

Prologue

August 1853

*The Central Criminal Court
at the Old Bailey, London*

She should have been listening to the judge. Instead, Mary's attention was focused on the flies swarming around her ankles in the prisoner's dock and their primary interest: the pool of stale urine at her feet. It wasn't hers. Some poor fool must have lost control of his bladder earlier in the day, but the puddle would remain until . . . well, until long after her case was finished, at any rate.

It was odd how her senses shifted. In the late afternoon heat, the flies' buzzing was the loudest sound in her mind. The judge's nasal tenor was far down the list, well after the persistent cackling of someone in the gallery. If she squinted in just the right way, she could make out a halo of loose, grayish hair. Mad? Or merely relieved that it was someone else in the dock?

The prosecutor—deformed by his wig, white powder drifting off it every time he turned his neck—had enjoyed himself hugely. He'd made much of her youth—

“How much more depraved is one so young, who has already trod so far and so fast through the thorny thickets of evil?”—and her dangerous looks—“Such pitch-black hair is a token of her pitch-black soul. Such evil should be nipped in the bud”—and by that cliché, he meant to hang her. She had not spoken in her own defense. She had nothing to say.

The judge’s voice, threading its way amid the excited droning of the flies, loomed suddenly close and intimate. “For the crime of housebreaking, Mary Lang, you are hereby sentenced to hang by the neck until you are dead. May God have mercy on your soul.” The last sentence sounded like mockery. How could it not?

There was some minor shuffling in the room but no murmurs of surprise. Mary lifted her chin and gazed steadily into the gallery, where the spectators looked uncomfortable in the late summer heat. Only one figure—a woman dressed in light mourning, her veil rolled back—met her eyes. And winked.

Mary blinked. When she looked again, the lady was gone. Then the wardress was dragging her from the prisoner’s box and leading her out of the courtroom, down the long, dung-and-onion-smelling corridor toward the cool damp of the cellar.

The wardress flung a brawny arm round her shoulder and jostled her roughly. “Don’t you faint, now, young woman.” Her voice was hoarse, with a West Country accent.

Caught off guard, Mary stumbled. "I won't," she muttered, but the woman shoved down onto Mary's shoulders again, hard enough to make her knees buckle.

"May the Lord have mercy on your puny weak soul, indeed!" Under the cover of her petticoats, the wardress kicked Mary's foot, sending her stumbling once again. "Lawsamercy, you scrawny brat, none of this nonsense!"

They had nearly reached the turnkey. Behind her back, the wardress administered a sharp twist to Mary's left wrist. The iron cuffs cut into her flesh, causing her to hiss in surprise. The woman shook her shoulders roughly, gabbling the whole time at the turnkey. "The bloody girl's fainting! I'm not having these fine-lady airs, that's for certain!" Her strident voice drowned out the responses of the nearby jailers. "A good ducking in the horse trough will sort her out!" cried the woman furiously.

Mary chose to go limp. What was another quarter of an hour's bullying to her? She was dragged outside and across the cobbled yard, the wardress still scolding and shaking her vigorously. The men clustered about the door, grinning at the spectacle. As she approached the trough in the corner of the courtyard, lugging Mary under her arm, the wardress produced a coarse handkerchief from her pocket and clamped it over Mary's nose and mouth. A new smell, sweet and cold, flooded her nostrils. She struggled for a moment, briefly bewildered by the expression in the woman's eyes.

And then the sky went black.

* * *

Was this death? Her mouth felt thick, as did her head. Her fingertips were numb. She twitched them experimentally and realized with a small shock that her wrists were no longer shackled. Indeed, she was floating, swaddled in linen and soft blankets. She turned her cheek to one side and rubbed against the pillow, catlike. The scent was pleasant and totally unfamiliar. No lake of burning fire so far. No heavenly choir, either. She saw no reason to move or even to open her eyes.

“Mary?”

