

HERRINGFORD AND WATTS MYSTERIES

*Of*  
DUBIOUS &  
QUESTIONABLE  
MEMORY

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## **OF DUBIOUS AND QUESTIONABLE MEMORY**

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## Dedication

*For Leah and Jared*

*I dedicate this story about siblings and friends  
to my siblings (who just happen to be my friends).*



*To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. I have  
seldom heard him mention her under any other  
name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates  
the whole of her sex. . . there was but one woman  
to him, and that woman was the late Irene  
Adler, of dubious and questionable memory.*

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, "A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA"

# Chapter One

*October 1911*

It all could have been avoided had we not accused Henry Tipton, Chief of Police, of stealing his neighbor's rooster. This accusation, I must note, was made before we were in possession of all the facts. My associate, Merinda Herringford, and I had very little to go on other than an anonymous note saying the bird was in danger.

Later, when our feather-flurried chase ended poorly, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* would run an article featuring a rather unflattering picture of Merinda and me in pursuit of the blasted bird. This would be but the tip of the iceberg of our humiliation, proving ever more true Sherlock Holmes's belief that it is a "capital mistake to theorize before one has data."

Rather than data, Merinda had a hunch. The Herringford and Watts detective business had been experiencing a bit of a lull, and perhaps that is why Merinda jumped to conclusions when the note arrived. I had no time for mysteries that day. I was preoccupied with memorizing the jam-making section of *Flora Merriweather's Guide to Domestic Bliss*. I was determined to master a few rudimentary housekeeping skills. (An astute reader might wonder what in heaven's name was I thinking in attempting jam in October so far out of season. I had been able to find some late-season blackberries from Murdoch's grocer—paying more than I ever had for produce—and decided to surprise my new husband, Ray.)

When Merinda invited me to sally forth, I quickly moved the jam from the stove and accompanied her, realizing halfway down Sumach

Street that I had used salt instead of sugar and the already burned concoction would smell something dreadful when Ray returned to the soot-stained kitchen (yet one more example of my less-than-exemplary domestic capabilities). But I put the kitchen out of my mind. I was blindly focused on the case at hand. So blind that just as we arrived at Chief Tipton's home, our mission was truncated by my face-first collision with a weaselly-faced man. He was wearing the badge of the Morality Squad, the plainclothes detectives who were tasked with cleaning up the streets... and would take any excuse to lock up a couple of wayward females.

I squeaked and stumbled backward, tripping over the curb in the process and tumbling into a mud puddle. My husband's second-best bowler hat fell from my head, and the long braid of hair that had been coiled underneath it came down over my shoulder.

"Rats!" I squeaked.

"You're a woman!" cackled Weasel Face. "Herringford and Watts, as I live and breathe!"

"Jemima," Merinda sighed, "you're really not very good at this, are you?"

To add insult to injury, I could do little to salvage Ray's hat as we were dragged off to St. Jerome's Reformatory for Vagrant and Incurable Females, Merinda bellowing the whole way about roosters and the Chief of Police not being above the law.

The iron door of the gated institution echoed behind us with a thud.

"Surely you can contact our particular friend and newly promoted Inspector Jasper Forth!" Merinda called. But no one was listening.

The matron appeared with nondescript gray cotton dresses folded in her arms, her mouth tight as if she perpetually sucked on lemons. "Everything off," she said with a hiss of disgust. "Everything." And she looked pointedly at my wedding ring.

"My ring?" I squeaked. "But surely..."

"Everything. A respectable married woman wouldn't be here in the first place," she huffed.

We washed in freezing water and coarse lye soap. And then we were shoved into a cell.

Merinda's eyes snapped around the dark, drafty room and her lips twitched. "This is a bit of a pickle." She took in the thin uniform and the ratty wool blankets. "But also a bit of a lark!"

I picked caked mud from my fingers, angry at the trap into which we had unintentionally fallen. Toronto's Morality Squad had wanted to lock up the notorious trouser-wearing, bowler-hat-sporting lady detectives for an age. Catching us just as we were arriving at Chief Tipton's home was a coup for them. Would they ever let us out again?

Now, cloistered in our frigid cell with a cracked window that did little to keep out the autumn air, I had dwindling tolerance for Merinda and her insufferably good mood.

"Why is it that whenever we are hired by a man, it's for some problem including fowl?" Merinda flopped back on the hard slat of a bed and folded her arms behind her head. "Honestly, it's a bit of a trial trying to establish Toronto's premiere consulting detective business when we're dashing after roosters."

"But we weren't hired. We just got a note," I said sourly.

"I should have smelled a rat the moment I saw that message." Merinda did her best to fluff the hard pillow on her wooden slat of a bed. "Tipton clearly wanted the Morality Squad to lure us into this exact situation!"

Time ticked onward. A loud knock at the door came not from Jasper as I had hoped, but rather the matron. She announced where supper would be served.

Merinda and I opted against the meal. Neither of us hungry, we stayed in our room. I tried to sleep, but every tick and creak in the vacuous hall outside kept me on edge.

"Cracker jacks! It's Jasper's birthday party tomorrow." Merinda sat up in her bed at the memory. "Well, he'd better spring us out of here by then if he wants his party. I already sent out all the invitations."

"My poor jam." I sighed. "I was so hoping to impress Mrs. Malone and prove I had finally ascended to the ranks of capable domesticity." Merinda's housekeeper despaired of my ability to keep myself fed.

"Oh hush, Jemima. Just buy jam at the market like the rest of civilization."

