

# **The Adventures of Sheila Holmes**

*Web of Deception*

**A Collection of Stories**

by

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## Friends in Need

A flash of lightning penetrated closed eyelids. The crack of thunder jolted Sheila Holmes upright on the mattress.

Brunette curls dangled across her forehead; she brushed them aside while orienting herself to the dark surroundings.

She heard voices.

Her flatmate, Johnny Watson, and landlady, Edith Hudson-Thorne, could have attested to that fact. Since the death of Tony Downton almost three years prior, the great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes had frequently exhibited aberrant behaviors...

This masculine dialogue didn't originate within her skull, though. Nor did any of them have an American accent, as Downton had. A British tenor, two baritones and a bass were engaged in a solemn discussion on the other side of the bedroom door.

Sheila reluctantly crawled from beneath the quilt, pulling Sherlock's tattered dressing gown - one of few heirlooms she possessed from the Great Detective - over her purple tank top and orange boxer shorts. As she tied the belt, she yanked wide the wooden panel, blinking against the bright sitting room lights.

Watson bolted from the armchair beside the dormant fireplace, nearly pitching forward. His prosthetic left leg askew, he was caught by one of his companions.

"What the devil is going on?" barked Sheila groggily.

Then, she noticed empty liquor bottles on the cluttered round table.

"Haven't I asked you, John..."

The disabled Army veteran bristled. "It's not what you think, Sheila. We were... waiting for you."

"Waiting for me to what? Pour you another? It's well past midnight..."

"We knew the storm would wake you."

Irritated, Sheila spoke through clenched teeth. "How often do I have to remind you: I don't like riddles."

He pointed to the visitors scattered around the room, introducing each in turn. Earl Munson had a shaggy ginger head and craggy features. Beneath a close-cropped sandy mop, Richard Connors bowed slightly. Peter Barnes suffered from premature baldness. "They're some of my mates who help with your cases," Watson concluded.

"Ah! Then, I will forgive you for the unorthodox hour." She sank in the basket-chair, tucking her feet in a half-lotus position. "How may I be of service?"

The three remained silent, almost tongue-tied. They deferred to Watson.

“To say the least, it’s embarrassing,” he began.

“Everything you tell me is confidential, of course.”

“It’s already gone beyond that.”

Chins bobbed in unison.

“Get to it, then,” she pressed.

Watson settled on the cushion, leaning forward, elbows on knees. “Over the past six weeks, Earl’s father has seen his entire stock portfolio sold off without his authorization, the money gone. Dick’s girlfriend, a professional model, was terminated by a number of prestigious designers after nude photographs from her past were posted on the internet. Pete’s elder brother, a member of the House of Commons, was disgraced and forced to resign when documents were anonymously leaked to the media proving he accepted bribes to secure a construction contract for a certain firm.”

“So, you are concerned for your loved ones?”

Connors grumbled, “That, and we’re implicated...”

“Who has implicated you?”

“Scotland Yard.”

The guffaw escaped Sheila’s mouth before she could stifle it. “Those dolts?”

“They claim to have irrefutable evidence against us,” piped Munson.

“You wish me to investigate?”

“Yes, please,” Barnes sighed.

Sheila yawned. “John knows how to contact you?”

More nods.

“Then, be off. I’ll be in touch in the next day or so.”

The men rose hesitantly, seeking confirmation from their acquaintance.

Watson led them to the threshold. “Be quiet going down the stairs,” he instructed. “Don’t want to wake Edith.”

The flatmates listened to the descent and the street door opening and softly latching.

Sheila glared at Watson. “Would you please explain to me...”

“There *is* no explanation. These deeds seem totally random...”

“Not that - and they aren’t random. But, why bring them here in the middle of the night?”

“We attended a Veterans Advisory Board meeting, which didn’t end until ten o’clock. We stopped at the pub for a round, and got to chatting...”

“At which point they unloaded their troubles?”

“Oh, no. I’ve known about this for a couple weeks. They apprised me of how the police weren’t having any success tracking the real culprits.”

“And you suggested I might be able to succeed where official channels failed?”

“Not at all. They begged me to intercede with you on their behalf.”

“So, besides being veterans who suffer from PTSD...”

Watson stiffened. “How’d you know that?”

“Your noble band grew from group therapy sessions through the veterans foundation.”

He smirked.

“They are all regular attendees?”

“As their various employment permits.”

“We’ll need to collect data on their co-workers, neighbors, debts, and the same with the impacted relatives.”

“To what end?”

The aroma of pungent tobacco swirled around the pair. “Yes, to what end?” boomed the spectral Sherlock Holmes, standing near the mantle, briar pipe clamped between his lips.

“Information these men have divulged has reached the ears of unscrupulous sorts, who are seeking some manner of revenge by victimizing those closest to them,” Sheila explained.

Watson countered, “Why, though? They didn’t serve in the same unit during their military service, weren’t even stationed in the same country. What common thread...”

“That is what we must discover.” Sheila straightened. “For now, we both need refreshing sleep, so our brains will be fully functional come daylight.”

Retreating to her room, Sheila left Watson to survey their resident ghost, who shrugged before dissipating in a cloud of smoke.

Not that the woman resumed her slumber. Something about the veterans bothered her, and she couldn’t pinpoint the cause. Close in age to Watson, they shared a similar physical build - that of a soldier who no longer regularly exercised.

With a bit of skillful make-up, a clever crook with an equally dissolute frame could double for any one of them, creating a false trail of guilt.

Finding that individual would mean delving into their connections, primarily the veterans group.

“You can’t!” Watson protested over a breakfast of bacon, eggs and biscuits that Tuesday morning. “The group therapy sessions are private, for good reason! Idle spectators would inhibit the conversation...”

“I wouldn’t be an idle spectator. I could question them before or after the session. I don’t give a fig about their various psychological issues.”

“What if I were to make the inquiries for you?”

“Based on a written script I prepared?” Sheila scoffed. “I wouldn’t be able to study their facial expressions and body language, which are just as vital as their verbal responses...”

“We’ve worked together enough, I think I could duplicate your technique.”

She reached across the table and patted his hand. “John, I appreciate the offer, and I know you’d do quite well, but unless you had a camera so I could see with my own eyes...”

Buttering a biscuit, Watson waited for her to continue. When she didn’t, he glanced up, recognizing the genesis of an idea.

“Oh, no.” He dropped his knife. “I’m not taking a camera...”

“A discreet one. The size of a shirt button.” She grinned broadly. “No one would be the wiser.”

“It would be a violation of the policy! I’d be booted from the program!”

“Only if you admit to it.”

Not only did Sheila cajole Watson into agreeing with the scheme, she coerced him into ordering the equipment online. It arrived on Thursday, and would be worn to Friday’s session.

“You’ll need to rotate your body so each participant’s face is viewed as he speaks,” she directed before he embarked for the Tube. “Try to make your movements look natural.”

“Are you barmy?” raged the former medic. “I’ll look like a robot, and feel like one, too!”

“I trust you.”

Perhaps the kiss of confidence on his cheek dispelled his doubts about the ordeal; it did little to assuage her trepidation. She paced the sitting room for three hours, anxious for his return.

Edith heard the steady footfalls, climbing the servants’ stairs mid-afternoon. “You could better spend your energy cleaning up a bit,” she remonstrated, piling lunch dishes on a tray.

“I will, I will,” her tenant replied absently.

“Is John in any sort of danger?”

“No, of course not! I wouldn’t...”

Calloused hands seized Sheila’s biceps, almost ripping the faded Led Zeppelin t-shirt. “Where has he gone?”

“To group therapy.”

“With some ulterior motive?”

Sheila wrenched free.

Edith about to pin the detective on the red Victorian divan and demand the truth, Watson could be heard scraping his shoes on the foyer rug and securing the deadbolt on the door. Though his gait remained slow on the creaking stairs, due to the prosthetic, he appeared beneath the lintel, beaming.

“You did it?” Sheila gushed.

“Indeed, I did.”

The women waited for him to take a position at the desk and download the camera’s files. Together, they viewed digital footage, though Edith wasn’t quite sure of the purpose.

Moving clockwise, Sheila assigned each participant a number, skipping the three females present. Barnes, Munson and Connors were 3, 5 and 8, respectively. None of the others matched their general physical characteristics.

“Who’s that?” she queried, pausing the video with the mouse and tapping the screen. The image of longish, lank, blond-streaked brown hair, an unkempt mustache and lame attempt at a chin-beard struck her as singular.

“Doctor Wilmot, the facilitator.”

“I don’t remember you mentioning his name.”

“He’s filling in while our regular counselor is on maternity leave.”

“How long ago did she have her baby?”

“Ten weeks or so.”

“Where does he usually practice?”

Watson rifled papers on the desk, consulting a business card. “Gower Street.”

“I may pay him a call.”

“You think he’s a suspect?”

She chuckled. “I think everyone’s a suspect, John.” He rotated toward her on the chair, eyebrows arched. “Except you, of course,” she clarified.

Grabbing the black fedora off a wall hook beneath the “V.R.” Sherlock created with bullet holes more than a century earlier, she smashed it atop uncombed curls and strode out the door.

“Will you be here for dinner?” Edith shouted after her.

“Haven’t a clue!”

Traffic already congested in anticipation of the weekend, Sheila strolled the distance to Gower Street, analyzing odors of cooking food, petrol and trash tinging the breeze. Wilmot’s office was located in row houses north of Euston Road, a converted flat above a sandwich shop.

A buzzer responded to her knock; she noticed the wireless camera attached at chest height on the doorjamb . Ascending dimly lit stairs, she paused before a tarnished brass name plate: Charles Wilmot, MBChB.

“Come in!” she heard through pine badly in need of varnish.

The grating knob, too, could use repair. Opening directly into a rustic consulting room, Sheila did not expect the figure at the desk, feet propped on the blotter, reading the London *Times*, to leap from his seat, toppling the chair, fumbling to make his uncombed brown-and-blond-streaked mane, open collar, short sleeved white shirt, unbuttoned leather vest and jeans presentable.

While forty-ish and slightly thinner than the group therapy veterans whose relatives had been exploited, he might have been able to impersonate them with appropriate disguises, except - in addition to multiple tattoos on both arms - he bore a gold lightning image on the back of his left hand, and a full-color hawk on his right, as well as chunky silver rings and letters in greenish ink on his fingers. Those markings would be difficult to conceal from notice during any manner of crime.

“Sheila Holmes!” he greeted in an awed bass.

She halted on a braided rug, absorbing the bookshelves, furniture, sepia tone photos, and artwork. “You know me, sir?”

“John has spoken of you during group and, I admit, I’ve seen accounts of your cases in the papers.”

“The media does tend to sensationalize the circumstances, unfortunately.” She approached an antique armchair matching the mahogany desk.

“By all means, make yourself comfortable!” Wilmot oozed, lifting a frame that must’ve been constructed by hand in the early 20th century and lowering himself onto faded purple velveteen. “How may I be of assistance?”

“I’ve come about John, actually. I’m that worried about his condition.”

“He does complain about his prosthetic on occasion, but the technicians at Bart’s can make adjustments...”

“No, his mental condition. Everything he’s been through the past few years...”

“I... can’t really address that, having taken over the group a short while ago, as a favor to a friend.” Wilmot squirmed self-consciously. “I’m primarily a researcher, you see, trying to develop certain medications...”

