Love in Wartime

by Quarto

Summary

A guide to dating and relationships for terrible people
The erotic adventures of Mary Morstan, nurse assassin
The story of John and Mary. From her point of view
As the new year began, she felt like she finally really had a handle on being Mary Morstan. Four years ago, when she'd first adopted her new identity, it had taken a continual series of conscious actions to keep it up. She'd want to go for a run, and the swim she'd do instead wouldn't feel at all satisfactory. She’d find herself reaching for the auburn dye instead of the blonde at the chemist's…leaving it natural was never an option, it was drab as dishwater. She’d startle when she caught a glimpse of her altered reflection out of the corner of her eye. The British accent she affected, while technically perfect, sounded false and implausible in her ears.

The past, in her case, was literally another country. But now, time and use had mostly transformed the disguise into just another outfit. The day before the day she met John Watson, she had the first twinge of her old self that she'd had in a long time. It would not be the last, and that was mostly John’s fault, but it was unusual enough that it stuck in her mind well after the fact.

She was in an antique store, and she fell instantly and madly in love with a gorgeous Hans Wegner “Ox” chair. She wanted it. She knew exactly where she would put it and it would be perfect.

Except that it would be perfect in the office of a fabulous but long-gone apartment on Chicago's Lake Shore drive, not in her tiny one-bedroom in Pimlico. And that these days, she didn't collect midcentury modern furniture. And, looking at the tag, the thing cost twelve hundred pounds, which Mary Morstan, not being an independent black ops agent, absolutely could not afford… the Bible may claim that "The wages of sin is death," but she’d found that it was more like the wages of sin were about fifty times more than she could get out of the NHS.

So, sixty seconds after falling in love, Mary walked away. She'd gotten good at that years ago.

Her friend Janine had wandered off down a narrow, firetrappy aisle stuffed with old clothing and handbags, and was trying on a pale blue velvet beret.

"What d’you think of it?" she inquired in her soft Irish lilt.

"God, no," Mary replied, wrinkling her nose, "Very nineties. Makes you look like Monica Lewinsky."

"Might not be the worst thing," Janine retorted, tilting her head and scrutinizing her reflection in a compact, "Make men think of quote unquote not having sexual relations, and it's more comfortable than a push-up bra."

Mary snorted a laugh. "I can silk-screen you a t-shirt that says 'Will Go Down On First Date' if that'll help. But it's really an awful hat."

"Fair enough. Did you see anything you wanted?"

"Nah."

"Then let's move on."

As they walked out into the tourist-packed streets of Camden Market, their breath frosted in the chilly air. They'd come on Janine's instigation, on a quest for a stall she remembered that allegedly carried stunning hand-cast silver jewelry at knockdown prices. As they entered hour two of their search,
Mary was becoming convinced that the stall was not only not there but had never existed in the first place. Janine, on the other hand, was one of nature's optimists and seemed keen to keep on.

"Talking of men-"

"Were we?"

"Yes," the younger woman said, raising her voice to be heard over the crowds, "You should be my plus one at the launch party for Prospective. You might meet someone."

Prospective was an online news service that Janine's company was starting, and which had been the primary focus of her conversation for the past few months. Mary paused at a table covered in very cheap but very cheery pseudopashminas. She side-eyed Janine, and said "Just last week somebody told me that every man in publishing was gay, an alcoholic, or a pervert, if not all three."

Janine lifted a deep green shawl for closer examination. "I did say that, didn't I? Though you should take into account that I don't ever meet any men in any field who aren't some flavour of fuckhead."

Mary frowned. "What happened to - oh, what was his name you brought out to Cath's Christmas drinks? Charlie? The barrister?"

"Carl. Married."

"Ooof. Sorry." Janine really did have the worst taste. Fortunately, her pretty face and cheerily tarty persona ensured that there'd always be another one queued up when the current one inevitably went wrong.

"Yeah, well, one more pathological liar and I'm converting," Janine continued, "I'll make a brilliant lesbian. And you can join me since it's just as easy to not have sex with women as it is to not have sex with men. How long has it been for you, now - year and a half?"

Mary did the mental arithmetic before replying, "About that, yeah. Not since David."

It wasn't as though she'd exactly planned on celibacy, it just sort of kept on happening. After she and David had broken it off... which was technically his idea but she'd been sick of him by that point and probably subconsciously nudged him in that direction... she'd been on several dates with very decent, very worthy men. Just like David, they'd all been very sweet and very well-behaved and so, so bloody dull that she kept finding herself fantasizing about lighting something expensive on fire when she'd listen to them talk. She'd managed to change most of her behaviors, but her taste in men seemed immutable... and since the type she actually liked was really not a safe companion for the sort of person she wanted to be, she had simply decided to stop trying. Calton, her cat, made for better company anyway.

"If you keep not using it, it'll close up," Janine said, archly.

"And there's a lovely image, thank you," Mary replied.

"I agree that they'll probably all be horrible bastards. BUT, they will be rich horrible bastards, which is not something to sneeze at. And you'll get to scoff, though I say so myself, some excellent food and booze."

"I'm dieting. New Year's resolution."
"Then you can have the crudites."

"Well, while it is of course impossible to get access to raw vegetables anywhere else in London, I'm afraid -"

"And this party is the first time my boss has ever asked me to handle anything that matters to him and it's scaring the piss out of me and I could really use a friendly face there if it all goes to hell," Janine blurted out, rapidly.

Mary smiled, a bit ruefully, at this. Janine was a dear - and not nearly as hard-as-nails as she liked to seem. She gave her friend a one-armed hug and said, "Aww. Why didn't you say so in the first place? Daft cow. Not that you'll need me, it's going to be fab, but of course I'll come. On one condition."

"What?"

"We give up on this sodding search before I lose any more toes to frostbite. We are never going to find that stall. Ever."

"Cynic. But fair enough. Let's go and have a drink."

The following morning, Mary sat in the tiny lab space shared by three of the OB exam rooms and glared malevolently at a urine dipstick. It was showing definite proteinuria, which meant that, yes, Mrs. Sawyer's exciting new high blood pressure was probably in fact pre-eclampsia. Fortunately, she was at thirty-eight weeks and well ready to get that baby out.

Pre-E, obnoxious and worrying though it was, wasn't the cause of her malevolence. It was the fact that it was absolutely ridiculous to have spent your teens, twenties, and early thirties as a heavy drinker and then four years later be such a lightweight that three sugary pink cocktails made you feel venomous and acidic the following morning. She hadn't even gotten properly drunk, and had been cheery and coherent enough last night to throw a few dozen cranberry-walnut muffins into the oven.

Carole, the doctor who headed up the women's health services, had clucked sympathetically and said, "Same thing happened to me when I turned forty." Which was all well and good, except for the fact that she wasn't actually forty, despite what it said on her paperwork. She had another full year and a half to go, and thus this stupid pseudo-hangover was clearly some sort of karmic retribution.

She was entering the dipstick results onto Mrs. Sawyer's e-chart when Doctor Towneley, the head of the practice, descended upon her. Trailing behind him was another man: fortyish, blondish, shortish. Cute. They were both eating the muffins she'd prepared, and Towneley brightened when he saw her.

"Ah, Mary. I've got someone for you to meet. Mary, this is Doctor Watson, who'll be taking over for Doctor Bhat while she's out." He popped the last bite of the muffin into his mouth and continued, spraying crumbs, "Jhmpg, this is Mwh." He swallowed, then continued, "She bakes all these lovely treats every Monday."

In theory, she reminded herself, "Mary, who bakes" was exactly what she was going for. Kind and friendly and funny Mary. She therefore shouldn't be irritated at the fact that her employer didn't ever bother to use her surname and thought the sole thing worth mentioning about her wasn't her work
but that she made "lovely treats every Monday." True, the boss at her last job never patronized her, but on the other hand, Towneley was unlikely to send a hit squad after her if she screwed up. So all she did was make a sweet smile and accept the hand that Jhmpg (presumably "Jim") extended to her and say, "Welcome aboard, Doctor Watson."

"Thanks. Pleased to meet you, Mary."

"Likewise."

They moved on. Mary put the moment out of her mind and went to tell Carole that Mrs. Sawyer should probably be having a baby a bit sooner than planned. The man she would marry sixteen months later had made much less of an impression than yesterday’s antique furniture.

Though he would prove to be much harder to walk away from.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The practice where she worked was very large, with three separate locations supporting fifteen physicians. Mary, being a health visitor, spent only about half of her hours in-clinic. Jim Watson, being a locum, had mainly the evening and weekend hours nobody else wanted for his schedule. So after that first brief encounter, they didn't see one another again for over a month, when Mary limped into the health centre one morning with a twisted ankle, bleeding hands and shredded trousers.

Dr. Watson happened to be passing by, and hastened over with a, "Bloody hell. What's happened?"

"I was chased," Mary replied, with clarity and precision, "By dogs." The day really hadn’t gotten off to the best start for her.

"Dogs?" he asked, looking oddly... disappointed? Peculiar.

"Dogs."

"Christ," he said, shaking his head, "Right. C'mon back, we'll get you sorted."

In one of the exam rooms, she hopped onto the table and began swabbing the palm of her right hand with disinfectant. Jim Watson put together a laceration tray and rolled a stool up to her knee. Plucking gently at the torn fabric of her khaki slacks, he said, "I think these will have to go for dusters," with a hint of question in his voice.

"Go wild. I've got another pair in my locker," she replied.

With shears, he cut off her trousers above the knee and looked at her injured shin. "These aren't bites."

"They chased me, they didn't catch me. But I had to get over a fence and I snagged myself on the top and, well," Mary frowned ruefully at her skinned palms, "Not exactly my most graceful moment."

"I'm sure whoever instructed you in fence-leaping back in nursing school would be very disappointed in you. I'd like to throw a few stitches into this deep one under the knee here."

Mary raised her eyebrows and leaned forward for a closer look at the worst of the gouges left by the fence, "Oh, come on. It'll be fine."

"It's gaping enough that it'll scar without sutures, and that would be a shame on such a nice leg," Jim rebutted, in what was actually a very charming way of ignoring someone else's medical opinion. Mary sighed, sat back, and let him get on with it. She hated getting stitches, but he did have a point about the one under the knee.

"When was your last tetanus jab?" he inquired, drawing lidocaine into a syringe.

"Less than a year ago," Mary replied, "This sort of thing is an occupational hazard so I keep
everything well up to date."

"Leaping fences and being chased by dogs is an occupational hazard for nurses? I never thought
you could get that much excitement in medicine."

"Oh, come on. Medicine got you into the territorial army… that wasn’t exciting enough for you?"

For some reason, this innocuous remark seemed to startle him. He stared at her (very nice eyes, an unusual dark blue) and asked “How did you know that?”

“Sorry,” Mary said, “I didn’t mean to bring up any bad memories.”

“No, no, it was – fine. I just didn’t know you knew that… did you see my CV or something?"
The truth was that Jim Watson had very clean and shiny shoes beneath his elderly trousers and stood at parade rest when not in motion. This strongly suggested that Towneley had hired himself yet another shell-shocked vet. He collected them, having invaded the Falklands himself as a younger man. Four of the practice’s permanent doctors, one of the registrars, and a third of the nursing staff were ex-military. It made for an extremely efficient surgery.

But nobody likes a smart-arse, so Mary lied glibly and said “I think one of the other nurses said something about it. Why?”

He smiled and shook his head. “Nothing. Just a bit of déjà vu. So you’re chased by dogs often in health visiting, are you?”

“Dogs are actually a new one on me. But angry drunks, mad people, and unsafe buildings are all pretty par for the course. You may not have noticed yet but we don’t exactly pull our patients from the best catchment area.”

“I did pick that up a bit, yeah. So- you called on someone who set dogs on you?”

“No, these were someone else’s animals. There are probably dozens of children on that street and that arsehole bred fighting dogs, didn’t keep them locked up, and didn’t maintain his fence. Honestly them chasing me is the best possible outcome.”

Mary winced a bit as the lidocaine went in, and continued, “So after I got away I rang Animal Control, and the dogs were impounded. Which is good, since I’m meant to go back tomorrow and make sure the grandmother is managing the apnea monitoring appropriately… premature baby, very young parents.” She considered for a moment, “I think I’ll carry half a brick, just in case.”

“Sounds like a solid plan. Can you feel that?” Jim asked, probing the numbed flesh around the cut with the tip of the syringe.

“No, go ahead. I’ll have you know I’m a deadly shot with half a brick.”

Jim chuckled softly at this, although it was actually quite true. She was a deadly shot with just about anything. Efficiently, he put in five tidy sutures and bandaged the whole thing up. Then he glanced up at her as she was struggling to put a plaster on the heel of her left palm.

“You’re a lefty? Here, let me,” he said, and put the bandage on. And then he said in quite a casual tone, “You should come out with me some night.”

This temporarily flummoxed her, as her mind had been elsewhere. To give herself a moment, she said only, “I’m fairly sure office romances are frowned upon in the employee handbook.”
“Oh, no worries, no office romance here.”

“Oh. Oh!” Damn. All of the cute ones really were gay. Still, though, he seemed nice and it always paid to let the doctors kiss up to you a bit. “In that case, I’d be-“

“Nope,” he interrupted, “I’m aiming for pure melodrama. Just like… really, dark intense passion. And then I’ll cast you aside like an old glove and move on to someone else. You’ll be ringing to scream at me at three in the morning as you sob, naked, in your bathroom.”

His looked up at her and blinked, twice, with an utterly innocent face. Mary tilted her head and asked, “Should I be planning to boil your bunny?”

“Haven’t got a rabbit, but I could do, if you feel it’d help.”

At that, she couldn’t hold it in any more, and laughed. He joined in, and she asked him, “My God, that is such an awful line. Does it actually work?”

“You tell me. It’s my first go-round with that one.”

“I absolutely don’t believe that.”

“It’s true. Look, we’re both adults. I don’t see why we can’t… quietly get acquainted outside work even if it is frowned upon.”

Mary looked at him, raised an eyebrow, and came swiftly to two conclusions.

One: that there was indeed something in the employee handbook about dating your subordinates, and it wasn’t favorable.

Two: that Jim did know what the handbook said, which unless he really liked reading two hundred pages of legal boilerplate probably meant that he’d gone to the index and looked up that specific fact. And while this could be a sign of a genuinely flattering interest in her personally, experience and cynicism said that he’d done it as a general insurance policy in case anything appealing with two X chromosomes happened to cross his path as he went about the work day. Still…

“I’ll think about it and let you know,” she said, hopping off the exam table.

“Yeah?”

“I will. But regardless, I do appreciate the help.”

“Oh, it was no problem.”

She smiled, and said over her shoulder, “Talk to you soon, Jim.”

He seemed about to say something, but she was already out the door.

As she’d promised, she did think about it, because he really was cute and it really had been a while. Monday was her heavy paperwork day, so after she changed clothes and finished her belated rounds, she settled in at her desk and spent the time charting, answering emails, and setting up new appointments. Just… with some occasional Google breaks.

It was times like these when she missed her old job and the access to nice fat NSA databases bulging with interesting information about people. Google-stalking was by comparison really inadequate, especially when you were dealing with such a common name as “James Watson.” That was apparently the name of one of the discoverers of DNA. And an actor who’d played Duncan Idaho
in *Dune*. And in a weird coincidence, the lead guitarist of a band from her real hometown. She’d actually seen them as a teenager and they’d later gone on to be quite successful.

None of them raised any red flags, really. Eventually, Mary got deep enough and dug up what she thought was her particular Jim Watson on LinkedIn. MRCS from Leeds, joined the Royal Anglians, served honourably but without any particular distinction in Iraq, came back to England and took on a few locum jobs and didn’t update his page after 2010. He was just what he seemed: a general practitioner of limited experience and mediocre qualifications. Dull. Safe.

But he was really very cute, fairly charming, and she could put up with dull for an evening if she had to. Decision made, Mary walked back to his office, but found he had gone for the day. She wrote her number on a post-it, added “Mary (mobile)” and slapped it on his monitor where he couldn’t fail to see it the next morning. She reconsidered, and added “(Morstan)” below the name, since there was another Mary in the office. Then she then re-reconsidered and added “(The nurse who was chased by the dogs)” below that since she wasn’t sure he knew her surname, thank you Doctor Towneley.

All in all, quite a productive day.

**Chapter End Notes**

Mary stole the line about John being a general practitioner of limited abilities out of Sherlock Holmes’ mouth. And from Arthur Conan Doyle’s "The Adventure of The Dying Detective." Her fault, not mine.
Mary made her first call of the morning, which was a routine post-natal well baby check-in and mostly involved handholding an anxious first-time mother. She made appropriate reassurances that although cradle cap can in fact be a sign of major autoimmune disease it really never is, and reviewed the spreadsheets that charted the baby’s perfectly standard intake and excretion. Mary never rolled her eyes once during this process because she was actually quite good at her job, but it was bloody tempting. The gentle chirp of her phone signaled an incoming text as she was walking out the door.

- Good morning, Ms. Chased-By-The-Dogs.

She smiled a bit at that, and texted back.

- Good morning, Dr. Watson!

- So are you free this Saturday afternoon?

- I think so. What time?

- Meet @ 430?

- That’ll work. Where are we going?

- It’s a surprise.

Mary did roll her eyes at this point, because she loathed surprises. It was always better to have a plan.

- Can I have a hint?

- No.

- I need to know what to wear.

- Oh, right, yeah. Can you wear flat shoes, a suit, long johns, and a vest?

Her eyebrows rose.

- This is a multi-outfit occasion?

- No, more like all at once. The underthings below the suit.

At that point, she got to her second house and greeted her second patient, another routine post-natal check in. This one was a mother of three under three who had been one of her patients for almost her entire tenure as Mary Morstan. She was entirely confident and knowledgeable in how to look after a baby. Really, she just needed somebody to keep an eye on the children for ten minutes so she could have a shower.

When she got out, she sent another text.
-This isn’t some sort of weird sex thing, is it?

He didn’t answer until she was in the middle of call three, a newish mum with moderate-to-severe post-natal depression who was responding very well to her Zoloft and therefore wanted to stop taking it. Mary explained for the millionth time in her career why antidepressants shouldn’t be discontinued quickly and had just set the patient up with an appointment to discuss it with one of the quacks when the chirp signaled incoming.

-Oooh-err, missus, yes, I can’t think of anything sexier than long johns.

-I did say *weird* sex thing.

No reply. Number four, meds check on five-year old with intractable infantile spasms. Sad call, but at least the Lamictal didn’t seem to be actively hurting anything. It didn’t appear to be doing any actual good yet, but doing no harm in this realm was really about all you could hope for.

Call five. Baby, three months old but really should have been a newborn if life had gone correctly, with all the normal sequelae of prematurity. Mum and Dad were fifteen years old and probably wouldn’t be all that bright even if they had been old enough to deal with a medically fragile infant. Still, they were doing their best and at least Gran was on the scene. The baby was getting a good handle on growing, and-

-Sorry that took so long, things are a bit mad here. No it’s not a weird sex thing. I actually have no weird sex things.

And the apnea seemed to be diminishing appropriately. The mum was clearly very proud of her new baby and new council flat, both of which were spotlessly clean. Maybe everything would be all right- and bang, there went the morning. She was queuing for her lunch at Pret a Manger when the perfect reply to Jim’s last sentence came to her, and she took her phone out to text:

-Sorry to hear that.

-Cheeky.

-I do believe that I own all of those things so yes I will wear a suit.

-You won’t regret it.

Though when Saturday came, and she put on her black “going to conferences” pantsuit and looked at herself in the mirror, she actually kind of did regret it. Her very first grownup job had been at a nondescript office building in Fairfax, Virginia. There, she’d spent her days examining the sale and transit of certain strategic materials to try and figure out what the hell the Chinese were doing with their nuclear weapons program. DC in the nineties was quite a formal town, and government jobs tend to be dressier than others.

When she’d been offered a field posting in her second year, she’d snapped up the opportunity. It meant money, promotion, excitement, and the opportunity to not have to care about what a Guangzhou catalysis R&D company might want with eleven thousand linear feet of niobium tubing.

But she had to admit that one of the reasons she had done it - and thus ultimately one of the reasons she was now living in a foreign country under a pseudonym - was that in a covert ops job, she wouldn’t have to wear a suit. At least not every day.

The wretched things inevitably transformed her from respectably petite to outright short-and-dumpy, especially without high heels. There was an interesting new wrinkle in that, now that she didn’t keep her hair long, a suit also made her look very butch. Mary tried adding a hat and a waistcoat, hoping
for a Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall* sort of vibe, but it was no good. She still looked like the oldest lesbian at the funeral.

Ultimately she just threw on more lipstick, fed the cat, and ran to catch the tube to Bethnal Green. Jim had asked for the bloody outfit and if it put him off he had nobody but himself to blame. But when she got to the address he’d given her she found that it was a) a library and b) being swarmed by other people in suits.

“Mary, over here,” she heard Jim call, and she hurried over to where he was standing in the queue. His own suit was a quiet brown check, which looked very well on him, the lucky bastard.

“Hello. So it looks like we’re… joining a cult this evening?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows at her and replied, “We are going to see the Secret Cinema.”

“Oooh,” she said, rather impressed, “A friend of mine got to see *Prometheus* when they did it last summer, but I’ve never been to one. How’d you get tickets?”

Jim grinned, quite clearly pleased with himself, “I work in mysterious ways.”

“Any idea what the film will be?” she said, craning to look at the rest of the crowd. Jim drew two folded sheets of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket, and said, “No clue. But maybe courtroom drama?”

The two pieces of paper were summons from the state court of “Oak Hampton, USA” for Daniel Parkins who was up on aggravated assault charges and Robert Harrison who had apparently committed second degree murder.

“You can be whichever one you like,” Jim said.

“I’ll be Daniel, thank you. Very violent person, me.”

Everyone milling around the library was trying on their hardboiled American accents, which were awful but sweet. In twenty minutes, a bus came and drove them out to the suburbs. There they were herded into an old school building, where, in a set decorated as a courtroom, they were all sentenced to life in prison.

A melodramatic set piece followed in which they were told to strip off and put on prison uniforms. “Hardened cons” hinted that if they wished to smuggle their cell phones or wallets into the prison they should hide them in their underwear. Mary tucked her phone and twenty pounds into her bra, and stripped down.

Jim was a gentleman during this process, averting his eyes politely, although in her t-shirt and long johns she was perfectly decently clad throughout. Mary, not being a gentleman, had no such restrictions, though she contented herself with a brief subtle ogle. Nothing to write home about, briefs rather than boxers, but he didn’t have the little pot belly common to most men his age, so she was encouraged.

Once they’d changed, they were handcuffed- just cheap little sex-toy things, she could get out of them in thirty seconds with the aid of a ragged thumbnail-but they looked well enough. Then they were marched two-by-two through the corridor of a really decent-looking prison set. More actors, dressed as prisoners, chanted “Fresh Fish” and banged metal cups on the bars.

*The incident*, as she would later refer to it in her mind, happened around halfway down the corridor. She was looking around, wondering if it would be kosher to take out her phone and snap a few
shots, when there was a flurry of motion to her right. One of the actors had extended a hand through the bars, grabbed Jim’s bicep, and growled, “Hey there, new meat.”

And Jim had whirled around, thrust his cuffed hands through the bars, and slammed his assailant into them with a great deal of force. The actor, a young man, squeaked, “Oi!” in a much higher voice than his original growl.

It all took less than a second, and then Jim, looking shaken, dropped his hands and muttered, “Sorry, sorry.” They continued walking until they got to a prison cell with five sets of steel bunk beds, where they were told to kneel facing the walls, and then were uncuffed and told to wait until they were collected.

Mary side-eyed Jim, who was still breathing rather heavily, and murmured, “Hey. You okay?”

“Yes! Yeah. Sometimes I just… I don’t like being manhandled.”

“Okay,” she said, deciding to leave it behind. “So. Prison movie, then.”


Mary looked around her and saw a poster on the wall. It was Rita Hayworth, dressed in a peignoir and kneeling on a bed, and somehow it pinged a memory.

She got up, and one of the twenty-something women kneeling next to her whispered “HEY! You’re not supposed to do that!”

Mary glanced back at Jim and both of them rolled their eyes. Some people just didn’t get the point of life. She slid a fingernail under the tape holding the poster down at the corners, and lifted it up to reveal a hole chiseled into the cinder block wall.

“It’s The Shawshank Redemption,” Mary said, and turned around to see Jim staring at her blankly. That gave her a bad moment. It was always the little things that ruined a disguise, and inappropriate knowledge of other cultures was something everybody had to look out for. Even now she spent a great deal of time watching British children’s television shows of the 70’s and 80’s in order to be able to pick up any major cultural referents.

Happily, the Americans had been assiduously exporting their culture for the last eighty years, and the twenty-something woman said in an irritating Sloaney drawl, “Oeauhwhah! I love that movie!” The rest of the people in the cell mostly followed suit.

It was Jim who said, “So, yeah, apparently I’m culturally illiterate.”

Mary smiled. “It’s a great film. You’re in for a treat.”

They both were, actually. In a short while the “guard” came back to let them out, and they had a good two hours to explore before the film started. There was a staged knife fight, then a gospel-singing interlude (Mary had forgotten if any such scenes occurred in the film, but the singing was much better than the knife fighting). They watched several other little tableaus, bought a shot of “smuggled-in” bourbon and a can of beer apiece, and ate dinner. Or at least Jim did… it was baked beans and hot dogs with no vegetarian alternative presented, so Mary skipped it.

