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THE ROYAL
SABOTEURS

LADY
and the
SCAMP

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANA
GALEN

Lady and the Scamp

The Royal Saboteurs

Book II

Shana Galen

LADY AND THE SCAMP

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Chapter One



“Lady Averley, are you attending?”

Emily Blythe-Coston, Countess of Averley, turned to see the queen gazing at her with an expectant look on her face. The queen was young and pretty, the roundness of her circular face accentuated by her middle part and the sleek sweep of her dark hair fastened into a low bun at her nape and embellished with a froth of lace.

The queen and her ladies-in-waiting were seated side-by-side in an open carriage currently moving slowly through Hyde Park. Across from her, the Duchess of Charlemont, an older woman with gray hair covered by an old-fashioned cap, frowned at Emily in disapproval. Lady Jocelyn, closer to Emily’s age of thirty-one, gave Emily a look of concern. Emily could only imagine how long the queen had been talking to her with no response. She’d been thinking about her husband.

Her dead husband.

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” Emily managed. “The day is so lovely that I was distracted.”

The Duchess of Charlemont snorted, and Queen Victoria raised her brows. She gazed about her and, belatedly, Emily realized the day was cold and gloomy, not a day to compliment at all.

“Are you feeling quite well?” the queen asked. “Perhaps we should return home.” She raised a hand and Prince Albert, her young and dashing husband, was immediately beside her on his regal mount. He was an attentive husband and a good father. Seeing the way he cared for his wife had made Emily’s heart ache for her own husband at times.

“Are you cold, darling?”

“We are quite well, but I fear Lady Averley is unwell.”

Emily shook her head. This was mortifying. She had been the one to suggest a ride in the park. She’d felt so cooped up in the palace the last few days and had longed to go out and breathe fresh air. The other ladies-in-waiting had argued against such a venture as it was cold even for spring. But after days of rain, the queen must have also wanted an outing. She’d ordered the older children be taken for a walk around the grounds of the palace and quite easily agreed to Emily’s proposal of a ride in the park.

Emily felt somewhat guilty, as she’d known the queen would agree to her plan. Victoria was young and inquisitive and liked to see her subjects whenever possible. Despite the rain, dozens of people stood on the sides of the carriage path and waved to the queen.

“I assure Your Highness, I am quite well,” Emily protested meekly.

The prince, presented with this female disagreement, allowed his horse to fall back so the ladies might discuss in private.

The queen sat back, looking small and quite young in her voluminous wrap. She *was* small, a petite woman who made Emily feel tall, even though she was on the shorter side herself. “Then we suppose our conversation was not to your liking,” Victoria said.

“Not at all, Your Highness. The fault is mine entirely. I was distracted by my own—”

A loud explosion of sound followed by a rush of hot air so shocked Emily that she did not finish her words. The guards surrounding the carriage erupted into a frenzy, and she heard someone yell, “Pistol!”

Emily didn’t think. She threw herself over the queen, covering the monarch with her own body. Lady Jocelyn threw herself on the queen’s other side, and the two ladies gently lowered the queen to the floor of the carriage. Victoria

protested loudly, but Emily ignored her, keeping her own head down and her body over the queen's as a shield.

Her heart pounded, and she couldn't manage a breath. Her lungs burned, and she feared she had been struck. Emily prayed it was just her terror and not a pistol ball.

Emily couldn't see anything, but the sound of men's voices yelling in panic and the jolt of the carriage as the coachman spurred the horses into a gallop made her already racing heart pound so hard it too hurt her chest.

Someone was shooting at the queen.

Again.

Emily bit her lip to keep from crying. She had to be strong and calm. She could not allow the panic threatening to well up inside her to escape. This wasn't the first time one of her subjects had tried to assassinate Victoria, but the Guard had been certain the threat was over. The last attempt had been years ago and the lad who had shot at the queen—quite mad, poor fellow—had been apprehended. Now someone else was shooting at the monarch and the rest of her entourage as well. Bursting into tears would help no one.

“Let me up!” The queen's demands became strenuous enough that Emily and Lady Jocelyn could no longer ignore them. Emily raised her head and tried to make sense of the blur of colors and shapes. The coachman had steered the queen's carriage into the trees just off the driving path in the park. Several guards surrounded the conveyance, while others could be heard shouting in the distance. No doubt they were pursuing the would-be assailant. “I cannot breathe down here.”

Emily and Lady Jocelyn assisted the queen back onto the carriage seat, and she gulped in air. Emily needed air as well. Her lungs were still constricted and her breaths short and rapid. Damn her corset. It dug into her abdomen and made taking a deep breath impossible at the moment.

“You are quite safe now.” The captain of the guard rode up on horseback. He was a man of middle years but still fit and sure on a horse. He gave the ladies a smile that was probably

supposed to be reassuring but was so obviously forced, it only made Emily more concerned. “We will have you back at the palace in a few minutes.”

The duchess harrumphed loudly on the other side of the vehicle. Emily had quite forgotten about her, but now she glanced at the duchess and noticed she didn’t even appear ruffled. She sat, her face quite placid, as though being shot at and subjected to a mad dash through the woods were everyday activities. “You wanted excitement, Lady Averley.” She narrowed her eyes at Emily. “Now you have it.”

Emily blinked for a moment as she sought to make sense of the woman’s words. “I did not want excitement, Your Grace,” she argued, though such behavior was most unbecoming in a lady, especially one of the queen’s ladies. “I merely wanted fresh air.”

“It was you who cajoled the queen to leave the palace. I wanted to stay in,” Lady Jocelyn said with a note of accusation in her voice. “And now the day is ruined, and we are returning without the prince.” Her voice was tremulous, perilously close to tears. Emily’s patience was at the breaking point, and she bit her lip to keep from retorting.

Lady Jocelyn’s wavering voice caused the queen to sit up quickly, even as the carriage began to move, making them all lurch back. “Albert?” she called. When he didn’t reply, she addressed her guards. “Where is the prince?”

“He is pursuing the gunman, Your Majesty.”

“What?” Victoria looked at Emily, eyes wide. “That is not safe. We cannot return without him.”

Emily opened her mouth but did not know what reply to give. Why had the prince acted so rashly? Did he not know that if anything happened to him the queen would be devastated?

Emily knew the pain of that kind of loss intimately.

“Stop the carriage!” the queen commanded. “We will not return to Buckingham Palace until Prince Albert is at our side.”

The carriage slowed to a stop at the queen's command. The duchess was the first to speak up. "Your Majesty, I do not think we should sit here. We are a target. You would be safer inside."

The queen ignored her. "Captain, go look for the prince. Tell him we have need of him."

"Your Highness, I would beg to stay at your side. I will send the lieutenant."

"Very well." She waved a hand.

Emily watched the man ride back toward the carriage path. She had the urge to slink down into her seat. At any moment she expected another shot to explode in the silence and to feel the hot sear of a pistol ball in her flesh. But the queen sat straight and tall, and Emily could hardly think of her own well-being when her monarch was in danger.

"Your Majesty, I do hope next time Lady Averley attempts to persuade you to go out, you will listen to wiser counsel," the duchess said.

Emily bristled. "You would have us virtual prisoners at the palace, Your Grace. The queen should be able to go out when she chooses."

Victoria was still staring in the direction of the path, seeming not to hear the squabbling ladies.

"Surely Emily did not know of the danger today," Lady Jocelyn said.

"I'm not so certain of that," the duchess said, looking down her nose at Emily. "It is difficult to know whom to trust in these tumultuous times."

Emily's jaw dropped. Was she being accused of plotting to have the queen shot?

"How can you think that of me?" she sputtered.

"What else am I to think when you beg to go out on a day like this? It makes no sense unless one has an ulterior motive."

“Your Majesty,” Emily looked imploringly at the queen who still seemed unaware of the argument. “Please know that I would never be part of anything that would harm you or anyone.”

“Difficult to believe considering her late husband,” the duchess muttered.

“Why you vicious, old—”

“There he is,” the queen said, interrupting words Emily would probably have regretted later. Much later. At the moment she didn’t feel that she would regret anything she said to the duchess.

“Darling, are you hurt?” the Prince asked as he neared.

“I’m quite well. You?”

“Fine. We didn’t catch him.”

The statement shocked Emily. The would-be assassin was still at large? Again, the urge to shrink down threatened to take over, but instead of giving in, she willed anyone wanting to shoot at the carriage again to aim for the Duchess of Charlemont.

“The royal guard are still searching the area,” Prince Albert continued. “I think the best thing is for all of us to return home. This excitement is tiring the queen.”

Emily glanced at the queen, who looked fine if a little weary. She assisted Lady Jocelyn in tucking the blanket back around the queen and then sat back as the carriage returned to the palace. The next hour was spent settling the queen into bed. Prince Albert had persuaded her to nap for an hour, and though Emily suspected the queen did not like the idea of a nap, she was shaken enough to agree without much argument.

The duchess stayed with the queen, and Emily and Lady Jocelyn were free for a time. Usually, Emily relished these brief hours of freedom, but today she did not wish to go to her room to read or catch up on correspondence or even walk in the palace gardens. She was restless and agitated.

Emily had not been present the last time the queen's life had been threatened. She had not been a Lady of the Bedchamber then. She had found the accounts of the danger quite exciting and had secretly wished she'd been at the queen's side so she might have experienced it for herself. Now she knew how completely ridiculous her thinking had been. She was still shaking from the events of almost two hours ago. She feared she would startle every time she heard a loud sound. It was terrifying to think that someone might injure or kill the queen. It was equally terrifying to think that she might be in the way of a pistol ball and be killed herself.

Since Jack had died, Emily had learned that life was fragile. A man or woman might be hale and hearty and laughing with you one day and gone the next.

Emily wandered rather aimlessly in one of the palace corridors, ostensibly admiring the paintings, though seeing nothing but her memories of earlier. Finally, she turned with the purpose of finding her lady's maid and asking for a cup of tea. Emily was cold and the tea would warm and perhaps soothe her as well. She could hint that Pratt might spill a few drops of brandy in the tea and no one would be the wiser.

Her new route took her past the prince's study, and she heard male voices rumbling through the partially open door. Emily did not slow. She had no intention of eavesdropping, but when she heard her own name it was impossible not to listen.

"I believe Lady Averley suggested the outing," the prince was saying.

"That's Lord Averley's widow?" another man asked. It sounded like the prime minister.

"Yes." The prince spoke again. "She suggested a ride in the park. After the recent rains, we had all been craving an outing."

"But it was Lady Averley who suggested the park?" the prime minister asked.

“It was. You cannot possibly suspect Lady Averley of having a part in this, though.”

Emily closed her eyes, thankful that the prince at least was on her side.

“I am not accusing her of anything.” The prime minister must have been moving about the room because she caught a glimpse of him as he passed the doorway. “I am suspicious of everyone.”

“And you must admit”—this was a new voice, one Emily did not know—“her late husband was not the most loyal of the queen’s subjects.”

“What are you saying?” the prince asked. “The Earl of Averley may have been a vocal opponent of some of the queen’s policies, but he was not a traitor, and neither is she.”

“Someone betrayed the queen.” The prime minister passed by the door again, but this time he happened to look out, and his gaze met Emily’s. He moved toward the door and grasped the handle. “And we must be vigilant.” His eyes never left Emily’s as he closed the door with a final thud.



“LADY AVERLEY, MIGHT I introduce my good friend Mr. Willoughby Galloway?”

Emily had been staring at her fan, turning it this way and that in her hand so the gold scalloped edges might glint in the light from the drawing room chandeliers. She’d been dreading this dinner for the past ten days, ever since the incident in the park. The prime minister would be in attendance, and she could still hear Lord John Russell’s words ringing in her ears—*we must be vigilant*.

As though she had anything to do with the shots fired in the park.

The queen was now saying it had probably been poachers who had fled when they realized their stray pistol ball had endangered the queen. Everyone had agreed with the queen publicly. Privately, Emily received more than her share of dark looks.

Emily looked up from her fan into the kind eyes of the prince. She did not think Albert suspected her, but she had not expected him to approach her. He generally took little interest in the queen's ladies. The prince nodded at the man at his side and Emily offered a mild greeting, holding out her limp hand so the man might take it.

“Lady Averley, Mr. Galloway is the son of Viscount Smythe.”

She did not know the viscount, so she smiled at Galloway wanly. But the expression froze on her face as his eyes met hers. He had the most stunning eyes. They were a beautiful light brown with flecks of gold and dark gold lashes. He took her hand, and she almost gasped aloud. Something akin to lightning passed between them. She felt the zing of... connection even through her glove. Emily had the urge to tear her hand from his, to examine it, but she gritted her teeth and held still through the pleasantries.

“Lady Averley,” Galloway said, lowering his head to brush his lips over her gloved hand. Emily's eyes widened. The gesture was completely unnecessary. Most men simply bowed and released her. But Galloway seemed to have no intention of releasing her, and her hand burned where his lips had touched the white leather. He looked up from the kiss, his light brown eyes sparkling with mischief as though he knew she was burning from his touch.

“Mr. Galloway,” she murmured. “How lovely to meet you.” Now he would release her. Now she could pull her hand back and break this—this—she did not know what it was, but it unnerved her.

“The pleasure is all mine.” He straightened but did not release her. Emily cast a quick glance at the prince, but he did not seem to notice the impropriety. “I have been wanting to meet you for some time.”

“Oh?” She tugged her hand, attempting to release it, but Galloway held firmly and smiled. She couldn't say what it was about that smile, but her breath caught at the sight of it. It

wasn't even a full smile, more of a crooking of his lips—his soft, full lips—in an upward motion.

“I'm pleased to report the rumors are not rumors at all.”

Emily stiffened, the heat from his touch and smile turning to ice. Now she did jerk her hand from his, though he pretended not to notice. She had a spotless reputation, so any rumors he mentioned must be concerning her being an accomplice to the shooting in the park.

“You are as beautiful as they say. More beautiful, if you do not mind me saying so.”

It took several seconds for Emily to comprehend him. She'd expected him to say something of the attempt on the queen's life, to indirectly accuse her of complicity, but to compliment her—this she had not expected. When she did finally comprehend him, she was no less confused. She was no great beauty. Her hair was so blond as to be almost white and her eyes so pale a blue as to be almost translucent. More than one person had found her appearance unnerving. Jack had said she looked like an ice queen, and that had been as close to a compliment as she had ever received. It wasn't that her features were unattractive. Her nose was small and unremarkable. Her lips were quite adequate, her brow high but not too high, her chin round but not too round, her eyes spaced well, her skin clear if not just a little too pale. But somehow the overall effect was not a pleasant one.

Knowing all of this from her earliest looks in the mirror, Emily concluded in less than a second that Willoughby Galloway was one of those men who set about charming women with lies and false flattery for their own nefarious purposes.

And she had been ensnared. Only for a moment, but her heart had definitely beat more quickly at the sight of such a handsome man smiling down at her.

Now she gave him an icy smile. “Thank you.” She glanced at the prince, but he did not seem inclined to move away and introduce his companion to another unsuspecting lady. Emily was forced to make more conversation.

“How is it you know the prince?”

“We’re old friends,” Galloway said, slapping the prince on the shoulder. Albert stepped forward at the force of it then managed a smile.

“Yes, old friends,” he agreed.

“How did you meet?” she asked, genuinely curious. The prince had grown up in Saxony, and as the son of a viscount, Emily had to assume Galloway had been raised and educated in England.

“Mr. Galloway and I met in Saxony years ago,” Albert said, returning the slap on Galloway’s shoulder, though not as forcefully.

“I was on the Grand Tour,” Galloway said. “Albert and I spent several years traveling and exploring the duchy and beyond.”

“Several years?” Emily raised her brow. “I was under the impression a gentleman’s Grand Tour is but a year.”

The scamp *winked* at her. “For some of us it lasts a bit longer.”

The prince coughed, and Emily thought she heard him say, “Quite a bit longer.”

Galloway was obviously one of those debauched libertines who spent his life overindulging in drink, cards, and loose women. Though Albert did not strike her as such a man, his brother Ernest had a similar reputation. Emily looked about, hoping for some escape from the conversation. Seeing the queen still engaged with the prime minister, she despaired of ever being called to dinner and escaping Galloway and the confusing emotions she felt in his presence.

“I am surprised I have not seen you at the palace before,” she said, glancing at Galloway but avoiding looking into his eyes too long. She wanted to catch sight of those gold flecks in the brown of his eyes, and she wanted to look more deeply.

“I’ve only just arrived back in London,” Galloway said.

“Surely not from your Grand Tour.”

“No. I’ve been in France the past few years on business.”

She smiled with genuine interest. Perhaps there might be some conversation to be had after all. She could converse at length about French fashions, wine, and furnishings. “And what kind of business took you to France?”

“The business of making new friends, of course.” He gave her another half-smile and she had to stop herself from sighing in disgust. He meant women, of course. Paris was notorious for its courtesans. She told herself she was unaffected by his smile, but it wasn’t quite true. For some reason, his closeness, his smile, the look in his eyes made her flesh warm and her heart beat faster. She couldn’t understand it. She did not like rakes. One of the reasons Victoria had asked her to come to court was because Emily’s reputation was untarnished. During her marriage there had never been even a whisper of infidelity, not even a harmless flirtation. The other reason for the queen’s kindness, of course, was that Emily was a distant cousin of Victoria and had no close relatives still living. No doubt the queen felt it her duty to take Emily under her wing after Jack died. But she had asked Emily to come to Court even before Jack’s death. It had often been a topic of conversation between Emily and Jack. Emily had wanted to serve the queen and experience life in Buckingham Palace, and Jack had said that the queen only wanted her because she’d been advised to keep her friends close and her enemies closer.

But Emily had never been the queen’s enemy, even if Jack had seen himself as such.

“And how do you find life at court?” Galloway asked.

“I’m very fortunate to be asked to serve the queen,” she replied as she always did.

“Ah, excuse me,” the prince said. He moved toward his wife, and Emily felt a flicker of hope that dinner would begin soon.

And this conversation would end.

Galloway folded his arms over his dark blue coat paired with a robin’s egg blue waistcoat, which seemed much too

bright a garment to be proper. “Life at the palace sounds quite tedious.”

Now that the prince had moved away, Emily did not feel compelled to hold her tongue. “Perhaps to some.”

Galloway leaned closer. “Perhaps to you,” he murmured. “It’s a good thing I’m here to liven things up a bit.”

“And what makes you think I want anything livened up, as you say? I am quite content with the status quo.”

He gave her a long perusal, starting from her face down her body, clad in gray half mourning, then back up again. He looked so long and so thoroughly that she felt her cheeks warm.

“Are you quite through, sir?”

He gave her a mischievous smile. “I haven’t even begun. And to answer your question, I can look at you and see you want livening up. I’d say I am just the man to give it to you.” And with another wink—really, the gall of the man—he bowed and moved away.

Emily sputtered, trying to think of a reply to call after him, but nothing came to her. She would probably think of the perfect rejoinder tonight when she was half asleep and then kick herself for the next few days for not conjuring it earlier.

Lady Jocelyn moved to stand beside her. “Who was that man?”

Emily blew out a breath. “The most horrid creature. A friend of the prince, if you can believe that. I do hope I never have to see him again.”

“Really?” Lady Jocelyn fanned herself. “I think he’s quite handsome.”

Emily shook her head, unable to outright deny the observation. Galloway was handsome. “If you like that type,” she said.

“I dare say every woman likes his type.”

They were summoned to dinner, and Emily used the short walk to the dining room to compose herself. She spotted her place card easily enough and moved toward her seat, but just as she did so, she saw Mr. Galloway lift his place card and trade it with the card of the man whom she had been seated beside. Emily's jaw dropped open. He could not do that! The queen had spent quite a lot of time and effort on the seating chart.

But if she pointed out Galloway's effrontery, surely she would make a spectacle of herself, not to mention draw attention to the fact that he had moved cards to seat himself beside her. Then tongues would wag as to why he had wanted to sit beside her.

Emily met Galloway's eyes and he raised his brows as if in challenge. He knew she knew, and he dared her to call him out.

Gritting her teeth, Emily said not a word and instead allowed Galloway to pull her chair out and seat her himself. Determined not to look at him, she turned her head to the man on her opposite side.

It was the prime minister.

Galloway sat down, and Emily was surrounded.



Chapter Two



Will knew Lady Averley didn't like him. He'd misjudged her. He'd thought a widow living under the thumb of the queen would want excitement.

He still thought she wanted excitement. But not the sort he had offered just now.

If his instincts were correct, she wanted another sort all together. And though her role in the recent assassination attempt was still just a suspicion, Will was here to find the proof. She may not like him. Not yet. But he would persuade her to like him. That's why Baron had sent him. Everyone liked Willoughby Galloway, and it would take a man of considerable charm and patience to uncover and sabotage the effort to kill the queen.

Will looked about the table at the ladies-in-waiting, the prince, the prime minister, and various other lords and secretaries. He didn't suspect a single person at the table tonight would harm the queen directly. Lady Averley wouldn't stab Her Majesty or poison her, but *someone* was helping the Irish assassins who wanted the queen dead, and at this point all evidence pointed to the blond woman on his left. Lady Averley had suggested a ride in the park that day. The excursion had not been planned. How would the would-be assassins know of such an occurrence if they hadn't an accomplice inside Buckingham Palace?

The first course was served, and Will went about making himself agreeable to everyone at the table. He made easy conversation with the lady on his other side and those seated across from him. He attempted to speak to Lady Averley several times, but she was either in conversation with the prime minister, seated on her other side, or the queen.

Finally, the queen addressed him directly. “Mr. Galloway, you have a sister, if we recall correctly.”

“I do, Ma’am.” He gave her an engaging smile, and she smiled back, looking almost like a girl again when her cheeks turned pink. *Take that, Lady Averley. I can be charming.*

“Do you know Miss Galloway, Lady Averley?” the queen inquired.

Will wanted to groan. Obviously, the queen had noticed the frostiness at this end of the table and decided to intervene.

Lady Averley set down her spoon. “I’m afraid I do not know Miss Galloway, Ma’am. I only had one Season before I was married.”

“That’s right. Lady Jocelyn?”

“I met Miss Galloway a time or two,” Lady Jocelyn answered. “She was quite a lovely, vivacious woman, if I remember correctly.”

Vivacious was putting it mildly.

“Galloway, why do we not recall news of her marriage?” the queen asked, piercing him again with her shrewd eyes. Will was certain she knew the answer to her own question, but he obliged, nonetheless.

“She is not yet wed, Ma’am.”

“Not yet wed? But she must be five and twenty.”

“Six and twenty,” Will said, sipping his wine. He didn’t often feel sympathy for Lucy. The two siblings were rather competitive, but he did understand how tiresome it must be for her to always be asked when she would wed. He was one and thirty, and no one ever asked him.

“Your mother must be quite beside herself,” the queen remarked.

Sophia Galloway was hardly beside herself. She had plenty to keep herself occupied. But she had remarked, a time or two, that she would like to meet her grandchildren before she was dead.

“Lord and Lady Smythe patiently await the happy day,” Will said diplomatically.

“Where is your sister now?” the prince asked. “Perhaps she can come to Court for a week or so while you are here visiting. We could host a ball.”

“Oh, yes!” Lady Jocelyn cried. “A costume ball would be divine.”

For a moment the voices at the table rose with excitement, and Will couldn't have been heard even had he tried. Lucy definitely could not come to the palace. The prince didn't know Lucy was part of the Royal Saboteurs. The less known about the members, the better. That's what Baron believed. The prince only knew that Will had been sent to uncover any plots against the queen. Albert had thought it prudent to keep this information from his wife. The queen did not like to be managed, and she would see Will as a bodyguard, intent upon keeping her locked away. She'd evade him, rather than invite him into her inner circle, which was precisely the sort of access Will needed. Thus, Will and Prince Albert had concocted a story explaining how they'd met and become friends on the Continent before the prince had wed Queen Victoria. This same story had failed to impress Lady Averley, but Will could hardly tell her he'd never met the prince until a week ago. She too needed to believe the story and his rakish persona.

Finally, the voices lowered enough that Will could be heard. “I'm afraid Miss Galloway is currently rustivating in the country with friends. She would not ignore a summons from her queen, but she would sorely miss the company of her friends.”

The queen pursed her lips and turned the conversation to the second course as the footmen were even now clearing away the dishes from the first. Will breathed a sigh of relief. He'd spoken the truth—Lucy would have come if she'd been commanded, but as she was currently training as a Royal Saboteur at the secret facility they all called The Farm, she would not be pleased. She was probably crawling under fences right now or practicing her bomb-making skills. She would

hate to have to sit and embroider with the likes of Lady Jocelyn and the Duchess of Charlemont.

“It seems as though you’ve saved your sister for the time being,” Lady Averley said as her plate was whisked away by one of the footmen.

Will looked over at her, surprised she had spoken to him voluntarily. But he didn’t waste any time. This was the moment he’d been waiting for. “I do hope you will mention my gallantry to her if you ever meet. She won’t believe me if I tell her myself.”

Lady Averley smiled slightly. She looked pretty when she smiled. Her light blue eyes warmed slightly, and she looked less regal and more human. “I imagine you teased and tormented her enough when she was a child that she has little reason to trust you now.”

“You have an older brother then?” Will asked.

“Two of them, and I cannot count the number of times they put a frog in my apron pocket or jumped out from behind a door to scare me.”

Will laughed. “If I’d put a frog in Lucy’s apron, she would have retaliated by placing a snake in my bed. She’s not one to let anyone best her.”

Lady Averley’s eyes widened with, if he was not mistaken, admiration. “She sounds quite fearless.”

“I can’t think of a single thing she fears, except”—he leaned close—“being leg-shackled.”

Lady Averley didn’t lean away from him. “But why should she not want to marry?”

Will couldn’t tell her the truth—that Lucy would rather chase after spies and assassins than toddlers. “I think she will marry one day, when she finds the right man. She hasn’t met him yet.”

“Then I hope she does meet him, and I wish her a long, happy union.”

It was exactly the sort of thing a well-bred lady would say. Will could play the part of a well-bred gentleman, but that wouldn't help his mission.

The footmen set down Lady Averley's plate, and she might have ended the conversation there, if Will had allowed it. "I was sorry to hear that your own union ended prematurely," he said. "You honor your late husband by still wearing mourning clothes."

Lady Averley looked down at her gray dress, which was fashionable but still modest and suitably somber. "He has been dead two years," she said, poking at the fish on her plate. "But it seems like only a few days to me. Lady Jocelyn has encouraged me to put away my mourning clothes, but I haven't felt quite ready."

"You must have loved him a great deal." Two years was far longer than required for a young widow to mourn a husband.

She glanced up, her pale blue eyes seeming to look right through him. "I did, yes."

Will was startled by the honesty and naked emotion in her eyes. Neither was something he often found among the upper classes.

Finally, she looked away, and Will allowed himself to be drawn into another conversation. That conversation centered on the food and the way each dish was prepared and didn't require Will's full attention. His mind wandered back to his mission. This might be his first mission with the Royal Saboteurs, but covert work was in his blood. His parents had been operatives for the Barbican, a secret group formed in the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Their missions had been varied—to protect the country from French plots as well as investigate more domestic matters of public safety. Now the French were not as much a threat, and the police force could deal with murders and other incidents. Will had worked with the Foreign and Home Offices to follow suspected spies. He'd even done some spying himself. But the Royal Saboteurs was the position he'd wanted. Not only was Baron, one of the

original members of the Barbican, at its head, but the Royal Saboteurs were not just following suspected spies and reporting on them. The Saboteurs were protecting Queen and Country.

Will had jumped at this chance to come to Court and ferret out the traitor helping those who wished to assassinate the queen. All suspicion was on Lady Averley. Will had thought he would come in; charm the pretty, young widow; gain her trust; and find the incriminating evidence.

Now he realized it wouldn't be so easy. She might be a pretty, young widow, but that did not mean she was bored. He'd found a quiet young woman still in mourning. She had obviously loved her late husband and was not looking for a handsome young man to take the earl's place by her side or in her bed.

By no means did any of these qualities remove her from suspicion. In fact, she was even more of a suspect now than before. Everyone knew the Earl of Averley had been an opponent of the queen and her policies. Unlike most peers, the earl had been in favor of reform and limiting the power of the upper classes. That included limiting the power of the queen. There was no proof the earl wanted the queen dead, but he had been involved in several Parliamentary schemes that would have made Victoria little more than a body on a throne and the House of Lords little more than a social club.

If Averley's countess shared his views, then might she be ripe to support a group who sought to remove the queen altogether?

"Have you been to Lyme Regis, Mr. Galloway?" Lady Jocelyn asked.

Will had been smiling and nodding at the conversation but paying it very little mind. Now he paused to sip his wine and pull his mind back to the conversation at hand. He nodded to the lady seated across from him. "I have, my lady. In fact, when I was young, my family visited the seaside there several times."

"And how did you find it?" Lady Jocelyn asked.

Will noted that Lady Averley had ended her conversation with the prime minister and was looking at him expectantly.

“I confess I enjoyed my time there very much. I would spend all day on the beach and after several weeks, when we returned to London, I’d have tanned skin and my hair gone almost blond.”

“That hardly sounds suitable for a lady,” Lady Jocelyn said. She nodded at Lady Averley. “The countess has been trying to persuade me to accompany her for a few weeks to Lyme Regis this summer, when Her Majesty is in Scotland.”

“We needn’t spend all day on the beach,” Lady Averley said. “Although it’s quite refreshing to walk there. With a sturdy parasol, you needn’t worry about your complexion. I’m fairer than you and manage to avoid sunburn.”

“Oh, but it’s the freckles I worry about. One touch of sun, and spots pop out all over my face,” Lady Jocelyn said.

“I think you should look quite fetching with a sprinkle of freckles,” Will said.

Lady Jocelyn gave him a coy smile. “Thank you, sir, but my husband does not agree.”

“There is more to do in Lyme Regis than walk on the beach. Pleasant as it is.” Will nodded to Lady Averley. “The area is also known for its fossils.”

“Fossils?” the prince asked, interested as ever in anything remotely scientific. “What sort of fossils?”

“Fascinating creatures who no longer walk the Earth, at least not anywhere in England,” Lady Averley replied, her eyes shining. Will knew an opportunity when he saw one, and he pounced on the topic that might be a bridge to gaining her affection.

“Have you ever found any fossils there, my lady?” Will asked.

“I have.” Her cheeks were pink now, and Will found the change in her quite mesmerizing. “Unfortunately, not any

finds of particular interest. Mostly just sea creatures, and all of those I could identify. What about you, Mr. Galloway?"

"I confess I have also gone fossil-hunting, Lady Averley. I too found several specimens, but like you, nothing out of the ordinary."

"Is fossil-hunting a common pastime in this place?" the prince asked.

"Oh, yes, Your Majesty," Will answered. "Hunters trek out along the sea and among the cliffs. A few years ago there was a phenomenon known as a landslip that occurred at Bindon Manor, which is not far from Lyme Regis. The area had been covered with turnip fields, but those were dislodged when an enormous chasm opened up."

"I have not seen it," Lady Averley said. "How large is the chasm?"

"I have not seen it either," Will admitted, "but my sister went with my parents to view it. My father wrote that it was about 300 feet across and 150 or more feet deep. It ran for almost a mile. Quite a number of fossils were discovered in that chasm."

"Fascinating," the prince commented.

"Have you heard of Mary Anning?" Lady Averley asked.

Will thanked God that he hadn't spent all his time barefoot and splashing in the waves at Lyme Regis. "The lady geologist? I have heard of her and seen a few of her finds. They fetch quite a high price."

"And what did you think of them?" Lady Averley inquired. "Do you believe they are the remains of ancient sea dragons and other mythical creatures?"

"If you are asking if I believe her finds are frauds, then no. I believe they are real, and I believe she has made several extraordinary finds. As to what to make of them, I know not. They certainly do seem to be the preserved remains of creatures the likes of which I have never seen. Perhaps one day we will find one of the creatures alive or come to learn what happened to them."

“And you say a woman made these discoveries?” the duchess asked, her voice high and shrill. “How unseemly, to be digging about in the dirt.”

Will knew a dozen women like the Duchess of Charlemont. He could handle her in his sleep. “You are not alone in thinking so,” Will said. “Miss Anning has not been accepted into The Geological Society of London. Her finds have been written about by others, doubtless many who do not even credit her.” He glanced at Lady Averley when he said this, wondering which side she would take.

“Why should she want credit for such an activity?” the duchess observed, taking the side he’d known she would. “If she must dig about in the dirt then I am sure she would not want it known.”

“On the contrary,” Lady Averley said, “I think she would like very much to be credited for her discoveries. It’s only the men in the scientific community who will not allow it.”

Interesting, Will thought, though considering her husband’s beliefs, he should not be surprised she had progressive views about women.

“They’re threatened by her, no doubt,” Will said. He meant it too. He’d seen men threatened by the strong women in his family many times. But he’d been raised to appreciate and value a woman for her talents and to believe they could be equal to and even surpass a man’s. “It’s a foolish attitude, as such prejudice only slows their own study.”

“The men of the Geological Society threatened by a woman who digs up rocks in Lyme Regis?” the duchess laughed. “How utterly ridiculous. And now I must turn the conversation to something other than rocks. Shall we discuss the theater?”

The older lady went on with her opinions on various plays and operas now on stage, but Will wasn’t listening. Lady Averley had glanced back at him and smiled. His comments had been his true thoughts, not just statements to win her approval, but it appeared his opinions had pleased her. Finally, a step in the right direction.

And now to plan his next step.



IN THE AFTERNOONS, the queen often spent time with her children and the prince in the nursery. This meant the ladies-in-waiting were not wanted, and Emily had an hour or so to herself. The Duchess of Charlemont napped, while several of the other ladies, including Lady Jocelyn, sat in the sunny parlor and chatted whilst embroidering pillows or cushions.

Emily wanted to be as far from the other ladies in the afternoons as possible. While the queen spent time with her children, the other ladies were reminded of their own children and talked of them incessantly. Emily was the only lady without a child.

Without a living child, that was.

She had given birth to a child, but the baby was born too early and had died. She and Jack hadn't conceived again. Emily knew the other women did not mean to bring her fresh pain with their chatter, but their talk of children when she had nothing to add only made her loss more apparent.

Emily liked to steal away to the music room to play at the piano. The queen owned an Erard Grand Piano, the instrument preferred by Liszt and Mendelssohn and known for consistency in touch and sound. When the Prince's brother Ernest was in Town, he often joined Emily, and they would play a duet. But she was alone this day, and after warming up with a number of scales, she played through a few of her favorites by Mozart and Handel. She had been learning a piece by Mendelssohn, who was one of the queen's favorite composers, and she took it out now and played slowly through the first two pages before coming to a new section. She studied it, then, feeling a pair of eyes upon her, turned to see Mr. Galloway leaning against the door behind her.

"Don't stop on my account," he said, lifting one corner of his full mouth.

"I hadn't realized I had an audience," she said, turning to face him. The sight of him caused a strange tightness in her

chest.

“I heard you playing Mozart and came to listen. And then I was admiring your industriousness. What is it you are learning?” He moved closer, and she turned back to the sheet music. Maddeningly, her cheeks had heated, and she felt warm all over in his presence.

“It’s a piece by Mendelssohn.”

“I see. I don’t know his work. I confess I only recognize a few pieces by Mozart and some by Beethoven. I’m not as musically literate as I should be.”

“Too much time running about on the beach,” she observed. She hoped her curt words would encourage him to leave. He’d shown a bit of promise at dinner the other night, but she feared, now that they were alone, he would try and seduce her again.

“Actually,” he said, sitting beside her on the piano bench, “I was always a very studious child.” Lady Averley was forced to slide over to make room. She grew warmer and wished she could fan herself. “I took my Greek and Latin quite seriously. I had a music tutor, but while my sister became proficient, my parents quite despaired of my efforts. I assure you my lackluster skills are not for lack of trying.”

His voice held a note of sadness, and she almost felt sorry for him. “Surely you have other skills,” she said, trying to buoy his feelings.

“I do.” He ran his fingers over the keys, playing a quiet, easy melody. “But it was one of the first times I realized there were limits to what I could accomplish. Up until that point, I had thought I could do anything.”

Her cheeks cooled and she stopped trying to think of ways to escape him. “That’s because you are a man. No woman is ever raised believing she can do anything. Limitations are a part of life.”

“And I’m sorry for that,” he said, “though you certainly are not lacking in your musical skills. I should leave you to it.” He rose, and Emily, who had been certain she would have to

fend off an advance from him, was surprised that she missed the warmth of him beside her.

He stopped at the doorway to the room and looked back at her, as though just thinking of something. “My lady, our discussion of fossils at dinner last evening has given me an idea. The prince mentioned that there are several fossils at the British Museum. I had thought to go see them tomorrow. Would you be interested in accompanying me?”

Emily was so surprised at the invitation that one of her fingers plunked down on two keys, making a discordant sound. She had told herself that she did not want to spend any more time with Mr. Galloway than was necessary. And yet, she did want to go to the museum and see the fossils. She had always wanted to see the collection but had never been able to interest Jack or any of her acquaintances.

“I should not have asked you so indelicately,” Galloway apologized. “You do not have to give me your answer immediately.”

Emily blinked at him in surprise. Had she misjudged him? She had thought he was a flirt and perhaps a rake. But now he was treating her with every politeness.

“I will have to ask the queen if she can spare me,” Emily said.

“I understand. It was simply a suggestion. If you are able to accompany me, do send me word.” He bowed and left her alone. Emily sat for a few minutes, sure he would return and make some effort to speak to her further, but no one came. She tried to go back to her Mendelssohn, but her thoughts were too scattered now.

She had been to the British Museum before, of course, but always in the company of others, who had either not been prone to lingering or who had interests different from hers. She’d never been able to take any time to look at the fossil collection. Now Galloway gave her that opportunity. But if she agreed, would he make assumptions? Would he assume she wanted his attention or was interested in him romantically?

Emily rose, crossed to the window, and looked out on the grounds of the palace. The queen often remarked that the palace was a beautiful cage. Emily had not understood before. After Jack had died, she'd seen the palace as a refuge. This was a place she could come to escape the memories of Jack in every corner of the home they had made together.

But now she saw that she had imprisoned herself. She'd used her position here to lock herself away, and unlike the queen, she did not have to remain behind these walls. She could go out and explore London. Jack had taken her to a few of his favorite places, and of course, she had been out with the queen, but why not visit something she had an interest in?

If Galloway thought that meant he could take liberties, well, she could handle a man. She was a one and thirty, not a child.

Now she just needed the courage to accept his invitation.



Chapter Three



Will ducked under the lintel and entered the coffee shop, pausing to remove his hat before looking about. He didn't see the man he sought at first, and Will was tempted to check his watch to make sure he wasn't early. But then a man in a back corner rose slightly and nodded to him. Of course, Callahan Kelly had seated himself in the darkest corner, where no one would see him.

Will made his way over and took a seat across from Cal. "Who are you hiding from back here?" he asked.

"Sure and a man can't be too careful," Cal said, the Irish lilt of his voice familiar to Will and sounding very foreign after the several days Will had spent at Court, surrounded by the Queen's English. "Coffee?" Cal offered, gesturing to the empty cup in front of Will.

Will nodded and Cal poured the strong drink then sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. His dark hair fell over his forehead in a roguish style. "So then how is life at Court?"

"Tedious. It's all seven-course meals, visiting dignitaries, and evenings of string quartets."

"I don't know how you can stand it," Cal said, sarcasm lacing his tone. "When Baron sent me on a mission, I had to work twelve hours the day and live in a cramped flat in The Liberties."

"A cramped flat with Miss Murray. I hear there was only one bed. That sounds a hardship indeed."

Cal winked at him. "She's Mrs. Kelly now, if you please. And she'll be waiting for me to return to the cramped flat here in London and tell her what of our meeting."

Will nodded, still finding the union of the rough and tumble Irishman and the efficient, organized clerk difficult to comprehend. “Let’s not keep her waiting then. I have managed to make the acquaintance of Lady Averley. I don’t know her well enough yet to make any determinations about her character, but the prime minister does not think she is above suspicion. The prince is less convinced, and he does know the countess better than Russell.” Will sipped his coffee.

“Then you’ll have to get to know her better.”

“Exactly. I’ve invited her to the British Museum. We have a mutual interest in fossils.”

Cal’s brow went up. No doubt he thought these English nobs strange and ridiculous. “Has she accepted?”

“Not yet. If she does, I imagine she will be free tomorrow afternoon when the queen is occupied with her children.”

“Bridget and meself will make plans to visit the museum as well. Then you’ll have another set of eyes on her.”

Will nodded. “Have you uncovered any whisperings about the assassination attempt?”

“I’ve heard a word here and there,” Cal admitted. “I’m reasonably sure it was a plot by the Irish separatists, but I haven’t identified which faction. As far as any mention of this Lady Averley or any other accomplice, nothing yet.”

“Whoever was involved can’t hide forever. Between the two of us, we’ll find him.”

“Or her,” Cal added.

“Right.” What Will didn’t add was that he rather hoped Lady Averley was not guilty of betraying the queen. Now that he’d met her, he found that he liked her. It was more than the fact that she was beautiful. She was intelligent and, he suspected, buried under all those gray flounces and demure looks, she was a woman of great passions. He’d glimpsed just a hint of it in their discussion of Mary Anning. Most women he knew would have agreed with the duchess, that fossil-hunting was not an occupation suited for a woman. Lady Averley had not contradicted the duchess, but she had not

agreed either. He liked a woman with some spine. He liked a woman not afraid to disagree with those who outranked her, but who was also able to do so diplomatically.

“Sure and that lad is trying to catch your eye,” Cal said.

Will glanced over his shoulder and spotted a boy of about twelve standing in the doorway. He held a slip of paper in his hand, and Will suspected he must have a note from his valet, as that was the only person he’d told of his destination.

“I have a note for you, sir,” the lad said, his voice breathless. “It’s from a man at the palace.”