“Nonetheless, since you’ve familiarized yourself with his situation, may I fill you in?”

“Please.”

Sheila launched into a narrative about meeting Watson, his involvement in solving their many and complex cases, her affiliation with Tony Downton and prolonged absence while Watson was diagnosed with cancer. She concluded with, “And, now...”

“Now?” Wilmot prompted.

“I’m not at liberty to reveal the details.”

“Everything said within these walls is privileged, Miss Holmes.”

“John’s uncle... made some bad investments on behalf of his clients. If steps can’t be taken to... recoup the losses, he may be publicly exposed and... and...”

“I see.”

“John is, rightfully, devastated. It’s impacted his entire attitude about life...”

“Do you believe he might harm himself?”

“Not being a... professional in that field, I can’t say.”

“Would you wish me to set a private appointment?”

Sheila shot upright, feigning fear. “Oh, no! If he knew I’d come to you...”

At her side instantly, Wilmot caressed her shoulders. “You’re distraught, my dear. Let me get you some tea.”

“I... prefer coffee, if you have it.” She pretended to brush a tear from her cheek, shuffling toward the window.

“Whatever you like.”

When Wilmot made his exit, the detective let her instincts have sway. A close examination of the Cambridge diplomas, yellowed with age, convinced her this host was not who he claimed to be. The graduation date on each appeared to have been meticulously altered, from 1930 to 1980 in one instance, and 1934 to 1984 on the other.

Tugging her mobile from her jeans, she snapped photos and forwarded them to Watson, a text requesting he verify their authenticity with his contacts.

She slid open the top desk drawers, finding only pens, pencils and dust. No files, no appointment diary. Medical volumes on the shelves were first editions, useful to a physician practicing five decades prior; nothing current.

Wilmot reappeared with two steaming ceramic mugs. Sheila accepted one, warming her hands on the surface while inhaling the unusual aroma.

“I know this will seem presumptuous of me, but it *is* getting late, and you’ve piqued my interest about John’s health. Would you be willing to join me for dinner, to continue the discussion?” the man entreated.

“I would... welcome the company,” Sheila choked, secretly amazed at his boldness, “but, I’m not dressed...”

“Neither am I, frankly. I know a delightful pub not far from here, where they don’t care about clothes, and the food is excellent.”

“That’s very kind of you, doctor.”

“Chazz, please.”

They set their mugs on the desk; Sheila realized the moisture would leave rings on the expensive wood. Wilmot’s failure to care about the preservation of his possessions heightened her suspicion.

Rather than trek toward the bustling Euston Road, they turned north upon leaving the converted domicile. Sheila allowed her escort to proceed two blocks before challenging his route.

“There aren’t any pubs in this direction,” she stated flatly.

That’s when she felt the pistol barrel shoved in her ribcage from behind. With ninja-like stealth, two men had fallen into step with them, both armed.

“You’re not the only one who’s observant, Miss Holmes,” drawled Wilmot. “I noticed the camera John wore during today’s session, and knew you’d be visiting me.”

“At a location conveniently borrowed without permission?”

“Not at all. The office connects with my laboratory where I am, in fact, performing very specific experiments.”

Steered toward a waiting lorry, Sheila balked at being abducted. Sweeping Wilmot off balance with her left leg, she spun and battered the pair of boilersuit-clad thugs with rapid Wing Chun strikes, propelling them off the curb. The taller fell into the street, nearly crushed by an approaching bus. His associate sprinted down an alley.

Wilmot swiftly recovered the discarded Luger, brandishing it boldly. “If you want to die, keep it up.”

Not about to crawl into the rear of the idling vehicle, Sheila executed a spinning round-house kick to Wilmot’s temple. As he crashed to the pavement, his finger squeezed the trigger; the weapon discharged with the projectile shattering the windscreen, killing the driver.

The few pedestrians nearby scattered, shrieking. Intent on Wilmot’s restraint, Sheila didn’t realize the lorry had started to roll. The deceased occupant must’ve knocked the engine into gear as he slumped behind the wheel, or already had shifted the transmission and, his boot retracted from the brake, set it in motion.

The impending collision would benefit no one. An uppercut to his jaw rendering Wilmot unconscious, lithe limbs propelled her onto the running board. She wrenched open the door; the limp corpse flopped from its perch. She slid onto blood-soaked upholstery and arrested the forward motion.

She removed keys from the ignition, surrendering them to the first constable on scene. Angry motorists honked violently at the blockage, soon cleared by a cadre of uniforms.

Wilmot stood, crestfallen, pinned between two burly uniforms.

“Is this the man who fired the shot?” inquired the sergeant.

Sheila attested, “Yes, but I wasn’t finished questioning him.”

“Questioning? Who are you...”

His partner grunted. “That’s Sheila Holmes.”

“Oh, Miss Holmes!” His free hand touched his forelock in salute. “Sorry.”

“Bring him along, gentlemen. We could all use a good meal, I suspect.”

Wilmot struggled to extricate himself, in vain. “Do you really think I’ll tell you anything?”

“No, but you *will* satisfy my... curiosity.”

Sheila presented the police sergeant keys to Wilmot’s office, retrieved after they fell from the criminal’s pocket when he impacted the sidewalk, while a mini parade marched along Gower Street to the sandwich shop. Inside the deserted establishment, she shoved her captive into a booth, motioning the constables to a position near the counter.

“But, if he tries to escape...” protested the younger.

Guided to their table, the elder chided, “She can take care of herself. Besides, we’re between him and the door.”

Sheila couldn’t restrain a snicker at this exchange. She sobered, however, as she confronted Wilmot.

Distracted momentarily by a vibration from her mobile: the results of Watson’s research.

“You’re not a doctor,” she remarked. “Nor did you ever attend Cambridge. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were one of James Moriarty’s former lieutenants, who’d set up shop for himself.” Perusing the bill of fare, she monitored his agitation. “An elaborate and impressive plot, to be sure: extortion, revenge, theft.”

“And a myriad of other endeavors,” boasted Wilmot. “You have no idea the extent of my... influence. I’ve woven a web around this city - the entire country, for that matter - and no one can destroy that network.”

“I’ve heard that before, from masterminds more adept than yourself.”

The waitress glided over, jotting Sheila’s order on a pad. “And, those two?” She waggled her thumb at the constables.

“Whatever they want, on my bill.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Another source of levity, the massive platters of food soon presented to the public servants.

“If your network is so intricate, why put yourself in the cross hairs by taking over as group therapy facilitator for veterans on limited pensions?”

“You really have no idea?” Wilmot spat.

“Enlighten me.”

“Fine, though I now realize I’ve squandered precious time.” He stretched out on the bench. “Reports about you exposing Deke Caruthers’ corruption by

dressing as an East End tart intrigued me. You know, there were security cameras in his cozy hideaway.”

An unexpected tingle ran up Sheila’s spine. “Really?”

“Yeah. I installed them. Footage of that interlude... might be of interest to your high-tone clients.”

“If you intend to blackmail yourself out of this...”

“I don’t have to. Media coverage you’ve garnered gave the impression you were a force to be reckoned with, and my enterprise could thrive only with you out of the way. You’ve been... quite a disappointment, to be honest.”

She sniffed, “Apologies.”

As the waitress delivered her club sandwich and chocolate shake, the Scotland Yard sergeant whisked into the structure and ambled toward her. “Sorry to interrupt, Miss Holmes, but I think you better come upstairs.”

“You found something?” she mumbled between bites.

He nodded glumly, helmet bouncing.

Another quick bite preceded Sheila’s compliance with the request. En route, she tucked a 50 pound note in the waitress’ hand, Wilmot and the other officials on her heels.

Half-way up the flight to Wilmot’s office, dizziness consumed the woman. Vague echoes of laughter infiltrated her fogged brain as the “constables” hoisted her over the threshold and dumped her on the faded carpet. The fedora rolled into a corner.

“Leave us,” instructed Wilmot.

Blurred violet orbs strained to focus, to no avail. “You... bastard!” she gasped.

“Like I said, you’ve been a waste of my efforts,” he gloated, squatting beside her. “Up to now. You’ll make a fine subject for my clinical trial...”

“How...”

“I own the deli downstairs, and many of the buildings on this street.”

“And, those weren’t really...”

“Of course not! Don’t you think I knew you were coming far in advance and calculated every contingency?”

“Except, killing your driver.”

“That was... an unplanned complication.”

“Which will score you a life sentence in prison.”

“If I’m ever caught.”

“I’ll make certain you are.”

“You... won’t be around to have a say in the matter. After I log the results of my new date rape drug...”

“Drug...”

“A substantial advance on the traditional pill dropped in an alcoholic beverage. It can be sprinkled on food or in a soda; it’s absolutely undetectable.”

“So...”

“Another notable innovation: rather than lay there like some dead fish, the recipient’s nerves react to sexual stimulation to give the... perpetrator greater enjoyment.”

These statements a haze in her semi-consciousness, Sheila felt herself being scooped off the floor and carried into an adjacent room, unable to register the furnishings or decor.

Deposited on a narrow, bare mattress, she lay motionless, envisioning how he would smother her with a pillow, and she hadn’t sufficient control of her limbs to defend herself.

But, no.

A yanking - first on her right foot, then the left - indicated her sneakers were being removed. Her jeans were unzipped and jerked down her legs. Vicious fingers fondled the inside of her thighs, moving upward.

“I can have my pick of women,” Wilmot almost crowed, straddling her. “When I saw you on camera in Caruthers’ bedroom in that mini-skirt with the fish-net hose, I promised myself I’d have you before I rid myself of you.”

He smothered her, indeed - with savage lips. His hands worked their way inside her t-shirt, and she experienced a sort of disembodied arousal as the assault persisted.

His mustache and scraggly beard tickling her flesh, she squealed, “Tony!”

Rearing back to unfasten his trousers, he guffawed, “So, you *did* bed the late, lamented Tony Downton! Well, he’s nothing, compared to me!”

An ear-piercing rapport; Wilmot thumped on her chest. Sheila felt liquid dripping onto her cheeks and trickling along her neck. She screamed in terror.

The weight was lifted off within seconds that, to her, dragged like hours. Her head was raised by gentle arms, a glass of water held to her mouth.

“Sheila? Sheila?” Watson’s trembling baritone sought recognition.

“John?”

“What did... that scoundrel do to you?”

“Who... shot him?” she gurgled.

“I did.”

Paramedics took over, restoring her to a prone position and wiping rivulets of blood from her skin. Their examination uncovered no damage - physically.

Real Scotland Yarders converged on the flat as Sheila was transported by gurney to an ambulance. As she passed through the vehicle’s metal doors, she grasped the handles and exerted all her strength.

“No hospital! Just take me home!”

Watson soothed, "Not knowing what drug he used, it's wiser to keep you under observation for a day or so."

"No! The waitress can tell you..."

"Waitress?"

"He owns the sandwich shop, and... and..."

Totally spent, she fainted.

Saturday morning, she woke in her own oak double bed on Baker Street.

Watson and Edith kept vigil on either side.

"Good morning," she croaked, hoarse.

Watson immediately checked her pulse. "How do you feel?"

"Headache."

"It'll fade."

"Wilmot?"

"Dead."

"His... people?"

"Three arrested on charges of impersonating officers, for starters, the entire staff of the deli and assorted others - a couple with broken noses."