She hadn’t considered that God might be female. Slowly, reluctantly, she raised heavy eyelids and focused on the speaker. The woman had changed her lavender mourning dress for something darker, but it was she: the lady who’d winked at her from the gallery. That meant this was neither hell nor heaven.

“How do you feel?”

The question seemed irrelevant. Mary let her gaze slide around the room—large, simply furnished, lit by candles—and back to the Winker. “I don’t know.”

“Your head might ache; chloroform sometimes has that effect, although we use as little as possible.”

Chloroform: a fancy word for a dangerous substance. She’d heard whispers of potions that knocked one out but always dismissed them as wishful lies.

“You must be thirsty.” The Winker offered a glass of something pale and cloudy. At Mary’s hesitation, she

smiled. "It's quite safe to drink." To demonstrate, she took a sip.

Mary's first taste was tentative. Then, as the cool liquid filled her mouth, she guzzled it greedily. Lemonade. She'd had it once before, a couple of years ago. Now she was sorry when it was all gone. Wiping her mouth, she looked at the lady. She still felt fuzzy-headed, but her curiosity was strong. "Why?"

"Why don't I begin with who and where? Then I'll get to why and how."

Mary nodded. She felt mocked.

The lady sat down beside the bed. "My name is Anne Treleaven," she began, "and I am the head teacher here at Miss Scrimshaw's Academy for Girls. Our founder was an eccentric and wealthy woman whose desire was to help women achieve a measure of independence. Education for girls in our country is generally very inferior, even for the rich, and many girls receive none at all. So Miss Scrimshaw founded a school."

She spoke quietly, but her eyes were sharp, and they rarely left Mary's face. "We are a little like a charity school, since most of our students would not normally be able to afford our fees. However, we are a very unusual institution in that we often select our students instead of waiting for them to come to us. We search for girls who would most benefit from the special training we offer." She paused. "We have chosen you."

Mary scowled. "I suppose you think that's generous.

What makes you think I want to be chosen? Suppose I *want* to hang?"

Instead of shock and outrage, Anne's face showed mild amusement. "Don't bristle. We don't intend to keep you here by force. You may leave at any time and go directly to the gallows, if you wish. But I hope you will at least listen to me for a few minutes before choosing."

Mary felt both churlish and childish. She shrugged.

"My colleagues have been watching you for some time. You know one of them as the wardress at the Old Bailey, of course; another observed you in Newgate prison during the weeks before your sentencing. They were both struck by your intelligence. They were also intrigued by the fact that you pled guilty instead of insisting upon a trial. Most people charged with capital crimes insist upon their innocence, whether they are truly innocent or not. But you didn't. Why not, Mary?"

After a pause, Mary shrugged again. "Maybe I was fed up."

Anne's eyes glinted. "With lying? Stealing?" She refilled Mary's glass and passed it to her. "Or perhaps with living?"

Mary's blink was the equivalent of a full confession from another, less hardened, girl.

"You are surprisingly resigned to death, for one so young."

"Twelve years is enough for me," she said. Well-meaning strangers—women, especially—were forever

trying to coax her into a tearful confession of her life's sufferings. She hadn't fallen for that sort of rubbish in years.

Anne raised one thin eyebrow. "That is what my colleagues suspected, and that is why we brought you to the Academy: in the hope that you might find the prospect of a different sort of life more tolerable."

"As an honest little maid-of-all-work, you mean? So that fine ladies can have the joy of beating me, all for eight quid a year?" She spat on the carpet. "Not I."

Anne's expression hardened. "No, Mary, not that. Not ever that."

"You're mad, then. There's nothing else—not for my sort."

"You're wrong about that."

"Am I?"

"You're clever, Mary. And fierce. And ambitious. There are a few professions open to women; you might join any of these." Anne paused and inclined her head. "And there are one or two other possibilities available to women of exceptional abilities . . . but to speak of these now would be somewhat, shall we say, premature."

This was absurd. Nobody ever got a second chance. Mary knew that much, at least. Oh, Lord—was the unexpected praise going to her head? "What's your angle?" she demanded.

