

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.