Sheila managed a feeble grin. "He wanted to get to me through you, John, to... to..."

"Something about him struck me as off, from the first session he facilitated. I should've trusted my gut."

Edith chimed, "Breakfast?"

"Toast and cranberry juice, please," her tenant murmured.

"Of course."

The russet-haired landlady withdrew, enabling the flatmates to relax.

"How'd you find me?" prodded Sheila.

"Sherlock, of course. I'd fallen asleep in my chair, and he woke me late. You hadn't returned, so I presumed..."

"Where'd you... get the revolver?"

"Again, Sherlock. Stashed behind those criminal histories above the lab table..."

She entwined her fingers through his. "Ta."

"Did you discover Wilmot's true identity?"

"The Yard can trace him through the company that installed Deke Caruthers' security system - and, probably many others, used in blackmail schemes."

"What about fingerprints or dental records?"

"He... seemed the type to alter the former and destroy the latter."

"And, if I told you his name really *was* Charles Wilmot - the fourth, known as Chazz - the pampered great-grandson of a noted physician who went wrong?"

"Brilliant, John."

Watson tucked her hand under the quilt. “Rest. Once you’ve eaten, you can get up for a bit.”

Her sole objection: “Sherlock’s fedora?”

“Safely on its hook.”

After he pulled the door closed, she strained to recollect the previous night’s experience. Her body shuddered at the memory of Wilmot’s touch. The taste of him remained on her lips.

His death did not mean his criminal enterprises would crumble. She swore to dedicate herself to quashing them.

## A Shock to the System

Standing in the cemetery, drizzle wetting the ground and those encircling the open grave - umbrellas notwithstanding - Sheila Holmes realized why she despised funerals.

The combination of false piety and feigned grief by black-clad mourners knotted her stomach.

Who, after all, could utter prayers for salvation over the deceased Charles “Chazz” Wilmot IV, who’d been attempting to rape her when shot by Johnny Watson? He’d purported to head a vast criminal organization, as well.

Would anyone expect him to be welcomed at the pearly gates?

She stood off to the left of the main group - in fact, quite a distance away, the better to behold those in attendance. Wilmot had boasted about having any woman he wanted and, given the two dozen unaccompanied females present - blondes, brunettes, gingers - maybe he’d spoken the truth. A few dabbed tears from their eyes, while others wiped runny noses with linen handkerchiefs.

Of the men, three were plain-clothes Scotland Yard detectives. Not hard to deduct their profession with holsters bulging beneath their macintoshes. The minister served as police chaplain, in addition to tending his own flock in Kensington. A separate cluster struck Sheila as five body guards and their boss, the latter’s features concealed beneath a wide-brimmed brown fedora with red band.

The height of the quintet also impeded her view, since the individual in their midst stood a head shorter.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” concluded the droning tenor. “May he rest in God’s peace. Amen.”

Sheila lingered as the assembly dispersed, curiosity not assuaged. A number of small floral bouquets were dropped atop the casket as it was lowered into the ground; a few threw clods of dirt. On cue, the cadre parted, allowing the central figure to spit on the polished metal.

Then, in step, they swept toward a white Rolls-Royce limousine.

Strolling toward the Tube station, the woman analyzed this bizarre scene. Wilmot had a loyal following of prostitutes - who didn’t even fight among themselves, strangely - and one definite enemy.

She’d expected his faithful lieutenants to pay their respects if, indeed, he’d created a network of illegal activities around the British Isles. That absence spoke volumes.

Still... Wilmot had arranged for the father of one veteran to lose his entire stock portfolio, the model girlfriend of another to be denied a livelihood after nude photos were posted on the internet. A member of Parliament, brother of a third, resigned after his acceptance of bribes was exposed.

Those former servicemen suffered from PTSD, seeking counseling in the same group therapy sessions as Watson. They'd been targeted so her flatmate would be drawn into the ordeal, and so would she.

Wilmot had initially considered her a threat. After viewing security footage of her recorded at disgraced Yarder Kevin "Deke" Caruthers' den of sadism, he... fancied a go with her, as not-so-modern slang described the act.

Not to mention using his own date rape concoction on her. She noticed her peaked mien reflected in the subway's curved glass, whisking toward Baker Street. Climbing the stairs and aiming toward 221B, she anticipated no trouble tracking down the firm that had installed those cameras.

"John, are you game for an outing?" she called, breezing into the sitting room.

A close-cropped blond cranium appeared through Watson's half-open bedroom door. "You just came in!"

"I'm going house hunting, and it'll be better if the agent believes he's showing the property to a young married couple."

"You mean, disguises?"

"For me, a bit. For you, no."

"Should do."

She strode toward her room. "Let me get out of these... and I'll make the call."

"Indeed. You look quite the bereaved widow," he chuckled.

"Shut up."

Sheila would've preferred pulling on a t-shirt and jeans, but to present the impression of newlyweds searching for their ideal love nest, she chose a light blue blouse and grey slacks from her wardrobe. She added a long curly wig with a sandy tone before settling at the computer desk and plucking up the land line receiver.

"I understand you're listing Sir Miles Caruthers' former townhome," she began in lilting tones when a male voice was connected.

"Yes, ma'am. Got the listing last week. A lot of interest..."

Liar! Sheila mused. Who would want to buy the residence where Deke tortured his women and engaged in who-knows-what other immoral activities?

"My... husband and I would like to see it."

"You're pre-approved for credit?"

"It is to be a wedding gift from my grandmother, if we like it. She'll be paying cash."

"And, who is your grandmother, may I ask?"

"Lady Angela Huntley-Smythe."

The man duly impressed, they agreed to meet at the South Bank location at noon.

“How do you get away with it?” Watson queried from the threshold, buttoning a white dress shirt.

“Lady Angela is an old friend of the family. She won’t mind.”

“And, if some secretary rings her to verify?”

“Not likely. As soon as I mentioned cash, I could hear him drooling. He won’t do anything to queer the deal.” She reached for the black fedora on its wall hook, a violent shudder restricting the motion. She inhaled deeply to slow her heart rate, eventually muttering, “Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

Mid-day congestion on the Tube minimal, they settled on hard plastic seats for the ride south across the Thames River. To present an air of affluence, they slid in the back of a taxi and rode the last five blocks in style.

To the displeasure of the cabby. “You coulda walked!”

A 20 pound note silenced him.

Gregory Peters, the house agent, greeted them at the front door. His team had obviously been conducting a thorough cleaning; the ground floor had been repainted and furnished, where Sheila recalled most of the rooms had been empty. Moving from parlor to library to dining room and kitchen, every trace of Caruthers’ aberrant lifestyle had been eradicated.

Up a broad, carpeted flight to the first floor, she hesitated on the landing. Watson entwined his fingers with hers and squeezed supportively. Totally in character, she kissed his cheek in gratitude.

“I understand there’s a security system in the house?” she prodded innocently.

Peters confirmed, “Front door and windows are fitted with sensors, yes.”

“What about cameras?”

“No. No cameras.”

She halted beneath the master bedroom lintel. Why would Wilmot have lied about installing video equipment?

He hadn’t, she surmised. He’d described the clothes she’d worn that dreadful night...

Inhaling intentionally, the truth struck her: Deke hadn’t known about the cameras. They’d been secreted in the dwelling as a means to... acquire fodder for extortion.

“Do you mind if we look around on our own?” Sheila requested, migrating toward the window.

“Take your time.”

Peters exited, leaving Watson to glare at his companion. “What the devil?”

“We must find those cameras, John!”

“What cameras?”

“Check the walls, the book shelves, the closets.”

“But, he said there aren’t any cameras...”

“Oh, yes, there are!”

Sheila visually inspected every inch of the faded wallpaper, then ran her fingers across the surface, repeating the process with the doors and casements. She didn’t bother with the bed frame or the furnishings; they weren’t what Caruthers had when...

His personal possessions had been confiscated as evidence.

“Bloody hell!” she exclaimed abruptly.

Watson pivoted on his prosthetic leg. “What is it?”

“The cameras aren’t here.”

“I already told you that.”

“No, John. They’re not here because they were removed... by Scotland Yard!”

“You’re barmy!”

She caught his sleeve. “Don’t you see? They were fitted into the fixtures, not the building. When the investigators removed Caruthers’... shackles, whips and their racks, they inadvertently took the cameras, too!”

“You’re serious?”

“Should do.” She indicated a rectangular patch of wallpaper brighter in color than that surrounding it. “See, there? I remember he had a case of... well, I’d rather not detail the contents. A small wireless camera wouldn’t have been detected among that junk.”

“So, you’re saying what Caruthers did here was...”

The wig bobbed solemnly.

“The Crown Prosecutor knows nothing about it?”

“No, and he probably should. Such evidence would be incontrovertible and guarantee conviction.”

“How do we retrieve it?”

She smirked, staring at the floor. “Your crew could canvas every security firm in London...”

“That would take weeks!”

Bending at the waist, she plucked a round, gold and blue sticker from between the varnished baseboard and the wall. She laid it on Watson’s palm.

“What is it?” he puzzled.

“The name of the camera supplier.”

Squinting, he read tiny print: “Nolan’s Electrical.”

Five minutes later, they had thanked Peters for his solicitude, lamenting the layout wasn’t conducive to their newlywed bliss. He remained on the stoop after they caught a taxi to the Tube station, before locking the deadbolt.

Consulting his mobile, Watson discovered Nolan's Electrical operated a warehouse near London City Airport. They diverted northeast, arriving as the administrative suite was about to close.

"We're going into our monthly staff meeting," explained the receptionist, dark hair accented by a purple streak, typing at a curved glass and metal counter.

Sheila clarified, "I have one question, possibly two, for your inventory manager."

"I'll see what I can do."

She excused herself in favor of an inner office. Another female, in a brown business suit, emerged moments later.

"How may I help you?"

Sheila revealed the sticker. "I need to know if any of your miniature wireless cameras were stolen within the past year or so."

"Are you from the Metropolitan Police?"

"I... assist with their investigations." No lie.

"We reported the palate hijacked from our lorry Christmas last, then another at the end of January."

"They haven't been recovered?"

"No, dammit. And our insurance carrier continues to delay payment for the loss."

Sheila thanked the executive. "I advise you to press your carrier for reimbursement. They won't be found."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because they've been installed in homes and businesses throughout the country by some very cunning criminals."

"They weren't stolen to sell on the black market?"

"Oh, no," chided Sheila. "Far worse and, for the thieves, far more profitable."

Ensnared in the sitting room at 221B that evening, neither Sheila nor Watson had much of an appetite, despite Edith Hudson-Thorne's tempting steak and kidney pie.

"Frankly, I don't understand any of this," the British Army veteran complained, seated by the ash-dusted fireplace.

"Chazz Wilmot confessed his penchant for blackmail - among other foibles - before he..."

"Took one in the back of his skull?"

"Precisely, John, and I can't thank you enough for sparing me his... his..."

"Amorous attentions?"

"To be polite, yes." Wrapped in Sherlock's dressing gown, perched in the basket-chair, she contemplated her great-great-uncle's pipes and Persian slipper on the mantle. "His... associates continue to collect data and process it, no differently

than a bank or a newspaper. Only, the information they collect is used for less legitimate ends.”

“But, with Wilmot dead, won’t they...”

“For every captain who is killed, there’s a lieutenant who steps into his shoes and takes command.”

“You think the operation remains active?”

“Definitely.”