Again, Anne appeared unsurprised by the question, the rudeness. "As I explained before, our aim is to offer

girls an independent life. Too many women feel forced to marry; even more lack that choice and resort to prostitution, or worse, in order to survive. We believe that a sound education will assist our graduates to support themselves." She paused. "Not all our pupils succeed. Some girls prefer the idea of marriage to hard work, not realizing that marriage to a brute or a drunkard is more difficult than any profession. But they choose their paths. We cannot force our ideas upon our pupils.

"But I digress. My colleagues see that you have a taste for independence and the desire to make your own way in the world. You are accustomed to making decisions and caring for yourself. Here at the Academy, we can give you a better chance of achieving that independence. We can help you to escape your life as a thief—to reinvent yourself, if you like. A chance to improve your expectations . . . to become what you might have been had fate been kinder in the first instance."

Mary swallowed hard. This woman's ideas were extraordinary—a giddy, improbable revelation. How was it possible for her feelings to change so quickly? Five minutes earlier, she'd been cursing the woman who had snatched her out of jail and away from the certainty of death. Now she was terrified that all this glowing promise might be merely a cheap confidence trick. "You still haven't answered my question," she said gruffly. She feared that her voice was shaking. "What's in it for you? What's the catch?"

Anne's eyes, she noticed suddenly, were steel gray. "I hate to see girls become victims," she said with quiet intensity. "You very nearly were. That's what's in it for me." Suddenly, she folded her fingers round Mary's cold hand. "And the catch, my dear, is that you must be willing to work hard for it. That is all."

That handclasp shocked Mary more than a sudden blow. When was the last time she'd been touched? The wardress, of course, had knocked her about a little—all for a good cause, apparently. Men had tried to grope her skirts in the streets. Drunks had reeled against her in mobbed alleys and public houses. Small children had bumped against her as they careened through crowds. But the last time someone had touched her, Mary, with affection . . . that had not happened since her mother had died.

Shaken, she pulled her hand away. *This can't be true*, she said to herself. *This must be another dead end. There is no hope. You learned that years ago, you little fool.* She drew a steadying breath and opened her lips to snarl all this. Instead, one word came out in a faint voice.

"Please. . . ."

One

Good Friday, 2 April 1858

Miss Scrimshaw's Academy for Girls

St. John's Wood, London

Mary took the attic stairs two by two. It was tricky in a steel crinoline and buttoned boots, but she needed some sort of outlet for her nervous energy. Since requesting a meeting with the head teachers earlier that day, she hadn't been able to concentrate on much. Her first attempt at a knock was shaky, her knuckles barely scraping the heavy oak door. She overcompensated with a pair of rugged thumps and cringed. It sounded as though she were trying to break down the door.

"Come in," came the crisp command.

She swallowed, wiped her palms on her skirts, and turned the polished brass knob. The door glided silently on its hinges, revealing a bland scene: a pair of middle-class women taking afternoon tea. While the ladies looked conventional enough, Mary had quickly learned that between them, they controlled everything about the Academy. "G-good afternoon, Miss Treleaven," she managed to murmur. "Mrs. Frame."

Anne beckoned her forward. "Come in, Mary. Do sit down."

"Th-thank you." She dropped into the nearest seat, a slippery horsehair chair that immediately attempted to deposit her onto the floor. She didn't normally stammer. Never had. This was a devil of a time to begin.

Anne poured a third cup of tea and handed it to her. It was a very warm day, especially up in the attic. As a curl of steam reached her nostrils, Mary blinked, her nervousness doubling. She was holding a cup of Lapsang souchong, a tea the ladies generally reserved for special occasions.

"Would you like a slice of cake?" Anne indicated the seedcake on the tray at her elbow.

The idea made Mary's stomach clench. "Thank you, no." The more she tried to steady her nerves, the more her cup rattled in its saucer.