Will gave him a coin and waited until he’d scampered away before opening the paper. He smiled when he read it.

“That’s good news, so it is,” Call commented.

Will looked up. “Lady Averley has agreed to accompany me to the museum tomorrow.”

“We’ll finally get a glimpse of the lass.”

Will finished his coffee. “It’s unlikely that she will meet with anyone there, but I’ll be glad for an extra set of eyes on her. I should get back.”

“Until the morrow then.”

“Give your wife my regards.” He donned his hat, tipped it, and left the coffee house. The palace was not far, and Will decided to walk. The night was cold, but he didn’t mind the cold when a warm bed was waiting.

He briefly considered hailing a hackney and stopping in at his parents’ town house. If Lord and Lady Smythe had not heard he was in Town yet, they would soon. The viscountess would have words for him if he did not come to call. But he wasn’t ready to see them yet. He wanted something to show for his work with the Royal Saboteurs first. He wanted to do something to make them proud.

Not that either his mother or father had ever said they were not proud of him. Quite the contrary. Will rather expected they would be proud of him if he became a ditch-digger. Somehow their blind love made it all the more imperative that he prove

himself. Whenever he said as much to Lucy, she reminded him of all he had done while he worked for the Foreign Office. He'd gathered invaluable information that had saved lives and protected his queen and the country. But Will hadn't earned that position. He'd received it because his parents were highly respected former spies. Not that anyone outside of the Foreign Office knew of their exploits. The *ton* thought they were just another noble family. Will was just an errant heir to the title who liked to travel, and Lucy was a spinster always visiting friends.

Unlike Will's first entrée into the "family business," the invitation to join the Royal Saboteurs was solely due to Will's skills and professional achievements as an operative. Yes, Baron had worked with his parents, but it had been Will's accomplishments with the Foreign Office that garnered him an invitation to the Farm. Now Will had been given a mission, and he would fail or succeed on his own. If he didn't ferret out Lady Averley or some other courtier as the Irish separatists' accomplice, Lord and Lady Smythe wouldn't be able to step in and save Will's position in the Royal Saboteurs. Everyone knew Baron expected his agents to do whatever it took to complete the mission.

And this was not just any mission. This one involved the queen's very life.

Will tucked his cold hands in his pockets and ducked his head against the wind in his face. Not for the first time, he wondered if he shouldn't have passed on this mission. Baron had more experienced agents. Will had even pointed that out to his superior. But Baron had argued that Will was the perfect fit, and Will hadn't wanted to contradict him. It was true he had a weakness for flattery, but he was also determined to prove that he had been invited to join the Royal Saboteurs on his own merits and that he deserved his place. His father always said Will was persistent to the point of irritation. It was an annoying trait in a child, but a useful trait in an agent for the Crown.

And so here he was. He paused and looked up at the shadow of Buckingham Palace in the distance. Somewhere

inside was a traitor, and if that traitor was Lady Averley, Will would put aside his personal feelings for her and see her treachery revealed and punished.



SHE CERTAINLY DIDN'T look capable of treachery, Will reflected as Lady Averley climbed into the gig beside him and smiled under her straw hat festooned with pink and white flowers. She wore a white dress as well, which was quite plain and without pattern. He was aware white was a color of mourning, but he could appreciate that she had put away the gray and lavender for the occasion.

“You look lovely,” he said, taking up the reins and calling to the horse to walk.

“Thank you. Again,” she said, tipping her parasol to shade her face, though it was a cloudy day. He supposed with her complexion, she dared not risk it.

“Forgive me,” he said, addressing her statement. He'd complimented her when she'd met him in the reception hall at the palace. “I must remind myself to keep my compliments to one per day. Is that acceptable?”

She slanted him a look that said she thought he was ridiculous. “I don't have rules regarding compliments, except that I prefer them to be rooted in reality.”

“Of course.” He steered the gig around a cart blocking part of the road. “No one likes false flattery.” He glanced at her. “I hope you don't think I was false in my admiration.”

“Not false,” she said, her gaze on the passersby. “But perhaps overly effusive. But let's not talk of that matter any longer.” She turned to look at him, and he felt his breath catch when he met her pale blue eyes. “I haven't been to the museum in years. I don't know why I didn't think to go before.”

“I'm glad you didn't or you might have refused my invitation.”

“I doubt many ladies refuse your invitations, sir.” She looked away, seeming to study a group of women selling

flowers.

“I didn’t invite just any lady,” he answered. “I invited you. Our conversation the other night reminded me how I missed Lyme Regis. Did Lady Jocelyn consent to accompany you this summer?”

“Not yet, but I believe our conversation had a persuasive effect. She seems more inclined toward the idea.”

Will was unable to speak for a few moments as he negotiated a rather busy thoroughfare, but soon they were entering Bloomsbury, and he was able to give Lady Averley his attention again. “Will you go to Lyme Regis alone if Lady Jocelyn does not accompany you?” he asked.

Lady Averley blinked as though she had quite forgotten the conversation. “I don’t know,” she said. “I...”

Will glanced at her expectantly. She swallowed. “You drive quite well, sir.”

He raised a brow, surprised at the clumsiness of her change of subject. “Thank you. You seem surprised.” He slowed the horse as they arrived at the museum. The groom, seated behind the body of the conveyance, jumped down and took the horse’s reins. Will dismounted, walked around, and held out a hand for Lady Averley. She gave him her hand and began to dismount, but somehow her slipper caught in her skirt and she all but tumbled down and into his arms.

Will had always possessed quick reflexes, and he caught her easily, his arms about her waist and their faces level for a long moment before he set her down. “I’m so terribly sorry,” she stammered, her face as bright as the red waistcoat he wore.

“It’s no trouble.” He set her down, releasing her, aware his heart was hammering faster than it ought after such mild exertion. “Are you injured?”

“Only my pride.” She ducked her head and pulled out her fan, concealing her face with her rapid movements. Will didn’t mind. He too needed a moment to collect himself. Strange that he should react so strongly to the feel of her body against his. He hadn’t even properly appreciated the softness of her flesh

pressed against him before his heart was hammering so hard he could barely hear above the racket.

He offered her his arm, and she took it, not looking at him, and yet he was very aware of the touch of her gloved hand on his sleeve.

Ridiculous, Will thought as he led her toward the entrance of the museum. He was no poet, waxing lyrical at the mere touch of a lady. What was the matter with him?

“It’s quite formidable, isn’t it?” Lady Averley said, pausing to stare at the front edifice of the museum. Will took it in as well. The Greek architecture seemed out of place in London, as though the Parthenon had been built in the wrong country. The effect of the Classical style was stunning.

“It’s like something out of another place and time.”

She glanced at him, her eyes unreadable. “Shall we go in?”

“Yes.” He led her through the columns and into a court with steps leading to the upper levels. “Would you like to visit The King’s Library?” he asked, referring to the gallery built to house King George III’s collection of more than 65,000 books. “Access is by ticket only, but I have my methods.” He winked at her, and her face colored.

“Perhaps another time,” she said. “Today I am eager to see the fossils.”

“The natural history collection is upstairs,” he said and led her up the grand staircase, nodding to the ladies and gentlemen coming down. Will had to make an effort to find Cal Kelly. He might not have spotted him at all except that Cal moved out of a corner when Will turned to look for him. Cal didn’t acknowledge him, seeming to be fascinated by a statue to his right.

Once they had reached the natural history collection, Lady Averley released Will’s arm and began to peruse the fossils. He pointed out several interesting pieces to her, but mainly he was content to allow her to read and study as she wished. She was truly interested in the exhibit, if the time she took to study each fossil was any indication. He moved at a quicker pace,

having seen everything within the space of a quarter hour. There was a bench near a large rock with an impression of what seemed to be a sea dragon, and Will sat, leaning back and pretending to study the piece.

Lady Averley moved about the room on her own. He did not think she would meet with any of the Irish separatists—after all, he had invited her—but if she was working with the group, this might be the perfect opportunity to exchange a message. Deliberately, he avoided looking at her, giving her a chance to rendezvous with her compatriots, if that was her plan. Callahan Kelly or Mrs. Kelly, who he had spotted studying a small row of shell-type fossils, would take note of her actions for him.

Now that Will had put some distance between himself and Lady Averley, his thoughts returned to his reaction to her closeness earlier. Anyone would have thought he was an inexperienced youth, easily titillated by a lady fluttering her lashes at him.

Will was a man of more than thirty years. He'd long since passed the stage of sighing over a lady's glances. He was no womanizer, but he'd had lovers over the years. Of course, he had parted from his last lover more than a year before. He'd been out of the country on assignment and then working toward admission into the Royal Saboteurs. He hadn't been thinking about female companionship and hadn't had the time or inclination to cultivate a relationship with any women. Perhaps that was why his body reacted as it had earlier. It had been too long since he'd taken a lover.

Unfortunately, there was no easy solution for that. He was not the sort of man to visit a brothel, and he wasn't likely to meet anyone at the palace. The servants were out of the question. Their status was such that they couldn't refuse him. Queen Victoria was no libertine, unlike her late uncle George IV. She wouldn't tolerate extramarital liaisons, and all of her ladies-in-waiting were wed.

Except Lady Averley. He flicked his gaze to her, finding her still studying the fossils and quite alone.

“That’s the second time you’ve looked at her,” a female voice said. Will looked to his right and saw Mrs. Kelly standing before what seemed to be a strange insect-type of organism. Though she was now married to Cal, he had met her months ago when he’d first arrived at the Farm. She had been a trusted assistant to Baron. He knew her to be clever and efficient, though he would not have thought her talents lay in surveillance. He was obviously mistaken as he hadn’t even known she was beside him.

Either that or he was more distracted than he thought.

“Good to see you too,” Will drawled. “And that’s only the first time I’ve glanced at her. I’d hardly be a fit companion if I ignored her entirely.”

“She doesn’t appear to be engaged in anything more nefarious than reading the placards by each specimen. Are you and Cal sure she is the one we seek?” She spoke quietly, not looking at him, her mouth barely moving. Though the exhibit room was not crowded, there were several men moving about, studying the fossils, and she didn’t want to risk being overheard.

Neither did Will. He kept his own voice low, and his gaze on the sea dragon. “I’m not sure of anything right now.”

Except he knew he could not allow himself to develop an attraction to Lady Averley. Yes, he found her beautiful. Many men would. Her features were unusual—that fair hair and those light eyes—but the overall effect was stunning. But he could not allow his appreciation for her outward appearance to develop into anything more. Baron had not told Will to sleep with Lady Averley, but if that was what it took to gain her confidence, then Will would do it.

But he couldn’t be objective about the possibility that she was a traitor if he cared for her. That meant no more catching his breath when she walked into a room, no more stealing glances at her, and no more pounding of his heart if she was pressed against him.

She was an assignment. Nothing more.

Suddenly, she turned and started toward him. Mrs. Kelly stepped closer to the fossils she was facing, easily putting distance between them.

“Mr. Galloway,” Lady Averley said. “Come see this piece.”

He rose and met her halfway across the room. “You’ve found something of interest.”

“Yes. I do believe this is a fossil found by Miss Anning or her brother.”

“This one?” Will asked, pointing to a skull.

“Yes.”

The skull was quite long, the mouth almost like a beak and the eyes quite large.

“It’s called *Temnodontosaurus platyodon*,” she read, sounding the long words out. “This doesn’t credit the Annings, but it was found near Lyme Regis. I’m sure it must be one of hers.”

“As am I.” Will tried to imagine what the body of the beast would look like and then he tried to imagine it walking about Lyme Regis or wading in the waters there. “How strange the world must have looked when this creature inhabited it.”

Lady Averley made a sound of agreement. “Then you do not think *Temnodontosaurus platyodon* is alive today?”

“I’ve spent a great deal of time at Lyme Regis and never seen its like.” He straightened and looked down at her. “What would you do if you were walking along the shore and spotted a *Temnodontosaurus platyodon*?”

“I’m sure I would run away screaming.”

He laughed. “I doubt that. You’re made of sterner stuff.”

“Very well, what would you do?”

Will thought for a moment. “I’d try to befriend it. I’d bring it food every day and try to gain its trust. Then I’d see if I could persuade it to follow me home.” Will almost

immediately regretted his words. They were too close to his strategy for ferreting out the Irish separatists' traitor.

"You'd make a pet of it?" Lady Averley asked.

"I wouldn't lock it up, if that's what you mean, but something so rare and unique should be protected."

"Then you wouldn't bring it to London for all the world to see?"

Will considered. "I don't think so. Would you?"

"No." She shook her head. "I would leave the creature alone and go home with the knowledge that I knew of a great mystery. A great secret that only I possessed."

Will took her hand and placed it on his arm, glad for the opportunity to touch her. "One wonders what other secrets you hold, my lady."

"Very few, I assure you," she said, her gaze still on *Temnodontosaurus platyodon*.

"I doubt that."

And though he still wasn't certain if she was the traitor, her answers concerning the fossil had been as revealing as his own. She liked mysteries and secrets. His job was to discover what she was hiding.



THEY SPENT ANOTHER hour at the museum. Emily spent most of it among the fossils, and though Mr. Galloway was clearly not as interested in them as she, he did not rush her. He did wish to stop in among the Egyptian artifacts. Emily disliked the Egyptian wing. The mummies and the sarcophagi, the jars and scrolls taken from tombs, seemed macabre to her. The last time she'd come here, she'd had nightmares. That had been when Jack was alive. She didn't want to remember how she'd wakened in the middle of the night, and how he'd held her and soothed her until she'd fallen back asleep.

But the memory didn't hurt as it once might have. It made her a bit wistful, that was all. Perhaps she was ready to put away her mourning clothes.

“Are you tired?” Mr. Galloway asked as they left the Egyptian wing and started down the stairs toward the grand entryway.

“Not particularly.”

“Then shall we take a short walk? Soon enough you’ll be back at the palace and at the whim of the queen.”

“I’m hardly at her whim,” Emily answered. “But the idea of a walk does sound agreeable.”

Once outside, she gave up the idea of opening her parasol. It was too windy, and the delicate object would break within moments. She didn’t mind the wind. She rather liked the feel of her voluminous skirts swishing about her legs.

Mr. Galloway led her along Russell Street, and the two admired the exterior view of the museum. She was in no hurry to return to the palace, and he too seemed content to stroll leisurely. He was easy to talk to, and they discussed their favorite attractions at the museum and more memories of Lyme Regis.

Emily would have been happy to continue with such frivolous topics indefinitely, but of course, the conversation turned where she did not wish it to go.

“Have you been a lady-in-waiting to the queen for many years?” he asked.

Emily’s next breath felt sharper, the air colder. “No, not many.” She hoped her short answer would be a sign that she did not wish to continue along that line of conversation. She should turn the topic, but she couldn’t think of another quickly. She was very aware of him walking beside her. She’d been attracted to him since their first meeting, but she had thought it only a superficial attraction. He was a handsome man, after all. But then there had been the conversation about Lyme Regis. After that, she had begun to like him a little.

Still, she had thought she was safe. What could be safer than looking at the remains of extinct organisms? She hadn’t, however, considered the carriage ride. He was an excellent driver, gentle with the reins but still very much in control. She

admired that sort of skill. Jack had also been a skilled driver, and she knew it took practice, patience, and respect for the horse.

“How long have you been in service to the queen?” he asked.

“Over a year now,” she said. “It was quite an honor to be asked, as well as a family tradition.”

“How so?” He turned those lovely brown eyes on her. Emily willed herself not to think of the way the muscles under his coat had flexed when he’d had to hold the reins tightly. Had she really been able to see them or just imagined them?

“My grandmother was a lady-in-waiting for Queen Charlotte.”

His brows went up. “Before or after the king went mad?”

“After, I’m afraid, though she said by then he was under the care of the royal physicians, and she never saw him. The queen, of course, was never the same after the king’s decline, and she relied heavily on her ladies as well as her children.”

“I am sure both were a comfort to her, as they seem to be to our current queen, though her circumstances are much more fortunate.”

“Yes, they are. The prince is a good man and a good father.”

“I agree.”

Emily might have turned the conversation then if she hadn’t been thinking about that moment when she’d stumbled during her descent from the carriage. Mr. Galloway had caught her, but she might have wished he hadn’t. The feel of his arms about her brought back emotions she would rather not have swirling about. One reason she had studied the fossils so intently was to attempt to wipe away the thought of how his arms had felt when he’d pulled her against him. The way his chest had felt. The way he had smelled—like bergamot and oranges. She thought if she leaned close now, she might catch the faint scent of him.

“Do you have children?” Mr. Galloway asked.

She should have seen this question coming, should have prepared for the sharp lance of pain. She tried to answer, but the sudden lump in Emily’s throat prevented her from speaking for a moment. All thoughts of being in Mr. Galloway’s arms vanished. “No,” she said. “I don’t.”

He paused, and she also had to pause, as her hand was on his arm. He looked down at her, and she was close enough that she could see the flecks of gold in the brown of his eyes. How could anyone have such beautiful eyes?

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She blinked.

“You sounded pained just now when you answered.”

She had been pained. She could not bear to think of the child she had lost. Every time she thought that hurt had dulled, she found it was still raw. The pain of that loss was, at times, even worse than Jack’s death. Emily managed a weak smile. “Doesn’t every woman wish for children?”

“No.” He began to walk again, and she was glad because she did not know how long she could have withstood his gaze on her before she did something foolish like reach up and brush his hair off his forehead. “My sister does not want children. I know several women who are quite content without the burden of children.”

“Burden?”

“To some,” he said, inclining his head.

“And you?” Emily didn’t know why she asked him such a personal question. She would have never done so if she hadn’t been taken by surprise at the turn in the conversation.

He smiled, and oh but he was even more handsome when he smiled. His eyes crinkled in an adorable manner, and he had straight, white teeth. “I adore children. I’d like as many as possible.”

“Really?” She almost reared back in surprise.

“Oh, yes. I’ve been told on more than one occasion I have a knack with children. Only give me a wailing infant and I’ll have him quiet and cooing in five minutes.”

Emily laughed. “I don’t believe you.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps one day you will have the opportunity to see for yourself.”

“Jack was good with children,” she said, before she could think what she was saying. “I mean, Lord Averley. My husband, that is, not the current Lord Averley.”

Mr. Galloway nodded. “He could soothe teething infants?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but his siblings had children, and he was always playing with his nephews and nieces. They would pile upon him, and he never minded. He’d tickle them all and chase them until they squealed with delight.” She smiled at the memory, though it was bittersweet. Jack would have made a wonderful father. Emily realized Mr. Galloway was watching her.

“You loved him,” he said.

She gave him a curious look. “Of course.”

“Not of course. Not everyone marries for love. My own parents didn’t.”

She shook her head. “That was a different time. It’s much more common now.”

“Not among our set,” he said. “Alliances for land and wealth are still far more common than love matches.”

“I suppose that’s true, but there is usually some affinity between the bride and groom before they are affianced. In our parents’ time, the betrothal documents were signed and the couple had little say. That was even more true in our grandparents’ day. My grandmother told me she had only met my grandfather once before they were betrothed.”

“And did the late Lord Averley sweep you off your feet?” Mr. Galloway asked smiling. “Was it love at first sight?”

She laughed. Strange that she did not mind discussing Jack with Mr. Galloway. Usually, it made her sad to think of him, or at least wistful. “Not love at first sight, no. We had known each other as children. Not very well, but we’d met several times over the years. When I had my Season, it was quite natural that he should escort me and ask me to dance. Soon I looked forward to those dances, as did he. By the end of the Season, he’d asked for my hand.”

“How long were you married?” Mr. Galloway asked.

“Almost ten years.”

“A lifetime.”

“A different lifetime,” she said, and her gaze went to the skies. “It’s growing late. We should get back.”

Without argument, he raised a hand, signaling to their groom to bring the gig, and Emily vowed to herself to exercise some restraint and keep her eyes on the scenery and not Mr. Galloway.

It was a vow she was unable to keep.



Chapter Four



Two days later, Will was still looking for a way to pull Lady Averley aside. The queen and her ladies were in the gardens of the palace, enjoying a sunny, warm afternoon. The royal children were among them. Vicky and Bertie, the two eldest, were attempting to fly a kite with their father's assistance. Will gave encouragement, but his thoughts were on how he could penetrate the ladies' inner circle without appearing too obvious.

The museum excursion had been both a success and a failure. He'd learned several important facts about Lady Averley. Firstly, she'd loved her late husband. There was nothing particularly unusual about this fact, but it would have been more to her advantage if she had loathed him. She'd loved him, and considering how young she'd been when they'd married, she had probably been sympathetic, if not in agreement, with his political views. And those views had not been favorable toward the queen.

Secondly, he'd learned Lady Averley was attracted to him. Will knew the signs well enough, though she had not been obvious about them. She hadn't flirted with him or made any overtures, but she'd looked at him a bit too long at times and often when she thought he wouldn't notice. This was a positive development. If she desired him, he might be able to use that to grow closer to her and discover what role, if any, she played in the attempt on the queen's life.

And yet, as Bridget Kelly had pointed out in her note to him after the excursion, Lady Averley had done nothing at all suspicious. Neither Cal nor Bridget had seen her so much as look at another visitor to the museum. Which meant Will was no closer to discovering if she was a traitor than he had been before.

His gaze was drawn to an approaching figure, and he recognized Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, making his way toward the queen. He met the man en route and exchanged pleasantries. “I bring news that might interest you, Galloway,” the secretary remarked before approaching the queen and bowing. “I am sorry to intrude, Your Majesty. If I might have a moment of your time?”

The queen was holding Princess Helena, who chose that moment to begin to cry. The monarch looked about for the nanny, but she was engaged with Princess Alice. The little girl had caught her dress on a thorn. Will caught Lady Averley watching him, one brow arched, and he gave her an answering nod.

Challenge accepted.

“Ma’am, would you like me to take Her Royal Highness so you might have a word with your secretary?”

The queen blinked at him, seemingly speechless. Will stepped forward and held out his arms, and the queen handed the princess over. Will, who had indeed held and soothed many babies, settled the child in the crook of his arm and began speaking to her softly.

“What’s this now, little one?” he said.

She paused in her fussing to look up at him, her blue eyes wide, and he took that opportunity to move about in a rhythmic and soothing manner. The queen, seeing the princess was in capable hands, moved away with Palmerston to speak privately.

“She seems to like you,” Lady Jocelyn said, looking up from the chair where she sat with a sketchbook.

“Clearly, you did not exaggerate your talents,” Lady Averley said. “Princess Helena is quite enthralled by you.”

The baby was looking up at him with that wide-eyed gaze so typical of infants. She blinked slowly, seemed to consider crying again, but Will adjusted his movements, and she yawned instead.

“She’s tired,” he said, “and wants a nap.”

By that time the nanny had freed Princess Louise and hurried toward him. “Sir, I can take her.”

Will handed the baby off willingly, and the nanny hurried the little princess and her baby sister back inside the palace.

He scanned the garden and spotted the queen and Palmerston still speaking. The queen looked pale, her face as white as the lace she wore at the back of her hair.

“What is it?” Lady Averley asked. He glanced at her and saw she’d been watching him and followed his gaze to the queen. “Do you know what news he brings?”

“No.” Will smiled, remembering he was supposed to be the prince’s carefree friend, not an agent of the Crown. “What is it you are sketching?” he asked.

Lady Averley seemed not to hear his question. She looked back at the queen with concern. Was it concern for the queen’s well-being or concern that the monarch was being told something that would implicate her?

She rose and casually handed him the sketchbook. “Here.”

He glanced at it long enough to see that she’d made a decent attempt to sketch the two older royal children with the kite before lifting his eyes to her face. But she was studying the queen. Suddenly, she turned to the prince. “Sir! Your Highness!”

Will took in the scene immediately. The queen looked to be in some distress, and Lady Averley thought to alert her husband. It was a decent thing to do, not the sort of thing one would do if one wanted the queen dead. By now the prince had heard her calling and she gestured to the queen. Even as Palmerston stepped away, the prince hurried toward his wife.

The queen allowed her husband to lead her away, and as Palmerston started back the way he’d come, Will made to intercept him. He moved casually but with purpose, calling out an innocuous greeting. The Foreign Secretary slowed, and Will caught up with him, keeping apace. Palmerston was a tall man with bold features and somewhat wild hair. He’d been a

favorite of the ladies before—and some said after—his marriage.

“Any progress on your part?” Palmerston asked as they walked.

Will didn’t report to the Foreign Secretary, not any longer. He reported solely to Baron, but he didn’t see the harm in answering.

“Not yet. I like to think I’m making progress. You? I gather that exchange was not to tell Her Majesty that the King of Denmark sent her a gift.”

“Not at all.” Palmerston glanced behind him. Will, seeing the need for secrecy, led the Foreign Secretary to a shaded section of the gardens, far from the others. They could not be approached here without the interloper being seen.

“Go on.”

“I planned to send word to Baron after I informed Her Majesty, but it will be faster to tell you myself. The police found the man who shot at the queen.”

Will caught his breath and went still. “Where is he now?”

“Hell, most likely.” At Will’s look, he went on. “They botched it, and the man was able to jump out of a window before they could take him into custody. He’s dead.”

“For Christ’s sake. We needed to question him.”

“Yes. Trust me, I had some scathing words for the head of the police, but what’s done is done.”

“Who was he?”

“His name was Liam O’Sullivan.”

“Irish.”

The secretary nodded. “As we suspected. The police searched his room and found several incriminating documents.”

“I need to see them.”

“Of course. For the time being, I will summarize. He had clippings from the papers about the queen, which is nothing anyone in the public can’t access, but they found something else.”

Will waited, knowing the Foreign Secretary had a bent for the dramatic. He gave the secretary his pregnant pause.

“A palace menu, such as the chef might prepare for approval from Her Majesty. And if what my men tell me is correct, it is initialed by the queen herself.”

“I hate to be wrong, but in this case, I might not have minded,” Will said.

“Yes.” Palmerston’s blue eyes looked out over the gardens, toward Lady Averley. “It seems we have a traitor inside the palace.”

“Any reason to believe it’s not she?” Will asked, knowing Palmerston still studied Lady Averley.

“No. But we know the dead Irishman was the one who attempted to assassinate Her Majesty. He was identified by more than one person in the park that day. We would have had him sooner, but he was very good at hiding.”

“He most likely had help.”

“We’re looking into that, yes. I’d be obliged if you would speak to your fellow agents who have some knowledge of the various factions of the Irish separatists. It’s quite probable he belonged to one, and they have been hiding him.”

“I will.”

“As to our blond lady, we have no evidence that she is involved, but the fact remains that O’Sullivan knew to be at the park that afternoon with his pistol. He was in place, and but for the grace of God, would have shot the queen. That excursion was unplanned and, from all accounts, last minute. And no one disputes it was initiated by Lady Averley.”

Will did not look toward the ladies-in-waiting. Already he was certain this conversation looked far too serious for a man

in his role. “When can I see the papers found with the assassin?”

“Tomorrow night after dinner?” the secretary suggested. “I’ll have had time to look at them by then. Come to my offices in Whitehall.”

“I shall see you then.” Will started away and then looked back over his shoulder. “Do you want to inform Baron or shall I?”

“By all means, do so. I have enough to be about at the moment.”



EMILY WATCHED THE PRINCE lead the queen away and debated whether or not she should follow. Lady Jocelyn had lifted her charcoal and gone back to sketching. “Do you think we should go in after Her Majesty?” Emily asked.

Lady Jocelyn shook her head. “He will tell her to rest, and she will argue, and he will end up having his way. She will call for us later if she needs us.”

“What do you think Lord Palmerston said that upset her?” Even as Emily said the words, she watched Palmerston greet Mr. Galloway and the two walk away together. Odd. She would not have thought the two men would be well acquainted. But the Foreign Secretary looked over his shoulder, and then Galloway motioned to a private corner of the garden where they could speak undisturbed. What were they discussing with such serious countenances?

“Lord Palmerston rarely ever brings any news that does not distress the queen,” Lady Jocelyn said, her gaze on her sketching. “He may be handsome, but I would not mind never seeing him again.”

Galloway and Palmerston completed their conversation, and Emily watched as the two men went their separate ways. She was disappointed that Galloway did not return to speak to them so she might inquire about the source of the queen’s distress. That evening the queen took dinner in her chamber, and Emily was free to dine alone in her own room. Normally,

she would enjoy such an evening, choosing to read as she dined and free of the constraints of an evening where she must make conversation. But this night she could not stop thinking about Mr. Galloway. He had looked so serious in conversation with the Foreign Secretary. Since their excursion to the museum, she had realized he was more than the frivolous ne'er-do-well she had first thought. Clearly, there was much more to him.

A tap on the door roused her from her thoughts, and Pratt entered along with a servant who took her tray away. Pratt tsked her tongue. "Are ye not feeling well, my lady? Ye barely ate."

"I'm not very hungry," Emily admitted.

"Can I bring ye some tea?"

Emily considered. "I don't think so. I think I'll take a walk."

"It's windy and cold outside, my lady. The family has gone to bed."

Emily understood the suggestion—she should walk about the palace. She left her room, nodding to the servants she passed as she traversed the salons and various galleries. As though she hadn't enough to think about, she spotted one of the queen's footmen, a tall man with red hair and freckles. Jack had hair almost the same color and a face full of freckles after he'd been out in the sun. She wondered if it was a sign that she saw the one servant who reminded her so much of her late husband?

Quite suddenly, Emily needed fresh air. She pushed open the French doors of a gallery and stepped onto a terrace. One of the royal guards passed by and nodded at her, and Emily pulled her thin shawl closer around her shoulders and breathed in the crisp air.

"I thought someone had mistakenly left the doors open," said a voice from behind her. She turned and there was Mr. Galloway. She couldn't stop her heart from jumping and the

flutter of excitement in her belly. “I thought the palace had gone to bed,” she said, keeping her tone even.

“I believe the queen has retired, yes, but it’s half past nine. I haven’t retired this early since I was eight.” He came to stand beside her, and she appreciated his warmth, though she resisted the urge to move closer. “I hope I am not in your way. Should I find another terrace to occupy?” He looked down at her, his expression innocent, but she saw the flicker in his eyes.

“I think this one is large enough for both of us.” She felt her face heat because, even though she pretended ignorance of the meaning behind his words, she knew he was suggesting she was out to meet a lover. And then she had another idea. “Or am I in your—er, am I an inconvenience at the moment?”

“I assure you, my lady, you are never an inconvenience.”

He gave her that handsome smile and a look from his captivating eyes, and she was struck by how different he had behaved this afternoon. “Do you mind if I ask what you and the Foreign Secretary discussed in the garden? You seemed very serious.”

His smile faltered slightly. She might not even have noticed it if she hadn’t been looking at him so closely. “It was a matter to do with our club,” he said easily. “Lord Palmerston and I belong to the same club, and he mentioned an issue with the betting book. Nothing that concerned me, but like any gentleman, I am always serious about my wagers.”

She almost believed him. Galloway and Palmerston most likely did belong to the same club, and most men did stake their reputation on honoring their wagers. But why would Palmerston speak to Galloway about their club after coming to deliver bad news to the queen? “Did he mention what he said to the queen? What upset her so?”

Galloway gave her a curious look, and she hurriedly added, “I know I should not concern myself with it, but Her Majesty seemed so distressed.”

“He did mention it, in fact,” Galloway said, his smile still in place but his voice devoid of any humor. “Come over here and sit for a moment.” He indicated a long, marble banister, wide enough that she might comfortably rest there. She followed him, settling herself on the cold stone, while he leaned against a decorative marble post.

She was colder now than she had been, but she understood he wanted her away from the French doors. He wanted to speak without being overheard. Emily wished she had worn a cloak or something more substantial than her thin wrap.

“It seems the police found the queen’s assassin,” Galloway said.

Emily’s eyes widened. She had not forgotten about the attempt on the queen’s life. How could she ever forget such an awful day? But she had not thought of it much recently and had quite forgotten that men were searching for the perpetrator.

“I see now why the queen was distressed.” Indeed, Her Majesty did not like to remember the incident. “But she is safe now, I should think.”

“Not exactly,” Galloway said, his face expressionless as he spoke. His gaze was still on her, but his eyes were hooded. “The man jumped out of a window before the police could take him into custody. He died before he could be questioned about any possible accomplices.”

“Accomplices? You do not think he acted alone?”

“I have no opinion on the matter, but Lord Palmerston most likely told the queen his supposition.”

“Which is?”

“The man is part of a group of Irish separatists who wish the queen dead.”

Emily stared at him, feeling as though she had been tossed into a churning sea. “Forgive me. I have not attended to current events as much as I should these past couple of years. The Irish separatists are those who want independence from England.”

“That’s correct. In the past year, they have escalated attacks on various cities in England, and now it appears they have the queen in their sights.” His gaze on her was unfamiliar, almost shrewd. In that moment, he seemed nothing like the pleasure-seeking man whom she had met a few days ago and who had taken her to the museum.

Then again, this news was quite serious. It was enough to sober even the most frivolous man. No wonder the queen had retired early.

“But why should their attacks increase now? Has something happened?”

“The famine, I should think.”

“Famine?”

He gave her a questioning look, almost as though he was trying to see into her mind. Then he went on, “The farmers in Ireland rely heavily on the potato crop. Two years ago, the crop was infested by some sort of organism that rendered much of the harvest inedible. The last harvest fared no better. The situation is dire. People are starving.”

Emily pushed off the banister. She did know something of the famine. No doubt Galloway thought her callous or self-absorbed to have forgotten. It was certainly easy to forget about the world at large when one lived at Buckingham Palace. “But the queen has tried to help,” she protested. “I have heard her speaking of it. She supported the repeal of the Corn Laws. Surely that has helped.”

“Not enough, and some Irishmen will never be happy until Ireland is free from England’s rule.” He had been looking off into the distance, but now his gaze slid back to her. “But you know something of that.”

She began to shake her head then froze as she understood his meaning. “You mean because my late husband supported Ireland’s independence?”

“He was a vocal proponent.”

“He was a proponent of Scottish independence as well and giving women the right to vote. What has that do to with

anything?”

Galloway shrugged. “I assumed he would have discussed the Irish position with you. Nothing more.” He gave her that charming smile again, and though she still felt uneasy, it was hard to remain annoyed when he smiled at her like that. She had mistaken his implication. That was all.

“You’re shivering,” he said. “Let me escort you inside.”

She took his arm without thinking. She was shivering but not because of the cold. She was frightened now. “Do you think these separatists will make another attempt on the queen?”

“I couldn’t say, but the prince will do everything in his power to keep her and his children safe.” They stepped back inside the gallery, and he looked down at her. “You don’t have to be afraid. You will be protected too.” As though to emphasize the point, he turned and closed the French doors, securing them.

“The prince is lucky to have a friend like you,” Emily said. “I’m sorry to say when I first met you, I thought—”

He raised his brows and took her arm again. “I was a libertine?”

She smiled. “Something like that.” They walked, passing old portraits and priceless paintings. She wouldn’t normally have spoken further, but something about him made her want to confide in him. “I have often thought that we have different friends for different times in our lives.”

“Go on.”

She was still shivering, but being close to him, the scent of oranges and bergamot teasing her nose, had a calming effect. “There were the friends I had in finishing school—sweet girls who would stay up late and giggle with me into the night.”

“I can hardly picture you giggling.”

She gave him a look under her lashes. “You don’t know everything about me.”

“I know almost nothing about you, so I am intrigued. Continue.”

“Some of those same girls came out when I did, but during the Season, there was a lot less giggling and more commiseration—is that the word? Competition, as well.”

“You make it sound like hell.”

They turned into a wide hall, and she gestured toward the wing where her chamber lay. “I don’t suppose you have any interest in marriage yet. When you decide to seek a wife, you’ll see. One look at you, and there will be a riot.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“You know you are handsome.”

“I didn’t know you thought so.”

She felt her cheeks heat and hurried to change the subject. “As I was saying, those were my friends before I married. After I married, it was the wives of Lord Averley’s friends and the women who were part of the gentry near Averley Hall.”

“And now?”

“And now it’s Lady Jocelyn and the Duchess of Charlemont.”

“Surely not the duchess. I can’t see her giggling late into the night.”

She almost smiled at the image. “But that’s my point. We have different needs at different seasons of our lives.”

“And you thought I was a friend to Albert when he was a bachelor seeking frivolity and adventure.”

“Yes. I couldn’t see how you would fit into his world now. I am happy to say I was wrong.” She gestured to her door. “This is my chamber.”

“Then I’ll bid you good-night and leave you with something to ponder.”

She paused and tilted her head to regard him. “What is that?”

“People change. I might have been a libertine in my youth—an assumption by the way, and not one based on fact—but I’m not still seeking pleasure at every turn.”

“I’m so sorry I assumed, and I see now my theory about needing different people at different times in our lives might be flawed in some circumstances.”

“It’s not flawed. It simply fails to take into account that love and friendship can be a constant. We may change, but our feelings for those we care about do not.”

“Albert is lucky to have you here during this trying time.” She was aware that Galloway was standing close to her. The distance between them was no less than it had been all evening, but it *seemed* as though he was very near, indeed.

“And the queen is fortunate to count you as a friend. But you’re still trembling.” He took her hand from his arm and held it.

“I’m cold,” she said. She should draw her hand away, but she liked touching Galloway. She liked having her hand held by him.

“Not frightened?” he asked. “I don’t want you to be frightened. You’re safe.”

She nodded. “I feel safe.”

Had he drawn her closer or had she moved toward him? It seemed they were brushing against each other. Her whole body was tingling and aching to press against him. She had to actively resist the urge.

“You are safe,” he said. “You are always safe with me.”

She knew she didn’t imagine the way he looked at her. His brown eyes were full of interest, so dark now that she couldn’t see the gold flecks. He leaned forward, and she closed her eyes, anticipating the feel of his mouth against her own.

But he merely brushed his lips over first one cheek and then the other, pausing close to her ear to whisper, “Good-night, Emily.”

She swallowed. “Good-night.”

He stepped back, and she felt even colder than before. Her hands were shaking badly now but, somehow, she managed to open the door of her chamber. When she closed it, he was standing outside, watching her go inside. She pushed the door closed and leaned against it, listening as his footfalls faded away.

Emily pressed a hand against her abdomen. Her corset seemed to cut off the air to her lungs. She couldn't manage a deep breath, and she badly needed air. She'd thought Galloway would kiss her. She had wanted him to kiss her—and not a mere brush of his mouth on her cheek.

Since Jack's death, she had never wanted another man to kiss her or even touch her. It had been difficult to even imagine such a thing. But she was imagining it now.

She rang for Pratt and waited for the crushing guilt to force her to her knees. She wanted a man who was not her husband to kiss her. Surely, she would feel ashamed of that.

But no guilt came. Pratt arrived and helped Emily dress for bed. With the corset off, she finally managed a deep breath, but even warm and snug under the covers, sleep was elusive. She didn't know how or when, but her grieving had ended. She would always love Jack, but she was no longer mourning him. Perhaps Lady Jocelyn was right, and it was time to take off her mourning attire. It was time to move on with her life.

Not that she would make Mr. Galloway part of her future, but he'd shown her that she was ready to take the next step. She could think of a future without Jack and even imagine herself married again.

She closed her eyes and heard Galloway whisper, "Good-night, Emily."

She shouldn't have allowed him to use her given name. She'd set him straight in the morning.



"WILLOUGHBY GALLOWAY, so it is." Callahan Kelly opened the door to the flat Baron had secured for Cal and his wife while they were in London assisting Will. It was not a

large flat, but Will had a room here too, in the event he needed to attend to matters that could not be observed by the royal staff.

“Bridget is already in bed,” Cal said, moving aside so Will could enter. Will noted that Cal looked annoyed he was not in bed with her.

“I need to write a missive to Baron. Can you send it tomorrow?”

“First thing. Bridget will have me head if I don’t offer you tea.”

Will shook his head. “I just need to write the letter then I’ll be out of your way.” He went to the room with the small cot he had only slept on a handful of times and sat at the desk. Opening a drawer, he pulled out the code Mrs. Kelly had devised, found a blank sheet of paper, and scrawled his message. Then he took another paper and began to code it.

“Here you are.” Cal set the tea on the edge of the desk then sat on the cot. “What’s happened besides the police letting the assassin jump from a window?”

Will looked up. “You heard about that.”

“I have me connections. What was the mood at the palace after the news? Sure and it was not a lively one.”

“The queen retired early with the prince. She went white as a ghost when Palmerston informed her the assassin had been part of a group of Irish separatists.”

“She didn’t know.”

Will studied the code and added a few more lines. “It wasn’t confirmed. She doesn’t understand why the Irish hate her.”

Cal let out a derisive snort. “And why shouldn’t we hate the English when they treat us little better than the dirt on their shoes? And the queen? What has she ever done for us? Thousands are dying, their children starving, and she goes on as though nothing has changed.”

Will looked up. “And yet here you are, defending Queen and Country.”

Cal shrugged. “Not all of us believe violence is the answer. And what kind of an Irishman would I be if I let a few radicals speak for all of us? It’s my country too, and I want peace as much as any man.”

Will finished the letter, sealed it, and handed it to Cal. “You’re a good man.”

Cal narrowed his eyes. “You sound as though you doubt you are one as well.”

“I don’t like this part I’m playing. I don’t like lying to Emily.”

Cal’s brows shot up. “Emily?”

“Lady Averley.”

“Oh, and sure but she’s Emily now.”

Something on Will’s face must have revealed his emotions because Cal’s teasing smile faded. “You have to make her trust you. It’s the only way to find out if she’s involved in this plot.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like it. I almost kissed her tonight.”

Cal leaned back on the cot. “I see. You knew that might be part of it. You must get close to her, convince her to see you as an ally.”

“I know. I agreed to that and didn’t think twice about it. But that was before I met her.”

“Ah, things have changed, so they have.”

Will ran a hand through his hair. “She’s not what I expected. You saw her at the museum.”

“Hard not to see her. She’s striking.”

