

A LETTER OF MARY

A MARY RUSSELL
NOVEL

LAURIE R. KING



IdeaFrost



Laurie R. King is the Edgar Award–winning author of five contemporary novels featuring Kate Martinelli, eight acclaimed Mary Russell mysteries, and four stand-alone mysteries, including the highly praised *A Darker Place*. She lives in Northern California.

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BY LAURIE R. KING

A Darker Place
Folly
Keeping Watch
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A Monstrous Regiment of Women
A Letter of Mary
The Moor
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—*Houston Chronicle*

A LETTER OF MARY

A Mary Russell Novel

LAURIE R. KING

Picador
Thomas Dunne Books
St. Martin's Press
New York

For my brother Leahcim Drawde Nosdrahcir and his family

From his sister Eiraul EEL

EDITOR'S PREFACE

THIS IS THE third in a series of manuscripts taken from a trunk full of odds and ends that was sent to me a few years ago. The puzzle of its origin and why I was its recipient is far from solved. In fact, it becomes more mysterious with each manuscript I publish.

After the first of Mary Russell's stories (*The Beekeeper's Apprentice*) came out, I received a cryptic postcard that said merely: "More to follow." After the second (*A Monstrous Regiment of Women*), the following newspaper clipping arrived in the mail:

A group of Japanese businessmen on a river cruise yesterday caught and towed to Hampton Court a punt which police have determined originated at Folly Bridge in Oxford. In it were found clothing and a pair of glasses. The Thames Authority has no suggestion as yet how a punt could manoeuvre the locks and deeper stretches of river.

I rose to the challenge. A bit of research determined that the clipping was a filler in the London *Times* dated three weeks before the book's publication date. The subsequent phone calls to England cost me an arm and a leg, but eventually I discovered that the clothing (trousers, sensible shoes, and a blouse) was that of a tall, thin woman, and it had been found carefully folded on the cushions, with the glasses on top. There was no suicide note. The pole was in the boat (a punt is not rowed or motorized, I gather, but shoved along with a wooden pole). Downstream from Oxford, the river becomes too deep for the punter to reach the bottom.

I even found out that the police dusted the thing for prints, which sounded like a joke until my informant told me how much a wooden punt costs nowadays. With a vague idea that this might someday help me find where my trunk had come from, I asked for a set of the prints. It took a while to clear this with the higher authorities, but I did after some months receive a copy of the forensic report which informed me that they had been made by two people, both with long, thin hands, one of them slightly bigger and thus probably male, the other with a scar across one of the pads. The scarred ones had been found on the glasses.

Interestingly enough, the fingerprints taken from the sides of the punt match those on a filthy clay pipe that was in the trunk with the manuscripts.

I should also mention that the inlaid box described in the following pages does exist, although when it reached me, there was no manuscript inside. It did hold a pair of black-lensed glasses, a dainty handkerchief embroidered with the letter *M*, and a key.

The key, I have been told, is to a safety-deposit box. There is absolutely no way of knowing where that box is.

—Laurie R. King

...I would terrify you by letters.

—THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 10:9

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PART ONE

TUESDAY, 14 AUGUST 1923–FRIDAY, 24 AUGUST 1923

A pen is certainly an excellent instrument to fix a man's attention and to inflame his ambition.

—JOHN ADAMS

alpha

THE ENVELOPE SLAPPED down onto the desk ten inches from my much-abused eyes, instantly obscuring the black lines of Hebrew letters that had begun to quiver an hour before. With the shock of the sudden change, my vision stuttered, attempted a valiant rally, then slid into complete rebellion and would not focus at all.

I leant back in my chair with an ill-stifled groan, peeled my wire-rimmed spectacles from my ears and dropped them onto the stack of notes, and sat for a long minute with the heels of both hands pressed into my eye sockets. The person who had so unceremoniously delivered this grubby interruption moved off across the room, where I heard him sort a series of envelopes *chuk-chuk-chuk* into the wastepaper basket, then stepped into the front hallway to drop a heavy envelope onto the table there (Mrs Hudson's monthly letter from her son in Australia, I noted, two days early) before coming back to take up a position beside my desk, one shoulder dug into the bookshelf, eyes gazing, no doubt out the window at the Downs rolling down to the Channel. I replaced the heels of my hands with the backs of my fingers, cool against the hectic flesh, and addressed my husband.

"Do you know, Holmes, I had a great-uncle in Chicago whose promising medical career was cut short when he began to go blind over his books. It must be extremely frustrating to have one's future betrayed by a tiny web of optical muscles. Though he did go on to make a fortune selling eggs and trousers to the gold miners," I added. "Whom is it from?"

