

Prologue

London, England

July 13, 1821

Her first awareness was of bone-chilling cold at her back, then the incessant cadence of muted voices. She blinked in the flickering red-hued darkness, but pungent smoke stung her eyes so she closed them again, waiting for the air to clear. Incense? No. Something acrid that clogged and burned the back of her throat. Something more intoxicating?

She tried to focus, to gain her bearings, but found the task impossible. Searching her mind for her last lucid memory, she had a vague notion of drinking a glass of wine—bitter wine—given to her by a handsome blondish man. Mr. Henley? Her stomach roiled and she feared she would vomit.

She ached. Every muscle, every part of her, screamed in outrage, but she did not know why. Time was shifting, blurring. She couldn't remember. Why couldn't she remember?

The chanting stopped and a single voice rose above her. Someone

standing at her head. The shadows closed in, then leaned over her, becoming vague faces and outlines. Yes. She was elevated, lying on a stone slab. The man above her stopped talking and reached over her to open whatever was covering her.

Bare! She was being exposed to all those faces surrounding her. She tried to move, to cover herself, but her limbs did not respond. Why couldn't she move?

Nameless terror squeezed her chest, cutting off her breath. She tried to scream, but she could only utter a tiny squeak barely audible above the chanting of dozens of voices. Everything had gone dreadfully wrong, but she could not make sense of it.

Another man appeared, kneeling between her legs. Lifting his robes. She knew. Oh, now she knew. She was to suffer Cora's fate.

Now terror had a name. The Brotherhood.

"No!" a distant voice screamed. Her sister's voice? Dear Lord! All was lost if they had Bella, too.

But suddenly the night was chaos and nothing made sense to her muddled mind. The clash of blades, shouts, shrill whistles and, suddenly, a blade at her throat. Searing pain. The warm ooze of blood as it seeped from her wound. She turned her head and closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable, praying it would be quick.

But death did not come. Instead she registered the sound of running feet and distant shouts. A warm cloak covered her nakedness as she was lifted from the stone altar and cradled in strong arms. The cloying smell of incense still heavy in the air

permeated his robe, but there was an underlying scent of clean masculinity. Something heated and strong. She clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulder and arm, terrified he'd let her go. Terrified, too, that he might not have come to save her. She opened her eyes, knowing it was too late to fight anyway. James Hunter. Oh, why did it have to be him?

Chapter One

September 12, 1821

Night again. Darkened streets, shifting movements in the shadows, muffled sounds, whispers on the wind, the damp chill of a suffocating fog. And always, the impending threat of disaster at her back. Gina O'Rourke hated the night, though she had begun to live her life in the hours between dusk and dawn—as if nothing evil could happen to her if she kept watch.

She brimmed with relief as she watched the lamplighter touch his torch to the lamp post outside the sitting room window. She could have sworn there were shadows in the park across the way.

Turning away from the window, she picked up her embroidery and sat by the fire where the light was best. As she pushed the needle through the fine linen she tried to direct her thoughts to the future, something she had not been able to do since *that* night.

Tomorrow, perhaps, she would speak to her brother in law about finding her and Mama a place of their own. Andrew and Bella should

have a chance to be alone, and to nurture their marriage without Mama's interference. Nothing so far away as St. Albans, but perhaps a cottage in St. John's Woods would do nicely. There, Mama could complain and fuss to her heart's content with no one inconvenienced. Except Gina. But there was something...*safe* in that sort of life. Safe and comforting, as only the familiar can be.

Yes, a quiet life without drama or danger was just the thing. No one would ever have to know about her past—about *that* night. She could stop racking her brain, trying to remember the bits and pieces of that horrid night before finding herself carried away from the altar cradled in James Hunter's arms. Just his scent, woody and heated, had calmed her then. Now the memory of it unsettled her in a most troubling way.

The front bell rang, followed by the sound of boots and a muted voice speaking with Andrew's butler in the foyer. She glanced at the clock. Nearly midnight. Andrew's meeting had run quite late, and he was still closeted in the library with Lord Wycliffe, but who would call at midnight? She stood, ready to make a quick retreat, but she was not quick enough. James Hunter appeared in the doorway and removed his hat.

"I beg your pardon, Miss O'Rourke. I came to see my brother and Edwards asked me to wait while he informs Drew that I am here. He must not have known you were using the room."

Gina struggled to think of something to say but found herself tongue-tied. She sank back on the settee, her heart racing and wondering

if her mere thoughts had been enough to summon him. Stranger things than that had happened to her lately.

