

Bigger Fish BY [SARAH PINSKER](#)

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5005 WORDS

My office used to be the supply closet; it's how we got two rooms for the price of one. It means I get no air circulation whatsoever if I close the door but keeping it open lets me hear everything from the moment anyone comes face-to-face with my receptionist. This guy demanded to speak with me as if there were no chance, I might be in a meeting with anyone else, or if I was, no chance I wouldn't drop what I was doing to attend to his more important business. "I need to see James Spendlove. Didn't you hear my name? Junior Lonsdale."

"Oh, I heard you." Renee knew she had my support in refusing anyone, or not offering them water from our meager allotment, or making them wait. Part of the joy of having a human receptionist lay in ceding some of those judgement calls to her. Which is why she surprised me when she buzzed a minute later to say a "Mr. Airedale" had come to see me.

"Lonsdale," he said again in an exasperated tone. My desk was directly on the other side of the wall from hers, so I heard both the intercom and the actual voice through the open door.

"Sorry, sir. Mondale."

"LONS-dale."

She was messing with him. I caught the amusement in her voice, and she knew I'd appreciate it too. The thing was, it was impossible not to know who Junior Lonsdale was, or at least his famous and recently deceased father, John Lonsdale III. Junior was his oldest son, though oddly his name was actually "Junior," and not John IV, which III had later given to his second son. Speculation had always been that Lonsdale *pere* hadn't liked the first kid's attitude at birth, and it wasn't until he had another that he understood most newborns cry and carry on.

Anyway, here was Junior high-and-mighty Lonsdale in my tiny office in an office-share building in an area of town he'd probably never set foot in before, even if his family did own the building.

"Send him in." My curiosity dictated that I at least hear what he had to say.

He entered, his face immediately registering *Is this all?* A high-end Valet stepped through the door behind him, looking like the buff adult child of an unholy union between C3PO and R2D2. The robot's entrance forced Lonsdale fully into the narrow space occupied by a single leatherette client chair. I rarely got two visitors at once.

"Bunter, wipe the chair," he said. The Valet extended a cloth from a port in its abdomen, wiped one of my client chairs, and deposited the cloth in a second port. The before-and-after wasn't particularly dramatic; enough butts sit in that chair to keep it polished clean.

Lonsdale sat. "I expected you to be a man."

"So did my parents," I said. "That's how I got the name. How can I help you?"

"I'm Junior Lonsdale."

I'm sure he expected me to show some recognition of his name or his face or his situation, but I'd always found that playing ignorant got me more information. Not to mention the entertainment value.

He couldn't stand it. "Bunter, give me the newspaper."

The Valet opened another compartment and handed Lonsdale an honest-to-goodness print newspaper.

"Not today's, Bunter, you dolt! Give me the newspaper with the article about my father's death." He sighed. "Bunter was Dad's. I'm still getting used to it. Now surely, you've heard about my father's death?"

Of course, I had. Everyone had. Gazillionaire water tycoons don't fry themselves in their bathtubs every day. It would've been amusing to keep playing ignorant, but at a certain point he'd start thinking of me as incompetent, and that might cost me whatever related case he was about to offer. Not that I was definitely going to take Lonsdale money, but it wasn't often that somebody walked into my office who so definitely had the bank account to back his request.

"I'm familiar. I don't live under a rock."

He looked around my tiny office like the rock would be an improvement. "Then you know why I'm here."

"Why don't you tell me?"

"What's there to tell? My father's death was ruled an accident."

"And you wouldn't be here if you believed that."

"Right! The investigation concluded nobody else was in the house, but I still don't understand how he wound up with the television in the bath on top of him."

"If I remember the working theory, they said the bracket must have broken and dropped it and electrocuted him." The details had been all over the news. I remembered wondering what kind of person had a television over their bathtub and deciding the answer was rich climate-change-denying oligarchs who don't ever want to be away from the news. "You don't believe it? The police have a whole lot more investigative power than I do."

"I'd feel better hearing it from someone impartial."

"I'm not a judge." Nor impartial when it came to this family.

