate honors shall be bestowed..."

"Please, Mr. Evans, don't. Keeping a low profile is vital in my profession. Getting my face on the telly or my name in the papers might help draw clients, but impedes progress when investigating sensitive matters."

"As you wish."

The sun had set before Sheila was deposited on the stoop at 221B Baker Street. Her exhaustion complete, she barely had the strength to unlock the stubborn deadbolt and climb creaking stairs.

Edith encompassed her in a hug no more she crossed the sitting room threshold. "You poor dear! What a day you've had!"

Watson, grinning, held up the London *Times*, which featured the headline, "Bomb threat at Chicksands."

"Why can't they ever get their facts straight?" the detective lamented, hanging the fedora on its hook below the "V.R." spelled with bullet holes by her uncle Sherlock more than a century earlier.

"Kendall is safe in custody?" the Army veteran queried.

She nodded.

"And, what about this marriage?" Edith prodded.

"There was no marriage. Not legally. Entering into such a union using a false name nullifies the whole deal. The Prime Minister has assured me the license was never recorded, and the paperwork will be shredded by his personal assistant as soon as he reports for work tomorrow morning."

"You'd think the media would have done some looking into this Jennifer Blythe's background..." Watson remarked.

"They did. In Kendall's inimitable fashion, he'd created an entire data file on the woman. Whenever the media input her name into a search engine, they pulled up that information."

"He was that good?"

"Like me, he had some computer experts to call upon." She crossed to Watson and kissed his forehead. "Mine is more honest, though."

"Honest enough not to open the envelope you left on the desk," he said.

"Ah, I forgot about that!"

She parked herself on the swivel chair, digging for the letter opener among the detritus. Slitting the top, she extracted a pale green cheque bearing the Prime Minister's crest.

“Another million?” Edith asked.

Sheila presented her the draft. “Two.”

Watson had risen, but sank again on the armchair’s cushion. “Oh, my God!”

“It’ll be divided among the widows and children of those who died because of my stupidity,” she announced. “We have enough left over from Kendall’s contribution to this debacle to last many a year.”

The doorbell chimed; Edith made her exit.

Sheila smelled the tobacco a second prior to Sherlock’s appearance. “Yes, Uncle, I know.”

“Your methods were shoddy and disorganized, and you missed many obvious clues...”

“But, like a mathematics problem, I reached the correct answer.”

“That’s no reason to be proud, my girl. In future...”

Footsteps on the stairs caused the spectre to abruptly dissipate.

“Sheila! There’s six dozen roses stacked up down here!” Edith called.

“And more being unloaded!”

Moving to the door, she shouted, “Who sent them?”

“Every blessed department of the British government, it looks like!”

“Tell the lorry driver to reload them and drop them at St. Bart’s Hospital. Distribute them among the terminally ill patients.”

After a brief delay, Edith led the stooped, uniformed figure into the sitting room. “Sorry, missy, but I’m not allowed to redirect...”

“Will five hundred pounds cover the inconvenience?” Sheila offered.

He tipped his hat as she counted the bills into his other palm. “Thank ‘ee, missy!”

Edith descended to secure the door after the man’s departure.

Watson chuckled, “You’re getting very popular with the big-wigs.”

“Shut up, John.” Sheila shuffled to the window and raised the casement, dispelling the odor of tobacco.