Leaving now would be obvious and rude. And revealing. She retrieved her needlework again and rested it on her lap, praying her fingers would not tremble when she took up her needle.

“I believe he is in some sort of late meeting, Mr. Hunter,” she told him. “I doubt you will have long to wait.”

“With such charming company, I shall pray he delays.”

She met his gaze and realized he was just being mannerly. To a fault, as far as she was concerned, and only because her sister was married to his brother. All the Hunter brothers were politeness to a fault. Still, she could never encounter him without reading the memory of that horrid night in the depths of his violet-blue eyes. She saw pity there, too, and abhorred the thought that she was pitied. She could not help but wonder if he still saw her as she’d been that night—naked until he had covered her with his cloak. Heat shot through her and she swallowed her tiny moan at the mere thought.

He dropped his hat on a chair and went to a console table to avail himself of the sherry bottle there. He glanced at her over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow by way of invitation.

“No, thank you,” she murmured, looking toward the sitting room door. Where was Edwards? And why did James, of all people, have to find her alone?

“How have you been, Miss O’Rourke?”

“Well, thank you.” She glanced down at her embroidery but her

right hand went to a spot near the hollow of her throat and the livid gash of scar tissue there. She met his gaze, swallowed hard and dropped her hand quickly. Why did he have to be so devilishly handsome? She might be able to bear it if only he were old or ugly or boorish instead of tall and uncommonly good looking!

“I am glad to hear it,” he murmured.

She stood, gripping her embroidery hoop in her left hand. “I...I am a bit fatigued. If you will excuse me?” She took several steps toward the door.

His eyes narrowed and he moved to block her way. “No.”

Surely she had not heard him correctly. “What?”

“No, I will not excuse you. I’ve had just enough to drink to not give a damn for social niceties. ‘Tis past time we had a talk, Miss O’Rourke. We cannot keep on as we have been.”

A slow chill seeped through her. Surely he did not mean to discuss that night? “I do not know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. We must come to an understanding for the sake of our families.”

“We are not at odds.”

He took a swallow of his sherry and studied her with darkened eyes. “Being at odds would require a misunderstanding. Alas, that would require conversation. And we, Miss O’Rourke, have had precious little of that. A mere nicety exchanged in public is our forte. This is the first time we have been alone since...well, ever, and I intend to make use of it. God only knows when the opportunity may arise again.”

“And my wishes?”

He shook his head. “I have tip-toed around your wishes, Miss O’Rourke, and could continue to do so for the next millennium if left to you.”

He was right. She would never have chosen to have this conversation. Never have spoken it aloud. And this was, perhaps, the worst count against the infamous Blood Wyvern Brotherhood—they had robbed her of self-respect and dignity. The men at that ritual had been cloaked and hooded. She had not seen their faces, but they had seen her. *All* of her. And now, when a man looked at her and smiled, she wondered if he had been one of them—one of the villains who had meant to rape and kill her that night.

“I...I really think...”

“Your sister is married to my brother. For that reason alone, there will be countless times in the future when we are in each other’s company. It would be easier if we could come to an understanding instead of this awkwardness we now engage in.”

Gina looked down at her slippers, just peeking from beneath the hem of her yellow gown. “That night...you...”

A full minute passed before James finally filled the void. “I will not insult you by asking which night. Even so, I can think of nothing that night to provoke your ire. I did everything I could to shield your modesty and to stop the bleeding....”

She was grateful. Truly grateful. But why could he not understand that, in her weakest moment, with nothing to hide her

modesty, he had witnessed her deepest humiliation. He would never forget it—she had seen that much in his eyes. Each time he looked at her or talked to her, he would recall her as she'd been that night.

Panic and now-familiar anger began to bubble upward. She needed to escape before she said or did something unforgivable.

He stood between her and the door, and she tried to skirt past him. He reached out to stop her with a hand on her arm. She gasped at the warmth of his touch and the queasy sensations it stirred in her middle.

He lowered his voice as he drew nearer and the heat of his breath tickled her ear as he leaned toward her. "I thought you and Isabella were so brave that night, to hunt down your sister's killers. I felt nothing but admiration for you. And for that, you shun me?"

Not for that, but for the knowledge in his eyes and the hours before her rescue. Hours that were still a blank to her. She could not go forward until she knew what transpired during that time. Had she been assaulted? Was she still a maiden? She looked up into his questioning eyes and shivered, trying desperately to think of something to say.

"Despite any personal feelings, for the sake of our families, Miss O'Rourke, shall we declare a truce?"