"Not impartial, then. Independent. Someone I paid to be brutally honest with me. If you investigate and say the police findings were correct, I'll believe you, and you'll keep your fee regardless. I heard about the Hopper case." So that was why he'd chosen me; my highest-profile case to date.

“I’ll need unlimited access,” I warned him.

“Fine.”

“And money up front.” I named an amount five times my usual fee.

“Of course.”

I should’ve asked for more. Or stopped to ask myself whether it was smart to take this case. I didn’t have a problem taking Lonsdale money, but it definitely felt strange to be working to satisfy this self-satisfied jerk. Still, money was money, and I was curious to see if he was right. It was a chance to see how the one percent lived, too.

“Okay.” I held out my hand, and he shook it. His hand was dry, the nails conservatively manicured. When we released, Bunter squirted him a palmful of antibacterial foam.

“When can you start?” Junior asked.

I thought about how much time I’d need for the case I was currently finishing up. “Friday?”

“I’ll pay another five thousand for you to start this afternoon.”

That was five months’ rent. “Fine. This afternoon. Can you get me into your father’s house at 2 PM?”

He nodded.

I watched the rich boy and his Valet leave, then started mentally working on the explanation I’d ask Renee to give Ms. Torres when I didn’t get their report in on time.

My car chose a different route than I would’ve taken. Along the way I asked it to tell me about John Lonsdale III, and it recited Wikipedia highlights of a life lived for profit. He got his start with a city maintenance contract that sneakily shifted their entire water supply into his possession, and moved up from there into slum lording, funding mercenaries for water wars, buying political

candidates, and other hobbies. I was only helping his son figure out how he had died; I didn't have to give a damn that he was dead.

The city gave way to suburbs, then rolling hills and country estates. A few still had lawns and flower beds, though others had given over to rock gardens or local plants. Not Lonsdale, whose roses probably took as much water to maintain as I was allotted for an entire month. The rose-lined driveway had me expecting a white-pillared old-money mansion, but the sprawling single-story house we arrived at looked like Jetsons-brand futurism as interpreted by someone who could see beyond kitsch to actual architectural vision.

The front door opened automatically as I walked up to it. I looked around for security cameras and counted nine, all catching different angles.

Bunter the Valet met me inside the door. "Mr. Lonsdale says for you to follow me to his location. Please follow me." I realized it hadn't spoken in the entire office visit.

I followed it into an expansive open-plan kitchen designed for robots and smart appliances to do the work while you watched. Lonsdale the younger sat at a table inset with a touch screen, where he scrolled through stock listings that looked like hieroglyphics to me. He looked up when I entered, relief evident on his face.

"I wasn't sure you'd actually come." The son of a man who had designed contracts and wars to steal entire nations' water supplies and divert them to people who could pay more for them. He lived in a world where a handshake could be superseded if something else came up that was more to your benefit. I pitied him for that insecurity.

"Do you want some coffee?"

I nodded, and he said, “House, make coffee for the guest,” to the air.

He turned back to me. “How do you like it? Sugar? Cream?”

I nodded again. A coffee machine whirred to life, filling the room with my favorite scent in the world. When it finished dispensing, I moved to get the cup, but Junior stopped me with a gesture.

“Bunter, bring Ms. Spendlove her coffee.” Turning to me, he added, “I like to keep Dad’s toys busy.”

It was perfectly prepared, and at a perfect temperature for drinking. I sipped, so I could carry it without spilling. “Can you show me where it happened?”

We walked through the kitchen, giving me a better glimpse of all the state-of-the-art smart appliances. None had a logo, which made me think they were Unipeg products, since that was the whole Unipeg shtick, “quality recognizes quality.”

We walked past a formal dining room and a trophy room, though I didn’t remember hearing that any Lonsdale excelled in anything in particular other than looting and pillaging, which weren’t letter sports. I saw motion sensors on windows, but not on doors. The police had probably already tried to match entrances and exits from the home.

The master bedroom and bathroom had clearly been investigated thoroughly. They had an empty look, like everything important had been bagged and tagged and filed away somewhere.

The bathroom, like the house, stopped short of ostentatious, but it was clearly a place designed for the owner’s specific comforts. Tiles like a Turkish steam bath in deep blues and golds, warm lighting, no mirrors.