“She’s more than beautiful. She’s curious and intelligent. She’s kind and cares for others. I can’t see her involved in the assassination plot.”

“And are you ready to tell Baron the same?”

Will took a deep breath. One of the first rules an agent learned was never to let the personal color the professional. “No, I’m not that certain. I don’t think it’s an act, but I’m not willing to stake the queen’s life on it. Not yet.”

“Then the work continues. I’ve tugged at me own connections here in London and hope to have some information you can use soon.”

“Send it through the usual channels.”

“I will. And now I’ll see you out before Bridget comes to see what’s keeping me and we both hear an earful.”



Chapter Five



The next day was clear and mild, and the queen proposed playing croquet and lawn bowls followed by a picnic.

Clearly the news about the dead assassin had scared her enough that she was not yet ready to venture outside the palace.

Will and the prince made their way outside before the others and stood in the shade, watching the servants finish laying out the croquet game.

“The police have nothing of any use,” Albert was saying. “They can’t even tell me if the man acted alone.”

“I’m sorry to say it, Your Highness, but I don’t believe he did. As I told you, the Royal Saboteurs recently infiltrated an Irish separatist group, and they have plans for actions all over the country. We believe the queen’s assassin was working with that group.”

“Innishfree.”

“That’s correct.”

“I want them stopped, Mr. Galloway.”

“We’ll stop them, Your Highness.”

The sound of feminine voices drew the attention of both men, and Will glanced toward the French doors leading out of the palace. The queen emerged first, her dog trotting at her heel. Behind her was the Duchess of Charlemont. Will tried to make himself look away then. He shouldn’t want to see Lady Averley so badly, but he found himself watching for her pale hair. She followed the duchess, and Will’s breath caught in his throat. She wore a lovely blue gown with white stripes and lace at the throat and sleeves. Her hair had been swept up and back, as opposed to her usual dour style of a bun at the nape of

her neck. She looked utterly ravishing, and Will thanked God for the others present because if they'd been alone, he would not have been able to stop himself from going to her.

“It appears as though Lady Averley has put aside her mourning,” the prince observed.

That would explain the blue dress and the style of her hair. “I wonder what precipitated that decision.”

“Do you?” the prince said, brow raised. He walked toward his wife and gave her a sweeping bow. She took his arm and they moved toward the croquet. Will made to follow, but a red-haired footman appeared with a silver tray. “Letter for you, sir.”

“Thank you.” Will recognized Bridget Kelly's hand and moved inside. It would need to be destroyed as soon as he read it. He found a parlor with a fire in the hearth and stood with an arm on the mantel. He read the note once then again then tossed it in the fire and watched it burn. Cal's contacts had uncovered a meeting of Innishfree tonight. Will was under no illusions that he would be able to gain entrance, but if Lady Averley was part of the plot to kill the queen, mightn't she attend?

He returned to the lawn, where it appeared a spirited game of croquet was already underway. He agreed to keep score and then wished he had chosen to play lawn bowls. Emily was one of the croquet players, and Will had to watch the game—and the players—to keep score. He should have been watching all of the players, but his gaze was drawn to Emily over and over. He traced the lines of her slim back when she bent to swing the croquet mallet. He watched the breeze lift the tendrils of hair that had come loose at the back of her neck.

And at one point, she caught him watching her, and he all but groaned when she gave him a slight smile and then appeared to wet her lips out of nervousness.

He might as well accept that he wanted her. And he might as well accept that he couldn't have her. He definitely had feelings for her and sleeping with her would only exacerbate that problem. She was his mission. He had to remain impartial.

Especially if she was plotting to help Irish separatists kill the queen.

Clearly that would not happen on the palace grounds this afternoon, and as soon as the game ended, Will moved away and moved to go inside. He wasn't about to watch the ladies play lawn bowls. Watching Emily bend over to roll a ball was too much to ask. He decided to take the long way back into the palace to give his body time to cool down. There was a long columned portico, and he stepped into the coolness beneath it. He'd lingered there no more than a moment or two when he heard his name.

He turned and uttered a low curse. Emily had followed him at a clip, and now she slowed, her hand on her waist as she tried to catch her breath. Will imagined loosening her corset so she might breathe easier. And then he imagined sliding his hands around her bare waist and up to cup—

“Lady Averley, is anything amiss?”

She shook her head and reached for a column where she rested a gloved hand. Will tried very hard not to notice the way her bosom rose and fell. Thank God it was afternoon and her gown was not cut low. “A word, sir,” she finally managed.

“Of course. Catch your breath, my lady. And may I say you look lovely today? Blue suits you.”

Her pale eyes flashed at him, and he all but took a step back. Clearly, she did not want his compliments.

“Last night,” she began, “you took liberties.”

Will could only wish he'd taken liberties. If he had, then he wouldn't be wondering what her mouth would feel like under his. “Did I? I was under the impression I merely escorted you back to your chamber and left you at the door.”

“You used my Christian name without my leave.”

Had he? It was entirely likely. He'd begun to think of her as *Emily* in his mind. “I called you Emily?”

She scowled at him, and he could hardly be sorry for using her name again when she looked so adorably annoyed.

“You’ve done it again, sir.”

“Perhaps you should call me Will—as retribution, of course.” He gave her a charming smile.

“I’d rather you refer to me as Lady Averley, and I will call you Mr. Galloway.”

Apparently, the smile hadn’t worked. “By all means.” He gave her a bow. “I apologize for my familiarity. It won’t happen again.”

He straightened. Her brow furrowed. “I—thank you.”

He took in her bewildered expression. “You thought I would argue or attempt to take more liberties?”

“No.”

He raised a brow.

“Very well. I suppose I didn’t expect you to agree quite so readily.”

Will had a moment to wonder if she hadn’t expected him to agree or hadn’t *wanted* him to agree. He took in the blue gown again. “You are not wearing mourning attire.”

Her pale cheeks immediately turned pink. “No, I am not.”

As she didn’t appear inclined to say anything further on the matter, he took a step closer. “I don’t suppose that has anything to do with our conversation last night.”

“My decisions have absolutely nothing to do with you, sir.”

She’d said that a little too quickly, and he caught the hint of defensiveness in her tone.

“I’m sure they don’t, my lady. But that doesn’t mean I can’t admire that gown or you.” He moved closer again, and she didn’t step back. In fact, he watched her eyes grow darker. She was definitely attracted to him. This was what he’d wanted when he’d accepted this mission. He hadn’t counted on feeling the same toward her. “Shall I escort you inside?” he asked, thinking of the parlor where he’d gone earlier. It was empty, the perfect place to close the door and steal a kiss.

“I must get back to the queen,” she said, finally stepping away. “Good day.” She turned and walked at an unhurried pace back toward the queen and her ladies. Will shouldn’t have watched her go, but why resist temptation now?



“IS ANYTHING AMISS?” Lady Jocelyn asked when Emily returned to the games.

“Not at all,” Emily answered. “Why do you ask?” She certainly hoped no one had seen her speaking to Mr. Galloway, or if they had, she hoped they assumed it was nothing more than a polite exchange.

“Your face is flushed. I thought you might be overly warm.”

She *was* overly warm. Something about the way Galloway looked at her made her corset feel too tight and her dress too heavy. She wished she had a fan so she might cool off. Instead, she angled her parasol to block the sun and lifted her face to catch the faint breeze. “A bit too much sun, I think,” Emily said. They watched the queen roll a ball toward the jack and then each took a turn. Emily was usually quite good at the game, but today her ball went very far off course.

She could blame that on Mr. Galloway too. She’d add a poor game of lawn bowls to a poor night’s sleep, a horrid game of croquet, and her flushed cheeks.

“I still cannot believe how pretty you look in that blue,” Lady Jocelyn said as the prince took a turn and they both stood back. “I’m so glad you decided to put your mourning away.”

“You have been telling me it was time for weeks. I finally listened.”

Lady Jocelyn leaned close so that their parasols touched. “I believe Mr. Galloway noticed your new attire as well. I caught him watching you during croquet.”

“I’m sure that’s only because he was keeping score.”

But Emily had felt him watching her as well. She’d caught his gaze on her more than once and, though she didn’t like to

admit what that gaze did to her, she couldn't deny much of her breathlessness earlier had more to do with feeling his eyes on her than the tightness of her corset.

She'd told herself last night that she would set him straight. Clearly, she needed to deal with herself first. Mr. Galloway might be an attractive man, but she would not become romantically involved with him. She would not kiss him. She would not think about him. And she absolutely would not wake up in the mornings after dreaming about his mouth trailing along her bare shoulder.

Emily closed her eyes. What was wrong with her? She had been married long enough to know that women too had needs, but since Jack's death she hadn't even thought of her own desires. Now they'd been let out of the box, and like a kindle of kittens, she couldn't seem to catch and confine them again. As soon as she gained control of one errant thought or image, another took its place.

"He was keeping score of everyone's play, but I didn't find him watching me so closely," Lady Jocelyn said.

"Then at least he has some respect for the institution of marriage." She watched the queen bowl and then clapped. As she folded her parasol to take her own turn, she said quietly, "It's nice to have a man's attention, but he will be gone soon. I think that's for the best."

Lady Jocelyn looked less than convinced. Emily could hardly blame her as she hadn't even convinced herself. Even after the games ended and the party went inside, she had trouble ridding her mind of thoughts of Mr. Galloway. She attended to her correspondence and helped the queen with her daily tasks and tried not to imagine what it would feel like to have Willoughby Galloway's mouth on her skin. His touch had been so light and soft last night when he'd kissed her cheeks. Would he kiss her entire body like that or—

"Lady Averley?" the queen asked.

Emily looked up and around the parlor where they had all been sitting and sewing. Her embroidery was in her lap, and she'd been staring out the window.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I do apologize for not attending.”

Lady Jocelyn was gathering up her things, but she managed to toss a knowing look at Emily. The duchess glared at Emily accusingly.

“You should apologize,” the queen said. “You have not been listening to a word we said all afternoon. Your conversation has been missed. Can we rely on you at dinner or are we to be greeted by more long silences?”

“You may rely on me, Ma’am.” Emily realized it was her turn to assist the queen in preparing for dinner. “Shall I send your maid for your bath and choose your clothing for this evening? I was thinking of the rose blush gown. You haven’t worn it in some time.”

The queen seemed to thaw a bit at this suggestion. “Please do.”

Attending to the queen finally took Emily’s mind from Mr. Galloway. The queen did look lovely in the rose blush, and by the time her maid was dressing the queen’s hair, Emily and the queen were talking and laughing as though there had been no rift earlier in the day. She excused herself to dress for dinner and surprised Pratt by choosing a deep pink gown, which would complement the queen. She still felt a shock when she looked in the mirror and saw herself out of mourning attire, but it did feel good to put on some of her pretty gowns. In fact, she should probably order new gowns so her wardrobe would be in the latest style.

She said as much to Lady Jocelyn as the two walked behind the queen on the way to the royal dining chamber. Lady Jocelyn begged to accompany her. She loved nothing more than fashion and had an eye for fabrics and colors.

“I would love for you to accompany me,” Emily said. “Won’t you wish to spend time with your husband and children?”

Jocelyn was the daughter of the Duke of Grafton. His dukedom had been created in 1675, and he was wealthy and powerful. Lady Jocelyn, whose given name was Mary, had

married the younger son of the Duke of Lennox ten years before and had two boys, ages eight and nine.

Lady Jocelyn waved a hand. “Lord Jocelyn will be busy overseeing the planting at the estate and the boys are at Eton. I shall see them when the Lent Term ends for Easter.”

“And only a few weeks later your rotation at the palace will end, and you’ll be home.”

“Exactly!” Lady Jocelyn took Emily’s hand. “We should enjoy this time while we have it. I shall miss you while we are away.”

Emily would miss Lady Jocelyn as well. She’d miss the court. She did not have anywhere to go home to. Oh, she had a residence in Town and there was the dowager’s house on the Averley estate. But she didn’t want to go back to Averley Hall. She didn’t want to remember all the time she had spent there as the mistress of the beautiful home. Jack’s brother’s wife was its mistress now, and Emily would only be in the way or all alone.

Perhaps she should renew her friendships with some of the women she’d known in her youth. That would make staying in Town more bearable, and hadn’t Galloway reminded her that love and friendship could be a constant thing. Her friendships needn’t have ended because she left school or became a wife.

The doors to the dining chamber opened, and the queen entered. Emily and Lady Jocelyn followed behind the Duchess of Charlemont and the other more senior ladies-in-waiting. Unless the queen ate in her private chambers, dining at the palace was never a cozy affair, though the party was smaller than usual tonight. There were the assorted ministers and secretaries, including Lord Palmerston, but otherwise it was just those closest to the queen and the prince.

As Emily scanned the room, noting who was in attendance, her gaze snagged on Willoughby Galloway. The blond in his hair glinted in the light of the candelabra he stood near, and he stood tall and straight on the other side of the room, where he spoke with Lord Palmerston. He might as well be standing

directly beside her because her senses conjured the scent of bergamot and oranges that she had come to associate with him.

Even as her gaze lingered on his handsome face, tracing the straight slope of his nose and his strong jaw, his eyes met hers and that lovely mouth of his curved into a smile. She felt a fluttering in her belly and quickly looked away. What was it about him that made her feel flustered and warm? Lord Palmerston was a handsome man, as was the prince and several other courtiers. None of them made her breath catch in her throat when they looked at her.

She thanked God Galloway stayed on the other side of the room speaking with Palmerston so that she might have a moment to gather her wits. When it was time to take her seat at the table, she was happy to see Galloway was not beside her.

Unfortunately, he was directly across from her.

Emily couldn't allow his nearness to affect her. She made every effort to attend to the queen and participate in the conversation, but she could feel Galloway's gaze on her. Strangely enough, every time she glanced at him, hoping to catch him and direct a scolding look his way, he was looking the other way. Was she simply imagining that he was watching her? Had she imagined he had any interest in her at all?

Finally, the Duchess of Charlemont claimed the queen's attention, and Emily tried to focus on her plate.

"Are you not hungry?" Galloway asked.

She looked up and found his dark eyes on her, those flecks of gold glinting in the candlelight. She wondered if she would ever look at him and not be struck by his raw beauty.

As if in answer to his question, she ate a bite of potato. The truth was she was not hungry. She had been to so many of these dinners that she was no longer interested in the rich food. Not to mention, her belly was still fluttering with nerves at his closeness.

"You look lovely in pink," Galloway said. Emily felt her face heat, and Galloway nodded to Palmerston who was on her

left. “Are you not glad to see Lady Averley out of mourning?”

Palmerston nodded. “Pink suits you, my lady.”

She pressed a napkin to her lips. “Thank you.”

Galloway took a sip of wine, his eyes still on hers as he lowered the glass. Emily glanced at Palmerston, hoping he hadn’t noticed the way Galloway looked at her, but no one else at the table seemed aware that Galloway was all but undressing her with his eyes. Or was she only wishing he was doing so?

There was an outburst of laughter at the table, and Emily realized she’d been staring at Galloway and not listening to anything that had been said. She would put Galloway out of her mind and focus on everyone else. She smiled at Palmerston, and he inclined his head. “I understand you recently visited the British Museum, my lady,” the secretary said.

She wanted to close her eyes and scream. All roads led back to Galloway. “Yes. We”—she nodded at Galloway—“took in the fossils. The museum has quite an extraordinary collection.”

“I haven’t seen it, but Mr. Galloway tells me you are quite the aficionado.”

Emily glanced at Galloway with some surprise. He only smiled at her.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I would,” Galloway added. “You know more about those pieces than anyone else I have ever met, save the Anning family. If you do go to Lyme Regis this summer, you should write to Mary Anning and ask if she will have you on one of her excursions.”

“I should never be so bold,” Emily said.

“Then you will never have what you want,” he answered with a wink. Emily stared at him, hoping no one else had seen the wink.

“Do not tell me you young people are discussing digging in the dirt again,” the duchess said, her voice ringing out through the room. “Do let’s discuss something else.”

“I agree,” the queen said. “I asked Lord Palmerston to dine with us this evening to tell us more about the Irish situation.”

Palmerston inclined his head gravely. “I am at your service, Ma’am.”

“You have an estate in Ireland, do you not?” the queen asked.

“I do. Classiebawn Castle is in County Sligo. Its construction and refurbishment has been a hobby of mine these past years. Alas, the work is not yet complete. I can only hope to survive to see it.”

“I see. And do you have tenants, Palmerston?”

Emily observed that Palmerston’s expression hardened at this question. “I do, Ma’am, though I have had to evict many for non-payment of rents.”

“That seems rather harsh,” Emily said without thinking. Palmerston turned to look at her, but she didn’t retreat. “I have heard there is an awful blight on potatoes and much of the Irish populace is starving.”

“This is true, but what would you have me do? Allow people to live on my land for free?” he asked.

“But where else shall they go if you turn them out?”

“Lady Averley,” the queen said. Emily all but jumped at the sharpness in her tone. “Surely it is not for you to question the Foreign Secretary in these personal matters.”

“I apologize,” Emily said.

Palmerston raised a hand. “If you do not object, Your Majesty, I would like to answer, Lady Averley.”

The queen made a gesture with her hand, and Palmerston turned back to Emily. “I do not know where they all go, but I have financed passage to New York for some and intend to do so for many more. In New York they can start a new life. The

problems in Ireland are much deeper than the famine, you see. I am in favor of ejecting as many small landowners and squatting cottiers as possible. Only then can the social system begin to improve.”

Emily stared at him. “I am appalled that you would speak so callously of your own tenants, my lord. Women and children among them.”

“And I am sure your own late husband did not allow tenants who could not pay their rents to squat on his land,” Palmerston said. “Nor will his brother. Nor should he, nor will I.”

Emily had no rejoinder to this. Had Jack evicted tenants for non-payment? She had never inquired or even spared a thought to such a thing. Her gaze sought out the red-haired footman who reminded her of Jack. He was staring straight ahead, his jaw tense.

But she was being ridiculous. Jack wasn't here, and she had lost the argument. It was too late to point out that the situation for tenants in England and Ireland was vastly different, considering that Ireland was in the midst of a famine at the moment. The conversation at the table had already moved on to the bubbling revolution on the Continent.

Emily reached for her wine and caught Galloway's gaze across the table. He didn't look away in embarrassment as she expected. In fact, he nodded his head at her, seeming almost proud of her recent exchange. Did he share her opinion? She hadn't even known she had an opinion on the Irish situation before this evening. But now she could not stop thinking of all the homeless families, dying of starvation while she sat at a table laden with food.



Chapter Six



Will paced his chamber and glanced at the clock on the mantel again. It was half past ten. Bridget had written that the Innishfree meeting was set to convene at midnight—of course—in the cellar of a shop not far from the palace. He didn't need to leave until quarter after eleven. That would give him plenty of time to find a place to watch and record the men and women who went in and out.

He didn't expect Lady Averley to attend. A countess would never be found in a shop cellar with a group of Irish radicals. But she must have a contact somewhere. After the conversation at dinner this evening, he no longer had any doubts she was a sympathizer. She'd been so bold in her questioning of Palmerston, the queen had to step in. Not that Will could blame Emily for berating the Foreign Secretary. The Irish landowners were almost all English and almost all entirely absent from their lands and tenants in Ireland. They cared little to nothing for the people. Palmerston thought nothing of evicting them or sending them overseas, away from all they'd ever known.

Truth be told, Will didn't like it any more than Lady Averley seemed to, but the difference was he didn't condone violence. If the separatists wanted independence, then that was their fight, but he couldn't allow them to hurt the queen or any of her subjects in their quest to obtain it.

Will glanced at the clock again and sighed. It was twenty-five to eleven. He might as well go now. He was wearing a hole in the rug as he paced.

He donned his greatcoat and tucked his hat under his arm, then slipped out of his room and made his way silently to the closest exit. He had made sure the prince added royal guards to every entrance and exit so they were guarded continuously.

One of Will's first tasks upon arriving at the palace had been to assess the security and make suggestions to improve it. As he made his way through the dark palace, he saw no servants whatsoever and made another note to tell the prince to ask the chief of staff to schedule several footmen to monitor the palace corridors all night. That way if one of the queen's enemies managed to slip through the royal guards, he would be intercepted inside.

But even as he had the thought, he realized that nothing could save the queen if the danger was within the palace. That was why he must deal with Lady Averley.

He finally reached the exit and made his way into the cool night air. The guard at the door grumbled—something about lovers and rendezvous—but Will ignored him and started across the lawn. He planned to exit through a garden gate and then make his way toward the meeting place. He didn't wish for anyone to see which direction he went or to know he left the palace grounds. He couldn't trust anyone, and this way anyone who saw him would assume he was only out walking among the plants and flowers. Will wasn't certain if the guard could see him in the dark, so he didn't start right for the gate. He made a pretext of walking in the other direction and would circle back using the hedges as cover.

But he hadn't walked for more than a moment before he caught sight of something pale in the half moonlight. Not something, he corrected. Someone.

Emily Blythe-Coston. Lady Averley herself.

Will stopped in his tracks, but it was too late. She turned and spotted him. And then she went rigid as well.

Will didn't have time to think about what she was doing out here or to consider how convenient it might be that she was out and about on the same night Innishfree held a meeting. She was meeting someone, and he'd stumbled onto that rendezvous. He should have listened to the guard.

Will reached into his pocket and felt for his dagger. He had another in his boot, but this one was just as sharp. He clutched

the handle, tense and ready for the attack. Lady Averley's shoulders went down, and she seemed to relax.

"You frightened me," she said. "I heard a sound and thought—" She waved a hand as though what she had thought was too silly to say.

Will could fill in the rest of the sentence for her. She'd thought he was her contact from Innishfree.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said, his voice as smooth as silk. "I needed some air. I'll leave you to your evening." He'd slip out of sight and watch who she met with.

"You think I'm meeting someone," she said.

Will clutched the dagger more tightly. He couldn't let her know he knew she was a traitor. "The guard did say something about a lovers' rendezvous. I shouldn't have come this way."

She shook her head and then looked up, seeming to study the moon. "I do not have a rendezvous. I also needed air."

He didn't believe her. If he'd been caught in her position, he'd say the same thing.

"We can breathe the air together, if you like," she said. "There's a bench just over there."

Will had not been expecting that. He'd expected her to try and get rid of him. Why was she inviting him to stay? Was her meeting over? Had he been too late?

"I'd like that," he said, keeping his hand on the dagger. He followed her to the bench and waited until she sat before looking about and joining her. One of the garden walls was behind them, so he was in little danger of an attack from behind. What was she playing at?

"Do you believe in Fate?" she asked.

Will raised a brow. "Not really. I believe men make their own fate." And that's why he wasn't about to let himself be murdered tonight.

"I don't either, but sometimes I find it difficult not to believe. I was thinking of you just now," she said.

Will's grip on the dagger loosened, and he had to remind himself to keep hold of it.

"And then you appeared. Is that coincidence or is it Fate?"

"Good question," he said, aware she could be speaking to lull him into a false sense of security. But he was on alert, and he heard nothing, saw nothing out of the ordinary. What if she *was* simply taking in the air? "What were you thinking about me?"

She gave a small, feminine shrug. She was still wearing the pink gown she'd worn at dinner. She'd taken her hair down, though, and it fell over her shoulders like moonlight. It wasn't as long as was the fashion. Many women never cut their hair and grew it to their knees. But Emily's hair didn't even reach the middle of her back. It was sleek and straight. Will imagined if he touched it, it would be soft and fine like silver thread.

"I was thinking that you shared my opinions tonight."

He might have stiffened again if his senses hadn't already been heightened. Instead, he used his training and gave her a relaxed smile. "On what topic?" He hoped she didn't say it. He wanted to remove her from suspicion. He wanted to believe she was innocent.

He wanted to kiss her because he found her beautiful and enticing, not because he needed to seduce a traitor.

"On the Irish," she said.

Will felt his belly tighten and a cold settle between his shoulder blades.

"The conversation you held with Lord Palmerston." His voice sounded easy and normal, but he gripped the dagger's hilt until his hand ached.

"I'm sure I shouldn't have said so much," she said, looking away. "I forget everyone isn't as interested in a lady's opinions as my late husband."

"I'm interested in your opinions," Will said. And he meant it, even though he had an ulterior motive in saying so. "And I

do agree with you. Palmerston and his ilk have managed the Irish situation badly. For all that the Foreign Secretary is a brilliant man who has steered the queen through many precarious diplomatic crises, he has his prejudices like any other British peer.”

She nodded vigorously. “That’s just it, isn’t it? It’s prejudice against the Irish. Almost as though they weren’t human and didn’t deserve to live.” She tilted her head at him, and the gesture was so adorable he was tempted to release his hold on the dagger. “But you are the son of a peer. Viscount Smythe, yes?”

“Yes. But my parents are...” How to put this? “Not traditional.”

“My parents are extremely traditional. They would be shocked if they’d heard me this evening. But I suppose living with Jack for so long changed me.”

“Jack was your late husband?”

“Yes. I never questioned my parents’ view of the world before I married. Why should I? I was barely eighteen. But now I seem to question everything. I’m sure Her Majesty was quite shocked.”

“I doubt much shocks Victoria.”

Emily smiled, and it was such a lovely smile that Will did loosen his grip on the dagger then. It would serve him right if his weakness for her smile got him killed. “But she expects me to be quiet and docile.”

“Why is that?”

“Because that’s how I’ve behaved these past two years.”

“And what has changed?” Will knew the answer. He knew it, and he knew what was coming. He knew he should be on guard. He knew he should remember she was a traitor, but he seemed powerless against this attraction to her.

“You arrived,” she said.

Will’s heart clenched in his chest, pounding hard against his ribs.

“You make me feel...” She gestured hopelessly. “You make me feel again.”

Will felt as though an invisible force pulled him toward her. For days now he'd been resisting it, fighting it, swimming against the current. He didn't want to resist any longer. They were facing each other on the bench, and it took very little effort for Will to lean forward and brush her cheek with his hand. She closed her eyes at his touch, and he slid his hand around and cupped the back of her neck, pulling her to him. His lips brushed hers, and he felt her arms go around his neck. He desperately wanted to put his other hand around her waist and tug her closer, but he couldn't let go of his dagger. He'd been trained too well, and this evening had every warning sign of a trap.

And then her mouth moved against his, and it would have taken a train racing toward him to make him remember all the warnings. She kissed him long and slow, her mouth parting just enough that he could taste her. Will had imagined kissing her, of course, but he hadn't thought she would be so skilled. He hadn't considered how she might seduce him with her lips, her tongue, the soft catch in her throat when he returned her kiss.

Her hands dropped to his shoulders, and she pulled him closer. He wrapped both arms around her, feeling the heat of her ward off the cool of the night. Her lips moved to his jaw and then just below his jaw to his throat, finding the little of it exposed above his shirt and neckcloth.

God, the feel of her lips was intoxicating. He had not wanted to seduce her, but he'd failed to consider that she might very well seduce him.

“You told me to call you Will,” she said, against his ear. He was hard now, his cock throbbing with every whispered word. “Isn't your given name Willoughby?”

“It is.” He started to move his hand to caress her back, then realized he'd pulled the dagger out and had it pressed flat against her corset.

She seemed to realize something was amiss as well and leaned back. Her gaze flicked up to his. “Is that a knife?”

He brought his hand around and showed her the dagger. “Forgive me. I had it in my pocket and withdrew it without thinking.”

Emily very carefully moved back, out of reach.

“Emily, I wouldn’t have hurt you. I forgot it was in my hand,” Will tried to reassure her.

“I’m not sure that explanation is heartening. It must be in your hand often if you forgot it was there.”

“I think it’s more that I was distracted by your kisses.”

Her blue eyes were still wary. “And why do you have a dagger in your pocket to walk about the gardens of Buckingham Palace?”

“With the recent political climate, one cannot be too careful.”

“Perhaps I should go in. If even the gardens are unsafe.” Her tone implied that it was he making the gardens unsafe, not any interlopers.

“It is late. Shall I escort you?”

She shook her head. “I can find my own way.”

Like a breeze, she was gone. Will would have cursed his clumsiness, but he rather thought he should be glad for the interruption. If they hadn’t been interrupted, he and Emily might have done more than exchange a simple kiss.

Not that there was anything simple about that kiss. When their lips had touched, he’d felt like a gas lamp when the flame is applied. His entire being seemed to burn, and it was still burning for her.

But he couldn’t allow his carnal desires to distract him.

He pulled out his pocket watch and realized he was late leaving for the rendezvous. Will did a quick surveillance of the area to ensure he was alone then slipped out of the gate and

made his way toward the cellar Bridget Kelly had written him about.

While he walked, he had ample time to organize his thoughts. No matter how he arranged and rearranged things, Emily Blythe-Coston looked very guilty indeed.

She was the one who had proposed the impromptu ride into Hyde Park where the attempt had been made on the queen's life.

That and the fact that her late husband had been at odds with the queen on many issues was enough to bring her to the attention of the Foreign Office and launch his surveillance.

Will had hoped to be able to clear her and turn his sights elsewhere quickly, but almost every encounter with her forced him to look at her more closely.

She expressed sympathy for the Irish separatists, even when it had been made clear they were suspected of plotting to kill the queen. She'd challenged Palmerston at dinner and sided against the English landowners and with the Irish peasants. And then tonight, when he'd known there was a clandestine meeting of Innishfree, she'd been alone in the palace gardens. He didn't believe a lady like her would leave the palace to attend such a meeting, but couldn't she be meeting someone to pass along information?

Perhaps she'd met him just before Will had arrived, and she'd kissed Will to distract him so the other man could escape.

Or perhaps Will was reaching, and she'd just needed air—as she'd said. He hadn't seen anyone with her or anyone slinking away. And he'd been on guard—mostly.

Will didn't have enough evidence to accuse her of anything, but what he did know did not bode well.

He took to the shadows as he neared the meeting place noted in the letter. It was closer to midnight than he liked, but surely there would still be men and women arriving to the meeting at the last minute. Will watched for a quarter of an hour, changed positions, and watched another fifteen minutes.

At half past twelve, he entered the building where Innishfree was meeting. It was dark and quiet, no sound from the cellar. He crept down, a dagger in both hands, and stood outside the closed cellar door. All was dark and silent.

If there had been a meeting tonight, it had not been here.

That meant either Bridget Kelly had decoded the intercepted information incorrectly or someone had sent word to the leaders of Innishfree that meeting wasn't safe tonight.

Will headed back to the palace with one thought in his mind: Bridget Kelly never made a mistake deciphering codes.



EMILY DID HER BEST to avoid Willoughby Galloway the next two days. Partly, she was embarrassed that she had given into her desires and kissed him. She tried to regret that kiss, but it was difficult when it had been everything she'd thought it would be and more. Emily didn't think she would have ended the kiss if she hadn't felt the hilt of the dagger at her back. She would never forget the look of shock in his eyes when she asked him about it. He hadn't meant to reveal he held it, though she didn't believe he intended to use it on her.

But why would he have it in the first place? And why would he be clutching it when they had been speaking for several minutes before the kiss?

Something wasn't right. There was something about Galloway she couldn't quite understand, and it annoyed her that the mystery of him made him all the more attractive. Her life was not some Gothic romance. She didn't want to almost fall off a cliff while chasing a mad hero.

But what did she want?

On the third day after the kiss, the queen suggested a picnic in Richmond. The weather was sunny and warm and that morning the sky was blue without a cloud to be seen. As the royal staff loaded coaches and Emily helped the queen dress, she tried to prepare herself for an entire day with Galloway. She wouldn't be able to escape him in Richmond.

The queen had a small cottage on the river there, but other than the small residence, there was nowhere to withdraw.

Thankfully there would be others around, and that was a relief. More and more she was realizing that what she wanted was not only to kiss Galloway again, but for him to take her to bed.

She knew most people looked the other way when a widow took a lover. Even the queen, who generally disapproved of carnal relations outside of marriage, generally pretended not to know when one of her ministers took a mistress or gossip swirled that a lady-in-waiting had a lover not her husband.

But Emily had never been to bed with any man save Jack. She'd been a virgin when they married, and he'd only been dead two years. What would it be like to allow another man to touch her, stroke her, slide inside her?

What would it be like to allow Willoughby Galloway to do so?

She shivered with need at the thought. If it was anything like the kiss they'd shared in the gardens, it would be brilliant.

"That will be all, Lady Averley," the queen said as her maid approached with a brush to smooth her hair.

Emily curtsayed and made her way toward the retinue waiting for the queen.

Of course, the first person she saw was Galloway. She felt her cheeks heat upon seeing him, and since she was so fair skinned, he couldn't help but notice. He seemed to take pity on her and pretended not to see the color rise. She would probably have combusted if he'd winked or given her some salacious sign that he knew what she was thinking about. But of course, he must be remembering their kiss as well. Only he looked very cool and self-assured, while Emily had to reach for her fan and wave it in front of her face.

Lady Jocelyn approached. "Are you too warm already, Lady Averley? You and I will have to stay in the shade together. Do you have your parasol?"

“Of course.” She held up her pale blue parasol, which matched her dress. “And the carriages are closed, which means we will not have to endure the sun on the trip there.”

“Yes, but it will be stuffy inside,” Lady Jocelyn complained. “I tried to persuade Her Majesty to take an open carriage, but she said that because of those awful Irishmen, we have to take extra precautions. Prince Albert only agreed to this excursion today because the queen threatened to make him take her boating on the Serpentine if he didn’t. Of course, Hyde Park is not as safe as Richmond.”

Emily nodded. “This cage is gilded,” she said, gesturing to the palace, “but it’s still a cage.”

Victoria finally emerged and the party departed. Emily was endlessly thankful that Galloway had opted to ride outside the carriage rather than sit inside. She couldn’t have borne having to look at him, seated across from her for an hour or more. Instead, she had to listen to the duchess snore quietly as the carriage bumped along behind that of the queen. Of course, all Emily need do is look out the window to observe Galloway. He tended to ride just outside her window.

Finally, the party arrived at the picnic grounds, a lovely spot near the water, where tents and tables and blankets had already been arranged for the royal party. Everyone was hungry and sat down to eat. Emily tried to focus on the conversation and not on Galloway, but it was difficult. Finally, the prince and some of his companions decided to race boats along the Thames. The queen seemed content to sit in a chair, Lady Jocelyn at her side, and watch the boats or her children playing. The Duchess of Charlemont dozed again, and Emily, who was too stirred by the presence of Galloway to relax, decided to walk about nearby and pick flowers. Her chambers would smell lovely with a vase of fresh wildflowers inside.

She passed Galloway, who was standing on the shore watching the men move their boats into position, and began to pluck wildflowers, laying each in her basket. She couldn’t manage the basket and her parasol, so she had left the parasol near the picnic area. Without the parasol to block her view of the surroundings, she caught the glint of something in the sun.

It was in the direction of the trees, not the water, and she turned in that direction just as she heard the loud blast.

She knew the sound. She'd heard it often enough during hunting season in the countryside. It was the sound of a rifle. Her gaze landed on a man crouched in the trees and froze when she saw the rifle was pointed at her.

No, not her. Just beyond her. And who was just beyond her? The queen sat only a few yards away, in a direct line behind Emily.

The sound of the rifle echoed again, the noise muted somehow, as though she heard it through a thick fog or underwater. She couldn't think, couldn't move, though she knew she should go to the queen.

She tried to do so, but her legs gave out and she dropped to the ground. As soon as she landed on the hard earth, all of her senses rushed back to her. She couldn't make sense of them at first, but she turned her head and heard shouts from the men in the boats. They had jumped off their watercraft and were splashing toward shore and the queen. The children were screaming and crying. The duchess was screeching, and it seemed that rifle blast still echoed in the air.

And then to her surprise Willoughby Galloway was kneeling by her side. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

Emily looked into his eyes. "You have such pretty eyes," she said. Her voice sounded far away, and Will's eyes began to seem blurry.

"Are you hurt?" Now his voice sounded as though it had acquired an echo.

"I don't know," she said honestly. More shouts drew her attention, and she spotted royal guards swarming around the queen and the prince and shepherding them away. Other guards raced toward the woods and the direction of the man with the rifle. Everything seemed to be happening so slowly, as though everyone she watched was swimming in water. "I must go to the queen." Emily tried to rise, but her legs didn't want to cooperate. "Can you help me rise?"

“I think you’d better stay where you are.” His voice was calm, but she heard the concern in it.

“I can’t. I…” But as she tried to rise again, her vision dimmed. Strong arms caught her before she could fall back. “I need a moment,” she said.

He smelled so good. She knew she shouldn’t allow him to hold her, but she couldn’t seem to open her eyes or rise from the ground.

He was yelling something, but she couldn’t focus on it. She felt a throbbing in her legs. Something was wrong there. Very wrong.

“Mr. Galloway,” she whispered.

“Just hold on, Emily,” he ordered. “Open your eyes.”

“Can’t,” she murmured. “Will you…will you stay with me?”

“I won’t leave you. But I need you to stay with me. Open your eyes, Emily.”

She wanted to obey, but she was simply too tired. Her eyes closed and everything went dark and quiet.



Chapter Seven



Will felt her body go limp and cursed. He didn't need to ask if she was injured. He could see the blood seeping through the material of the pale green dress she wore.

Everything had happened so quickly. The queen and her retinue were only now safely inside the royal carriages. Will had to make a quick decision—put Emily in the carriage with them or keep her here and have them send a doctor.

The carriage carrying the queen started away, and two guards marched toward him. “Is she injured, sir?”

“Yes,” he said. “Are you holding the carriage for Lady Averley?” Will gestured toward the waiting coach.

“Yes, sir. Should we carry her?” one of the queen's men asked.

“I have her. Send the carriage back and go with it. I'll take her into the cottage there and see if I can stop the bleeding. Send a doctor back, will you?”

“It will be faster if you ask the staff at the house to call for a doctor in Richmond, sir,” one of the guards said.

“Thank you. Go now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Will leaned down and attempted to rouse Emily, but she only murmured incoherently and did not open her eyes. He watched as the last of the party departed, leaving behind the few guards searching the woods. They wouldn't find anyone. The would-be assassin was long gone.

Will lifted Emily and started up the small rise to the cottage just beyond. It wasn't an official residence, but the queen liked to use it when she came to Richmond for picnics

or boating. It had a yard for the horses, several rooms she could use in which to change or seek shelter if it began to rain, and the small staff were able to serve tea and simple fare.

The white cottage was modest for the queen, but it would do nicely for his purposes. As he neared the door, it swung open and a liveried servant called out, "Is it one of the queen's ladies?"

"Yes. I believe she has been shot. Do you have a chamber with a bed where I could take her?"

"Yes, sir. Right this way, sir." Will followed him up a set of stairs, nodding as the servant asked if he wanted a doctor and then called down to another servant to fetch one.

The servant opened the door to a dark room, one that they had obviously not intended to use. The servant lit a lamp, and Will laid Emily on one of the two beds in the chamber. The bed was unmade and that was a good thing because the blood from the wound in Emily's leg would no doubt soil the sheets. Will sent the servant to fetch a basin of water and clean towels then stripped off his coat and neckcloth and tossed them both on a chair in the corner. Taking a deep breath, he raised Emily's skirts, cursing as he had to wade through several petticoats and a crinoline. Finally, he had them out of the way and could see the wound. It was on her upper leg, about two inches above the knee on the outer side of her thigh.

The amount of blood obscured everything else, and he couldn't determine how deep it was or if the pistol ball was lodged inside her flesh. Will rose and fetched his neckcloth, fashioning a tourniquet and securing it just above the wound. He was about to call down and see what was taking the servants so long with the water when the manservant who had opened the door to him entered with a basin in one hand and a bowl stacked with towels in the other.

"The maid is heating more water, sir," he told Will as Will took the basin and towels and knelt beside the bed. He immediately dipped a towel in the water and began to clean off the blood. Gradually, he became aware the manservant still stood in the chamber.

“Was there something else...”

“Peters.”

“Was there something else, Peters? The lady is in an indelicate state. I’m sure she wouldn’t appreciate you gawking.”

Peters went red, a color that all but matched his coat. “I was not looking, sir. I just wondered if the queen...”

“Of course. You are right to be concerned. Her Majesty was uninjured as far as I know. She is on her way back to the palace with the prince and the others.”

“Thank you, sir. I will see if the doctor has arrived yet.” Peters left, closing the door, and Will went back to the task of cleaning the blood. Of course, the servant would want to know if the queen was injured. That should have been Will’s first concern as well. He was a Royal Saboteur. He was sworn to defend the queen and prevent any threats to her life. But what had he done when he’d heard the first shot fired? He’d thought only of Emily. He’d raced to her, ignoring his queen altogether. Will could see now that he hadn’t even spared a thought for Victoria. He wasn’t even certain if the queen had been spared injury.

He dipped another towel in the basin, wiping away the last of the blood from the wound. Blood still trickled down, but the tourniquet had done its work and eased the blood flow. He could see now that the wound was a deep gouge. The pistol ball had not entered her flesh, just torn through the material of her skirts, grazed her leg, and continued on.

Will sat back on his haunches and blew out a breath. The injury was deep and must be cleaned. It might even require a stitch or three and would probably scar. But no surgeon would be required to cut the ball out, and it had not entered her leg, where it might have done more damage. She’d been lucky. Or possibly unlucky. The assassin had not been aiming for her. She’d stepped into the line of fire, inadvertently shielding the queen.

That didn't mean he thought she was innocent of all suspicion. But if she'd known there would be an attempt on the queen's life, wouldn't she have cried off before the outing? And if she could not avoid the outing, wouldn't she stay well away from the queen? Will tried to remember where everyone had been right before the first shots had been fired. Lady Jocelyn and the Duchess of Charlemont had been near the queen. The men had been on the river. He had been near the shore. Emily had been the only one to wander away, toward the wooded area where the assassin waited. It didn't make sense.

She stirred then, and he rose and leaned over her, touching her forehead to check for fever. Her eyes opened, looking darker and bluer than her usual light blue, but she focused on his face immediately. "The queen?" she asked.

Apparently, he was the only one who didn't think of the queen first.