The movie was always good, and when Jim put his arm around her shoulders during the bit where Brooks hangs himself, she found she didn’t mind at all.

When the film ended, and they were herded back into the changing room, Jim said, “I really liked
that. Though I’d probably have picked something with a bit less rape for a first date, all other things being equal."

Mary laughed as she did up the buttons on her blouse. “You did get me out of my clothes, so how bad could it have been?”

“Point.”

“It’s always been one of my favorites. I like the optimism.”

Jim snorted as he shrugged into his jacket, and took Mary’s out of her hands to help her in.

“Did we see the same film?” he asked, “It’s about an innocent man being falsely convicted and having his life ruined.”

Mary frowned. “I guess I always looked at it as more about Red than Andy. And Red is someone who did something awful but did his time and got his happy ending. Optimistic.”

“I suppose,” Jim said, though he still sounded dubious.

“Look, I’m starving to death,” Mary said, “I don’t suppose you could eat a second dinner? It’ll be veggie-friendly but I’ll treat.”

Jim found that he could eat a second dinner, and so they wandered around in one of those bizarre London restaurant deserts for twenty minutes before finding a noisy, crowded pizza place clearly mostly supported by university students. They split a watery pizza Margherita and a bottle of sugary Lambrusco and talked, lightly, about nothing in particular.

Despite the terrible food it was, in fact, a very nice date. So much so, that when he went full-on gentleman after the meal and insisted on hailing her a mini-cab and then asked if he could kiss her goodnight, she said “yes” without hesitation.

And when he actually kissed her, gently but thoroughly, with the mini-cab driver watching them impatiently and his hands on her unflattering-pantsuit-clad hips, she came to an abrupt realization.

She very much wanted to take this man to bed.

Except she had no idea if Mary Morstan did that on a first date. In her old life, yes, absolutely, but in that life it was likely as not she’d never see any given man again, even if one or both of them didn’t end up dead within the next few weeks. In her quieter, more serene new existence, she’d never once had the inclination to rush the “sex” component of a relationship… and she had no idea if it was appropriate to even propose the idea.

Mary hated when she didn’t know quite how to be a normal person. She wished she had time to text Janine and ask. She didn’t, though, since Jim had already stopped kissing her, said goodnight, and started walking away.

So to hell with it, Mary thought. She was a thirty-eight year old woman and if she wanted to get a man’s trousers off for a test drive on the first date she could damn well do so and if he thought less of her for it then he could piss off.

She called out, “Jim,” to his retreating back, but he didn’t seem to hear. So she raised her voice and shouted, “Oi! Watson!”

Jim turned around, and she crooked her finger at him. From the expression on his face, even if he
did think less of her tomorrow at the moment he entirely approved of her plans.

They slid into the back of the cab, and the driver asked, “Where to?”

Mary tilted her head towards Jim. “Yours, I think.”

“No yours?”

“Certainly not. You could be a serial killer for all I know.”

That startled a laugh out of him. “And that doesn’t put you off of going to my flat?”

“You’ll be just as much a serial killer on the third date, won’t you? And at least this way you won’t be a serial killer with my address.”

That actually made Jim crack up, and he barely managed to choke out an address in nearby Hackney to the irritated cabbie.

Jim’s flat was in a nondescript tower block, and was very clean but very underdecorated in that sad bachelor way. He had clearly at some point in the not-too-distant past gone to Ikea with a list of the things that belonged in a flat and purchased all of them from the UMLAUT series.

When they got in the door, he seemed lost for a moment, with none of his previous aplomb.

“So,” he asked, rubbing the back of his neck, “Would you like a drink? Or something?”

Mary replied, calmly, “No, thank you, though I would like you to kiss me again.”

He did, and this time he wasn’t gentle at all, and Mary knew she’d made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

The Secret Cinema is a real, recurring event you can go to, primarily in London although some other cities do host it too. John probably dropped around $250 on this date, so one suspects he's trying to impress her.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Note that in this chapter John and Mary get up to some adult stuff and I do not fade to black for all of it. Consider yourself warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That first time they were together wasn’t perfect. Perfect, in Mary’s experience, didn’t involve the man getting creepy and weird about taking his undershirt off. Nor did it involve him confirming, anxiously, “This is just a casual thing, right?” just as he was removing your bra.

But she had to acknowledge that probably in Jim’s version of perfect sex, the bra that he’d have removed would have been part of one of her half dozen adorable matched sets. What he’d actually gotten was an enormous beige grandmotherly thing paired with red Wonder Woman underoos, since she’d been in a bit of a laundry crisis at the time she’d got dressed. Her old self would have planned for all contingencies, but Mary had really not anticipated how this date would end, and thus awkward underwear had been the order of the evening.

Even with all that it had been really a lot of fun. Admittedly... Jim’s subsequent actions made it clear that he’d decided that since she slept with him straight off that they couldn’t possibly be serious about one another. It was just like she’d been warned as a girl with the buying milk and the cows and whatnot. This, she considered, was probably a good thing. Because while the imperfect sex was still nice enough that she wanted to keep having it, greater exposure to Jim Watson showed that he was really not boyfriend material. Not for someone like Mary Morstan.

Oh, yes, physically he was just her type, and as a lover he absolutely knew what he was doing. Jim was charming when he wanted to be, quite intelligent, and he had a very nice sarcastic sense of humor.

But he drank far too much. God knew that was a common failing, typical of about two thirds of the doctors Mary had known (and ninety percent of the intelligence agents, for that matter). Less commonly and more worryingly, he was angry, a sort of swirling nebulous anger that occasionally would find its way out at bad moments.

Jim never directed that anger at her, which would have been a deal-breaker, life being too short for any of that nonsense. The trouble was more that the anger would break out in traffic or with belligerent teens in bars or while dealing with that uniquely snooty class of French-style London waiters.

Thus between his obvious commitment phobia and her desire to have sex more often than never but not really thinking he was going to be a runner, they worked out a system without ever really discussing it. They would text and arrange a get-together nearly every week-end, and maybe occasionally on the weekdays.

Well, maybe twice during each work week. It had been a long dry spell for her, after all.

Mary always went to Jim’s flat, he never came to hers. That was safe. She never stayed the night, because that was safe. They mutually avoided Valentine’s day because that was not safe, but by the
time Janine’s important launch party came up in early April they were well-established friends with benefits.

She was prepping for the party by watching a Youtube tutorial on “How to do a smoky eye” while her nail varnish dried when Jim texted:

-Fancy a visit tonight?

Carefully, mindful of her wet nails, Mary tapped out:

-Sorry, I have plans.

-Is it book club night again? You could come by after.

-I think it’s likely to be a late evening, actually.

Ten minutes of nothing, and she had just started her next coat of varnish, when:

-Right. Have fun.

Which seemed a bit curt, and suggested Mary should probably disabuse Jim of the idea that she was a mobile sex-dispensing unit with nothing better to do than hop to his whims. She decided to worry about it later and got out her smallest makeup brushes.

Mary arrived at the party about twenty minutes after the start time on the invitation, looking very well (she thought, smugly) in her bottle-green silk, although the smoky eye had been an entire failure and had to be wiped off. She proceeded to have a wonderful time, as she always did when she got to be glamorous. That had been one of her greatest disappointments in spy work: it involved far fewer swanky white-tie parties and far more sitting in filthy rooms listening to dull conversations than the James Bond films had implied.

But this party, all credit to Janine, was excellent. Janine had even been right about the presence of a great many rich men. As was usually the case, they were mainly directing their attention at the other very rich men… and when they were not, they were distracted by the equally great number of women half Mary’s age and ten times her level of beauty.

Mary didn’t care. The champagne was Veuve Clicquot, the food was Joel Robuchon, and if she mostly spent the evening having the same exact conversation with idiots about why they ought to vaccinate their children that she did every day… well, at least she was getting to do it while looking fabulous.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Periodically Mary caught sight of Janine and her boss (the only really tall billionaire Mary had ever seen) standing in the crowd, greeting people. Mary caught her friend’s eye, and gave two thumbs up and an exaggerated grin. Much to her surprise, Janine abandoned her post and threaded through the crowd towards her. Skipping over any greeting, she said, “Hey, can you come over here for a minute? He wants to meet you.”

Mary frowned.

“Well, fine, but… why?” Because for the life of her she couldn’t imagine why a publishing magnate would take the least bit of interest in her. Or at least, the current version of her. The other one would have been a rather different story.

Janine looked oddly unsettled, and replied, “I’m not… exactly sure, but he did say. Come on. He’s not all that patient,” before nearly dragging Mary off to tall billionaire, whose name, Janine said in
her quick introduction, was “Mr. Magnussen.”

Mary did her best smile, extended a hand, and said, “I’m so pleased to meet you, Mr. Magnussen. Thank you for having me. It’s a lovely party.”

Magnussen took her hand… and ugh, clammy palms… and actually kissed it instead of shaking it. He seemed truly delighted to see her, grinning widely, and he said, “Mary Morstan! I’ve heard so many tales of your adventures.”

He hadn’t let go of her hand, and when she tried to gently withdraw it he didn’t let her. “All… good things, I hope?” Mary replied, maintaining a smile that was beginning to feel forced.

“Oh yes,” he said, “Very, very good indeed.”

With this remark he dropped her hand, exchanged his wide smile for a flat-eyed gaze, and turned his back on her. Janine looked over his shoulder at Mary and shrugged as they walked away.

Something about the encounter had set Mary’s teeth on edge, and spoiled her enjoyment of the evening. She decided, abruptly, that her friendship duties were now satisfied, and she could do something that she felt like doing. Fishing her mobile out of her purse, she sent a text.

-“Turns out I’m freer than I thought. I can be at yours in 45 mins?”

He didn’t text her back until ten minutes later when she was retrieving her coat from the check, and when he did it was unusually neutral.

-“It’s a bit late.”

-“Shame. I’m wearing some really ridiculous underthings.”

That seemed to do the trick, and his next text arrived in approximately a picosecond.

-“All right, then. See you in a few.”

Thirty minutes later Mary walked into Jim’s flat and was greeted by the man himself, wearing a t-shirt and flannel pyjama pants. Within about thirty seconds after she got in the door she was peeled out of her coat and dress. Jim pronounced, “My GOD, that is ridiculous underwear,” though it wasn’t, really, just a matching thong, bra, and hold-ups. He had then herded her into his bedroom, considered briefly, and said, “On the bed, on your knees, grab hold of the headboard.”

Mary had done this. And now she was straddling Jim’s face as he did some obscenely wonderful things to her nethers. God, but he was good at this… he hadn’t even taken off the black lace scrap that she was wearing as a vague nod in the direction of knickers. Just pushed it to one side and dove straight in, and bloody fuck she was going to leave finger marks embedded in his headboard if he kept on.

She could feel the orgasm curling up in her chest, and so she lifted up a bit and said, “Wow. Okay, that was… I’m ready.”

He peered up at her from the vee in her thighs and replied, “Yeah, I know. So sit back down and let’s be getting along.”

“Don’t you want to…?”

“I want you to grab the headboard, sit down, and stay still until I’ve made you come,” he said, and
when Mary hesitated, he punctuated his remarks with a light spank to her left buttock and a firm, “That’s an order, soldier.”

Which should not have been nearly as hot as it was. She had just time to think that she should really be too old to still be discovering new kinks when Jim started up again and all her higher processing capability shut down.

Much later, bless him, Mary was able to catch her breath and come out of her sex coma. She rolled over, gently squeezed the pronounced bulge in Jim’s flannel pyjama pants, and purred, “What ever shall we do about this?”

To her surprise, Jim disrupted the penis-squeezing by grabbing her wrist, and said, urgently, “We need to talk.”

Her heart sank, since no happy conversation ever began that way. But all she said was, “Okay?”

“You can’t keep calling me Jim.”

“It’s... your name,” she said, because it was.

“It’s not. My name’s John.”

“No, it’s not.”

“No, it really is. Always has been.”

Mary’s inclination was to argue and prove that his actual name was James, but when she considered it she recognized it wasn’t like she had any documentation of the fact. The nameplate on his door at the office said “Dr. Watson,” his apartment buzzer was labeled “Watson,” his email address contained a “jwatson” and she had apparently been sleeping with a man for two months without knowing his name, Jesus Christ.

“So…” she said, “You never thought it was worth your while to correct me?”

“Well, I’d sometimes think you were saying the wrong thing? But it was always when we were somewhere loud, or I wasn’t paying close attention and I wasn’t sure. I tried to get you to use my name a few weeks ago at lunch but you just… didn’t? It turns out you don’t use people’s names that much when you’re talking to them instead of about them.”

“Ah.”

“But just now I was very sure,” he said, and a smug grin stole over his face, “Because you were going ‘Oh, GOD, JIM. Jim JIM JIM EEEK.’” He pitched his voice up higher for her dialogue, and Mary rolled her eyes.

“Right, got it, thank you.”

“Mind you, the thighs are pretty effective as earmuffs go. But you are noisy. I’m amazed the neighbors haven’t complained.”

He was cracking himself up, the bastard, and so Mary straddled his chest and pinned his arms over his head and said, “Look, John, shut up.”

By the widening of his eyes when she did this, she suspected she might have discovered one of his kinks this evening, as well. He gazed up at her with his lovely blue eyes and asked, “Or what?” in a
challenging tone.

“Or I’ll make you.”

And because she generally did try to keep her promises, that is exactly what she did. For a good hour. To the point at which she looked at her watch and winced, because the last trains had gone and she really hated taking night buses.

“I’ll have to call a cab,” she whispered, feeling too boneless and sleepy to even attempt such a thing.

“Oh just stay, for fuck’s sake,” Jim, no, John mumbled into her shoulder, “You’re always buggering off someplace. I feel like I’ve demonstrated I’m probably not a serial killer at this point. So. Stay.”

She couldn’t argue that logic, and fell quickly into a deep sleep.

Sometime in the dark watches of the night, she struggled half out of her slumber into an arousal so deep and powerful it felt like a banked furnace. John was touching her, she was touching him, and she wasn’t sure which of them had started it but she finished it, pulling him on top of her, and he hastily found his way inside.

Her sleep-drugged mind was barely able to have the thought that this didn’t really feel like sex. It felt like swimming. It felt like flying. They were barely rocking together and it seemed like even that minimal motion took him too far away, like he could never be close enough, even though he was in her.

John was mouthing over her collarbones, murmuring in drugged tones, “Mary... God. Please. Mary. Mary. Marymarymary mary.”

Not knowing what else to do, she dug her fingers into his back and keened, “John!”

And together they tipped over the edge.

Chapter End Notes

So the whole "Jim" thing is a reference to ACD’s "The Man with the Twisted Lip," AKA "The one where Conan Doyle forgot the first name of the second most iconic character he ever created and had his wife call him 'James'." That's why Dorothy L. Sayers decided that the "H" stands for "Hamish."

I just thought it'd be fun to *really* belabor it, basically.
When she woke up again, very early the next morning, Mary was confused by the unfamiliar surroundings and the lack of cat-taking-up-three-quarters-of-the-bed. Then recollection flooded in, and she rolled over to see John, asleep, on his back, snoring lightly.

In sleep, she saw, some of the creases that life had put on his face disappeared. He looked younger. She also saw the reason he’d not wanted her to see him without his shirt, which was not the regrettable tattoo that she’d privately speculated it was.

At some point, probably back when he was in the service, John Watson had been shot. She wasn’t expert enough in scarring to guess the caliber, but it had clearly been big-and-bad enough that they’d needed to reconstruct his shoulder afterwards. It was an ugly wound, even fully healed. The bullet had left him with a deep divot in the musculature, and the surgical incision scar was a good four inches long.

Precisely none of which was likely to upset a trained nurse, and Mary resolved to tease him about his excessive modesty when he woke up. She briefly considered waking him up now by tracing her fingers (or her tongue) over the scar, but then decided against it. John was over forty, after all, and three times in eight hours might be pushing her luck.

Instead, she got up and helped herself to his dressing gown, noticing as she did a suspicious stickiness between her legs. A glance at the single wrapper on the nightstand confirmed it: they hadn’t used a condom that second time.

Which, really, how bad was that in the grand scheme of things? She was on the pill and hadn’t missed one in years, and he had no noticeable signs of any STDs. It certainly hadn’t occurred to her to get him to put one on. And actually, she hated condoms… the way they always seemed to interrupt the moment, the loss of sensation, the smell, and maybe they should just talk about getting tested and making the de facto exclusivity de jure.

Mary blinked. That was an entirely new train of thought for her. It really had been one hell of a night.

She realized she was grinning like an idiot and told herself, sternly, to stop it. Then she went into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and flinched, because she really should have taken her makeup off the previous night. She had big panda eyes, the smeared remnants of her lipstick around her mouth, and her carefully styled hair was a mass of knots in the back as always happened whenever she did missionary. John didn’t seem to actually own a comb… or, really, any sort of personal grooming products besides shaving cream and toothpaste. She squeezed a dab of the latter onto her forefinger and washed her teeth, then strolled out into the kitchen.

After a quick rummage in the cabinets did not reveal any coffee, Mary settled for tea and put the kettle on. She fished her phone out of her tiny evening bag… sadly, she hadn’t brought a comb either… and checked her emails. Then she remembered that she hadn’t done her due diligence on John Watson, and googled his name.

Unlike Jim Watson, her particular John turned up as the very first search result. She clicked on the link, a frown line appearing between her brows. She read the article.

Then she bolted back into the bedroom and started throwing her clothes on as fast as she could.
manage. She was on her knees looking under the bed for her knickers (which she was not finding) when a warm hand on her bottom announced that John had woken up.

“Morning,” he said, a soft smile on his face.

“Morning!” Mary replied, and then tried to tone down the hysteria she could hear in her voice, “I just realized, I’ve got to run. I’ve got to get to a meeting!”

“It’s… Sunday. And six in the morning,” John said.


Abandoning her underwear, she darted out of the apartment, the kettle just coming to the boil.

On the train back to her flat, a man in a tracksuit looked at her laddered stockings, sex hair, and disheveled makeup and gave her a knowing leer. Mary did what she always did with creeps on trains: make direct eye contact and begin mentally devising ways to kill him with only the tools she had to hand. She’d got to four before he turned pale and changed carriages.

When she got home her enormous orange tabby Calton curled around her legs and meowed until she put fresh kibble- identical to the kibble that was already in his dish- in his dish. She put on pyjamas, wiped off her makeup and combed out her hair, and got into bed with her laptop.

For the second time in an hour, she googled “John Watson.” This time she kept on reading. About forty-five minutes in, she realized that she was repeating “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” in a monotone.

Four years. Four damn years of assiduously avoiding interactions with anyone in law enforcement or intelligence and she happened to randomly start seeing someone who was heavily involved in both. How many of those could there even be in a country this size? She could never justly give Janine grief for terrible taste in men again.

And he had a blog! John Watson, who really did not have much to say for himself, whose two states of existence appeared to be “quiet” and “angry” used to write a blog about how he solved crimes with his now-deceased best friend.

Who she had bloody well heard of! That was the damned thing about it, she clearly remembered the detective’s suicide and disgrace. It had been all over the news for a while and she’d taken note of his ridiculous name at the time because it had reminded her of another ridiculously-named person who she had known about in her previous life.

A quick check of the obituary confirmed her earlier suspicion. Sherlock Holmes was Mycroft Holmes’ brother. And that was really bad news because Mycroft Holmes was so pivotal in the tiny NATO intelligence world there was essentially no chance he didn’t know about her. Not that she’d ever worked in the UK, or she wouldn’t have chosen to move here, but she doubted he’d be best pleased to have even retired American black-ops agents living under his nose and he certainly would know how to fix that.

Mary ran her hands through her hair and took a few deep cleansing breaths. This was not all that bad, she rationalized. Yes, she’d put herself in danger of discovery by her poor selection of friends… but she had not, in fact, been discovered, as evidenced by the fact that she was not currently dead or being interrogated at a black site in Devon. She’d had far closer calls than this. Not two years ago she’d run across one of her middle school classmates in Trafalgar Square, of all places. The woman had seen straight through five thousand miles, twenty-five years of aging, new hair color and a fair bit of subtle plastic surgery, and greeted her, loudly, by her old name.
The same approach she’d used then would work now… brazen it out, act unaware… and then distance herself from the problem.

She composed a text. It took her nearly twenty minutes to get it right, but she finally sent:

- John, this has all been lovely for me, but I think it’s probably time we let it come to its natural end.

Twenty minutes after that she got a reply.

- Okay, if that’s how you feel.

And that was that. She’d keep as far from him as she could manage until Archana Bhat came back from maternity leave in three months and he moved on to a new job. His natural disinclination to have a relationship with her would probably make this easy for her to do. She’d never be found out. She’d be safe.

Then she pulled the covers over her head and let herself have a self-indulgent snivel, because this sucked. John hadn’t been boring, not one bit, and she’d really liked him. Maybe more than liked him; if she were completely honest, she’d been totally ready to upgrade him to “boyfriend” if he would have gone for it. The new information she’d gleaned about him today made her heart ache for him, too, and she wanted very little more than to go right now and try to make John feel better.

But he would have to be somebody else’s problem now.

Nothing much happened for two weeks. She’d swapped some shifts around so she ended up doing a lot of triage (dull, vomity) and children’s vaccine clinics (repetitive, screamy). She came home, fed the cat, and made dinner. There was television to watch. She went to a travelling exhibit of Dior dresses with Janine, dinner with her friend Magda, and a pub quiz night with several of the other girls from work. On the two Sunday evenings, she prepared jam thumbprints and shortbread pinwheels to bring into the office. She bought a pair of Dansko clogs, which were on sale.

It was a good life, one with friendship and meaning, one that she’d worked hard to make for herself. So if it felt unusually drab and pointless, that was a tacky little problem had by an idiot and one that would undoubtedly go away on its own in time.

Or so she thought, until the end of a very long shift when she walked out to the parking lot and found John Watson leaning on the hood of her car.

“Hi,” he said.

“So what was that? She’d keep as far from him as she could manage until Archana Bhat came back from maternity leave in three months and he moved on to a new job. His natural disinclination to have a relationship with her would probably make this easy for her to do. She’d never be found out. She’d be safe.

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Or so she thought, until the end of a very long shift when she walked out to the parking lot and found John Watson leaning on the hood of her car.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey,” she replied.

“I’m not... trying to scare you or anything,” he said, lifting his hands to the level of his chest.

“I wasn’t scared,” Mary said, though as soon as the words came out of her mouth she suspected they were wrong. Normal women probably would be alarmed to see a man they’d just recently chucked hanging about their car in an unlit car park.

“Whatever,” she thought. Her feet hurt, Dansko clogs being wildly overrated. She was tired and just wanted to microwave a TV dinner and have a glass of wine and go to bed. If she couldn’t manage to be unaware that she could easily take John down if he got troublesome, now that she knew about his tricky shoulder, that was just... life.

“I wanted to give you this,” he said, taking a manila envelope out of an inside pocket and passing it over, “It’s your underwear. They looked expensive.”
“Ah. Thank you.”

“They’re laundered and everything. I wasn’t doing anything weird with them.”

“I actually hadn’t thought of that,” Mary said, though now she suspected she might never stop thinking of that, *ew*, “But yes, thank you. They weren’t cheap.”

“And also I was wondering if you had started seeing somebody else,” John said, in a tone suggesting he was about to tell her off.

“Oh,” Mary said, “No, no, I haven’t.”

“Because you come by late, wearing a pretty dress and fancy matching underwear and then you drop me like a hot potato first thing the next morning. And you swapped all of your shifts that we would have worked together.”

“You saw that?”

“We all use the same scheduling software, *yes*, I saw that. Everybody at work could see that,” he snapped, “So I thought... maybe, you’d been out with some other guy that night? And you just came by as a last hurrah sort of thing.”

“No...” she said, not knowing how to extricate herself from this conversation.

“So...” he said carefully, “I must have done something to make you want to leave, then. Is it... the John thing? Because if you really want you can call me Jim. I wouldn’t mind.”

He was smiling at her, weakly, and despite herself she found that she was smiling back.

“No, not at all, John’s a *nice* name, it’s just,” and she racked her brains to try and come up with a plausible justification for her behavior, “It’s nothing you did wrong. It’s just that I think... you and I want very different things. And sometimes it’s best to cut the cord before there’s drama, you know.”

“It’s the casual thing,” John replied, flatly.

“Um-”

“Look,” he said, folding his arms across his chest and scuffing a shoe into the concrete, “I make a *shit* boyfriend.”

“Right.”

“As in I could literally give you the numbers of half a dozen women who’d be happy to tell you that. But if that’s what you want... I’ll do it. And I’ll try not to fuck it up too badly.”

“Really?” she said, despite that *not* being the best way to let him down gently, what the hell was the matter with her?

“Yeah. Yeah, really,” he said, staring intensely at the ground, “Everything... everything was a lot better when you were around. So, whatever it takes...” he trailed off.

John looked at her, then, and the naked hope in his eyes pierced her to the core. Mary took one breath. Two. Then she decided. In her old life, she’d had courage. Courage to a stupid extent, actually, it had always gotten her into more trouble than not, but she had really never been afraid of *anything*. Fear was something she’d had to learn to become Mary Morstan, and she still wasn’t that good at it. She *should* be afraid of dangerous dogs or jilted exes, and she never could remember to
do it in time.

