

Prologue

Midnight, 30 June 1859

St. Stephen's Tower, Palace of Westminster

A sobbing man huddles on a narrow ledge, clawing at his eyes to shield them from the horror far below. It is dark, thus his terror is irrational; even if he wanted to, he could not make out what he's done, let alone note the gruesome details. Still, his mind's eye insists on the scene: gory, explicit, final. Imagination, not remorse, is at the core of his violent hysteria.

Within the hour he will exhaust himself and even fall asleep for a few minutes. When he wakes—with a start—reason will return and bring with it a degree of fatalism. Two paths now lie before him, and the choice is no longer his. He will pick himself up, carefully not looking over the edge. He will right his clothing, inspect his hands with care, and return home. And then he will wait to see what the future holds.

And he will vow to reveal the truth—but only at the time of his death.

One

Saturday, 2 July

St. John's Wood, London

The freedoms of being a boy, reflected Mary, were many. She could swing her arms as she walked. She could run if she wished. She looked tidy enough to avoid police suspicion but shabby enough to be invisible to all others. Then there was the odd sensation of lightness that came of having cropped hair; she hadn't realized how heavy her own hair was until it was gone. Her breasts were tightly bound, and even if they did ache a little at such treatment, she could at least scratch herself with impunity, scratching in public being one of those Boy Things she ought to enjoy while she could. It was therefore a shame that she wasn't enjoying the situation. Wearing boy's clothing was comfortable and amusing, and she'd enjoyed her escapades in breeches during her first-ever assignment. But this—today—was entirely different. It was serious, and she still had no idea why.

Her instructions were simple enough: to costume herself as a twelve-year-old boy and attend a meeting of the

Agency at three o'clock this afternoon. No further explanation had been offered, and by now, Mary knew better than to ask for more details. Anne and Felicity always gave precisely as much information as they deemed appropriate. Of course, such knowledge hadn't stopped her from fretting about the possibilities yesterday, overnight, and all this morning. Over the past year, she'd delighted in her training: tests, lessons, and brief assignments that offered a taste of the life to come. But there was little pleasure in her this morning. What did Anne and Felicity want? And what sort of assignment could be connected with her present guise?

The Agency had been created and was staffed entirely by women, and its genius lay in the exploitation of female stereotypes. Its secret agents disguised themselves as maids, governesses, clerks, lady companions, and other humble, powerless characters. In most situations, no matter how dangerous, few people would suspect a subservient woman of being intelligent and observant, let alone a professional spy. With this as the Agency's guiding philosophy, it made no sense whatsoever for Mary to be dressed as a boy.

She raked her fingers through her hair, then stopped abruptly midstroke: that was a girl's gesture. And the only thing worse than not understanding what she was doing was compounding it by doing a poor job, too. As she neared the top of Acacia Road, where the Agency was headquartered, Mary pressed her lips together and took

several deep breaths. Her cowardly impulse was to turn and make one last circuit of Regent's Park, to spend just a little more time thinking matters through. As though she hadn't already been marching about St. John's Wood for the past two hours. As though physical movement might still her mind and soothe her nerves. As though she was calm enough to sort through the swirl of emotions clouding her brain.

It was time to act, not to think. A few brisk steps took her to the house with its wrought-iron gates and polished brass nameplate: **MISS SCRIMSHAW'S ACADEMY FOR GIRLS**. The Academy had been her home for years now. But today, looking at the nameplate, she willed herself to look at it as a stranger might—specifically, as a twelve-year-old boy might. The house was large and well kept, with a tidy garden and flagged path. But in contrast with those of the neighboring houses, the front steps were swept but not whitened—an essential task that proclaimed to the world that one kept servants and kept them busy rewhitening the steps each time a caller marred them with footprints. The Academy's irregularity here was the only sign of the most unusual institution that lay within.

Suddenly, the front door swung open and disgorged a pair of girls—or, rather, young ladies. They were neatly dressed, neither at the height of fashion nor in the depths of dowdiness. They were having an animated conversation. And they looked curiously at Mary, whose nose was still inches from the closed gate.

“Are you lost?” asked the taller of the two as they approached the gate.

Mary shook her head. “No, miss.” Her voice came out higher than she wanted, and she cleared her throat hastily. “I was bid come here.”

A fine wrinkle appeared on the girl’s forehead. “By whom?”

“I mean, I’ve a letter to deliver.”

The girl held out her hand. “Then you may give it to me.”

Mary shook her head again. “Can’t, miss. I’m charged to give it to Mrs. Frame and no one else. Is this her house?” She’d spent all morning working on her inflection, trying to get the accent right while keeping her voice gruff.

The girl looked imperious. “You may trust me; I’m the head girl at this Academy.”

Mary knew exactly who Alice Fernie was. Head girl, indeed! She was only head of her year. “Can’t, miss. Orders.”