"She is unhurt as far as I know. She is on her way back to London."

She looked about, obviously deducing where she was, her face grimacing as she moved her leg and felt the pain of her injury. "Why are you here?" she asked.

Good question. He'd been asking himself that for the past quarter hour. Instead of answering, he said, "A doctor is on the way. I cleaned the wound, and the good news is that it seems to be a flesh wound. The pistol ball didn't enter your leg."

She glanced down at her leg, and her face colored. Obviously, she had noticed her skirts were up about her waist. Her gaze met his.

"I cleaned the wound, that is all."

Did she think he would take any pleasure in pulling up her skirts when she was injured and bleeding? Or that he would try to catch a glimpse of her bare flesh when she was unconscious?

"Thank you," she said. "It hurts."

“I imagine it will sting worse when the doctor comes and cleans it with something stronger than water. Are you injured anywhere else?”

“Is this a ploy to undress me completely?” She gave him a slight smile, and he couldn’t help but smile back. He was glad she could smile about the situation.

“You have figured me out.” He frowned down at her again. “Did you hit your head when you fell?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know why I fainted. I’ve never fainted in my life.”

“It’s natural after a sudden shock to your person. Not to mention the terror you must have felt when you realized the situation. Did you see the man shooting? Can you give a description of him?”

“Now, now.” The door pushed open and a man in black carrying a medical bag entered. “There will be time for questions later. I’ve asked Lizzie here”—he gestured to a servant—“to act as my nurse. I need everyone else out.”

Even if Will had wanted to object, he doubted he would win. This doctor was sixty at least, white haired and distinguished. He would not allow his orders to be ignored. Besides, Will was not a relative or a female friend of Lady Averley. He had no place here.

He stepped outside, standing on the other side of the closed door, listening to the murmur of voices. Peters emerged from another room. “Would you like some refreshment, sir?” He glanced at the closed door. “It might be some time before they are finished.”

“I’d like that, Peters.” Will wasn’t hungry or thirsty. His body had gone into fight mode, shutting off all needs and wants except those required for survival. But he needed to eat anyway, to make sure he had enough sustenance to stay sharp and focused. He doubted the assassin would come back, especially as the queen had been spirited away, but he must be vigilant.

An hour later the doctor entered the dining room where Will stared out a window, an empty teacup and plate before him. He stood, straightening his coat, only to realize he wasn't wearing his coat or neckcloth. The doctor waved him back down. "We didn't have time for proper introductions earlier. I am Augustus Phillips. I've been a doctor here for almost forty years."

"Willoughby Galloway, sir. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"I am always at the ready when the queen is traveling to Richmond." He gestured to an empty chair. "May I sit?"

"Of course."

Will gave the white-haired man a moment to pour tea and settle in his chair. The doctor's comment had raised a dozen questions, but first he needed to know Emily's status. "How is Lady Averley?"

"She is very lucky. The pistol ball only grazed her thigh. I cleaned and bandaged the wound, but it is not deep enough to require stitches." He removed his spectacles and cleaned them on a cloth. "I assume that was your neckcloth applied as a tourniquet."

"Yes, sir."

"That was good thinking, but as I said, she was fortunate. Or perhaps she was unfortunate. No one else was injured, I take it." He replaced his spectacles and peered at Will.

"Not to my knowledge, sir. The queen was quickly spirited away and seemed unhurt. Is Lady Averley able to travel?"

"Yes. She can return to the palace today, but she might be more comfortable if you waited until the morning. Then I could also return, check the wound for infection, and adjust her medication."

"What have you prescribed?"

Will listened as the doctor mentioned a draught to ease her pain and help her sleep. "After a shock like this, nightmares and anxiety can be quite common."

Will nodded. "I will send word to the palace and ask them to send a coach for tomorrow." Will paused. Now that the doctor had eased his concerns about Emily, he had another matter to address. "You say you knew the queen was coming to Richmond?"

The doctor sipped the tea. "Of course. I am notified whenever the queen will travel to this area, whether to stay several days at a royal residence or just for an afternoon at the river."

"I see. Who else would be notified?"

The doctor gave him a long look. "The household staff, of course. I'm sure no one in the village is notified, but they are most likely aware because the staff must procure provisions in case the queen would like to dine or desires to stay overnight."

"I imagine the number of people aware of the queen's visit today would add to several dozen."

"Easily, but if you are thinking that one of the local residents was responsible for an attempt on her life, I can assure you everyone here loves the queen. No one wishes her any ill will."

"Of course. And yet someone tried to shoot Her Majesty."

"I would argue that someone took advantage of the setting." He gestured to the window, which looked out on the river and the woods just beyond. He turned back to Will and lowered his glasses. "You are not simply a courtier, Mr. Galloway."

Will gave him a tight smile. "Thank you for your assistance, Doctor Phillips. If Lady Averley has any trouble during the night, I will send for you."

The doctor rose. "Please do. Otherwise, I will see you first thing in the morning."

Will saw the doctor out then went outside himself to confer with the royal guards who had stayed behind to chase the assassin. They had not been able to apprehend him, of course, but they showed Will where he had lain in wait and his means of escape. It was easy to trace the path of his hasty departure.

He'd broken branches and torn his clothing on sharp foliage. Will collected the piece of blue material and placed it in his pocket. Finally, he dismissed the guards to go into the village for dinner and a room for the night. He cautioned them to keep vigilant and report anyone suspicious.

Will would have liked to go himself and question the residents of the town, but he couldn't leave Emily alone. Will stood at the edge of the woods and looked up at the cottage. A light burned in the upper window of the chamber where Emily slept. He couldn't leave her alone, and yet he dared not let her too close.

Only that was exactly what he needed to do if he was to be certain she was not part of the plot to kill the queen.



EMILY WOKE TO A DARK, unfamiliar place. Her head hurt, but even worse was the pain in her leg. She reached down to touch it, felt the bandage, and that action seemed to flood her with memories of just a few hours before.

She'd been shot. She could have been killed. The queen could have been killed. She gripped the sheet covering her and tried to slow her breathing. She could not succumb to fear now. She had to be strong. She hadn't been killed, and the queen was safe. The doctor had told her she could return to the palace tomorrow. Then she would be safe as well.

Emily turned her head and saw the pitcher of water and glass on the nightstand beside her bed. Just beyond that was the other bed in the room. Someone was lying there. Perhaps it was a maid. Perhaps Pratt had come from London to care for her. "Pratt?" Emily murmured. Her voice sounded hoarse, as though creaky from disuse.

The body didn't stir. Pratt would have been awake and on her feet in a moment, so perhaps it was not Pratt. Gingerly, Emily pushed herself up and reached for the glass. But her hand felt too large and unwieldy, and her grip failed, sending the glass tumbling to the carpeted floor.

"Emily?"

The voice was definitely not Pratt. It was a man.

She gasped, and he sat instantly. “It’s just me. Don’t be alarmed.”

“Mr. Galloway? What are you doing in here?” The panicked beating of her heart slowed and she felt relieved he was here. Safer with him nearby.

He bent to retrieve the glass and filled it with water from the pitcher. “I came to check on you. The doctor said you might have nightmares. I thought I would stay for a little while in case you woke up. I must have fallen asleep.”

Emily tried to sip the water, but her hand shook. She had to cup it with her other hand.

“Here. Let me help you.” Willoughby Galloway moved to her bed and sat on the edge. He took the glass and guided it to her lips so she could take a sip. “Better?” His gaze met hers, and she had to force herself to look away.

“Yes. My head aches and my hands feel as though they belong to someone else’s body.”

“I imagine that’s a byproduct of the medications Dr. Phillips gave you. He said he gave you something to sleep. Are you hungry?”

“Not really, but my head and my leg are throbbing.”

“May I?” he asked, lifting a hand toward her face. She nodded and he pressed a cool palm to her forehead. “You feel a bit warm. Have another sip of water.”

She did as he asked, sipping the water again, which felt good against her dry throat. Then she watched in surprise as he wet a towel with water from the basin, wrung it out, and folded it. He helped her ease back down onto her pillow and pressed the cool cloth against her forehead. Emily looked up at him. “What are you doing?”

He seemed confused by the question. “I should think it’s obvious. I’m taking care of you.”

“Why? I mean to say, shouldn’t you call a servant to do that?”

“Probably,” he said. “Do you want me to call for a servant?”

She should say yes. She should ask for a maid to come in, but she didn't want Galloway to leave. She wanted him nearby. The problem with having him close was that he reminded her of the kiss they'd shared in the palace gardens. She couldn't stop thinking about the brush of his lips on hers and the feel of his arms holding her. She looked up at him, all but forgetting the question he'd asked. The silence dragged on for another long moment, and Galloway said, “I'll stay then.”

He turned the cloth over, cooling her forehead again. “The doctor left more pain medication. You should take some if your leg is hurting you.”

“Is it bad? The wound?”

He shook his head. “The doctor said you didn't need stitches. He bandaged it. You will need to keep it clean and rest for the next few days. He said you were either very lucky or somewhat unlucky.”

“I seem to be quite unlucky of late. Twice now I've been shot at.” She waved a hand. “Not that the cutthroats were aiming for me, but one does not like to be too close when pistol balls fly about.”

He gave her an understanding smile.

“Were you terrified?” she asked.

“Of course.”

But she didn't think he had been terrified. He had acted quickly and almost without fear. As though he had been in situations like this before. Perhaps he had been in the army. He hadn't mentioned it, but then she hadn't asked.

He drew the compress away from her forehead. “You're warmer than I thought. Let me rinse this and reapply.” He moved back to the basin, and she attempted to sit and reach for her glass again. But she moved too quickly. The pain shot up her leg like a lick of fire, and she hissed in surprise.

Will was immediately at her side. “Let me do that.” He held the glass so she could drink and then lifted the bottle and spoon beside the bed. “I think more pain medication.”

She didn’t argue. Even though the medication made her sleepy, her leg didn’t hurt when she was asleep. She took the bitter tasting stuff and lay back, closing her eyes when he put the cool cloth on her forehead again.

“You make a surprisingly good nurse,” she said.

“You are an easy patient.”

“How so?” she asked. Her voice sounded further away as she became drowsier.

“You don’t argue. I’m used to my sister, who could be on her deathbed and would argue she feels well enough to run a mile.”

“I don’t think I could even walk across the room,” she said. She began to drift off but woke again when he turned the compress. “Will?”

“I’m still here.”

“I’m glad.” She wanted to reach up and put her hand on his, but she couldn’t seem to control her arm. “You kissed me,” she said. She didn’t know why she said it. She hadn’t intended to say it.

A long pause followed, or perhaps it only felt long to her. “You mean in the palace gardens?”

“Yes. Why did you kiss me?”

“I should think that would be obvious. I’m attracted to you.” He paused again and the compress was lifted. After some time, it was replaced, cooling her heated flesh. “Why did you let me kiss you?”

“I should think that would be obvious,” she said, echoing his words. “You are handsome, charming...” She trailed off.

“Don’t fall asleep now,” he said. “I was just beginning to enjoy our conversation.” Of course, he would say that. She was complimenting him.

“Will you kiss me again?” she asked.

“Not right now. When you are feeling better, I’ll kiss you again. If you still want me to.”

Emily smiled and allowed the heaviness of sleep to push down on her. Willoughby said something, and she had to push against the weight of her drowsiness to try and comprehend. He’d said something about the Irish and the assassin.

She didn’t know what she answered. She mumbled something as he continued to speak. And soon she was not aware of him at all.



WHEN SHE WOKE AGAIN, sunlight streamed through the curtains and Dr. Phillips was speaking to her. He had a nurse with him, and when Emily glanced at the other bed in the room, she saw it was empty. The bed clothes appeared undisturbed. Had she simply imagined Willoughby Galloway had tended her overnight?

The doctor examined her wound and changed the bandages and then pronounced her well enough to travel. Emily didn’t feel well enough to do anything, but she allowed the maid who came after the doctor left to help her dress in the pale green gown. Everything seemed to take too long, and it felt like hours before she was presentable. Even then, she wore her torn dress from the day before. The maid had attempted to clean it, but there was only so much anyone could do with the garment. The gown, which made her eyes look more green than blue, had been one of her favorites. Now she never wanted to see it again.

Emily sat back on the bed, exhausted. The maid offered to bring her breakfast to her room, and Emily agreed. She managed to sip tea and eat a few bites of toast before Galloway tapped on her door. Somehow he looked fresh and clean, though she knew he wore the same clothing as the day before. Only his neckcloth was missing.

“You look much better,” he said.

She blew out a breath. “I was just thinking the same thing about you. How do you look rested and...” He moved closer and she peered up at him. “Have you shaved?”

He waved a hand as though it was nothing. “How are you feeling? The doctor says your fever is gone.”

Emily sipped her tea to hide her face. So he *had* been in the room with her the night before. Thank goodness she wasn't having hallucinations on top of everything else.

“I will survive.”

“That good, eh?”

She gave him a rueful smile.

“The queen sent her personal coach,” he told her. “And this.” He held out a small square of paper, and Emily took it, recognizing the queen's hand immediately. She opened the paper and read the short note, then looked up at Galloway.

“She says no one else was injured and she spent the night in prayer for my recovery. She now prays for my safe return.”

“You are very dear to her.”

“As she is to me.” Was it her imagination or did Galloway look skeptical at her response? “I suppose we should not keep her waiting.” Emily stood and began to move slowly toward the door. Her leg ached every time she put pressure on it. She tried to remind herself that once she was in the coach, she could rest.

“Would you like to lean on me?” Galloway asked.

Emily did not want to be so close to him, but she would also rather not take a wrong step and fall on her face. “Thank you,” she said. She moved to put a hand on his arm, but he wrapped that arm about her waist and pulled her close, supporting her entire body. He was careful not to touch her leg with his, but his strength and stability meant she could put less weight on her injury.

She was thankful for his strength, but she wished it did not come with his closeness. She couldn't help but feel his warmth and catch the scent of bergamot and oranges. She had come to

love that scent, and she couldn't seem to stop herself from turning her head to inhale it more fully. What was wrong with her? He was helping her walk, not asking to be the object of her lust.

But she did lust. She had enjoyed the marriage bed with Jack, and she missed the pleasures they had shared there. She was only one and thirty—too young to never enjoy a man's touch again. Of course, just a few weeks ago she had been in mourning, and it was as though her senses were asleep. She had not even thought of ever touching another man. Then Willoughby Galloway had swept in and awakened her and now it was difficult not to think about touching him. She turned her head slightly. It was difficult not to think about kissing him.

Will looked at her, and she held her breath, wondering if he would kiss her. Instead, he gestured to the stairs. "How should we manage these?"

Emily blinked and looked down the flight of steps. It was not a steep flight, and the steps were wide. "I can hold onto the banister and make my way."

Galloway frowned. "And if your skirts tangle about your feet, you will tumble all the way down. No, I think we'd better do it my way."

"What is your way?" she asked.

"This." He swept her into his arms, holding her as one might hold a sleeping toddler. Indeed, Emily had not been held like this since she was a young child.

"You can't possibly mean to—"

He started down the steps, carrying her as though her weight was nothing. Emily closed her eyes, afraid they might tumble down together, but he was on the ground floor in a moment. Only he didn't set her down. He continued to carry her past the servants, through the cottage, and out onto the drive, where the queen's carriage waited.

"You didn't have to carry me the whole way," she said, breathless from being pressed against him.

“It seemed more expedient, and I didn’t mind.”

She hadn’t minded either. In fact, she wouldn’t mind being held by him like this for the rest of the day. She wanted to rest her head on his chest. She wanted to reach up, put her arms around his neck, and pull his mouth down to hers.

A footman opened the carriage door, and Will placed her gently inside. He helped her settle and place a blanket over her lap and then withdrew. “You won’t be sitting inside?” she asked, wishing her voice didn’t betray her disappointment.

“I’ll be riding. I want to keep an eye on the countryside and make sure we don’t encounter any trouble. It was gracious of Her Majesty to send her coach, but it also makes us a target.”

Emily hadn’t thought of that, and she doubted the queen had either. She had simply wanted Lady Averley to travel back to London in the greatest comfort. She hadn’t considered that anyone who saw the coach passing might assume the queen was inside. “I see. You will take care as well, won’t you?”

He smiled. “I didn’t know you cared.”

And there was that flash of the scamp she had seen the first night they’d been introduced. That night she would have given him a look of cool disdain and an even colder rejoinder. Now the half-smile he gave her made her belly flutter. He closed the door, and she watched as he easily mounted a horse and signaled to the coachman. She also saw him pull a pistol from the horse’s satchel and place it in his coat pocket. The carriage jolted, and Emily winced as she leaned on her wound. She adjusted so her weight was on the other leg and forced herself to close her eyes and not to stare out the window at Willoughby Galloway, who cut quite the dashing figure on the black horse.

Unlike the day before, which had been sunny and warm, this day was cloudy and gray. A light drizzle misted the coach windows, and soon everything looked watery beyond the glass. But she could still make out the figure of Galloway on the horse. He’d donned a riding cloak and kept close to the side of the carriage, often riding ahead to join the royal

guardsmen then circling back and appearing at her window again.

He made her feel safe, and yet she knew a liaison with him would be anything but safe. He was a gentleman, no doubt. He'd behaved perfectly the day and night before. He could have certainly taken advantage of their situation, but he'd taken no liberties. But Emily had a feeling that had she been uninjured and had she given the slightest indication that she welcomed his advances, he would not have been a gentleman at all. He certainly hadn't kissed her like a gentleman.

She shivered at the memory of his kisses and the way her mind then conjured other images and ideas.

Suddenly, she heard a loud sound and it seemed glass was flying everywhere. The breath was knocked out of her as the coach lurched, and she was thrown to the floor just as she heard the scream of a horse.



Chapter Eight



G *oddamn them all to hell*, Will thought as pandemonium erupted on the road. He'd told the guardsmen they should take a different coach, but they'd been too worried about offending the queen. And now they'd all end up dead.

He pulled his pistol, pointed it in the direction of the last shot fired, and fired back. He had no idea if he'd hit anything. The misting rain obscured anything more than a few feet away, and this was the perfect spot for an ambush. They were between Richmond and London, with nothing but field and patches of woods on either side of the road. Will scanned the area, spotted the woods, and determined the assailants were firing upon them from the cover of the trees. He quickly spurred his horse, who was now attempting to rear up and bolt, to the other side of the coach.

On his way around, he noted the window of the coach had been shattered, and his heart lurched. He hoped to God Emily was uninjured and taking cover on the floor. He couldn't help her if he was dead, though, and the first thing he needed to do was gain control of his animal. The beast had not been trained for warfare and was understandably spooked by the loud noises. He soothed the animal just as another few shots sounded. The coachman fired back—thank God for coachmen and the weapons they always carried under the box—but instead of spurring the coach forward, he must have halted the horses because the coach came to a screeching stop.

The royal guards fired on the woods and that fire was soon returned. Will readied his pistol, using the cover of the coach, then fired again. He knew he was a decent shot, but he couldn't see anything to aim at. The assailants were well-hidden, while the coach made a large target.

There was a yelp and the coachman tumbled off the box, a hand clutched to his chest, where a large patch of red spread. Now the horses had no one to control them. If they bolted, they would take the coach with them. Will immediately gave up on controlling his own horse, jumped down and smacked the beast's rump. The horse trotted away to safety. He heard the shouts of the guardsmen as he yanked open the door of the coach.

Fear rose in his throat as he noted the empty seat and the shards of glass scattered all over the squabs. His gaze lowered, and he spotted Lady Averley on the floor, hands over her head to protect it.

“Emily!”

She looked up, fear in her wide blue eyes. He held out a hand. She grasped it, and he yanked her free just as the coach began to move. The horses were bolting. He pulled her close, away from the moving conveyance, then swore as their only protection careened away. There was nowhere to hide but the field at their backs. He took her hand and pulled her off the road, thankful the gunmen seemed to be still firing on the coach and the guardsmen.

Emily seemed to resist following him, and he looked back and saw her limping. Holy hell. He'd forgotten about her leg. In a quick gesture, he gathered her up and slung her over his shoulder. He began to run, his back burning as he imagined the feel of a pistol ball hitting him with every step. He breathed a bit easier once he was off the road and in the ditch on the side. He lowered Emily carefully. “Stay down,” he ordered. On his belly, he crawled back up to the road and quickly took stock.

The coachman lay unmoving on the road. The coach and the guardsmen were gone. There was no movement in the woods on the other side of the road. Either the assassins had gone after the coach or they were still hiding in the trees. Will didn't want to be here if they decided to come out and look for survivors.

He slid back down into the ditch and glanced at Emily. She was pale, all the blood drained from her face, making her

watery blue eyes look large and luminous.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head then gestured to her leg. “Except for my leg.”

“Of course. You can’t run.” They couldn’t stay here. The assassins could easily come for them. They had to hide.

“I can run.” Her mouth was set in a thin pink line and her eyes were hard flint. “Tell me when.”

Will nodded. If there was anything he admired, it was fortitude. He might have thought Emily a rich, pampered friend of the queen, but she was obviously much more. “Be ready,” he said. “I’ll fire off a shot in their direction and then we run. Hopefully, they’ll take cover and won’t be able to fire back at us until we are out of range.”

“Which way should I run?”

Good question. He was liking her more and more. Not only was she resilient, she was smart. The area behind them was largely open field, freshly plowed and ready for planting. That meant there might be a tenant’s cottage nearby. Only, if they sought shelter with a farmer, they might endanger that family. He didn’t think the Irish separatists cared about shedding the blood of innocents, as long as it was English blood.

“That way?”

Will followed her hand, where she pointed to a hedgerow that probably served as either a wind break or a property line. Either way, it would afford them some cover, much more than the ditch on the side of the road.

“Good choice.” He raised his pistol, readied it, and glanced at her. “Ready?”

“Not yet.”

To his shock, she leaned forward, grasped the back of his neck, and pulled his mouth to hers. For a moment, Will was too shocked to kiss her back. And then he was too afraid the

cutthroats would come upon them like this and shoot them both.

And then he didn't care.

If he was to die today, he'd rather die like this than shot in the back as he fled. Will gathered her in his free arm, pulled her tight against him, and kissed her back. The kiss lasted only a few seconds, but they were both breathless when she pulled back.

"That was for luck," she said, voice hoarse.

"Let's hope it works. Ready now?"

She gave a firm nod. He could see the fear in her eyes, but she was putting on a brave face. He readied his pistol and murmured, "One."

He saw her push up to a crouch, wincing slightly as she put weight on her injured leg.

He positioned himself on the incline. "Two." He pushed up, leveled his pistol, and aimed. "Three. Go!"

He fired, primed the pistol again, and fired again. He didn't care whether he hit anyone. Will just wanted the enemy to dive for cover. He thought he caught a blur of movement in the woods on the other side of the road, but the blur was all he could see before he slid back down the shallow ditch then out the other side and started running. Emily was ahead of him, but with her skirts and her injury, she wasn't moving quickly. He easily caught up to her, put an arm around her waist, and offered his support.

"Almost there," he said, indicating the hedge. There was a break a few yards away, and he angled for it. She stumbled, caught herself, and pushed harder. Will imagined the feel of the pistol ball slamming into his back. The fear pushed him to run faster, but he couldn't leave Emily behind. Finally, they neared the break in the hedgerow, and as she slipped through, he risked a glance back. Their attackers were emerging from the wooded area just then. He counted three before he too slipped behind the foliage.

Emily sank down, head bowed, hand clutching her thigh. Will crouched next to her. They couldn't stay here. It wouldn't take long for the separatists to reach them. "How bad is it?"

She glanced up at him, tears on her cheeks. "I'm fine. I say we go that way." She pointed toward a grouping of trees at the far end of the field. It was a long trek and one they'd have to make in the open if the separatists came around the other side of the hedge. But they might just make it if the cutthroats followed cautiously.

"Do you need me to carry you?"

"I'll make it," she said through gritted teeth.

"I can see that," he said. "You're tougher than I thought."

"I doubt that. I just don't want to die out here." She rose and took a deep breath. "Will you fire again for cover?"

"No. I don't want them to know where we are if they didn't see us head this way. If they did, they'll approach carefully since they won't know if we're behind the hedgerow waiting until they're on the other side." He took her hand. "Let's go."

They ran together, she with something of a lurching gait and he jogging at a pace he hoped she could manage. He ran at an angle, keeping one eye on the field behind them. It seemed miles before they reached the first grouping of trees. Emily was crying by then, but she simply held his hand tighter and kept running. Finally, they entered the tree line, and he pulled her behind a tree trunk and let her lean against it and catch her breath. He slunk back, searching the field for any sign they'd been pursued. He saw none. Either the assassins had not seen where they headed or they were making their way slowly and carefully. If the latter, it would not take them long to determine where their prey had gone. There weren't many places to hide.

He backtracked to Emily, but the suggestion that they keep going died on his tongue as soon as he saw her. Blood had seeped through her bandage and formed a long stain on her skirts. Her head was thrown back, her eyes squeezed shut. Her long, silvery blond hair hung in dirty clumps down her back.

Will went to her, pulled her into his arms. “Don’t argue with me.”

“I’m not—” He lifted her and put her over his shoulder. She gave a quiet squeal.

“Not a word,” he said and started deeper into the woods. She didn’t say a word, and though her body was rigid at first, eventually she relaxed. She wasn’t heavy, but even a light load grew to be a burden over time. He was panting once he’d walked the first two acres. He didn’t think the woods would be much larger. It was most likely a patch of land between two property lines or left undeveloped so the landowner might use it for hunting. Whatever animals lived here now were hiding as he made his way through the third acre. Finally, he saw where the trees thinned, though they went on to the east for another acre or two.

“Let me put you down for a moment,” he said. He lowered her to the ground, caught his breath, then straightened. “I’ll be right back.”

If she’d looked exhausted before, she was now barely a ghost of her usual self. She was so pale, her eyes too large for her face. Will tried not to think about how much she must be hurting. There was nothing he could do about it at that moment. Instead, he headed for the break in the trees, pushing through low-hanging branches and over tree roots. He’d hated the evasive maneuvers class he’d had to take at The Farm, the name the members of the Royal Saboteurs gave for their training camp. But when he went back, if he ever went back, he’d shake the instructor’s hand. Hell, he’d buy Mr. Fog a bottle of the best wine or sherry or whatever the man wanted. Thank God for those cold, wet hours he’d struggled through the courses. They’d given him the stamina and skills to make it this far.

At the tree line, he slowed and moved carefully. The landscape was unfamiliar, which was fortunate. He’d hate to have walked all that way only to have gone in a circle. The drizzle that had fallen as a mist earlier fell harder now. Under the canopy of the trees, they hadn’t noticed it as much, but if this continued, they’d both be colder and wetter. He still didn’t

see any cottages or other dwellings, but he did see something that looked like a small structure.

Cautiously, he left the security of the woods and approached the wooden object. As he grew closer, he saw it appeared to be a cart with a broken wheel. It might have been used for plowing or to bring crops in from this far area of the field. From the state of the thing, it had been sitting here, abandoned, for some time. Will walked around the cart, studied it, then studied the woods he'd left behind. If he could drag it back to Emily, it would be a decent shelter for them until...well, he hadn't figured that part out yet. But he'd rather be dry and sheltered while he made a plan.

Will dug the shafts out of the soil they'd lodged in, took one in each hand, and, acting as a pack mule, pulled the cart toward the woods. It was slow going as only one wheel moved as it should. But he dragged it into the tree line and then into the shadows before he set the shafts down, wiped his forehead, and took a breath. He removed his coat, slung it on the seat, then lifted the load again and pulled. It took more than an hour to drag the vehicle back to Emily. He had to push it over tree roots and divert it around fallen logs. But he made it.

She'd most likely heard him coming, and sat staring at him, her back against a large tree. "I thought you'd never come back."

"I brought you a gift."

"Thank you?" She eyed the cart behind him suspiciously. It was then he noticed her hair was wet and her dress clung to her. It had begun to rain harder, a fact he hadn't noticed because he was too busy managing the cart.

"I bring you shelter, my lady." He gave her a bow, and she shook her head at him, clearly having decided he was dicked in the nob. Well, she'd see, wouldn't she? He summoned one last bout of strength, pulled the cart near the tree where she was sitting, then turned it over and grunted as he leaned it against another tree. He made a few more adjustments to the angle then stepped back and admired his work. With the shafts sticking out on either side of the tree and the cart turned over

and at an angle, a small space beneath the cart would stay dry and protect them from the elements. He rather doubted the separatists would come this way in the rain, but if they did, it would be a good place to fire on them and provide protection from their return fire.

“After you, my lady,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.” Her voice was light, as though she made an enormous effort to play along, but when she tried to rise, she stumbled. Will caught her and helped her limp to the shelter. She slid down under it, moving back to make room for him.

Will grasped his coat from the cart above then ducked underneath. There was barely room for both of them, but the forced proximity would keep them warm. He took his coat and used it as a blanket over her.

“Won’t you be cold?” she asked.

“How can I be cold when I’m pressed against you?”

She laughed and rested her head on the tree trunk behind them. “Even now you are a flirt.”

“I’m still trying to win you over.”

She turned to look at him, her blue eyes mesmerizing. “Will, you won me over practically the first time we met.”

Will stared at her. His words had been offhanded. He’d forgotten about his mission to uncover her role in the assassination attempt on the queen. He’d simply been flirting with a beautiful woman and trying to make the best of a bad situation. But he could see she meant what she said. She had feelings for him, and—God help him—he had feelings for her as well.

He might have berated himself for allowing his emotions to get involved in the mission, but in this moment, he wasn’t certain he’d survive the mission. He wasn’t certain he cared about the mission. He cared about Emily and didn’t want to lose her. Now would be the time to tell her the truth—about who he was and what he was doing.

But doing so would go against his training and his oath to protect his country. And who the hell was he fooling? The truth was, if he told her, he'd lose any chance of becoming more than a passing flirtation, and he wanted so much more with her. Will didn't trust himself to speak and couldn't say what he knew he should. Instead he put an arm about her and pulled her close. "Try and stay warm," he said.

She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. It was incredibly tempting to exonerate her from any involvement in the plot against the queen. After all, she'd now been shot and was being chased by the queen's would-be assassins. One might think her a very poor spy indeed to be in a situation where her life was in jeopardy by the very people she was in league with.

Unfortunately, Will had a very skeptical mind. She had been shot, but the wound had been superficial. Did that prove her innocence or was it planned to turn attention away from her?

Now the cutthroats were after the two of them, after having shot at Emily in the coach. There was no longer a need to turn attention away from her, so one had to assume they were trying to kill her—well, they'd been after the queen but didn't seem to mind collateral damage.

Was that because she was innocent of involvement or because they no longer had a use for her? Perhaps they worried she might reveal their plans and needed to be rid of her before that happened.

After some time had passed, Emily shifted. "I can all but hear you thinking," she murmured. "Does all of that thinking keep you warm?"

"Not particularly." Especially not the direction of his thoughts.

"Are you thinking about who might have shot at us and why?"

"Yes," he answered because it was true in a sense.

"Is it the Irish again?"

“I believe so. The queen no doubt was trying to be kind by sending her coach, but it made us a target.”

Emily straightened. “You mean they thought we were the queen?”

“Yes.”

“But when it was clear we were not, why did they keep trying to kill us?”

“Any number of reasons—so there would not be witnesses, to hurt the queen tangentially if they could not strike at her directly, as a warning of what they are planning.”

“And what are they planning?”

He looked at her. “That should be obvious by now. To kill the queen, overthrow the monarchy, and plunge the government into chaos.”



SOMETHING ABOUT THE look in his eye made her uneasy. She'd been uneasy—frightened half to death, really—since she'd been shot at the picnic. But something about Willoughby Galloway calmed her. He made her feel safe, protected.

But not when he looked at her like that. When he looked at her like that, she could see there was much more to him than the charming scamp. There was sharp intelligence and cunning.

“Do you still suspect the Irish separatists?” she asked carefully.

“I have no reason to think differently. Palmerston's intelligence pointed to a violent wing of that movement, and it makes sense that if they failed at their first attempt, they would try again.”

“And again.” She bit her lip. He had answered easily enough, but he was being careful with his words. She knew him well enough now to recognize when he was acting with some caution.

“Last night...” She trailed off, remembering that she’d asked him to kiss her.

He raised his brows and gave her a mischievous grin. “Yes, last night. What about it?”

In that moment, she wanted to believe he was exactly who he said he was, but she couldn’t keep ignoring the other side he’d shown her—quite unwittingly, she suspected.

“Yes, well, after that part.”

“What part?” he asked, all innocence.

“I was not well, and the medication affected me strangely.”

“Apparently, it made you want me to kiss you.”

She looked away to hide her growing blush. “You are not a gentleman to mention it.”

“If I wasn’t a gentleman then we’d be talking about more than kissing right now. As I recall, I refused you as I didn’t want to take advantage of your state.”

He had done that, and a small part of her thought his refusal might indicate he didn’t want her. But now he seemed to indicate he wanted much more than a kiss. But that wasn’t what niggled at her.

She looked at him, hoping her face wasn’t as pink as it felt. “But you did take advantage of my state.”

His brows lowered. “I would never.”

“You asked me about the Irish separatists.”

His brows rose, and his face went carefully blank. Interesting how quickly and easily he was able to do that.

“You thought I wouldn’t remember,” she said.

He didn’t respond. She couldn’t quite read the expression on his face, but it had changed from a blank mask to show some of what he must have felt. And what she saw there was conflict.

“I don’t remember exactly what you asked me.” She pressed a finger to her temple, willing the memory to surface.

Willing him to tell her so she wouldn't have to ask. "Do you?"

"No," he said flatly.

She dropped her hand. "Liar." She'd given him a chance, and he hadn't taken it. "You *do* remember, but you don't want me to realize that you suspect me."

"Suspect you? Of what?" There was a tinge of outrage in his voice, but not so much as to be overdone.

"You're very good," she said. He was either a brilliant actor or he'd been trained at dissembling. He looked genuinely confused and a little hurt by her insinuation. "But though my inhibitions might have been lowered and my memory hazy, I remember enough."

"I don't know what you think you remember—"

"You asked me for the names of the Irishmen. You asked me where they meet."

Now he looked away.

"You suspect me of being involved in planning to kill the queen." As she said the words, her outrage deepened. She'd wanted to trust this man, to believe she was safe with him. But how could she trust him if he didn't trust her? "How could you think that of me? How could you believe *I* would try and kill the Queen?"

He turned to face her, his cheeks flushed with color now. "I admit, I questioned you. I..." He trailed off, closing his eyes almost as though he felt an intense stab of pain. As though his next words hurt him.

And then he opened his eyes, and his expression was calm, though she could see the heat in his gaze when he looked at her. Whatever attraction she felt for him, he felt it too.

"I suppose I questioned you because Palmerston said—" He shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

She put a hand on his arm. "What did Lord Palmerston say?"

“He said to trust no one and suspect everyone. It’s ridiculous to think you had anything to do with it. After all, *you* were the one injured.”

He was trying very hard to reduce her suspicions, but she would not let the matter drop this easily.

“Do you work for the Foreign Secretary?” she asked.

He gave her a look of incredulity. “Do I work for Palmerston? No. And I suppose if I ever hoped for a career in that sector—which I assure you, I do not—I should take your rebuke of my heavy-handed questioning as my cue to abandon that hope. I shouldn’t have questioned you.”

“Because you don’t work for Palmerston?”

He turned to face her fully, his light brown eyes lovely in the gray half-light of the woods. “No, because you’ve done nothing wrong, have you?”

He paused, longer than needed for a rhetorical question. Finally, he went on, “I don’t know why I decided to play agent for the Crown last night. I regret it. I should have kissed you instead.” Heat flared in his gaze, and she felt an answering pull in her belly.

“Yes, you should have,” she said. She wanted to believe him. His expression was so sincere, the regret in his eyes so visible.

“Emily, let me kiss you now. Let’s forget, just for a little while, about the world outside of this place. I just want to be Will who is kissing Emily.”

Emily blinked, shaken out of her scrutiny. “Here? Now?” Her voice was breathless.

His hand cupped the back of her neck, sending a river of heat down her spine and making her forget all about the night before. “Right here. Right now.”

“But I look—”

“Ravishing,” he said. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known, and that doesn’t change because your hair is wet.”

She kissed him. She might have questioned his earlier statements and wondered at the way he schooled his features, but there was no doubt what he'd said in that moment was true. He found her beautiful. He desired her. He suspected her of treason.

She pulled back and he tried to follow, but she put a hand between them. "You want me to forget that you thought me guilty of treason."

"I want us both to forget everything besides this feeling between us right now."

She wanted that too. She wanted to close her eyes and give in to the heat of his gaze and the feel of his lips. She could feel how much he desired her. It had been so long since she'd felt desired. She lowered her hand, and he all but crushed her to him. This time his lips took hers as he kissed her hard and deep. She buried her hands in his hair and leaned closer. She couldn't get close enough. Except that the movement caused her thigh to press against his and she gasped at the jolt of pain.

He withdrew instantly. "I hurt you."

"It was my fault," she said, closing her eyes as the pain receded. "I tried to move closer, and my leg brushed yours where I was injured."

He blew out a breath. "You're hurt. I should have taken that into consideration."

She pulled him close again. "The only thing you should take into consideration is how much I want you."

He made a low noise in the back of his throat, and his hands closed on her waist. "You want me to kiss you." It wasn't a question, and the way his eyes went golden was a clear indication that he wanted the same.

"I'll be more careful," she said.

"I'll be careful," he said. "Come here." He kissed her again, this time gently and with more care. She liked this kiss as much as she liked the one with the passion from earlier. She kissed him back, her tongue licking inside his mouth as she attempted to elicit some of that former heat. But he had other

ideas. His hand slid from the nape of her neck down her arm and then under his coat and her cloak. When she felt his touch over the thin material of her dress, she inhaled sharply, letting out a small moan as his hand brushed over her breast.

She could feel the pressure of his touch and longed to feel his skin on hers. Unfortunately, her corset made that impossible. Perhaps another time. Even as she had that thought, his hand slid lower, down her belly and toward the junction of her thighs. Emily's heart beat rapidly now, so hard she could hear the thudding in her ears. His hand slid over the heat at her center, making her moan quietly, wanting more. Apparently, he intended to give her more. His mouth trailed kisses along her jaw and throat as his hand slid over her uninjured thigh. And then he began to drag her skirts higher.

His hand slipped under them and slid along her drawers until he parted her legs slightly. He was looking for the slit in the drawers. She shouldn't allow it, but she wanted him to touch her.

"Your skin is so soft," he said, his breath hot on her neck. His fingers found the opening in her drawers, and she felt his warm hand on her bare flesh.

"The assassins," she said on a breath.

"Have no idea where we are. But I'll hear them if they come this way."

She wouldn't. She couldn't hear anything but her heart drumming.

"Emily." His gaze met hers. "Right now it's just me and you. Let me show you how it can be."



Chapter Nine



“Yes,” she said. She wanted him to touch her, and she wanted him to look at her like he did right now for the rest of her life. His gaze told her he needed her more than breath.

She gasped as his hand slid over her damp curls, and his mouth covered hers to catch the sound. The kiss was hot, but his touch was the real tinder. He slid two fingers over her sex, instantly heating her and sending sparks of feeling throughout her body. He took his time touching her, caressing her until her entire body had come alive and smoldered. Then he dipped one finger inside her, and she jerked at the sensation.

He ended the kiss and stilled. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. Far from it.” She grasped his head and pulled his mouth back to hers. “Don’t stop,” she said before kissing him. He slid back into her, and she moaned and clutched at his hair. Just when she thought her body would catch fire, he slid his slick finger upward to circle the small pulsing center of her. She almost exploded. Her head fell back, and she simply allowed the pleasure to consume her. The heat built, higher and higher, until Will’s skilled touch brought her over the edge, and she felt as though she exploded into a thousand bright stars.

When the thudding in her ears subsided, and the sounds of rain on the shelter and Will’s harsh breathing were audible, she turned her head to look at him. He’d pulled her skirts down and held her close, looking down at her.

“That was...” She didn’t have the words.

He nodded, a slight smile on his lips. “You are so beautiful,” he whispered and bent to kiss her. She shook her

head, and he paused and gave her a questioning look. “You don’t think so?”

“Thank you for the compliment,” she said, “but I’m not a debutante. I don’t need sweet words.”

“I’m not giving you sweet words. I’m telling you what I see. You are a beautiful woman, and no more so than at this moment when your hair is streaming down your back and your face is flushed and your eyes bright.”

She studied him. “You really think I am beautiful?”

“I was stunned by you the first time I saw you.”

She cupped his face and kissed him softly. “Thank you. You make me feel beautiful.”

He raised a brow. “Is that what you’re feeling?”

She smiled. “My leg doesn’t hurt for the moment. That is something.”

He put his arm around her and looked up. “As much as I like forgetting about the world outside, I can’t keep it out forever. It will be dark in a few hours. I’d rather not sleep on the wet, cold ground.”

“Nor I.” How she longed for a bath and bed. She had never wished to be inside the palace so much as she did right now.

“We should have arrived in London by now. When we don’t, the queen will send men to search for us.”

She straightened. “I hadn’t thought of that. Perhaps they will catch the assassins.”

He gave her a dubious look. “Those men aren’t fools. They have been too clever with their ambushes. They won’t stand about on the road waiting for the royal guard to ride along. If they don’t find us soon, they will scatter.”

“And try again another day,” she said.

“I’m afraid so.” He looked so very serious in that moment. Then he seemed to shake the expression off. “But that is not our concern. Palmerston and his office can deal with the threats to Her Majesty. I need to get you home.”

“If you help me, I can make it back to the road.”

“I know you can, but if we encounter the cutthroats, you won’t be able to run, and we’re in no position to fight.”

She considered and understood his implication immediately. “You’ll go alone,” she said.

“Not if you don’t want me to leave you.”

“I’m not a child. It makes sense to wait here while you go back to the road and wait for the guard. You can go quietly and quickly. I’ll just be in your way.”