“And, your plan is to...”

“Thwart their efforts, of course.”

“But, how?”

Swirls of tobacco smoke encompassed them; Sheila coughed deliberately.

“I’ve told you, Uncle...” she scolded.

Watson rose and opened a window overlooking Baker Street.

“You haven’t a clue how to proceed, eh?” challenged the Great Detective’s spectre.

His niece muttered, “I’m working on it.”

The day’s London *Times* fell on her lap.

“What’s this for?”

“What do you see?” Sherlock growled.

Unfolding the newsprint, she studied the headlines and articles. “A photo from Wilmot’s funeral...”

“The photographer had a better vantage point than you.”

“Up a tree, possibly.”

“From that angle, what can be seen?”

Instead of responding, Sheila directed her attention to Watson. “John, can you bring this up on the computer?”

The photo’s web version exceeded the grainy print copy in clarity, and could be enlarged to view. Watson moved the mouse to shift the images as his flatmate scanned the screen.

“Well?” prompted Sherlock.

More of the man in the fedora was visible, including short brown hair, a clean-shaven profile, the top portion of an expensive suit, and his left ear.

Sheila admitted defeat. “I don’t...”

“You have the coroner’s photos of Charles Wilmot?”

The manila envelope was tucked among folders of criminal histories above the corner lab table. Sheila fetched it and presented them to the ghost.

“Look for yourself,” he instructed.

She gulped, “I... can’t.”

“John?” urged Sherlock.

Watson unclasped the flap and extracted oversized, gory portraits. He rifled through them, selecting one that showed the deceased's left ear. He held it up to the monitor, offering a comparison of both.

"Bloody hell!" Sheila gulped.

Watson glared at Sherlock, rumbling, "That's impossible. No two people have identical ears."

"And, you're positive Charles Wilmot is dead, because..." the latter intimated.

"Because, I shot him!" raged the disabled veteran.

Sheila intervened, "Calm yourself, John." She paced the floor, speculating. "The only exception to that rule is..."

The men waited for her to complete the sentence.

Watson, however, reached the conclusion before her. "Oh, my God! Twins!"

He earned a benevolent bow from the flat's original occupant, who gradually dissipated.

Sheila hovered near the fireplace, trembling. "I... don't need this, John," she sobbed. "I don't need to face down that bastard's identical..."

He joined her, hands massaging her tense neck muscles. "Less than an hour ago, you were ready to wipe out Wilmot's entire network. Now, because his brother..."

She dropped on the basket-chair, expression brightening. "He may not be involved, for that matter. At the funeral, he spat on Chazz's casket. That means he despised his brother, an upstanding citizen's final condemnation of an errant sibling."

Watson sank on the armchair. "Or..."

"Or?"

He uttered the words reluctantly. "What if Chazz double-crossed him?"

"Gee, thanks." She shot to her feet and stomped to her bedroom, slamming the door.

Windows rattling from the impact, Edith entered with a silver tray to gather the dinner dishes. She paused, frustrated, at the table. "You didn't eat!"

"Not hungry," retorted her tenant, limping toward his own chamber.

Sheila could hear the landlady's disgusted tirade through the wood, objecting to the wasted food, the detritus scattered about, the stacks of unopened mail. She grit her teeth and slid open the night stand drawer. A brown paper-wrapped parcel rested within, recently delivered in the post.

Averse to partaking of the coca leaves, she reclined on the double mattress, violet eyes not really focused on the ceiling. Her brain swam with disjointed thoughts, spoken aloud.

“What is the deal with these narcissists who muster hordes of low-lives to do their bidding, amassing fortunes from their victims? I mean, I could understand James Moriarty, driven to match or exceed the evil of his infamous forebear. Pearly White, though... that conniving son of a bitch, and now Chazz Wilmot and his twin? It’s ludicrous!”

She punched a pillow, already wet with tears.

“This can’t register on an emotional level,” she warned herself. “I’ve got to approach it logically. He purported to own the sandwich shop on Gower Street and most of the adjoining row houses. Tomorrow, I start by authenticating those claims. If true, I’ll visit each and every one, to discover what goes on there...”

Not that she slept that night. She hadn’t more than dozed in a fortnight, since Wilmot had... had...

Try as she did not to remember the sensation of dizziness from the drug - which the lab at St. Bart’s Hospital had not been able to identify after drawing six tubes of blood from her arm - or the heightened excitement as he’d run his fingers over her flesh... The knowledge she would’ve died if Watson hadn’t saved her sent her scurrying along the corridor, emptying her stomach into the toilet.

Tied in the tattered dressing gown, bleary orbs strained to navigate that Wednesday morning; Watson sipped coffee at his desk, perusing a news feed.

“Any uplifting stories?” she groaned.

“The Queen has a new great-grandchild.”

Her fingers refused to grasp the carafe handle to fill a ceramic mug. “Boy or girl?”

“A healthy boy.”

“Good for her. More heirs to wear the crown.”

“He’d be...” Watson calculated mentally, “fourteenth in line, and even further along since they changed the rules to allow girls to succeed to the throne.”

“Very astute, John.”

“Ta.” Glimpsing her lack of agility, he came to her aid.

Clutching the cup in both hands, she gulped the potent brew greedily.

“Bad night?” he prodded.

“Awful.”

“I really think you should see a doctor.”

She shuffled to the red Victorian divan, slumping on the cushions. “You know my feelings about that.”

“Sheila, you aren’t immortal. Your body can only tolerate so much stress...”

“You’re saying, I need a shrink?”

“If you didn’t have PTSD before... Wilmot, I’m positive you do now.”

Tousled brunette curls bounced as her head shook. “I love you, John, but you’ve got to understand...”

Raising his arms in a gesture of surrender, he shifted once more toward the computer.

"I... would appreciate if you'd come with me today," she remarked sheepishly.

"Edith has a grocery list and will be going to the store..."

"No, a different set of errands."

"Such as?"

"Tracing deeds of ownership."

"For what?"

When she didn't answer, his digits froze on the keyboard. "You intend to proceed with your investigation?"

"I *must* discover the truth about..."

"If I do as you ask, will you do as *I* ask?"

"Once I get to the bottom of this... conundrum, you can schedule an appointment with the finest shrink in London."

The next instant, he towered above her, hand extended.

"What?"

"When two people reach an agreement, they shake on it."

She fidgeted. "You don't trust me?"

"The state you're in, you're liable to forget this conversation ever took place."

"Oh, so be it."

The bargain sealed, she held onto his mitt as she pulled herself upright. "Give me a few minutes to dress."

A Beatles t-shirt, jeans and sandals didn't impress the clerks at the land registry office; Watson perceived the middle-aged women's expressions as uncooperative when Sheila half-staggered toward the counter.

"Leave this to me," he whispered, depositing her on a metal bench and plucking the list of addresses from her fist.

Her contralto strained to be heard. "Ta, John."

A forced pleasantness accompanied Watson's exchange with the departmental employees. He watched closely as they punched search parameters into their databases, and came away with a 12-page printout of properties owned by Charles Wilmot IV.

"This is incredible!" Watson mumbled on the Tube to Baker Street. "He's bought up clusters in every major city, not just London. Selling them would net millions!"

Sheila, drained of energy reserves, rested her head on his shoulder. "He'd already netted millions, John. The businesses were fronts for his nefarious schemes. The houses and flats... where his prostitutes and drug dealers reside."

"How can you be so sure? Now that he's dead..."

“You’ll see I’m right when we call on the occupants.”

He bristled. “All of them?”

“As many as necessary to track the flow of cash and... so forth to its source.”

“Wilmot’s successor?”

When he glanced down, she’d fallen asleep.

Not a long nap, unfortunately. As the train screeched into the station, she wrenched awake, screaming.

Occupants of the car regarded her dubiously. Watson shrugged as he steered her toward the platform, announcing, “Bad dream.”

He flatly refused her suggestion they continue to Gower Street. “You’re in no shape to do any more today. You must have a serious lie-down.”

Stumbling into the sitting room, she drawled, “Only if you stay with me.”

The very fact she felt comfortable enough to relax in his presence resigned him to the task. While he’d hoped their relationship would progress beyond mere friendship to a deeper level of affection, he’d contented himself with her eccentric blend of reliance and detachment these many years.

They’d never shared a bed before.

Watson justified the arrangement as occurring in broad daylight, fully clothed, with the door open.

When Edith delivered tea and scones at 4:00, her proprieties rebelled at the sight of Sheila curled beside him, snoring quietly. “I told you long ago, if I ever caught you...”

“Shh!” he signaled with his free hand. “This is the only way she could sleep without... without...”

“Honestly?”

“Must do.”

“No... hanky panky?”

Watson struggled to stifle his laughter. “If there was, I’d have the decency to shoot the bolt!”

By the time Sheila woke the next morning, the arm wedged under her spine exceeded numb. Besides that, his prosthetic needed adjustment. As she trudged to the bathroom for a shower, he remained prone, flexing his fingers, assessing which psychologist among his acquaintances would best mesh with her unorthodox behaviors.

Humidity already penetrating closed panes, Sheila opted for an orange tank top and khaki cargo shorts.

“Going full casual today?” he mocked.

“We can better pass for lost tourists dressed this way.”

Her reasoning made sense. Last thing they needed was a confrontation with an angry pimp or wary shopkeeper concealing contraband in his storeroom.

His blond mop towed dry after a cool stream refreshed him, he joined her in the foyer wearing frayed jeans and a sleeveless red t-shirt. She smiled her approval, whisking into the oppressive swelter.

Their first stop: the sandwich shop. Large placards facing the street declared new management for the establishment. Brisk trade corroborated the declaration; Sheila would not order from the menu. As Watson sipped his soda, she twirled on the stool, identifying no one among staff or patrons.

Her anxiety did not ease until they'd departed and trekked 100 meters north.

"See?" Watson pressed. "Nothing to worry about."

"A new manager does not mean a new owner, John."

"Depending on who inherits Wilmot's estate, it may take months for the courts to clear up any disputes..."

"I do so cherish your patience."

"Sometimes, I think you enjoy being contrary."

"Not on purpose."

He viewed her askance.

"Not *always* on purpose," she corrected.

"That's better."

Pausing before the next address copied from the records, Sheila registered every detail of the three-story domicile, without passing through the wrought iron gate.

"What can you glean from this?" inquired Watson.

She replied mysteriously, "Too much, and not enough."

"Meaning?"

"While the house itself has not been divided into flats, at least six unrelated people live here. That does not bode well. Nor do the discarded syringes."

"Syringes? Where?"

"Half buried in the bushes, and one in the flower box."

"Oh, damn!"

A vaguely familiar voice piped, "Well, fancy meeting you here!"

The couple swiveled toward Gregory Peters, the house agent.

"Are you looking at this neighborhood, as well as the South Bank?" he asked.

Watson bluffed, "We're... all over the map."

"There are a couple nice vacancies two blocks from here - rentals, though, not for sale."

"We'll... let you know."

"You have my card?"

"Yes."

He passed on, while neither of the pair budged.

“He never should have recognized us,” Sheila droned.

“Unless he’s really good with faces.”

“Or, he’s...”

“No, Sheila,” Watson countered. “You can’t suspect everyone of having ulterior motives.”

“I’m sorry, John. You mentioned recently how you should trust your gut. I must trust my eyes, ears, and brain.” She linked arms with him and proceeded along the sidewalk. “Did you see which building he came from?”