Head Girl’s face twisted into a scolding look, but before she could speak again, her companion said, “Never mind, Alice. We’ll be late if we stop to argue with him.”

“I’m not *arguing*; I’m just saying . . .”

The second girl unlatched the gate and nodded kindly to Mary. “Go on, then.”

Mary tugged her cap respectfully and dodged around the pair, leaving Alice scowling into the road. As she walked around to the side door—the front door wasn’t

for the likes of humbly dressed messenger boys—she grinned broadly. Her disguise had passed well enough before Alice and Martha Mason, which was a start.

Her small stock of confidence plummeted, though, as she walked down the familiar corridors, heavy boots shuffling against the carpet runners. It was one thing to slip past a pair of schoolgirls, and another to confront the managers of the Agency. As she neared the heavy oak door of Anne Treleaven's office, her stomach twisted and she felt a wave of dizziness. She'd been too overwrought to eat breakfast. Or, for that matter, last night's dinner.

As she raised one hand to knock, she had a sudden memory of doing precisely this, feeling exactly this way, just over a year earlier. That was when she'd learned of the existence of the Agency and embarked on her training as a secret agent. And here she was, not fourteen months later, feeling as confused and anxious as she had back then. The thought gave her courage. She was not the same girl she'd been last spring—untrained, ignorant, hotheaded. Over the past year she'd learned so much. But it wasn't the physical techniques—sleight of hand, disguise, combat—that showed how she'd matured. It was her understanding of people, of calculated risk, that showed how she'd changed—as well as what remained for her to learn. It was all thanks to these women. She trusted them. And that trust would conquer the fear that made such a hard knot in her stomach.

Somehow.

* * *

"You ought not have accepted the contract, Felicity."

Felicity Frame's confident smile did not waver. "It's an excellent contract: interesting, lucrative, and one that brings us to the attention of certain Powers That Be at Westminster. If we impress them with our work in this instance, this could be the start of a whole new era for the Agency."

Anne Treleven was careful to keep her expression neutral. "Such grandiose claims do not change the fact that you acted inappropriately. We've never before accepted work without making a joint decision."

"I hadn't time to consult and discuss; I had to move quickly in order to secure the client." Felicity paused and studied Anne's face. "You're still cross with me."

"I'm not cross." Anne's voice vibrated with suppressed tension. "But I am concerned about both your actions and your plan for carrying out the work."

Felicity looked suddenly weary. "Don't tell me—"

A knock on the door interrupted them. Four hesitant small raps, to be precise.

Felicity shot Anne a look. "Expecting someone?"

"No." The clock on Anne's desk showed it was just before eleven o'clock. "Come in."

The door opened slowly to reveal a slight, scruffy-looking boy. He wore a clean but much-patched suit of clothes, a round-brimmed cap, and unpolished boots that made a heavy clumping sound on the wooden floor as he advanced.

Anne frowned. "Who are you?"

The boy slowly tugged off his cap and wedged it between elbow and ribs. His hair was dark and badly cut. "Mark, ma'am." He paused, and then grinned wryly. "Mark Quinn."

Anne's jaw went slack.

Felicity gave a strange, high-pitched squawk.

Mary swept them both a neat little bow.

After her initial paralysis, Anne jumped up and grasped Mary by the shoulders. "Look at you! I can't—you—how—?"

Mary grinned and twirled about in a distinctly unboyish manner. She'd never heard Anne sputter before.

Felicity, too, came over to inspect her face. "Turn toward the light."

Anne's recovery was swift. "Well, my dear," she said with artificial calm, "you make a charming boy."

"Did you cut your own hair?" demanded Felicity.

"Yes, Mrs. Frame."

A subtle look of satisfaction crept over her face. "Rather a drastic step, don't you think?"

"I didn't think you would ask me to dress as a boy except for a serious purpose."

"Precisely."

"We arranged to meet with you this afternoon," said Anne. "I suppose you came early on purpose?"

Mary nodded. "I thought it a better test of the disguise."

“A sensible initiative.”

“Thank you, Miss Treleven.” Mary glowed at the restrained praise. Anne was never lavish with compliments; even such measured approval meant much from her.

“Since you’re here, we may as well have our meeting,” said Felicity with patent satisfaction. “Unless, Miss Treleven, you’ve an objection . . . ?”

A look that Mary couldn’t decipher flickered between the two managers. There was a prolonged silence, broken at last by Anne. “Do begin, Mrs. Frame.”

Felicity smiled and passed Mary an illustrated newspaper printed in lurid colors. “We may as well start here.”

THE EYE ON LONDON

“NEWS FOR THE PEOPLE”

FRIDAY, 1 JULY 1859

CURSE OF THE CLOCK TOWER!

THE GHOST OF PARLIAMENT STRIKES AGAIN?