He squeezed her hand. “You’d never be in my way, but if I go back, I can hide until the guard arrives and lead them here. We can have you back to Town in a few hours.”

“Go.”

“You will be fine on your own?”

“Yes.”

“You will stay right here? You will not move?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be right here. You should go now.”

“There’s time yet.”

“Yes, but I can practically feel you bouncing up and down. You want to go. Here, take your coat and—”

“No. I’ll be warm enough moving around.” He slid out from under the cart before she could object. “I’ll be back as soon as I spot them.”

She nodded. “Be careful.”

“I will.” He stepped back, studied the makeshift shelter he’d made then seemed to nod to himself. Then he bent back down, leaned in, and kissed her. “I’ll be back.”

A moment later he was gone. He moved quickly and quietly and within moments, the air about her had stilled and it was as though he had never been there. But she could still feel the warmth of his body where he’d sat, and her body still tingled from the pleasure he’d given her.

She supposed it was natural for a man and woman who were attracted to each other to take advantage of a situation like this. No one at the palace would question what happened between them. She was a widow and didn't need a chaperone. But Emily couldn't help question what had happened. Had Will merely taken advantage of a situation, or did he feel something for her? He obviously found her attractive, and that was immensely flattering, but was there anything deeper?

For her part, she was on a slippery precipice and scrambling not to fall. He was everything she liked in a man and didn't know she wanted. He was charming and he made her smile, but he could be serious as well. He was resourceful and decisive. He made her feel protected and safe, but he didn't treat her like a child. And he didn't talk to her like she was a child, as so many other men spoke to women. He was interested in her opinions and her thoughts. They had shared interests. He was obviously a man who had strong relationships and loved his friends and family.

But the way he kissed her. The way he touched her. She closed her eyes. Well, that connection was something that she hadn't expected or ever thought she would feel with another man.

Yes, there were many reasons to stop fighting that fall.

And yet she couldn't let go. There was something he wasn't telling her. He was skilled at hiding it, but there were loose threads she thought might just unravel if she kept pulling them. He'd thought she might be a traitor. She supposed everyone was under suspicion now, but he had tried to question her. And the way he'd reacted when they'd been attacked. He had not panicked. He had seemed to know just what to do. She looked up. He'd led them to safety and found her a shelter.

Interesting that a man who had supposedly been lolling about the Continent seeking pleasure the past few years would be so capable in a crisis. Most gentlemen she knew would have cowered or been at a loss for what to do. But Willoughby Galloway had rescued her, taken cover, and shot at their

attackers. Didn't a response like that require training? Had he been in the military?

She wasn't certain how long had passed, but she noticed the rain had stopped and the late afternoon sun slanted through the trees. She hugged the coat closer, trying to keep warm, and waited.



WILL MOVED QUICKLY. Without an injured woman by his side, he retraced his steps easily. He saw no sign they had been followed into the wooded area. That eased his mind considerably. He didn't have to worry about Innishfree finding Emily and harming her while he was away.

He sought cover at the hedgerow that offered a view of the road and watched for a long time. No conveyances passed, and there was no sign of the queen's coach or the dead coachman who'd been lying on the road. Either a traveler had come by and taken the body to a magistrate or the cutthroats had moved it.

He also saw no sign of the separatists. If they were hiding in the trees on the far side of the road, waiting for another opportunity to strike, they were very good at concealment. But if he were in their place, he would not see any point in staying here. They must know now that the queen was not in the coach. She certainly wouldn't come to this place with her guard. And they would be outnumbered and outgunned if they tried to attack when the guard arrived.

Undoubtedly, they were on their way back to London. But this wasn't the end. They would try again. The problem was it could be months. Now that the palace was on alert, they would want to wait until everyone's guard had dropped. If Will wanted to sabotage their efforts, he needed to find out who was helping them. He needed to expose the traitor and turn them over to Palmerston. Only then could they root out the separatists and keep the queen safe.

Will cocked his head as he heard the distant sound of thunder. But, as he'd hoped, it wasn't thunder. It was a large group of horses moving his way along the road.

The queen's guard had come, as he'd known they would.

He stepped cautiously out from the hedgerow and stayed low as he made his way across the field. No one moved in the far woods, and he was able to make it to the ditch at the side of the road and crouch down until he spotted the first of the guard approaching. Then Will waved a hand and climbed up to the road, waiting as the guard slowed and stopped.

Fortunately, the man in charge of the guard was quick-witted. When Will explained, the guard understood immediately what had happened and what needed to be done. He sent several men with Will to find Lady Averley. As Will led them back to her, he tried to decide how to move forward. He had hoped she wouldn't remember his questions about the separatists, but she had and she'd been clever enough to understand what his goal had been. She knew he wondered if she had been in league with the separatists. That meant she had an idea he might not be who he said he was.

He'd had to make a choice in that moment, and he'd chosen the one duty demanded. He'd lied. But had he lied because of duty or because he knew if he told the truth he'd lose her? He wanted her too much to lose her.

The question now was whether he was compromised. She had suspicions about him, and he had mixed emotions about her. It was more than wanting to take her to bed. If this was just lust, he might feel badly about having to expose her for a traitor, but he would do it.

But he had feelings for her. He cared about her.

And he did not think she was the separatists' contact inside the palace.

But did he think that because he wanted her to be innocent or because it was true?

And if he recused himself from the mission now, would Baron be able to find another saboteur to take his place before the queen's life was endangered again?

He'd discuss it with the Kellys when he returned to London. He didn't exactly want to discuss his feelings for

Emily, but at this point he needed an objective opinion. He needed to—

He froze and held up a hand to signal the men behind him to stop as well. There was the place he had left Emily. He'd remembered the route perfectly. There was the tree and the overturned cart. It was growing dark as the afternoon slid toward evening, but this was no trick of the shadows.

Emily was gone.



FOR PERHAPS ONE OF the first times in his life, Will didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to think. Where the hell could she have gone? She'd been injured. She couldn't have gone far on her own. Had the separatists found her? He looked about for signs of their approach or signs of a struggle and saw none.

A darker thought entered his mind. What if she'd just been waiting for her opportunity to join the separatists? She'd known he suspected her. She might have decided to go into hiding before she could be taken into custody.

Will shook his head. Nothing about the incidents in the last twenty-four hours made sense if she was in league with the separatists. They had tried to kill her—or at least not tried at all *not* to kill her. Had they taken her by force then?

“Sir?” the guard behind him said.

Will turned. “She’s gone,” he said matter-of-factly. “She was here an hour or so ago, but now she’s gone.” Will might not know what to do, but he could give orders. “Have your men fan out and search for any sign of her. Start by backtracking. I want to go over this area myself.”

“Yes, sir.” The guard gave the orders and the men behind him turned and began to move slowly back the way they'd come, eyes downcast and attention on the ground. Will moved carefully toward the cart. He'd have the men search here and in front of him as well, but he'd rather go over it himself first. They would most likely trample any signs, and he'd been trained to take note of details as well as in tracking. He wished

now he'd had more time at the Farm so he might have improved his tracking skills.

He searched the area, finding no sign of a scuffle or which way she might have gone after he'd left. Was it good or bad that he didn't see signs of struggle or resistance? It meant she'd gone willingly with whoever had helped her. He started along the most likely path out of the woods—the way he'd walked when he'd found the cart. That path was still trampled from his efforts to drag the cart back.

She could have walked out on her own. Her injury didn't prevent her from walking, but how far could she have gone? He'd seen her wound. It was real, and he knew her pain was real. Will emerged in the field where he'd found the cart and began to search for signs of Emily here. He found areas beyond where he had walked before where the ground cover had been flattened, but it seemed as though only one person had walked here. He followed the trail as best he could but saw no signs of a skirt dragging.

So were these footprints from a local farmer or a separatist? And where was Emily?

“Sir?”

Will turned quickly, annoyed at the interruption of the guard. “What is it?”

“It's growing dark, sir.”

Will looked at the sky. It *was* growing dark. In another hour, he wouldn't be able to see a thing, and they still had to return through the wooded area to the road. “We can't return to London without Lady Averley,” Will said.

“I agree, sir, but perhaps we should start searching again in the morning. The men are tired and hungry.”

Will wanted to shout that Emily was tired and hungry, but she would have no cozy inn tonight.

“Fine. Have your men start back.”

“What about you, sir?”

“I'll follow in a moment.”

Will turned back to the field, hands on hips. Now that he stood still, his mind registered that he was cold and wet and bone tired. But of course, he was cold. He didn't have his coat. He'd left it with Emily.

Will turned suddenly and marched back into the trees, moving quickly to the overturned cart where he'd kissed her and touched her. He ducked down, waiting a moment until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. But his hands felt the ground, telling him what his eyes would see in a moment. His coat was not there. Wherever she'd gone, she'd taken it with her.



THE NEXT MORNING WILL had the royal guard assembled in the inn's courtyard before the sun was up. He had no authority over them, but perhaps Palmerston or Prince Albert had given them order to defer to him because the head of the guards seemed more than willing to take his commands. Not that deference was anything new to Will. He was used to it. His mother had always said he was born to give orders—she hadn't always meant it as a compliment. Still, it served him well this morning. The men listened to him, eager to please.

“And after we've gone over every stretch of that area on the road, we go to every farm and knock on every door and ask if they have seen her or the assassins.”

A young man in the back raised his hand. “Sir, should we look for the assassins as well?”

Will nodded. “Look for any signs of them having been there, but the guards who were with us yesterday said they fled after a brief pursuit. I don't believe the cutthroats are still in the area, but I've been wrong before so keep your eyes open.”

He'd been wrong to leave Emily yesterday. He should have taken her with him. He'd chastised himself a thousand times and played out every alternate scenario in his mind. If anything had happened to her, it was his fault. He'd never forgive himself. “Any more questions?” he asked, voice curt.

The men shook their heads or shouted *no, sir*.

“Then let's go find her.”

Will mounted his horse, forcing himself to resist the urge to spur the horse to a gallop so he could more quickly reach the spot on the road where they'd been attacked. He had to work slowly and methodically. It had never been difficult for him before, but he'd never felt this sense of panic before. He'd spent a sleepless night going over every single event from the last two days, wondering what he'd missed. Every time he'd lain down and tried to sleep, the panic had started to press down on his chest. He hadn't been able to breathe, and he'd needed to walk about and busy his mind.

If he allowed himself to think too much, he would wonder at his response. Then he would look deeper at his feelings, and he couldn't afford to do that right now. He didn't want to know why he felt panicked and afraid when he thought of Emily hurt or dead.

And he really didn't want to consider how he'd feel if he received proof of her treachery. He'd wanted to trust her. He *had* trusted her, and if he'd been wrong then perhaps he should resign from the Royal Saboteurs now. An agent needed good intuition and he couldn't continue working for Baron if his was so easily warped by a beautiful face and a few kisses.

It was after one in the afternoon, the sun bright and the wind fierce, when Will heard the rumble of hoofbeats. He'd been to see three local landowners and knocked on the doors of more than a dozen tenant farmers, all to no avail. He was about to mount his horse after a fruitless conversation with the wife of one of those tenant farmers when a guardsman appeared in the distance, dust flying behind his horse. Will's chest constricted.

They'd found her and she was dead. He didn't want to even think it, but he couldn't put the dread from his mind. Will clenched his fists and prayed he was wrong.

"Sir!" the guardsman called, pulling his mount up short and scattering dust and small pebbles on Will's boots.

"Tell me."

"We've found her, sir. At least we think we have."

Hope leaped in Will's chest, but he tamped it down. "Where?" He waved a hand. "Never mind. Show me." He mounted his horse and rode just behind the guardsman, who led him to the road not far from where the attack yesterday had occurred. There Will spotted the leader of the royal guards speaking with an older woman, who was driving an empty cart. It was the type of conveyance farmers used to transport their produce to market. This woman was sixty or so, dressed simply, and looked apprehensive but determined.

The guard's leader raised his hand to signal to Will, who rode up beside him. "You have news?"

"Yes, sir. This woman thinks she might have found Lady Averley."

Will didn't like the sound of that. The image of Emily's body strewn on the field, blood in a pool around her, flashed in his mind.

Will had the urge to order the woman to tell him what she knew, but he forced himself to be patient. He nodded to the woman politely. "Madam, if you have some news, I can assure you that you will have the queen's gratitude. Lady Averley is a lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty."

The woman's eyes widened slightly. "I suppose I had better start at the beginning." She had a rural accent, and her speech wavered slightly as though she was nervous.

"Please." Will wanted her to hurry, but there was no point in flustering her.

"I was on my way back from Hounslow. I sell my veg there twice a month in the winter and every week in the fall and summer. Yesterday I left early in the morning with my leeks and parsnips. Usually I take my son."

Will's eyes narrowed. As the woman was past childbearing age, one could only assume her son was not a child.

"He's not quite right, if you know what I mean."

"I don't, no. Could you explain?" Will couldn't leave room for suppositions or questions on his part.

“He’s a good boy—a good man,” she corrected, “but though he’s over thirty now, he has the mind of a child. He’s simple. He wouldn’t hurt a mouse—at least he wouldn’t mean to. But he doesn’t always know his own strength—”

“Madam.” Will was growing more concerned by the moment. “What does your son have to do with Lady Averley?”

“I’m coming to it. Usually I take him with me, but I couldn’t persuade him to climb into the cart yesterday. I’m sure you can understand that he’s far too big for me to force, and it’s just the two of us. If he doesn’t want to go, I can’t make him.”

“So you left him at home.”

“I did.” She nodded. “I’ve done so before. It’s only one night. I usually stay with my cousin Agnes when I go to Hounslow as I’m getting too old to make the journey there and back in one day. I stayed for breakfast and helped my cousin with some of her morning chores.”

Will wanted to shake the woman and force her to get to the point, but he took a breath and made himself exercise patience.

“On my way back, I saw your soldiers and wondered a bit at seeing them.”

Will didn’t tell her the guards weren’t soldiers or under his command, he simply nodded at her to continue.

“But then when I reached home and Edgar wouldn’t open the door...well, I grew concerned.”

“Edgar is your son?”

“Yes.”

“And he wouldn’t open the door to admit you?”

“No. Usually he comes out to help me with the horse and the wagon, but he didn’t come when I know he heard me arrive. He doesn’t speak very well, and he can be a bit hard of hearing, so I went to the door and tried to open it. I thought he might have been sleeping or preoccupied with something else and hadn’t heard me. But when I tried to open the door, it was bolted from within.”

“And that’s not usual?” Will asked.

“No one here bolts their door. We only do that if we’re gone for more than a few days, and we don’t travel much as we have the chickens to feed—”

“So this was unusual,” Will said, trying to speed the story along.

“Yes, but I thought Edgar might have bolted it because I was away. So I pounded on the door and told him to come unhitch old Molly here, but he didn’t open the door. And he didn’t answer. I called again, and that’s when I heard her.”

“You heard Lady Averley?” Will asked, leaning forward.

“I don’t know if it was your Lady Averley, but it was a woman, and she was speaking softly. I couldn’t hear well—it was through a door—but I didn’t recognize the voice. I tried pounding and calling for Edgar again, and then I remembered all the soldiers and started thinking perhaps they were searching for someone and perhaps Edgar had found her and…” She trailed off.

Will wanted to finish for her—perhaps this Edgar had kidnapped Emily. Will clenched his jaw.

The woman cleared her throat. “I thought Edgar might have found her and thought he—er, might keep her.”

“*Keep her?*” Will was growing more concerned by the moment.

The woman held up a hand. “I know how that sounds, but Edgar is simple and gentle.”

Except she’d said he doesn’t always know his own strength.

“He likes to collect pretty things. A pebble that sparkles, a piece of metal, a broken bracelet—that sort of thing. Lady Averley might have had some pretty thing he liked.”

Yes, Will could imagine many men might like Lady Averley, with her rare eye color and that pale, lovely hair.

“I think you’d better lead us to your home, Mrs. . . .?”

“Church, sir. Sarah Church.”

“I’ll follow you, Mrs. Church.”

Ten minutes later Will rode into the yard of a small, well-kept cottage with a thatched roof and a half dozen chickens pecking in the yard. The door was closed, and the curtains drawn. No smoke puffed from the chimney. Will did not wait for Mrs. Church to slow her cart or climb down. He jumped from his horse, marched to the door, and pounded on it. Edgar had exactly one minute to open it before he kicked it in.



Chapter Ten



Emily jumped at the pounding on the door and glanced at the man seated at the table. He was a large man, well over six feet tall and probably close to sixteen or seventeen stone. He grunted at the sound of the pounding and hunched forward, seeming to try to ignore it.

Emily forced herself to remain calm. She'd been forcing herself to remain calm for the better part of a night and day. "Sir, you had better open the door," she said quietly. "I told you that my friends will come looking for me."

The large man just covered his ears and made a low moaning sound. In the time she had been here, she had come to understand he didn't like loud noises. She hadn't understood much else as he either didn't speak or wouldn't speak to her. He didn't need to speak to express his wishes clearly, though. When Emily tried to leave, he blocked her way. When she'd cried and screamed at him, he'd covered his ears, as he did now.

"Open the door or I shall knock it down!"

Emily's heart kicked. She knew that voice. It was Will. Will had found her, and it was he pounding on the door. A woman had pounded on it earlier, saying, "Edgar, open this door!" But the large man—presumably Edgar—had not opened it, though he'd looked as though he felt he should.

"Mr. Galloway!" Emily called.

The pounding paused. "Lady Averley?"

"Yes!"

"Are you hurt?"

Emily dared not say more as Edgar had risen now and was lumbering toward the chair on the far side of the room where

she sat. *Where she had been placed* might be a more accurate description as Edgar had lifted her and put her there several hours ago and blocked her way whenever she'd tried to move. Emily tilted her head back to look up at Edgar, who now stood over her. He glared down at her and put a finger to his lips as though shushing her so a baby might sleep. Emily swallowed and pressed her lips together.

“Lady Averley? Emily?” Will called.

“If I don't answer,” Emily said softly, “he will break the door down.”

Edgar put a finger to his lips again and made a *shhh* sound. Had he even understood her?

“I'm coming in.” That was Will again, and he sounded panicked. Emily cringed back in her chair, afraid of what this Edgar might do when the door crashed open.

Something crashed against the door—most likely Galloway's boot—and the entire cottage shook. Edgar's eyes, rather small in his face, bulged wide. He covered his ears again and shut his eyes. Emily had waited long enough. She pushed out of the chair and past Edgar. Her leg, which was stiff and sore from immobility, gave a sharp pang of protest, but she ignored it.

“Will!” she called. “Hurry!” She lurched toward the door just as something slammed against it again, pushing inward and splintering the frame. Emily glanced over her shoulder. Edgar was moving toward her now, hands still over his ears and shaking his head as though to say *no*. Just then the door crashed open, hanging at an awkward angle, and Will pushed into the cottage. His eyes, angry and bright, took in the scene quickly. He moved toward Emily, staring at the approaching Edgar and holding up a staying hand.

“No!” Will said, as though he was chastising a child. “Mine. She's mine.”

Edgar made a sort of keening sound and moved to grab at Emily, but Will was faster. He swept Emily up into his arms as though she weighed nothing and walked out of the cottage, not

bothering to look back. Emily blinked at the bright light outside as she realized a half dozen royal guards were in the yard, their rifles drawn.

“Don’t shoot!” an older woman called. “Don’t hurt him!”

Emily couldn’t see behind her, but she could hear the woman talking to Edgar, soothing him as his keening cry grew louder. It was the sound of a child whose toy was taken away. Only she had been the toy.

Emily looked up at Will. Her teeth began to chatter, and her entire body trembled. Will stopped beside a horse, using the animal to shield her from view. “You came,” she said, her voice wavering.

“I told you to stay where you were.”

She couldn’t help it. She began to laugh. He was so angry and so serious, and now that she was free, the entire ordeal was really rather ridiculous. Except she’d been so scared, and now her entire body was shaking.

“You are in shock,” he said.

“No.” She shook her head, but she couldn’t stop laughing.

Will pulled her close. “You’re safe now. You can fall apart.”

Emily clenched her fists, trying to keep her giggles from turning into tears. “Are you angry with me?”

“We’ll discuss it on the way back to London. We are leaving before you run off again.”

That set off a new round of giggles and then sobs. As though she could run anywhere. Will held her tight, caressing her hair as she wept.

She had finally stopped crying and shaking by the time the queen’s coach arrived in the yard. It looked rather dirtier and more tarnished than it had the day before, but Emily wouldn’t complain. She had asked Will to put her down at least ten times, but he had refused. “And lose you again?” he’d said. “I don’t think so.”

He lifted her into the coach, settled her on a plush squab, then climbed in and sat across from her. She shouldn't have been surprised. She supposed he didn't trust her not to jump from the moving conveyance.

Emily looked out the window of the coach and saw the older woman speaking to Edgar, who now sat on the ground and pounded his fists on the dirt. "Oh, dear. He looks rather distraught."

"He's lucky he's not rather dead," Will said coldly. "I'm fighting the urge to kill him right now."

The coach started forward, and Emily turned away from the view with a shudder. She didn't want to see the cottage or Edgar. She'd be happy never to see Richmond again. "I didn't think you were a violent man," Emily said.

"My lady, even I have my limits."

She could see that. He had obviously been pushed to the edge. His hair was disheveled, his clothes wrinkled, and his jaw covered in a dark stubble. He looked tired and angry and for some reason she found that all but irresistible. He glanced at her and she could almost feel the magnetic pull of him. Her mind couldn't help but go back to yesterday, when he'd kissed her and delved beneath her skirts to touch her.

"Would you care to tell me what happened?" he barked. Emily didn't take his harsh tone personally. He'd been worried about her. He wasn't angry. He had been scared, and in her experience when men were scared, they often expressed it as anger.

"Where shall I begin?"

"How about the part when I said do not move and you said, *I'll be right here.*"

"And I had every intention of staying right there. Do you think I went looking for that man? Edgar?"

"Oh, he's Edgar now?"

Emily clenched her hands together. She was almost at her limit as well. She was tired and cold and her leg still hurt—

damn it. “Will,” she said softly. “Come here.” She indicated the empty space on the seat beside her. She thought he might refuse, but he crossed the coach quickly and with surprising agility, considering the vehicle was moving rather quickly. As soon as he took his seat, she was grateful for the additional warmth he gave and couldn’t resist leaning closer to him. There was the scent of bergamot and oranges. She loved that scent, wanted to close her eyes and bury her nose in his shirt. She was wearing his coat, and she’d often put her nose close to the wool superfine to inhale his scent while she’d been imprisoned in the cottage. Having part of him there had soothed her.

Now she reached out and took his hands. “I’m not hurt. At least not hurt any more than I was. That man—Edgar—scared me but he didn’t hurt me.”

He let out a breath, and she realized he’d been afraid for her. “What happened?” he asked.

She began to explain how she’d been dozing under the cart, shivering and trying to keep warm when she heard the sound of someone moving through the woods. The branches on the ground cracked under foot as the person moved toward her. She’d wished then that she had some sort of weapon. She’d been terrified it might be the Irish separatists. She hoped, against reason, that it was Will coming back. She knew it couldn’t be him, and she kept very still and shrank into the darkest recess of her shelter.

And then she’d screamed when a man’s face appeared at the opening. He’d covered his ears and his face had disappeared. Emily had searched for a weapon of some sort, found a stick, and brandished it the next time his face filled the opening. He’d grabbed it and thrown it away, and she’d screamed again, causing him to cover one ear. He used his other hand to grasp her hand and haul her out. She might have fought, but her injured thigh knocked against the edge of the cart and she reeled in pain. She’d gone to her knees, and that was when he’d picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder as though she were a sack of flour. She’d tried to call for help, to call for Will, but she couldn’t make much of a sound when

she was hanging upside down. And then she'd been too busy fighting the low-hanging branches that tangled in her hair or her clothing and tore at her.

Finally, she'd seen a field below her, then a road, and then what looked like the sort of gravel one might use for a drive. She'd looked up and spotted a cottage, and that was when she'd grown nervous again. The man had pushed open the door, carrying her inside, and Emily had begun to fight. She'd been terrified he'd rape her or murder her. When he'd put her on the bed, she'd tried to kick him, but though her good leg made contact with his chest, he didn't seem to feel any pain.

"I tried to get away from him," she told Will, whose face had gone rather pale, "but every time I tried to rise, he would gently push me back down. Finally, I realized he wouldn't hurt me. He just wanted me to stay where he'd put me. It was as though I were a doll or a dog. He wanted me right there and I had better not move."

Emily closed her eyes, finding this part of her ordeal easier to relate. "I finally realized he wouldn't hurt me. He gave me bread and water and didn't try to touch me. After several hours, I fell asleep, and when I woke up this morning, he was still there, refusing to let me go. I started talking to him then. He seemed to understand as I told him I was the queen's lady-in-waiting, and Her Majesty needed me at the palace. I told him the queen would send soldiers to search for me, and he should allow me to go. If he let me go, he wouldn't be in trouble. He definitely did not like the idea of being in trouble."

"What did he do when his mother returned home?"

She remembered the pounding on the door and the woman's voice. "I thought that might be his mother. He just covered his ears and waited for her to go away." Emily swallowed and blinked at the stinging behind her eyes. Instantly, she was in Will's arms, being held tightly.

"You don't have to talk about it," he said, his hand caressing her hair, his voice low and soothing. She pressed her face into his chest and listened to the steady beating of his

heart. She was surrounded by the warmth and scent of him, and she never wanted to leave this cocoon of his embrace.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just needed a moment.” Now was the time she should push away. Now was the time she should move back to her side of the seat. She should tell him to move back to his seat.

But she didn’t.

“I understand,” he said. “Up until that point you had been waiting for something to happen, someone to come. And then she came, and nothing changed, and you were afraid you might never escape.”

He did understand. She looked up at him. “It wasn’t rational. He couldn’t keep me forever, but I was so tired and my leg hurt and—”

“I would have never left you. I would have torn every building apart, upended every rock, searched every haystack until I found you.”

Their gazes met. “I know,” she said. “That knowledge was all that kept me from panicking. I knew you’d come for me.”

There had never been a doubt in her mind about Willoughby Galloway. He might have had his suspicions about her, but he’d more than proven himself to Emily. She slid a hand through his hair and cupped the back of his neck, gently tugging his mouth down to hers.

He needed no inducement. His lips were gentle and probing. He was being careful with her, and she didn’t want careful in that moment. She wanted to feel alive. She wanted to feel free again. She parted her lips and when he did the same, she teased him with a flick of her tongue. She felt his arms tighten on her, but that was the only sign he was affected. He was remarkably restrained, even as she kissed him deeper, exploring and tasting and tangling with his tongue.

He kissed her back, teasing her as she had him, then kissing her with a passion that left her reeling. The whole world seemed to be spinning as his mouth took hers, and when

he moved to kiss her neck, she opened her eyes and realized she was lying on her back.

The carriage's curtains were closed, making the interior a soft gray, but she could see the painting of a Scottish landscape on the ceiling and could almost imagine they were there—away from London and Court and all of the awfulness of the past days.

His mouth trailed down to her bodice, his hot breath making her nipples ache through the layers of undergarments. She wanted these wrinkled, dirty clothes off more than she could say, but it was almost impossible in these close confines. What was not impossible was for Will to slide her drawers off, ruck up her skirts, and bury himself inside her. She wanted that, wanted to feel him moving within her as their breathing came faster and faster with pleasure.

His hand was under her skirts, stroking her good leg. She wanted him to move higher, opened her mouth to tell him to take off her drawers, and then she clenched her hands and forced herself to slow down.

Will felt the change in her immediately. He lifted his head from her breast and looked up at her. "What's wrong? Should I stop?"

"No," she said, "but yes?"

He raised a brow.

"I'm sorry. That was unclear. It's just that I do want you ___"

"But not here."

"Not like this. Not for our first time."

A slow smile spread across his face. "There will be more than one time?"

She couldn't help but smile back at him. "Come to my chamber tonight."

He shook his head. "You'll be tired."

“Then I’ll send you away.” She frowned. “That won’t work. The queen is very strict about her ladies. Men aren’t allowed in our wing.”

“Then come to my chamber. If you don’t come, I’ll know it’s because you’re sleeping. The choice is yours.”

Emily rather liked having the choice. She’d loved her husband, but she’d never been the one to initiate lovemaking or to go to his bed. He’d always come to her when he wanted her. Now she had that power. Just the idea of it made her want Will all the more.

He gave her a wary expression and pushed up. “When you look at me like that, I can’t resist you. Here, sit up and I’ll help you...” He gestured to her disheveled clothing.

She laughed. “I fear there’s no help for it. I want to burn this dress when I return. Shall I burn your coat too?”

“God, no. Surely my valet can salvage it. And if not, I’ll keep it to think of you.”

His words reminded her that this—whatever was between them—was temporary and fleeting. They would go their separate ways in a week or a month or two. She only had this little time with him, and she wanted to make the most of it.

“Rest now,” he said. “We should be in London within the hour.” He pulled her against him and settled her comfortably. She was surprised at how well she fit against him and how perfect she felt in his arms. It was as though they had always known each other. As though she was meant for him.



AS SOON AS THEY ARRIVED at Buckingham Palace, Emily had been swept away. The queen had wanted to see her, and Emily had been engulfed by a froth of women in large skirts and lace. Five minutes after they’d arrived, all that remained of Emily was the fading heat of her body where it had pressed against him in the coach.

Will scrubbed his face, feeling the stubble. He needed a bath and a shave and a nap. After that, he wouldn’t mind a large quantity of food. He didn’t remember when he’d last

eaten, and it was early evening now. But before he could start for his chambers, the Foreign Secretary and the prince strode down the corridor, looking grim.

There would be no meal or bath for him yet.

An hour later he finally stepped into his chamber and allowed his valet to strip off his clothing. He dismissed the man and stepped into his bath, leaning his head back on the tub and letting the tension in his muscles seep away. Lord Palmerston and Prince Albert had asked dozens of questions. Will wished he'd had answers for them, but he had nothing. He was no closer to sabotaging the separatists' assassination plans now than he had been when he'd arrived at the palace. In fact, now he didn't even have a suspect. The more he came to know Emily, the less he believed she could have anything to do with the plot. It wasn't solely intuition, though he had excellent intuition. He would never have been considered good enough for the Royal Saboteurs if his intuition wasn't nearly always spot on.

But even more than intuition was careful investigation, including surveillance, at which he excelled. So far all Emily Blythe-Coston had been guilty of was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. She'd been shot, ambushed, and then kidnapped. It was more than most people experienced in a lifetime, and yet she hadn't broken. She was an extraordinary woman, and she was no traitor.

The water had cooled, and Will climbed out of the bath and dressed in loose trousers and a robe. He rang for a tray and sat by the fire to devour the food that arrived. He doubted Emily would come to him tonight. She'd have a bath and probably fall into bed. He couldn't blame her. And perhaps that was for the best. In his mind he'd dismissed her as a suspect, but that didn't mean Baron or the Foreign Office believed her innocent. Until they had found the true traitor, she was still under investigation, and it was best if he did not involve himself with her personally.

Which meant he would almost certainly never touch her again, kiss her, hold her. There were only two ways the next few days could go. One, he'd leave the palace and start

searching elsewhere. Or two, she'd find out who he really was, and no woman wanted to be lied to. Either way, it was better that he hadn't taken her to bed.

A soft knock on the door made him jerk to his feet. Holy hell. She'd come. He should turn her away, but he damn well knew he would never turn Emily out of his chamber or his bed. He crossed to the door, his heart pounding, and opened it.

But it wasn't Emily on the other side. It was a footman with a silver tray. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late, sir. This came for you, and the delivery boy said it was urgent."

Will took the folded white paper and closed the door. He recognized the hand who had written his name on the front. Bridget Kelly. He should have written to Cal as soon as he'd arrived, but it had slipped his mind. That was unforgivable and extremely unprofessional. No doubt the Kellys wanted an update on his progress to pass on to Baron.

Unless they had discovered something in his absence.

Will carried the letter to his desk, took out another sheet of paper, and began to decipher the code. As he'd expected, the Kellys had been concerned about him and had heard of the assassination attempt. Though the queen had kept it out of the press, even the palace was no match for the talents of Cal and Bridget Kelly. Cal requested a meeting at the coffee shop tomorrow. He wanted to know what Will had learned of Lady Averley's role in the plot. And the Kellys hinted they had news of their own to share.

Will set the decoded letter aside and pulled out another sheet to write his response. He'd be at this half the night as he first had to write the thing and then code it. He'd better ring for tea. He stood to cross to the bell pull when another soft tap sounded on his door. Will frowned. Another letter? Or perhaps Palmerston wanted to see him again.

Will pulled the door open and any thoughts of work flew from his mind. A woman in a cloak stood on the other side. He stared at her for a long moment, until she pushed the hood off her pale blond hair and looked up at him.

“May I come in?”



Chapter Eleven



Will couldn't have refused Emily if he'd tried. He didn't think; he simply stepped aside and swung the door wide. She moved past him, bringing the fragrance of lavender and of the scent that was indefinably her.

She turned back, and he realized he was staring at her. Will closed the door and leaned against it, needing the support.

He hadn't thought she would come. He hadn't dared hope. But now she was here, and he had to clench his hands to keep from grabbing and kissing her. He had to at least pretend he was civilized. He couldn't throw her over his shoulder and toss her on the bed. No matter how much he wanted to.

"For a friend of Prince Albert, these are rather modest accommodations," she said.

Will was still staring at her, definitely for far too long at this point, and he hadn't noticed she was surveying his quarters. "I don't need much."

That was true, but what was even more true was that he wasn't a friend of the prince but an agent for an arm of the Foreign Office here to do a job. His quarters reflected that reality. His chamber was on the smaller size and held a compact desk, a dresser, washstand, and a bed. His gaze lingered on the bed, freshly made and calling to him. Earlier it had been calling to him to relieve his exhaustion. Now its appeal was slightly different.

Beside the bed was a small table with a bottle of wine and a glass. Will crossed to it, poured the wine, and offered Emily the glass. "Would you like some wine?"

"No, thank you." Her eyes were that same odd shade of pale blue, but those who had called them icy had it wrong.

Will could practically feel the heat in her gaze burning him. He drank the wine in one swallow, and her brows lifted. “Thirsty?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She lifted a hand to tug at the cords of her cloak. Will watched in breathless anticipation as she slid the garment off her shoulders and allowed it to pool on the carpet. She wore a simple linen chemise beneath. He didn’t need to wonder if she wore anything else. The chemise was thin enough that there was no question.

“I think I need more wine,” he said.

She stepped toward him, took the glass, and set it on the table. “I should be the one who is nervous.”

He clasped her hand, feeling her warmth.

She gazed up at him from under her lashes. “I haven’t done this in a long time.”

Holy hell. He hadn’t considered that this might be the first time she’d gone to bed with a man since her husband died. He might be the first man, other than her husband, she had been with. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” he said.

She smiled. “I just hope we have time to do everything I *do* want.” She stepped into his arms and kissed him. Will didn’t know what had come over him. Usually, he was the pursuer. He took the lead. But Emily had turned his world upside down, and he was scrambling to find his footing.

The kiss firmed the ground beneath him. These were the lips he wanted, the mouth he’d enjoyed, the tongue that had teased him. His body knew what to do, even if his mind still reeled at having her here with him. His arms went around her, pulling her close. Holy hell. Her chemise was even thinner than he’d imagined. He could practically feel the silky skin of her waist through the material. He slid his hands down to cup her hips. They were rounded and curved into a firm bottom. Grasping that bottom, he pressed her against his erection and heard her indrawn breath.

Will pulled back. “I’m moving too fast. I should—”

She undid the ribbon of her bodice and let the garment slide down her shoulders.

Will's mouth went dry as she shrugged out of the linen, revealing small, pert breasts with pale pink aureoles.

"Perhaps I'm not moving fast enough," he said. She smiled invitingly and reached for the tie of his robe. He let her loosen it then discarded the robe, so he stood in his trousers, chest bare. Reaching out, he ran two fingers over one breast, feeling her nipple harden as he stroked it. "You're beautiful."

"So are you," she said, her own hands exploring his chest then sliding around to run up and down his back. He pulled her to him again, liking the feel of her skin against his. She was so warm, her skin like molten heat as he touched her, kissed her, stroked her. She explored him as well, making him catch his breath as she ran her nails lightly over his back. Her other hand slid down his chest and into the waistband of his trousers.

Will caught her hand, lifted it to his mouth, and kissed it. For the first time since she'd entered, she looked uncertain. "I'd like this to last longer than two minutes," he said, pulling her to the bed. He was aware of the clean bandages on her leg, and he moved slowly.

She saw his gaze and smiled. "It's much better now. The queen's physician treated it. He said it should heal completely, and I'll have a small scar."

"I'm sorry for that." He lifted her onto the bed, watching as she fell back on the burgundy coverlet. It made a striking contrast to her pale hair and skin.

"I'm not."

He bent over her but paused to give her a questioning look before kissing her. "No?"

"When I'm old and gray, I'll look at it and remember this adventure. I'll remember you."

"You won't need a scar to remember me," he said, kissing her. She kissed him back, moaning as his hands roamed over her. He couldn't get enough of touching her, tasting her. She

had bathed before coming to him, and he could smell the scent of the soap she'd used on her skin, almost taste it when his mouth bent to her shoulder, her neck, her breast. He slid lower, kissing her belly then her hip, then opening her legs to kiss her there. He waited to see if she'd protest as he kissed her inner thigh, but her breath grew quicker, and her hands fisted in the bedclothes.

She wanted this, and he wanted to taste her. He'd been thinking about it for days now. He spread her legs wider, taking in the shades of light and dark pink. She was wet and perfect, and he used his tongue to stroke her. She gasped, jerking almost as soon as he found the center of her pleasure. She was definitely ready for him, but he wanted to take his time. He wanted to see what she liked.

And he did take his time, kissing and licking and teasing her. He'd bring her just to the point of climax then pull away. By the time he allowed her to fall over the edge of pleasure, she was panting and crying out. Her climax was almost violent, her back bowed and her hips raised to press her sex against his lips.

When she went still, the only sound that of her ragged breaths, Will loosed the tie of his trousers and slid them down.



EMILY COULDN'T THINK. She couldn't hear anything but her own breathing or see anything but a swirl of darkness and pale gold candlelight. Willoughby Galloway had brought her to a shattering climax unlike any she'd ever felt before. She was utterly spent, her entire body limp and sated. When she finally opened her eyes and turned her head to smile at him, she saw him step out of his trousers.

Her breath caught again. He was thick and hard and aroused. Her sex pulsed hungrily, and Emily felt another surge of desire. His gaze met hers, and she reached for him. That seemed to be all the permission he needed. He was above her in a moment, his lips on hers, his weight balanced on his elbows.

She wrapped her legs around him, feeling his hard member slide over her swollen intimate flesh. She couldn't stop another moan, though a moment ago she would have sworn she was completely spent. He entered her slowly, his gaze locked on hers as he inched inside. It was too slow, too wonderful.

"More," she said.

He obliged, stretching and filling her, and bringing her more pleasure as he did so. She raised her hips, taking more of him, and he swore as he tried to keep his composure, but she didn't want him composed. He'd utterly destroyed her, and she wanted to do the same. Finally, seeming unable to resist, he filled her. She didn't know what she'd expected next but certainly not the slow way he moved inside her. His breathing came fast, but his movements were measured and deep, the friction building until she was panting as well.

"Will," she said on a breath, and he linked his hands with hers. She knew he must be on the edge of climax, but his gaze on her was intent, his control unbreakable as he edged her closer and closer to the peak. Emily couldn't break the connection as pleasure speared through her. She gave herself over to it and watched as he jumped off the cliff as well. And then he was gone, spilling his seed on her belly and groaning against her shoulder.

Emily let her legs and arms fall, too boneless to do anything but breathe. Her entire body thrummed with satisfaction. She was vaguely aware that he rose and returned from the washstand with a wet cloth. He cleaned her then pulled the covers over her and wrapped his arms around her.

"That was..." She didn't know how to describe it.

"Yes," he said. "Give me fifteen minutes, and we'll try it again."

She swatted at him, half afraid he was serious. She didn't think she could survive if he pleased her again tonight.

"How is your leg?" he asked.

“What leg?” she quipped. “I don’t feel as though I have any legs at the moment.”

“Good. Then you won’t be leaving any time soon.”

And yet they both knew she couldn’t stay all night. Neither of them wanted to be discovered and for rumors to circulate, much less reach the queen. Emily closed her eyes, hardly believing that in twenty-four hours she’d gone from being kidnapped to being worshipped. “Thank you for saving me today,” she said.

He looked down at her. “As though I would have ever left you.”

“I know. You wouldn’t have left anyone, but still, thank you. You’re a good man.”

He seemed to be at a loss for words momentarily, and then he muttered, “Damn it all to holy hell. I would have searched for anyone who’d been in your situation today, but I can’t pretend it was simply my duty. I was half-mad with worry for you, Emily. I couldn’t bear not ever seeing you again.”

She ran a finger along his smooth jaw. “Careful. You’ll make me believe you have feelings for me.” Her words were light, but inside her chest was constricted. She didn’t want to be hurt if her feelings for him were not reciprocated.

“How can you believe I *don’t* have feelings for you? I thought I’d made it rather obvious.”

She studied his lovely eyes, the flecks of gold in them seeming to glow deeper in the candlelight. “You made it obvious you wanted me in your bed.” She gestured to the bed where they lay.

“I did want you in my bed, and I’d be happy if you never left. But there’s more than that. I care about you, Emily. You’re brave. You’re clever. You are amazingly resilient. You are the most amazing woman I have ever met. How can I not have feelings for you?”

Emily’s cheeks were burning. She hadn’t expected such a passionate declaration of his feelings, and she wasn’t quite sure what to do about it. Except tell him how she felt too. But

carefully. She wasn't ready to be vulnerable yet. "You know," she said, "you're not at all like what I thought you'd be when I first saw you."