Personal feelings? The notion that he might dread seeing her, too, had not occurred to her before. She managed a slight nod. She'd agree to anything if he'd just let her go.

"Mr. Hunter will see you now."

They spun to find Edwards standing in the doorway.

A muscle jumped along James's jaw. He released her arm without

another word, stepped back and bowed. “Miss O’Rourke, a pleasure, as always.”

Gina watched him depart, then went to the console table to pour sherry into a glass and nearly choked on it as she drank it in a single gulp. She had to find those answers. To fill in those lost hours. She could never really be herself again until she did. And she needed to know that those men would never hurt another woman.

She placed her empty glass beside Mr. Hunter’s and squared her shoulders. No more cowering in the dark. She would reclaim her life if it was the last thing she did!

Jamie studied the fire through the deep red contents of his glass, finding it difficult to keep his mind on the conversation after his encounter with Miss Eugenia. The memory of her always lingered with him long after she did. Tonight, was it the blood red color of his wine that triggered the memories? Was it frustration? Lust? Anger? Did it matter? From their first meeting in the park in early July to this very night, he could not shake the memory of her away. Waking, sleeping, in a crowded room or a solitary moment, the thought of her would rise in him like an unholy obsession, disquieting him, kindling a deep burn in his soul.

Her form, with its soft lush curves, promised delight. Her hair, a deep brown, gleamed with multicolored strands of chocolate, chestnut, caramel and copper when the light touched it. Her eyes—a deep greenish hazel reminiscent of summer forests—captivated him. Her

mouth—ah, that mouth! Inviting, plump lips curved up at the corners as if a perpetual smile was lurking, waiting to bloom with the slightest provocation—and, by the heavens, how he wanted to provoke it. Kiss it. Explore the silken depths beyond those rosy petals. Lose himself in her.

But Miss Eugenia cared nothing for him. Or, at the very least, she was not comfortable in his presence. Worst of all was that she had singled him out for this dubious honor. Her manner with Drew and Charlie was quite cordial. Clearly it was Jamie she disdained.

“So deep in thought, Jamie?”

He came back to the moment and looked at his older brother and Lord Marcus Wycliffe, his superior at the Home Office. “I’ve things aplenty to think about, not the least of which is why you sent for me tonight.”

Drew settled back in his chair, a bland expression on his face, a sure sign he expected trouble in one form or another. Jamie took his glass to the fireplace, stood with his elbow propped on the mantle and glanced toward his younger brother, Charles, who was prowling the room with restless energy. “I think Charlie and Wycliffe’s presence here gives you away. Something about the Brotherhood, is it not?”

The Blood Wyvern Brotherhood, they called themselves. As members of the ton, they had thought themselves above the laws of decency and God. Only a week or so had passed since their last attempt to round up the remaining members of the ritualistic cult had failed. Well, partially failed. They’d brought in all but a few unimportant dabblers and the one man at the top—the most evil of them all—Cyril

Henley.

Drew nodded his confirmation. “We wanted to wait until the women had retired for the evening.”

Jamie thought of Miss Eugenia, ready to flee with her embroidery in hand. But he would not expose her. If she could not sleep, at least they had that much in common.

“Wycliffe wants to send you both abroad,” Drew told him.

“Abroad? Me and Charlie?” Jamie turned to his superior. Why would Wycliffe send them away in the middle of an investigation?

“There has been no sign of the Brotherhood,” Wycliffe told them. “No whispers. No sightings. And no more women have gone missing. With his cohorts captured, the Secretary suspects Henley has left the country. Or perhaps someone else has disposed of him for us.”

In Jamie’s experience, which was prodigious, the Home Office wouldn’t be that lucky. Men like Cyril Henley were like cockroaches. They survived all attempts to eradicate them, then came back to infest the world with their own sort of filth.

Wycliffe interpreted Jamie’s silence for skepticism and nodded. “I doubt it, too, Hunter. But the Secretary is convinced he has left England. Gone to France, Germany, Italy or perhaps even the Americas. He is bound to find followers and victims enough wherever he goes, as long as he does not make the mistake of trifling with the ton again. But this mad dog is our responsibility.” Wycliffe paused to take another drink from his glass. “And that is why I recommended you to the Foreign Office.”

Jamie opened his mouth to speak, but Wycliffe held up one hand in interdiction. “You want these curs caught as badly as I do, Jamie. You, Charlie and Andrew know more than anyone else about this case. Andrew is married and does not work for the Home Office. You and Charlie are all we have left of the men who have been on this case from the beginning. If Henley is gone and the Brotherhood crushed, who better to send after him?”