"You wished to speak with us." To Mary's surprise, Anne rose and began to pace restlessly before the cold fireplace. Mary's glance flicked toward Felicity Frame, who remained seated. The two women seemed opposites in all ways: Anne was thin, plain, and quietly serious, while Felicity was tall and curvy, a striking beauty with a rich laugh.

Mary moistened her lips. "Yes." When they remained silent, she supposed there was nothing else to do but begin. "I am very grateful to you for rescuing me from the gallows and for the education you have given me. I owe you everything, quite literally. But I have been thinking of

my future, and I wish—that is, I do not think . . .” Mary faltered. Her carefully rehearsed speech was evaporating before their grave, curious faces.

She took a scalding sip of tea. *Why serve a special tea today?* A strong sense of guilt prompted her to speak quickly and bluntly. “What I mean to say is that for some time I have been questioning my position as an assistant teacher. While I enjoy living here at the Academy, I know that I’m not very good at the work. I do like the girls, but I lack the patience to be a teacher.”

She hurried on without looking up. “I’m afraid it gets worse. Two years ago, I took lessons in shorthand and typing, but I do not find the repetitive life of a clerk appealing. Last year, I began preliminary medical training with the idea of becoming a nurse. But the matrons did not have confidence in me, and I was not invited to continue.” She swallowed, the taste of that humiliation still strong in her mouth. “Recently, I have been wondering: Is it not possible—is it even reasonable—to expect something more from my work?”

Anne looked mildly curious. “What do you mean, ‘something more’?”

Mary writhed inwardly. “It sounds foolish, I know. . . . I mean a sense of pride and active interest in work . . . even enjoyment. Perhaps satisfaction?” There. It was out. Ungrateful as she was, it was out.

There was a short pause, but not a flicker of surprise or disappointment showed on either face. Anne spoke

first. "How long have you been teaching the junior girls now, Mary?"

"For a year; I began when I was about sixteen."

"And you have lived here at the school since you were twelve, of course."

"From the day you rescued me from the Old Bailey." Mary flushed. "At least, I was roughly twelve . . . as you know, I've no birth certificate. But I'm certain I was born in 1841."

"Nearly one-third of your life, then, has been spent with us."

Mary nodded. "Yes. I know I must sound terribly selfish."

A faint smile passed over Anne's lips, but it was gone in a moment. "Let us leave the question of gratitude to one side. You have reached the age of seventeen. You find yourself . . . stifled . . . by the routine of the schoolroom."

Mary nodded. "Yes."

"Do you wish to return to your life as it was before you were imprisoned? Housebreaking and picking pockets?"

"No!" Mary realized that she had half shouted the word. She moderated her voice. "Not in the least. But I long for a little independence . . . for a different sort of work."

"Ah." Again, that satisfied gleam passed over Anne's features. "What sort of work do you envision?"

Mary shook her head miserably. "That is what I do not know. I hoped you would be able to advise me."

Felicity spoke for the first time. "Are you quite certain that you wish to work at all? Many girls try to marry in order to escape poverty."

Mary shook her head firmly. "No. I have no desire to marry."

"Other women find lovers to provide for them."

Mary nearly dropped her teacup in amazement. "Mrs. Frame? You are surely not recommending . . ."

Felicity smiled faintly. "I am not recommending anything. But I wish to set aside conventional morality and speak of practical possibilities. You are not beautiful, but you are intelligent and rather . . . striking. Exotic, even. Being a mistress is a possibility."

"I hate being looked at! People are forever asking whether I'm foreign, just because I haven't got yellow hair and round blue eyes."

"That's my point: unusual looks are sometimes better than mere prettiness."

What a preposterous thing to say. And just what was Felicity suggesting, talking about her "exotic" looks? Did she suspect . . . ? Mary struggled to find her point. "Besides, a mistress is just as dependent as a wife." As the words left her mouth, she remembered hearing a rumor about Mrs. Frame's own colorful personal history . . . but it was too late to retract her remark—were she so inclined.

Felicity arched one eyebrow. "You have been well trained in the philosophy of the school, Mary. We do

not encourage girls to build their lives on the whims of men.”