Late last night, tragedy struck outside the Houses of Parliament: master carpenter John Wick, 32, of Lambeth, fell to his death from the pinnacle of St. Stephen’s Tower, better known as the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament. It is not known how he came to fall from the 300-foot-high tower, which is still under construction. The Metropolitan Police refuse to confirm whether or not the death was an accident, but the building site was cordoned off this morning and is likely to remain so for the entire day. It was surrounded for the better part of the morning by a circle of builders and other laborers, who narrowly observed

the travails of the police and other officials as they carried out their grisly duties.

Mrs. Betty Hawden, proprietress of a small coffee shop across from the Houses of Parliament, witnessed the removal of the unfortunate corpse early this morning. "It was terrible, just dreadful," she said, still visibly shaken, although speaking several hours afterward. "His poor broken body . . . and the expression on his face!" Owing to its convenient proximity to the building site, Mrs. Hawden's coffee shop was a hive of activity earlier today, with many of the dead man's workmates and acquaintances coming in to hear "the latest." And "the latest" generally included a discussion of the subject which official sources continue to deny, and which we at the *Eye on London* vow to pursue—**THE CURSE OF THE CLOCK TOWER.**

There followed a series of vivid illustrations depicting scenes of struggle, blood, and horror which corresponded only loosely to the article in question.

Mary shook her head and looked up at Anne and Felicity. "I must be reading the wrong article," she said. "Did you mean the one about the ghost of parliament?"

Anne nodded.

Mary scanned the pictures swiftly and shook her head again. "I'm sorry; I don't understand what this could possibly have to do with the Agency. Or, frankly, why we're even looking at this scandal sheet." Her fingertips were already smudged with cheap ink.

Felicity tilted her head to one side. "You don't think we can learn from the gutter press?"

“Well, not *facts*,” said Mary. “I suppose it’s useful for the perspective it provides: someone, somewhere in London, might believe in the ghost of the clock tower. But we know better.” She searched her two employers’ faces. “Don’t we?”

Felicity grinned, a broad, toothy, unladylike smile. “We think we do. But this news item definitely has to do with the Agency, and specifically with you.”

Had she been alone with Felicity, Mary might have risked a joke about an Agency for the Control of Supernatural Phenomena. However, Anne’s presence meant that she merely said, “Please tell me more.”

“Setting aside the question of ghosts,” said Felicity, “a suspicious death occurred two nights ago at St. Stephen’s Tower. The accident occurred despite the presence of night watchmen at the Houses of Parliament, in a highly public part of town. And the death occurred after hours, which is certainly suggestive.”

Mary swallowed. She’d been too quick to assume that the entire story was a fabrication, dead man and all. “So the authorities are concerned with the cause of the carpenter’s—Mr. Wick’s—death?”

“Mr. Wick was a bricklayer, not a carpenter; the article is, as you might expect, riddled with errors.” Amusement curved Felicity’s full lips. “But his death demands an explanation. This is normally a task for the police, of course. Scotland Yard have inspected the site and found no conclusive evidence. No witnesses have come forward.

There is to be an inquest on Wednesday, but if no other evidence is uncovered, the verdict will have to be one of death by misadventure."

Misadventure. It seemed a coy, silly way of saying "ghastly accident."

"And the Agency . . . ?" asked Mary. Things were falling into place now, but after jumping to one conclusion, she was reluctant to make other assumptions.

"We've been asked by the first commissioner of the Parliamentary Committee of Works to inquire into two related matters: the first is to monitor any gossip or anxiety about Mr. Wick's death. We may pick up information that Scotland Yard is unable to uncover, simply because we'll be on site in an unofficial capacity."

Mary's skin tingled at the word *we*. She had the prospect of becoming a full-fledged member of the Agency in just over six months' time.

If she worked hard.

If she continued to improve.

If Anne and Felicity so decided.

"As for the second matter, the new commissioner of works is concerned by the high rate of accidents on the building site, coupled with the fact that the tower's construction is grossly behind schedule. This is the kernel of the hysterical mention of ghosts and a curse in that scandal sheet: apparently, some say that a man killed in the original fire of 1834, the one that burned down the Houses of Parliament, haunts the site in ghostly form. This rumor

seems to have been absolutely fatal to site discipline.

“The commissioner finds this impossible to investigate formally, of course: no man he interviewed would confess to believing the story of the ghost, but it still seems to be at the heart of the matter. But he also believes that having someone on the ground, so to speak, would be useful. Perhaps a superstitious belief in ghosts has delayed the works. Or, alternatively, perhaps the men are in no condition to report to work; perhaps they are flouting safety practices, and the foremen condone it; perhaps . . .” Felicity made an eloquent gesture. “Much is possible.”

“And our knowledge of building practices is limited,” said Anne. “For that reason, I was extremely surprised when the commissioner approached the Agency.”