In the shaft of light through the bars, I watched her blow a truant blond curl from her forehead. Her mind was clearly no longer on the party. “Our pursuit of the rooster was sound. I mean, suppose I was acting a little, erm, rashly...but there is a logical explanation for...”

“Shush, Merinda!” Dirty water dripped through the cracked ceiling to drum on my forehead. “I’m too tired and too upset for us to fall down this rabbit hole of your silly hypotheses again.”

Finally, after hours of darkness and little hope of sleep, the gray light of morning stretched over my cramped shoulders. I swallowed the sour, chalky taste in my mouth as, blessedly, the door clamored open.

The dowdy matron jangled her keys impatiently, and we hopped to our feet. A man stood beside her, dark circles rimming his eyes but his face washed with relief.

“She give you any trouble?” he asked the matron while glowering at Merinda.

“No more than to be expected from a girl like her.”

Merinda opened her mouth to defend herself, but I grabbed her wrist to stop her. If she blabbered on we might never get home.

The matron handed over the bag containing our soiled belongings, and I was relieved to find my ring tucked into the pocket of my trousers. We changed back into our men’s clothing, the mud from the day before caked and dusty.

Walking across the broad lawn, Jasper inspected both of us. His eyes took in every part of Merinda, from her dirty tweed right down to her scuffed ankle boots. His eyes glimmered. “That was too close, girls.”

“I look this way because I was holed up in St. Jerome’s all night. What’s your excuse?” Merinda quipped, clearly uncomfortable under his careful eye.

I shot her a look. “You must have been worried sick, Jasper.”

“I just got promoted, Merinda. Chief Tipton! Chief Tipton’s *house*! I spent most of the night cutting through bureaucratic tape trying to liberate you. I was able to do so with the strictest of warnings.” He yawned and then apologized. “And my word, Jemima. I’ve never seen Ray so angry.”



"I burned the jam. Come to think of it, I left the door unlocked too..."

We were soon seated in the automobile and Jones, a young officer, began steering us toward Merinda's flat on King Street.

"When I heard," Jasper was saying, "I dashed over to Ray as soon as Tipton let me go. Your husband threw a teacup. Took one of our new bicycles."

"The new motorized fleet of bicycles!" Merinda positively jumped in her seat. "I've been longing to give them a try."

I shoved her back onto her seat, Officer Jones coughing uncomfortably at our disheveled appearance and Merinda's improper behavior. We made it to King Street in near silence.

"You're remembering the party tonight," Merinda said to Jasper as he opened the door of the car for her. "Seven o'clock sharp. It's going to be a wonderful evening. You'll forget this unfortunate business ever happened!"

Jasper's countenance remained stern. "It's a rather hard thing to forget, Merinda. I doubt you'd forget if the Chief said *you* were on a short thread for encouraging reckless lady detectives."

My stop was next, and I spent the moments of our journey staring out the window. Jones swerved the automobile to the curb of the Cabagetown townhouse Ray and I had shared for the three short months of our new marriage.

Jasper helped me out of the backseat and looked at me kindly. "Jem, you're the sensible one."

I chortled. "Not so much."

"My job is important to me." He smiled. "You know that. Can you make her see that? She's like a runaway train, barreling through everything in her path."

"Your job?" I hedged, knowing while his mouth said *job*, his heart said *Merinda*. I blinked into the sun as it settled above us with a cheeriness I didn't feel. "She cares about you, Jasper."

Jasper gave a curt laugh. "Does she?"

I gave his arm a quick squeeze. "She does. Happy birthday."

I waved him off and straightened my shoulders. I'd had such high hopes for yesterday, I thought, stepping slowly over the stone walkway. I picked my way between overrun weeds and shrubs I had no intention of taming with a careful manicure. I slowly turned the doorknob, hoping Ray was out on his usual beat.

I wasn't so fortunate. He bounded into the front hall at the turn of the door handle.

I let him get through a string of *Do you have any idea* and *Honestly, Jemima*. His English was always far poorer when he was riled, and his flurry of furious words was knotted by drifts into Italian, his first language. Something seemed to have flustered him quite completely.

Too tired to stand any longer after my sleepless night, I dropped on the sofa in my muddy clothes and sighed. "I knew this would happen. I knew even while I was shivering in that cold jail cell that you would be angry because I left the kitchen in a state and probably left the door open. I told Jasper as much, and he said you were in quite a state. And obviously we can chalk this up to one more disaster in my pursuit of domestic proficiency."

Ray dug his finger under his collar for a moment. Cocked his head to the side. Blinked a few more times. "The *kitchen*? Are you seriously thinking that—"

"There's no sense in just standing there fuming at me. Go get a drink of water. My goodness, even the tips of your ears are red! I am not going to fight back. I had grand plans for yesterday. I was going to cook something wonderful and of course not leave the kitchen a charred mess—"

"Jem, have you been listening to me at all?"

"Yes. And I am dreadfully sorry. You have every right to expect that the kitchen will be clean and the food will be warm after a long day. I will try harder." I didn't know how, I thought, but I would.

He just stared at me. Finally, after several ticks of the large, hollow clock in the next room, he turned. "I have to go work."

"I'll see you at Jasper's party tonight? You can be sore at me, but poor Jasper had nothing to do with it. You have a fresh shirt at the office, I hope?"

My husband didn't answer me before he walked out the door.

I heaved a sigh. My first order of business was to scour the scorched kitchen as best I could. Then a proper bath. A luxurious dose of lavender. And the red dress that was a particular favorite of Ray's. A nice dress, I thought, would go a long way toward showing him I was sorry.