Anne spoke again. “Very well. That is your view. Tell us, now, about your early life and your family.” At Mary’s look of surprise, she smiled. “We do know the details, but I should like to hear it from you once more.”

So this was a test of perspective. “I was born in east London—Poplar,” she began. She spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. Could she trust these ladies with the full truth about her past? About her family? How would they respond? They thought they already knew everything about her. . . .

“Is everything all right?” asked Felicity.

Mary blinked, unaware that she’d halted. “Of course.” She took a deep breath and forced herself to continue. “My father was a merchant sailor and my mother an Irish-born seamstress. Although my father was frequently at sea, I remember that my parents were happy together. Their only real grief was that my two younger brothers both died in infancy.” She paused and swallowed hard. “When I was seven or eight years old, my father’s ship was wrecked and the entire crew reported dead. The shock and grief made my mother very ill, and she lost her job as a seamstress through her illness. She was expecting another child at the time, and she lost that, too.

“When she was a little better, Mother tried to get piecework so that she could work at home. But the piecework paid next to nothing. She then tried going

out as a charwoman, cleaning houses, but she only got twopence a day for the work. It wasn't enough to keep us both." Her voice was detached now, toneless. "Mother didn't care about herself, but she had me to look after. She soon had no choice: she became a prostitute. Late at night, when she thought I was asleep, she brought men back to our lodgings. That is how I learned to steal. Sometimes they would fall asleep, and I would take coins from their pockets." She drew another long breath and looked up at the two women defiantly. "It was never very much; I never took notes—only coins. I must have thought . . ." She shook her head. "I don't know what I thought.

"It's an old story, I suppose. Mother soon became ill. We didn't have enough money for medicine from the apothecary, and the neighbors kept away. All I know is that even with the bits I'd stolen, we hadn't enough money to live." She paused. "I don't remember much about the time immediately after Mother died. A few months later, I had learned how to pick pockets properly, and then someone taught me to pick locks as well. I dressed as a boy; it was easier and safer.

"I became quite good at housebreaking for a time. Then I began to take larger risks, foolish risks, really, and I was not terribly surprised that I was caught. The only mystery is that I was not caught earlier. And you know the rest—that I was sentenced to hang." Mary flashed the ladies a grateful look. "You saved me."

There was a minute's pause. When Anne spoke again,

her tone was unusually gentle. "Thank you, Mary. It is to your credit that you are able to tell the story of your early life so clearly and without extreme bitterness." She half smiled. "As you know, we at the Academy place great emphasis on strength of character.

"Well, my dear?" Anne turned to Felicity, her voice crisp once more. "How do we assess Mary's professional prospects? That she is intelligent and ambitious is evident."

"She is loyal and capable of great discretion," Felicity added with approval. "She is also brave, tenacious, and decisive. And she strives to do what she believes is right."

Mary glowed under their warm and wholly unexpected praise.

"However, she has a bad temper," Anne noted coolly. "She dislikes correction and goes to great lengths to avoid being in the wrong. She is shy of strangers, particularly men. That is understandable, given her childhood, but a fault nevertheless."

Mary's proud glow became a flush of shame. They were all too correct.

"Mary, you look heated," observed Anne. "Do you wish to continue this conversation?"

Mary swallowed hard. "Yes," she whispered.

"Very well. We understand your philosophy and know your character." Anne looked at Felicity, who nodded once, very slightly. "As it happens, Mary, we have

a post in mind that we think will suit your abilities very well.”

Mary looked up eagerly.

“But before we continue,” said Anne sternly, “you must give me your solemn word that you will never reveal any part of our conversation, or hint thereof, to any other living being. Do you understand me?”

She swallowed and nodded. “Yes.”

“Swear it.”

“I give you my solemn word that I will never reveal any part of what you are about to tell me to another soul.”