"Shall I read it to you, Russell, so as to save your optic muscles for the *metheg* and your beloved furtive *patach*?" His solicitous words were spoilt by the sardonic, almost querulous edge to his voice. "Alas, I have become a mere secretary to my wife's ambitions. Kindly do not snort, Russell. It is an unbecoming sound. Let me see." I felt his arm come across my desk, and I heard the letter whisper as it was plucked up. "The envelope is from the Hôtel Imperial in Paris, a name which contains distinct overtones of sagging mattresses and ominous nocturnal rustling noises in the wardrobe. It is addressed simply to Mary Russell, no title whatsoever. The hand is worthy of some attention. A woman's writing, surely, though almost masculine in the way the fingers grasp the pen. The writer is obviously highly educated, a 'professional woman,' to use the somewhat misleading modern phrase; I venture to say that this particular lady does not depend on her womanliness for a livelihood. Her *t*'s reveal her to be an impatient person, and there is passion in the sweeps of her uprights, yet her *s*'s and *a*'s speak of precision and the lower edge of each line is as exact as it is authoritative. She also either has great faith in the French and English postal systems or else is so self-assured as to consider the insurance of placing her name or room number on the envelope unnecessary. I lean toward the latter theory."

As this analysis progressed, I recovered my glasses, the better to study my companion where he stood in the bright window, bent over the envelope like a jeweller with some rare uncut stone, and I was hit by one of those odd moments of analytical apartness, when one looks with a stranger's eyes at something infinitely familiar. Physically, Sherlock Holmes had changed little since we had first met on these same Sussex Downs a bit more than eight years before. His hair was slightly thinner, certainly greyer, and his grey eyes had become even more deeply hooded, so that the resemblance to

some far-seeing, sharp-beaked raptor was more marked than ever. No, his body had only exaggerated itself; the greatest changes were internal. The fierce passions that had driven him in his early years, years before I was even born, had subsided, and the agonies of frustration he had felt when without a challenge, frustration that had led him to needles filled with cocaine and morphia, were now in abeyance. Or so I had thought.

I watched him as his long fingers caressed the much-travelled envelope and his eyes drew significance from every smudge, every characteristic of paper and ink and stamp, and it occurred to me suddenly that Sherlock Holmes was bored.

The thought was not a happy one. No person, certainly no woman, likes to think that her marriage has lessened the happiness of her partner. I thrust the troublesome idea from me, reached up to rub a twinge from my right shoulder, and spoke with a shade more irritation than was called for.

“My dear Holmes, this verges on *deductio ad absurdum*. Were you to open the envelope and identify the writer, it just might simplify matters.”

“All in good time, Russell. I further note a partial set of grimy fingerprints along the back of the envelope, with a matching thumbprint on the front. However, I believe we can discount them, as they have the familiar look of the hands of our very own postal-delivery boy, whose bicycle chain is in constant need of repair.”

“Holmes, my furtive *patachs* await me. The letter?”

“Patience is a necessary attribute of the detective’s makeup, Russell. And, I should have thought the scholar’s. However, as you say.” He turned away, and the sharp zip of a knife through cheap paper was followed by a dull thud as the knife was reintroduced into the frayed wood of the mantelpiece. There was a thin rustle. His voice sounded amused as he began to read. “‘Dear Miss Russell,’ it begins, dated four days ago.

Dear Miss Russell,

I trust you will not be offended by my form of address. I am aware that you have married, but I cannot bring myself to assign a woman her husband’s name unless I have been told that such is her desire. If you are offended, please forgive my unintentional faux pas.

You will perhaps remember me, Dorothy Ruskin, from your visit to Palestine several years ago. I have remained in that land since then, assisting at three preliminary digs until such time as I can arrange funding for my own excavations. I have been called back home for an interview by my potential sponsors, as well as to see my mother, who seems to be on her deathbed. There is a matter of some interest which I wish to lay before you while I am in England, and I would appreciate it if you would allow me to come and disturb your peace for a few hours. It would have to be on the twenty-second or twenty-third, as I return to Palestine directly my business is completed. Please confirm the day and time by telegram at the address below.

I believe the matter to be of some interest and potentially considerable importance to your chosen field of study, or I would not be bothering you and your husband.

I remain,

*Most affectionately yours,
Dorothy Ruskin*

“The address below is that of the Hôtel Imperial,” Holmes added.

I took the letter from Holmes and quickly skimmed the singular hand that strode across the flimsy hotel paper. “A decent pen, though,” I noted absently. “Shall we see her?”

“We? My dear Russell, I am the husband of an emancipated woman who, although she may not yet vote in an election, is at least allowed to see her own friends without male chaperonage.”