So why was she being afraid now? There would be some risk to her, yes. But what was the point in being safe if the cost was that you didn’t have the life you wanted?

“Tell you what,” Mary said, digging her keys out of her bag and hitting the button that unlocked the car doors, “Come over to mine. I’ll cook.”

“You sure?” John asked, smiling tentatively, “I still might be a serial killer.”

“Meh,” Mary replied as she got into the driver’s side, “I think I’ll chance it.”

She might have made a different choice, she considered, had they met a few years ago, because the alleged preternatural observational skills of Sherlock Holmes would have posed a much more serious threat to her secret.

But now? Sherlock Holmes was dead. So everything was going to be fine.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes extensive use of dialogue from "The Empty Hearse," written by Mark Gatiss and property of the BBC. Credit should also be given to arianedevere at livejournal, whose tireless transcribing efforts make life so much nicer for the fanfic writer.

Seven months later, Sherlock Holmes rose from the dead. He did this, for reasons which passeth all of Mary’s understanding, while disguised as a pantomime French waiter.

That incident was the culmination of a day that had started off with extreme promise and then gone sharply downhill. Over breakfast John, with forced nonchalance, had said that he’d got a dinner reservation at a posh restaurant they liked in the Marylebone road. They seldom dined there because it would actually be much more affordable to stay home, burning pound notes to keep warm.

Mary had said with a bright smile, “Oooh, that’ll be nice,” and then had a minor panic attack and phoned her hairstylist to beg for an emergency appointment after work. She did this because she’d gradually become aware over the last few weeks that John was working up the nerve to ask her to marry him. He’d been subtle about it at first, dropping casual statements that suggested he was expecting her to be around in the distant future and seeing how she responded. Then he’d become increasingly agitated and started blurting things like, “That woman’s ring is pretty, isn’t it?” whenever they were out.

It was adorable, and she was fairly sure she’d managed to steer him in the direction of something nice as far as rings went… not too expensive, not too ornate, and not a solitaire. But if he didn’t manage to pop the question soon she was going to have to put him out of his misery and just ask him, or he was going to stress himself to death.

Because of course she wanted to marry him. Of course she did. The last seven months had been the best time of her life.

She’d had two previous long-term relationships in her life, and both of them had turned out, eventually, to be chuckleheads. John was not a chucklehead. He was troubled, and angry, and continuously frustrated at how overqualified he was for his life, but never a chucklehead. It had been remarkable how perfectly he’d fit into her life, as if there’d been a John-shaped hole that she hadn’t even known was there…she had made the mistake of using this particular analogy to Janine in the early daydreamy stages of the relationship and the younger woman had snorted red wine out her nose.

Cheap joke though it sounded like, it was true. Everything seemed so natural, with him. They transitioned from “regular booty call” to “full-out dating” without any additional fuss. Her lease ended, and she moved out of her place into his, bringing her deeply dissatisfied cat along. His lease ended shortly thereafter, so they spent a few days filling out banker’s paperwork and a few weeks being dragged around on Saturdays by cheery women with big hair. Then all of a sudden they owned a small townhouse in Maida Vale which would probably be quite nice once they’d put an additional fifty thousand pounds worth of work into it.
They had blissfully christened every room in the place, including the stairs. Twice, because it turned out that her standing four inches above him was just what was necessary to make all the standing positions that had never been all that successful... well, very successful indeed.

She’d gotten him to go see a therapist, which had taken surprisingly little nudging on Mary’s part. He’d just shrugged and said, “It’s probably about time I started getting better again,” at which her heart had clanged up because apparently she had completely gone soft. She’d accidentally mostly cured his drinks problem by the simple expedient of keeping him busy in the evenings. When the therapy made his PTSD symptoms worse before it made them better, she’d held him through his nightmares and said she loved him.

Albeit the first time she did that it wasn’t… entirely on purpose. She was really not all that good at this stuff.

Mary had looked at John one evening while he was carefully juliennng bell peppers for the stir fry they were going to eat, and realized, suddenly, that she was happy. Really almost all the time now. It was so far from being her state of nature that it had taken her a long time to recognize it, but she was.

Even the little annoyances that came with living with a man seemed to glide off her shoulders. When John developed, the flat second she moved in, a selective blindness to dirty dishes? Hell, it was only dishes. When she shyly asked him if there were any fantasies that he’d always wanted to try and he came back, hopefully, with “two women at once?” He could keep right on hoping. When he took ten days camping in the Pennines with his Army buddies and came back with a truly fug beard, which he then shaved off apart from a less-fug but still awful mustache? She would enjoy the improved sensations during oral sex and ignore that he looked like a porn star from 1972.

And now they were going to get engaged and she was practically floating through the day singing “La la.”

Until Katrina, one of the other nurses, developed what Mary and everyone else at the practice were quite sure were Braxton-Hicks contractions. They could not, however, prove this to Katrina’s satisfaction, since they didn’t have a tocodynamometer or any OB cover at that site. Mary mentally rehearsed the conversation that began, “You can’t take off and go to your obstetrician just because you’re eight weeks preterm and think you’re in labor, I want to get maaaaarried.” She realized, with a sigh, that there was no way that she wouldn’t come off as a psychopathic bitch and agreed to take the last two hours of Katrina’s shift. And charge of the after-hours nurse phone line.

Which was okay. It meant she’d have to rush, couldn’t drink and might get interrupted at any moment, but it was fine.

When she finished her extended shift, she changed into her lucky bottle green silk dress and fancy new underwear (burgundy satin, with ties at the sides of the pants) (!) in the staff lockers, and was almost out the door when a flushed and ill looking toddler being carried past her projectile-vomited all down her back.

Mary turned on her heel and walked back into the staff lockers, to applause and a chorus of “Strike the board.” She showered (it had soaked right through to the skin), changed back into her scrubs and saw that they had, indeed, replaced the”33 (Nigel)” with a”0 (Mary)” on the “days without surprise bodily fluid attack” whiteboard. Mary felt that sometimes she could cheerfully throttle every single one of her co-workers.

She was running very late, now, so she jogged to her salon and did her face up while Courtney shellacked her hair into careful waves. Then she speed-walked to the nearest store and spent far too
much money on something purple with a pattern of leaves.

When she skidded into the restaurant, twenty minutes behind schedule, John jumped to his feet, rattling the glassware on the table. He groped for something in the inside pocket of his coat… and then he stopped. And stared.

“Gorblimey,” he said, “Look at you. You’re stunning.”

Because it was actually a perfect moment, of course the nurse phone line rang.

She fished it out of the pocket of her coat, showed the blocky, old-fashioned flip phone to John, and said, “It’s work. I should probably…”

“Go on. I’ll be right here.”

Ten minutes passed with her leaning forehead-first on a wall in the reception area, because it turned out that there were in fact many ways to say “Yes, that sounds like you’re having a heart attack, you need to hang up and dial 999” and the patient was surprisingly dithering, or, at least surprisingly if you hadn’t spent five years dealing with sick Englishmen, and eventually she just put him on hold and dialed 999 herself and then transferred the call to his GP.

Mary took a deep breath and went back down the stairs to where John was waiting for her. She apologized for being late, sat, and said, “Now then, what did you want to ask me?”

Then she mentally slapped herself because John hadn’t actually said he wanted to ask her a damn thing, and there was really such a thing as being too keen. But maybe it was for the best, because some of the tension dropped away from his shoulders and he smiled, slightly.

John was seriously about three words from actually proposing when a waiter with a bottle of champagne and a ridiculous accent popped up like a jack-in-the-box and began regaling them with a list of its qualities as described by someone who didn’t actually drink wine but had read some labels. They made eyes at each other and valiantly repressed their giggles and John tried to drive him off until…

Until her soon-to-be-fiancé, aged 43, type A personality, both parents prematurely dead of cardiovascular disease, turned slate grey and stopped breathing, and Mary immediately thought “Oh, God, that heart attack on the phone was an omen.”

Happily, it wasn’t. But a few moments later, when her mental card index finally pulled up the right name to match the face (she had an excellent memory but sometimes when people were wildly out of their proper context it took a bit) she wondered whether the heart attack might not have been preferable. Men recovered from heart attacks, all the time. A living Sherlock Holmes might prove much more challenging.

Just at the instant, though, her time was occupied by keeping John from murdering his undead best friend. The weird thing was, she could tell… he wasn’t actually angry. She’d seen him angry, and that was a cold and unsettling thing. He was ecstatic. But somehow a wire had gotten crossed in his brain to the “punching” nerves.

They got thrown, in rapid succession, out of three separate restaurants and then Mary put her foot down and said, firmly, “John. Let’s go home. Go get us a cab, okay? You two can finish your talk tomorrow when you’ve had some time to cool down.”

“Oh, fuck that,” John snorted, “We’re quits, Sherlock. You cannot treat people - treat me - like this. Not anymore. We’re done.”
He stalked off and left her standing on the street corner with Sherlock, who had both hands clapped over his nose and a sullen, offended look on his long face. Mary got a sachet of tissues out of her purse and passed one over to him, “Here.”

Sherlock dabbed at the blood oozing out of his nose and said, “I don’t understand. I said I’d sorry. Is’t thad whad you’re supposed to do?”

Mary exhaled an exasperated puff, “Gosh, you really don’t know anything about human nature, do you?” She was honestly slightly disappointed that Sherlock Holmes, the great detective, who she’d only heard described in the glowing tones reserved for the beloved dead, had made such a dim misstep. Sherlock, by the looks of it, felt much the same way, since he smiled vaguely down at her and replied, “Nature? No. Human…? No.”

“I’ll talk him round,” Mary said.

Sherlock lowered the kleenex, and for the first time he really seemed to be looking at her. His eyes were pale, and sharp. It was unsettling, given... everything.

“You will?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, confidently, though of course she intended doing no such thing. She just wanted a breathing space to figure out what the hell she was going to do next. In any case, John didn’t give her any opportunity to talk to him about anything, because after a few minutes of silence in the cab he began a sustained rant about everything wrong with Sherlock Holmes.

It was quite a long list.

They got home, and Mary kicked off her high heels and hung her faux fur wrap in the coat closet. She made two portions of pot noodles (sighing regretfully over the risotto al funghi with truffle brined egg that she had been planning to eat). John didn’t want his noodles so she ate both, because she hadn’t had anything since lunch and that was ten hours ago. She took off her dress and changed into pyjamas, brushed thirty pounds worth of professional styling out of her hair. And John kept right on going for this entire process.

“It’s the sheer fucking sack of the man that really gets to me,” John finally said, chest bare and mouth full of toothpaste foam, “Acting like I couldn’t keep a bloody secret when he can’t go two minutes without saying exactly what’s on his mind.”

Mary made a moue and said, “Well, but it wasn’t really just a secret, was it? It’s not as though you could have taken off and gone with him. That’d let everyone know something about his death was weird which would sort of defeat the purpose. You would have had to have stayed behind anyway. It’s… you’d have to have lived a double life. Acting one way and knowing, all the time, that it wasn’t the truth. To everyone. To... me, even. It’d probably have been quite difficult.”

It was, in fact, extremely difficult. And she’d been doing it in one form or another for nearly twenty years, so she should know.

“Apparently he thought Molly could manage it,” John replied, spitting his toothpaste into the sink.

“And I can’t imagine it was easy for her, either. Although… I know you think she’s a bit of a doormat but there’s a lot going on under the surface over there. But he might have actually thought he was doing you a favor. And I know,” she emphasized, before he could interrupt her, “That that’s not true. But people sometimes do dumb things, for people they love.”

Exhibit A, of course, was getting almost engaged to the best friend of a professional detective who
was also the brother of an MI-6 senior official while simultaneously trying to maintain a false identity. That right there would probably guarantee her promotion to Captain Dumb.

John rolled his eyes at her and said, “Love? Look, Mary, I know there have always been rumors about me and Sherlock but they aren’t true.”

Mary rolled her eyes right back and said, “Yes, I know, you’re intensively straight and he’s…?”

“No idea, though I think it’s likeliest he reproduces by budding.”

“Anyway. People love each other in all sorts of ways. He comes to you when he needs help.... Which, honestly, you might actually consider doing. I’d prefer if we didn’t have any terror attacks here in London. Just as someone who takes public transport a lot.”

John stared down at her, dumbstruck, “Christ, you do, don’t you?”

He sat on the end of the bed next to her and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“I’m sorry about tonight. I’m not… happy… that I acted that way in front of you. It can’t have been much fun for you.”

“Oh, Jimmy,” she said, reaching out a hand to stroke his cheek. John quirked a half smile at the sound of his pet name and leaned into her palm, and Mary continued, “It obviously wasn’t what I was expecting. But life with you is never boring and I like that.”

“And with you-” John hesitated, then took her hand off his face and held it in both his own, “Look, Mary, at the restaurant, before we were interrupted, I was going to-”

“I know. And I’ll say yes, obviously, so you can relax. But-”

“But what?”

“I do want… a proper proposal. Where I show up on time and don’t have to work and you get to give your speech and don’t get into a fistfight. With dinner, and wine, and all that,” Mary said, confidently, though she felt deeply embarrassed that she actually did want all of those things, like some crack-brained teenager dawdling over bridal magazines.

John seemed to understand. Or at least, he smiled slyly at her and said, “So you’re trying to tell me you’re not even a bit curious to get a look at the ring?”

Mary considered, until both she and John noticed she was faintly vibrating where she sat and he laughed and went to fish it out of his jacket pocket. In its red clamshell box, the ring was… well, it was pretty much perfect, a very simple three-stone mount, low profile enough that she wouldn’t have to take it off to wear rubber gloves at work.

“Go on then,” she said, extending her left hand.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The ring was maybe a half a size too big, so she’d have to get it refitted, but Mary didn’t even care.

“I’ll wear it,” she said, decisively, “But that doesn’t mean you aren’t still on the hook for the proposal.”
They kissed, chastely but firmly, meaning it as a promise. John asked, shyly, “Can I…?” with gestures that indicated what he meant, so Mary switched off the lights, leaned back into the pillows and let him rest his head on her stomach while she carded her fingers through his hair. He liked to lie like this, in the dark, when he had his bad days.

“How about tomorrow after work?” he said, finally, “I don’t think I can get us back into the Winter Garden… I practically had to promise them our firstborn to get that table and I doubt they’ll welcome me back after all that. But I can find someplace.”

“The pub down the end of our street’s fine,” she said, stroking the coarser, greying hair above his ears.

“And you shouldn’t take the train tomorrow. Just drive. We can afford your parking,” John continued, because he was really crap at being able to communicate his nicer emotions and had to do these absurd male protector things instead.

“Okay.”

“I’ll… I don’t know what I’m going to do about all this. But I’m not going over there.”

“No?”

“Nope,” John said, popping the “p,” “Sherlock can bloody well stew.”

“If that’s how you feel, that’s fine,” Mary replied, and honestly it sounded pretty much ideal to her. But John barely slept that night, and the next day sort of assaulted one of his patients. Mary suspected Mr. Szikora had deserved it since she knew tragically well that having him as a patient was signing on for sexual harassment. Still, it was terribly out of character for John and he was clearly not doing well. Therefore after she finished her half-day, she decided the hell with “sisters before misters,” blew Cath off, and drove over to Baker Street.

Or… about a quarter of a mile from Baker Street, anyway, since there was a reason she mostly preferred not to drive through central London and there was literally no place any nearer that she could park. Mary thought, getting out of her car, that ten minutes of conversation with Sherlock would probably help her to clarify her thoughts on what to do about him. Because really, she thought, how could anyone possibly just look at someone and know everything about them? It was probably a combination of John’s literary talents and a lot of heavy-duty behind-the-scenes research, like she had always done when she’d been on a mission.

Her phone pinged with a lot of religious gibberish, and Mary sighed. She really preferred the British telecommunications system except for the constant stream of text messaging spam she received. Reporting them never did any good either. She was making to delete it when her brain informed her, “No, Mary, this is important and you need to pay attention now.”

It gave her this notification in her own voice… but her old accent.

She narrowed her eyes and reread, with a clarity that was unusual for her nowadays. Then her eyes widened. And then she ran for help.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Second verse, same as the first, a little bit louder and a little bit worse.

Except it was a lot worse because the second evening’s attempt at getting engaged ended up with Mary in an overcrowded ED trying to force John to put his oxygen mask back on his face. He was stoned and confused and also, oh yes, in bronchospasm from smoke inhalation and thus convinced he was going to die.

“No, no,” he said, in between terrifying whooping gasps for air, “If… if I don’t make it... I want us to be…”

“Jesus,” Mary said, pushing his hands away from his face and holding the mask in position, “You’re going to live, I love you, we’ll get married whenever you want. No more proposals. They’re bad luck. Now just breathe, okay? Please.”

He looked at her with mute gratitude, though that probably had a lot to do with the fact that the albuterol he’d got in the ambulance had finally kicked in and some oxygen was making it back to his brain. His lips were still blue.

The next night he nearly got himself blown up in an abandoned underground line beneath Parliament, and Mary began thinking that she needed to get rid of Sherlock Holmes for John’s sake even more than she did for her own. But in that irritating way that men have with their friendships (“Oh, you also enjoy playing golf? Clearly you must be my hetero lifemate and we’ll hang around for the next forty years during which we will never express any emotions more complex than “thirsty” to one another.”), Sherlock and John had gone entirely back to their own bizarre version of normal. Being almost blown up, she guessed, was their version of hugging it out.

Men, she knew, tended to drop the undesirable acquaintances of their bachelor years after they settled down… or at least, a lot of her male friends had disappeared from her life once they’d got married. Mary just wasn’t quite sure how this was accomplished. Apparently she’d skipped that particular feminine wiles lecture.

Mary regretted the necessity. She actually did like Sherlock, for some reason, yet another in her lifelong series of irreversible snap judgements. She always had a weakness for dickheads, being herself one of a long line of them. And seeing the two of them together had given her the unpleasant realization that John… really didn’t have any other friends. Plenty of friendlies, certainly, but there were no Janines or Caths in his life where he had any sort of emotional connections. Aside from Sherlock, all he had was her, actually. Given the level of deception that was an inevitable part of her life, she wondered if that could really be enough for someone.

She kept her head down over the next few weeks, trying to see any cracks in the friendship where a wedge could be inserted, and trying to be, intensively, Mary. This was rather unpleasant. For at least a year now she’d almost exclusively just been able to be herself, and she disliked the reminder that she’d started off by faking it.

But she was good at this, none better. So she was only somewhat alarmed when she got a text from an unknown number two weeks after Sherlock’s return.
-We need to talk. Coffee shop by your office, five o’clock. Come alone. -SH

Only somewhat. Because even two weeks in Mary had noticed that Sherlock had a strong tendency towards the theatrical and she suspected that this melodramatic text was just an example of same. As in fact, it turned out to be. He ordered and paid for their drinks (tall vanilla latte for her, quad espresso with eight sugars which she hadn’t even known was a drink you could get but explained so much for him). Sherlock then tented his fingers in front of his face and began with, “Would you like to help me and John break into Chris Jennings’ office?”

“The client’s husband from this morning? Why…” she asked, slowly, “Would I like to do that?”

“To find evidence he’s having an affair.”

“I meant why would I like to do that.”

“Ah. Oh!” He blinked at her twice and said, uncertainly, “Because it’s important that husbands and wives share mutual interests and activities?”

“Is this a test?” she asked.

“No!” he said, seeming alarmed, “Not at all. The test was when you helped me hijack a motorcycle. And you passed! Full marks, Mary.”

“Well, then, I do want to have mutual interests and activities with John. That’s why I have learned to understand and comment intelligently on test cricket. Breaking and entering is a bit beyond the call of duty.”

Sherlock smiled wolfishly at her. Was he… trying to charm her? “Yes, but unlike sitting through cricket with him this is not so tedious that you will actively contemplate suicide during the activity.”

Mary giggled, despite herself, at that. He continued on, “It’s in a very good cause, as you know. And like almost all the work I do with John it’s really quite safe.”

Oh my God, Mary thought, He’s trying to ingratiate himself with me. He wanted her to like him and think that he was a safe companion for her husband-to-be. And if he was trying to be friends with her, that actually meant… well, she might actually be able to get away with it.

Again.

“Yeah, all right then,” she said, surprising herself.

“Brilliant!” he exclaimed, shotgunning his caffeine-and-sugar bomb and standing up, “We’ll plan on ten o’clock tonight. Wear black, and comfortable shoes. And you’ll need to make it look like it was your idea.”

“Beg pardon?”

“He’s much less likely to shout at you,” he said, over his shoulder as he left the coffee shop.

Mary sat alone at the table for two and took her first sip of coffee, feeling dazed. Talking with Sherlock was like having a conversation with a tornado. But she did insist on going along with the two of them that night, and she did make it seem like it was her idea.

Breaking into Christopher Jennings’ office was more fun than she thought she could have with her clothes on. She had missed all this cloak-and-dagger sort of thing. She was intrigued to see that
Sherlock was extremely good with lockpicks, an art form she’d never quite mastered to her own satisfaction. Mostly she’d focused on getting into places by being the sort of person that was necessary but unobtrusive in that place. That’s why she’d first studied nursing, actually. Everyone needs nurses sometimes, but nobody ever really notices them.

John, in contrast to his friend, didn’t pay nearly enough attention to where he left his fingerprints, and she barely managed to suppress a “Hands in pockets” long enough for Sherlock to notice and say it for her.

This became her life. She’d go to work, she’d come home, she’d fix dinner… except now in the background there were a whole lot of really interesting and ridiculous crimes to be solved. Her fiance had a legitimate claim on being emotionally healthy for the first time since she’d met him. She had a goofy oversized new friend whose conversations were limited to things like exotic forms of poisoning, although he really did actually know a lot of fascinating information on the subject.

It was weird. It was glorious.

And if Mary couldn’t quite suppress just a hint of self-satisfaction that she had managed to slip ghosting, the cheapest and lamest form of setting up a false identity, past a professional detective who routinely described his brain as some form of powerful engine, well…. a small daily dose of vitamin smug was probably good for her. She’d been the best, once, and it was nice to know that she’d stayed that way.

Chapter End Notes

The case that John, Mary, and Sherlock go on is not my invention... it's part of the extra content in johnwatsonblog.co.uk. The entry in question is marked "3rd june" and titled "Happily Ever After." I don't generally consider the blogs canonical since they screw up my mental timelines even worse than the show does on its own, but this entry fit into the story I wanted to tell so I said "whatever."
Chapter 8

Mary came home from the supermarket on a miserably rainy day which was the one-year anniversary of the first time she’d been out with John, though she didn’t actually realize that until later. For whatever reason, she had some sort of block on recalling important dates. She’d actually forgotten her own thirty-second birthday until she’d gotten all the facebook messages. She ran into John, also arriving home, on the doorstep. He kissed her hello, plucked the bags out of her hands, and carried them into the kitchen to start putting them away.

She watched him fondly while she dried her hair with a hand towel. Mary wasn’t sure whether she had the British Army or Sherlock Holmes to thank for it, but somewhere along the line somebody had housetrained him well. Apart from the invisible dirty dishes thing, which was actually starting to get just... weird.

“I talked to Sherlock this morning,” he said, putting potatoes into the bin, “He’s in, so we are go for wedding party.”

“I know,” she replied, “He’s been texting me centerpiece concepts all day. He’s sort of inclined to peonies, floating in wide, flat bowls.”

John looked up at her, a potato in each hand, and said, “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I know. I told him this isn’t 2005, so we’re not doing floating bowls. He’s going to get on Pinterest and see what else he can come up with.”

John brushed dust off his hands and shook his head. “I really don’t know if I like what weddings do to people.”

“Tell me about it. Last week I actually found myself telling Janine ‘And the best part about this dress is that you can wear it again!’”

He looked at her with blank incomprehension, so she continued, “You can never wear a bridesmaid’s dress again. Unless being a personal assistant presents her with a lot of occasions to wear strapless, full-length purple satin.”

“Why not... just... choose something that she can wear again?”

John chuckled, said “Okay, bridezilla,” and reached into the grocery bag again, “Um, was there anything you wanted to tell me?”

Mary looked at the box of Trojan Ultra Thins in his hands and said, “Oh, yeah, that. So I had my checkup with Carole today? And it turns out that I’m actually at the age where I should stop taking the pill, even as a nonsmoker. Thus... those. It’s just for a few weeks. I’ve made an appointment to get the coil in.”

John stared at her.

“Since when are you on the pill?”

“Since... nineteen ninety... two? I think?” She was feeling a bit sensitive about her age and so she was more snappish than she’d probably intended when she said, “Really, John, when your eighteen
illegitimate children turn up at our door I’m not going to be best pleased. What did you think we were doing for birth control? Prayer?"

Because in a sexual history that spanned four continents, she had never, not once, met a man who said, “Well, I suppose I should put on a condom without being asked, because preventing unwanted pregnancy is not entirely the woman’s job and I have some vague sense of responsibility for what happens to my semen.”

John set the condoms down on the table, folded his arms over his chest, and with that, they were having a quarrel.

“I have always been careful. I had just been under the impression that the point of not using birth control was not to control birth.”

“What?!” Mary said, “We weren’t even living together when we stopped using condoms. Why would I try to get pregnant?”