“No, but it had to be on this side of the street. We would’ve seen him cross, if...”

“Very good.” She thumped the sheet. “Any of these *not* owned by Wilmot?”

Blue eyes scanned house numbers. “No, he owns them to the next intersection.”

Sheila spun on her heel.

“What?” Watson wondered.

“Let’s go home.”

“Are you not feeling well?”

“I’m knackered. Tired of hacking my way through a jungle of intrigue.” Course set for Euston Road, she swallowed her agitation. “I need a vacation.”

## Confronting Demons

Fully cognizant if Sheila Holmes fled London, on the premise of vacationing in cooler climes, the manifestations of her PTSD would worsen, Johnny Watson reveled in the presence of a navy blue-suited official on the sitting room's red Victorian divan when they returned from their investigation of Chazz Wilmot's properties on Gower Street.

Edith Hudson-Thorne, their landlady, had warned them of his arrival when they'd raided the refrigerator in her kitchen, late for lunch.

Mounting the servants' stairs, they burst into the cluttered chamber; their guest set aside the crumpled copy of the London *Times* he'd been reading and rose. "Good afternoon," came his dignified greeting.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," apologized Watson, slightly embarrassed at the general untidiness.

Sheila, for her part, didn't bother with such emotions. "So, you're the new Metropolitan Police superintendent."

Her flatmate bit his lip, shocked she'd referred to the agency by its proper name, when she usually complained about the ineptitude of Scotland Yard, the more common moniker.

"Dermot Vale, at your service."

The pair clasped hands.

"Please, sit," Sheila invited, absorbing his manner before crossing to the basket-chair.

Edith appeared with a fresh pot of coffee and selection of pastries on a filigreed silver tray. Watson assisted in clearing the table and arranging the dishes, before the American widow withdrew.

Head shaved, eyes bloodshot, Vale declined the offer of refreshments. Watson left the cups, positioning himself in the armchair near the fireplace.

"I'm afraid this isn't a social call, Miss Holmes," Vale summarized.

She scowled at his crooked teeth. "I'd be surprised if it was, Superintendent."

"To be blunt, your tendency to stick your nose where it doesn't belong is impeding a very sensitive investigation."

"If you could be more specific," she urged.

"You and Sergeant Watson were reported snooping around various crime scenes in the past few days..."

Sheila chortled, "Snooping? Is that how you define work that has brought more criminals to justice than your own reputedly well-trained operatives?"

"Sheila!" Watson hissed in warning.

“No, John. I won’t be insulted on my own turf. Make your accusations, Mr. Vale, then make your departure.”

“These aren’t accusations, simply facts. You visited the former South Bank residence of Sir Miles Caruthers without departmental authorization, then began harassing suspects at sites along North Gower Street.”

“That’s a lie!” stormed Watson.

“So, Gregory Peters is an undercover investigator?” Sheila grunted.

This observation gave Vale pause. “He didn’t let on...”

“He didn’t have to. You just outed him, yourself. Fortunately, the news will remain confidential.”

“I never mentioned his name...”

“No need. He’s the common thread. My suspicions about him were justified; he never should have recognized me on Gower Street, since I’d worn a disguise to Caruthers’ house, unless he already knew my identity.”

Vale blushed, visible despite hiding his face behind his hands.

“You really should be more careful,” Sheila chided. “One reckless word in the wrong ear, and you could ruin dozens of discreet investigations.”

“Sheila, please!” pressed Watson.

“Come, John, you agree with me! Mr. Vale has been promoted to his current post because his predecessors allowed the likes of Deke Caruthers to run amok, worse than some hardened criminals. He’s been tasked to sweep up the mess, repair the public’s perception of the department, and get the train back on track.” Exhaustion hardened her lean features as she struggled to her feet. “You’ve no need to fuss with me, Superintendent. I do the job your team should do, and fail at - miserably. I allow them to take credit in the media for most of it, as well.”

She wavered unsteadily. Watson leapt up, grabbing her waist.

“If you’ll excuse me...” She signaled her companion toward the bedroom.

Vale lingered on the divan until Watson returned. The latter poured two cups of coffee and presented one to the visitor.

“She’s... in a bad way,” the official opined.

“Her... mental state has deteriorated since the encounter with Chazz Wilmot. Learning of his twin brother...”

Vale’s stunned reaction caused hot liquid to spill on his lap. He shot off the cushions, hopping awkwardly. On instinct, Watson grabbed a pitcher of water and dumped it on Vale’s legs to cool the burning sensation.

Both erupted in laughter.

Watson fetched a towel, allowing Vale to sponge some of the moisture from his trousers. With the high humidity, however, any likelihood the cloth would soon dry remained nil.

“I’ll loan you a pair of mine temporarily,” the host suggested. “Edith can have those good as new in a trice.”

Another ten minutes passed before the men resumed their conversation, with Watson posing another theory.

“Why is knowledge of Wilmot’s brother such a huge secret?”

Vale sighed. “We’ve had Maurice Wilmot under surveillance for months. He had a very... turbulent relationship with Chazz. His death presents complications for Maurice’s... business interests.”

“Meaning, criminal syndicate?”

The bald head nodded.

“Chazz wasn’t quite... right, psychologically.”

“How would you...”

“When he took over the veterans group therapy sessions, impersonating a PTSD therapist, some of his remarks were less than professional, for one, and blatantly offensive.”

“Maurice entrusted Chazz with the Gower Street operations - the sandwich shop that catered mostly to the dregs of society, the pimps and prostitutes, the drug dealers - solely to keep him from interfering with more profitable enterprises.”

“And the extortion ring?” supplied Watson.

“Eh?” Vale squinted.

“You didn’t know about the hidden cameras installed in Caruthers’ bedroom and, potentially, hundreds of other residences?”

“This is absolutely new to me!”

“Nelson’s Electrical was robbed of two palates of the devices over a course of months. There are police reports detailing the thefts somewhere in your files. Sheila found a label off one when we went to Sir Miles’ old townhome, after Chazz revealed he’d seen footage of her there.”

“You mean, the night Caruthers was arrested?”

“Precisely.”

“But, you didn’t find the cameras?”

“Sheila believes they were embedded in the furniture.”

“Which is now in our evidence warehouse,” drawled Vale.

“If you can recover the devices, and trace the digital signatures to their source, you’ll probably break open another of Chazz’s underhanded schemes.”

“Located on Gower Street?”

“He owned properties throughout the country, not only London. The base could be anywhere.”

“Miss Holmes deduced this from...”

Watson bristled, “We did it together.”

“Yes, of course,” gulped Vale by way of an apology. “You are both to be commended.”

“Sheila’s being honored by the Queen, as a matter of fact.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard.”

“Mr. Vale, you really need to keep your ear to the ground. No administrator can do his job competently if his lines of communication are blocked, or nonexistent.”

“Very wise, Sergeant.”

Edith appeared with the dried and pressed trousers; Vale accepted them gratefully. He retired to Watson’s room to change, while the landlady cleared the uneaten treats.

Her tenant snatched a sticky bun as she retreated, lightening the mood.

When the superintendent rejoined him, a tense silence reigned.

“You have more to say?” Watson hinted.

“This meeting hasn’t gone as I’d planned. I meant to enlist Miss Holmes’ aid - and yours, of course - with a series of smash-and-grab thefts occurring throughout the city.”

“Smash-and-grabs?”

“Kids on Vespas, we think, violating curfew in the wee hours, throwing bricks or rocks through display windows at high end shops, stuffing their take in backpacks and disappearing in the darkness.”

“Random?”

“The first five, we thought so. There does, however, seem to be pattern.”

“I’ll tell her. She’ll be in contact if she’s up to it.”

“You’re a good friend, Sergeant. Take care of her.”

Vale eventually made his exit with more respect for the independent detective and her staunch defender, though Watson wished he’d taken the opportunity to pry more details about Maurice Wilmot from the guest.

With a name, though, he could make a start toward alleviating Sheila’s chronic stress.

He accessed his colleagues via the internet, veterans mostly, who had discovered security vulnerabilities in databases and password-protected sources. They, too, could benefit from this search, since some of their loved ones had been victimized by Chazz Wilmot - possibly with Maurice’s sanction.

Sheila didn’t emerge from her bedroom until nightfall, tied in Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown, flesh drawn and pale.

Watson hinted. “You’ve restocked the coca leaves?”

“I can’t ask you to sleep with me whenever I close an eye, John,” she remonstrated.

“You’ve got to do something, see someone who can...”

“I remember our bargain, never fear.”

He leaned forward on the desk chair. “Then, you’ll let me set up an appointment?”

“We still haven’t broken the web of Wilmot’s influence.”

“But, we’re nearer to that goal than we were a few hours ago.”

“How so?” she prodded.

Watson regaled her with Vale’s insights and the subsequent influx of unrelated tidbits as she stood over his shoulder staring at a spreadsheet on the monitor screen.

“Maurice Wilmot was named after his maternal grandfather, according to Eton biographical accounts. He’s married with three children. The family lives in a posh country estate up north near Bradford. He leases an apartment at One Hyde Park, but doesn’t live there himself.”

“A mistress?” Sheila mused.

“Could do.”

“What else?”

“His legitimate interests include a chain of senior care homes, two breweries, pubs here and there, a music production company and support of a regional theatre troupe in Bristol.”

“With such diverse holdings, he can launder a huge chunk of illegal income.”

“No doubt.”

Sheila bent toward the screen, violet orbs having difficulty focusing.

“Anything on his bodyguards?”

“Arrest records for some minor scrapes, always acquitted or the charges dismissed.”

“Bribes to the judges and prosecutors.”

“That would be my guess.”

“What about bank records?”

“His businesses have their own accounts, naturally, and periodic audits indicate no irregularities.”

“Unless they’re well hidden or falsified outright.”

“When it comes to personal accounts, there’s one in his wife’s name with the Bank of England, used to pay utility and other bills for their home.”

“None in Maurice’s name?”

“Not affiliated with British institutions.”

She grinned. “Overseas holdings.”

“I’d love to help in that regard, Sheila, but my contacts...”

“No worries, John. Fancy a visit to the pub?”

“Which one?”

“Pick from your list.”

Blue eyes widened. “You’re not in a fit state...”

“I look worse than I feel, believe me,” she assured him. “A shower, appropriate attire, and I’ll be a suitable date for a night of music and dancing.”

Vanishing into her room, Watson remained at the desk, perplexed.  
“Dancing?”

The train from Paddington Station to Oxford deposited them in a bustling metropolis, despite the university holiday. The Bull and Bear occupied a prominent street corner, drawing students and locals for the beer, food, neon decor and lively atmosphere.

Not Sheila’s particular comfort zone, as Watson would have been first to confess, but she’d assumed an entirely upbeat demeanor for the occasion. She acted flighty, flirty, bubbly - the kind of female he ordinarily avoided. She’d applied blue eyeshadow, pink cheek rouge and red lipstick, recycling the leather mini-skirt from the Caruthers’ debacle with a low-cut sleeveless blouse. She shunned stilettos for lower heels, so she could join the crowd on the cramped dance floor, when asked.

Ask the male patrons did. She barely had a chance to sip her margarita between songs, the rotation of eager partners a constant. Watson remained at the tiny square table, stained by countless glasses and condiments, nursing his sore leg with its prosthetic.