"Oh?" His brows lifted and he propped himself on his elbow. "Do tell. What were your first impressions of me, Lady Averley?"

"I thought you were one of those ne'er-do-wells who flit about the Continent chasing courtesans and trying to corrupt young men. The prince is such a serious man at times that I was surprised at your connection."

"I can be serious," he said, tracing a finger over her shoulder and making her shiver. "I can be very serious."

"I see that now," she murmured. "You're not the scamp I thought you were."

"Scamp!" His head lifted off his hand. "I feel as though I should be insulted. And here when I first saw you, I thought you all beauty and grace."

She felt her face heat. "I am not beautiful."

He caught her chin before she could look away. "Why do you keep arguing with me? Who told you were not beautiful?"

"I've always known it."

"So your parents told you."

"No, but when I was a child the other children used to say I had ghost eyes."

He furrowed a brow.

"My eyes were pale like those of a person who was dead—a ghost. It didn't help that my hair was light blond and my skin so pale."

"Your eyes are beautiful," he said. "You are beautiful and unique. I imagine all those children were jealous."

"It's not as though I had suitors flocking to me as I grew up," she said, giving him a rueful smile.

“Then those men were blind or stupid. Surely your husband told you that you were beautiful.”

“He did. He was the only man ever to do so...until now.”

“Then I’ll tell you every day, though I would like you even if you resembled a head of cabbage.”

Her eyes widened. “I can’t quite imagine that.”

“I don’t care how you look. You have a beautiful heart, Emily.” He kissed her, and she put her arms around him and kissed him back. And then fifteen minutes must have passed because he was stroking her and arousing her and making love to her all over again.



EMILY WOKE WHEN IT was still dark. The fire burned low, and it would only be a half hour or so until the charwoman came in to sweep the hearth and build up the fire. Then the rest of the servants would wake and begin preparing hot water and tea and food to break the fast of the palace. If she was to return to her room unobserved, she had best do so now.

Emily pushed the bedclothes off, careful not to wake Will. He slept on his back, one arm thrown over his head. It was difficult not to climb back beside him and kiss him awake. He looked utterly delicious, and she missed lying in his arms already. Her cold, lonely bed would be even colder now that she had a taste of his warmth for a night.

Emily moved about the chamber quietly, gathering her linen chemise and her cloak. It was a simple matter to pull the chemise over her head and tie the strings at the bodice. Then she donned the cloak and sat in the desk chair to push her feet into her slippers.

Finally, she rose, but her cloak swept a piece of paper onto the floor, and she bent to return it to the desk. She glanced at it then frowned. It was written in some strange sort of code. It wasn’t a foreign language. She had seen enough of missives from foreign rulers to recognize almost every form of alphabet. This was a series of shapes and symbols. How odd. Why would Will have a coded letter?

Emily laid the letter on the desk beside a sheet with those same symbols and words in English. She might have left it there and asked Will about it in passing later, but she spotted her name. Heart pounding, Emily lifted the paper with her name and carried it closer to the hearth, where the light was better. She saw immediately what she held. It was the deciphered contents of the coded letter. And the letter had been about the assassination attempt on the queen and the author asked about her role in it.

The print on the page swam as Emily swayed on her feet. The words used, the phrasing, all of it made one thing quite clear to Emily—she was suspected of helping the separatists who wished to assassinate the queen. She was suspected of treason.

And Willoughby Galloway was not who he said he was at all. He was not some mere nobleman who'd wiled away his time exploring the Continent. No. He was some sort of agent for the Crown or the Foreign Office. He'd been sent here to ferret out the traitor. And he thought that traitor was Emily.

As though the last piece of a puzzle slammed into place, Emily suddenly understood. It was all perfectly clear. So clear that she didn't know how she hadn't seen it before. Of course, the Foreign Office suspected the assassins had someone inside the palace helping them. It hurt that suspicion fell on her, but that was to be expected. Jack had possessed strong views on the rights of Ireland, among other things, and it was natural to assume she would also be sympathetic to her late husband's views, including the Irish wish for Home Rule. She had not helped her situation by suggesting that ride in the park, where the first assassination attempt had occurred.

But Emily hadn't thought anyone would seriously think she wanted Victoria dead. The idea was ludicrous. And yet, Willoughby Galloway thought exactly that. She'd known he'd quizzed her in Richmond, and yet she'd believed him when he'd given her pretty words. She'd trusted him when he said he was only playing secret agent. Then he'd kissed her and touched her, and she'd forgotten all about it.

But he'd lied. Everything she'd believed about him was a lie. He wasn't a friend of Prince Albert. He was an agent, and he was here to prove she was a traitor. Had seducing her been part of the plan or just a bonus?

Emily crumpled the paper in her hand. She might have flung it at him or thrown the water from the wash basin over his head, but she didn't have time. The charwoman would have started on her chores already. Emily had to go or be seen.

She started for the desk, intent on replacing the letter, and then she turned and went to the bed. She placed it on her pillow, still dented from where her head had lain beside Galloway's. He slept the sleep of the innocent, though she now knew he was not innocent at all. He was the liar, the traitor.

Emily turned and swept silently out of the chamber. She closed the door behind her and forced herself to walk, not run, back to her chamber. The servants were already up and about, and while they might think it odd she was also awake, they would definitely remark it if she were hurrying or looking frantic.

She passed a maidservant and then a footman. Of course, it was the footman with the red hair who always reminded her of Jack. She lowered her eyes, not wanting to look him in the eye today. It felt too much like Jack chastising her for the way she'd spent the night. She knew Jack wouldn't have wanted her to spend the rest of her life alone, but she also didn't want to be reminded of him so soon after spending it with another man, especially when that man had lied to her so thoroughly.

Emily reached her room and shut the door. Alone, she finally allowed herself to crumple to the floor and bury her face in her hands. How could she have gone to bed with a man who thought she was the enemy?



Chapter Twelve



Will woke alone. He'd slept rather later than he was used to, but that was to be expected considering the events of the night before. Not to mention, the events of the days before. He wouldn't be expected at the breakfast table, though he assumed the queen and the prince would want to speak to him later and to hear about the ordeal.

He also wasn't surprised Emily was gone. He wished she had stayed, but he knew the queen was strict about morality, and Emily did not want to earn the monarch's displeasure. She must have tiptoed out in the dark. She should have wakened him. He would have helped her dress and given her a candle to guide the way. But she was too kind, she would have done all she could to avoid disturbing him. He rolled over, his cheek on her pillow, and stared at a slip of paper. His heart sped up. A note?

He lifted it, took one glance, and swore. He sat up, pushed the covers off the bed, and shoved on his trousers. He practically tripped as he grasped the bell pull, summoning his valet so he might dress. He had to speak to Emily. Now. Before she got the wrong idea.

Not that the idea she inferred from the letter he'd decoded was wrong. He had been sent here to find the traitor, and he had been pursuing her as that traitor. No, that wasn't wrong at all. Neither would she be wrong to assume he wasn't who he'd said he was. He'd lied about that. He'd had to. He couldn't exactly walk into Buckingham Palace and tell everyone he was a member of the Royal Saboteurs, here to sabotage the assassination efforts. Either the traitor would have him killed or the separatists would just wait until he'd gone and then make their attempts on the queen's life again.

Not to mention, he'd completely ruin his cover, and he'd spent years making sure no one but his closest family knew that Willoughby Galloway was an agent for the Crown.

And so when his valet arrived with warm water for his shave and clean linen, Will sent him away. He needed to speak to Emily, but it would be a mistake to rush to see her. He had to think carefully about how to proceed with her. He didn't think she was the traitor. He was almost entirely sure she was not. And his first act today should be to respond to the Kellys' letter and arrange a meeting. If he went to Emily now, he'd only be putting her before his mission again, and he couldn't afford to do that. If Emily wasn't the traitor, who was? The queen wouldn't be safe until he determined that and foiled their attempts to contact the separatists.

It took some time to write the Kellys back and then to code the letter. After he did so, he summoned his valet again and proceeded to dress. Then he left the palace before the queen could call for him. If he was not in residence, he couldn't be detained. Instead, he went straight to the coffee house, even though his meeting with Cal wasn't for an hour yet.

At the Farm, Will had been known for his skill at surveillance. He didn't pride himself on it because it wasn't a skill he'd worked to cultivate. It was something innate. He had an eye for details. He knew how to observe without being seen and to make himself blend into the background. Likewise, he knew when he was being watched or followed. It wasn't that he saw anyone following him as he walked down James Street, but he *felt* the eyes on him, *felt* the presence behind him. So when he stepped into the coffeehouse and out of the light rain, he waited for whoever had followed him from the palace to enter as well. He sat in the back, where he and Cal usually sat, his back to the wall. He pretended to read the paper and sip his coffee, but his attention was on the door.

If he hadn't been watching closely, he would have missed it when she stepped inside. She was quick and smart enough to enter with a small party, so she might hide behind the other patrons. She would have made a good agent. Emily even kept her head down as she took a seat a few tables away from

where he sat, her back to him. She probably hoped to be close enough to overhear what he might say.

If she hoped to convince him she wasn't in league with the assassins, this was not the way to go about it. Of course, no one had the knowledge he had—that she had left his bed a few hours ago and, upon doing so, discovered the man she'd shared the night with was not the man she'd thought. He could hardly blame her for following him and attempting to find out who he really was. He would have done the same.

The problem was, she couldn't be allowed to find out more about him or about his work. It wasn't safe for either of them.

And if he hadn't allowed himself to fall half in love with her, he wouldn't be in this compromising position. Neither of them would be.

He had to do something about her, but before he could decide what that might be, Callahan Kelly ducked into the coffee shop. He kept his hat low over his forehead and made straight for Will, taking the seat beside him so they could both keep an eye on the door.

“Took you long enough to write me back,” Cal said without preamble. He removed his hat and shook the water off it.

“I had a trying few days.” Will thought about stopping the conversation then but decided to allow Emily to hear this.

“So I read. And apparently you no longer believe the lady is our traitor.” He lowered his voice on the last word.

“I know she's not.” Will looked up at the approaching server and ordered coffee. Cal did the same. When the server hurried away to fetch a pot, Will said, “Which means we are back at the beginning.”

“Not exactly. I told you I have news to share.”

As eager as Will was to hear it, he couldn't allow Emily to overhear. Learning that he thought her innocent—something she already knew from reading his letter—was one thing. Finding out any more about his work was another thing entirely.

Will raised a hand, staying Cal's next words. "Before you speak, I want to introduce you to someone."

Cal's eyes narrowed then widened as Will rose and took two steps to stand behind Emily's chair. "Lady Averley, meet my friend Callahan Kelly."

Cal swore, an oath more fitting for a tavern than a coffeeshop. And Emily took her time turning to look at Will. When she did look up at him, her cheeks were crimson.

But her eyes were ice cold. She glared up at him, her gaze cool enough to send a chill down his spine. "You knew I was here all along," she said, not bothering to acknowledge Cal.

"I'm an agent for the Crown, sweetheart. Did you think I wouldn't know I was being followed?"

She rose, shoulders straight and back stiff. "You don't even have any shame about lying to me, do you?"

"I don't have any shame about my work, but I am sorry for lying. It's part of the job." He should have left it there, but he saw the flash of hurt in her eyes and it felt like the slice of a knife on his heart. "Emily, if you'll let me explain."

She shook her head. "I think I had better leave you to your...work."

He grasped her arm before she could stomp away. Her cloak was wet, and she must be cold. "And where are you off to? You can't walk back to the palace alone. You took enough of a risk following me."

She snatched her arm away. "Don't pretend you care about me or that I was anything more than a part of one of your missions."

Cal cleared his throat. "Perhaps I should take a brief walk and leave you two—"

"Not necessary," Emily said, pointing at him. Cal sat back down. "I have nothing more to say to Mr. Galloway. If that is even your name."

"It's my name," Will hissed. "And sit down before you cause a scene. That's the last thing any of us need right now."

The serving woman returned with two mugs and the pot of coffee. She stopped short upon seeing Will and Emily face to face.

“Could you bring another cup?” Cal asked, voice light. “We’ve added another to our party, so we have.”

Will took that opportunity to pull out a chair and glower at Emily until she took it. Cal poured her a cup of coffee and sat back. “Well, this is a fine kettle of fish.”

Emily extended her hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kelly, is it? I apologize for interrupting your meeting.”

Cal took her hand with a bemused smile on his lips. He cut Will a look. “Do I kiss her glove or just shake it? Sure and I’ve never met a lady before—not properly at any rate.”

Emily withdrew her hand. “You mean you don’t make a habit of accusing ladies of treason?”

“Keep your voice down,” Will said. “We don’t need the whole of the coffeehouse knowing our business.”

“Your business, Mr. Galloway,” she said. “Apparently, you are an agent for the Crown, not a friend of Prince Albert’s. Was anything you told me true?”

Cal looked at Will. “Tell me you didn’t break the cardinal rule, Will.”

Emily peered at him. “What’s the cardinal rule?”

“Never become romantically involved with your subject,” Cal said.

She turned to Cal. “He seduced me. Does that qualify?”

“I—” Will sputtered. “I did not seduce you. You came to my chamber—”

Cal held his hand up. “I really think you should save this conversation for a more private moment. Right now, we have a decision to make.”

“What’s that?” Will asked.

Cal slanted a look at Emily as though to inquire if it was safe to speak in front of her. Will let out a breath. She already knew too much as it was. What was one more piece of knowledge? Will nodded.

“I told you I have news, so I did.” Cal looked about to make sure they were not being observed. “Two days ago, I spotted a man I recognized as a member of Innishfree. He was here in London.”

“What’s Innishfree?” Emily asked.

“Not so loud, lass,” Cal said. “Innishfree is a group of Irish men and women who want Home Rule in Ireland. And they are quite willing to go to any length to achieve it.”

“You mean...” Her eyes widened. “The queen?”

Cal shrugged. “What better way to get the attention of the government and to show that they are a serious force to be reckoned with?”

“What better way to ensure a battalion of troops descends on the country, bringing harsh penalties and even harsher laws with them?” she countered.

“Perhaps they want a war,” Will said. “If England were to send troops, that might rally the common man. But whatever it is they want, my task is to sabotage their efforts to assassinate the queen.”

“And you thought I was involved.”

“He was ordered to investigate you, among others,” Cal said. “He was given a job, so he was. It wasn’t personal, lass.”

“I’m not your lass,” she said, straightening.

“A thousand pardons,” Cal said, giving a slight bow. “My *lady*.”

“You were saying you spotted a member of Innishfree,” Will said. He knew that look in Cal’s eye and had better intervene to keep the conversation civil.

“So I did. And I followed him and liberated him of an interesting letter. There’s a meeting called for today in

Wapping.”

“Wapping,” Will said quietly. Wapping was a city adjacent to London, a stopping point for the hundreds of vessels that sailed down the Thames each year laden with goods from around the world. The land around the river at Wapping was full of quays and warehouses to store the goods. And Wapping was full of sailors from every part of the world. No one would look twice at a group of Irishmen there.

“Today you say?” Will glanced at his watch. It was after one. “What time?”

“Five,” Cal said.

Will started. “Then I have to go now.”

“Within the hour if you hope to get into position in time.”

“Where are they meeting? I can leave...” He trailed off, looking at Emily. “I can’t go. I have to escort her back to the palace. Can you go?”

Cal shook his head. “Too many of them know me from my time in Dublin. They know I’m not one of them and that I played a role in the death of their leader. They’ll have a new man now, but if I’m seen in Wapping, they’ll know they’ve been found out.”

“And then they’ll go back into hiding,” Will said. “We won’t know when or where they’ll strike. It could be a month. It could be a year.”

“They’ve already come far too close to taking the life of Her Majesty,” Emily said. “I fear they will succeed if given another chance.”

“I agree. I need to go now. Cal, can you escort her back to Buckingham Palace?”

“Of course.”

“No,” Emily said. “I want to go with you. To Wapping.”

“No,” Will said, appalled at the very idea. He’d thought Emily had more sense than to even suggest such a thing. “Absolutely not.”

“I have to agree, lass—lady,” Cal said.

Emily gave Cal then Will pointed looks. “You said you were sent to find the traitor within the palace.”

“That’s right.” Will nodded.

“Are you certain there is one?”

“Not certain but reasonably sure, yes. The attempts on the queen have been too well-planned to be chance. Someone with access to Her Majesty is giving the separatists information.”

“And if that someone is not me,” Emily continued, “then it stands to reason it’s someone else in the palace. And that someone else might be at this meeting in Wapping today.”

“To be sure,” Cal said. “That’s what we believe.”

“And who do you think knows the Court better than I do?” Emily asked. “You have been at the palace a couple of weeks. I have lived there for two years. I know everyone by sight, if not by name. You need me, Willoughby Galloway.”

Will wanted to argue. He wanted to send her straight back to the safety of the palace walls.

“She has a point, so she does,” Cal said, echoing what Will was thinking. Will saw his error now. He’d been so focused on Emily that he hadn’t considered someone else in the palace might be the traitor. If that someone else was one of the other ladies-in-waiting or one of the secretaries or ministers, Will would know him or her. But he saw now that was unlikely. What was more likely was that the traitor was a servant—a maid or footman who knew the queen’s plans and could quickly slip out, alert the assassins, and return unnoticed.

Will had been so focused on finding someone who could influence the queen’s plans, someone who could put her in the way of harm, that he hadn’t considered it would be just as easy for a person of no particular rank or position to send word of the plans. It would mean the assassins would have to work quickly to be in place, but it was possible.

“I would recognize a good number of the staff and courtiers,” Will said.

“And you want to stake the life of our monarch on the chance the traitor is someone you will recognize?”

Will knew he had a good eye and a good memory for faces. But he also knew he'd been distracted by Emily ever since he'd arrived at the palace. Could he recall the face of every maid who'd scurried in or out of the palace chambers? Every footman who'd served at dinner?

The truth was, Will couldn't. He'd watched Emily at dinner. He'd been focused on her when he'd been in those royal chambers. The rest had been noise.

“Tick-tock,” Cal said.

Will made his decision. If nothing else, he could make quick decisions. Usually, he didn't regret them. He hoped this wasn't one of the few he did come to regret.

“You can come,” he said to Emily. He took her arm and pulled her out of her seat.

She blinked at him, seeming not to believe this was actually happening. “What, now?”

“Now.” He held out a hand and Cal put the letter he'd taken from the Innishfree man in his grip. Will tucked it in his waistcoat, grabbed his hat, and started away, Emily in tow.

As he departed, he heard Cal mutter, “And he leaves me to pay the bill. Again.”



EMILY HADN'T EXPECTED to travel in style, but she had not been prepared for the filthy hackney in which she'd been placed. The straw on the floor was matted and dirty, and she dared not look too closely because she feared there were things moving in it. The seats were sticky and their fabric torn. The roof of the conveyance bowed in, and she rather feared it would fall on her at any moment.

“I shall have to burn this dress when I return,” she said. “*If* I return.”

Will grinned at her from the other side of the hackney. “It must be difficult to live in the world of mere mortals, even if

only for a few hours.”

“No more difficult than passing through the world lying to every person you meet.”

His expression turned serious. “Emily—”

“Lady Averley to you, sir.”

“Emily,” he said, ignoring her request. “You understand why I couldn’t tell you the truth of who I was. If you had been the traitor, then by telling you I would have endangered the life of the queen.”

Emily bristled. It hurt to think that he would ever have believed she was a traitor or that she would want Victoria dead. It hurt even more to know she had trusted this man, given herself to him, all the while he’d been pretending.

“And when you realized I was not in league with the cutthroats, what prevented you from telling me the truth then?”

He looked away.

“You let me come to your bed, let me believe you cared for me, when all along it was part of a scheme to—to investigate me.”

His head reared back as though she’d punched him. “That was not part of the investigation. I knew you were innocent by then.”

“And yet you continued on with your lies about who you were.”

“I may not have told you the whole truth. I’m an agent for a specialized group who operates in secrecy. I can’t go around announcing our existence. And what I told you about myself was otherwise true. I am Willoughby Galloway, and my parents are Lord and Lady Smythe. I do have a sister. I did go to Lyme Regis as a child.”

The mention of Lyme Regis, of their first connection, stung. At least that was true. At least he hadn’t played her for a complete fool.

“And I do care for you. That wasn’t a lie.”

Emily looked away, not certain what to believe. How could she know whether some new “truth” about Will might be revealed that would change everything? How did she know he wasn’t lying to her even now?

“You shouldn’t even be here. If Baron knew...”

“Which baron do you refer to?”

She saw the change in his expression. Saw his eyes shutter. Emily waved a hand. “Never mind. Nothing you say at this point will be true anyway.”

“I can tell you Baron is his code name. He’s my superior, and he wouldn’t be pleased to have you here.”

“Then perhaps he shouldn’t go about accusing innocent people of mischief. It tends to make us want to clear our names.” She folded her arms and stared out the window at the streets of London. After so much time in the countryside at Averley and then in the palace, she had almost forgotten how crowded the city was. It seemed every street was bursting with barrows and carts and people on foot. So many people—young and old, whole and missing limbs, men and women. She was in a hackney—and a rather shabby one at that, but Will had said most drivers wouldn’t go all the way to Wapping, so beggars couldn’t be choosers. She had rarely traveled in a hackney before. She’d always been in a coach driven by a smart coachman and accompanied by liveried footmen. When she’d passed people on the streets, they’d paused and looked at her pass and gawked. Some had waved. Others would stare or even bow. No one paid her any attention now. No one had the slightest idea who she was.

She had the sense that it could be thrilling to pretend to be someone else. Perhaps that was what Will found enjoyable about his work. He could be someone else for a time. Emily thought she might like to be someone else on days like today. Will’s betrayal had wounded her already bruised heart, and now all the old pains were coming to the surface. There was the surprise and anguish of Jack’s sudden death. And before

that the child, a little girl who had come too soon and been stillborn.

Even now, all of these years later, the pain of it still took her breath away. She wished, with all her heart, she could be someone who didn't know those losses. Even if for just one day, one hour. She'd thought she had found a balm with Will. When she'd been in his presence, in his arms, the old hurts had seemed to fade.

But now she knew it had been lies, a veil pulled over her eyes, only to be ripped away and expose her pain anew.

They had been traveling for some time in silence, the bustle of London behind them as they moved closer to Wapping. The dockside area had its own congestion, and she marveled at the carts passing them on the road, stacked high with crates and barrels and boxes from all around the world. She rather thought it must be some sort of competition—which driver could stack their goods the highest. Some of the barrels or crates were stacked so high they teetered, and Emily feared they would tumble down if the cart's wheel hit a bump in the road.

“We will reach the posting house shortly,” Will said. Emily looked away from the window and her view of another cart. “When we arrive, do exactly as I say. Don't speak. Let me manage everything.”

“Will we go straight to the meeting?”

“I'll need to find a place to observe who goes in and out. I'm afraid a lot of my work is sitting and waiting. It can be cold and uncomfortable.”

“I'm sure I'll manage.”

He gave her an assessing look. “No doubt. I'll need you to pay particular attention to those coming and going. If you recognize anyone, I want to know immediately.”

“I understand. I'll point out the traitor and you will take him or her into custody.”

“Either here or back in London, yes. Palmerston will want to question him and send officers to Wapping to round up the

others in the group. I'll have to assist with identifying them here or if they're caught returning to Town."

"And then what?" she asked.

He opened his mouth to answer, then seemed to understand she wasn't asking what would happen to the men. She was asking what would happen to them. "I don't know," he said. "I suppose I return to Baron and take another assignment or continue training."

"And I will continue serving the queen."

He nodded. "I suppose you must."

"Then this is good-bye," she said, surprised at how the pain of those words cut through all the other pain. "After today, I mean. We go our separate ways."

Will didn't answer, merely looked out the hackney window.

But that was answer enough.



Chapter Thirteen



Will didn't know Wapping well, and the maze of warehouses and dockyards took some time to navigate. By the time he located the tea warehouse where Innishfree was to meet, he didn't have much time to look for a good vantage point to observe. The drizzle he'd hoped to leave behind in London had followed them, and Emily looked wet and miserable as she dragged behind him. She still favored her injured leg, but if it pained her, she gave no other indication. She was quiet and stoic, offering no complaint though she must be as tired and hungry as he.

"I think this is the best we can do," he said, gesturing to a dirty cart with a broken wheel across from the warehouse. It listed to one side but seemed sturdy otherwise. He had Emily crouch behind it while he gathered a length of torn canvas from the bed and stretched it over the top. When he was satisfied the canvas would shield them from sight, he crouched beside Emily. "I'll make sure no one is about, then we climb under the canvas and wait."

She looked at the cart and must have been considering how dirty the bed, not to mention the canvas that would be covering her, was but she allowed him to help her into the cart. Will told her to lay down, no point in her straining her neck to peer out until there was something to see. In the meantime, he tented the canvas to keep an eye on the warehouse. Then he settled in to watch.

"At least we're dry under here," she murmured after he'd been watching for about a quarter hour.

"I've been in worse situations," he said.

"Tell me."

He glanced over his shoulder, seeing only her vague form behind him. She lay on her side, her head on her arm, watching him. He couldn't give her details of any of his missions, but he could tell her a little. "Once I was attempting to gain entrance to a house. The owner was supposed to be away, but I forgot to account for the servants. Instead of breaking in when they were asleep, I went too early and was almost caught in the yard. I ducked into the privy so they wouldn't see me."

"Oh, no," she said.

"Exactly. I had to hide in there for several hours, in mortal fear the entire time that someone would come out to use it and I would either be discovered or have to jump into the privy pit to avoid discovery."

"Stop," she said, her voice choked either with disgust or amusement. "I shall be sick."

"Fortunately, it was a cold night and the servants either had their own privy or used chamber pots. When I was certain they wouldn't see me, I ran to hide in the chicken coop, which I assure you was little better."

"I do hope you received some sort of medal for your valor."

"No. It turns out the information we'd received was wrong, and my search uncovered nothing. We had the wrong man, so I'd gone through the ordeal for nothing."

She made a soft sound of annoyance. "It seems I'm not the first person you mistook for a criminal."

"Emily—"

"Lady Averley."

"I can only work with the information I have. My suspicion of you was based on what I'd been told. I had orders to investigate you. It wasn't personal."

"It certainly felt personal last night."

He winced. "You're right," he said finally. "I should have told you before we...before. I couldn't have told you

everything, but I should have told you something about who I really am. Please believe that everything between us last night was real.”

He heard a sound that might have been a snuffle. “I’d like to believe that, but—”

The sound of low voices approaching silenced her as they both tensed. Will could have sworn at the bad timing of the approaching group. It seemed that Emily was finally softening towards him. Now he might never know what could have been. Two men and a woman came through the drizzle. None of the party carried an umbrella, and Will made space for Emily beside him as the group neared the warehouse. She peered out from under the canvas, watching their approach. One of the men produced a key to the warehouse, opened the door, and a moment later, a lamp flickered in the window.

“That’s most likely a sign that all is clear,” Will whispered. “There will be more arriving shortly. Did you recognize any of those three?”

“No,” she whispered. “It’s hard to tell with the rain and the shadows, but they didn’t seem familiar.” A moment passed in silence. “Are those really the assassins? The ones who tried to kill the queen and then attacked the coach?”

“Some may be the same, yes.” He reached for her hand and took it in his. Hers was small and cold, even with her gloves on. “They can’t see you here. Stay under the canvas and don’t move. You’re safe.”

Of course, she would have been safer in her chambers in the palace, but there was nothing to be done about that now. She’d left that safety, and then offered to be of assistance. And he needed her. The Crown needed her.

Her hand on his tightened, and he cut his gaze toward the sound of approaching voices. The voices were low and hushed, and soon two more men were visible, followed by a lone woman then a lone man. “That’s seven,” he whispered when all were behind the closed door. “Do you know any of them?”

“That last man had his hat pulled low. But he didn’t seem familiar. I’m sorry.” She turned her head, and her face was quite close to his under the canvas. “I don’t think I’ll be any help after all.”

Will debated what to do next. He could take her back to London. That was the safest option. At least it was safer for her—not the queen. Once again, he felt torn between his duty and his feelings for Emily. He had sworn to protect the queen, but his heart had made a different vow. His heart wanted to keep Emily safe.

“Two more,” she whispered, going very still beside him. Will squinted and spotted the men coming from the opposite direction. Wherever the others had been, these two had not been with them. They didn’t speak, and the shorter man walked with his arm slung about the taller man’s shoulders. It was an awkward way to walk and drew Will’s attention because the shorter man’s hand was clamped on the other man’s shoulder—almost as if he was leading the man.

Or directing him.

Emily’s hand squeezed Will’s, and he glanced at her, careful not to turn his head or make any movement under the canvas. The afternoon was gloomy, but it wouldn’t be enough to hide them when they were so close to the approaching men. The shorter man opened the door and then stood aside to allow the other to enter first. The taller man paused, looked about him, then ducked and entered. The shorter man followed, closing the door behind him.

Will waited for thirty long seconds, counting them off and making certain no one else approached. Then he pulled the canvas down and turned to Emily. He couldn’t see her in the darkness, but he could feel her trembling. “You knew him?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Which one? The taller man?” That made the most sense. He was being led by the other.

“Yes. I think he is a footman in the palace. I recognize him because—I just recognize him.”

Of course, footmen were supposed to be tall and strong. The taller man fit that criteria, from what Will had seen.

“Do you know his name?”

He heard her breathing, could all but hear her thinking. “James? John?”

They were typical names given to male servants and probably bore no relation to the man’s actual name. “You’re certain?” Will asked.

“Not certain, no,” she said. “I can’t be certain. Not from this distance and in this drizzle.”

Will wanted to leave it there. He wanted to hail a hackney and take her back to London, back to the palace. Then he wanted to spend the rest of the night apologizing to her for all the wrongs, real and imagined, he’d done.

But he couldn’t do that. He had a duty.

Will lifted the canvas again and surveyed the area. He watched for at least a quarter of an hour, and when he was certain no one else approached, he pushed the canvas back and hopped off the wagon.

“What are you doing?” Emily hissed.

“We are taking a closer look,” Will told her. She gaped at him as though he must be mad. He held his hands out. “Come on then.”

She shook her head but took his hands. He helped her rise then lifted her down from the wagon by the waist. And if he allowed his hands to linger on her waist just a little longer than was necessary, she didn’t remark. He straightened the canvas back on the wagon so it looked undisturbed then took Emily’s hand and led her toward the side of the warehouse. The last thing Will wanted was to be standing at the front window when someone decided to step outside for a smoke or a piss.

But there were no windows on the side of the warehouse and when he went around the back, there was only a large door, big enough to open most of the back of the warehouse so that goods might be delivered by wagon. A rusty padlock had

been clamped on it, and he tugged at the thing, but it was solid. He didn't have any of the tools he typically used to pick locks, not that he was very good at it at any rate. Will made his way back around the side of the warehouse to where Emily waited.

“Well?” she whispered.

“No other windows. We'll have to peek through that front window.”

“What if they see us?”

“We make sure they don't.”

She opened her mouth to protest further, but he took her hand and pulled her along before either of them could think too closely about the danger. Will had learned that sometimes he simply had to dive in and hope for the best.

Will motioned for Emily to stand at one side of the window while he ducked beneath it and stationed himself on the other side. The low murmur of voices could be heard. It sounded like a mixture of English and the Irish Gaelic.

Very slowly, Will leaned toward the window and allowed one eye to peer inside. The window was at chest height, and he was careful not to let his body cast a shadow. The small group sat huddled together, studying a paper laid out on a table. The man Emily thought might be the footman was directly across from the window and clearly visible. He had red hair and clutched his cap in his hands.

Will didn't recognize him at all.

He stepped back and gestured to Emily to peer through the window. He held his hands out and pushed them down slightly, a gesture he hoped she understood to mean “move slowly.”

She did move slowly, imitating his earlier actions and moving so one eye could look through the window. Just as quickly she snapped back again, pressing her back against the warehouse. Her face was pale, even paler than usual.

Will ducked beneath the window, crossed to her, and took her hand. He led her around the side of the warehouse again then took her shoulders. She was shaking. “What did you see?” he asked.

“It was him,” she said. “No question.” Her voice trembled. “I’ve seen him at the palace. Will, my God. He’s a traitor.”

Will felt the surge of excitement. Finally, he had his man. All that was left now was to return to the palace and wait for the man to show himself. He could be taken into custody and questioned, forced to reveal his accomplices.

The rain was coming down harder now, causing rivulets to run down the street and into the river behind them. For the first time, he noticed Emily was soaked, her hems heavy with the wet. As much as he wanted to return to London immediately, traveling in this weather might be treacherous. Not to mention, Emily could catch her death if she sat in wet clothing and shivered all the way back.

“Come with me,” he said, pulling her away from the warehouse. “We’ll dry off and make a plan.” He hurried away from the warehouse, tugging her behind him. He took one quick look back to ensure the door to the warehouse remained closed then stopped at a movement.

“What is it?” Emily asked, looking over her shoulder.

Will stared at the spot, narrowing his eyes. But nothing moved now, and he couldn’t discern any shapes. It was probably just a cat or the rain.

“Nothing,” he said and tugged her along again.



“I THINK YOU MUST BE cursed,” Emily said an hour later when they sat in a private room at the posting house. She was near the fire, and though it blazed, she was still cold and wet and miserable.

Will raised a brow at her words and sipped from his coffee. He’d slicked his wet hair back, and the firelight played on the planes and contours of his face. She looked away, finding him too handsome as always.

“It seems every time I am with you,” she continued, “I am cold or wet or injured.”

“I can’t help the weather,” he said. “England in the springtime is wet. Next time I’ll tell the separatists to wait until summer to try and kill the queen.”

She hated how charming he was. How he made her want to smile, despite her cold feet and aching head. She sipped her tea and imagined the warmth of it traveling all the way down to her toes. She longed for a bath and bed and her own chamber back at the palace. “It must be dark by now,” she said. “Shouldn’t we start back?”

“Give me a moment.” He rose and stepped out of the room. She heard him speaking to the innkeeper and then all was quiet, and she was alone. Well, it was not quiet exactly. The rain thundered on the roof of the inn and slapped against the window. The curtains were drawn, but if she should open them, she knew she would only see darkness and the streaks of water. She could imagine the ships in the river tossed about by the howling wind. It would not be as rough as the sea, to be sure, but the sailors on their vessels would not pass an easy night.

It was difficult not to remember last night and compare it to this. Then she’d lain in Will’s arms, sated and warm and content. Her only concern was whether he might ever come to love her as she did him or whether their affair would end as suddenly as it seemed to begin.

How much had changed since then, since she’d realized who he really was. Her anger had subsided now, replaced by practicality and reason. Of course, he couldn’t tell her who he really was. This was not a game he was playing at. This was life or death.

Perhaps he would forgive her for being an idiot. She could blame it on the stress of the past few days—she’d been attacked multiple times, shot, kidnapped...

He’d wanted to protect her. How could she be angry at him for that? And yes, he’d suspected her of treason, but seeing the footman in the warehouse with the queen’s enemies made her

realize that anyone could be an enemy. It was even worse that the footman was the one who reminded her so much of Jack. Despite what the queen's courtiers thought, Jack had never been the queen's enemy.

The door opened again, and Emily smiled at Will when he entered. His step faltered slightly, and he gave her a questioning look. No doubt he wondered why she should smile at him when she'd been scowling at him all day. "I have good news and bad news," he said carefully.

She raised her brows. "Go on. The good news, please."

"The good news is that the innkeeper has a room."

"I don't see how that applies to us."

"The bad news is I can't find any drivers willing to take us back to London in this weather."

She began to protest, but he held up a hand. "I thought about arguing, but I took a look at the streets and they're flooding. The river is over its banks in some areas. I'd rather not be stranded out on the road. We can leave in the morning."

"What if the rain persists through the morning? The queen will be wondering where I am."

"You have all night to think of an excuse. With all you have been through the past few days, I doubt she expected you to wait on her."

Perhaps Victoria wouldn't have expected anything of her, Emily thought, but the duchess would have expected Emily to do her part and would have sought her out. No doubt she had wasted no time in informing the queen that Emily was missing. She should have left a note or at least told Lady Jocelyn she was going out.

"And I suppose the inn has only one chamber," she said, pretending to mind.

"I was fortunate to get it. The man who came in after me will be bedding in the stables." He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his wet hair. "I can bed in the stables as well, if you'd like."

“That’s not necessary.” She held his gaze for a long moment, but before she could tell him the direction of her thoughts before he’d returned, he pulled a damp notebook from an inside pocket then fumbled for a stubby pencil.

“What’s that?” she asked, sipping her tea.

“Notes.” He opened the book and sat across from her. She peered across the table and tried to glimpse the writing. He turned the book so she could see more easily. “It’s coded,” he said as she frowned at the neat but unintelligible scrawl.

“What else do you learn when training to be a spy?” she asked.

“How to avoid questions like that,” he answered. “Now tell me more about this footman. You can’t remember his name?”

“I can’t. He didn’t wait on me, and he didn’t even wait on the queen that often. I had the feeling he was brought in when one of the queen’s regular servants was ill or had a day off. I have more a sense of him... lurking.”

“Lurking or simply waiting to serve?”

“Well, at the time I’m sure I thought he was waiting to serve, but now it seems more like lurking.”

“Of course. Do you remember him being present when you discussed riding in the park that day the queen was fired upon or before we went to Richmond?”

She shook her head. “I don’t. But other servants at the palace would remember when he had been called to step in and if he behaved at all unusually.”

“I’ll question them when we return.”

“Won’t they wonder at you asking them questions like that?”

He shrugged. “Let them wonder. I needed to conceal my identity from you, and now that you’ve been exonerated, I’m not so concerned who else has questions. Once I have the footman in custody, I’ll be gone, and the questions won’t matter.” He seemed to realize too late what he’d said, and his gaze lifted to meet Emily’s. “I’m sorry. I meant—”

She took a shaky breath. “You meant what you said. This is a mission, nothing more. And when it’s done, you’ll be called to another.”

“That’s generally how it works, yes.”

“Then our time together is short. We should make the most of it.” She stood, and he scrambled to his feet as well.

“I don’t understand. I rather hate to point this out, but shouldn’t you be angry with me?”

She waved a hand. “I realized I was wrong.”

“You were?” He looked like a man wearing new boots and carefully negotiating his way through a manure-filled cow pasture.

“Not about everything. I’m still angry that you ever suspected me of wanting to kill the queen, but I understand now why you couldn’t tell me who you really were. I don’t like it, but I understand.”

“Then you forgive me?”

“If you forgive me.”

He crossed to her in two steps and pulled her into his arms. “There’s nothing to forgive, Emily. I’m only sorry I caused you more pain.” She heard what he hadn’t said. That she’d had so much pain in her life.

She twined her arms about him. “Sometimes the pain is what makes the pleasures in life even sweeter.” She rose on tiptoe and kissed him, her mouth brushing over his. Even the barest touch of their mouths sent a frisson of heat through her.

Will pulled back. “You call that a kiss?” he murmured.

“If I kiss you how I want, I’m afraid we might spill our beverages.” She eyed the table behind them and thought how easy it would be to allow Will to sweep the cups to the floor and lay her back on it.

Will released her, which made her frown until she saw he grasped his notebook, closed it, and stuffed it in his coat. He took her hand. “Let’s go to our chamber, Mrs. Galloway?”

She pulled back, laughing. “Mrs. Galloway? I’ve fallen in rank.”

“I feared the innkeeper wouldn’t allow me in the room if I didn’t say you were my wife.”

“And how did you know *I* would allow you in the chamber?”

He winked at her. “I have my ways.”

Yes, she thought. Yes, he did.



Chapter Fourteen



Will closed the door behind him and fumbled for the lock, unable to secure it before Emily pushed him against the door and kissed him. He thought he'd have to spend the night apologizing and groveling. He didn't relish the task as he was proud that he was an agent and felt no need to apologize for it. He hadn't meant to hurt her, and now she seemed to understand that. All of these factors only reinforced what he'd already known about her—she was a rare woman.

She stripped off his coat and ran her hands down his arms and over his back. The coat landed on the floor, and Will was glad to be rid of the garment, heavy with damp from the rain. He unbuttoned his waistcoat as Emily reached for her cloak, allowing it to drop beside his coat. Underneath, her dress was wet and clung to her body, and Will could have cursed himself for not considering how chilled she must be in her wet things.

Instead of allowing her to ravish him against the door, as he would have liked, he took her hand and pulled her to the hearth. A low fire burned there, but he grasped the poker and stoked it, adding a bit of kindling to make it burn hotter.

“Are my hands too cold for you?” she asked, a smile on her face as she watched him.

“No, but Victoria will never forgive me if you catch a chill. I should have stripped you of these wet things an hour ago.”

“Strip me now,” she said and removed a comb from her hair. The bulk of the shining silver mass fell over her shoulders, and then she plucked at a few pins and the rest of it tumbled down as well. Will couldn't resist reaching out to run his hands through the soft skein of it. It fell straight like a waterfall. Without warning, he spun her around so her back was to him. Lifting her hair out of the way, he kissed the back

of her neck and traced a path to the fastenings of her gown. He was under no illusion that undressing her would be quick or simple. Ladies wore layer upon layer under their gowns—petticoats and crinolines and bustle to give their skirts a domed look. He quickly dealt with the bodice, peeling the wet material away and tossing it near the hearth to dry. Now she was in her corset, which extended into her skirts.

He'd start on those laces next, but first he traced a finger over the exposed skin of her upper back. It was so pale that he could almost see the blue veins through the flesh. He pressed his lips to it, and she made a sound of pleasure.

Reaching back, she unfastened the skirt and let it fall. He helped her with the next layers until she was standing in her stockings, chemise, and corset. The corset laced in the back, and he began to unlace it, the knot tight from the rain that had seeped through. But he finally freed it and pulled the laces away. She took in a deep breath when the garment fell and pressed her hands on her ribs. Will knew when he removed her chemise, he'd see the red impression of the corset's boning on her skin.