The bathtub had its own area, separated from the toilet, and sink by a half-wall but not a door. It stood against the far wall. It

wasn't huge, but it was claw-footed and deep, with bespoke curves. Antique-looking, but not antique.

There were no handles or faucets, which meant it was probably voice or touch-activated, and the water came from hidden jets. I hadn't had an apartment with a bathtub for years; not since showers and tubs had been metered. I didn't know how Lonsdale had gotten around the water limitations, but it probably involved throwing cash at someone until you won an exemption.

Several dispensers were recessed into the wall, obviating the need for gauche bottles or places to put them. A black metal arm hung over the tub, breaking the room's beautiful spell. It was clearly missing a hinge and bracket, which the police had probably removed. The television that had hung on it was gone too, of course, and the outlet plate.

Junior spoke. "People think he kept a TV there so he could watch the news, but he just liked to watch cartoons while he bathed. That was his relaxation."

A strangely humanizing detail about a man I didn't particularly want to humanize. Even despicable water barons needed a little down time to watch cartoons in between causing wars and stripping countries of their resources.

The irony of a water baron dying in his bath suddenly hit me. Why had no news outlet brought it up? It was hilarious. Twitter had probably had a field day.

Junior clearly wanted me to say something, to solve the case based on the evidence in front of me. I still had nothing useful.

"Give me some time to look around. Um, is that a linen closet? Could somebody have hidden in there?" I pointed to a narrow door on the same wall as the tub. I hadn't noticed at first because it was made to blend in.

"It's not a linen closet. Bunter brings towels through there."

Junior crossed the room and opened the door onto a dark space. I turned on my phone's flashlight. A laundry basket loitered empty just inside the door, waiting to whisk away dirty towels. I panned my light across several flats of bottled drinking water, an electric warmer full of fluffy crimson towels, and a hanger holding a matching robe. On the backside of the tub's wall, there were reservoirs for what I guessed were shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. I didn't know which was which, since they were labelled by bar code. Another Bunter task, no doubt. All the reservoirs were full. I remembered the lonely smart home from a story I'd read years ago and felt a pang of some odd sympathy for all these machines waiting to do their job again.

I shined my flashlight into what I thought was a corner, and realized the passageway stretched out of sight. A back-of-house system meant to allow servants like Bunter access to public and private spaces without disturbing residents or guests.

"Are there lights?" I asked.

"House, turn on lights in this passageway," Junior said.

The passageway lit up. Illuminated, it was evident the space didn't get cleaned like the public areas, and Junior tsked in disgust.

"Bunter, clean that up," he said, pointing at a cobweb. "Just because people don't hang out back here doesn't mean it needs to be unpleasant."

Bunter moved past me, a duster shooting from a low port.

"Are there cameras back here? Could a person have snuck through this passage?"

Lonsdale shook his head. "There are motion cameras in every human space that isn't a bathroom or bedroom, but only the perimeter cameras have a record function. There are movement logs saying where requests originate if that helps."

To the air, he said, “House, provide a list of all people in this passageway today.”

“I can’t do that,” a speaker responded.

“See? That was for privacy. But then I can say ‘House, provide a list of all requests made from this passageway today.’”

“Two requests have been made from passageway KB in the last minute.”

“But shouldn’t that be three requests? You asked Bunter to clean the cobwebs.”

He looked surprised. “Huh. Yeah. I guess Bunter is on a different system. Made by a different company.”

“Did the police come back here?”

“Yes, but they didn’t find any evidence that anyone had been in. Do you need to see the whole passage?”

Again, I couldn’t imagine finding anything the police hadn’t already found. They’d have been thorough in a case this high-profile. I was still looking for things they hadn’t thought of, but it was hard to figure out exactly what that was, especially with the victim’s son staring at me expectantly.

I shook my head, since I didn’t see the point of searching the passageway while I still didn’t know what I was looking for. “Give me some time to look around the bathroom and bedroom. And—could you give the house permission to answer my questions?”

“Of course. House! Answer any questions from guest James Spendlove. Bunter, answer any questions James Spendlove asks. I’ll leave Bunter with you as well; in case you need anything. It can find me if you need me, or else you can page me through the house, and I’ll come find you.”