He chuckled to himself that he needed to schedule his own appointment, for an adjustment to the contraption.

He kept a close watch on Sheila as she cycled through the evening. A trite smile seemed permanently screwed onto her face, but the pain evident in her violet orbs tore at his heart.

“Haven’t you had enough?” he practically shouted over the din as the band took a break.

“It’s like a clearing house of odd facts in here!” she countered. “I’ll be able to hand Dermot Vale ten felons and a score of minor criminals tomorrow morning!”

“What about Wilmot?”

“He’s here, with his mistress.”

Watson stiffened. “Where?”

“A table up two steps, toward the back. His own ring-side seat, if you will. While his lady gulps champagne and yammers on about who knows what, he’s kept his attention on me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve deliberately faced toward him, no matter who I’m with.”

“He really *is* identical to his brother?”

Sheila sobered abruptly. “It’s chilling, John. Except that he’s clean-shaven, there’s absolutely no variation. It’s taken every ounce of determination to remain on my feet. My knees feel gelatinous when I sense his gaze upon me.”

“Let’s go home.”

“Not yet. If he makes a move...”

“What about his entourage?”

“They’re posted in each corner of the establishment, with the fifth near the bandstand.”

“Won’t they... intervene if you...”

“Not if he’s the aggressor.” She squeezed his right hand. “During the next music set, I predict he’ll initiate a row with his mistress, and two of the guards will be ordered to drive her to London. Then, he’ll send another over, requesting I join him.”

“Ready to wager on that?” smirked Watson.

“If I’m wrong, you can call for that appointment with the shrink tomorrow. If I’m correct, I want triple chocolate cake for dessert with dinner.”

“Done.”

As they shook on the deal, what resembled a motorcycle gang member sauntered to the table, demanding a dance with Sheila.

She shrugged playfully at Watson and let the behemoth with his stubbly cranium and ample white beard escort her between the throng.

He seized her and pressed her to his flabby chest, despite the fast tempo of the song; she flinched. A few deep breaths calmed her agitation, and she prepared to rake his shin with her shoe to escape, when his tattooed arms were wrenched from around her and pinned to his spine. He whimpered as a trio of Wilmot’s guards shuffled him toward the street.

Maneuvering through the crush, she collided with the proprietor himself. Definitely in his forties, he’d shed the wide-brimmed fedora he’d sported at his table, brown hair darker and shorter than his brother’s, and styled in a bouffant with an excessive amount of product. His sole adornment: a gold and ruby university ring on his middle finger, left hand.

Sheila fought the repulsion welling in her stomach, feigning geniality.

“I apologize for... that oaf,” remarked Wilmot with a rich bass. “Every now and again, a roughneck evades the screening.”

“Screening?”

“I don’t like low-lives in my pub.”

“He did look... out of place.”

“May I buy you a drink?”

“I already have one, thanks.”

She tried to push past; his firm grip halted her.

“You’re with someone?”

“A friend.”

“You’ve been dancing with different guys all night. If he’s your boyfriend...”

“Just a friend.”

“Will he mind if you... take off with me?”

She tittered, “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because I like what I see, and I always get what I want.”

“Sounds like a spoiled child.” In her mind, she added, “Sounds like your brother.”

“Wouldn’t you like to be spoiled for awhile?”

She decided not to prolong her resistance. “Sure.”

“Meet me outside in five minutes.”

“Okay.”

She found herself dogged to the table by a guard, offering Watson a perfunctory farewell with the underlying message that he should try to follow at a prudent distance.

Bound for the exit, she detoured toward the ladies’ room.

“Where you goin’?” grunted her shadow.

“Beer runs right through me,” she bluffed.

He took up a post outside the door, noting, “Me, too.”

It didn’t matter she hadn’t been drinking beer - had barely touched her margarita. The exchange affirmed the intellectual prowess of Wilmot’s men: capable of taking orders, and little else.

She washed her hands, straightened her blouse and smoothed her hose, ignoring the reflection in the mirror above multiple sinks. Why did impersonating a tart garner more success with her investigations than when she dressed more conventionally?

The question would remain an enigma, for the moment.

Outside, humidity clung to her like a pall, but Wilmot’s white Rolls-Royce limousine cooled her with air conditioning. The vehicle’s owner delayed not an instant once they slid onto the back seat. His arm slithered around her spine, tugging her close.

“You’ve got a lot of potential,” he oozed.

“What kind of potential?”

“To earn serious money.”

She hedged, “I’m still at university...”

“Here?”

“Birmingham.”

“Studying what?”

“Business administration.”

“You?” he guffawed. “You’re lucky to be able to read and write!”

She pouted, “That’s not fair.”

“If you’re so smart, why dress... like this?”

“To catch myself a sugar daddy.”

The declaration’s brusqueness startled him.

She snuggled against him. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“How do you know I’m rich?”

“Any guy who can afford to pay five thugs to do his dirty work, and buy a ride like this... you’re not hanging out in a bread line.”

“Very... astute.”

“What about that gal you brought in tonight?” she inquired lightly.

He snarled, “A... friend.”

“Not your wife?”

“God, no.”

“Keep her around for... kicks?”

“She bores me.”

“You want to replace her with something... fresh and exciting?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Like me, I suppose.”

Wilmot lowered his chin as Sheila gazed into deep brown orbs. An involuntary shudder ran through her.

“Cold?” he ventured.

“A little.”

He snatched up a phone and instructed the chauffeur to regulate the temperature. Returning the handset to its cradle, he shifted toward her. “Better?”

“I will be, in a minute or two.”

“Good.”

“You’ve got pierced ears, but don’t even wear studs.”

Multiple piercings in each lobe, actually, she noted.

“Years ago, my brother bet me I wouldn’t have it done, after I teased him about all his tattoos.”

“You got any?”

“Any what?”

“Tattoos.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it. But I like ‘em on guys. Makes me hot.”

Wilmot reached for her. “I had... other ideas for you... but you might be a welcome change to my... routine.”

She perked up. “What ideas?”

“My brother has... had a business in the city, and I’ve taken charge. I thought... you’d fit in well with the rest of the... staff.”

“I’m not looking for a job.”

“So you said. Are you so... resolved to take a degree?”

“Sure. My parents expect me to...”

“Any parent would expect their daughter to behave like a normal, red-blooded girl, taking whatever she’s offered, in order to get ahead in the world.”

“That’s... true, Mister...” The scenery beyond tinted glass distracted her briefly - eastbound toward London. “I don’t even know your name. I don’t make a habit of going off with strangers...”

“Your parents would be proud, on that score.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What’s your name?”

“For that matter, I don’t know yours, either.”

“Tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine.”

Stealthy digits encircled her from behind. “After.”

A sharp elbow to his ribcage forced him to retract his hold. She pivoted, her face an innocent mask.

“I’m so sorry! Did I hurt you?” she stammered.

He croaked, “Not at all.”

“It’s a reflex action. I went through a haunted house when I was a kid, and someone grabbed me like that. Scared the life out of me. Ever since, I can’t...”

“Perfectly... understandable.”

“You were going to tell me your name,” she persisted.

“Maurice. Maurice Wilmot.”

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “That’s for forgiving my clumsiness, Maury.”

“How... sweet.”

Wilmot must’ve pressed a button on the seat or side panel; the limousine slowed and braked at a curb on the outskirts of Uxbridge. The liveried driver opened the door and waited.

“What’s this?” Sheila wondered.

Wilmot snarled, “I... must leave you here. Urgent business. Unavoidable. You can catch the Tube to London, then a train to Birmingham.”

The woman alighted, not as distraught as she might have acted, being deposited in the middle of the night in unfamiliar surroundings.

She’d garnered so much intelligence from this single outing, it could lead to the decimation of the twins’ empire, after all.

Furthermore, she’d emerged unscathed.

A taxi pulled up beside her, Watson emerging from the interior after paying the cabby. “Not cheap, that,” he complained. “Are you hurt?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“What happened?”

“He realized I wasn’t going to play ball, as the Americans say.”

“Play what kind of ball?”

“He intended to induct me into a very exclusive sorority, headquartered on Gower Street.”

Watson's jaw gaped. "He was recruiting whores at the bar?"

"One, anyway."

"Is that what you expected?"

"Not exactly. But, in addition to his other idiosyncracies, he treats his mistress like a yo-yo. She's tolerable to have at his beck and call, but when it's inconvenient, he shuns her like the plague."

"That intrigues you why?"

"She could be the weak link in his chain. If she's jealous, or just angry, she might give up his secrets quite readily."

Watson marveled at these machinations. "Oh, Sheila, I'd hate to see you turn rogue."

"I already have, John. I already have." With a mischievous cackle, she entwined her fingers through his and led him toward the Tube station.

Barely three hours' sleep in her own bed at Baker Street preceded another excursion on the London Underground: Scotland Yard. Apprehensive about her depleted state, Watson brooked no opposition about accompanying her.

The reception desk clerk balked at announcing the pair to Superintendent Vale, until Sheila identified herself. A solicitous corporal guided them to a lift, then to the corner office where expensive chairs had already been positioned near a marble inlaid desk.

"I didn't expect to see you so soon," Vale greeted, waving them to their seats.

Sheila declared, "There's no time to lose. You'll need to coordinate with the Oxford constabulary to apprehend this list of suspects."

A folded sheaf, plucked from Watson's trouser pocket, dropped on the blotter. Stubby fingers rifled sheets compiled on the train overnight, while the cramped script furrowed Vale's brow.

"You're positive about this?" he queried.

"I saw the transactions myself, and engaged directly with some of the perpetrators."

"Openly?"

Her nose twitched. "On the dance floor."

"I..." Vale blinked. "You dance?"

"There's not much to it these days."

"You'll be called to testify..."

"Unless they enter a guilty plea."

"Not likely."

Sheila grinned. "You'll be amazed. Mention the pub was wired with cameras, and they'll beg to stay behind bars."

"Eh?"

“If they believe Wilmot will... punish their failures, they’ll be all too willing to confess and petition for protective custody.”

“You really think he’d...”

“He isn’t the first, nor the last, to hold the reins of his organization tightly. He won’t risk being exposed.”

Vale rose. “We’ll get on this immediately.”

“Don’t include my name during the press conference when you’re thanking the squads who make the arrests,” Sheila reminded him.

“As you wish.”

“Not for my safety, you understand. When the opportunity arises, Maurice Wilmot will be made to realize he sat within arm’s length of me, and botched his chance to comb me permanently from that head of slick hair. Then, we’ll sell tickets to the fireworks.”

Watson matched pace with his flatmate as they departed, confused by her attitude.

“What’s up your sleeve?” he mumbled toward her ear, huddled amidst pedestrians at the intersection.

“First, a trip to Bart’s to get your leg fixed. Then, a trek to One Hyde Park.”

“They don’t take walk-ins at the prosthetic clinic, and I haven’t rung for an appointment.”

“You didn’t, but I did. Last week.”

“You... did?”

“Of course,. I may feel like the dog’s dinner, but I won’t let you prolong your agony on my account.”

The traffic signal flashed green, and they moved into the crosswalk.

## Adjustments

Sheila Holmes observed cars trundling past St. Bart's Hospital, hoping to flag a taxi. "John, I fear I've made a serious tactical error."

Seated on a bus bench, Johnny Watson straightened. This frank, monotone admission from his friend and flatmate shocked him. "How so?"