Pulling her against him, he kissed her shoulder. She let her head fall back on his chest, and he reached to the front of her chemise and pulled the strings loose. The garment slid open and then down, revealing her small, rounded breasts. He kissed the back of her neck, one hand coming around to cup her breast and flick lazily at the distended tip. She murmured, pressing her bottom into his hardening cock as his other hand pushed the material of her chemise down to her waist and then her hips.

His hand followed it until the fine lawn fell away, and she wore only her stockings and drawers. The drawers were white with blue silk ribbons threaded through the leg holes and below that trimmed with lace. It always amazed him how pretty women's undergarments were, even when no one would see them. He unfastened the drawers and let them slide down her legs to reveal the triangle of pale hair between her thighs. He rested a hand on her hip, letting the fire and the heat of her

skin warm his flesh before he cupped that triangle then slid between her legs.

“Will.” His name was a whisper, a plea, a prayer. He felt how slick she was, already prepared for him, though he had no intention of rushing this night. His fingers slid into her easily, feeling her muscles clench around him.

She looked up at him and he kissed her, a bit awkwardly as she was still leaning against him. Her nipple had hardened in his hand, and he thumbed it even as his tongue stroked hers and his fingers slid in and out of her then up to circle the small bud of her pleasure. She moaned and bit his bottom lip gently, and he couldn't restrain himself any longer. He pulled away, causing her to make a sound of complaint, then swept her up and carried her to the bed. He set her on it gently then slid down her body until his mouth was between her thighs.

She tasted sweet, of the lavender soap she used and damp linen and woman. She parted her legs, and he swept his tongue inside her then over the pulsing heat of her until her hands grasped his shoulders and her back bowed.

She'd come hard and fast, and he vowed to make the next time take longer. But now he sat back and undid his neckcloth then the buttons of his shirt. He drew the garment over his head and tossed it aside. She'd turned her head to watch him, those pale blue eyes dark and wide now with desire.

She sat as he rose and dealt with his boots. Slowly she untied her garters and slid her stockings down. Will paused to watch as the creamy skin of her legs was revealed, inch by inch. She laid the stockings aside then, naked, reached for his trousers. She unfastened them and slid them down over his hips, her fingers skating over his bare flesh as she did so. He stepped out of the clothing and stripped off the rest. Then he pulled the bedclothes down and climbed under them, holding them up so she might nestle beside him. She gave him a questioning glance, and he pulled the covers over them both.

“I intend to take my time,” he said. “I didn't want you to get cold.”

“How thoughtful. You aren't worried I shall fall asleep?”

“I’ll find some way to keep you awake.” He kissed her, tasting the tea she’d drank earlier. The scent of clean linen surrounded them as did the sound of the rain on the roof and the windows. She moved closer, and then his senses were overcome with the feel of her. She was soft and womanly, and he wanted to explore every inch of her. He took his time, as promised, touching, stroking, kissing.

When he was desperate to be inside her, though, she stayed him with her hand. “My turn.”

Will groaned with impatience and arousal and she proceeded to explore him as thoroughly as he had her. When he couldn’t take it any longer, he pulled her on top of him and watched as she took him, rolling her hips until he thought he would go mad from restraint she asked of him. But watching her face as she climaxed was an indulgence he wouldn’t soon forget. She took his breath away.

When she slumped down, he rolled her over and raised her hips, taking her from behind. She moaned, turning her head to look at him, lips parted with pleasure. She was warm and wet, and he almost lost himself completely. At the last minute, he pulled out and spilled his seed on her back, coming with a guttural cry. He took a moment to recover then fetched a towel, wet it, and cleaned her off. She burrowed under the covers, and he joined her. Will thought he would fall asleep immediately, but he found he wanted to savor the feel of her head on his chest and her warm presence in his arms.

Gradually, he came to realize she was crying. He tilted her head up so he could see her face and the streaks of tears on her cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m happy.”

“So am I.” It had been a long time since he’d been happy, truly happy, and a long time, possibly never, since he’d felt the way he felt with Emily. She was everything he wanted and hadn’t been looking for. How the devil was he going to walk away from her?

“Why do you have to be so good?” she asked.

Will opened his mouth and closed it again. “I, er—”

She gave him a light slap on the chest. “I don’t mean that. I mean, you are so considerate and caring. It makes it very hard not to fall in love with you.”

Will took a breath, her words sending a shock through him.

She went on, not seeming to notice. “You make sure I’m warm and comfortable, and even in the midst of passion, you think of me and act to prevent me from becoming with child.”

“I care about you,” he said simply, very aware it wasn’t the same as saying he loved her. “I wouldn’t want you to be burdened with the care or scandal of a child.”

She shook her head, the tears falling harder. “A child wouldn’t be a burden,” she said, looking away. “I’ve always wanted a child.” She glanced up at him. “Not like this.” She gestured to the room, but he understood she meant as an unmarried woman. “But when I pictured my future, I always thought I’d be a mother.”

“You and Lord Averley couldn’t conceive?” he asked.

“Not for the first several years of our marriage. But when I was finally with child, we were both so happy.”

Will took a breath, knowing what was coming next. His own parents had struggled to conceive him. Will had known since he was a child how much he’d been wanted and what a miracle they considered him and his sister.

“What happened?” he asked, needing to know but hating the pain the memory caused her.

“The child, a girl, was born too early. I was only six months along, and it happened so suddenly there wasn’t even time to call the midwife. My maid delivered her, and she was so small.” She made a gesture with her hands, indicating how small she’d been. “Her skin was so fine. I could see all the little veins beneath it. But she had ten fingers and ten toes and perfect little eyelids and eyelashes. She never opened her eyes. She never took a breath or cried.”

“Emily, I’m so sorry.”

She turned her face into his chest, and he pulled her close, just holding her for a long, long time.

“I was sorry too. Neither Jack nor I were ever the same after that. We tried again. We had to for the sake of the title, but I think we were both resigned to the fact that we’d never have a child. And then a few years later he became ill and died, and his brother inherited. The current earl has children, two boys already. I don’t need to give birth to a son.”

“But you want to be a mother.”

She looked up at him. “Yes.”

Will pulled her close again. His chest felt tight, and his own eyes stung with unshed tears. He’d been selfish to act on his desires with her. She needed more than a man who would take her to bed a few times then disappear. She needed a husband, a man who could father children with her, a man who could give her his love and loyalty.

But Will’s loyalty was already taken—given to the Crown.



EMILY LAY AWAKE LONG after Will’s breathing had slowed and his body had relaxed. She knew she should try and sleep as well. She was exhausted and tomorrow would be another grueling day. But despite the lulling sound of the rain and the warmth of the fire and the comforting feel of the man beside her, she couldn’t sleep.

Why had she told Will about the baby? It was something she rarely told anyone. She hadn’t even told her parents when it happened. She’d wanted to mourn privately, wanted the baby to be hers and Jack’s alone for as long as possible. But now Jack was gone, and she was the only one to keep and cherish the memory of their beautiful little girl.

Willoughby Galloway had reacted just as she’d expected. He’d been sympathetic and comforting. She’d wanted comfort, but she’d wanted something else as well. She’d told him she loved him, told him she wanted children. As a gently bred lady, she couldn’t really tell him more directly that she wanted him. Even before she’d confided in him, she’d known she’d be

disappointed. He cared about her. He might even love her, but he obviously loved his work more. He wasn't ready to give it up to be a husband and father.

Well, she wouldn't beg. She had some pride left. They'd return to London tomorrow. He'd uncover the traitor and be gone. She'd go back to life without him. She could be thankful to him for shaking her out of her mourning, reminding her how she'd loved simple pleasures like the beach at Lyme Regis or a picnic on a sunny day. Mostly, she could be thankful that he'd showed her she could love again.

The rain stopped at some point in the early hours of the morning, and Emily slept. But she woke early, summoned a maidservant who brought tea and helped her with her corset and dress, and she was pinning her hair up when Will sat up in bed.

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

He yawned. "No, but you should have. We should have hired the first hackney back to London."

"It's still early. We'll be back before the queen breaks her fast."

He rose and padded, naked, to stand behind her. She admired the view of his body in the small mirror she was using. "I wish we could have lingered in bed a bit longer."

Emily would have liked that except the more she was with him, the more she would miss him when he left. "You have your duty," she said, looking up at him. "And we can't risk the life of the queen."

"We have to return before the footman." He found his shirt, lifted it, frowned at the wrinkles, and pulled it on.

"He will have been deterred by the rain as we were," she said.

"Certainly." But he didn't sound certain, and a tight ball of worry settled in the pit of Emily's stomach.

Will dressed quickly, though, and left her in the chamber to see about securing a hackney for the journey back to London.

Emily was too worried to sit still and tried to put the room to rights as best she could. Then she went to the window and stared out at the wet courtyard below. It was still dark and overcast in Wapping, and Emily hoped more rain would hold off until they reached London. Because the day was still so gloomy, she saw the door to the chamber open in the window glass. She didn't turn right away, assuming it was the maid or Will returning. Instead, a man she had not seen before entered.

Emily froze, a thousand thoughts running through her mind. Perhaps he had the wrong room. Perhaps Will had sent him.

Perhaps he had come to harm her.

This last thought took root as he closed the door quietly, reached into his pocket and stalked closer.

And then everything happened so quickly. Emily spun around. "Do not come any closer." She barked the order, which seemed to surprise the man. But he only paused for a moment before he pulled his hand out of his pocket, showing her the silver glint of a knife.

Emily didn't pause. She lunged for the washstand, grasped the handle of the ewer and flung it at him. It landed a bit short, but he'd dodged to the side, and Emily jumped on the bed and threw pillows at him. It seemed to take her an eternity before she could manage a scream. Ridiculous, really, since screaming was probably her best chance of survival. Anyone in the inn might hear her and come to her aid.

"Will!" She screamed. "Help! Will! Someone help!"

The man caught the pillow she threw at him, tossed it aside, and lunged for her. She tried to run, but her skirts caught, and she tripped and rolled off the bed. She landed on her injured leg, and a flame of pain shot up her body. She looked up as the man peered down at her and raised his knife.

The door burst open, and the man's gaze shot up and away, and all Emily could think was *Thank God*. She crawled away as Will burst into the room.

“He has a knife,” Emily yelled, but Will ignored her warnings and charged the intruder. Emily heard a crash as presumably both men went sprawling. The innkeeper must have been right behind Will because he was at her side and helping her to her feet. He tried to pull her out of the room, but she yanked her arm away and ran to the other side of the bed where Will and the intruder fought.

She saw blood and skidded to a stop. All the feelings of loss and pain she remembered from when she’d lost Jack welled up inside her. The anguish at never seeing him again, the torture of the long days ahead without him.

But with Jack, she’d had time to say good-bye. This was too sudden. She needed more time with Will. As though reading her thoughts, he turned to her. His eyes were dark, his face drawn. He stumbled back from the intruder and stood on wobbly legs. Emily gaped at the splash of red on his pale blue waistcoat and white shirt. She reached for him and pulled him hard against her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, voice raspy and low.

“No. I’m fine. But you—Will. You can’t die. I love you.”

“It’s not my blood,” Will said. “I’m fine. Come away.”

“Touching scene, so it is,” another voice said, and Will tried to pull Emily away, but she resisted. She looked down at the floor and saw the intruder with a hand over his side. Blood seeped through to cover his fingers in crimson.

“Emily, go,” Will said.

Emily stared at the dying man. “You’re one of them. The Irishmen trying to kill the queen.”

“Saw ye skulking about last night, so I did. I’d kill all of ye if I could,” he spat. “Eating and drinking and sleeping in yer fancy beds as though ye haven’t a care in the world. And in the meanwhile, me friends and family are dyin’.” He looked down at his wound. “Now I’m dyin’ too.”

Will looked at the innkeeper. “Fetch a surgeon. Hurry.”

“Too late for that.” The Irishman lowered his head to the floor. “I don’t mind dyin’. I’ll see that queen of yers in hell.”

“No, you won’t,” Will said. “You’ll stand trial for what you’ve done.”

“Too late,” the man whispered. “And ye can start back for London yerselves, but ye’ll be too late to save her.” He closed his eyes, and Will released Emily and bent down beside the man.

“What are you saying?” He lifted the man’s head and looked at Emily. “Some water, please.”

She gestured helplessly to the overturned washstand and the shattered ewer.

Will looked down at the man. “Don’t you die on me.”

It seemed an eternity before a man in black strode into the room. Emily stood back as what appeared to be the surgeon pushed Will aside and knelt before the man. He shook his head and spoke quietly to Will. Will nodded, but instead of grief, Emily saw determination and fear in his eyes.

“We have to go. Now.”

She nodded. She’d understood the dying man’s threat. The footman was already back at the palace. She wanted to believe that it was a lie. Surely the rain had been too heavy last night for travel. But even if the man wasn’t back yet, he could be soon.

The queen was in danger.

“You can’t leave,” the surgeon said. “A man is dead. We need to fetch the magistrate.”

“Tell him to find me at Buckingham Palace,” Will said, taking Emily’s hand and pulling her in his wake. “It was self-defense. He had the knife, and in the struggle, I turned it on him. I didn’t mean to kill him. He’s a traitor, and even now his compatriot could be within the palace walls.”

“Now just a moment,” the surgeon yelled. Will didn’t wait. He led Emily down the steps of the inn, the innkeeper right

behind them. Will raced into the stableyard, and Emily was surprised when the innkeeper pointed to a waiting hackney.

“I’ve already secured you a conveyance back to London,” the innkeeper said. Will led Emily to the hackney and put her inside. He climbed in after her, stalled only by the innkeeper who stood at the window. “Is it true? Is the queen really in danger?”

“You’ve been a great help,” Will said. “I won’t forget you.” He knocked on the roof and the hackney started away. Emily watched as the innkeeper stood in the bustling yard. Then they turned a corner, and she stared at Will.

“You’re covered in blood.” She pulled her handkerchief from a pocket and offered it to him.

He gave her a smile. “You keep it. As I said, this isn’t my blood. I didn’t mean to...” He trailed off. “I’m not sorry. He would have killed you.”

She nodded then burst into tears. Will crossed to sit beside her. “I’d hold you, but—” He gestured to the blood on his clothing.

“I’m fine,” she sobbed. “I’m just tired of people trying to kill me.”

“That’s understandable. You didn’t sign up for this.”

She raised her chin. “No, I didn’t, but after all this, I’m not about to sit by and allow anyone to hurt the queen.”

“Neither am I.”

He looked out the window, seeming impatient at the pace, but powerless to do anything but watch the passing people and buildings. The roads were all but clear this early. They’d be back at the palace within the hour. Emily reached for Will’s hand, and he closed his warm hand around hers.

For some reason the fear she’d felt when she’d thought he’d been stabbed hadn’t faded. He was alive, but this was still an ending. They’d either save the queen and say good-bye or arrive too late. Either way, he would leave her.

She gripped his hand tighter, and he glanced at her. His eyes said what he hadn't with his words yet. He loved her too. She could see it plainly in the way he looked at her.

And she could see, as well, that there was no point in him saying it. The end would be the same either way.



Chapter Fifteen



Will held Emily's hand until they were almost upon the palace. He didn't like to acknowledge how many times he'd almost lost her these past few days. He only had himself to blame. He should have never allowed her to go to Wapping with him.

And, of course, if he hadn't, he wouldn't know who to search for now. He'd always enjoyed being an agent before. He'd wanted to be an agent for the Crown ever since he'd been a child and learned of his parents' service to their country. He hadn't realized that giving Baron his oath of loyalty would mean putting Emily in danger.

Of course, he had to save the queen. But now he wasn't so certain the queen meant more to him than Emily. The more he searched his feelings, the less certain he was that the queen was more important than Emily. Or that anything was more important than Emily—even his duty.

The carriage hadn't even fully stopped before Will had the door open and was running inside the palace. The guards at the doors allowed him to pass when they saw who he was, and as he raced by, he called, "Come with me!" Enough followed that when he spotted the first palace footman, the man stopped in his tracks. It wasn't the footman Will wanted, but he grasped him by the lapels anyway. "Where is the queen?"

The startled man pointed the way he'd come, but as there were a dozen rooms that way, Will shook the man. "What chamber, man?"

"S-she's with the prime minister."

"What chamber?" Will yelled.

“Mr. Galloway,” came Emily’s soothing voice. “Please release him. You’ll find the queen in the Audience Room. That’s where she always meets with Lord Russell.”

Will dropped the footman and whirled to face her.

“This way,” she said calmly. But she moved quickly, walking with a determination that made every servant quickly jump out of her path. She had that way about her, Will observed. She had an innate authority that made people take notice. “These are her private apartments, so please do not barge into the Audience Room,” she said. “We’ll enter calmly. There’s no need to upset the queen.”

Will could not have cared less about the queen’s delicate sensibilities. He didn’t care if he upset her or not, but he didn’t have the traitorous footman in custody yet. That was his priority, and if the man wasn’t with the queen, he didn’t want him to bolt.

“I need that footman,” Will said, resisting the urge to run and leave Emily behind. He needed her too. She would keep the queen calm and could corroborate his information on the footman.

It seemed hours before they finally came upon a closed door with two royal guards standing outside. The men shook their heads as Will and Emily approached, their intent to enter obvious.

“The queen is not to be disturbed,” one of the guards said.

Emily paused and when Will would have bodily removed the guards, she put a staying hand on his arm. “Stephen,” she said to the guard, who gave her a surprised look. “That is your name, is it not?”

“Stephen Simmons, my lady, yes.”

“Mr. Simmons, then, I am terribly sorry, but I must ask you to allow us inside.” She lowered her voice. “We have urgent news for the queen.”

Will would show Stephen Simmons how urgent if he didn’t move aside in three heartbeats.

“My orders—”

“Mr. Simmons, I promise you Her Majesty will thank you. If she is at all displeased, I will take the full blame. Now, move aside.” Her tone brooked no discussion and after a glance at his compatriot, Simmons moved aside and opened the door. “Lady Averley and Mr. Galloway,” he announced.

The queen was seated behind a desk that was quite masculine in style and as a consequence thereof emphasized how petite she was. She looked almost like a child peering over the top. Across from her sat the prime minister, and he turned to stare at the intrusion, his mouth in a frown. “What is this about?” he asked.

“Your Majesty,” Will said. “Forgive my intrusion. I must speak to you in private about an urgent matter.” As he spoke, he took in the scene more fully. He saw the fire burning in the hearth behind the queen, an official red Despatch Box on the desk before her, the maps spread out on a nearby table, the cup of steaming tea at her elbow, and the footman wheeling the tea service toward a servant’s door in the back of the room.

“I am afraid, Mr. Galloway, you will need to wait,” the queen said. She lifted her teacup, and to Will’s shock, Emily practically leapt over him and knocked the cup out of the queen’s hand.

“Don’t drink that!”

“What on earth!” the queen demanded.

The prime minister stood and began to sputter, but Will had met the eyes of the red-haired footman.

“That’s him!” Emily shouted. “James or John or...or...”

“Not another step!” Will started for the footman, expecting him to flee. Instead, he lifted a silver tray and tossed it at Will, who was forced to duck and lunge to the side to avoid being hit. The footman raced by him, and Will reached for his coat but caught only the tail. The footman tripped then righted himself, stumbling into the queen’s chair then reaching for her and hauling her out of it.

The queen went white, shocked at the assault on her person. Emily and the prime minister took a step back, and suddenly all in the room went very quiet. Will straightened, considering the situation. The odds were not in his favor. The footman must know that even if he managed to escape this room, he'd never escape the palace. He had laid hands on the queen and was as good as dead. He had no reason to spare her now. He might as well die a hero for his cause.

"Get back, all of you," the footman said. "Or I'll snap her neck. I can kill her in an instant."

"Unhand me, James," the queen demanded. Will admired her strength in that moment. She spoke with authority, even if her voice wobbled.

"Why couldn't you just drink the tea?" James the footman asked. "Then we could have avoided all of this."

Will looked at Emily, who had knocked the teacup out of the queen's hand. No doubt she had saved her life. Now he had to save her again.

"And you," James said, looking at Will. "You are supposed to be dead in Wapping."

"James, is it?" Will spoke calmly. "Why don't you release the queen, and we can talk? We can come to an agreement."

The man shook his head. "I'm as good as dead."

"You haven't hurt her yet, James," Emily said. "It's not too late."

"What do you know about too late?" James said, his mouth turning up in a sneer. "You sit here with all the other ladies, drinking your tea and eating your little cakes, and all the while innocent men and women beg for just a crumb of bread and water."

The queen's eyes were wide, and her gaze darted between Emily and Will. Will tried to give her a reassuring nod. He worried she would scream or struggle and James would break her neck. Like all the footmen in the palace, he was at least six feet tall, muscular, and strong. In his grip, the queen looked like a doll.

“You have family in Ireland,” Emily said. Will knew she must be guessing, and he could have kissed her. He needed James to keep talking. Every moment he was talking was a moment more the queen was alive.

“My mother’s family lived in Ireland. I say *lived* because they are either dead or gone to the Americas now. Do you know how my mother wept at the letters she received informing her of the death of her parents, her brother, her nieces and nephews? And all the while, you laughed and rode in the park and sewed pretty flowers on handkerchiefs.”

“And so you went to Innishfree. You joined the separatists,” Will said. The footman’s face was red, his eyes wild.

“They came to me! But I didn’t hesitate to join them. My family deserved better.”

“Hurting the queen won’t bring your family back,” said Will. “And what the separatists want is Home Rule. What if Her Majesty granted that? What if she signed a . . . proclamation right now granting the Irish independence? Isn’t that what you really want?”

James stared at Will, obviously never having considered this idea. It wasn’t something the queen could do, of course, but Will doubted the footman knew the intricacies of British law.

“The prime minister is right here.” Will gestured to Lord Russell, who stood frozen beside his chair. “He can draw up the papers, and Queen Victoria can sign them.”

James narrowed his eyes, and Will prayed the man didn’t start thinking about logistics and Parliament.

“We will never sign such a document,” the queen said, her voice ringing out. “Ireland is a part of our body, and we will not sever it.”

Will could have sworn aloud. Bloody good time for the queen to decide to be brave.

“Then you can die!” James yelled. He shifted her to face him, put his hands about her throat, and began to squeeze. Will

leapt forward, but Emily was faster. She jumped on the footman's back and rained blows down upon him.

“Help the queen!” Will yelled as he pushed her aside and locked his arm about James's neck. He squeezed and yanked, and James released the queen and stumbled back, his hands clawing at his neck.

They were of a similar height and size, but Will had trained in hand-to-hand combat. It took him only a moment to render the footman unconscious and drop his limp body on the floor. Then he bent over and tried to catch his breath as pandemonium erupted around him.



EMILY CAUGHT THE QUEEN just as she crumpled to her knees. Her small hands clutched at her throat, where dark red marks were beginning to appear on her pale skin. Lord Russell was barking orders at the guards, and Emily saw that at least half a dozen had stormed into the room. They rushed toward the footman.

“Careful with him!” Lord Russell said as the first man jerked him up. “We need him alive and able to talk. You.” He pointed toward one of the soldiers. “Fetch Lord Palmerston.”

“Your Majesty, are you hurt?” Emily asked, knowing it was a foolish question but asking it anyway.

“I want Albert,” the queen said, looking very young and very frightened. Emily could feel the monarch trembling as she helped her to her feet and then to a nearby chair.

“Lord Russell,” Emily said. “Could you have someone fetch the prince?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Emily knelt before the queen, holding her hand. “You're safe now. Take a deep breath, if you can.”

The queen tried, but her breath hitched in her throat. She held Emily's hand in a tight grip, her rings biting into Emily's flesh.

“The prince is coming!” someone called, and Emily began to rise, to move aside for Prince Albert. Victoria pulled her back.

“What is it, Your Majesty?”

“The tea,” Victoria rasped, gesturing toward the broken teacup and the spill of liquid on the wooden floor. “Was it poisoned?”

“I don’t know, Your Highness, but I feared it was.”

“Then you saved my life.”

Emily shook her head. “Mr. Galloway saved your life.”

The prince raced to his wife’s side, and Emily moved away to allow the couple their privacy. She took a seat nearby, her gaze searching for Will. He was speaking with the prime minister and giving orders to the guards. This was it then. He had done his duty. How long until he was gone?

He glanced at her, his eyes unreadable. She gave him a shaky smile to show him she was fine. She would be fine without him. She was no stranger to loss. She had survived the loss of a child and a husband. She could survive the loss of her lover, even if in that moment it felt as though a knife plunged into her chest. But she knew from experience that pain would fade.

“I want to see you both,” the queen said as Albert ushered her out of the room. “I want to know everything.”

“Later, my darling,” the prince said. “Come with me now.” And then to everyone’s surprise, he lifted the queen and carried her out of the chamber. Emily felt tears in her eyes at the sight of the prince’s devotion. She had never envied them before. They had virtually no privacy, no time out of the public gaze. But she envied them now. And she wished Will could sweep her up and carry her away.



THE REST OF THE DAY was a whirlwind of questions and interrogations. Emily was conscious of Will nearby at times. She heard him order someone to fetch her tea and sandwiches

and she tried to eat them, but she was so weary. Her leg had begun to hurt again as well, and finally she was allowed to go to her room, where the queen's physician examined her leg, cleaned and bandaged it, and prescribed rest. Emily waved away Pratt's offer of a bath and fell into bed and was instantly asleep.

When she woke again, she had no idea what time it was. Her curtains were drawn and her room dark. She felt ravenously hungry, though, and her body ached all over. The events of the day came rushing back to her, and she wondered how the queen fared and if Will had managed to snatch any rest. With what seemed enormous effort, Emily climbed out of bed and padded to her window. She drew the curtains aside, expecting to see the darkness of the middle of the night. Instead, she was greeted by bright sunlight, more typical of the middle of the day. What day was it? And how long had she slept?

"Oh, my lady! Did you ring for me?" Emily turned to see Pratt entering with a stack of clothing. She set it on a chair and crossed to Emily. "I didn't hear the bell. I must have been on my way to your chambers already."

"I didn't ring, Pratt. What day is it?"

"My lady." Pratt took her arm and led her back to bed. "You should rest. You still look a bit pale."

Emily didn't object. She felt a bit weak and dizzy. Pratt propped up her pillow and tucked the covers in around her. "I'll send for tea and the physician. He will want to see your leg."

"It feels a bit better," Emily said.

"No doubt. You finally rested it."

"How long did I sleep?"

"A day and then some, my lady. I came to check on you every few hours, but you didn't so much as move." She pulled the bell, signaling she wanted a maid. "And no wonder. The entire palace is talking about how you saved the queen's life."

The door opened, and Pratt told the young maid to bring the tea tray and fetch the physician. Then Pratt, who was at least ten years older than Emily and moved with practiced efficiency, opened her wardrobe and began to arrange the clothing items she'd brought with her. "I couldn't salvage the dress you arrived in, my lady," Pratt was saying, her brown hair with its white cap all Emily could see as the woman bent lower. "I'm afraid it was damaged beyond repair."

"Pratt," Emily said, hardly hearing her. "Did you say I slept the rest of the day and night?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. The queen asked about you at dinner but didn't want to disturb you."

"How is Her Majesty?"

Pratt waved a hand. "Quite well. Quite well. She is not easy to scare, our queen. She has asked for constant updates from Mr. Galloway and Lord Palmerston on that traitor James. I never liked him, you know. I always had my suspicions about him."

If that was true, it was the first Emily had heard of those suspicions.

"Now he will rot in prison or face the executioner. No less than he deserves for what he did to our queen. Imagine! Laying hands on Her Majesty!"

"Pratt, you mentioned Mr. Galloway. Could you send for him?"

Pratt turned with brows raised. "In your state, my lady? You're not even dressed."

"You can help me into a dressing robe. I need to speak to him."

Pratt went back to her wardrobe organization. "I'm sorry, my lady, but even if you were dressed, I couldn't call him for you. He left early this morning. He took his valet and his luggage. The queen was quite annoyed when she called for him and he was no longer at the palace, but Lord Palmerston spoke with her and she was satisfied."

“What do you mean, he left early this morning?”

“Oh, yes,” Pratt said. “It was not even ten in the morning.”

“Did he leave a note for me?”

Pratt turned to face Emily, her expression concerned. “No, my lady. I don’t think so.”

“Not even a word?”

“No, my lady. Should I ask the other staff if—”

“No.” The last thing Emily needed was the palace servants whispering about her. Pratt continued talking, but Emily nodded without hearing. Will was gone. He hadn’t even told her good-bye. She had known things would end, had even expected that they would end within days of their return to London, but she hadn’t thought he would be gone so quickly or without even a fare thee well.

But then what had she expected? He hadn’t made her any promises or professed his undying love for her. He hadn’t even told her he loved her when she confessed her feelings. Yes, he cared for her. He had feelings for her, but she must have attributed more weight to those feelings than she ought to have. And really, what did he owe her? She was not a virgin whose innocence he’d taken. She was a widow who had come to his bed knowing they could never have a future. He had his work and she had...

What did she have?

An image came to her mind of Lyme Regis—the battered sea cliffs, the cool ocean breeze, the cries of seagulls. She suddenly missed it terribly, suddenly wanted to go and visit. Perhaps she would even call on Miss Anning and ask to view any fossils she’d uncovered.

The maid entered a few moments later with the tea tray, and Emily looked out the window and imagined a view of the sea as Pratt poured the tea and tried to tempt Emily with a crumpet.

Then the physician came to see her, examined her wound, and said it was healing nicely. “But what you need, my lady, is

rest. No more running hither and yon. A few days in bed, and your leg should heal nicely.”

Emily glanced away from the window. “What do you think of Lyme Regis, sir?”

The white-haired man tilted his head in question then glanced at Pratt who shrugged.

“What I mean to say is, do you think it might do me good to take in the sea air?”

“I don’t think it would hurt, my lady. You do look rather pale and thin.”

“Lyme Regis?” Pratt said. “Do you think the queen could spare you, my lady?”

“I shall have to ask,” Emily answered, her mind set now.

As the physician had directed Emily to stay in bed, another day and night passed before the visitor she had been expecting arrived. Emily was sitting up in bed when Pratt admitted the queen, followed by the Duchess of Charlemont and Lady Jocelyn. Lady Jocelyn had come to visit her that morning and informed her Victoria had asked after her. Emily was missed. A few weeks ago, Emily might have been gratified to know that she was missed or even noticed. Now it didn’t seem to matter. She’d still had no word from Will, and she was forcing herself to accept the fact that there would be no word.

Emily tried to rise when the queen entered, but she gestured for Emily to stay where she was. “We would prefer you to stay in bed, Lady Averley,” the queen said. “Our physician tells me he has prescribed rest.”

“I’m feeling much better, Your Majesty.”

“So Lady Jocelyn tells me.”

Emily glanced at Lady Jocelyn, who smiled, and then at the duchess, who was looking about her chamber and scowling. Pratt didn’t seem to know what to do and was standing in a corner wringing her hands.

“We have come to give you our thanks.”

“That’s not necessary, Your Majesty.”

“It’s very necessary. In fact, we feel as though we should bestow—”

“Please don’t.”

The queen raised her brows at Emily’s interruption, and Emily felt her cheeks heat. “I’m sorry. I only meant that I did what anyone would have done. I don’t need any special honors. I don’t want them.”

“I see.” The queen turned to her ladies-in-waiting. “Could you give us a few moments alone?”

“Of course,” Lady Jocelyn said. “Emily, I will come by later and bring cards or a book.”

“That would be lovely. Thank you.” Emily would miss Lady Jocelyn. Not so much the duchess who always looked as though she’d just eaten something very sour.

When Pratt closed the door, leaving Emily alone with the queen, Victoria sat on the edge of the bed. She was dressed in a modest white day dress with a lace cap, her hair in a simple coil at the nape of her neck. She looked young and pretty. Far too young to have been so close to death.

“Emily.” Victoria took her hand. “If you won’t allow me to publicly thank you then I hope you will allow me to do so privately.”

“There’s really no need, Ma’am. I did what anyone would do.”

“I think it was a bit more than that. Mr. Galloway told me how instrumental you were in identifying the traitor in our midst. He seemed to think I might be dead or in danger still if not for you.”

Emily gave a tight smile. It was just like Will to deflect attention from himself. But that’s what men of duty did. They did not want attention, couldn’t claim it even if it was thrust upon them. Their lives were in the shadows. “I don’t believe that, Your Majesty. You know who he is now?”

She nodded. "I knew before, though the details were not made clear to me until more recently."

"He is very good at what he does, very capable. He would never have allowed any harm to come to you."

"Regardless, it was you who knocked the poisoned tea from my hand. You who bodily attacked that footman when he ___"

She broke off, putting her hand to her throat. It was a rare moment of loss of composure for the monarch.

Emily tightened her grip on the hand she still held. "The last few days have been trying for all of us."

"Yes, this Irish situation has been most trying," the queen said. "But you need not concern yourself with that. When you are better, we look forward to your company again."

"Your Majesty," Emily began.

The queen sighed. "I already know what you will say. I had hoped my instinct was wrong, but it rarely is."

"You know what I want to ask?"

"You want to leave us."

Emily nodded. "Not permanently, Ma'am. I just need some time away."

"Of course. Will you go to Averley Hall?"

Emily had almost forgotten the dowager house at Averley Hall. But she couldn't return there, not with all the memories of her dead child and her dead husband. She wanted fresh and new. "I thought I might go to take the air at Lyme Regis."

"I see. And will anyone be joining you?"

"I had thought to take Pratt, of course. I can rent a house with other servants."

"You know who I mean, Emily. Don't think I didn't see the looks you and Mr. Galloway exchanged these past weeks. I may be married, but I am not blind."

Emily felt her cheeks heat. "I'm afraid Mr. Galloway has had to leave. I have not had any word from him."

"And this pains you?" Now it was the queen who squeezed Emily's hand.

"I..." Emily was mortified to feel her eyes burning with the threat of tears. "I don't know how to feel, Ma'am."

"You will sort it out then," the queen said. "And yes, you have my permission to take your leave. But it's only temporary. I need you, Lady Averley. I can't be left at the mercy of the Duchess of Charlemont's frowns and ill-humor."

Emily suppressed a laugh. "No, Ma'am. And I do promise to return."

"Well, then. We shall see you soon enough." She rose and made her way out of the room. Pratt returned a moment later and gasped when she saw Emily out of bed.

"My lady, you should rest."

"No time for that, Pratt. We must begin packing."



Chapter Sixteen



“Good work, Will,” Baron said, sitting back in his chair and steepling his hands. “I never doubted you were the agent to send. I’ve even received word that the queen wants to bestow some sort of medal or order upon you.”

Will shook his head. “No.” The last thing he needed was more attention. He wouldn’t make a very good agent if everyone knew he’d been decorated for his service.

“I’ll see if she can do it privately,” Baron said, making a note.

“It’s not necessary.”

“I know. You’re much like I was. Like your father was when he was an agent.”

Will raised a brow, interested now. To be compared to his father or Baron were much higher compliments than any piece of silver given by the queen. “How so?”

“You don’t do this work for the glory or even because you love your queen or country. Not to say that you don’t love both, but for you—like for me and Adrian—it’s about the need to protect, to see good triumph. Dare I say that the need for adventure and excitement also plays a role?”

“I’ve had enough excitement for the time being,” Will said.

“Then you’ll be staying at the Farm for further training?”

It shouldn’t have been a question. It should have been an order, but the fact that Baron asked the question meant he knew more than just the bare facts of the mission. “I wanted to speak to you about that.”

“I know,” Baron said. “And I have a feeling this has to do with Lady Averley. I hear she’s quite charming.”

Will swallowed. He’d spent virtually all of the train trip north to the Farm trying to think what he should say about Emily. Of course, he’d sent his report ahead, but that only told the facts—Lady Averley was innocent of any involvement in the attempts to kill the queen. In fact, she’d been instrumental in thwarting the last attempt. But that didn’t tell the entire story. The dry words on paper didn’t begin to tell how he felt about her.

She *was* charming, as Baron had said. And she was also beautiful and clever and loyal and...he loved her. Will didn’t know if he’d realized it before that moment. She’d told him she loved him, and he had been focused on the mission and refused to look at his own feelings. But now, seated in Baron’s cozy office, he couldn’t deny it. The realization of his feelings seemed to sharpen his senses and burn the memory of where he was into his mind. Behind him the fire crackled, the sunlight glinted off the large polished desk before him, and through the window overlooking the budding green trees, he spotted the other agents walking from one building to the dining hall.

“Lady Averley is...” Will didn’t know where to begin. “She was a surprise.”

Baron tapped the papers on his desk. “Your report is quite complimentary.”

The report didn’t do her justice. “Sir, I—”

Baron held up a hand. “Will, I have known you since you were born. There’s no one here but the two of us. You can call me Winn and you can tell me what you’re thinking. What you’re not saying in these pages.” He tapped the report again.

Will stood and paced to the window. He spotted his friends, Hew and Duncan, trudging through the mud on their way to the dining hall. If Cal had been there, the four of them might have eaten together like old times. But he couldn’t go back. And he wasn’t certain how to go forward.

“I think I’m in love with her,” Will said, still looking out the window.

“And she feels the same way about you?”

Will nodded. “Yes.”

“There’s no reason you can’t marry her. But…”

Will turned to face Baron. This was the moment he’d been dreading.

“I won’t lie to you and tell you it will be easy. Marriage is hard enough even when one partner isn’t a Royal Saboteur sent on dangerous missions at home and abroad. Callahan Kelly and Miss Murray—and yes, I know she is Mrs. Kelly now, but I will always think of her as my Miss Murray—married, but they are able to work together. Lady Averley isn’t an agent.”

“She wants children.”

“That makes it even more difficult as you could be called away at a moment’s notice and indefinitely.”

Will stuck his hands in his pockets and took a breath. He had worked practically all his life to become an agent. Then he’d worked the last two years to become a Royal Saboteur. It was all he’d wanted. Did he give it all up for Emily? Could he be happy if he did so? Could he be happy without her?

“Take a fortnight,” Baron said. “I’ll grant you leave.”

Will’s head snapped up. “I didn’t ask for leave.”

“Take it anyway. You’re not one for rash decisions, and I don’t want you making one now. Go to London. See your parents. Or perhaps call on Lady Averley. As a man who has been married more years than I want to count, I’ll counsel you not to make the mistakes I did.”

“*You* made mistakes? But every time I see you with Lady Keating—”

Baron waved a hand. “That’s now. I made plenty of mistakes when I was your age, and most of them were because I didn’t sit down and talk to Elinor about how I was feeling

and my thoughts about the future. This may come as something of a shock, Will, but women do like to be included in decisions that pertain to them.”

Will wanted to protest that this news wasn't a shock at all, but he stayed silent because Baron had a point. Will was making decisions about his and Emily's future without even speaking to her.

“I'll take the leave, Uncle Winn.”

“Good. I'll expect you back here in a fortnight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now go eat dinner. I saw Slorach and Arundel shuffling into the dining hall. No doubt your sister is there as well.”

“Thank you, sir.” Will walked out of the office and into the hall of the old farmhouse. He would be back in two weeks. He just didn't know whether he'd be asking for another assignment or tendering his resignation.

He nodded at Baron's new clerk, a man sent up from Whitehall to replace Miss Murray—Mrs. Kelly. Now Baron had him forgetting she'd married Cal. The Kellys were still in London, still keeping a watch on the group of Irish separatists who were now in hiding. Lord Palmerston and Lord Russell had managed to take about half a dozen into custody, but Cal's contacts and experience with the separatists led him to believe there were more.

Will stepped into the chilly spring afternoon and started across the yard to the dining hall. This far north, the weather was cold and damp and would have felt like winter to him if he hadn't been here in the winter and experienced the bitter cold. He would take this milder version of the cold any day.

He walked into the dining hall and the smells and sounds brought him back to his time training here almost immediately. Without even thinking, he made his way to the dining table he and the other agents he'd trained with always shared. Lucy saw him first.

“Will!” she cried and all but tackled him as she flung herself across the room to embrace him before he could even make it halfway to the table.

When he was able to peel her off him, he kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you too. Are you all here?” He made a show of counting her limbs and fingers until she shook him off.

“You’re not amusing.” But she was smiling at him with those dimples that had charmed everyone since she’d been a toddler in bows and ruffles.

“I’m not trying to be amusing. Knowing your history with explosives, I genuinely feel the need to make sure you haven’t blown any bits off.”

“Do not talk to me of explosives,” she said, her mouth turning into a pout. “How are Mama and Papa?”

He took her arm and led her back to the table where the others were smiling at them. “I assume they are fine. Hasn’t Mama written?”

Lucy stopped midstride. “You were in London for all those weeks and didn’t call on them?”

“I was on a mission.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are hopeless.”

They’d reached the table now and Duncan and Hew had risen to shake his hand. Hew looked as polished as ever, despite the rustic accommodations. His jaw was neatly shaven and his hair neatly combed. Duncan’s hair was a bit long, and he had the beginnings of an auburn beard. Both men looked hale and hearty and glad to see him.

“Hail to the conquering hero,” Hew said, slapping him on the back. “I have a bottle of brandy in the bunkhouse. You’ll have to come back and have a celebratory drink with us.”

“That hardly seems fair,” Lucy said. “Margaret and I aren’t allowed in the men’s quarters, and we want a drink.”

Miss Margaret Vaughn had risen from the table like everyone else when Will entered, but she looked as though

she'd rather be reading the book in her hands than drinking with any of them.

“We'll sneak you in,” Will said.

“Better to bring the brandy to the farmhouse, and we can toast with Baron too,” Margaret said, ever practical.

“That is a better idea, Miss Vaughn,” said Hew. “But not as much fun.”

Will sat in his old spot. Beside him, Duncan smiled broadly. “It's good to have you back. Not sure what you'll do to top saving the queen. Your next mission can't begin to compare.”

“At least he's had a mission,” Lucy said. “We're still waiting.”