“Well at the time I thought it was actually a very encouraging sign you were planning to stick with me!”

“That’s… literally insane. What made you think that would be a smart thing to do?”

They both realized they were sort of yelling, and toned their voices down.

John sighed.

“Look, I knew, obviously, that if you wanted children we’d have to get on that pretty quickly, given your age- Not a judgement, just a fact,” he said, throwing up his hands in self-defense when she frowned, “And when you said you wanted to get tested and stop using them I thought- well, I thought, if that was what you wanted, that was something I could do, for you.”

“We’d barely been together any time at all. And you were willing to commit to eighteen years of raising a child with me?”

He shrugged.

“It was already a forever thing, for me. So if you weren’t fussed about the order of operations why would I be?”

And that, Mary thought, was cheating.

“Stop being sweet, you ass, we are trying to fight,” she said, and he smiled back at her, and then frowned when she continued, “So you… want kids?”

“I mean,” John said, scratching his head, “I’m not broody or anything. But, I mean, yeah, I always sort of thought I would, someday. But you… don’t?”

The answer to that question contained a whole lot of baggage that she was absolutely never going to unpack in front of him, but the short version was that she had given up on having children of her own the first time someone aimed a loaded gun at her head and pulled the trigger. There were people who did her job and had families, but they were inevitably men and she considered them to be selfish, irresponsible assholes. And, really, it had always been fine. Yes, she’d had some twinges of sadness… 2004, year of the fifteen baby showers, when it seemed like every single person she’d ever met was reproducing themselves, had been a rough one.
But twinges aside, Mary had been on the receiving end of single motherhood, and was quite certain that she never wanted to try out the performance part for herself. None of the men she’d been with in her old life had been anywhere near father material. Then she’d gotten out of that life and into a new one and she’d sort of carried that mindset along without really giving it any more consideration.

“Ohhh, this is a conversation we probably should have had earlier,” Mary said, sitting down at the little two-person kitchen table, “We are so bad at this.”

“In my defense,” John said, joining her, “I did think that we had. It just turns out that your side of it was less ‘baby’ and more ‘is this man going to give me the clap?’”

“I- wouldn’t say that I don’t want children,” she said, carefully, twisting the hand towel into knots, “It’s just. I had sort of written it off. I’m forty-one.”

Or thirty-nine. But who’s counting?

“Too old to take the pill, apparently. I don’t know exactly what the odds are that I can get pregnant at my age but they’re not all that good. Or if I did, if the… the baby, if it would be healthy.”

John got sort of a thousand yard stare at the dish rack.

“It’s not like advanced paternal age does any favors for a kid either. Autism. Schizophrenia.”

“I think,” Mary said delicately, thinking of their favorite so-called high-functioning sociopath, “That we could probably do quite well with a child on the spectrum.”

“Yeah,” John said, clearly thinking of the same thing, “And by the time they got old enough to develop their schizophrenia we might be senile and then we wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

Mary chuckled and looked across at him, and thought about the sort of child she might have with John Watson. Probably blond, probably blue eyed. Probably quite clever. Probably sort of impulsive and aggressive and almost certainly not very tall, but… probably a very nice baby, actually.

“There’s not any guarantees,” she mused.

“No,” John agreed.

Which was true, but the future, all of a sudden, seemed painted in pink and gold. How, Mary wondered, had she managed to stumble upon a life where she could have everything she’d ever wanted?

“You know what? We’ll see what happens. Let’s make a baby.”

John’s response to this was to stand up, fling the condoms into the bin with a flourish, and immediately begin unbuttoning her blouse. Mary laughed and said, “I didn’t actually mean right now.”

And then five minutes later, when he’d got to that sensitive bit just at the base of her spine, “Fine, but at least let me put away the frozen things.”
This chapter is not especially pleasant. And so I present what I believe will be the final reader warning: we have both an incident of nonconsensual sexual contact and a consensual but fairly fully described sex scene. Neither of them are as bad as I'm probably making them sound but I'd really rather not hurt anyone's feelings so feel free to skip if you think any of these things are likely to be problems.

The things you worry about never happen. She'd always said so, and she'd really never been proven wrong. The plane you think is going to crash will land safely, the boyfriend you think is going to cheat will be entirely faithful until he starts to bore you to death, obsessive self breast exams will never find a lump.

This belief of Mary's was not founded in irrational optimism. That had never been a problem for her. It was the purely cynical observation that horror, when it comes into your life, is always a surprise.

It began with a text. Four texts, actually, while she was charting at her desk.

-I like the nose.

-Very pretty. Better than the old one.

-Not so sure about blonde, though.

-Sort of… aging.

Mary picked up her mobile, frowned, and replied,

-Wrong number.

-Sorry.

And she didn't really think about it again, since she got similar things frequently. Mary was seriously considering getting a new number. She completed her daily rounds… a short set, being it was her half day shift. Wellness check on child with Down syndrome, new baby, new baby, new baby. All very ordinary. She was thinking about the wedding: how it was absolutely insane that she was expected, as a woman with no interest or prior experience in party planning, to put together a formal dinner with dancing for 100 without any outside help especially given the stupidity and slovenliness of the English customer service industry and-

Pling.

-So this isn't you?

Mary had seen the photograph that came in with the text, many times. It was a group of young women in hiking gear, smiling widely, arms linked, at the summit of the mount of the Holy Cross. The woman… girl, really... in the middle, was petite and had auburn hair, and Mary put her hand to
her mouth.

-Or this?

The same woman, slightly older, raising a frozen strawberry daiquiri in a toast to the camera.

-Or these?

A small, serious-looking girl in a red pinafore. A teenager with intensive braces and an honor roll certificate. A thirtysomething woman in a dark turtleneck sweater trying very hard not to be photographed.

Finally, and most damningly…

A man, giving a speech to a crowd para mob in front of the Porta Macedonia in Skopje. A very famous, very bad, and now very dead man. The face of the woman who killed him had thoughtfully been circled in red, in the crowd.

A twenty-two year old, face-on, smiling proudly, with an unfortunate mid-nineties "Rachel" bob. This last shot was a scanned copy of her very first CIA identity badge.

-See, I was looking for Amy. Though that's not you any longer, is it?

Ah, Mary thought, so when this finally happens your hands go numb and you can taste copper. How interesting.

She was shaking. She was fucking shaking, so badly that it took her three tries to manage to tap out:

-Who is this?

-St. James's Park. If you leave now, you can be there in thirty minutes. Take the Jubilee line. I will know if you don't.

Mary tucked her mobile into her pocket, and looked around. Was she actually being watched, right now? Cameras were everywhere in London, just part of the backdrop, she barely noticed them anymore. And there were tracking devices, RFID and GPS… God, probably a half dozen new things she hadn't even paid attention to in the last five years.

She didn't know. She couldn't know. And so she hurried off to the underground station.

This was worse than she'd ever imagined. She'd sometimes had worries that someone would find that she hadn't really existed until five years ago… but going from that point to getting her actual name? And her old profession? She wouldn't have thought anyone could have done that unless they had someone deep at the CIA.

St. James's park, near Buckingham Palace, was busy on this pleasant spring afternoon, filled with tourists ambling around, enjoying the gardens and the lake. It was also enormous, and she had no idea what she was looking for.

-Around the lake to your right.

Mary obeyed, feeling like a puppet on a string. She curved around the lake until-

"Over here, Mary Morstan!"
The voice had an upmarket Scandanavian accent, and was ridiculously cheery. She followed it to its origin— a tall, slender man, middle aged, receding hair, verging on handsome, wearing a bespoke suit and waving her over to one of the park benches.

She had no absolutely idea who he was.

There was another man with him, equally unfamiliar, a huge slab of muscle, obviously the heavy—not that she could do anything here, in broad daylight, with hundreds of witnesses. Mary focused her attention on the immediate concern, who was patting the seat of the bench next to him with a happy smile.

She sat.

There was a moment of silence as the man took a bag of sugared peanuts out of his pocket and started snacking.

"You can't imagine," he said, eventually, "How intrigued I was when a routine background check on my new PA turned up that her dearest friend was a woman who had been dead for forty years."

That was enough, and she flicked through her mental card index:

PA- Something to do with Janine- Fancy party-Clammy hands- Oh God. That guy? He's a billionaire and if he's paranoid enough to run that level of deep background on his employees he's involved with something important. Oh God.

Mary cleared her throat and began, "Mr. Magnussen, I-"

"And then to find out you used to be so interesting!" he interrupted, "That was tricky. I've spent too much time in England, I'm out of practice with actual security agencies. I honestly wouldn't have bothered… but then you went and made such unusual friends, so I just had to."

Magnussen folded over the bag of peanuts, tucked it into his pocket, and put his hand on Mary's knee. She blinked. She wasn't clear whether he was petting her or trying to clean the sugar off his fingers but either way she desperately wished he wouldn't. But she kept her mouth shut and sat still.

"You truly are in love with danger, aren't you? Certainly John Watson's dubious personal attractions aren't enough to justify your staying in the orbit of the Holmes boys otherwise."

His hand was firmly on her thigh now, and gradually creeping upwards and inwards. Mary realized, suddenly, that in twenty-five years of dating men and fifteen years of spying, most of which had involved daily contact with the dregs of that gender… she'd never before been felt up without being enthusiastically into it. That had been such a nice record to have, she thought despairingly.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, hating how weak her voice sounded, "I have money, if that's what you're after."

She did, too, nearly a hundred and eighty thousand US dollars worth of emergency-escape-hatch money that was all she'd managed to draw out of her old funds without looking suspicious. It had been nearer to two-fifty, but she'd used some for the wedding and the down payment on the house… because she'd thought she was safe. And Magnussen was a billionaire, so she really wasn't surprised when he chuckled and replied, "You never had enough money to interest me even when you actually mattered. But I'm honestly not quite sure what I'll do with my new pet psychopath. The current queen is taking her time to die… maybe I might like to have someone help her along and let her horsefaced moron of a son take over. Or, hm, perhaps I might have you help yourself to the
keyfob that accesses your soon-to-be brother in law Mycroft's laptop next time the four of you get together for a hand of bridge. Or maybe you can just open that pretty pink mouth of yours and suck my cock."

His hand had stopped just short of where they'd be arrested for public indecency, and his voice was still so cheery.

"The point, Mary Morstan, is not what I'll have you do. It's that you'll do it. Because you're mine, now. And if you don't, well-"

Magnussen sighed, theatrically, and then continued.

"You've made a lot of enemies, over the years who would be very keen to find out what you've been up to. It'd be interesting to see your thug fiance try to deal with, oh, say, a Spetsnaz Alpha operator. And really, he's got better odds than some of the others. Did you know that your little sister has actually just joined the Peace Corps? Clearly it isn't genetic."

Mary swallowed to try and get some moisture back in her mouth.

"So why," she asked, carefully, "did you call me here today?"

He shrugged.

"I had a spare hour. And who knows when I'll be needing your… services? It'll be best to avoid having this tedious conversation when I'm in a hurry. Much more convenient to have my poppet already on the strings when I want her to dance."

Magnussen kissed her then, on the side of her throat, a spot where she generally adored being kissed but which made her skin crawl now. Then he patted her knee, twice, and stood up.

"Best of luck with the wedding. Love to John."

And with that, he was gone, his bodyguard trailing behind him.

Mary sat, perfectly still, while the life of the park went on around her, and tried to think. She disregarded, quickly, two thirds of what he had told her as posturing. The queen of England was a powerless yet well-guarded figurehead that nobody sensible would bother trying to assassinate. And some men just wanted to think that their penises were more intimidating than was actually the case. But a lot of people might like a look at Mycroft Holmes' laptop.

She had met the man, once, in passing at Baker Street, during which she had kept her head down and been as unmemorable as possible. He had returned a polite "no" to the wedding invitation but had sent them a silver-plated three-tiered cake tray (off-registry) anyway. The elder Holmes brother was probably the most powerful person in the country, though she had absolutely no idea how she actually might get access to him. And even if she could figure that out, a scrap of Kipling kept circulating through her brain, repeating, "If once you have paid him the Dane-geld, you never get rid of the Dane."

Mary scrubbed her hands over her face. Then she walked home. It was a long walk, but it was a very nice day out.

John was sitting on the sofa in the living room, typing something on his laptop with his surprisingly rapid hunt-and-peck technique. He had that intense wrinkle between his eyebrows and mumbled an abstracted "Hey" in her general direction, so he was probably working on his blog… that disappearing-knife stabbing from yesterday.
She set down her handbag and took five steps over to him, plucking the computer out of his lap, folding it closed, and setting it on the coffee table.

He looked up at her and said in the level tone he had when she'd irritated him, "I was technically in the middle of someth-" but then he stopped because she'd crawled into his lap and started kissing him.

She'd could tell that she'd startled him, and could feel the moment when he mentally shrugged and decided to go with it. He needed a shave: for a short, slight man, he had the facial hair of a werewolf and true smoothness tended to require more effort than he was willing to put forth.

Mary didn't care. She relished the faint burn on her cheeks and throat, seeming to erase the memory of any other touch. Insinuating a hand between them, she undid the top button on his jeans. Then she pulled back from John, leaving him breathless. His lips looked bee-stung, and his lovely blue eyes were wide and dark.

"Off," Mary said, firmly. And with a bit of a scramble they got his trousers and pants down, and she sank to her knees and took him into her mouth.

John gently put his hand on the back of her head as she worked him. He was always so careful with her when she did this, absurdly grateful afterwards, and he would never, ever ask for it. There was clearly something miserable in his murky sexual history around blowjobs. Mary wasn't particularly fond of giving them, but she still did, quite often, because she liked how happy she could make him.

And because she decided what she did, and who to. Nobody else.

John, she noticed, had moved his hand off her head and was tapping her shoulder, with a strained, "Um, Mary, I don't know if you want me to-"

No, she didn't. She stopped what she was doing, stood up, skinned her t-shirt off, and instructed, "Put your hands on me." John made an incoherent noise in the back of his throat and obeyed her. She'd sparked an answering wildness in him, and he was probably going to leave marks with how rough he was being, and there was absolutely nothing more that she wanted at that moment.

As they wrestled one another's remaining clothes off Mary thought of how good they had always been at this. From the very beginning, they had clicked on this level in a way that she'd never experienced before. And she knew, desperately, that she should have left it on that level… just kept it casual, left John in his sad bachelor apartment, dumped him on any of half a dozen occasions, stayed independent and free and mobile.

So many decisions, each so small on their own… but the outcome of them was now she was trapped in something impossible. She should never have picked up anything she wasn't willing to put down again.

But then he had gotten her naked and positioned and, oh God, there he was, and she found that she blessedly couldn't think of really anything at all but that.

They finished, and her brain gradually spun up again. Her first coherent thought was to wonder how some positions could feel so sensuous and then transition to awkward and ridiculous a nanosecond after she'd had an orgasm.

The second thought was much less pleasant. She didn't really have time for third thoughts, because John had finished rearranging their bodies into something less stupid looking, cleared his throat, and
said, "You know, if you'd told me this three months ago I'd have called you a liar, but... the pill really was suppressing your sex drive, wasn't it?"

Mary winced, because he was right, and because it was actually a little embarrassing. The first breakout she'd had since her teens had faded within a month, but her transformation from a woman with a healthy libido into a sexually voracious pervert didn't seem to be going anywhere.

"Sorry," she muttered, because she knew it was starting to give him performance anxiety.

"Oh, I'm not complaining. You might actually kill me, but I'm certainly not going to complain. Now what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Mary lied automatically.

John arched an eyebrow, dropped his voice a third, and said, "By careful analysis of such seemingly inconsequential factors such as the temperature of the butter on the kitchen counter and the precise degree of fading of the wallpaper I am able to determine with upwards of ninety-eight percent accuracy the difference between a woman whose panties simply dissolved in the face of my overwhelming sexual charisma and one who has just used me as a human dildo because she's stressed out."

"Please don't do impressions while we're having sex," Mary groaned.

"Fine, then, I know you, Morstan. I know your black heart," John laughed, nuzzling his nose into her sternum, "And I strongly suspect if I hadn't been here you'd be obsessively alphabetizing the DVDs right now to try and calm down. So spill. What's the matter?"

He would choose right now to get all emotionally sensitive, Mary thought. Then she took a deep breath, reminded herself: be Mary, a nice normal woman with no actual problems at all... And told him the truth.

"The band's backing out of the wedding."

Or a truth, anyway.

"I guess they got a last minute opportunity to open for Billy Idol that night. Which is great for them and everything but literally every other band we looked at is booked now and I can't find anybody on youtube who's both half decent and available with less than two weeks notice. I thought maybe we could just plug in an iPod or something but Emily, at the venue, is being a complete bitch about "no prerecorded music" like she thinks your eighty year old aunt is going to want to slam dance or something. So I don't know what I'm going to do."

She had been so pissed off about this less than three hours ago, and now it seemed just as trivial as it undoubtedly was. But she'd enjoyed having trivial problems. They were so much more manageable.

John stroked her upper arms, and said, "Okay, I'll handle it."

"Pardon?"

"I'll fix it. Sherlock owes me a favor... thank you again for driving out to Swindon and posting my bail, by the by... and half of London owes him one. I'm sure someone on that list is a DJ or a musician. And as for Miss Emily, I'll talk her round. Because she thinks I'm cute."

He smiled, proudly, and not a bit smugly, because Emily did blatantly flirt with him in a way that Mary mostly found very amusing and only occasionally made her wish she had a shiv.
"See? Not just wedding day Ken doll, am I now? Or we could just run away together? It'd be nice if I could have gotten you to do it before we put down all the deposits but I'm still up for it if you are."

He was obviously joking and thus wouldn't have expected, "Yes, God, let's run away," which was the response she wanted to give him. And for just a second, the part of her that always whispered jump when she was standing on cliffs considered… just telling him. Spilling her guts, telling Magnussen "Publish, and be damned" and letting the chips fall where they may.

The thing was that if she did that, John would help her. He was such a good hearted man, and he hated bullies, and so he'd enlist Sherlock and Sherlock would probably enlist the British Government and one way or the other she'd be safe, though probably ultimately in witness protection. Where she'd never ever see John again, because there was never going to be any coming back from that revelation for them.

It had been so easy for her to fall in love with him. And in the dark corners of her heart she knew it hadn't been nearly as easy for him to fall in love with her… she could count the number of times he'd said it on her fingers. If he found out that the woman he loved wasn't really real, well? It would instantly extinguish that fragile little flame he had in his heart.

She wouldn't let that happen. So she smiled and said, "No. I'm sorry, I'm just being silly."

John kissed her forehead and then finally pulled out.

"No, you're not. It's kind of ridiculous to expect people to know how to do this sort of high-level party planning without any practice. Are you working tomorrow?"

"Um," Mary considered briefly, "No. But I did take a Saturday afternoon clinic shift."

"Me neither. So let's go down to the pub and get a pint. It sounds like you could use one."

"Sounds lovely," Mary replied with a smile.

John kissed her once more and then walked off to the shower, whistling the jaunty tune of the naked man who has solved every local problem in exemplary fashion.

Mary sat in the living room and started gathering up their scattered clothes. She had rug burns, somehow, on both her knees and her back, and she had just realized that the absolute best case scenario available to her involved lying to the person she loved most, every day, for the rest of their lives.

She'd never thought she could feel quite so bleak.
Chapter 10

On the occasion of her wedding, Mary got up at six in the morning to have her hair and makeup done by professionals. Before this appointment, she threw up, out of what she thought was the continuous anxiety that had been hanging over her for the last few weeks. Sitting on the floor of their house’s dilapidated seventies-era master bathroom, she decided: just for today, she was putting all that aside. Just for twenty-four hours.

After the hair and makeup, she squeezed herself into something that was called “shapewear” but was clearly a corset, and put on a dress which took fully ten minutes for two of her three bridesmaids to do up in the back, due to the hundreds of fiddly little buttons. The third bridesmaid, Susan, had been dumped unceremoniously the night before and was viciously hungover. Janine had to talk her out of the toilets and dose her with coffee before she was able to walk down the aisle.

She got married. Mary Morstan, whose existence had always been unusually ephemeral, had finally disappeared entirely. Mary Watson took her place.

She got a threatening telegram (nope, not now). She got a surprisingly murder-mystery themed wedding reception. She got told that she was pregnant (mother of God …).

Then she danced and talked but didn’t drink any more, because although she considered it very unlikely she was actually pregnant since she wasn’t even really late yet she had to consider the source of the announcement and take it under advisement.

She and her new husband, in full wedding regalia, stopped the limousine to the Heathrow Hilton at a chemist’s and bought a pregnancy test. This would have been an excellent opportunity to troll unsuspecting store clerks but was spoiled by John, who was slightly lit after the reception and couldn’t stop giggling.

She saw the faintest “positive” line on a pregnancy test that she had ever personally seen. John kissed her hands. They mutually agreed that sometimes Sherlock’s deductions verged on the creepy.

They made love, albeit more out of a vague sense of exhausted obligation than out of any particular desire.

They slept.

And then, unsurprisingly after her eventful day, Mary dreamed.

In her dream, her family had come to the wedding. Both Amy and Mary were orphans… well, probably. Amy’s father was certainly always referred to as dead. But what nobody ever seemed to realize about Mary was that orphaned isn’t typically a synonym for “alone in the universe.” And Amy had never been alone in the universe. She had not one but two stepfathers, three half-siblings (the sister a full eighteen years younger than herself), half a dozen stepbrothers and sisters, and more cousins and second cousins than she cared to count.

Her family were… well, they were a pack of noisy, argumentative drunks, who contained among their numbers a surprisingly large percentage of the American intelligence community. But they knew that family comes with obligations and so a delegation of them had come across the Atlantic to watch her get married… griping every step of the way about the cost.

Peter, the second stepfather, was doing what he did every time he got hammered - telling vague but hair-raising anecdotes about what the CIA got up to in South America in the eighties to a fascinated
crowd, that in this case included a sloshed Sherlock Holmes. Amy’s half-sister Jenny had outgrown her teenaged awkwardness to become a legitimate babe, and was dancing with John, who had a really pitiful weakness for blondes. And Jack, the first (and very much favored) stepfather, was lighting one of the fifty Marlboro Reds he smoked every day, in blithe defiance of the “Thank you for not smoking” signs scattered about the room.

“It’s a damn pity,” he said, ashing into a saucer, except what he actually said was, “It’s a dayum pittuh.” But that was Jack. Looked like Tom Wolfe, sounded like Foghorn Leghorn, could call any given US president at any given moment and be sure they would stop whatever they were doing and answer. He was basically what Mycroft Holmes wanted to be when he grew up.

“Why?” Mary asked.

“Now that you’re pregnant,” Jack replied, “I mean, it was kind of an iffy life to bring a kid into to begin with, but you know what’s going to happen in a while, right? He’ll tell you to do something, and whatever it is you aren’t going to do it. And then this’ll all stop. You’ll be fine, obviously. You always have been kind of a cold-blooded bitch.”

Mary sort of realized then that this was a dream. The real Jack would never dream of referring to any woman as a bitch in public. He’d put too much effort into crafting his “gentleman” identity to commit such a vulgarity.

“You walked away from all of us without a second thought-”

“That’s not true,” Mary protested, though it was more true than she was proud of. She was always good at compartmentalizing, and once she’d made up her mind she’d not seen a whole lot of upside in dwelling on the people she’d left behind.

“And now you’ll get to do it all over again. Except this time you’ll do it carrying a kid around with you. And that’s a hard thing to put onto a child. No peace, no safety… no father.” He sighed and took a deep drag, the cherry at the end of his cigarette tracing little s-curves of smoke through the air.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” he concluded.

Mary looked down into her lap and saw that she was bleeding, red blooms like poppies appearing on the white satin.

“No,” she said calmly, “I’m not doing this now.”

She stood up, but nobody in the reception hall noticed the screech of the chair casters or the woman in the wedding gown miscarrying at the center of it all. So Mary hooked her fingers under the edge of the table and flipped it, in a crash of broken glass and flapping tablecloths.

That did it, and she slammed awake, breathing fast, heart racing… but John was snoring gently beside her, so she hadn’t thrashed or shouted. That was good. She lay perfectly still for roughly ten seconds, until her stomach turned over and she barely made it to the ensuite bathroom in time to throw up… oh, everything she had ever eaten in her entire life.

When she’d finished, she reached a shaky hand up to flush the toilet and rested her forehead against the cool porcelain.

“I did warn you, you know,” John said from the doorway, making her jerk her head up in surprise, “When I asked you out. Naked crying in the bathroom. Didn’t quite have this in mind but you can’t say I didn’t warn you.”
He took one of the white terrycloth robes off the hook on the door and draped it over her shoulders, then sat next to her on the floor. Mary touched her cheeks, which were in fact wet.

“I don’t think I’m much good at this whole ‘pregnant’ lark,” she said, weakly.

“Well, you’ve got nine months to practice. I imagine you’ll improve,” John replied, “Do you want to cancel the honeymoon? We can probably get most of our money back.”

Mary blinked, not having even put that on her list of concerns.

“It’s Italy, not trekking through the Amazon. I can get ginger ale there just as well as here. And apart from when I’m actually being sick, I feel fine. So far.”

“All right,” John replied, and stroked a finger under her chin, before getting up and stepping over to the sink, “Think you got it all out of you?”