“Don’t be an ass, Holmes. She obviously wants to see both of us, or she would not have written that last sentence. We’ll have her for tea, then. Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Wednesday is Mrs Hudson’s half day. Miss Ruskin might have a better tea if she came Thursday.”

“Thank you, Holmes,” I said with asperity. I admit that cooking is not my strong point, but I object to having my nose rubbed in the fact. “I’ll write to let her know either day is fine but that Thursday is slightly better. I wonder what she wants.”

“Funding for an all-woman archaeological dig, I shouldn’t wonder. That would be popular with the British authorities and the Zionists, would it not? And think of the attraction it would have for the pilgrims and the tourists. It’s a wonder the Americans haven’t thought of it.”

“Holmes, enough! Begone! I have work to do.”

“Come for a walk.”

“Not just now. Perhaps this evening I could take an hour off.”

“By this evening, you will be bogged down to the axles in the prophet Isaiah’s mud and too irritable to make a decent walking companion. You’ve been rubbing your bad shoulder for the last forty minutes although it is a warm afternoon, which means you need to get out and breathe some fresh air. Come.”

He held out one long hand to me. I looked down at the cramped lines marching across the page, capped my pen, and allowed him to pull me to my feet.

WE WALKED ALONG the cliffs rather than descending the precipitous beach path, and listened to the gulls cry and the waves surge on the shingle below. The good salt air filled my lungs, cleared my head and took the ache from my collarbone, and eventually my thoughts turned, not to the intricacies of Hebrew grammar but to the implications of the letter that lay on my desk.

“What do you know of the archaeology of Palestine, Holmes?”

“Other than what we discovered when we were there four and a half years ago—which trip, as I recall, was dominated by an extraordinary number of damp and hazardous underground chambers—almost nothing. I suspect that I shall know a great deal more before too much longer.”

“You think there is something to Miss Ruskin’s letter, then?”

“My dear Russell, I have not been a consulting detective for more than forty years for nothing. I can spot a case sniffing around my door even before it knows itself to be one. Despite what I said about allowing you to see her alone, your Miss Ruskin—yes, I know she is not yours, but she thinks she is—your Miss Ruskin wishes to present a puzzle to the partnership of Holmes and Russell, not merely to Mary Russell, a brilliant young star on the horizon of academic theology. Unless you think my standard degree of megalomania is becoming compounded by senility,” he added politely.

“Megalomania, perhaps; senility, never.” I stood and watched a small fishing boat lying off shore, and I wondered what to do. The work was going slowly, and I could ill afford to take even half a day away from it. On the other hand, it would be a joy to spend some time with that peculiar old lady whom I indeed remembered very well. Also, Holmes seemed interested. It would at least provide a distraction until I could decide what needed doing for him. “All right, we’ll have her here a day

sooner, then, on the Wednesday. I'll suggest the noon train. I'm certain Mrs Hudson can be persuaded to leave something for our tea, so we need not risk our visitor's health. I also think I'll go to Town tomorrow and drop by the British Museum for a while. Will you come?"

"Only if we can stay for the evening. They're playing Tchaikovsky's D at Covent Garden."

"And dinner at Simpson's?" I said lightly, ruthlessly ignoring the internal wail at the waste of time.

"But of course."

"Will you go to the BM with me?"

"Briefly, perhaps. I had a note from the owner of a rather bijou little gallery up the street, inviting me to view the canvas of that Spaniard, Picasso, that I retrieved for them last month. I should be interested to see it in its natural habitat, as it were, to determine if it makes any more sense there than it did in that warehouse on the docks where I found it. Although, frankly, I have my doubts."

"That's fine, then," I said politely. Suddenly, Holmes was not at my side but blocking my way, his hands on my shoulders and his face inches from mine.

"Admit it, Russell. You've been bored."

His words so echoed my own analysis of his mental state that I could only gape at him.

"You've been tucked into your books for a solid year now, ever since we came back from France. You might be able to convince yourself that you're nothing but a scholar, Russell, but you can't fool me. You're as hungry as I am for something to do."

Damn the man, he was right. He was wrong, too, of course—men have a powerful drive to simplify matters, and it would be convenient for him to dismiss the side of my life that did not involve him—but as soon as he said it, I could feel the hunger he was talking about, waking in me. I had in the past discovered the immense appeal of a life on the edge of things—walking a precipice, pitting oneself against a dangerous enemy, throwing one's mind against an impenetrable puzzle.

The waking was brief, as I ruthlessly knocked the phantasy back into its hole. If Dorothy Ruskin had a puzzle, it was not likely to be anything but mild and elderly. I sighed, and then, realising that Holmes was still staring into my face, I had to laugh.

"Holmes, we're a pair of hopeless romantics," I said, and we turned and walked back to the cottage.

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