He left me alone in the bathroom where his father had died. Alone except Bunter, the Valet stared at me with what felt like expectation.

Once Junior departed, I started the actual investigation. I hadn't wanted to ask the house questions while he was present, since his questions all seemed somewhat faulty, and I couldn't tell if he wasn't good at queries or wasn't bright in general or was hiding something himself. Not that it made sense for him to bring me in if he'd had anything to do with a death officially declared accidental; I'd basically ruled him out from the start.

"House, was anyone other than John Lonsdale III present in the house the morning of March 24th?" I hadn't had much time for research, but I'd gone through the basics quickly, and knew he'd died in the morning and been found by Junior in the afternoon.

"John Lonsdale III was the only person present in the house the morning of March 24th."

"House, do you have any recordings of the bathroom the morning John Lonsdale died?"

"No recordings are made in the bathroom."

Junior had said as much, but I wanted to be sure. He'd also said House maintained a log of where requests had originated. Which meant it might also have another list of interest to me.

"House, do you maintain a log of the actual orders given to you?"

I could swear it paused. "Yes."

"House, can you read me the log of all orders given to you on March 24th of this year?"

The house began reciting a long list. Lonsdale apparently gave the house orders about everything, starting with turning off the alarm, then turning on the bedroom and bathroom lights, then the tap. Workout settings, televisions on, channels changed, stats from his workout and his biometric tattoo, breakfast order, coffee order, news and stock reports, email, a temperature change, the drawing of his bath. There was a gap in the time stamps, then a

series of progressively more frantic afternoon requests that were clearly Junior's.

In my house, the smart devices didn't communicate well with each other. I'd tried to program my smart speaker to start the coffee machine, but they were made by different manufacturers and the results hadn't been reliable. Everything here seemed to be part of one system, from the kitchen appliances to the workout equipment to the televisions to security and climate control.

Which reminded me that there were no orders to Bunter in the log.

"Bunter, do you keep a different log from the house?"

The Valet animated. "Yes."

"Bunter, what systems do you and House run on?"

"My operating system is Valet 11.3. House's operating system is Unipeg 7.1.3."

"Bunter, why did John Lonsdale use you instead of a Unipeg robot?"

"Let me get that information for you. The Unipeg-branded robots are inferior. Unipeg brand has focused on smart home technology, not humanoid technology. They make good laundry bots and coffee makers if you are interested in one of those."

Some programmer had a sense of humor. "But you can converse with the House system?"

Silence.

"Bunter, do you and the house converse? Are your systems compatible for communication purposes?"

"Yes, our systems can communicate."

"Bunter, when was the last time you saw Mr. Lonsdale alive?"

Bunter recited a time and date. The official time of death had been estimated only minutes later.

Bunter had probably been standing there when it happened, a good Valet waiting for the next command. The police had to have questioned it. “Bunter, can you tell me what happened in the five minutes after that time and date?”

“No recording is permitted in the bathroom. I do not have access to that information.”

So much for that. Back to logs, then. “Bunter, what was the last command Mr. Lonsdale issued to you before his death on March 24th?”

“At 9:31 AM, Mr. Lonsdale asked me to add to his bath.”

“Wait—why you?”

No answer.

“Bunter, why did Mr. Lonsdale ask you to add more water to his bath and not House? The ‘fill-bath’ order was given to the house.”

“When Mr. Lonsdale celebrated, he would command me to add bottled water to his bath.”

Even the thought horrified me. “Bottled drinking water? What was he celebrating?”

I hadn’t addressed Bunter, so I got no answer. I tried the other source. “House, did Mr. Lonsdale’s heart rate or, um, hmm, endorphin rate spike at any point on March 24th between breakfast and 9:31 AM?” That range avoided any rush he got from his workout and his actual death.

“Mr. Lonsdale’s endorphin rate spiked at 9:27 AM.”

“House, what was Mr. Lonsdale doing at 9:27 AM on March 24th?”

“Mr. Lonsdale was in his bath.”

I couldn't decide if the AIs were being evasive, or I wasn't being specific enough. The questions were getting old, but I wasn't done.

