

Chapter Eight

Mary gripped the dock rail of the Great Hall in Winchester castle making her knuckles turn white while two judges in their finery and a magistrate in a dark frock coat sat high above the assembled court for her trial at the Quarter Sessions. On the wall behind her was the fabled Round Table of King Arthur where it had hung for six hundred years as witness to what was called justice. Though King Arthur was legend, not real, Mary wished one of his knights would ride into the court and rescue her. The Bloody Assizes of Judge Jeffries held in this sombre hall had seen many men sentenced to death for the Monmouth Rebellion. Mr Stevens had told her about it in one of her lessons. She never imagined that one day she would stand here. Mary's alleged crime was far less serious hence the Quarter Sessions rather than the twice-yearly Assizes though the outcome for her looked dire.

She didn't expect justice to be done. Mrs Jones and Brenda had denied being present when Lady Elizabeth gave Mary the earrings. Though it hurt her that they lied she understood why. Sir Edward held considerable power over them and everyone else at Hartford House.

"Mary Dunsford, do you plead guilty or not guilty to the theft of a pair of diamond earrings the property of Sir Edward Glendenning?" said the clerk of the court dressed in a black gown and white wig.

"Not guilty, sir," said Mary in as strong a voice as she could manage though her words were lost in the vast hall. She glanced over at the twelve men of the jury; a respectable group of local traders she understood them to be but they looked very solemn to her.

Mary sat down, next to a matron with a frosty face.

A black robed man in a wig stood and addressed the court. "Milord, gentlemen of the jury, this is a simple case of thievery by someone in a trusted position made more shameful by the fact that it was committed on the day of the funeral of the defendant's employer. Call Sir Edward Glendenning."

Sir Edward marched into the room, into the witness box and swore the oath with the Bible in his right hand.

"Sir Edward, do you recognise these earrings?" said the prosecutor holding up the diamond earrings.

An usher took them to Sir Edward.

"I do. I bought them for my wife on her thirtieth birthday."

"And did you, sir, give these diamond earrings to the defendant?"

"Of course not. Why would I?"

"Did your wife give the earrings to the defendant?"

"No. How ridiculous to suggest that such a valuable pair of earrings would be given to a maid."

"When did you last see the earrings?"

“On the day of the funeral. They were in my wife’s jewellery box. I was overtaken with grief and looked in her box to try to gain some comfort from them and to remember the times she wore them.” He choked back a sob.

Mary stared at him. Three months had passed since she was arrested and Sir Edward’s facial wounds that she inflicted had healed. She could see he was giving a fine act.

“And when did you find the earrings missing?”

“The next day. I went to the jewellery box to put it in a safe place and found the diamond earrings were not there. I noticed that they were missing because they were my wife’s favourite earrings and I wanted to have a last look at them before I put them away.”

“And then what happened?”

“I called for Dunsford and discovered that she had left the house that morning, early, with her belongings. One of my staff told me he had seen her and she stated she was going to Southampton to catch a train to Dorchester. She didn’t give notice. She just left. I informed the police.” Mary had no money; she was unrepresented so she had to defend herself.

“Sir Edward, you were present when Lady Elizabeth gave me the earrings. So were Mrs Jones and Brenda.”

“Not only are you a thief, but you are also a liar,” said Sir Edward.

Mary pondered whether she should raise the night he tried to force himself on her as that was the reason she left in a hurry the next morning. She was sure he would deny it and if the allegation alienated the jury against her then that would make her position even worse and decided against it. There was nothing she could say about her arrest.

If she insisted on calling Brenda and Mrs Jones, they would either lie to the court and risk a long jail sentence for perjury if discovered or if they told the truth they would be unemployed and probably not believed by the jury. Their positions were as dire as her own so she decided she would not call them.

The judge summed up which took less than five minutes before the jury left the court. The matron took Mary to the cells to await the verdict and she had just sat down on a bunk when she was called back to the court.

The jury foreman read out the verdict. “Guilty.”

Mary’s stomach turned oily. She knew the punishment for a maid stealing from her employer would be harsh to send a signal to other maids.

The judge intoned over his beaky nose. “Mary Dunsford, you have been found guilty of stealing a pair of diamond earrings from your deceased employer on the day of her funeral. Such a wicked act must be punished severely. You are sentenced to seven years transportation to Australia. Next.” Mary’s heart sank. Her feet descended the stairs to the cells as if they were made of lead.