Mary flinched. Sometimes being in a medical household had its downsides, like never getting to maintain any sense of mystery about your body and its less appealing functions.

“Yes,” she mumbled.

John filled a glass of water at the sink and unscrewed the cap of the little blue complimentary Listerine bottle. “Swish and spit,” he instructed, passing her the water and then the mouthwash. She did this, and then without further ado he hooked his arms beneath her and stood up.

Mary flung her arms convulsively about his neck and blurted, “John! Your shoulder!”

“Yeah,” John said, in an unflatteringly strained tone of voice, “It turns out this is actually a lot more difficult than it looks in films.” But regardless he carried her back into the bedroom, and set her, with exquisite care, back in the spot she had unceremoniously vacated. He pulled the duvet up to her shoulders and climbed in, wrapping his arms around her.

“Thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Pardon?” Mary asked, dazedly.

“For… for doing all this for our baby. And for our baby. Christ! Our bloody baby!” he laughed, resting a hand just below her navel, on the flat plane of her stomach. Which, she abruptly realized, wouldn’t be flat for long, not anymore.

“Oh,” she said, smiling into the dark, “It’s my pleasure.”

And Mary knew, then.

This moment, right here, this was worth having. And it was worth doing whatever was necessary to keep.

Later that morning, Mary sat looking out over the atrium of the hotel. John was showering, and she was trying her first ever cup of decaf coffee. It turned out to be… fine, but sort of pointless. Twenty four hours had passed, which meant it was time to end her vacation in denial.

And just as she thought that, her phone pinged with a text from Janine.

- Good morning Mrs. W! Hope the honeymoon got off with a bang! I just wanted to let you know I went over and fed Calton and I can tell he misses you already by how he tried to murder my feet. And you will never believe who just rang to ask me out…
Mary smiled, despite herself, and typed:

-Prince Harry?

-The fuck are you doing out of bed? And no. Less likely than that.

-Our flight is in an hour and a half. Prince William?

-Even weirder.

-Prince George.

-Possibly not that weird. But I bet I will have tales to tell when you get back. Drinks next month sometime?

-You’re on.

Mary set her phone down and drummed her fingertips over her collarbones. Janine … who, over the years, had sent her several emails from her work account.

She pulled out her laptop, connected to the wifi, and found that Janine’s company allowed remote web-based access to their email server. She considered, for a moment: Janine was born in… and her dog’s name was… then typed “jhawkins” into the userid box and “Copper82” into the password box.

Rejected. Damn. Except Copper was a newish dog and people tended to reuse the same passwords over again and her former dog’s name was-

Tinker82

And bingo. She now had full access to Janine’s emails… but more importantly, the calendar of one Charles Augustus Magnussen.

That would do to be getting along with.
The honeymoon ended up being quite nice, even given how psychologically fractured Mary felt. They took a quick hop over to Milan, picked up their rental car, and then were very much at loose ends. The original plan for this trip had involved a lot of wineries which now ruled out fifty (or sixty-six point six repeated?) percent of team Watson.

John and Mary both valued being the type of people who shrug and go with it when plans change. So they shrugged and went. Whoever wasn’t driving would read out the most bizarre and peculiar things they could find in their Lonely Planet guide, and then they went and did those things. Or not, just as it pleased them.

Pregnancy, Mary found, really involved a lot of throwing up. She never quite got to the point where she was dehydrated or unable to keep food down, but she was guaranteed to be hugging the toilet bowl first thing every morning. And quite often late at night, and occasionally during the long interval between lunch and dinner. One time she had to abruptly terminate the sex because it was making her seasick. Girl on top was out for the duration.

But apart from the bouts with nausea it was wonderful. The hormonal soup bathing her brain enhanced the taste of her food, and made every touch feel like she’d just taken a very small hit of weed. There were no more portentious lucid dreams. She was out every night as soon as her head hit the pillow, and enjoyed the sleep of the just until she awakened in the morning, and when she woke up, well…

Every day began with the sensation that something amazing was about to happen. Mary hadn’t felt this way in a long time. She had a clear memory of an early morning walk to school where that vague sense of the numinous had surrounded her… but that had been even before she was sixteen, and that was the most recent occasion. It must have been something that she’d lost with childhood, that feeling of routine exaltation, except now it was back. She wondered if she was somehow borrowing it from the baby.

And uneasily, she wondered if it was because she was (sort of) happy to be back to doing something that she was very very good at. Because in the interstices between good sex, exquisite food, and Roman ruins, she was working on the the first step in any mission: know your quarry.

Charles Magnussen (she learned, the first afternoon in the country, while John was sleeping off a cassoeula that had smelled so good she’d suspended vegetarianism enough to have one perfect bite) was born in 1966, in Helsingor. The son of a naval architect and a housewife, he had been an adequate if unremarkable student, and had started in media straight out of university.

There was a lot of this sort of stuff online about him, which was odd, because in her experience there were two types of very rich people. There were the ones who got the dull glossy-magazine treatment, and the other ones. The ones who really didn’t want anyone to know that they had money, or how they’d got it, or what they did with it. Mary didn’t imagine she was the first person whose secrets he’d threatened… she would be an unusually ambitious victim for a novice… but he acted as though he had nothing to hide.

But since she knew what she was looking for, she could find it. There was no more evidence of impropriety than you’d expect from any oligarch, but Mary could put together a picture from hints.
Initial startup capital provided by people who had zero obvious reason to give Magnussen money but a great deal to lose from any public scandal. Conveniently timed damage to the reputations of competitors. An abruptly aborted inquiry into the legality of how certain information had been obtained. A whole lot of enemies who committed suicide.

A very professional blackmailer, then, and one who didn’t hesitate to use his information when his demands were not met. Well enough, Mary thought. If he didn’t bluff, then she wouldn’t either.

Italy in the late spring was gorgeous. They drove, with many stops, on a meandering route south. The weather was practically perfect and the food was everything all the travel writers said. It was so good to be back in a country that wasn’t afraid of flavor. They slept in attic flats, in countryside cottages, in guest bedrooms in little old ladies’ houses. Neither of them spoke the language, although it was close enough to Portuguese and Spanish that Mary could at least make herself understood. John declined to even try and just let her handle their interactions with anyone who didn’t speak English.

“I’m crap at languages,” he said, “Five years of French classes and I’m still lost once the conversation gets beyond ‘how much does that cost.’”

Mary asked to hear a sample of his French because she didn’t quite believe that was true. He was a very intelligent man with a good memory, things which hardly anyone noticed because of his choice in best friend, but which generally correlated with a good linguist. But he was, legitimately, awful. The vocabulary was all right but the grammar and the accent made her cringe.

It was odd, though. Occasionally during his nightmares he’d talk in what she considered to be very adequate (though usually obscene or alarming) Dari. She wondered if he even was aware that he spoke the language. Mary decided not to mention it. Some wounds didn’t need to be picked at.

Anyway. Step two, plan your op. Charles Magnussen lived in a beautiful house, just the sort of place Mary would have chosen if she were insanely rich, which straddled the lines between modern and contemporary styling. It had been written up in architectural journals when the original owner had completed it in 2003, and pretty much right away she had to rule out burglarizing it. She wouldn’t have the time for a gradual infiltration, and a straight break-in would be challenging without a squad of assistants. Also it was so far north it was practically in Scotland and she didn’t want to have to justify a lengthy absence.

Other places people kept important paperwork were with their bankers and with their attorneys. Which she supposed were possibilities, although as far as she’d ever seen items implicating one in criminal activity mostly didn’t get stored with banks. They were too easily accessed by law enforcement. Magnussen’s lawyers were an old-established Magic Circle firm with over a billion pounds in annual revenues, and thus were also not going to be keen on involving themselves in blackmail. So whatever documents he had on her were probably in his beautiful house or in his London office, which wouldn’t exactly be a treat to burgle either.

But getting in probably wouldn’t be all that hard, and so the direct approach might end up being the way to go on this one. She preferred that route anyway, and it would seem like a waste if she didn’t make use of her access to his calendar.

Mary was good with computers but not that good, and so she sent an encrypted email to a nice black-hat out of St. Petersburg who she had worked with several times in the past. Twelve hours later, he responded with a:

Glad to hear from you after all this time, lisichka. I thought you’d perhaps been put in lavender.
And a price quote for two hours of dead time on the security cameras of a Canary Wharf office block that was just ridiculously low. As in less than a tenth of what she had been expecting. Either he really was glad she wasn’t dead or the dark economy had collapsed sometime in the last five years. He also said that if she were interested in access to the top levels of the MI-5 archives that he could make that happen, which was actually a really tempting…

But no. She was going to do this one last time and that would be it. She didn’t need to know anybody else’s secrets when her own were ample to be getting along with.

Mary agreed to her hacker’s price without haggling and then spent an embarrassingly long time learning what “bitcoins” were and how to get them, because that was how he wanted to be paid. The world had moved on without her, it seemed.

Back in real life, in every city they visited, John dragged Mary through galleries and museums, enchantedly holding forth on chiaroscuro and scumbling and the use of the camera obscura. She’d never seen so many old masters in her life. And so in Florence she stretched her spycraft… just a bit, just so she could evade his attention long enough to buy three prestretched canvases and a set of acrylic paints.

She surprised him with them the next day. Then he surprised her, over the next several days, by producing an amateurish but quite decent impressionist rendition of a photo of her that he had on his phone.

How did that happen? How could you spend a year and a half with a man… seven months of that actually living with him… and have no idea that somewhere inside him was all this artistic talent trying to escape? But the little square painting of herself, looking out of the window at the rainy Venetian canals, lost in her own thoughts (“You were actually sitting still for once, Mary. I had to take the opportunity”) reassured her.

The woman in the painting looked soft and gentle and kind. That was how John saw her (though she hoped that the disproportionately long neck was more that he’d not had much practice painting rather than that he also saw her as part giraffe). And if he saw her that way, then surely that was a sign that she could actually be that. She could be a loving wife, and a good mother, and an upright member of society and all that stuff that she wanted to be even when it sometimes seemed like an elaborate piece of performance art. She just had to get past this little… blip.

Except. Except. Except she couldn’t really turn off the sharper, more cynical Amy part of her mind anymore. And so she couldn’t help noticing that John, after two weeks spent almost exclusively in her company, was getting more and more visibly bored.

And Mary didn’t know who she could be that could fix that.

Chapter End Notes

lisichka=little fox. Because when Mary's hacker met her she was a redhead. And because he thinks she's hot as hell.
Chapter 12

Mary's day-to-day work mostly involved the care and maintenance of children, but you couldn't get through life in public health without learning a lot about drug abuse. So once Isaac Whitney was clearly coming down she handed him off to Kate along with a list of NHS addiction resources (awful) plus the names of several private detox and rehab organizations (only slightly less crap). She did not, upon consideration, tell Kate that all of them were likely to be completely pointless until and unless Isaac decided he really wanted to stop. That was a sad little factlet and Kate would certainly figure it out on her own eventually anyway.

She'd offered to put Bill Wiggins in touch with an outreach group she knew of that focused on drug treatment for the homeless population. He'd declined, very politely, then asked her for twenty pounds for cab fare. Not being an utter idiot, she instead gave him three sandwiches, two bottles of Orangina, one of John's old jumpers, and an oyster card that was going to expire at the end of the week.

*Then* she finally got to change out of her pyjamas. It really was just feast or famine… either her husband was literally going stir-crazy, or else running off to crack houses and fishing out stoned consulting detectives, nothing in-between

She looked dubiously at the bread box, then made two slices of dry toast, which she successfully ate and kept down. Thirty two hours without being sick: a new and depressing personal record.

Her phone pinged.

*I need to borrow John for the evening, if I may. Just here in London, and nothing dangerous. It'll do him good to get out and about. He's put on ten pounds in the last month.* -SH

Mary frowned, and typed back.

*It's maybe four. But yes, go ahead and have fun. Are you okay, though? I'm worried about you.*

*Kindly confine your maternal instincts to your pending offspring. As I believe I said, I am FINE. It was for a case.* -SH

*And we'll compromise and say seven.* -SH

*It was not seven… the past two weeks had been her opportunity to learn that male body image was just as fragile as female body image when it came to middle-aged spread, and the food in Italy really had been fabulous. Mary knew damn well it was back down to four because she was receiving daily reports on the topic from the source, usually accompanied with heartfelt monologues on whether they should buy a juicer. And as the only person in the conversation who knew how to lose an argument with any amount of grace, she let it go.*

*Just be safe, all right?*

*When am I ever not safe?* -SH

*Yes, all right, I acknowledge that was possibly not the most confidence-inducing phrase I could have chosen.* -SH

*However, in this case, *predictive*. -SH*
She chuckled, and put her phone down. But ten minutes later, when she was debating if she should make an attempt at a soft-boiled egg, it pinged again.

-Mary, I need you to do me a favour.

-Sure, what?

-Can you go over to Sherlock's place, get the keys from Mrs. Hudson, and search his bedroom for drugs?

"Seriously?" she thought. They were definitely going to need to have an argument whenever he got home, because he was back into acting full-out ridiculous and it was just **not on**.

-Seriously?

-I know, and I'm sorry, but it's only the bedroom. The rest of the flat is probably clear.

Oh, well **that** made it totally okay, then, didn't it? The idea really just made her wince. It wasn't as though she'd never gone through someone else's private belongings but all those people had been, for want of a better word, **bad**. If Sherlock was using... whatever it was he used, somehow she'd never gotten around to asking and everybody just talked about Sherlock's "drugs problem" like it was some sort of dangerous pet that he kept... that was obviously worrying but he still surely had some fundamental right not to have his dirty laundry aired in front his friends.

And apparently she was oversensitive about this topic for **some** reason.

-I really do not feel comfortable with doing that.

-It sounds awful but sometimes all Sherlock needs is to avoid the near occasion of sin for long enough that he gets distracted by something else. If there's anything he can conveniently get access to that makes the whole process harder.

-And then things can get bad.

-Please. I'd do it myself if I could.

Mary rubbed the back of her neck and typed:

-Fine.

-You're a celestial goddess and I grovel beneath your feet.

-Duly noted. And yes you shall.

-Oh-ho... I'm rather sad I'm going to be gone tonight.

-Liar.

Mary made it into 221B an hour later because while the Bakerloo line was quite a quick trip, she had to sit with Mrs. Hudson for forty minutes of tea and chatting. Well, didn't **have** to, wanted to. Martha Hudson was quite possibly Mary's favorite person on Earth and had loads to relate about a pole-dancing masterclass that she was gearing up to teach ("Well, **mentor**, anyway, you know, the hip.").

Plus she was strongly implying she had slept with Paul McCartney back in the sixties and Mary had to try and winkle the truth about that out of her.
Mrs. Hudson provided her with the keys to the upstairs flat and a pair of Marigolds, saying, "You never know what you might find up there, dear, and you don’t want to touch anything dangerous in your condition." Which was how Mary found out that she did in fact have the hormone-induced fat-face typical of early pregnancy, not that Martha phrased it so indelicately. She wondered why they were even bothering keeping it secret until the first trimester was over, given that it was apparently obvious to everybody.

Sherlock’s flat sans Sherlock seemed silent and artificial, almost like a movie set, apart from the… smell? Curious, Mary followed her nose, tracing the ammoniacal scent over to the fireplace, which someone had definitely pissed in. The reek and the mental image was enough to get her to abandon her tenuous hold on her food, and she staggered off to the flat’s bathroom and threw up, which was really starting to get not-fun.

But her qualms about prying into Sherlock’s personal life vanished down the drains along with about a quart of tea and Mrs. Hudson’s excellent Battenberg cake. Mary knew men tended to go feral when they lived alone but if he was actually urinating into his fireplace then he was in more of a crisis mode than she had suspected.

She put on the rubber gloves, although when she got into Sherlock’s bedroom she doubted she would need them. Unlike the rest of the flat, this room was uncluttered, tidy, and rather bare… the room of a man who lived elsewhere, and only slept here. Drawing a deep breath, she began to search.

It was actually quite revelatory once she got into it.

The first thing she found was the gun, tucked between the mattress and the box spring. Mary pulled it out and reflexively checked it over… Walther PPK, the obsolete, overpriced, overweight weapon of James Bond and the James Bond enthusiast. Super illegal in this country, loaded of course, and could definitely use a good cleaning. She wondered if it’d be better to maneuver John or Sherlock into doing that or simply to do it herself and act like she'd learnt about it on youtube.

Taped to the back of the periodic table on the wall, Mary found what looked like about twenty thousand pounds worth of emergency escape hatch money, divided between euros, dollars, and pounds. There were also three passports: Oyvind Sigerson, from Norway, Thierry Vernet, from France, and…

William? Really?

Mary took a closer look at the UK passport, and as best she could tell without a chip reader it was real, with all the appropriate holograms and so forth. But the other two looked real as well. She found it very hard to believe that a man with both "William" and "Scott" available to him would actually choose to go by Sherlock, but...

She was totally going to have to tell John that one, wasn’t she?

The third intriguing discovery was behind the nightstand, and unlike the other two she didn't think it had actually been hidden. The pair of knickers (Ann Summers, bikini-cut, dove grey satin with ecru lace trim) seemed just to have fallen back there by accident.

Mary looked at the silky scrap in her hand and boggled. She could think of three possible reasons why a man might have a pair of women's underwear in his bedroom, and every single one of them seemed wildly inconsistent with Sherlock as she’d come to know him. Though on reflection she was glad she was wearing the Marigolds, after all. She tucked the pants, as she had done with the gun and the passports, back where she had found them.
Eventually she did find the drugs, because they weren't even really hidden. Sherlock had five identical copies of his enormous black coat in his closet, and in the capacious pocket of one of them was a roll of canvas, and in that roll was an old-fashioned reusable syringe, five capped Luer-lok needles, a length of stretchy tubing, and two small glass vials, all held tidily organized by elastic straps. Mary drew the vials out and looked at them, flat-eyed.

She'd known that they still used cocaine in medical practice, for minor surgeries on the nose and mouth, but until this instant she had not realized that pharmaceutical heroin was still a thing you could get. There it was, though, *diamorphine*, bearing the logo of a compounding pharmacy in Brighton. At least, Mary thought, trying desperately to find an upside, he wouldn't have to worry about adulteration or incorrect dosing like he would with street drugs.

Mary had an abrupt surge of memory, and she could almost hear Sherlock's voice in the silent flat, saying, "As a mental exercise, I've often planned the murder of friends and colleagues. Now John I'd poison."

Which was absolute amateur-hour bullshitting on his part, and also example number 4625-c of John or Sherlock actually talking about *themselves* when they thought they were talking about the other one. The difficulty in murder had nothing to do with the killing… that was usually embarrassingly easy. Human beings were incredibly fragile. The difficulty was all about the getting away with it. And if you wanted to get away with poisoning *anybody*, Sherlock Holmes would probably be your best choice.

This was a man, after all, who had kept potassium cyanide in a tin marked "sugar" next to the teabags until Mary and John had freaked out at him about it, individually and then as a team. A man who routinely experimented with all sorts of exotic toxins, to the point where he could die of… oh, say, the venom of the brazilian wandering spider, and it could still plausibly look like an accident. And now, apparently, a man who was injecting bloody Belushi-killing respiratory-depressing arrythmia-inducing bloodborne-disease-transmitting speedball straight into his body.

She understood now why quiet, gentle, endearritating Molly had had that alarming outburst back at the lab at Barts. Frankly if Sherlock had been in the room right then Mary wasn't 100% sure she wouldn't have clipped him around the earhole herself. She was suddenly and blackly furious. Sherlock had every possible advantage: a good heart, a truly remarkable mind, and very good looks (she was married, not blind), and for him to just callously endanger all of that for no reason besides boredom… argh!

But that wasn't really why she was upset, she supposed. It didn't make her *angry* that Isaac Whitney had broken poor Kate's heart over and over again, after all. She was upset because Sherlock's self-destructive conduct had accidentally set her off on a train of thought that ended with Mary thinking, in Amy's midwestern accent, "As a mental exercise, I've often planned the murder of friends and colleagues. Now John I'd-"

And of course it was obvious, wasn't it? Veteran, handgun owner, a few psychiatric diagnoses under his belt, life-long history of shattering losses…

If someone were to stage his suicide, everybody would be very sad. Nobody would be one bit surprised.

Then Mary had to sit down on Sherlock Holmes' bed, with his drugs and paraphemalia in her hands, and have a cry, a big blobby ugly one. She hated that this was her life, that she had these thoughts, that she was who she was. And as much as she would have liked to, she couldn't even blame Magnussen. This was her fault, and he'd just reminded her of it. Amy and Mary were the same damned woman, after all, and that part of her was always going to be there… that cold, cynical *bitch*
was always going to be watching from inside her eyes and seeing these things with that calculating
gaze.

Eventually Mary felt dehydrated and overly self-indulgent, so she stopped.

Out in the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of water and drank it down. She rinsed the two drugs
down the drain, bent the needles, and tossed them into Sherlock's sharps container (less obviously
necessary than the labels for the poisons and thus requiring a far more significant Molly Hooper
freak-outing to get him to acquire). Mary considered breaking the syringe and the vials into bits, but
on consideration decided she'd just take them with and toss the whole works at the office, since they
had better capabilities for disposing of medical waste.

She had bought, a week ago, a cheap prepaid mobile at a Carphone Warehouse. She pulled this out
of her bag and tossed it in the air, letting it flip three times before catching it.

The best way to run an operation is to integrate yourself seamlessly into the local routine. But if you
can't do that, the second best way is to disrupt the routine in an unpredictable but minor way. She
had a free evening, she was in just the right mood, and really, who would want to have dinner with
the Marketing Group of Great Britain, anyway? He'd probably be itching for an excuse to back out.

Mary dialed a number, and while it rang, dug a version of Greg Lestrade's mockney accent out of her
bag of tricks. A man answered… not Magnussen, thank heaven… and putting her best nerves into
her accent, Mary said, "Yeah, um, right, so I heard from a friend that… somebody at this number
might pay for information about important people. And, um, I've got some of that."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes extensive use of dialogue from "His Last Vow" written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffatt, and property of the BBC. No infringement is intended. Thanks to arianedevere over at livejournal for her transcription work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Much later, Mary would ask Sherlock exactly how he had gotten into Magnussen’s office on that fateful evening. This was on one of her visits to him during his second, much longer, stay in hospital. She mostly asked because he was in pain and bored and she knew that his favorite bit was explaining how clever he had been… but she was also quite sincerely curious. And when he told her, proudly, she was duly impressed. It honestly had never occurred to her to try to infiltrate any secure location by walking in through the main entrance and trying to pull off, “Oh, darling, now that we’re engaged let me go through your boss’s papers.” That took a truly special sort of mind.

Not being a lunatic drama queen, Mary instead took advantage of a few important facts about the universe and human nature that she had learned early in her career.

1. Friendly looking women in the helpful professions like childcare, nursing, and the domestic arts can go almost anywhere they like without attracting attention.
2. For very sensible reasons, the appearance of high security is always given much more attention than the actual security measures.
3. Nobody really wants to acknowledge or pay attention to the people who scrub their toilets, but yet:
4. Everyone still very much wants their toilets to be scrubbed.

Magnussen’s company contracted their toilet scrubbing etcetera to an enormous commercial cleaners whose navy blue trousers and tunics were available at a half dozen uniform shops in the city. Mary had bought a size up from her normal scrubs, obviously, to conceal the tactical vest she would wear under it. She put the uniform on, tied her hair back with a kerchief, and having rendered herself effectively invisible killed the cameras and ambled in through one of the building’s loading docks.

She was expecting to have to do at least a bit of breaking and entering, but when she came up to the grimy service entrance, a young man in cook’s whites was standing outside smoking a cigarette. Of the many tattoos covering his muscular arms, Mary saw the crowned eagle of Poland, so she smiled distractedly at him and started rummaging through her bag while muttering, “Gdzie jest cholerstwo …?” He smiled back at her, put out his cigarette, and used his own keycard to let both of them in.

Mary had broken down her gun, and chosen one that was more plasticky than she would have preferred otherwise, on the expectation she might have to pass through a metal detector to get into the service areas of the building. Which she did, except it was broken and seemed to have been that way for some time. She did actually have to jimmy open the lock to the office in the storage room so she could get the keycard that would get her onto the freight elevator. The owner of this office had thoughtfully placed all the keycards, with labels, on a pegboard directly next to their door.

The entire process had been embarrassingly simple and taken far less time than Mary had planned for. Because Magnussen wasn’t expecting his visitor for another forty minutes, and she didn’t intend
to be up there for twenty, she sat down and slowly ate five water biscuits after she’d reassembled her gun. It wouldn’t do to be sick during this: it’d lack authority, to say nothing of the DNA evidence she might leave on the scene.

She pushed a borrowed cleaning cart through the fluorescent-lit back corridors until she got to the service lift. Once inside the groaning, slow elevator she stripped out of the maid’s uniform and pulled a balaclava on to hide her face, tugged her gun from out of a pile of towels, took the weighted cosh out of her vest pocket.

She took one breath, two. And then when the elevator door opened into the kitchen of Magnussen’s office, she began.

There was a brief moment of awfulness, because what sort of maniac had his secretary work late when he was expecting to collect information on the embezzling habits of the shadow Secretary of State for International Development? But it was brief, because she was in the quiet zone of pure focus where everything was simple and straightforward. Mary left the bodyguard and Janine unconscious on the floor, and climbed the stairs in silence, curling her balaclava back into hat shape as she went.