Anne’s features relaxed, and she nodded with satisfaction. Stepping to one side of the fireplace, she slipped her fingers behind the polished oak mantel. There was a barely audible click. Then, on the wall to Mary’s left, one panel of faded wallpaper swung aside to reveal a dark, narrow opening in the wall.

Mary’s mouth dropped open in amazement, and she dragged her fascinated gaze back to Anne’s face, which wore a small, triumphant smile.

“Let us enter the headquarters of the Agency.”

Shaking with excitement, Mary rose and followed the women into the narrow opening and through a short tunnel. Although the tunnel was not lit, its bricks were dry and free of cobwebs—evidence of regular use. They emerged in a large, plain room containing a round table with four straight-backed chairs. Anne and Felicity set

down the oil lamps they had been carrying. The yellow light flickered over the exposed bricks and rough wooden floorboards, making the room seem oddly cozy.

The women each took a seat round the table, and Anne smiled at Mary warmly. "I always hoped you would come to us one day, my dear—and you did. But I have talked too much already, perhaps giving you the impression that I am in charge. I am not; the Agency is a collective, although only two of us are present this evening. Felicity, would you care to explain to Mary what we do here?"

Felicity cleared her throat; she had been unusually quiet thus far. "As you know, the goal of Miss Scrimshaw's Academy for Girls is to give young women the means to achieve some form of independence. Marriage is an uncertain gamble, and the primary types of work open to women depend upon the good nature of one's employer. That is why most governesses and domestic servants are so shamefully abused."

Anne vigorously nodded her agreement. "Precisely. Although a few professional opportunities for women exist, it is our aim to train women to do more than teach children and serve meals. But you know this already, and you have been helping to prepare young women in this way, too." She paused and glanced at Felicity. "I beg your pardon, Flick. Do go on."

Mary bit back a smile on hearing the affectionate nickname. She had never before heard the grave, thoughtful Anne Treleaven speak so informally.

Felicity turned her marvelous eyes on Mary, her gaze almost hypnotic now. "The Agency complements the Academy. Here, we turn the stereotype of the meek female servant to our advantage. Because women are believed to be foolish, silly, and weak, we are in a position to observe and learn more effectively than a man in a similar position. Our clients employ us to gather information, often on highly confidential subjects. We place our agents in very sensitive situations. But while a man in such a position might be subject to suspicion, we find that women—posing as governesses or domestic servants, for example—are often totally ignored."

She permitted herself a small smile. "We also find that well-trained women tend to be more perceptive, as well as less arrogant, in their observations. They are often, shall we say, less prone to error—not because they are cleverer or more fortunate but because they make fewer assumptions and take less for granted. And, contrary to stereotype, they are often more logical." She looked at Mary keenly. "Have you any questions thus far?"

Mary nodded. Her fingers clenched hard on either side of her chair. "How many members does the Agency have? Do your clients know that your agents are female? When was the Agency founded? And by whom? Is Miss Scrimshaw involved?"

They laughed at her eagerness, and again it was Felicity who answered. "The Agency was founded some ten years ago, and Anne and I were among its first

operatives. We are now its official heads and daily managers, although major decisions are made collectively. However, for reasons of security, you will almost never meet other agents face to face.

“We do not discuss our operatives with our clients. They are attracted by our reputation, but we disclose to them very little beyond the information they seek. We find that to be in the best interests of all involved. We are also highly selective in our clients. We decline to work for criminal organizations or those whose activities we find undesirable or dubious. And no, Miss Scrimshaw is not involved with the Agency . . . although we believe she would approve of our actions.”

Mary’s eyes were wide. “And you really think I might be fit for this sort of work?”

Felicity’s voice was deep and rich. “We had been debating for some time whether or not to approach you. We were each convinced that you had the potential to become an agent, but we were equally concerned that the work might remind you too much of your past. We had no desire to make you unhappy, and we did not want you to attempt the work simply to please us.” She smiled brilliantly. “But you have come to us, instead.”

“Let us not congratulate ourselves prematurely,” Anne announced in her usual brisk manner. “Mary, you must still listen to the assignment we propose and decide whether or not you wish to undertake it. And before that, we must turn to the question of skill.”