Charlie stopped his pacing. “Transfer to the Foreign Office? Now there’s an intriguing notion. Another day, I might be tempted by the proposition. But not at the moment. There are too many loose ends here. And I’ve fallen behind on my paperwork.”

Jamie almost laughed. When had Charlie ever cared about paperwork?

“What do you say, Jamie?” Wycliffe asked.

“I think it is highly unlikely that Henley has gone anywhere.” No, he would be thinking himself impervious to the Home Office. It was far more likely he was biding his time, waiting for the Home Office to put the case aside in favor of more urgent matters. He met Wycliffe’s dark gaze. “I think I’ll pass.”

Wycliffe sighed. “I believe the Secretary is expecting your acceptance. He has made arrangements.”

“Tell him to arrange someone else.”

“I thought you wanted to advance.”

“Not at the expense of this case. Henley has not gone anywhere.”

Jamie noted Drew’s distress and the look on Wycliffe’s face and realized

there was more to this than they were telling. “Why are you so anxious to get us out of the country?”

Drew sighed and sat back in his chair. “There is a price on your head.”

“Henley?”

Wycliffe finished his brandy and stood. “Him, or any of the other cases you’ve brought to justice recently. I thought you’d be better off out of reach for a while. Think again, Jamie. Make yourself scarce. I will stall the Secretary while you reconsider.”

Jamie was no coward, but the thought that someone wanted him dead badly enough to pay for it was sobering. Henley would be looking for any way to stop Jamie from coming after him. “Give me another week, Wycliffe. I’ll make my decision then.”

His superior nodded. “Take care in the meantime.”

Charlie gave a low whistle as they watched Wycliffe take his leave. “I wonder just how many people want you dead, Jamie,” he ventured.

Jamie chuckled. “I can envision a queue from Parliament to St. Paul’s. But I have no intention of leaving the country. The bastard is here. In London. I feel it in my bones. Henley would never abandon his hunting grounds. I’d wager everything I own that someone is hiding him. His family, perhaps, or friends. Each time we get a lead, or think we’re closing in, he disappears in a puff of smoke.”

Drew looked doubtful. “How do you propose to find him?”

“Draw him out. There’s a bounty on my head? Good. I shall

make myself visible. And when he comes after me....”

“Setting yourself up as a target is a rotten idea, Jamie. He won’t come for you himself. He’ll hire cutthroats. And I don’t want you dead.”

Charlie began to pace, his head down. “Can we talk you out of this?”

Jamie pointed to his ears. “Deaf.”

“Talk to Lockwood about this, Jamie. He still has connections at the Home and Foreign Offices, and he may have insights or be privy to information—”

Jamie took a deep breath. He did not want to involve their eldest brother in this quagmire. He had a wife and new child to think about, not to mention the duties attached to his title. “Not unless we are desperate. But this has to end now. Two months ago we thought it was over but they rose again. Last week we got the rest, but not Henley. I swear, the man is as slippery as an eel. As sure as I’m sitting here, Henley will find other hearts as dark as his own and rebuild his cult. He has a taste for killing now.” And pray God he did not come after Eugenia to finish the job.

Drew combed his fingers through his hair and sighed. “There is a bounty on your head. Go, Jamie. Transfer to the Foreign Office. Make it a holiday. Let someone else handle this.”

Jamie looked down into his glass again. Good sense and reason told him Drew was right. But, “I’ve been on this case from the beginning, Drew. I intend to see it through to the end.”

“Pears to me it’s more personal than that.”

Jamie tossed the remainder of his wine down and stood. Damn Drew’s perception! “I want that blasted scum dangling from a rope for what he’s done, and justice for—,” he stopped himself from saying Eugenia and substituted, “—for all their victims. And I bloody well want an end to all the secrets and lies.”

“It always comes down to that with you, does it not—needing to know every last detail, every last truth? Why, Jamie? What drives you to that?”

“Truth never fails. There is no argument against it. It is the only rampart that remains when all else is crumbling. Truth tames chaos. It is just, honest and right. You can stand by it unashamed, depend upon it. If I did not stand for truth, what else would matter?”

“I pity you when you finally learn that some questions are better left unanswered, and that the truth does not always serve you best.”

Andrew pushed his glass away and shook his head. “The world is not as black and white as you think, brother, and the truth is a double-edged sword. If you chase after it, be damned sure you are prepared to get cut.”

“Living with lies could never be better,” he said with unshakable certainty. “C’mon, Charlie. It appears I am going to need you to watch my back.”