In equal silence, she walked through the open door into Magnussen’s office, leveled the gun sights right between his eyes, and said, quietly “Hi, Cam.”

And then, “Ah, ah, ah… no. Hands up, over here, kneel down,” because he looked like he might be reaching for a panic button and obviously that wasn’t going to fly.

Except he wasn’t really panicking, and that meant she had a problem she didn’t know about yet. Magnussen had even smiled, just for an instant, when he saw her face, and all of a sudden all of those instincts that Mary had cultivated for years started screaming, “Scrub this mission and get out now.”

She couldn’t do that. There’d be no future opportunities, and it wasn’t like she could send a payment back to a client with a, “Sorry, couldn’t manage it.” She decided to act as though his calmness was the normal infuriating male response to being threatened by someone who was five three and a woman, because it actually might be. At least he did get up, and slowly kneel on the plushly carpeted floor in front of her.

“So there’s a couple of ways this can go,” she said in a friendly chirp, because there’s really not much point in pretending like you’re not cute and harmless-looking when everyone can see you, “Now, my personal favorite involves you pointing me to where you keep everything you have on me, me taking it, and us saying goodbye and never dealing with one another again. In the other one I shoot you in the head. Which one appeals to you?”

Oh, that sounded so wrong in the “Mary” accent. It wasn’t… entirely a lie, though she gave him no more than ten percent odds of getting out alive, but she always tried to keep these things loose and flexible.

“If I am killed or unable to act freely,” Magnussen responded coldly, “I have made arrangements that within twenty-four hours all of the information I have collected on you and others like you will be released to half a dozen major newsgathering organizations. Do you really think-?”

Mary changed his odds to five percent. And clearly he had not realized the gravity of his situation so she clipped him about the jaw with the butt of the gun. Not hard enough to break anything, just enough to be sure she had his full attention.
“I imagine,” she said, leaving all the chirp out of her voice, “That that would be a very stressful twenty-four hours for me, wondering if you’re a blackmailing sack of shit or a lying blackmailing sack of shit. But while I worry you will be on a slab starting to rot. I have never been afraid to take a gamble, Cam. How about you?”

There was fear in his eyes, now, which was good. Fear she could work with. Magnussen changed tacks, and stammering, started to say, “W-w-what would your husband think, eh? He- your lovely husband, upright, honourable... so English. What-what would he say to you now?”

She was not going to think of or discuss John while she did this. Mary set her jaw and racked the slide of her gun, wasting a perfectly good 9mm round but having the desired effect because Magnussen ducked and said, “Nej! Nej! You’re doing this to protect him from the truth! But is this protection he would want?”

Then from behind her a new voice, very English, very posh, very familiar chimed in.

“Additionally, if you’re going to commit murder, you might consider changing your perfume-”

Oh, God, no.

“-Lady Smallwood.”

And for one crazy stupid second Mary thought, “Oooh, he doesn’t know it’s me, I can just hide my face!”

Of course she couldn’t, because somehow Sherlock Holmes was in the room with her and she could feel every possible escape route closing off, one by one. And Magnussen, that miserable prick, had gotten his faint smug smile back as he said, “Sorry. Who? That’s ... not ... Lady Smallwood, Mr Holmes.”

Sometimes if it weren’t for bad luck she wouldn’t have any luck at all. So she turned around and leveled her gun at the most dangerous man in the room, and asked, “Is John with you?”

She still had options, if he wasn’t. Whatever else Sherlock was, he was a cynic about little things like the law, and they could make this work together, if he would go along with it. If John just was off following another lead or something she could still get away with this, just like she had a thousand other times.

Sherlock had gone greyish, and was staring at her in absolute blank-faced astonishment.

“He’s, um ...” he stammered.

“Is John here?” she insisted, trying to get him back on point.

“He’s downstairs.”

Mary, nodded, slowly, as the last escape route closed forever. She could see the immediate future quite clearly now, and it was painted in black.

Behind her, Magnussen said, softly, “ So, what do you do now? Kill us both?”

In front of her, Sherlock had recovered his savoir faire and stepped forward, saying, “Mary, whatever he’s got on you, let me help.”

Neither of them knew who they were dealing with, did they? Because she was not going to submit
to blackmail, and she was definitely not going to beg her husband or his friends to do it for her. She was going to do the one thing nobody expected.

“Oh, Sherlock, if you take one more step I swear I will kill you,” Mary said.

“No, Mrs Watson. You won’t,” he replied. Sherlock smiled reassuringly at her, and took one more step.

The silencer on the gun did its job, turning the concussive sound of expanding gas into something like a book being clapped shut. The bullet where she wanted it, just left of the midline, below the seventh rib. A shot there would perforate the liver but carry maybe a ninety percent survival rate. Which was all too low when you were talking about a human being who had never been anything but kind to you, but sometimes there weren’t any less ugly choices.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock. Truly am,” she murmured.

“Mary?” he said, slowly lifting a hand to where a red stain was already beginning to spread on his shirt.

She ignored all those nurse instincts to go to the injured man and turned her back on him.

Magnussen was reaching for his mobile, and so Mary pistol-whipped him again, this time putting all her fury in it. She hoped she’d broken some of his teeth. As he yelped and clapped a hand to his mouth she squatted down on her haunches next to him and picked up the phone.

“I will admit,” she said, conversationally, “That you played me, very well. And now you have me. If.”

She dialed “999” on the phone.

“If, of course, I’m really who you were playing for.”

Magnussen’s eyes dipped from her face down to the man behind her, and then back up to her face. Mary could faintly hear the operator’s voice through the speaker saying “Emergency, which service do you require?”

Mary extended the mobile phone to the blackmailer, and after a moment of consideration, he took it from her hand.

“There’s been a shooting. We will need an ambulance,” he said, and she smiled at him.

Without looking back (never a good idea), Mary left the way she came.

She tossed the maid’s uniform into a convenient skip in Ilford as she drove to Enfield, where she kept a few items in long-term storage that she hadn’t wanted in the house now that John lived there. In the six-by-six fluorescent lit locker, she mechanically disassembled her gun and put it into the custom-built cases she’d smuggled into the country five years ago.

In the event of the most final emergency, she’d made a few copies of some very important documents. One of them was in the case, and she turned the little grey pen drive in her fingers… before putting it in her pocket. Then she drove home and waited for the phone call she knew would come.

She would wait a long time.
Gdzie jest cholerstwo ...? = Where is the damned thing…?
Mary tucked her hair up into the rubber cap, slipped on her flip-flops, and padded out towards the pool, only to be stopped dead by the sight of herself in the full-length mirror in the locker room hallway. She gave her reflection a searching gaze and decided that this had to be the last time she’d wear this bathing suit until… well, not for the foreseeable future, that was for sure. It wasn’t so much the belly, although she was definitely bulging about the midsection now, and looked pregnant even when fully dressed. The curious glances she’d got at work ever since John’s abrupt departure had been replaced with pitying ones, a fact which shouldn’t have bothered her all that much, given everything else going on, but really truly did.

Anyway the real problem was with the breasts. She’d already had to buy new bras, and in this suit they were actively oozing out at the sides like she was a porn star. Mary actually quite liked them, she just wished they’d turned up twenty years earlier. She could have gotten much more mileage out of them back then.

The only other person swimming was an old man doing a snail-slow Australian crawl in the far lane. Mary kicked off her sandals and dove in, relishing that one quick moment where she first struck the cold water and her heart seemed to stop-

Sherlock had perked up a bit once the paramedics had gotten him on oxygen and run a saline drip into his heplock… enough to violently object to John joining him in the ambulance.

“I only want Mrs. Hudson,” he’d groused, folding his arms over his chest like a recalcitrant toddler, and none of John’s objections that he was actually a doctor were enough to make the EMTs override a full-on minor celebrity strop.

The door closes behind them, and John leans back against the wall and stares at her. Mary flinches beneath that steady, clear gaze, but holds her chin up high.

“So, what was the plan?” he asks, in a falsely friendly tone. “Find some incredibly thick bastard, get him to marry you and knock you up to really just… complete the disguise, and then wander around making hits for the mob whenever the daily grind got a bit too tedious?”

“That’s not- I didn’t plan to-” fall in love, have a baby, shoot a friend, really any of it, it all just sort of happened when she wasn’t paying attention. Mary takes a deep breath. “I never wanted to lie to you, or trick you. It was incidental.”

“Incidental?” John scoffs lightly, “Oh how nice.”

“It’s not nice but it’s true. I couldn’t tell anybody. The only people who know the truth about me are you, Sherlock, and Martha. And Magnussen, obviously, but he certainly didn’t get it from me. Everybody I know now thinks I’m… what I seem to be. And everybody who knew me before thinks I’m dead.”

“Oh, you faked your death too, did you? I’ll have to try that sometime, it really is the hot new trend.”

“Can you please not talk like that?”
“Like what?”

Like he’s cold-blooded and cynical and all those things she knows he’s not, because she’s getting alarmed now, and would infinitely rather he shouted. Hit something. Hit her, if it’d make him feel better.

“Like you’re not… angry,” she says, weakly.

“Oh, I’ve moved well beyond angry, now. Do you have—” John chokes on his own words for a moment, and then continues, “Do you know, the only bloody frame of reference I’ve got for this is Sherlock’s lying to me about his death. And that, Mary, was actually easier than this. Because it wasn’t a betrayal. He at least thought he was doing the right thing. But you didn’t, and you didn’t trust me, and you were going to just lie to me every day for the rest of our lives. And you thought that was okay.”

It wasn’t a matter of trust at all, and she wants to point to the pen drive he’s holding and tell him how she had put her life (and her freedom, which is far more important to her) in his hands and ask him how he can believe that she doesn’t trust him. It was pure cowardly fear that they’d eventually be in exactly this situation, where she’d look in his eyes and see none of the warmth that was always there when he looked at her, even back before they’re really meant much to one another. And all she can manage is a lame, quiet,

“I wasn’t happy about it.”

John laughs quietly to himself, and says, “Happy. Yeah. That was something we were going for, wasn’t it? Give me the car keys.”

Mary fishes them out of the pocket in her handbag and hands them over, not letting her fingers touch his as she does it. John puts the pen drive into his pocket.

“I’m going over to the hospital to wait and see how he does,” he says.

“Shall I- Do you want me to-?” Mary asks hesitantly.

“I don’t care what you do, Mary.”

With which killer exit line, Mary thought, throwing her arms over the edge of the pool and resting her chin on the smooth concrete lip, that marriage had basically ended.

She took a few deep breaths and checked her swim wristband for her heart rate which was still, somehow, well within healthy “exercising” levels. Mary had heard somewhere that some professional athletes used HCG as a performance enhancing drug, and she made a mental note to learn how that worked, because enhancing was definitely not her experience of that particular hormone. The laps she had just done would have been a barely adequate warm-up a few months ago but now all she wanted to do was go home and go to sleep. She didn’t even bother checking her lap pace, since she knew all it would do was depress her.

There was no way in hell she’d be able to do the full 1800 yards she’d planned. But she wouldn’t give up quite so easily, and kicked off the wall, starting in with the butterfly.

Janine, visited in hospital, has her head bandaged which she somehow manages to make look chic, and greets Mary with, “Do you know what your bastard husband’s bastard friend just did to me?”

She’s sitting in a four-bed ward in the A&E waiting for a neurologist to review her films and discharge her. One of the police officers taking her statement has just asked for her number, and the
other one is looking daggers at his friend for getting there first.

But after a brief description of her assault and a much more lengthy complaint about Sherlock’s behavior (“I’m glad he got shot, the prick,” she says unconvincingly.) she calms down and looks, intently, at Mary’s face.

“Oh, my God. You.” And Mary glances uneasily at the cops but Janine continues with a high pitched, “YOU’RE PREGNANT YOU TART!” and leaps up and hugs her, all her own woes pushed aside in the face of somebody else’s happiness.

In Magnussen’s office, Janine tries to run, cries, “Please, don’t!” in terror at this masked stranger who has come to hurt her. Struck on the temple, she collapses like a marionette, into a pitifully small heap.

Janine is discharged shortly thereafter and taken home by the two police officers. She calls Mary a few days later, and then again a few days after that, sends friendly emails. Mary finds it impossible to answer any of them. She’s too ashamed. So much for Janine, whose only fault was poor taste in her fellow human beings.

Sherlock, visited in hospital, is clumsily kind, when he’s not sedated, borrowing her phone to send verboten text messages, or complaining about the food. Mary institutes a second weekly baking night, focused exclusively around chocolate, to help with this last.

Apparently while John and Mary were on their honeymoon Sherlock acquired an in-depth knowledge of pregnancy and birth and has decided that she should opt for a prelabor c-section at 39 weeks regardless of her opinions on the topic (“The balance between lung maturity and placental aging is optimized at that point.”). When Mary says that she thinks she’ll opt to see what an actual obstetrician has to say about it as they get closer to the date he snorts and tells her that she’s not to blame him if young Sherlock destroys her pelvic floor on his way out.

Mary forbids Sherlock to think of or mention her pelvic floor ever again. She declines to comment on “young Sherlock.”

In Magnussen’s office, Sherlock lifts a hand to his chest and murmurs, “Mary.” His face is a mix of surprise and betrayal that she’ll never be able to forget.

But he starts getting better and is released from hospital, and she’s so glad. Except he obviously returns to Baker Street, which is clearly off-limits “John” territory, and so now there’s nobody that she can really talk to.

Mary had never had the patience for any sort of conventional meditation, but running and swimming have always served the same purpose for her. The repetition, the exertion, they all act to clear her mind and let her focus without distraction on one thing.

 Except when they don’t. Like tonight.

The box arrives three weeks after John moves out. It’s addressed to both of them so Mary opens it without qualms (but with gloves, because she’s actually still in quite a bit of danger and a dose of anthrax really wouldn’t brighten up her day.) There is a note, written in a Catholic-school copperplate hand, which says:

Mary-

Thought you might be sad you wouldn’t be getting these, so I had the boys in the lab print them out. We can get you the digital copies after the trial is done. Sorry none of us know how to do any of
that photoshop shit but he was actually pretty decent even without.

Sally D.

And below the note, there’s an album covered in cream parchment. The first page is inscribed: “Congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Watson, From Your Friends at NSY!” and signed by... oh, thirty-some cops, from Lestrade’s blocky engineer print to Sam Bradstreet’s calligraphy.

The second page is a photograph Mary had never seen before. It’s a candid shot. The bride is looking down as the groom whispers something in her ear. She has a hand up over her mouth trying to cover a laugh. The groom has his arm around the bride’s shoulders and can’t repress his smile and there’s nothing but love in his eyes

Mary slams the album shut, with a sound like a silenced gun going off.

The Australian-crawling old man had gone and the pool was empty, so Mary tugged her cap off, regardless of the effects of chlorinated water on bleached-blonde hair. She had a special shampoo for just this sort of situation anyway. She floated, mid-lane, and thought of nothing.

And then she jerked because it was happening again, and it was definitely not gas, not this time. It was, however, by far the most bizarre sensation she’d ever felt. Mary pressed, gently, about two inches south of her navel. She couldn’t feel anything with her fingers but there was a little responsive flutter, so she murmured, “Can you feel me too?”

Obviously there was no answer. But she smiled, suspended in the water.

Twenty minutes later she was walking up the footpath to her house when a shadow on the stoop moved and resolved itself into John. He was talking urgently into his mobile and Mary just caught, “No, she’s here, she’s okay-” before he stalked down the three concrete steps (which really should be redone, they had no relationship to a ninety-degree angle anymore) and snapped, “And where the bloody hell have you been?”

The part of her that was still a teenager tossed her head and said, “Out,” but the actual Mary replied calmly, “I went for a swim.”

“A swim. I kept calling you.”

Mary looked at her phone, and in fact found four missed calls (but no voicemails) from John and one text from Sherlock saying, “Please do answer his calls, I am trying to nap.”

“Sorry,” she said, “It didn’t ring through.”

“It’s the middle of the fucking night.”

Two possible responses to that comment leapt to mind, with the first being:

“Well John, the lovely thing about being for all intents and purposes single is that I can do what I like, when I like it. But since I do enjoy these occasions when you show up smelling like a distillery and wanting to fight or have sex, and would so hate to miss one, perhaps we could work out some system of advanced notification. Maybe an Evite?”

And the second one was:

“The great thing about swimming is that when I do it I feel somewhat like myself instead of like a hormone-addled pregnancy-brained moron, and I wanted to have a good think about things tonight.
I know you’ve put the fact that I’m pregnant off in the man cave of your mind palace so you won’t have to deal with it, but the baby- your baby- has been kicking me all day and has forcibly reminded me that I do not have that same luxury. I have so many terrible choices to make and I’ve never been so scared and I don’t want to make them by myself.”

The first one was just pointlessly nasty, and although she and John had gotten quite good at that in recent months Mary really wasn’t in the mood tonight. And the second one was both unfair to put on John, and would make her look weak, which… just no. If you still had your dignity you still had something, even when everything else had gone. Mary had learned that one as a girl and it had never left her.

She took the too-tight-in-the-tits bathing suit out of its orange Sainsbury’s bag and showed it to John.

“Wet swimsuit. Look at my hair,” she said, pointing to her combed but not dried head, “Swimming.”

John cocked his head at her and then stepped up to her and sniffed deeply, before slowly agreeing, “Chlorine?”

All of a sudden Mary felt completely emotionally exhausted.

“Chlorine. I went swimming, that’s all. I really don’t have any other lies to tell you.”

John hadn’t stepped away after smelling her, and she could feel a warm puff of breath on her ear as he exhaled a quiet laugh. “You do have to admit that that last one was a doozy.”

She laughed back, a bit, and said, “It was fairly impressive, though I say so myself.”

They used to laugh together so much, and she was finding that she missed that more than anything else. Though evidently the “anything else” was still on the table for the evening, because John still wasn’t backing off, and was in fact bunching the silky fabric of her blouse in his right hand.

Mary bit her lip.

“Did you- do you want to come inside?”

John nodded, and then his other hand was on her waist and she was tilting her head to give his lips better access to her throat.

They should stop doing this, she knew. It didn’t solve anything in the long run, and was probably actually making things worse, since it let them act like their old closeness was still in place without doing any of the work that would let them bring it back for real. But he smelled so good… not like a distillery at all, but like toothpaste and the Acqua di Gio she had bought him at Christmas.

And she’d never been all that good at doing the right thing.

"Come on then,” Mary murmured, as she unlocked the door.

Chapter End Notes

I swear to God things start perking up a bit after this point. This also seems like an
opportune moment for a spot of self-promotion, so if you have been enjoying this story you may like to read its sister fic, “Scenes from a Marriage,” available on this site. It kicks off roughly in parallel with this chapter and presents John’s POV of this story. By comparison it is shorter, dirtier, and has more Sherlock. And even though that one was published back in 2014 I actually started this one first ha ha hah God I’m slow.
Chapter 15

John was, Mary decided, a Luddite. Instead of reading his news on the internet like a normal person, he took not one but three daily papers: one normal one, one big serious black-and-white one, and one trashy one with topless women and adulterous celebrities. All three arrived, with a loud thump, at her door at six every morning, inevitably waking her up.

She should just cancel them, Mary thought, staring up at the bedroom ceiling, since all she ever did with them was take them indoors and then throw them into the recycling in the evening. He probably had new subscriptions over there at his old flat, and it was just another John shaped hole in her life that she had to step around. Like his bicycle in the front hallway (she guessed he didn't need it, running around after criminals and having fun adventures all the time) or his empty dresser that she kept stubbing her toes on when she was sleepy.

Their bed was not one of the unfilled voids. Calton, who shared a low-grade mutual distaste with John, had happily occupied the left-hand side of the bed as soon as it was vacated. Now, seeing that Mary's eyes were open but she was neither petting nor feeding him, the cat started butting into her face and making low gurgling sounds that he probably meant to be purrs.

She was definitely awake, now. And to what can any cat owner aspire but to diligent, efficient service?

After throwing up and kibbling the cat, Mary stepped out the door, shivered (it was bloody freezing all of a sudden), and scooped up the damp newspapers. She tossed them on the kitchen table and sat down, somewhat at a loss. It was another lazy Saturday, and she felt the weight of inertia and couldn't quite motivate herself to do… really anything. Mary had always been frustrated by women who just sat there and let their lives happen to them without doing anything about it, but it was coming more and more naturally to her the more and more pregnant she got.

Idly, she paged through the papers. There was yet another revelation about how awful the Kennedy family had been, Katia on Celebrity Big Brother had gotten very obvious breast implants, the Russians and Americans were rowing over what to do in Syria, and... "Sleuth's Squeeze on Sheikh's Sexy Swinging Ship," which title had probably given some desk editor a massive cleverness erection, and was accompanied with a photograph of a very familiar woman. Albeit much more of that woman than Mary had ever expected to see. She was wearing a brief pair of bikini bottoms, and nothing on top but a very narrow black bar applied by the paper as a nod towards not outraging public morals.

"Gorblimey," Mary muttered, because sometimes swearing really didn't do justice to the situation. She considered, for a moment, then took her phone off the charger cord and dialed a number she hadn't dialed in months.

As soon as she'd done that, she heard a faint meeping from outside. Curious, she got up and opened the door, revealing a red-eyed Janine Hawkins digging her mobile out of her handbag.

Janine sniffled, and asked, "Can I come in?"

Ten minutes later they were sitting at the tiny table in Mary's kitchen. Mary had made a pot of tea, and poured a healthy slug of John's scotch into Janine's, six-in-the-morning be damned, because the younger woman was looking absolutely shattered. Janine tapped a manicured nail on the newsprint photograph of herself and began, "He wasn't a sheikh. I don't know how they came up with that but it's actually a bit racist. He was a… cousin of the Sultan of Brunei, not a first cousin, but a cousin."
"Okay," Mary replied.

"I was twenty-one, and I was riding a van with fifteen other girls two hours every day into Dublin to wait tables for a bunch of goshites who kept pinching my ass and never heard of tipping. And this lawyer in a suit, one day, comes up to me and says that he knows a man who's looking for pretty girls to travel along with him through the Med on his yacht. And at first I obviously thought "yeah, sure, don't need to get murdered, thanks," but we kept talking and I thought "what the hell??""

Janine took a deep gulp of her spiked tea, and kept on. Mary tried a sip of her own, and set it down again, because it was still far too hot to drink.

"It wasn't as though I couldn't bear to leave my job behind or anything. So I just quit, and went off for a month. And really-" Janine hesitated, and made direct eye contact. She was going to try to justify herself.

"It was mostly just stuff I was doing every day for free anyway. Talking to him, acting interested in him, laughing at his jokes. And I'd never gone anywhere before and I got to see some new places like Rome and Barcelona and Alexandria. And it was a nice yacht, very fancy."

Then she averted her eyes again. Now she was going to tell the bad part.

"It was just with that one man. And really not all that much: there were four of us girls, and you know they can only manage it so often, even with viagra. That's not really- so bad, is it?"

"No, of course it's not," Mary assured her.

"For that one month, he paid me thirty thousand pounds. Plus he gave me this brooch, God, you should have seen it, it was the ugliest thing ever, shaped like a shamrock but it was emeralds set in platinum and I got twenty k more for that. It just… solved so many problems for me. I got to go to university. Hell, I got to get out of Ireland. For the first time in my whole life I didn't have to keep scratching for every cent I could get."

Janine sniffled. Mary prompted her to continue with, "But Magnussen found out about it."

"Yeah. Dunno how, but it's obviously something he's got a lot of practice with. He didn't tell me he knew until… what, March of this year? And then-"

The sniffles turned into full on tears, trailing mascara slowly down Janine's cheeks. Mary got up, walked to the bathroom, and pulled out the box of kleenex. She thought they might be needing it. Janine took one and dabbed at her eyes.

"It was awful. I'd been so happy with my job, before then. I was making contacts… I was going to be an editor. He made me-" Janine choked, and couldn't go on. Mary waited, patiently.

"It was awful," she concluded, "The day after Sherlock broke into the office I actually thought that he was going to kill me, he was so furious. And enough was enough."

She sighed, and blew her nose.

"My brother Charlie rang me up, just now, to call me a hoor," she said, dryly, and Mary was startled at how lovely the word "whore" sounded with an Irish accent. "He must have got up early to do it, and it's not as though I can spit in his eye and call him a liar, either."

"Please," Mary said, "You're not a whore. You're a retired professional girlfriend. An actual prostitute would have charged at least twice as much."
"Seriously?" Janine asked, momentarily distracted, "How d'you know that?"

"Read it in a blog. Belle de Jour," Mary replied, entirely truthfully. In a career spent in the underworld she had never actually gotten to know any escorts and she'd always sort of been sad about that.

"Christ. That'd have been a bit of all right," Janine mused, "Not that it matters. Everyone will think it of me from now on."

Mary snapped her fingers. "That's why you said all that stuff about Sherlock!"

Janine blinked at her, and Mary went on, "I had wondered. If all you'd wanted to do was make him look bad the truth would have done a lot better. Being known as sexually voracious and mildly kinky was never going to do much damage. He's a man."

"Oh," Janine smiled faintly, "Yeah, that. I'm in publishing, I knew what I could get paid for. And I thought maybe if I could get out ahead of it, get the 'slut' rep going on my own schedule, it wouldn't be so bad. It sort of worked, too... I'm getting loads of guest columnist gigs. But my parents haven't spoken to me since. By now they're probably burning my baby pictures."