"By setting Scotland Yard on the trail of the Oxford suspects, I'm compelled to accelerate my timeline to reach Wilmot's mistress, before he learns of the arrests via the media."

Scratching his close-cropped blond head, the British Army veteran deliberated. "I see what you mean."

"Will you mind much if we go directly to One Hyde Park, instead of back to Baker Street? I know you must be in pain..."

"At least, this discomfort isn't from the prosthetic. If I'd have known the way that loose spring rubbed the skin would cause an infection, I would've dealt with it much sooner."

"You'll come with me, then?" Sheila pressed.

"Should do."

The Middle Eastern cabby accustomed to transporting those in diminished health, he assisted Watson onto the rear seat. Given the address of their destination, he merged skillfully with traffic, enabling his passengers to continue their discussion.

"Do you really think she'll confide in us?" Watson queried.

"If I drop a hint that she could be prosecuted as an accessory to Wilmot's crimes, yes."

"How do we get in the building?"

"Walk through the front door, naturally."

"What about security?"

She patted his arm. "Don't worry, John. Everything will go smoothly."

That Sheila exuded confidence, despite her own physical depletion, should have eased Watson's anxiety but, settling on the worn naugahyde upholstery, he felt his heart throbbing in his ears.

The driver received a generous tip when the pair alighted in Knightsbridge before the cluster of modern structures nestled between more traditional architecture. Retail shops solved the issue of accessing the property; Sheila slipped a clerk 50 pounds to be pointed toward the service tunnels.

"Do you remember the flat number?" she whispered as Watson hobbled behind her through the dimly lit corridor.

He stopped, pulling his mobile from his jeans and tapping the email app. He scrolled through messages. "It's on the fifth floor of the west pavilion."

The process of locating the proper lift delayed their arrival by a quarter hour. Standing before the arched double doors, Sheila brushed a cobweb from Watson's shoulder, ran fingers through her tousled brunette mop and pressed the bell.

A vexed soprano penetrated the panels - "Jesus, Maurice, did you forget your key?" - a moment before the reinforced steel swung inward. The occupant, platinum blonde wearing a sheer sky blue negligee, immediately clutched her matching satin robe closed at the presence of strangers. "Who are you?"

Jostling her backward through the tiled foyer, Sheila crossed the threshold with Watson in tow, before securing the deadbolt behind them.

"What *is* all this?" the woman raged.

Sheila assumed a solemn air. "You're in danger, and we've come to help."

"What are you talking about? What danger?"

Watson took her arm gently, leading her into the vast, luxurious living room. He swallowed hard before speaking. "Your friend Maurice is soon to experience a... negative return on his business interests, for which he may blame you."

She shook off his grip. "You're barmy. Who are you?"

"I'm Sheila Holmes," came the blunt declaration.

Color instantly drained from the woman's cheeks. She stumbled over the coffee table and, if Watson hadn't grabbed her waist, she would've crashed into a glass vase of flowers on a marble stand.

He guided her to the off-white leather sectional sofa, easing her onto the cushions. "Can I get you something?"

"I'll... be all right," she wheezed.

Sheila circled the furnishings, glanced out the span of windows to gain perspective on the venue, then sank beside their unwitting hostess, stating quietly, "I can promise you protection from the Metropolitan Police, if you cooperate."

"Do you really believe..."

"I've no doubt in my mind."

"Why should I trust you?"

Watson interspersed, "Because Sheila is the best option you have for staying alive."

Flashing green eyes honed in on him, before shifting back to the detective.

"We just need to know where Wilmot conducts his... business," Sheila explained.

"His corporations are listed..."

"Not those." The young woman leaned closer. "The other ones."

The flat's tenant shot upright. "Oh, *no*..."

Watson slid a comforting arm around her narrow ribcage. "What's your name?"

She shoved him away, annoyed. “You mean, you don’t know? You come here and make baseless accusations...”

“Not baseless, Miss,” insisted Sheila. “Wilmot is brutal and merciless. I saw how he treated you at the pub last night.”

“He can be a... right bastard sometimes, true enough. But, I don’t know anything about any... illegal activities. He doesn’t... talk about...”

“Still, you overhear conversations with his... associates, his bodyguards...”

She exhaled. “Now and then.”

“What’s he into, mostly?”

“Jewels.”

Watson echoed, “Jewels?”

“Diamonds, from Africa. Smuggled to Amsterdam to be cut, then sold.”

“What else?” Sheila pressed.

A pregnant pause as she mustered her courage. “Weapons.”

“Bloody hell!” grumbled Watson.

With the liteness of a model, the mistress lowered herself on the sofa.

“Can you really guarantee my safety?”

“You’ll have to leave with us immediately,” Sheila affirmed. “Take nothing but the clothes you’re wearing...”

She giggled, a lilting trill. “This? Oh, no!”

“Then, hurry and change into something practical and inconspicuous.”

She glanced from Sheila to Watson, who nodded his approval. Then, she vanished into the bedroom.

“What *is* her name?” he puzzled.

Sheila set out to discover that information, searching the drawers in the writing desk, but finding no mail, no wallet, no credit cards issued to the woman.

“Wilmot pays for everything,” grunted the visitor.

Watson limped toward the kitchen. “I’m getting some water. Would you like a glass?”

The heat and humidity of the day made the offer appealing. “Sure. Bring our... friend one, too.”

A key scraping in the lock immobilized Sheila near the wall-mounted television. Watson detected the sound, as well, deactivating the faucet to conceal his presence.

“Bindi?” came Wilmot’s stern bass. “Are you here?”

He whisked into the living room, pulling up short at the sight of this intruder.

“What the devil?”

“Hullo, Maury,” Sheila greeted snidely.

His jaw gaped. “You’re...”

“The woman your brother tried to rape and murder.”

“What?” He examined her visually. “No! You’re that... college kid from the pub!”

“Indeed.”

“What are you doing here?”

“A little girl-talk with your lady.”

Suspicious aroused, he retreated. “You know Bindi?”

“Met her about 15 minutes ago. Nice gal.” Sheila sensed his trepidation and seized her advantage. “Too good for you.”

“She’s a spoiled tart,” he growled. “Rescued her from Chazz’s collection of cast-offs to keep me... entertained.”

Bindi heard the remark as she emerged from her room, in skin tight lime green leggings, a spaghetti strap yellow shirt and diamond-accented leather sandals.

“So, is that what you really think of me?” she hissed.

Wilmot didn’t reply, merely sneered in her direction.

“None of that,” advised Sheila. “Consider the relationship over; Bindi is leaving with me.”

“Oh, so it’s that way, is it?”

Wilmot’s innuendo required no clarification.

Bindi sauntered toward him and slapped his arrogant face.

Receiving a bullet in the midsection for her trouble.

Sheila raced to abate her collapse, blood gushing onto the expensive carpet. The detective glared up at Wilmot’s superior posture: the bouffant-style hair, the disdainful brown eyes, pistol twirling.

“No one treats me like that,” he proclaimed.

“Oh, no! But you let Chazz mistreat women, engage in blackmail, manufacture lethal drugs...”

“Chazz is dead. He was a punk, never amounted to anything. Went to university, couldn’t earn a degree. Couldn’t hold a job. He kept coming to me for money, so I offered him a chance to be his own man.”

“A criminal.”

“His choice. He could’ve made a comfortable income leasing the Gower Street properties, but his tastes ran to the...”

Sheila straightened, “Baser instincts?”

“Very diplomatic.”

“You aren’t the upstanding citizen you pretend to be. If you’d had your way last night, Bindi would’ve been kicked to the curb, and I could’ve been living here.”

Tucking the Glock beneath his jacket, he inched forward. “I still don’t get why you...”

“You don’t read the papers, do you?” she chuckled.

“I have more important matters on my mind than politics or movie reviews. My boys keep track of that, and fill me in when something merits my attention.”

“You’re saying, how Chazz died didn’t merit your attention?”

“What’s it to me? He’s out of my hair, and good riddance.”

“So much for fraternal bonds,” she lamented. “And, so much for my assessment of you as an intelligent adversary.”

“Adversary?”

“My name is Sheila Holmes, you dolt.”

Eyebrows arched. “No way...”

“Within the week, a sizable number of your underlings will be imprisoned, and I predict a good percentage of them will provide evidence to score you a very, very long sentence.”

His hands clamped around her throat, applying unrelenting pressure. Though weak, she still possessed wherewithal enough to kick his left shin, then sweep his right leg, throwing him off balance.

As he staggered, she heaved lungfuls of air, scanning the chamber for a means to defend herself.

The vase of flowers soared at her head; she dodged the impact. Shattering on the stone fireplace, shards of glass ricocheted in all directions.

Wilmot tackled her. They fell on the sharp fragments together, Sheila howling. She strained to roll the assailant off her; he reared upright and began pounding her with his fists.

“Freeze!” Watson bellowed from across the room.

Wilmot desisted, raising his arms in surrender. “Who are you?”

“The man who killed your brother.”

Wilmot scrambled into a quasi-dignified position. “Then, I should congratulate you.”

“Drop the gun.”

“Not happening.”

It suddenly dawned on Sheila - gingerly attempting to right herself, blood dripping from multiple wounds - that Watson wielded Sherlock’s revolver, as he had during the debacle with Wilmot’s twin.

Light-headed, from her injuries as well as her overall condition, she managed to collar Wilmot and forcibly remove his weapon from its holster. “Call Vale, if you would, please, John,” she stammered.

“Already done.”

At that precise instant, a cadre of police burst through the door, spreading like a fan to secure the premises.

“It’s all right,” Sheila drawled. “Fun’s over.”

She crumpled on the sofa, unconscious.

“Get the paramedics up here!” Superintendent Dermot Vale commanded, absorbing the devastation.

The constables retired with Wilmot in shackles once the coroner and detectives arrived. Vale sat with Watson at the desk as the investigation proceeded; white-clad attendants argued with an uncooperative patient shunning anything beyond their basic ministrations.

“You would’ve been justified in killing him, Sergeant,” acknowledged the official. “It would’ve saved the courts considerable expense.”

“Aren’t suspects innocent until proven guilty?”

“Miss Holmes saw him murder his mistress in cold blood. That’s guilt enough for me. Why let the solicitors engage in their grand theatrics, trying for an acquittal?”

“What about that list of his flunkies, and his brother’s prostitution and drug rings?”

“We expedited warrants for raids on the sites. A total of 183 arrests.”

“Sheila will be glad to hear it.”

“Glad to hear what?” she shouted the question.

Watson sniffed, “Wilmot’s organization has been broken.”

“Not yet, John. Not completely.”

“Eh?” injected Vale.

“Once those in custody start talking, I estimate a thousand, or more, implicated in the diverse network of crimes.” She slapped away a gauze bandage for a gash on her cheek. “Chazz did say he’d woven an extensive web around the island.”

“And the world,” Watson added.

Vale conceded the debate. “The seed you planted will bear much fruit, Miss Holmes. Two of the thugs already confessed to orchestrating the smash-and-grab scheme. You have our thanks.”

“For Queen and country,” she sighed.

“I’ll be sure the Queen is made aware of your... assistance, in anticipation of the honors already being bestowed.”

“Actually, I’d prefer if that fiasco could be canceled, outright!”

Watson mumbled toward Vale, “She doesn’t mean it.”