“Skill?”

“We are interested in your skills of observation, Mary. Close your eyes and picture the room in which we received you. Can you tell me how many lamps there were?”

Mary found it easy to summon a detailed image of the room and her employers. “Three,” she said with confidence.

“What are the dimensions of that room?”

“Roughly eighteen by twelve; the ceiling is about ten feet high and plastered smooth.”

“And the table that was to your left?”

“It is round and made of walnut—about three feet high and eighteen inches in diameter. It has three legs. There was nothing on it.”

“What jewelry am I wearing today?”

Mary paused to consider. Again, a mental image of Anne clicked into place. “An oval brooch made of gold and amber. It has a filigree border.”

“And what time do you estimate it to be now?”

“I came to meet you at half past four. It must now be a little after five o’clock.”

“Thank you, Mary.” Anne nodded as though checking off an item on a list. “You did well—unusually so. I also believe you know something of the art of pugilism.”

“Boxing?” Mary smiled at her employer’s delicate phrasing. “I have no technique, and I fight dirty. But growing up near the docks, I learned to protect myself. I believe that all young women should know how; that is

why I began teaching some elementary maneuvers to the older girls.”

Anne nodded briskly once more. “The first phase of training, involving observation skills, self-defense, and a few other useful techniques, normally lasts for several months. However, given your background, this may feel like unnecessary repetition. Mrs. Frame and I have agreed that you may—if you choose—compress the initial training period into one month. It will mean a great deal of intensive work, and you may prefer to undergo the usual training period, which allows for a little more leisure and a greater margin of error. The choice is entirely yours.”

Mary paused, suddenly dizzy at the prospect. In the space of an hour, her entire life had been transformed by these women, much as it had five years ago. She gazed at them but couldn’t read their expressions. Felicity appeared casually unconcerned. Anne’s gold-rimmed spectacles hid the expression in her gray eyes. And Mary thought she understood: their expectations didn’t matter. It was entirely her decision. “I should like to begin as soon as possible,” she said, her voice firm and clear. “I choose the intensive, one-month training.”

“If we start tomorrow morning,” said Felicity suddenly, “you’ll be ready to commence practice field-work in May. The timing is excellent!”

Mary sat bolt upright. “Why is that?”

A look of amused resignation rippled across Anne’s face. “Felicity, you’re getting ahead of yourself.”

Felicity bit her lip. "I'm sorry; I thought we talked about this: that if Mary knows what she's training toward, she'll be better able to focus and prepare."

A sharp tingle ran up and down Mary's spine, making her scalp prickle.

There was an appreciable pause. Then Anne began to speak, her voice dry and dispassionate. "During the mutiny in India last year, a number of Hindu temples and homes were robbed of precious jewels and sculptures. In at least two instances, these very unique items have made their way into private British collections. We have been asked to investigate a merchant who is believed to have handled a significant number of the smuggled artifacts. He is suspected of selling them to crooked antiquities dealers in London and Paris."

Mary frowned, disciplining her thoughts away from the sheer excitement of the situation and toward the problem described. "This task is beyond the scope of the police?"

"Yes and no," said Felicity. "These crimes did not occur on English soil and there is still no evidence linking our suspect to them. As such, Scotland Yard cannot act. Instead, the Yard has engaged us to find the connection and retrieve the evidence. It is a freedom available to us, as an independent agency.

"Our suspect's name is Henry Thorold. He is connected with the East India Company, the Far East Trading Company, and a number of American interests. Although he has warehouses in Bristol, Liverpool, and Calais, his

operations center primarily in his London warehouse, located on the north bank of the Thames.

“Thorold has, in the past, been suspected of financial crimes—evading import taxes, some eight to ten years ago and, more recently, defrauding his insurers—but nothing was proven. We believe that our agent will be more effective. She describes it as a straightforward job that is likely to take a month or so. Of course, international trade is always precarious and subject to extreme weather conditions; ships might be long delayed, and our priority is to collect a significant and conclusive amount of evidence.”