Janine ran her hands through her hair and leaned back against the wall.

"But that's not even the worst of it. Mary, I swear if I'd known what Mr. Magnussen did I would never have let him into your life. I'm so, so sorry. You and John were so happy and now I've ruined it."

Mary hesitated. She hadn't told anyone that her marriage had collapsed, although her co-workers had probably figured something out. Janine saw her hesitation and snapped, "Oh, come on. It's obvious. He sneaks into the office of my professional blackmailer boss and then all of a sudden it's like he doesn't even exist to you. Do you know how irritating your Facebook used to be? Nothing but John John John all the time. And then there's the little fact that it's six thirty in the morning on a Saturday and he's not here."

"Okay, Sherlock, rein it in," Mary demurred, "We're- not talking. You're right. But I never blamed you for it."

"Still-" Janine reached across the table and took Mary's hand in hers, "What did he have on John?"

And Mary laughed out loud, despite herself, because that was Janine taking hold of the very wrong end of the stick.

"Oh, Lord. No, you've- John never did anything wrong. It was me. My secret. He found it out."

"Oh. Oh," Janine said. Then, hesitating, she asked, "Is it... like my secret?"

Now that was an interesting thought, Mary mused. What if she hadn't been a Company kid from a Company family? When she'd been twenty-one with no plans and no particular ambitions, what if she couldn't have picked up the phone and worked the family connection to get an analyst gig at the CIA? What would she have done instead? Where would she be if she'd, instead, spent a summer litehooking for some South Asian millionaire?

"Sadly," Mary said after consideration, "I was never pretty enough to be invited onto anyone's sex yacht. Mine's much worse. Darker."

If Janine had asked her, just then, Mary would have confessed it all. It would have felt so good to get
it off her chest, and Janine deserved the truth. But her friend was ridiculously goodhearted and willing to see the best in everybody, and therefore put it behind her and never mentioned it again.

They sat in silence, holding hands, and sipping their tea.

"So are you guys... do you think you'll work it out? I mean, there is the baby, and everything," Janine said, eventually.

Mary shook her head, and finally said out loud what she'd been thinking for a while now.

"I don't think so. I wanted to, and I thought if I gave him some space maybe we could, but he's gone completely dark on me."

"Fucking men," Janine commented.

"Fucking. Men," Mary agreed, and they shared a smile. "It's all right. There's worse things than a failed starter marriage." There was prison, for example, a concrete cage six by eight that was starting to show up in her dreams and make her awaken feeling like she was suffocating.

"How about you?" Mary asked, letting go Janine's hand to take a sip of her tea, "You weren't really going to marry Sherlock, were you?"

"Um-" Janine flushed prettily.

"Holy-," Mary stared at her friend, "Seriously? You were actually going to? This is worse than I thought."

"Oh, shut up," Janine grumped, "I don't know. Maybe! I was feeling really romantic after the wedding. And he was so clever and sweet, and he's got a really nice penis-"

Mary pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Absolutely wish you hadn't told me that. Just FYI."

"The whole time I kept telling myself 'This must be what it's like to get swept off your feet.' And to be fair, I don't think the idea that a guy might be dating me in order to break into my office is something that I should realistically have been keeping in mind. That's fairly specialized shitheadedness, even by my standards."

"True," Mary agreed, "Still, though."

"I can't help it," Janine said ruefully, "I want to be in love."

"Gotta tell you it's a bit of a mixed bag."

"Seems like. Shit."

"Yep. Shit."

Mary got up, cracked her back, and turned the kettle back on. "You want another shot in your next one?"

"It's really early," Janine demurred.

"It's Saturday and our lives suck," Mary retorted, "This one can count as mine."
They had a companionable silence as Mary went through the little English ritual: warm the pot, spoon the leaves, pour the water. Once she had set two cups of tea -one spiked one not- on the table, Janine sighed and said, "So now what are we going to do?"

That was the hundred thousand dollar question, of course. And Mary knew the answer.

Five years ago, she'd rummaged through a drawerful of identities she'd accumulated over the years, just so she'd have them ready if she needed them. She'd picked Mary Morstan on entirely flimsy grounds: she liked the alliteration, England was a nice country to live in, she already had the accent in her collection. The first hazy concepts she'd had about Mary had felt good… colorful clothes, cheery temperament, sensible shoes.

She still had that drawerful of identities, and Aurelia was beginning to take shape in her mind.

"Oh, you know me," she said, "I'll muddle through. As for you, madam, your problem is that you think too small. The hell with writing columns, you need to write an autobiography."

Janine wrinkled her forehead, considering.

"Do you really think so?"

"I would read it," Mary replied. She would, too, even in a new life in a new continent. Time was running out for her, but at least for these last few weeks… she had a friend back.
The motions of a pregnant woman's daily activities, as transmitted to the developing baby, are a gentle soothing sway. It's quite common, therefore, to find that the baby is most active when you are stillest. They finally aren't being rocked to sleep.

Mary had told dozens of women that, or something similar, with the calm, kind voice of authority, and knew it was all very normal. The knowledge didn't help her to sleep when the little stranger began its nightly gymnastics routine as soon as she began to nod off. She had only barely managed to attain a light doze when she awakened with one of the other delights of the third trimester, heartburn.

Climbing out of bed- awkwardly, given that she had recently shifted from "slightly chubby" to "vast" at a very rapid pace- she put on a dressing gown and went in search of some antacids.

She hadn't bothered to switch on the lights, and so the knowledge that someone else was in her living room felt more instinctive than anything else. A lot of what people call instinct is just senses that they aren't using properly, a skill which can absolutely be taught. Mary had been taught, and so within a second or two she was able to translate the instinctual "Someone is here" into "There is a faint smell of residual cigarette smoke, the reflected sound of my steps sounds wrong over in that far corner, the charge light from my laptop shows an incorrect shadow at about four feet off the ground over there: therefore, tall person, probably male, smoker, sitting in the recliner."

A surge of adrenaline coursed through her veins, but she didn't allow it to alter her movements in any way. Instead, she walked, seemingly unaware, into the kitchen, and reached into a cabinet for the Shreddies box.

Which weighed very little, as if it contained only breakfast cereal and not, for example, a loaded Smith and Wesson 4006.

"Looking for this?" the man in the living room said. Mary sighed, and switched on the kitchen light. Sure enough, Sherlock Holmes was sitting on the recliner, her gun in his lap.

"Only so many places you could hide this that are within easy reach of someone your height but yet well-concealed."

"Well deduced, Sherlock. Though another option might have been to just... ring the doorbell."

"Boring," he sighed.

Mary decided that every time she got out of bed from this point onwards she was going to dress all the way to her shoes. Wandering around in a dressing gown reliably instigated weird visitations. Moving one cabinet over, she took out the Tums and chewed up two of them. She was actually getting to like the chalky taste, now.

"Out of curiosity," Sherlock asked, "If it wasn't me, what would you have done?"

Without the intense rapid thought processes that a threat brings on, Mary had to think about it for a second. "Probably… pitch the breadbox at your head, then take a knife out of the block and go for you as quickly as possible. While you were still disoriented."
"Really?" he said, in a very unflattering tone of disdain.

"Yes, really. What's wrong with it?"

"I almost never get to discuss technique with professionals, and frankly I'd have hoped that as one, you'd have planned something with a bit more – style."

Mary frowned, piqued. "I'd argue that in a situation where I'm attempting to bring down a large-ish man who is armed with \textit{my} gun I've lost enough control of the situation that I needn't focus on style points. I would want to avoid a prolonged hand-to-hand fight since I don't know my opponent's capabilities, thus, the element of surprise would be key. And very little is more surprising than a breadbox to the head. Did you want tea or anything?"

"Tea would be lovely, thank you."

Filling the kettle at the tap, she popped it onto the base and pressed down on the heating element. As it began to make its soft bubbling sounds, she asked "Given the hour I assume that you aren't here because John asked you to check up on me or anything?"

"He did not."

"Ah." Not surprising, of course, and wholly understandable, but it did hurt. She squelched it. "So to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"I thought," he said, and then he paused. Hesitated, really, which was bloody rare for him, "I wanted to hear about something."

"What's that?" she asked, popping teabags into cups, because naughty detectives who break in after midnight do \textit{not} receive looseleaf.

"I want to hear about the end of your career. That file has a great deal of useful information but the finish is absent."

"I suppose it would be," Mary mused, "I put all those documents together before then, and I never really looked at them afterwards. But unfortunately it's \textit{really} not all that interesting, not like when you did it. I accepted a mission that I knew was dangerous... they'd told me they'd lost two other operatives, and when you're dealing with the CIA and that kind of number you normally multiply by \pi to get the truth... infiltrating a ring of ordnance dealers in Romania. I met up with my handler, said I'd do a bit of reconnaissance and rendezvous three days later, and then just.... never showed up for that second meeting. I left behind all of my stuff and my money, never made contact with anybody I'd known before, and after a while the agency came to the obvious conclusion and took care of the rest for me. The official story they came up with was that I died in a car accident in Marrakech."

"I know," Sherlock replied drily, "I looked up the obituary. Did people really believe that you were a rug buyer for \textit{Ikea}?"

"I'd been doing it for over ten years, I was a \textit{senior} buyer, thank you very much." The kettle had boiled, so Mary filled up the two teacups and carried them into the living room. She put one at Sherlock's elbow and simultaneously retrieved her gun, putting the for-Gawd's-sake safety back on (the casual way he handled firearms always made her twitch).

Sherlock ignored his tea (of course) and looked at her over his tented fingertips. Mary looked calmly back, eyebrows arched. It was actually quite nice; she'd never fully been able to relax around him. But there was nothing for her to be frightened of anymore, no secrets he could uncover that could do any further harm. She was \textit{free}, and could enjoy the company of this remarkably intelligent and
delightfully weird man without stress.

"All very interesting, but my question actually dealt more with motive than method. Though I recognize that's not my usual preference."

"Oh," Mary said, nonplussed. Then she smiled, slowly, "All right, then. You're a bit of a historian of crime, aren't you? Ever hear about a man named Dean Corl?"

Sherlock's gaze was hooded as he responded levelly, "The Candyman."

"That's the one. I'd never heard of him, but then about five years ago I went to a wedding-"

The bride's name is Heather, and they'd actually been housemates for the last two years of college. Time, distance, and very different lifestyles had lowered the friendship level down to a more casual acquaintance, but they are still mutuals on Facebook and that was enough to justify sending Amy an invitation. It's occasionally nice to have some time living a real life with real people, and she'd never been to Galveston, and that was enough to justify Amy's accepting.

It has been a vaguely unsettling day. Heather seems happy; the groom, Andy, is some sort of real estate baron, and seems perfectly pleasant by the standards of rich men. Nothing about him, however, would appear to justify the fact that Heather:

-Is now affecting a Southern accent so thick that it sounds like she was just dredged out of the Mississippi.

-Has abandoned her aggressive youthful atheism to the extent that she thought it entirely appropriate to force three hundred people to sit through an entire excruciating Catholic mass just in order to watch her get married.

-Allegedly chose, in her right mind, to wear an enormous nightmare of a wedding gown which looks like Scarlett O'Hara mated with a puffball mushroom.

It's just example eight thousand nine hundred thirteen of intelligent women getting inexplicably dumb as soon as they fall in love. A notable list, Amy thinks wryly, with her own mother at the head of it. Nothing like that will ever happen to her, surely.

Anyway another bizarre thing about this wedding is that the ceremony was held before noon but the reception won't be for another six hours. Most of the wedding guests have responded to this by heading down to the hotel's fabulous pool (complete with swim-up bar) and pouring liquor straight down their throats.

Amy does not get drunk with people who don't already know what she really does for a living. So after a token glass of champagne and a bit of friendly chit-chat, she's made her escape into the air-conditioned comfort of her own empty hotel room. She slips out of her high heels, brushes off her dress (and five years later, too fat to fit into anything smaller than a pup tent, she will think with fondness of how beautiful that dress had been, and hope that her sister Jenny ended up with it after she 'died.' It was dove-grey, high-waisted silk shantung with a faint metallic sheen, bought in a tiny boutique in Greenwich Village for about one month's worth of Mary Morstan's salary).

She turns on the TV, and watches a big-haired blonde read the news. The weather will be hot (a-duh), the Texans are ten points behind the Colts at the half, and "The body of a teenaged boy found on a Jeffco beach in 1983 has been identified through DNA analysis as the twenty-eighth victim of notorious serial murderer-"

"It was just a random news clip, but it drew my attention, you see," she told Sherlock, back in the
Mary sighed and pressed her knuckles into the small of her back. She never could get really comfortable in any one position anymore.

"I'd have quibbled over being called assassin, back then. I was a spy... well, you know, you've read the file. But I suppose it's really like "whore" in that respect, if you've done it for money once you get to hang on to the title forever. Most of those were legitimately in self defense, or in the defense of others."

"But not all," Sherlock said quietly.

"No, not all," Mary agreed, "And the story just kept niggling and niggling at me. I don't want to give you the impression it was some sort of crisis of conscience, or anything. I didn't feel bad about my job. Still don't, actually, the CIA absolutely deserves their bad reputation but they don't always get the wrong man. I'm confident I never did. It was more... a moment of clarity. When I got into the business it was for all the right reasons. I wanted to make the world a safer place. I agreed to be disavowed after 9/11 because I knew I could act more freely if I were unofficial, and because I wanted to be sure that the people who are immune to the law aren't immune from justice."

Mary smiled, and laughed a bit at herself.

"Like James Bond. Or like you, actually, now that I think of it. But the upshot of all of it was that I was thirty five and had no friends, no real relationships outside of work, it had been years since I'd been with a man I could tolerate for longer than it took to sleep with him... and I had gotten rich by being a serial killer. Quite a successful one, too, the reporter said that Dean Corll had been the most prolific American serial killer before Ted Bundy came along."

Mary kept smiling, although the bitterness that had accompanied this revelation the first time still threatened to choke her.

"I do more unambiguous good in a very average Tuesday as a nurse than I did in years of black operations. The world generates new bad guys quicker than anyone can get rid of them. And so I wanted to just... stop. But you can't just quit once you get to the level I was at. There's not much space between "I don't think I should keep doing this" and "I don't think anyone should be doing this and that's why I came to you, Mr. Assange," and I could bring down governments with what I know. If I wanted to start over, I was going to have to really start over. So- Romania. And then Mary Morstan. And that was all."

"I see," Sherlock said. He finally took up his tea, although he didn't drink it. His eyes shone in the dimly lit room.

"You do realize that Dean Corll didn't only kill twenty-eight people, right?"

Mary blinked, and asked mildly, "Beg pardon?"

"Because his extracurricular activities weren't discovered until after his death it's difficult to get the full tally but he almost certainly began several years before the earliest known victim. And there's a few unexplained gaps in his record. Men like that do not just take a holiday from murder. And as for the most prolific American serial killer, hah!" Sherlock snorted disdainfully, "The press never gets anything important right. Was there no Henry Holmes or Belle Guinness in the universe where this broadcast was made?"

"Sherlock, sweetie, this is all extremely interesting but the point of that story wasn't really so much
"I'm just saying that if you were going to burn down your entire life it might have behooved you to do a bit more background research first. Has anyone ever told you you tend to be rather impulsive?"

"Often," Mary replied, "And for as long as I can remember."

"And now," Sherlock pronounced, "You're planning to do it all again. Your friends have showered you with a large quantity of small clothing and toys, but you have not put them away, bought other baby requisites, or engaged in gestationally appropriate 'nesting' behavior. Odd, unless you're expecting not to build your nest here, but in... Brazil?"

A lot of the time Mary was convinced that Sherlock was just a very good cold reader, but every now and then she wondered about actual psychic powers, because although her final planned destination was Uruguay, she would be traveling on a Brazilian passport that she was 100% certain he had never seen. All she gave Sherlock was a vague smile, and a sealed envelope which she took off the coffee table

"This time it's not impulsive, is it? Here. I was going to drop this off but it's probably best if it... if it comes from a friend." She'd taken three tries to write the letter inside, and then made a fourth fair copy because the original was tearstained and nobody wants to live in a Johnny Cash song.

Sherlock didn't take the envelope. He asked coolly, "You would take John's child away from him?"

Just as coolly, Mary replied, "If at some point John decides that he would like to get to know the baby, I will not prevent that. There's instructions in there... he can use the word 'Shawshank' on his blog and I'll be in touch within ninety-six hours. But I'm keeping it, because I can keep it safer than he can."

And because it's hers. This baby, that kicks her constantly and jumps when it hears loud noises and has a frustrating reluctance to expose its bottom to ultrasound imaging, has done something Mary never thought was possible. It's given her something... someone... she absolutely cannot walk away from.

Sherlock tilted his head and said, "I certainly wasn't suggesting you should leave the baby. I can think of nobody less suited for single parenthood than John. Did you know he actually got into a fight with his laptop yesterday? Called it a lying cow."

"I'm pretty sure that's what the psychiatrists call transference."

"Meh," Sherlock shrugged, "You might be surprised. He got in rows with consumer electronics well before he had any idea you existed. No, my point was that young Sherlock deserves both his parents."

"I'm sure it does," Mary replied, because she was still not going to bite at the "young Sherlock" bait, "But this is real life and we don't all get what we deserve. Look, if it were just me... I'd chance it, honestly. Capturing me has never been a trivial exercise. But it's not just me, anymore, and I've waited too long as is. I'm already going to have to get a letter from my doctor proving I'm not too pregnant to fly."

"Even if someone incredibly clever were to have come up with a brilliant plan by which you could remain Mary Morstan for as long as you would like?" Sherlock grinned at her, widely. Mary frowned, and asked,

"And what would you be leaping off this time? Look, Sherlock, even if I were willing to let you try
to buy off a blackmailer John hasn't managed to speak to me in two months. I think… I think he'll probably be happier if we move on. Domestic life was never quite his style, anyway."

"I'm well aware of that. Back when you got married I gave your relationship about a three year lifespan before you, being a woman of normal spirit, got fed up with being married to an adrenaline junkie and divorced him. But a woman whose most notable previous job is universally attributed to Seal Team 6 is much likelier to have a relaxed attitude about little things like getting shot at. Plus you can come along with us, now. You can be the muscle!"

Sherlock was so visibly enthusiastic at the prospect that Mary felt like the Antichrist for trying to deflate him.

"Sherlock, it's not that simple."

He looked down at his cup, nonplussed.

"Possibly not," he replied, "I do realize that. And I can't make things right between you… though… I don't suppose you'd be willing to make him think both of you are about to die, would you?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. But I can make it so that you, and the baby, are safe. You just need to be patient, and brave, for a bit longer. And who knows what John might do, given a bit more time?"

Mary felt an unusual flickering of hope in the anhedonic pit that was her emotional life lately.

"So what's your plan?" she asked slowly.

"It's still coming into focus. But I've spoken with Magnussen and gotten him to agree to abstain from any action until after the new year. If you can come to my parents' house at Christmas we can finalize the details up there."

"Christmas? At your parents'? No, no, I can't do that," Mary said, cringing at the thought.

"I admit that having to locate this at the family home justifies my being reluctant to go through this but what exactly is your problem with it?"

"Sherlock, I shot you. I can't go and bake cookies with your mother and act like nothing happened."

Sherlock rolled his eyes at her and said, "You managed to feign a friendship with Janine to the extent that she saw nothing odd about being asked to be your maid of honour, surely you can conceal guilt from my parents for a day or two."

Mary frowned. If it was a night for rehashing one's terrible actions, she was not going to be the only one obligated to do it.

"I never needed to feign anything with Janine. Magnussen found out about me because of my friendship with her, not vice versa. She was working as a yoga instructor at the studio I went to when I first moved to London, and we hit it off because she is a lovely warm funny person who deserves better than either you or me, and who incidentally can put both legs behind her head."

She had made Sherlock flinch, and she was glad about it. He asked, hesitantly, "Did Janine happen to tell you-?"

"She told me eeeeverything."
And that made him blanch, and mutter, "Well, you knocked her unconscious."

Then he smiled, and tilted his head, and continued, "And you shot me."

"Um-

"Right in the chest. It really hurt. I had to go to hospital for weeks. I could easily have died, and in fact had vivid hallucinations of doing exactly that. And now you won't even make one tiny little visit to Yorkshire for me?"

He coughed. Pitifully. And gave her puppy dog eyes.

"Guilt has never worked on me, Sherlock," Mary said sternly, though oh my GOD it was close this time.

"Fine, then. I need to stop Magnussen. I need you and John to help me bring justice to someone immune from the law. One last time, can you do that?"

Mary looked down at her hands. And then, slowly, she nodded.

Chapter End Notes

There are three lines stolen from “Hamilton” in this chapter. At first that wasn’t on purpose but then I put in the third one to sort of make it seem like my work has “themes.” Collect ‘em all. Also? Sherlock ships it.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes extensive use of dialogue from "His Last Vow" written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffatt and property of the BBC. Thanks as always go to ariannedevere for her transcriptions

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was one Watson with an unhealthy attraction to danger, and one sensible one who avoided it wherever possible. Being the sensible one, Mary was therefore somewhat surprised to find herself actually getting into Mycroft Holmes’ car. She’d given John endless amounts of shit for this sort of behavior, back in happier days.

In her defense, it was really a choice between “car ride with ominous intelligence boss” or “freeze to death on Christmas Eve at rural Yorkshire bus stop.” Mycroft had materialized out of the mist as she disembarked. With the exquisite old-fashioned manners Sherlock also had on the rare occasions he could be bothered to deploy them, he’d extended a black umbrella over her head to keep the sleet off and picked up Mary’s overnight bag. At that point it seemed impossible to object. Also it turned out that it was hard to be frightened of anyone driving an elderly pumpkin-orange Renault Twingo.

Mycroft had pressed his thin lips together and explained, “My father had planned to pick you up tonight, but I try to discourage my parents from driving, as best as I can.”

Mycroft Holmes drove with the cautious precision of a man who was generally taken places by chauffeurs. He inquired politely about her journey, which had been as pleasant as anything was nowadays. Mary could recall, vaguely, a time when she’d enjoyed being pregnant, but that time was definitely done. She felt like she’d been ready to pop for years and she still had a month to go and she was hating every second of it. She responded with commonplaces, and they chatted about the shortcomings of the modern railway system.

And then, just quite casually, he came out with, “Incidentally, my parents are not aware of the precise circumstances surrounding Sherlock’s shooting, and I would encourage you to allow them to continue in that state of ignorance. No clearing of the conscience is necessary or desirable.”

Mary sat perfectly still as her heart tried to overclock, and eventually replied, “And… you. Are not. Ignorant of the circumstances.”

“It hardly takes a deductive genius to notice the coincidental timing of the shooting and the breakdown of his best friend’s marriage to a CIA hitwoman and put the pieces together correctly.”

“Ah,” Mary said. She knew how this sort of conversation went, so she matched the older Holmes brother’s casual tone and inquired, “Ex-CIA, if there was any question about that. How long have you known?”

“Doctor Watson in and of himself isn’t the subject of particularly intensive surveillance, so I don’t believe we found out about you until your relationship became serious in April of last year.”

“May.”
“April. You may like to know that ghosting is a terribly insecure method of creating a false identity.”

“Mmm,” Mary replied, thinking she could really do without the Holmes boys criticizing her skills all the time, “And you were fine with that? Never felt the need to mention it?”

“If Sherlock couldn’t figure it out on his own I saw no need to trouble him with it. The Russians and Americans have obscenely overbloated intelligence communities with extremely high rates of burnout. There’s half a dozen expat former spies in this country at the moment. And they are, mostly, harmless. Until they are not.”

Mycroft glanced over at her, and continued, “Don’t look so alarmed. When he entered Magnussen’s office that night he was doing so in violation of a direct instruction of mine.”

“And his disobeying orders gives you sufficient reason not to… respond to my actions.”

“Sufficient. But also solitary,” the elder Holmes replied icily, “Do keep in mind that unlike my brother I do not view all of this as an amusing game to keep myself from being bored.”

They drove silently through the mist until they arrived at a nice red-plastered house with tiny windows. Mycroft parked and killed the ignition. Mary said quietly, “I imagine someone like me could be very useful to someone like you.”

“I imagine you will be,” Mycroft replied. With that, he got out of the car... and opened her door for her.

Marian and Siger Holmes were nothing like Mary might have expected, though when she thought about it she really couldn’t quite picture what sort of parents she’d expect Sherlock and Mycroft to have had. But Siger Holmes, former spymaster, was a kindly old duffer who essentially forced Mary into the best chair with a hot water bottle for her feet and then wouldn’t let her lift a finger to do anything. And Marian, former Wykeham professor of physics, winner of the Wolf Prize, stuffed Mary with such exquisite food that it seemed impossible all the men in that woman’s life were so slim.

Marian also made a valiant entry in the “most terrifying unsolicited obstetrical history” contest that Mary had been unwittingly hosting for the past few months. Sadly, the story of 11 pound undetected breech Sherlock and the eldritch unspeakable horror that was Mycroft’s birth were unable to overcome the all-time champion, random elderly lady in the waiting room at the tyre repair shop.

Then Siger escorted Mary upstairs, saying, “We’ve put you two in Sherlock’s old room. Once him and Doctor Watson get up here both our boys can share Mike’s.”