No one monitoring activities near the exit, their reaction to the reappearance of Maurice Wilmot - cuffed with a service weapon leveled - was delayed the split second required to prevent him squeezing off a rapid succession of shots.

Two ripped through the torso of the more assertive paramedic, bent over Sheila cleaning wounds on her legs. Another shattered the window above Watson’s head. Vale dove for cover as the fourth mutilated a framed portrait on the desk. The last drilled into the sofa beside Sheila’s ear.

Five constables subdued the escapee, their beaten, panting comrades bringing up the rear.

“How’d he get loose?” Vale demanded, confronting the squad.

The corporal recounted, “Pretended to twist his ankle. Elbowed Carnes in the stomach, slammed O’Brien’s skull against the wall and nicked the pistol.”

“Idiots!” their superior chided. “Get him out of here! And, be more careful!”

“Wait!”

All eyes turned to Sheila, edging toward them as the paramedic tended his partner while waiting for a second ambulance.

“Sheila... don’t,” warned Watson.

“Like hell I won’t, John. I’ve got enough strength in me to teach this bastard a lesson he’ll never forget.”

G glaring defiantly, Wilmot taunted, “Give it your best shot.”

The uniformed pair restraining him withdrew as she positioned her sneakers and executed a precise front kick.

Wilmot hit the floor two seconds before she did.

She’d driven his jaw into his brain.

Watson had difficulty balancing as his flatmate dug her nails into his arm to recover a vertical posture. Vale assisted in the endeavor, holding Sheila’s elbows.

“I could charge you with murder, Miss Holmes,” he ventured. “Your feet qualify as deadly weapons.”

“He planned to murder everyone in the room.” She mustered a faint grin. “As you told John, the courts have been spared the expense of a sham trial.”

“Now, you’re to hospital,” Watson directed, easing her onto the gurney, a second crew appearing to transport their colleague.

She raised his hand to her lips, kissing it playfully. “We just came from the hospital.”

Before the rolling bed was loaded into the ambulance four floors below, she’d fallen asleep.

Watson sensed, the Wilmot twins dead, she would emerge from this latest trauma with minimal lingering effects. Her physical recuperation, however, would take weeks, if not months. The accident and emergency room doctor confirmed she suffered from malnutrition, anaemia, and dehydration.

“I’d like to admit her for a week, at least,” suggested the prim redhead.

Watson placed his hand over Sheila’s mouth before she could object. She batted it aside.

“We all know what you’re going to say,” he scolded. “But, you promised...”

“I promised to let a shrink poke around inside my head, not to loaf around in bed.”

The former medic drew the physician aside. "A diet high in protein? Fruits and juices?"

"Serve her anything she likes, as long as she eats at least six times a day. Once she gains back some weight, healthy is better."

"You owe me triple chocolate cake, John," Sheila grunted.

"After one of Edith's delicious dinners?"

"Agreed."

They shook hands on the deal.

Rolling her eyes, the doctor signed off on the records and departed. Watson helped Sheila sit up, offering her a Tower of London t-shirt he'd purchased in St. Bart's gift shop, to replace her torn and blood-stained blouse.

"You're a kind and conscientious friend," she praised as they retraced their route to the same corner, the same cabby swinging to the curb for the late evening ride to Baker Street.

"You work long hours," Sheila observed.

"I must provide for my wife and four children."

"Good to see people engaging in honest labor."

Watson bit his tongue.

An assortment of newspapers tucked under her arm, Edith greeted her tenants in the foyer of 221B. "You've had a busy day."

"You don't know the half of it," breathed Watson.

She presented him with the stack. "Maybe not, but I can read between the lines."

Together, they aided Sheila in climbing the narrow stairs, and settled her in the basket-chair, after she refused her bed. She perused the articles while her companions descended to the kitchen, smelling of freshly baked muffins and cake.

"Sheila said something about chili dogs and crisps in the taxi," revealed Watson.

The landlady said, "You can handle that, while I mix the chocolate frosting."

"I've made frosting before..."

"You can lick the bowl," she snickered.

Delightful aromas preceded the arrival of the meal in the sitting room; Sheila salivated in anticipation - the first time in weeks she had an appetite.

"Not too fast, now," Watson counseled. "Don't want your stomach to reject the lot."

She quipped, "Yes, father."

As prearranged, Edith hovered over Sheila, serving her portions of crisps, milk and cake, while Watson slipped into the detective's bedroom, rummaging through drawers and wardrobe for the box of coca leaves she'd secreted. Finding it in the night stand, he crushed the cardboard and jammed it in his trouser pocket.

His ploy successful, he rejoined Edith, who requested he fetch more mustard from the kitchen.

That allowed him to consign the confiscated substance to the depths of the alley wheelie bin, beneath assorted orange peels, sticky candy wrappers and leaky soda cans.

“No more!” he pledged.

Once Sheila delved into a thick slice of cake, he and Edith finished off the platter of hot dogs, smearing the buns with tasty fixings. They emptied the bag of crisps before the tenants settled in for a quiet evening, Edith resigned to wash the dishes.

“So, Maurice Wilmot died from injuries sustained in a fall down the stairs,” Watson recounted, folding the London *Times* and tossing it on the fireplace grate.

“I wonder how Vale orchestrated that deception. The paramedics, the coroner, the constables... It’s only a matter of weeks or months before someone leaks the truth to the reporters.”

“He did it to protect *you*.”

Sheila groaned. “He did it to protect himself. It’s a feather in his cap to break such a huge case when he’s new to the position. Makes the department look efficient, dedicated... clean of corruption. If the powers that be got wind of how Wilmot bested his captors and nearly killed even more... he’d be out the door in a flash.”

“True.” He rifled the pages of the *Evening Standard*. “There’s no mention of the bodyguards.”

“Safely away to the Continent, I surmise. Wilmot’s practice was to give them a few hours’ break when he’d visit Bindi, just like they didn’t ride in the limousine with him while he... made his play for me. Once they saw the Yarders converging on the street, they bolted.”

“Think they’ll try to sneak back and resume their old lifestyle?”

“Not likely. They’ll hire on with the some narcissist who fears getting too close to the crowds, in Paris, Rome, Vienna...”

“Might be a lucrative profession.”

“You considering a change of career?” she squinted.

“Well, we are kind of strapped for cash...”

“Nonsense! Check the safe. There’s plenty.”

Watson’s chin dipped.

“What?”

“You’ve been... rather extravagant in your spending the past year or so. If you hadn’t paid the rent well in advance, I’d be worried Edith would evict us.”

Medical tape securing the gauze on her limbs and back, she rose gingerly and removed the painting that hid Sherlock’s safe from view. Vigorously, she spun

the dial, wrenched open the heavy door and stared at a single stack of 10 pound notes.

“What the devil?”

“You don’t realize, when you’re... under the influence... how you waste your assets.”

“John, I...” She slunk to the divan. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Something will turn up.”

A knock on the sitting room door preceded Edith’s irritated presentation of Dermot Vale and a tall, blue suited, mustached companion bearing a brief case.

“Apologies for calling so late,” Vale directed at Edith. Then, to the pair near the fireplace, “Please, don’t get up.”

Watson and Sheila both relaxed.

“What’s up, Superintendent?” inquired the latter.

“You’ve seen the news?”

Watson waved the paper.

“It’s imperative that... the facts in this matter remain confidential, so I must ask you to sign a non-disclosure statement.”

“A what?” roared Sheila.

“Beyond what transpired this afternoon, the Metropolitan Police investigation has linked a number of prominent political figures and members of... certain families to the Wilmots’ illegal activities. Not a word must ever be spoken that would compromise their standing.”

Watson exclaimed, “Bloody hell!”

“So, I take it you won’t be informing the Queen about my role?” Sheila chortled.

“You are still slated to receive your honors, as I understand. And, because some of the hardened criminals on the list you provided had a price on their heads, I’m also empowered to present a cheque for the reward.”

Vale didn’t understand why the flatmates doubled over with peals of laughter. He directed his associate to present the legal documents, after clearing piles of unopened mail and food wrappers off the table.

The problem, then, involved finding a pen amongst the detritus cluttering the desk. Sheila smiled as she affixed her signature in triplicate, witnessed by Vale and Jonas Federer, the barrister.

Watson took his turn; Sheila drew Vale aside. “What about Wilmot’s wife, in Bradford?”

“She’s been informed of her husband’s demise. Her response, according to the lieutenant and police chaplain assigned to the detail, could not even remotely be described as shock or grief.”

“They’d been separated for a considerable period?”

“She hadn’t seen him in over a year.”

“The properties on Gower Street?”

“An organized crime squad is processing the buildings, confiscating items for evidence, and destroying Chazz Wilmot’s... drug research. Each parcel will be sold at public auction, as Chazz left no will. The proceeds will be pooled in a fund to train the prostitutes for more... legitimate careers, and cover treatment for the addicts.”

“Not to mention compensating his blackmail victims: the veterans’ loved ones.”

“Certainly.”

Forms folded and tucked in the brief case pocket, clasps snapped shut.

“One more thing,” noted Vale.

Watson and Sheila waited.

“Nelson’s Electrical - those miniature surveillance cameras?”

“What about them?” asked Watson.

“All but two hundred were recovered, stored in the basement of one of the row houses. The insurance company will be sending its own cheque.”

Sheila prompted, “And, the recorded footage from those Chazz installed?”

“Will be integrated into our investigations.” His sunken orbs sparkled.

“Except for two files that were inexplicably corrupted.”

Clasping hands in parting, the official slipped a crushed sheet into Sheila’s palm. She grasped he wished no effusive outburst in his company.

“Well?” Watson urged after footsteps faded on the stairs and the street door latched.

She smoothed the tan rectangle on the mantle.

“Oh, my God!” Watson croaked.

“That’ll refill the safe nicely, I should think.”

“Remember, you mentioned taking a vacation? We could, you know...”

“No. This, we save for a rainy day.”

“Should do.”

She smirked, touched by the veteran’s disappointed tone. “Maybe, a weekend jaunt to the country.”

“That’d be fantastic. After... you get to feeling better.”

“I feel fine, John. Really.”

The scent of burning tobacco offended their nostrils. Shaggy dark hair, stubbly chin and slim figure materializing behind his great-great-niece, Sherlock clucked his tongue with a briar clenched between his teeth.

“You look like death warmed over,” droned the baritone.

His descendant retorted, “You should know.”

“My... constitution was stronger than yours.”

“What you’re saying,” Watson interrupted, “is that you could abuse your body to a greater extent, and still maintain a modicum of health?”

“Precisely.”

The response, in tandem: “Bullshit.”

“Be that as it may, you’re advancing into a realm where no one can be trusted, from the highest ranks to the lowest dregs. You must tread wisely.”

“We’ve already discovered that, Uncle.”

As Sheila crossed to raise the window, Sherlock added, “Flippancy will be your downfall, I fear.”

“It’s a different age, Sherlock,” supplied Watson.

“And death claims those in every age.”

He dissipated in a haze of smoke.

“On that note...” Watson joked. “I’m for bed.”

Sheila reached over and kissed his cheek. “Me, too.”

He watched her trudge toward her room, commiserating with her anguish. “Did the doctor prescribe any pain meds?”

“Of course, she did. I tore it up.”

“Living with you, Sheila...” - his prolonged exhalation slowed her pace - “will be the death of me!”

“Cheers, John.”

Her door closed; he retired to his room.