Mary nodded, trying to appear calm and patient. “I see. But you—you did mention that there might be a role for me in this case?”

Felicity smiled. “Not a major role, certainly. We already have an agent on the case who is conducting the bulk of the investigation. But there is a second post we thought might serve as a training ground for a new agent.” She glanced at Anne. “Perhaps, Miss Treleaven, you could describe the post?”

“Certainly. Mrs. Thorold is an invalid who believes that her daughter, Angelica, requires a companion. She would prefer to engage a younger woman—not so much a chaperone as a paid friend, close to her daughter’s age. The daughter, I gather, is rather spoiled and accustomed to having her own way.” Anne paused, a glint of humor in her eyes. “I expect your classroom experience will prove useful to you, in that respect.”

Mary thought of the month long training period. "But won't the post be filled by someone else in a month's time?" she asked.

"I think not. I'm due to meet Mrs. Thorold next week in my capacity as head teacher at the Academy. The negotiations will take some time, and Mrs. Thorold appears to be fairly slow-moving, in general."

Hmm. It sounded as though the ladies had been thinking of her all along. "And if I hadn't chosen the one-month intensive training . . . ?"

"If, at the end of the month we deem you unready, another agent will take the post and you will meet with an equally useful training assignment once your training is complete," said Anne firmly. "You mustn't think that this assignment depends upon you; that would be a gross overstatement of the importance of your role."

Mary nodded, blushing.

"However," said Felicity a little more gently, "you may train with this particular assignment in mind. It will be an opportunity for you to practice being insignificant and meek."

Mary digested that. The Academy trained its pupils to think rationally, to carry themselves with confidence, and to stand by their opinions. Presumably, a stereotypical lady's companion would have little use for those skills. "May I know more about the assignment?"

Anne studied her for a moment. "I don't suppose it could hurt. You'll receive a more thorough briefing before

you begin the assignment—*if* you receive the assignment. But, in essence: the agent posted in the Thorold household will listen for news of a particular shipment coming from the Malabar Coast. There is a secretary living in the house—a young man who has been with the family for less than a year, named Gray. There is a chance that Thorold and Gray might discuss illegal business at home.”

Mary nodded. “That seems straightforward enough. Is there anything else that I—that the agent, I mean—should do as well?”

Anne smiled at her disappointment. “You did mention that you’re impatient. No, Mary. This is to be your first experience of fieldwork. We’ve chosen it precisely because it’s a safe place in which to learn your craft.”

“I understand,” Mary murmured. “I’m a quick learner.”

“I am sure you have further questions, but before we continue—” Anne leaned forward, her eyes intent. “Mary, at this time, you are still free to choose your course. You may leave us now and attempt to forget that this conversation tonight ever took place. Or you may choose to join the Agency. But should you choose to enroll, we must know that you are fully committed to the Agency and to its principles.”

Felicity folded her long, shapely hands together. “The Agency is a covert organization, and we require absolute discretion from each of our members. Being a secret agent carries with it many known risks, as well as the constant

possibility of unknown threats. Think carefully before you choose." She straightened her posture, seeming to grow more majestic with each moment. "In becoming a secret agent, Mary, you become part of a new family. When you are on assignment, we will be the only people who know where you are and what your purpose is.

"We will support and assist you in any way possible, and we will never ask you to go against your conscience. But there are times when you will feel very alone indeed. Don't rush, Mary, and consider carefully. We will not think less of you if you choose to return to the schoolroom."

Mary took a deep breath and sat tall. Her decision was already made. Her voice was perfectly steady as she said quietly, "I am ready to choose. I accept your terms, and I will carry out all assignments to the best of my abilities."

There was a moment's silence. And another. And a third. Then came the sound of chairs scraping against wooden floorboards as the ladies stood and clasped Mary's hands in theirs.

Anne beamed, pride ringing in her voice. "Mary, welcome to the Agency."