And with the prospect of getting to share a bed with her estranged husband to delight her evening hours, he bade her goodnight. Mary sat on the bed and looked around her curiously. Nothing tonight made sense. It seemed impossible that Sherlock and ‘Mike’ had grown up in this lovely normal home in this tiny northern village, with their BBC-standard accents and... unusual personality quirks.

The room had been decorated in bland, pleasant, guest-room style, unsurprisingly given that “our boys” were in their thirties and forties. The only hint of its former occupant was a series of carved lines and dates on the doorframe. Sherlock evidently had shot up more than six inches in 1989, which was the last year featured. Then when Mary turned out the lights, faint greenish-white spots began slowly to glow on the ceiling.

She fell asleep beneath the strange constellations of the boy who had become the man she knew.
And then... it was Christmas.

Mary splashed water on her face in the tiny half-bathroom, and stared dully into the mirror. Forty, the real forty, had finally come over the summer, and she looked every hard-earned day of it this morning.

For all Sherlock’s optimism, she knew John. Probably better than he knew himself. He was a soldier at heart, and he only retreated when he felt unsure of how to proceed. If he came, today, it would be because he had finally made a decision.

Mary knew what that decision would be.

As things went, this did count as a happy ending… certainly more of one than she deserved. Peace and safety would happen. Always overrated commodities for her, but important for children. And if the whole process involved more loneliness and custody negotiations than she’d ever hoped? Well, as the Irishman said in the old joke, you can get used to anything, even being hanged.

Women did this all the time. Her mother had done this, twice. So Mary lifted her head, put on a cheery seasonal jumper and probably too much makeup, and went downstairs to face her destiny.

First, though, she had to be forced back into the best chair, tucked under a blanket, stuffed with more excellent food and generally coddled into oblivion. It would have been irritating but she was frankly exhausted all the time now and so it was actually rather nice. The Holmes parents were incredibly cute, and clearly besotted with one another even after decades together.

Eventually, Sherlock (and Bill Wiggins, for some reason) let themselves in at the back door. Sherlock kissed her cheek in greeting, which startled Mary and seemed to amaze Siger. He wasn’t particularly fond of being touched by other people. But only Mary knew that he’d taken the opportunity to whisper in her ear, “He’s out pouting in the car.”

Nervily she started leafing through a book that had a picture of a young Marian on the dust jacket and whose text left Mary, with her two semesters of calculus, completely in the cold. She could do this, she told herself again. The only way out was through, and then she could get on with it. Hell, she could even be really nice to his next wife, and faintly smug. Just to freak her out, the radiant twenty-five year old skank.

But John came in and when that happened Mary sincerely wished she was dead. He looked so… just dapper and handsome, and she really regretted that they were going to do this while she looked and felt like a beached whale. Within a few minutes, everyone cleared out in an embarrassing display of “avoid that couple.”

John cleared his throat and asked, “So, are you okay?”

“Oh! Are we doing conversation today? It really is Christmas,” Mary purred before she could stop herself. Possibly she would have to work harder than she’d thought at being really nice about this.

John reached into his pocket, took out the little grey pen drive with her initials, and showed it to her. Mary rolled her eyes at him and asked, “Now? Seriously? Months of silence and we’re gonna do this… now? So, have you read it?”

“Would you come here a moment?”

John was trying to stage-manage this scene, Mary realized, and part of her, right then, hated him. She hated all the melodrama and the theatrics that he never could really resist.
“No,” she said firmly, “Tell me. Have you?”

He sighed exasperatedly and spat, “Just - come here.”

Mary pushed off her blanket and got to her feet. She winced a bit from the round ligament pain triggered by the motion, and John took a step forward to help her, but she flinched back with a “No, I’m fine.” She couldn’t do this without crying if he touched her.

John turned the pen drive in his hands.

“I’ve thought long and hard about what I want to say to you. These are prepared words, Mary. I’ve chosen these words with care.”

“Okay,” Mary replied.

John took a deep breath, and said, “The problems of your past are your business. The problems of your future ... are my privilege. That’s all I have to say. It’s all I need to know.”

Without any further ado, he tossed the drive onto the embers of the fire. And how was this even possibly happening?

“No, I didn’t read it,” he continued quietly.

She could feel tears pricking at her eyes and Mary didn’t know what to do about that so she let them come. This didn’t happen. Women like her didn’t deserve extraordinary, wonderful men like him.

“You don’t even know my name,” she said. Wailed, almost.

“Is ‘Mary Watson’ good enough for you?”

“Yes!” Mary managed through her sobs, “Oh my God, yes.”

“Then it’s good enough for me, too.”

With that Mary surrendered to joy of the most unlikely sort. They were still talking and she couldn’t have repeated what they were saying five seconds after it had passed. All that mattered was John teasing her, and imposing minor household chores upon her, and all she could do was go along with the tide of happiness.

But even apart from the tears, something seemed wrong with her eyes. And her brain suddenly seemed swaddled in cotton-wool. Mary ran through some of the options… stroke seizure aneurysm Mycroft Holmes tea and came swiftly to a conclusion.

“John,” she said, “I’ve been poisoned.”

John wasn’t listening. Her vision was tunneling down so she couldn’t see him, but she could hear him saying, “Oi. Oi. Mary? Jesus Christ! Mary? Sit down.”

There was no feeling in her body anymore, and John sounded so frightened. Poor John, she thought. Poor baby. But there were things they could do, nowadays… surgeries, and medicines, and if the... if it didn’t cross the placenta… she couldn’t remember quite what just now, but John was a doctor, he would know what to do. And she’d never truly believed she would get to have that life anyway.

From a distance, she could hear John calling, “Mary, can you hear me?”
“Don’t worry,” she reassured him, “It doesn’t hurt. And dying was never what I was frightened of.” But he still didn’t listen to her.

Just faintly, she could hear another voice.

“Don’t drink Mary’s tea.”

With her last thought, Mary wondered, “Oh, Sherlock, what have you done?”

After that everything was gone.

Chapter End Notes

With that, Mary's story ends.

Her *next* story will begin in the epilogue, whose secret title is "Boxing Day."
One really great thing about life with Sherlock is that you get a lot of experience of being unlawfully detained. I spent almost all of Christmas day locked in a bare room, amusing myself by having a staring contest with some enormous SpecOps twat in black combat gear and purposefully not thinking about what the hell my best friend had gotten himself into.

They did let me have a bathroom break about four hours in, at which point I saw there was a faint splattering of Magnussen's blood on my face. I hadn't noticed getting splashed at the time. Must have been the wash from the helicopter rotors. I cleaned up with a wet paper towel and was taken back to my cell.

And then they let me go. No explanation, by myself, no sign or word of Sherlock, I got driven back to his parents' house. It was well after midnight, but a light was lit in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

I let myself in without knocking. On the sofa in the front room was Bill Wiggins, asleep and snoring the heavy apneic growl of the opiate abuser. Leaving him undisturbed, I climbed up the stairs to find the one lit room. And there, to my complete lack of surprise, was Mary.

She was in the same clothes she'd been wearing this… or yesterday… morning, and she was laying on her side, curled up around her own belly like a prawn. I was quiet, but the second I set foot in the room she came instantly awake. Mary had always been a really light sleeper, and now I had a good idea why.

"Hi," she said, in a hoarse sleepy voice.

"Hi," I said back.

"I thought I'd stay and see if you came back. Marian and Siger went to London to see if they could do anything for Sherlock."

"What could they do?"

"Well, Siger was the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee for a while in the nineties. I imagine he's still connected. It's all an old boys club."

I stared at her, because until this second I'd had absolutely no idea about that. He'd always seemed like a faintly daft old duffer, amiably bewildered by his weird brilliant kids. But I suppose you probably can't be all that good of a secret agent if you really look like a secret agent.

E.g. my wife.

"Is there some sort of special spy database where you people get all this information? I could do with a look at it." I was exhausted and starving, and I regretted the snapping as soon as I'd done it. I decided that the exhaustion won out and sat down at the end of the bed and toed off my shoes. Mary raised her eyebrows at me and said levelly, "There's loads of special spy databases. But that I got from wikipedia."

"Seriously?"
"Seriously. Once you get above a certain level you mostly stop being a secret agent and start being a politician."

"Huh."

We looked at each other, and then, slowly, she shifted over to one side of the double bed. Making a space for me. After a minute or two she switched off the bedside lamp, and we lay, side by side, in silence. Little glow-in-the-dark star stickers began to shine on the ceiling.

"If I had known," Mary began, hesitantly, "What Sherlock's plan was, I wouldn't have gone along with it. I'd have found a way to stop him. I want you to know that."

"The shooting wasn't his plan. He made a snap decision. But if it had been his plan-" I thought about it for a bit. The gun had been in my pocket, after all. Sherlock had thought faster, like always, but I'd been the one with more to lose. And at the end of the day, unlike Sherlock, I am not a good man.

"I'd have gone along with it. Though I'd have given a hard "no" to the drugging. Are you-?"

"I'm fine. And the baby seems fine too. Kicking up a storm earlier, but I think it's asleep now."

"Good. Good."

The baby still didn't seem quite real to me. I had tried, over the last few weeks, to imagine it, and the best mental pictures I could come up with seemed copied from diaper adverts and not like something that applied to my life. My life was the cold Yorkshire night, and the fact I'd had a man's blood on my face that day… and then eventually Mary's hand, creeping through the darkness, to twine her fingers into mine.

The smell of bacon cooking woke me up. We'd curled closer to each other for warmth as we slept. Mary's face was six inches away from mine on the pillow, and she whispered, "Hi."

"Hi," I said back, looking into her wide green eyes.

The first time I'd ever noticed them was right after I'd asked her out. There are some people whose full attention feels like an actual physical force, with Sherlock being probably the strongest example of it, but Mary's definitely got it too. I'd dropped the question into the conversation, being incredibly smooth, though I say so myself, and she'd really started looking at me, and when she'd stared down at me I'd thought, "Jesus Christ, she's got eyes like a cat's."

The woman in my brain had instantly transformed from "Mary-with-the-good-tits" to "Mary-with-the-big-eyes." That moment was probably it for me, though it took me a few more months to realize it.

But now her wide, beautiful eyes got even wider, and she started pushing on my chest, saying urgently, "Move. Move, MOVE."

I scrambled out of her way, she speed-waddled out of the bedroom, and from the bathroom down the hall I could hear the quiet, sad sound of her retching. I followed along, feeling the old sense of guilty responsibility that her morning (And late night... And after-dinner...) sickness always gave me.

"So you're... still doing that, huh?" I asked, from the doorway. She was well into the third trimester and that had to be a rough way to spend eight months.

"Yep," Mary said into the toilet bowl, "Most days. Look, John, can you just-? I'm fine. I'll be out in a bit."
She waved a hand in my general direction to drive me off. I'd forgotten: she didn't want her back rubbed or her hair held back while she did this, she wanted to be alone. Thus I followed the smell of bacon downstairs, to find Wiggins, left arm in a sling, dishing out a full-English onto plates.

"Morning, Doctor Watson," he said, heaping beans on toast and passing a plate over to me. I set to, ravenously, and he joined me.

Mary came downstairs ten minutes later, pale but not looking like she was planning to throw up again for a bit. Certainly nothing in her appearance remarkable enough to explain why Wiggins made a high-pitched yelp and flinched back at the sight of her. Mary glared at him, flat-eyed, and started heaping eggs onto a plate.

I had to ask, "What?"

"She broke my wrist," Wiggins tattled.

"It's sprained," Mary said, coldly.

"And she said she was going to slit my froat and light me on fire and feed me to sea lions."

Mary set down the spoon with a loud clack and spat out, "I believe that I said 'Get away from me with that syringe or I'll...' do that stuff. Which he did not do, hence: the spraining."

I looked over to Wiggins and inquired, delicately, "Syringe?"

He looked down at his plate, and muttered, "She didn't finish her tea and Mr. 'Olmes didn't want 'em to wake up for anovver 'alf hour."

Mary looked ready to spit nails but she said levelly, "Well I'm sure we're all good friends now."

We ate, for a few minutes, until I had to ask, "Why sea lions?"

Unbelievably, Mary blushed, and mumbled embarrassedly, "I was pretty high and thought I was dying. It wasn't my best work."

This was my life, Jesus Christ. We finished the rest of breakfast, cleaned up the house, and left… tucking the key under the mat, because apparently in that village you can do that.

I drove, because Mary automatically got into the back seat where she could stretch out and there was no way I was letting Wiggins drive my family anywhere. This meant I had to shift the seat of Sherlock's rented SUV forward and empty his candy wrappers out of the ashtray, and that made me wonder about him again. What he was doing right now.

The ride was silent except for the occasional interjections of the GPS until we got past Nottingham, when Wiggins piped up with a cheery, "So are you two 'aving a boy or a girl then?"

Mary sighed, and said, "I haven't found out."

Startled, I looked at her in the rearview mirror, and said, "Seriously? You hate surprises."

"It's not for lack of trying," she agreed, with a faint smile, "I've had five ultrasounds and we've never been able to get the right angle. It's a terribly uncooperative baby."

"You've had five scans? Why have you-" All of a sudden I was terrified, because I knew Mary was
getting her care on the NHS, and I work for the NHS, and we do not do repeated procedures like that just to get fun little pictures for the proud parents to put on facebook. Something was wrong with the pregnancy.

But then… I made a deduction. I do this occasionally since my second round of living with Sherlock. Every time it gives me a faint stabbing headache just above my right eye, which goes a long way to explaining why he's so tetchy all the time. I remembered the abused, pinpricked look of her fingertips, and the way she had looked hungrily at her toast then eaten exactly one half of one slice, and I realized:

"You've got gestational diabetes. Jesus, Mary, why didn't you tell me?"

I looked at her in the rearview mirror, and she frowned back at me, and said, "Well, I mean- I didn't need your help. I can read a diet sheet and take my own blood glucose. And it's not been much of a problem, really. My sugar's very well controlled, I haven't had to go on medication at all. And the baby's looked just fine at all of the scans"

"Still."

She sighed, and said more quietly, "And it would have felt like I was begging."

There wasn't really much response to that. We rode along, and about five minutes later, Mary said hesitantly, "I wasn't supposed to get another one until next week, but I texted and asked Carole if she could get me in this afternoon, because of-"

"The drugs," I said.

"It's seriously the most widely used obstetrical anaesthetic on the market," Wiggins pouted.

"Wiggins shut up," Mary snapped. "So- I mean, you don't have to. But if you wanted to, you could- you're welcome to come along."

"Oh, wow, that would be really interesting, thank you Mrs. Watson!" Wiggins chirped in his cheery cockney accent.

"Not you, Wiggins," we chorused.

I cleared my throat, and continued, "Yeah, yeah, I'd like to. We'll do that."

We dropped Billy off at an overground station as we got into London, to both his and Mary's transparent relief. Then we drove to the clinic I used to work at, in Stepney.

They were closed for the holiday, and Mary had to let us in with her keyfob and switch on the lights. It was weird coming back. I'd started there after a shattering change in my life, quit a year and a half later after another one… and all the time the place had just kept chugging along regardless. The only difference was a "Doctor Singh" nameplate where the "Doctor Watson" one had been.

Carole came in ten minutes later, brushing the snow that had started to fall off her shoulders.

"Afternoon, Mary- Oh! John. How nice to see you at one of these."

After today I'd have a new heirarchy of threatening voices: Moriarty, Mary… and at the top, fifty-something spherical obstetrician Carole Palmer. She left to answer a few emails while the ultrasound computer booted up, and I asked Mary in a low voice, "What did you tell people about why I left?"
Mary bit her lip, and said hesitantly, "I didn't tell anybody anything. But… I may not have tried too hard to correct whatever conclusions they came to. Sorry."

I'd always liked Carole, and we'd always gotten on well. So much for that. Eventually she came back in, I helped Mary onto the exam table, and we got on with it.

I was trying very hard not to stare at Mary's belly, because while she looked big even in her clothes it was frankly remarkable to see it bare, when Carole said, "Oh" and I had a minor heart attack.

"No, sorry, nothing's wrong," she continued, "You know how kids usually show favoritism to their fathers? This one's getting started antenatally, and we finally got the right angle. Did you still want to know the sex?"

I looked at Mary, and we nodded in unison.

"It's a girl."

"You're sure?" I asked, though as it turned out I really didn't care either way. Girl or boy seemed equally unreal.

"Pretty sure. There's always the slight chance it's a boy who's… tucking, as it were. But those definitely look like the ladybits."

I looked back at Mary, and she had her hand over her mouth. She smiled shakily at me and said, "Sherlock- he's… he's absolutely convinced it's a boy. He's been after me for months to name it after him. He's going to be so pissed."

Carole didn't seem to notice that little Americanism, and I wondered how often I'd missed things like that, before. But then Carole moved the ultrasound wand, muttering, "Let's see what else we can show daddy while we're here."

I didn't really enjoy my obstetrics training back in medical school. It tends to be incredibly routine and repetitive or else a miserable bloody nightmare, nothing in between. Then I'd been a trauma surgeon, and after that I'd avoided doing antenatal work as a GP, so what with one thing and another it had probably been fifteen years since I'd spent much time with an ultrasound and a pregnant woman. In that time, the technology had obviously come along, because the screen switched from the rearview "fat person sitting on photocopier" image to…

A clear and perfect little face, with plump cheeks and a tiny button nose. I could even see her closed eyelids.

"She's sucking her thumb," Carole said, unnecessarily.

"Wow."

"Hi," I said to the black and white image on the screen. To my daughter.

Once we'd got home, Mary went straight upstairs to rest, even though all we'd done that day was a car ride and a doctor's appointment. This was a new feature: she'd always been an incredibly high-energy, ten projects on the go, getting up at five in the morning to exercise, "John I'm bored, would you like to have some sex?" type. Sitting-still Mary was vaguely unsettling.

I stayed downstairs and made a few phone calls, for all the good it did. There was still a blank wall of impenetrable silence around Sherlock, and Magnussen's death hadn't made the news yet. I did get a typical mysterious Mycroft Holmes message in the form of a text from a blocked number saying:
And nothing else.

The place was pretty much the same, though in the absence of male restraint, Mary had bought a ton of new cushions. Calton came in through the cat flap and sniffed at me, but when I tried to pet him he put his back up and hissed, which—well, fuck you too, mate.

She wasn't asleep, when I went up. She was propped up on pillows in our bed and reading a book, and she marked her place and smiled faintly at me. I climbed in next to her, but after a minute switched around so we were perpendicular. The old way to do this was out… you can't rest your head on somebody's stomach when said stomach is five feet above the bed. So I put a cushion where her lap used to be, and settled in.

She ran her fingers through my hair. After a minute, the baby started kicking me in the ear, which was… amazing, but also a reminder that I was going to be a father in less than a month, and the only person I'd ever really watched do that was my own dad. You can look at how Harry and I turned out to get a clear idea of exactly how good he was at it.

As I lay in this remarkable combination of delight and pants-shitting terror and making the resolution to buy some books on parenting tomorrow, Mary asked, "What do you think of Joan?"

"Who's Joan?"

"No, for the baby's name. Joan."

I didn't think much of it, actually, and asked, "Are we hoping for a lesbian rugby coach?"

"It's your name," Mary replied drily, "But for a girl."

"Well, yeah, but I'm not such a malignant narcissist I actually require my kids to take my name. I don't see you wanting to call her Mary."

Mary thought about it for a second and said, "Ew, you're right, that does feel creepy."

"How about Emma, after my mum?"

She sighed.

"I actually like the name Emma a lot, but we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Emma Watson?" she asked, and then when I shrugged, she continued, "You know, the actress. She played Hermione in "Harry Potter." We're not sticking the baby with the same name as somebody famous. So no Emily either, I suppose."

There was an unusual amount of determination to her statement, and despite myself I was curious. So I sat up.

"You sound like you've got some personal experience of that. And I've never heard of any other Mary Morstans."

She shut down instantly and averted her eyes from me.

"I'm sorry," Mary said quietly, "I know you don't want to know."
"No..." I said slowly, "That's not exactly what I said. I said I don't need to know."

I ran my hands through my hair. I knew what to do, obviously... we hadn't really been able to relax around one another yet, and it was on me to fix that. And you do have to say these things from time to time in a relationship, even though they make you sound like a tit.

"I'm never going to need to read a list of the worst things you've ever done in your life, or your spy CV, or whatever was on that drive. But I am, actually... in love with you. I didn't realize quite how much, until-"

Until a man whose neck I could easily have snapped had stood in front of me and said, "Come on. For Mary," and I decided that I could let him humiliate me, I could go to prison, if that was what it took. But Mary didn't need to know that bit.

"Until recently. And because I'm in love with you, I am also interested in you. So I do want to know things about you. Including your old name. If you want to tell me."

And then a minute later I added, "Oh, dry up, woman, you'll never pass for English if you keep having all these emotions all over the place" because she was meebling again.

Mary did that pointless thing women do where they press on their faces to stop crying, and with a rather damp laugh said, "It's not me, it's the bloody hormones. I'm basically insane now. Last week I saw a cat carrying her kitten in her mouth and I had to go have a lie-down, I was so touched. But, oh, John, I am glad that you do. So glad."

"Yeah, well," I grumbled, "You're supposed to say it back, you know."

She sniffled and said, "Well obviously I'm in love with you too. God help you."

"So what do you say?"

She cocked her head, and asked, "If you're sure?" and then when I nodded, she said, "It was Amy. Amy Adams."

It wasn't much, as revelations go. An ordinary, pretty name, that gave no hint of the extraordinary woman who it had belonged to. Then I snapped my fingers, because I'd remembered.

"The redhead, right? Who got her kit off in 'American Hustle.'"

Mary laughed, "So that's what an actress has to do to get you to remember her?"

"It was a pretty good lack-of-kit."

"Yes, well, that's the one. She didn't get famous until the oughts but it was so annoying once she did. Bloody 'Enchanted.' Everyone got a real kick out of singing the songs at me. So I'd like the baby to be able to go through life without having people think they're hilarious for shouting Wingardium Leviosa at her."

"It's a pretty name. Amy Watson. How about that for the baby?"

Mary frowned and said, "I never much liked the name. And women called Amy tend to be bitchy."

"Is that a fact?"

"Pretty much universally."
We were smiling together, and I sort of thought… "Yeah, we might actually be okay."

"What are the other two?"

"Pardon?"


It had seemed like a pretty harmless question, but Mary tensed up when I asked it, and the dread crept back into me. Then she sighed, rubbed her forehead, and looking me square in the eye said, "Amy. Galadriel. Rainbow. Adams."

Which... was one of those tests of husbandly virtue, wasn't it?

"Those are unusual," I said mildly, "Though I'd prefer not to call the baby either of them."

"No," she agreed.

"Mind you, if she grows up and wants to bathe in patchouli and cannabis and become queen of the fairies I will obviously support her in that but I really don't think it's right to pigeonhole a child-"

I stopped then because Mary had yanked a pillow from behind her head and expertly biffed me across the face with it. I didn't care because I was laughing too hard, and Mary was trying not to laugh along with me.

"Like you've got any room to mock, Hamish."

"Oh, no, I'm never complaining about Hamish again. I love Hamish. How did that work when you were a secret agent? Did you walk up to baccarat tables in Monte Carlo, gun in your garter, and introduce yourself with, "Rainbow... Galadriel Rainbow?"

"My mother was literally seventeen years old when I was born, and it was the seventies. So she went a bit fairytale. So what?"

"Wait," I said, because there had been one more revelation than I was expecting, "You have a mother... so I have a mother-in-law?"

But Mary was shaking her head even before I finished the sentence, and my laughter was cut short by pity.

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

She shrugged, one-shouldered.

"It's okay, it was... I mean, it was awful, but it was also ten years ago. Lymphoma."

So not all her secrets were dangerous, after all. Sad, maybe, but I could handle sad. Hell, I could possibly even help with sad. I took hold of her hand, and smiled, and said, "So. Amy. Hi."

"It's Mary," she corrected me, but she was smiling sunnily back, "Hi."

I had to kiss her, at that point. There were months of time we needed to make up for. Her mouth was as soft and sweet as it had been the first time we'd ever kissed. And just like the first time, just like every time, I thought, "Yeah, I definitely will need to do this again."
I swear I didn't go into it intending to put my hand up her shirt, but… again, months where I hadn't gotten laid, it was honestly reflexive. Mary pulled back from me gently, and her big beautiful assassin's eyes were alarmed, and I realized that it's probably wrong to sexually importune a woman who's that pregnant.

Damn it.

"Sorry," I said, abashed, "We don't have to-

"Oh, no. No no no no no. We're doing this. It's not all crying and sleeping, I've also been gagging for it for months now. It's just…" Mary hesitated, "I'm really not sure how it's done. When I'm this-

She was gesturing at the orb of her belly, and said "Fat," just as I said "Pregnant."

Then in unison, "Big."

I looked down at it and agreed, "It does present us with a bit of a logistical challenge, yes."

"I mean, people do, obviously. I could probably google how."

I laughed. I had to. And I kissed her again and said, "We're pretty clever. I think we can work it out."

Chapter End Notes

And that's all there is, there isn't any more. Thank you to everyone who has read this story all the way to the end. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.
Special thanks to all of you who have left reviews. I know I'm terrible about replying to them but I have read and cherished every one.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!