“Don't mind her,” Duncan said. “She's peeved because Mr. Powder banned her from his classroom.”

Will gave his sister a chiding look. “What did you blow up this time?”

“Nothing!” She crossed her arms. “Very big,” she added quietly.

Everyone laughed and Will sat back in his chair, listening as everyone caught him up on all that he'd missed while he'd been away. He realized he'd missed all of them too. Their group felt like a family. Of course, Lucy was his family, but Duncan and Hew were more like brothers than friends and he even had a soft spot for Miss Vaughn.

How could he leave all of this when he'd only just found all of them? And yet, how could he give up Emily? He couldn't imagine his life without her either. He tried to imagine Emily with his friends as they drank brandy in the farmhouse that evening and then again after the men moved to the dormitory and he sat in the front room of D Building. D Building was where Will, Cal, Duncan, and Hew had been assigned when they'd first arrived at the Farm. D Building had two rooms. The front room, where he sat now with Hew, had a large hearth, several worn chairs and couches, and a couple of round tables. The paintings on the wall were truly awful, but

Will admired the effort to make the place more like a home. A door at the back of the front room opened to a large bedchamber, equipped with another hearth and four beds.

Duncan had an early morning with Mr. Fog, which meant he would most likely be crawling about in the mud, and had pulled the drapes on his bed and gone to sleep. Cal's bed was empty now and stripped of its bedding. No one had come in to replace him yet. Will's sleeping area was much as he'd left it.

"Tell me again why you gave Mr. Fog that bottle of sherry?" Hew asked. "The man is a sadist."

"I came to appreciate him more in the field."

"Then *you* wake up tomorrow and crawl in the mud." Hew held his brandy glass in his hand, having taken only a few sips. He obviously had to join Duncan in the morning for training. Will might have grown to appreciate Mr. Fog, but he didn't miss the early mornings and evasive maneuvers class. He'd preferred to spend as much time as possible with Mr. Glass's surveillance lessons, though obviously he should have worked harder since he didn't manage to notice the traitor even when the man was right before him.

"I have to freeze my bollocks off, and you get to take a leave," Hew grumbled.

"It's just a fortnight," Will said, taking another drink of brandy. He would be back on the train in the morning, not climbing over fences. "Then I'll be back at The Farm."

"For good or to pack up your personals?"

Apparently, Hew had been taking extra classes with Mr. Glass or, more likely, he was just too clever for his own good. "That remains to be determined."

Hew set his brandy aside and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. His blue eyes were assessing. "What makes the agent who has just saved the life of the queen decide to take a...a sabbatical? Baron is obviously champing at the bit to give you another mission. Duncan and I would jump at the chance to partner with you. Any of the instructors here would

like an hour to hone your skills. But you have decided to go on holiday. Curious.”

“I’m not a code for you to crack, Hew.”

But Hew continued to study him. “It can’t be a family matter. Your sister is not taking leave. Could it have something to do with a woman?” His eyes narrowed at whatever he saw in Will’s face. “It *is* a woman. Someone you met at the palace?”

“You should be assigned to interrogation,” Will said, finishing his brandy. “You’re relentless.”

“Thank you. Who is she?”

“She was my target,” Will said. “I was sent to watch her and sabotage any further efforts she made to assassinate the queen. But it turns out, she wasn’t the assassin at all.”

“And she forgave you for that assumption?”

Will gave a curt nod.

“So you are spending time with her on this leave?”

“I don’t know,” Will said truthfully. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I suppose that’s what I’ll use the fortnight to figure out.”

“You have a promising career ahead of you,” Hew said. “Don’t throw it away on a woman.”

Will raised his brows. “You don’t have a very high opinion of matrimony, I take it.”

Hew looked away, his mouth turned up in scorn. “From everything you and Miss Galloway have said, your parents have a happy marriage. Of course, you have a rosy view of the institution. But the truth is that in most cases, once the lust has faded, there’s not much there. Women are fickle. That isn’t to say men aren’t. We are worse than they are in many respects. But your success in your career as a Royal Saboteur, a position you worked toward and love, is assured. Your happiness in marriage is not.”

“Your own parents’ marriage was not a happy one, I take it,” Will said.

“It was not, but I speak from more personal experience.” Now he lifted the brandy and took a long sip. “I was married.”

“Was?”

“She’s dead.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. She died giving birth to her lover’s bastard. I didn’t wish her dead, but her death was the only thing she ever did that made my life easier. When she died, it meant I didn’t have to divorce her for crim. con.”

“Hew, I’m sorry.” Will held up a hand. “I know. I don’t need to be sorry, but...” He trailed off, not certain what to say.

“I’m jaded,” Hew said. “I know that’s what you’re thinking, but take what I say under advisement. Make sure she is worth it before you throw away everything you’ve worked for this past decade—your whole life, really.” Hew rose, gave Will a slap on the shoulder, and opened the door to the bed chamber.

Will sat alone in the living area for a long time, staring into the fire, and trying to imagine a life without Emily.



WILL KNOCKED ON THE door to his parents’ town house on Charles Street not far from Berkley Square. Wallace opened the door, looking as stoic and imperturbable as ever. “Mr. Galloway,” he said, seeming unsurprised to see Will arrived completely unannounced after months of absence. “Welcome home.”

Will entered the vestibule, the scents of home washing over him. Wallace took his coat and hat. Will had always thought Wallace was ageless. He’d been with the family since before Will was born. Since before that, actually. He must be close to eighty, and yet he looked the same as Will remembered him from his youth. “Lord and Lady Smythe are in the garden.”

“Thank you. I’ll go surprise them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Will made his way through the familiar house, greeting the servants he’d grown up with and finally stepping outside into the spring sunshine. He could tell at a glance his parents were arguing. His mother had her hands on her hips, and his father had a furrow between his brows.

“The daffodils should go there,” his mother said, pointing to a sunny spot near the house.

“We put them there last year, and they died,” his father said, his voice filled with exaggerated calm. “We agreed to put them over there this year.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I do. In fact, I made a blueprint for the garden. Give me a moment, and I’ll fetch it.”

Will paused in the doorway, watching his parents’ good-natured bickering.

“Of course, you made a blueprint,” his mother said with an exaggerated eye roll. “You haven’t heard that wild gardens are *au courant*. We should simply put all the flowers where we want. We could even mix them up, and it would look like an explosion of colors.”

“It would look like an explosion,” Lord Smythe muttered under his breath.

“Don’t you think the irises beside the daffodils would look ravishing?”

His father reached out and put his hands on his mother’s waist. “I think *you* look ravishing.” He gave her a kiss.

His mother narrowed her eyes. “Are you trying to soften me up to the idea of your blueprint?”

“Is it working?”

“I’m not sure yet. Keep trying.”

His father leaned down to kiss her again, and Will cleared his throat. Both his parents glanced at the doors and his mother let out a loud squeal. His father just grinned broadly. A moment later Will was wrapped up in his mother's embrace. She smelled of citrus, as always, and she hugged him fiercely, as always. She pulled back and looked up at him. "When did you grow taller than me?"

"I think when I was thirteen, Mama. When did your hair turn gray?" She had several gray streaks in her otherwise glossy chestnut hair. Will thought they made her look distinguished, but he liked to tease her. "You look so matronly now."

His mother gave him a light punch. "You'd better be careful. I still carry a dagger in my boot."

"Good God, Mama! Why?"

"Old habits," his father said, pulling Will in for a hug. They were the same height now, but his father had gray eyes and his dark blond hair was mostly gray. "Did I miss your letter that you were coming home?"

"He doesn't need to inform us when he's coming home," his mother said. "But was this planned? Baron hasn't sacked you, has he?"

"No," Will said. "In fact, I have reason to believe Baron is quite happy with me. I'll tell you over dinner."

"But that's not for hours!" his mother complained.

"You have other business?" his father asked.

"I do. I have an audience at court."

"With the queen?" His mother took his arm and led him into the house. "Why does she want to see you?"

"Actually, I requested the meeting, and I'll tell you—"

"The rest over dinner," his mother said.

"At least tell us how Lucy fares," his father said. "She writes faithfully, but she's not allowed to write anything more than that she is alive and well."

“Lucy is doing well,” Will said. “She looks happy and healthy, and if she doesn’t blow everyone up, she’ll certainly have her own mission soon.” He kissed his mother’s cheek. “I’ll see you for dinner.”

As he walked away, he heard his mother say, “This is your fault. You should have never given her that lesson with gunpowder when she was five.”



“LADY AVERLEY HAS LEFT us,” the queen said two hours later. Will had waited an hour and a half for his audience and then suffered through thirty minutes of formal thanks from the prince and the queen. All the while, he couldn’t stop his gaze from darting about. Emily was not in attendance. Surely, she would have known he was coming. Was she intentionally avoiding him? Finally, he was left with no other option but to ask after her, under the guise of wanting to make sure she’d recovered from her injuries.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. She has left you?” Will’s chest constricted painfully. The phrase *left us* could have a myriad of meanings, and at the moment, he could only imagine the worst.

“She has asked for a few months’ leave,” the queen said. “After her service, we could hardly refuse her, though we do miss her terribly.”

“I see.” So he wasn’t the only one who needed time to think. Will couldn’t ask where she’d gone for leave. The queen probably wasn’t at liberty to say. “I am glad she is taking time to recover.”

He bowed and backed out of the throne room when the queen finally dismissed him. When the doors shut behind him, Will stalked away. Was Emily’s disappearance a sign that he should give up or proof that she missed him as much as he did her? Should he leave her alone or seek her out? And if he were to try and find her, where to start? Averley Hall, he supposed. That was her home.

“Mr. Galloway.”

Will turned and saw Lady Jocelyn slip out of the throne room. She was young and witty but not someone he had much in common with. Her husband was the younger son of a duke, which accounted for her position at court. He gave her a bow. "My lady. It's good to see you. How have you been?"

"Very well, sir. Thank you. I couldn't help but notice you were asking about Lady Averley."

"I wanted to make sure she is recovered."

"Oh, well, if that is all." Lady Jocelyn flicked her fingers as though to dismiss the topic. "Hasn't the weather been lovely lately?"

Will gritted his teeth. "Very well. I wanted to see her. I came to see her." When Lady Jocelyn didn't say anything, Will prodded. "I gather she is not here. Has she gone home?"

"No."

Will waited for Lady Jocelyn to elaborate. When she didn't, he said, "Where has she gone?"

"Guess."

Will frowned. "My lady, I'd prefer not to play games."

"But you should be able to guess, sir. It's something I should think you would know about her."

Will stilled, half angry, half intrigued by the lady's words. If she had not gone home, where would she have gone?

"Lyme Regis," he said after a moment. "To see the fossils."

"You *do* know her well." Lady Jocelyn smiled. "And I knew you would come looking for her. It's so romantic. I told my—"

"Excuse me, my lady." Will didn't want to waste any more time now that he knew where Emily had gone. He practically sprinted out of the palace and might have run back to Charles Street if he hadn't forced himself to slow down and to be rational. He couldn't leave for Lyme Regis this afternoon.

He'd have to go in the morning. He'd see Emily tomorrow. He'd hold her tomorrow—if she didn't hate him for leaving.

He hailed a hackney and took it back to his parents' house. He'd forgotten that he'd promised to dine with them, but Wallace informed him they were waiting for him as soon as he walked in the door. Will went to the dining room and was greeted warmly by both parents. They'd changed for dinner, and his mother had put her hair up and wore her diamonds.

"I'll just go change." Will started away, but his mother grasped his hand.

"Not a chance. Now that we have you here, we want to know all about your training and your missions. Everything."

Will took his place at the table, took a sip of wine, and began to talk. He didn't give as many details as Lucy would have, but his parents' enthusiasm and attention encouraged him to be thorough. That and the fact that the Smythe staff could be trusted implicitly. His parents had been agents for the Barbican for years and no one had ever heard a whisper of their dual identities as Agent Saint and Agent Wolf. Still, out of habit, he lowered his voice when speaking about his mission to sabotage the assassination of the queen. He related the facts of the mission as stoically as possible, but he still caught the exchange between his parents the fifth time he mentioned Lady Averley.

When he had finished and sat back to contemplate his half-eaten dinner, his mother leaned forward. "Does Lady Averley know you're in love with her?"

Will rolled his eyes and said, "Mama!" at the same time his father said, "Sophia!"

She glared at her husband. "He *is* in love with her." She then turned her fierce brown eyes on Will. "Do you deny you're in love with her?"

Will wanted to deny it, but his parents had interrogated world-renowned spies. They would find out the truth. "I don't deny it. I just don't know what to do about it. She's gone to

Lyme Regis. I thought I might call on her there and try to sort it out.

His father raised a brow, and his mother pressed her lips together.

“I know those looks.” Will pushed back from the table and stood. “Say what you’re thinking.”

“Do you really want to hear it?” his mother asked. “You know we don’t like to interfere.”

“I want to hear it.”

His mother looked at his father, and Lord Smythe sighed. “I have to do it?”

“You know Willoughby and I are too much alike. I’d go in without a plan as well.”

“That’s not exactly an accurate depiction,” Will said.

“Your plan, from what I heard,” his father said, “is to sort it out in Lyme Regis. That’s not a strategy.”

“I don’t need a strategy. She’s not my adversary.”

“Do you want to marry her?” his father asked. “Because given the way you’ve mucked things up so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if she laughed in your face.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Will muttered. “And I don’t know if I want to marry her. I just started with the Royal Saboteurs. I’m not ready to give that up.”

“But you don’t want to give her up.” That was from his mother.

“I don’t.”

“You’d better be prepared to fight,” his father said. “If you love her, fight for her. It’s easy to walk away. Harder to stay and work things out.” He glanced at his wife, and Will saw her give him a tender smile.

“That’s good advice,” Will said.

“So what will you do?” his mother asked.

Will gave her a tight smile. “I suppose we’re more alike than I thought. I’ll know what to do when I see her.”



Chapter Seventeen



Emily turned her face toward the ocean and let the breeze whip her hair and her skirts back. The wind was particularly fierce today. White caps formed on the water and even the seagulls seemed to struggle to stay aloft. Emily liked the reminder of her small place in the world. Like the fossils Miss Anning collected, Emily could only hope to leave a faint impression on the limestone of history. The world would go on. It had when Jack died. It had when Will left. It would when she was gone.

The question was how to spend the time she had left. She knew how she would not spend it—crying into her pillow. She'd done quite enough of that the first few days in her leased seaside cottage. Now she was done with tears. Willoughby Galloway had never promised her anything. And for as much as their parting had hurt her, she didn't regret any part of their time together. He'd shown her she could love again. He'd thrust open the drapes of her dark existence and shown her the sun was shining, if only she stepped out into it.

She didn't want to go back into mourning.

The problem was, she didn't know what she wanted instead. The queen wanted her back. Jack's brother had also written and reminded her that she was always welcome at Averley Hall. She could be a doting aunt. She could marry a country squire. She could stand on this beach all day and allow her skin to turn as pink as a dandy's coat.

She turned to go back to her cottage then stilled. A tall figure moved toward her, and she knew that stride. She knew the way Will moved even without being able to see his face. The wind threatened to steal her hat, and she pressed a hand to it, keeping it in place. She felt rooted in place as well. He looked even better than she remembered. Tall, broad-

shouldered, slim-hipped, and moving with confidence. As he neared her, she saw his brown hair looked sun-kissed in this light, and his eyes looked almost golden.

His mouth curved in a smile when she saw him, and though she had imagined a moment like this a thousand times, her reaction had never been to rush into his arms. She'd thought she'd scold or weep or demand answers. But she went to him without reservation, and he opened his arms and pulled her into his embrace.

She wrapped her arms about his neck, releasing her hat to the mercy of the wind. It flew away on the breeze, and Will cupped the back of her neck and kissed her. Her skirts whipped around them, and the breeze pulled at her, but Will was a solid anchor, holding her tight. When they parted, she looked up at him.

“You came to Lyme Regis.”

“I had to see you. Emily—”

She put a finger on his lips. “Come back to the cottage with me. If we stay out here, I'll only kiss you again and we'll be arrested for indecency.”

Will smiled at her. “Lead the way.” He took her arm and helped her up the stairs to the small blue cottage overlooking the ocean. Pratt took one look at Emily and Will when they came through the cottage door and made an excuse to go to the shops. Emily would have pulled Will to her small bed chamber in the back of the house, but he tugged her into his arms in front of the large windows. Outside, the trees shook in the wind and the sun glinted on the water. Inside, Will's strong arms wrapped around her waist.

“I told my parents I would know what to do when I saw you.”

“Your parents?” She turned her head to look at his face. “You told them about me?”

“I told everyone about you. I couldn't stop thinking about you.”

Her belly did a slow flip, and she couldn't seem to take a deep breath. "I couldn't stop thinking about you either. I kept hoping you'd come."

"I'm here." He kissed her neck. "And I know now I should have never left." He turned her to face him then sank to one knee. "Emily Blythe-Coston, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Emily grasped his hands, squeezing them tightly. Then she stepped back. "No."



WILL'S OTHER KNEE CAME down, and he knelt on the floor like some kind of lovesick fool. He hadn't thought she would say no. He'd never even considered the possibility. She turned away from him, and he had a moment to stare at her back and wonder what he'd done wrong. He knew she loved him. Had that changed?

"Holy hell," he said. "I'm a fool."

She turned back to him, tears glistening in her pale blue eyes. "No, you're not."

He rose. "I am. I proposed to you without telling you the most important part." He took her hands. "Emily, I love you."

Her breath caught on a sob, and he watched as she tried to keep from bursting into tears. "That wasn't exactly the response I was hoping for."

"I'm happy," she said, looking anything but. Tears were spilling from her eyes now, and she looked utterly miserable. "I've wanted to hear you say those words."

"Then hear them again." He wiped a tear from her cheek. "I love you, Emily. I want you to be my wife."

She shook her head. "I love you too, but I can't marry you."

If the first rejection had been a slap, this one felt like a punch. He couldn't breathe and felt his shoulders slump.

“It’s not because I don’t love you,” she said. “I do. I love you so much, Will. I didn’t even know I could love someone so much.”

Will understood her meaning. The moment he’d spotted her on the beach, his feelings of love for her had almost knocked him to his knees. He’d known then he’d been a fool to walk away from her. He’d been a fool to ever think he could exist without her.

And now it looked as if he would have to find a way to exist without her. She didn’t want him.

“Then why...” He trailed off, the lump in his throat making it difficult for him to speak.

“Because I care about you more than myself. And I know you won’t be happy without your work.”

“I will. *You* make me happy, Emily.”

“And you make me happy, but you’ll miss it. I don’t want you to resent me.”

“I would never.”

“If you didn’t, I would. I have seen what a good agent you are. How can I take you away from that work? The country needs you.”

“*I* need you. Emily, if the past few days without you has taught me anything, it’s that nothing matters without you.”

“I know you say that now, but can you be sure you will feel that way in a year or five?”

If you love her, fight for her.

His father’s words came back to him, and Will knew if he didn’t fight with everything he had now, he’d regret it for the rest of his life.

“I’m not sure of anything except that I love you.” He took her upper arms lightly in his grasp. “I want you, and if I have to spend the next five years convincing you of my love, then I’ll do it. You might think I’ve disappeared on a mission, but

when you turn around, I'll be back and on my knees, begging you to marry me."

"Will..."

"Don't make me beg, Emily. If you don't want me, say so. I'll walk away. But if you still love me, give us a chance."

Tears still shimmered in her eyes as she took his hands. Will steeled himself for her tender rejection. "Come here."

She pulled him close, wrapped her arms about his neck, and kissed him gently. Then she pulled him with her, leading him to a room off the main living area. The room held a dresser and a bed, both painted blue like the ocean on a calm day. The curtains were open, showing a view of the beach. He could imagine her waking up and looking out at the endless expanse of water. She turned to him, reached for her hair, and began to pull the pins out. He watched as her white-blond hair fell about her shoulders, the sunlight making it look almost golden at times. She gave him her back. "Help me with the gown, will you?"

Will reached for the small buttons on the gown then paused. "I'll freely admit, I'm not very good at this sort of thing, but did you give me an answer?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "The answer is yes, my love. Now help me out of this gown so I can show you how much I want you."

His love. His wife.

Will's hands felt thick and clumsy as he fumbled with the small buttons. Finally, he had the row unfastened, and he slid the garment off her shoulders. He kissed the creamy skin he bared as she unfastened the hook on her skirt. That too pooled on the floor, but she still had layers to go. While she untied petticoats, his hands moved to her corset, and he began unlacing her. Finally, she stood in her chemise, the sunlight filtering through it to outline the curves of her body. He turned her to face him and bent to kiss her collarbone then her breasts through the thin linen of the undergarment.

“Take off your coat,” she whispered. Reluctant to release her, he shrugged out of his coat, necktie, and waistcoat. While she moved to the bed, he removed his boots and pulled the shirt over his head. When he looked at her again, she was lying on the bed. Naked.

Will’s mouth went dry, and he stumbled toward her. He was drunk on the sight of the curve of her breasts and the rounding of her hips. She spread her legs slightly, and he quite forgot all the ways he’d planned to pleasure her before taking her. The pink of her sex glistened, and his cock went painfully hard. He stripped off his trousers and went to her, naked, feeling the warmth of the sun on his skin.

“I need to be inside you,” he said.

“Yes.” She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him on top of her. His mouth met hers in a long kiss, where he showed her with his tongue exactly what he wanted to do with his body. Her legs wrapped about his hips, urging him closer, and he moaned at the heat of her.

“I need you, Will,” she said.

He didn’t need to be told twice. He guided his cock into her warm, wet sex, feeling her clench around him. His gaze met hers as he began to move. “I love you,” he said on a groan.

“And I love—oh, yes.”

He’d reached between them, stroking her swollen nub to give her pleasure.

“I love you. Don’t stop.”

“I’m yours as long as you want me.” Pleasure crested, but he staved off his climax as long as he could. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from coming when he felt her inner muscles clench around him. Her eyes went soft then widened as she gasped out his name. Her hips bucked, and he couldn’t resist any longer. He thrust deep as she cried out then prepared to pull out, but her legs tightened. “Stay.”

Will met her gaze, saw what she wanted, and was helpless to resist. He didn’t have to resist. She would be his wife. He

thrust again, making her cry out in pleasure, and then his own pleasure overtook him until his shout echoed.

He'd never climaxed inside a woman before, and he was breathless at the sensation. It was better than he could have ever imagined. And he was still buried inside her as the aftershocks of pleasure rippled through them both. Finally, he rolled off her, pulling her to him so her head rested on his shoulder. His arms were tight around her. He'd fought for her, and now he wouldn't allow her to go.



EMILY DOZED IN WILL'S arms, the scent of him wrapping her in a haze of pleasure and desire. She'd agreed to marry him. She would be a wife again. Perhaps she'd have another chance at being a mother.

She'd have to tell the queen, and the thought of the monarch's disapproval made her stomach clench. She'd miss the queen and the palace and the other ladies-in-waiting as well. She had enjoyed her time there, had enjoyed being in court and meeting men and women from all around the world. She wished she didn't have to give it up.

Emily opened her eyes. But why should she have to give it up? The other ladies-in-waiting were married. None were newly wed, but they all had husbands. Why couldn't Emily keep her position at court even after she married? And why couldn't Will keep his position as a Royal Saboteur? When he was away on a mission, she would live at the Court and serve the queen. When he returned, she'd spend long blissful days in his arms. That sort of arrangement couldn't last forever. If they had a child, she'd want him home and out of danger, but she didn't know if she would ever receive that blessing.

"Will," she said, sitting up to look at him in the late afternoon light. He had a faint dusting of pale stubble on his jaw, and his eyes were almost golden when he opened them.

"Give me a moment to gather my strength," he said.

She smiled. "That wasn't why I woke you. I have an idea."

He smiled lazily. “I have an idea as well. Roll onto your stomach.”

She smacked him lightly. “That’s not what I meant. I was thinking about the future. About marriage.”

His eyes went dark, and a crease appeared between his brows. “You were thinking? I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I haven’t reconsidered,” she assured him. She sat, and his gaze drifted down to take in her nakedness. She put her hand on his chin and drew his gaze back to her eyes. “I realized that you aren’t the only one who loves your work.”

“Go on.” His brows rose with interest, and she had his full attention now.

“I enjoy being at the palace. I like meeting foreign dignitaries and enjoying state dinners. And traveling with Her Majesty, when no one is trying to kill us, is wonderful. She is discussing a visit to Ireland. I’ve never been to Ireland.”

“Ireland may not be the best place to visit at the moment...”

She laid a hand on his chest. “Regardless, it occurred to me that the other ladies-in-waiting are married. Why shouldn’t I stay on at the palace and you stay on with the Royal Saboteurs? I’ll serve the queen while you’re on a mission and when you return—”

“I’ll serve you?” he said.

She smiled. “Something like that.”

Will looked away, past her and out the window at the churning ocean. “It could work. Not indefinitely.”

“Nothing is forever.”

Will gathered her close. “Except the way I feel about you. I’ll love you forever.” He kissed her as the waves crashed endlessly on the shore.



Epilogue



“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Emily said, holding the smooth object in her palm. “It’s obviously a creature, but I’ve never seen one like it.”

Will finished stoking the fire in the cottage’s hearth and peered over her shoulder. “We can take it to Miss Anning tomorrow and see if she recognizes it. Perhaps she has found others.”

Emily looked up at him. His hair was windswept and his cheeks bronze from the last few days in the sun. He looked more handsome than the last time she’d seen him. “You know I love to visit Miss Anning. She’s always found something new.”

He sat down on the couch beside her. “The way to your heart ever was through fossils.”

“I can’t argue.”

They were back at Lyme Regis, their favorite place to meet when he was not on assignment, and she could take leave of her royal duties. They had a house in Town when they only had a few hours or days together, but for the time being they had long weeks stretching ahead of them. The queen was in Scotland for at least a month and probably more and Will had just finished a mission, which he couldn’t tell her anything about, but which must have been dangerous as he had new scrapes and bruises on his body.

She’d kissed every single one.

They were back in the same cottage where he’d proposed and where they’d spent several blissful weeks after their marriage. The evenings were chilly, and she appreciated the warmth of the fire.

She turned the fossil over in her hands again. “Do you think someday, in say, three thousand years, people will walk along this beach and find remains of a seagull or a crab and marvel at it?”

“Perhaps.” He plucked a pin from her hair. “Or perhaps they’ll find a hair comb or a stocking and marvel at it. Let’s take yours off and see if they’ll make good fossils.”

She allowed him to push her back on the couch and kiss her until she was breathless. “Miss Anning would never approve of your methods,” she said as his hands rucked up her skirts.

“It’s not Miss Anning I want to hear crying my name.” He kissed the inside of her thigh, and for a long, long time, Emily forgot about all about fossils.



About Shana Galen



Shana Galen is three-time Rita award nominee and the bestselling author of passionate Regency romps. Kirkus said of her books: “The road to happily-ever-after is intense, conflicted, suspenseful and fun.” *RT Bookreviews* described her writing as “lighthearted yet poignant, humorous yet touching.” She taught English at the middle and high school level for eleven years. Most of those years were spent working in Houston’s inner city. Now she writes full time, surrounded by three cats and one spoiled dog. She’s married and has a daughter who is most definitely a romance heroine in the making.

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**Here's an excerpt from the next
book in the Royal Saboteurs series,
Saved by the Belle. Look for it in
March 2023!**



“It’s exquisite, isn’t it?” Hew Arundel turned this way then that, admiring the wool superfine coat. The blue was the color Navy men wore. He’d chosen it because he had blue eyes, and blue was his color.

“Exquisite,” the tailor at Schweitzer and Davidson’s echoed. But Hew was paying the tailor to admire the coat—not that Schweitzer and Davidson would ever create an item of clothing of inferior quality. Hew’s gaze met Randall’s in the mirror. Randall raised a brow.

“Surely you don’t need my approval.”

Hew shrugged, liking the way the material of the coat flexed with his movement. “It’s been so long since I’ve worn anything remotely fashionable, I’ve stooped to relying on your opinion.”

Randall snorted good naturedly. “It’s exquisite, though for that price, you could buy three coats.”

“Not *exquisite* coats.” Hew waved the tailor’s hands away when he tried to assist in removing the coat. “I’ll wear it,” he told the man. “Have this coat”—he gestured to the not-Navy blue coat he’d worn in—“sent to the Pulteney.”

“Very good, sir. Might I interest you in—”

Hew waved him away.

“The Pulteney,” Randall said as Hew stepped away from the cheval mirror where he’d been admiring himself. “I

assumed you were staying with your parents.” Randall rose from one of the dark leather chairs set against the wall of the private dressing room. Schweitzer and Davidson’s was an old and respected tailor and catered to the wealthy and privileged. That sort appreciated the dark wood paneling, the sedate lighting, and the comfortable chairs with a decanter of port of sherry within reach. Some of his friends would have said Schweitzer and Davidson was too traditional and patronized Henry Poole & Co. But after nine months crawling through mud at the Farm, Hew wanted his little comforts.

“They’re not in Town,” Hew said. “They’ve gone to the country.” Most of his friends and all of his family was in the country now. The Season was over, and there was no reason to stay in London. But Hew wasn’t looking for dinner parties and balls. This was his first leave since joining the Royal Saboteurs, and he wanted a large slice of civilization.

“You should have said something,” Randall said, following Hew out of the curtained dressing room and into Schweitzer and Davidson’s showroom. Like the dressing room, it was dark and quiet, smelling of tobacco and cedar. “You might have stayed with Lydia and me.”

Hew gave his friend a narrow look as he stepped past the man who held the door open for him and emerged onto Savile Row, which was teeming with people despite the chill in the air. “Your wife, lovely as she is, does not need a houseguest at the moment.”

“You’re just afraid she’ll give birth while you’re trying to sleep. But the doctor says she has several weeks yet.”

Hew didn’t believe that for a moment. He had intended to stay with Randall and his wife. Randall was an old friend from Oxford, who had disgraced his family by choosing a life in trade. Randall had a knack for finance and kept the bankers in Threadneedle Street busy managing his investments. But when Hew had stepped off the train and spotted Randall in the station, he’d also spotted his wife. Mrs. Lydia Randall looked ready to burst. Of course, Randall had told Hew his wife was expecting. Hew just hadn’t thought she would be expecting any moment. He’d allowed the couple to assume he was

staying with family as Randall had been correct that he hadn't wanted to be wakened in the middle of the night with screams of a woman in labor. God knew he was awakened in the wee hours of the morning enough at the Farm.

Now that he'd completed his first mission—a successful mission at that—he wanted rest and relaxation. “I don't want to impose on your marital bliss,” Hew said. “Besides, at the Pulteney I can sleep until noon and no one accuses me of sloth.”

“No one would dare accuse you of sloth. From the little you've told me of your training, it sounds as though you work as hard as three laborers.”

Hew doubted the laborers would agree. It was true he spent his days at the Farm crawling through muddy fields, practicing evasive maneuvers; learning how to diffuse explosives; and shooting at targets until his fingers were numb. But there were servants there to cook and clean for him and the other agents as well as doctors to tend any injuries. Not that training to be a Royal Saboteur had been easy by any stretch of the imagination.

Before he'd been accepted as a Saboteur, Hew had been a diplomatic aide on the Continent. The job, as far as he knew, involved mingling at dinner parties and collecting state secrets, which he'd passed on to the Foreign Office. He'd been good enough to be considered for the Royal Saboteurs, an elite group, which he had only heard whispered about before he'd been offered a chance to join.

“It is too bad that your family is not in Town,” Randall said. “They'd want to celebrate the successful completion of your first mission. Though I don't suppose you could tell them any more about it than you told me.”

“I'll go see them at Christmas.” That was assuming he didn't have another mission that kept him away.

“Will you dine with us tonight?” Randall asked.

“If your wife doesn't mind.”

“She was the one who suggested it. Let’s stop at my club for a drink, and I’ll send word.”

The two spent an hour in the members’ only gentleman club to which Randall belonged then made their way through the streets of Mayfair to the Randall town house. Randall owned the house, unlike Hew’s family, who leased theirs every Season. The lack of a permanent London residence was another reason he’d reserved rooms at the Pulteney.

Lydia Randall, tall and lovely, waddled toward them when they arrived just before the dinner hour. “There you are,” she said, taking her husband’s arm and smiling up at him. Hew was almost jealous of the look the couple exchanged—until he remembered not every woman was as faithful as Lydia. Some could look at you with adoring eyes all the while stabbing you in the heart. Lydia smiled at Hew, her expression turning friendly. “Mr. Arundel, I hoped you would join us for dinner. I told the butler to set another place. Darling”—she gazed back at her husband—“shall we go into dinner or do you want a drink first?”

“Arundel and I just had a drink at my club.” He was frowning down at his wife. “Are you well? You look tired.”

Lydia swatted his shoulder. “Just what every woman wants to hear.” She patted his arm. “I’m fine.”

The three went into dinner. It was a simple meal, but the food was very good. “What have they been feeding you at this farm?” Lydia asked the third time Hew complimented the fare. “Gruel?”

Hew forced himself to set down his fork. “Not at all. The food is quite decent. Not that I generally care as I’m usually so tired at the end of the day I’m likely to fall asleep with my face in the plate.”

“Oh, my. What do you do all day?”

Hew realized he had begun a conversation he probably shouldn’t have. Randall must have seen the hesitant look on his face because he chimed in. “I believe that information is top secret, darling.”

“Surely you can tell us something,” she said. Then with a glance at the footmen who had cleared the table, she tried to push up. “But I’ve stayed too long. I should leave you to your port.”

“Stay,” Randall and Hew said at the same time.

She hadn’t yet been able to push out of her chair, and she ceased struggling. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Hew said. “Have your tea in here. In fact, if you don’t mind, I’ll have a cup myself.”

“You won’t regret it,” Randall said. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Clearly, he was thrilled to stay at his wife’s side. “Lydia’s brother married the daughter of a prosperous tea merchant. It’s the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“It’s almost good enough to make my parents forgive him for lowering himself,” Lydia said.

Hew smiled. Neither Randall nor Lydia’s family was titled, but they were both children of gentlemen who owned property and lived a life of leisure. To marry into a family involved in trade was quite frowned upon. Hew had often been told any labor at all was beneath him. He’d joined the Foreign Office anyway and with only a bit of muttering from his parents. Diplomatic work was an acceptable pursuit, even if they did remind Hew at every turn that he did not need the salary. He had no idea what his parents thought he did at present. They certainly would not approve of the Royal Saboteurs.

“You were asking about my work at the Farm,” Hew said when the footmen had left to fetch the tea service.

“Is there anything you could tell us?” Mrs. Randall leaned forward, her eyes wide. Randall was right. She did look tired. She had dark smudges under her blue eyes, and she hadn’t eaten more than a few bites of the excellent dinner. “Charles says you are a member of the Royal Saboteurs.” She lowered her voice on the last two words.

“Darling!” Her husband shot her a quelling look.

Hew waved a hand. “It’s fine. I am a member.” With the completion of his first mission, he had been asked, formally, to

join. He'd been told that six short months as a probationary member was quite impressive, but it had felt like years to Hew. "I'm not allowed to give any details about my mission, but I can tell you a bit about the group in general."

"Please do. I assume since the group has the name *royal* in it, you work for the queen?"

"I suppose that's true, but I've never met her. It's more that our mission is to protect Queen and Country. We're called saboteurs because we sabotage efforts—both foreign and domestic—to do harm to either the queen or the country."

"Are there people that wish harm to Her Majesty?"

"Of course. There are many individuals and foreign governments who would benefit from the chaos that would result if something were to happen to the queen or if widespread violence or disruption were to befall England. Our task is to sabotage groups and individuals trying to cause harm or disruption, whether that be an assassination attempt or a riot over grain prices."

"Oh, my. I fear asking you questions has only piqued my curiosity and raised many more. I remember last spring reading about the queen being shot at in the park. Were you involved in protecting her?"

"I was not, no." But Hew knew who had been called to the palace to infiltrate the Court and ferret out the assassin. The fact that Willoughby Galloway was able to apprehend the would-be assassin and keep the subsequent attempts on the queen's life from becoming public knowledge spoke of his unsurpassed abilities.

"But I've no doubt the Royal Saboteurs kept her safe," Randall said.

"We're not bodyguards," Hew said, avoiding the topic. "But we are trained in both firearms and hand-to-hand combat."

"And that's what you do at the Farm?" Lydia asked. "Train?"

The conversation ceased as the tea service was brought in and tea poured for all three of them. Hew spoke as he allowed his tea to cool. “We do train in the skills I’ve mentioned as well as explosives, evasive maneuvers, languages, cyphering...” He sipped his tea then paused and lifted it to his nose to inhale the fragrance.

Lydia was watching him. “I told you the tea was exquisite.”

“Quite,” he said. “Well worth the scandal of a mesalliance.”

“You’re making me envious,” Randall said, “with all your talk of explosives and evasive maneuvers.”

“I promise you there is nothing to envy. Evasive maneuvers involves crawling through mud and brush in the cold hours of the early morning all the while an instructor yells at you and tells you to crawl faster. And this is before any tea or coffee or a bite to eat.”

“Barbaric,” Randall said. “And you say there is a waiting list of men wanting to join?”

“Women too,” Hew said.

“Women!” Lydia set down her cup. “Really?”

“Absolutely. We have two ladies in training at the moment, as well as one who completed a mission last winter.”

“And they crawl about in the mud?”

“They do.” He thought of Margaret Vaughn and Lucy Galloway. Neither had been faster than he on the obstacle course, but Margaret could decode anything, speak a dozen languages, and she was a wonder with a knife. Lucy, on the other hand, had no fear and had a love-hate relationship with explosives. She might not be the quickest through the obstacle course, but she could move like a phantom and be at your side before you ever knew she was in the same room. “There’s not a man or woman in the Saboteurs who doesn’t deserve to be there,” Hew said, and he meant it.

“Must you return to the Farm or do you wait in London for your next assignment?” Lydia asked. “I do hope you will stay a few more weeks so you might meet the baby.”

Hew smiled. “Unfortunately, I must return north by the end of the week, but Randall knows where to send word. Once the child is born, I will return posthaste.” He finished his tea. He considered staying for another cup, but Lydia Randall did look tired and Hew felt a bit melancholy now that he’d mentioned his fellow agents. He wondered what Duncan, Cal, and Will were up to. For all he knew, Cal and Will might be in London at this very moment.

“Now I shall take my leave,” Hew said.

“It’s still early,” Lydia protested, but Randall gave him a grateful look. Clearly, he was concerned about his wife and wanted to put her to bed.

Randall rose. “Mr. Arundel doesn’t leave for a few days yet. We’ll see him again.”

Hew motioned for Mrs. Randall to stay seated and crossed to her, kissing her hand and thanking her again for the exceptional tea. “I’ll send a tin of it back with you,” she said.

“I’ll be the most popular agent at the Farm,” he said then walked out of the dining room with Randall. But instead of seeing him to the door, Randall accompanied him outside.

“Will you walk?” Randall asked.

Hew looked up at the sky, from which a steady drizzle fell. “I think I will hail a hackney. Knowing my luck, the heavens will open up halfway to the hotel.”

Randall motioned to a footman, who moved to the corner to hail any approaching conveyances for hire. “Is it just my imagination,” Randall said quietly, “or does she look tired?”

Hew did not have to ask who *she* referred to. “Your wife does look a bit pale and weary, but no more so than any other woman in her condition.”

“She ate almost nothing.”

Hew wasn't sure what to say. He didn't have any experience with breeding women, and he didn't know what Lydia Randall's lack of appetite might portend. Surely, he could not go wrong by reassuring the father-to-be. "I'm certain it's nothing a night of sleep won't cure."

"I hope so." Randall looked over Hew's shoulder at the sound of an approaching conveyance. "That one is occupied," he said, his tone irritated.

"You needn't wait in the rain with me," Hew said. "Go inside to your—" He felt the prickle of something off—something wrong—and because he was not expecting it, reacted just a second too late. He turned, swinging his arm up to ward off an attack, but the attacker had already struck. Hew felt the blade of the knife sink into his ribs. Surprisingly, after the initial pain that took his breath away, he felt nothing. He swung out, catching the attacker on the jaw and sending him stumbling away.

"Get him!" Hew yelled. At least he'd tried to yell. His voice came out as little more than a wheeze. But Randall jumped into action, going after the attacker who was now running into the street. Hew watched with annoyance as the approaching hackney slowed, the door opened, and the attacker jumped inside. Randall had to jump out of the way to avoid being trampled by the horses.

"Nicely done," Hew muttered as he sank to his knees. Whoever had planned this attack—and there was no doubt it had been planned—had done well. If Hew hadn't turned the second he did, the knife would have plunged straight through his back and punctured his lungs. As it was, the knife had plunged into his side, just below his lungs. He tried to rise, found his legs would not cooperate, and then put his hand where pain had begun to radiate. The knife was still there.

"Bloody hell!"

Hew wasn't certain where the voice came from. The streetlights had gone out and the night was closing in.

"Call for a doctor. Hurry!" Someone caught him just as Hew fell over.

“Call for a doctor. He’s been stabbed.” It was Randall. Hew knew that voice.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Randall argued. “You have a knife sticking out of your side.” Randall stiffened. “Lydia, darling, go inside. It’s not safe out here.”

“But Randall!” Her voice was high and sounded terrified. Hew’s vision cleared for long enough to see her coming toward them. The front of her dress was wet as though she’d spilled water in her lap. Except Hew did not think that was water.

“The baby. He’s coming!”

“What?”

“I told you it wouldn’t be several weeks,” Hew croaked. “Go to her.”

“Where is that bloody doctor?” Randall demanded, his voice bordering on panic. Lydia made a sound of pain, and Hew felt himself lowered to the ground. He reached over to find the hilt of the knife again, and his hand brushed the wetness on his coat. His *new* coat.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered. “Not the coat.”

The streetlights dimmed again, and the world went black.



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