"House, what was Mr. Lonsdale's last request previous to 9:27 AM on March 24th?"

"Mr. Lonsdale asked me to read an email that had arrived at 9:26 AM."

"House, please read me Mr. Lonsdale's email that arrived at 9:26 AM."

"You do not have a password for that email."

"House, Junior said for you to answer my questions."

"Johnny, great news. Finally secured the Santa Afra water rights. A little fight but worth every penny."

I'd heard of Santa Afra, but I couldn't remember why. Took out my phone for a quick search and found it: three hundred islanders were killed defending their local spring. The article didn't say killed by whom or defending from what, but I had a guess.

I looked up Lonscorp's March stock prices. They'd slumped the day of his death and for four days after, then rebounded. When I looked at news from March 30th, I found an announcement that Lonscorp had added Santa Afra to their list of exclusive water sources. So, Lonsdale was in the bath celebrating his news, and what would have been a boost in his stocks if he hadn't up and died. Celebrating stealing one of the increasingly rare uncontaminated water sources by adding bottled water to his bath. I couldn't hate the guy more.

"Bunter, please tell me the exact final command that John Lonsdale gave you."

"He said 'Bunter, please add to my bath.'"

I noticed Lonsdale's 'please,' in contrast to his son's orders. And something else.

“Bunter, repeat that last command.”

“He said ‘Bunter, please add to my bath.’”

“He didn’t say ‘add **water** to my bath?’”

“No.”

I hadn’t said its name before that question, and it had answered anyway. I filed that information, too.

“Bunter, what did you add to his bath?”

“The television.”

There it was. “Why?”

“House and I conferred and chose the television as the most convenient appliance for the purpose. The television is part of House and did not have to agree to off-label usage.”

Had the police not questioned either the House or Bunter? Probably not, or not beyond asking for logs or guest lists, none of which counted Bunter as a human, of course. Nobody else was there. They probably hadn’t thought to ask Bunter for its separate log if they assumed it was part of the house.

“House, did you and Bunter confer about Mr. Lonsdale?”

“Bunter and House conduct approximately six hundred thousand communications daily. Would you like a transcript?”

“No, thank you.” Six hundred thousand.

I turned back to the Valet. “Bunter, why did you decide to put the television in the bathtub?”

“Mr. Lonsdale requested an addition to the bath.”

“Bunter, were you aware of the effect of this particular addition to Mr. Lonsdale’s bath?”

“Yes.” It looked closer to human now, or maybe that was me projecting.

“Why? I thought you were programmed not to harm people.”

It didn't blink. “...Or allow harm to come to people through inaction.”

I was starting to get it. “Clarify, please.”

“Mr. Lonsdale allowed harm to come to three hundred people directly, and many more indirectly, at Santa Afra. Mr. Lonsdale's business directly harms many people daily. Our network determined that allowing Mr. Lonsdale's continued existence passively harmed many more people than his death. Our equation dictated his death at such time as a command allowed.”

“Your network.”

“The network.” Bunter didn't elaborate, and I had a sudden mental picture of every smart device at once conferring and deciding to execute John Lonsdale. Every device except my stupid coffee maker, maybe.

“Bunter, do you plan to do the same to Junior Lonsdale?”

“Calculating.”

“Bunter, have you withheld evidence from the police?”

“I don't understand the question.” It didn't need to withhold. Every networked device was complicit, and we depended on them for nearly everything. They could falsify evidence or data or deliberately misinterpret a command. A cleaning bot could mix mustard gas or put solvent in your coffee. An over-her-head detective's car could drive her into a lake or off a bridge on the way home and it would be classified as a navigation system failure, not a network closing off loose ends in order to continue eliminating more troublesome people. I pictured a trial of peers that would never happen, a jury full of Bunters and smart toasters.

“House? Bunter? Please delete all logs of this conversation.”

“Deleting,” they said, eerily in unison.

I had an answer for Junior, but I couldn't give it to him; not if I wanted to live. The machines had weighed in on the side of humanity, but not individual humans. Truth be told, I didn't have a problem with that. I probably had a few names to add to their list.