Mary was startled. “He didn’t know . . . ?”

Felicity shook her head. “No. The fact that we’re an all-female agency is still very much a secret.”

“I’ve always wondered, Mrs. Frame: how do you manage to keep that secret when you meet with clients?” Mary asked the question timidly. Felicity was generally more forthcoming than Anne, but perhaps this was too nosy—a look into the inner workings of the Agency.

Felicity grinned again. “In several ways. We correspond by post a great deal; in meetings, Anne or I sometimes appear in the guise of a clerk or secretary representing the head of the Agency; and, when required, I make a rather convincing man.”

Mary bit back a gasp. Felicity was tall and curvy, with

a beautiful and distinctly feminine face. Picturing her in a cravat and beard required more imagination than Mary possessed. Surely Anne Treleaven, a thin, austere-looking woman in her middle thirties, would make a more plausible man?

“To return to the point,” said Anne, “the job requires an agent who can pass unnoticed on a building site; however, we know very little about its practical realities.” She paused. “We could, I suppose, have declined the assignment . . .” The look she shot Felicity was ripe with meaning.

“But we didn’t,” said Felicity firmly, “for a number of excellent reasons I shan’t enumerate now. The point is, no grown man could plausibly work on a building site without a trade or any general experience. And it would be exceptionally difficult for a grown woman—me, for example—to pass as a teenage apprentice. The difference in costume between a gentleman and a working man is quite unforgiving.” Felicity sounded wistful.

“The Agency has no expertise in exclusively male environments,” said Anne quietly. Again, that current of tension flashed between the two managers.

Felicity leaned forward. “We’ve two choices: to post an agent near the building site—for example, working in a neighboring pub or shop or selling food on the street—or to find an agent who can pass as a relatively young boy beginning his first job as a builder’s assistant.”

Mary blinked. “I see.” And she did—perhaps rather

more than she wanted. There was a strange, hollow feeling in her chest that she didn't care to analyze.

Anne leaned forward and fixed Mary with a steady gaze. "Before Mrs. Frame goes into further detail, I shall ask the usual question: Do you wish to learn more? Or will you decline the assignment?" It was disconcerting, how Anne sometimes read her thoughts so accurately. "You may take a day to consider."

Anne's gentle tone—the more remarkable because her voice was normally so clipped—made Mary bristle defensively. "There is no need. I accept the assignment." Her voice was almost angry.

Anne looked at her carefully. "You are certain? I need not remind you that it is unwise to take on an assignment unless you are fully prepared, both physically and mentally." She laid a subtle emphasis on the last word. "If you—"

"I'm fine." Mary interrupted her for the first time ever. In the past, she had always been too much in awe to be so rude. "Please—tell me what the assignment will involve. I'll perform whatever tasks you set."

There was a short silence, during which Anne and Felicity again exchanged quick looks. Mary clenched the edge of her wooden chair and willed the tight feeling in her chest to vanish.

Finally, Felicity cleared her throat. "You will disguise yourself as an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy taking on his first job at a building site. The position will be forgiving

of your lack of experience. Your task is to uncover information pertinent to the death of Mr. Wick, as well as to the possible causes of injury and delay on the site. This includes an investigation into the ghost stories, which may or may not have a basis in fact.

“You will begin by questioning the men and boys, and simply keeping your ears open. The engineer in charge of the site, a Mr. Harkness, already reports directly to the commissioner and his paperwork is all copied to the Committee of Works, so any evidence you find will be unofficial. The information you collect will determine your subsequent actions, of course. As you can see, it’s an open-ended task which begins in a straightforward fashion.” Felicity paused, but when Mary did not immediately reply, she hurried on. “You’ve already demonstrated that you can pass as a boy, and I’ll spend some time coaching you on the finer points. As you know, it’s primarily a matter of posture and movement, rather than costuming. You’re young and slim and strong, so there’s already a natural resemblance, and lots of boys’ voices haven’t broken at that age.”

Mary nodded. Her fingers were very cold now, and she felt curiously numb. Felicity was always persuasive—a trick of her voice rather than her facility with words—and Mary hated to disappoint. “Very well,” she said. “When must I begin?”

Anne frowned slightly, possibly at her phrasing. “There are still a few arrangements to make concerning

your false identity as a boy — such as ensuring that there's a place for you on site. Mr. Harkness is deemed reliable, but he will not be privy to your real identity. Add to that time to work on your masculine persona. . . . I should say you could begin no earlier than Wednesday or Thursday."

Felicity compressed her lips. "Too long, I think. Ideally, you'd start on Monday."

Mary nodded. "Very well."

"Report back here after luncheon tomorrow," said Felicity. She nodded at Mary briskly, and glanced at Anne. The meeting was over, and Mary was dismissed.

She stood clumsily, mechanically scrunching the *Eye* in her hand. "Thank you." For what, she had no idea.