

Chapter One

London, April 1822

Charles Hunter always sat with his back to the wall to avoid unpleasant surprises—a tactic he had learned from his superior at the Home Office, Lord Wycliffe—and the Black Dog Tavern was not a place where one would want to be surprised. Charles watched Wycliffe come toward him now, wondering why he had arranged this meeting outside the office. The grim look on his face was not reassuring.

Trouble, then. Serious trouble, and highly sensitive if they couldn't they talk about it at the Home Office. He took a deep drink from his mug and gestured to the waiting tankard, which Wycliffe lifted promptly.

"Hunter," he said as he sat.

Charles nodded. "What is this about?"

"It's on the hush, Hunter. I can't make you take the venture, but it would be good for your career if you did. Probably get you that assignment to the Foreign Office you asked about. That's why I thought I'd give you first chance at it."

The Foreign Office? That was a plump little carrot to dangle in front of him. He'd wanted to get the hell out of England for months now. Maybe a transfer would clear his head. Ever since he'd been wounded last fall, he'd been restless, angry and a bit reckless. Standing by one's best friend as he was shot through the head could do that to a man, he'd been told.

"What's it about?"

Wycliffe sighed and looked down into his ale. "Long story. First, have you met the late Lady Caroline Betman's former ward, Georgiana Carson, currently known as Mrs. Gower Huffington?"

Charles covered his surprise and damned the quick twist of his gut at that name. Did he know her? Hell, he'd been about to propose to her when her guardian informed him that his feelings were not returned. But that was before she'd married for the first time. She'd been so fresh. So beautiful. *So duplicitous.*

"We've met," he admitted.

"What do you think of her?"

"I've always thought she is a stunner. Intelligent and self-possessed, though guarded and..."

Wycliffe nodded again, as if confirming Charles's opinion. "Inscrutable?"

Charles shrugged. He'd been about to say *deceitful*, but perhaps that had only been his experience. "Aloof, I'd say. And not given to emotion."

"Odd for a woman who's been married twice."

"And widowed twice, and hides in the countryside now, from what I hear."

"Then you didn't know?" Wycliffe narrowed his eyes as he sat back in his chair. "Mrs. Huffington has come back to town."

The connection was lost on him. What did Georgiana Huffington, née Carson, have to do with Wycliffe's assignment? He rubbed his shoulder, still

aching from the ball he'd taken when his friend was killed last October.

"Aye, she's come back to town and...?"

"Good Lord, Hunter! Where have you been? Allow me to catch you up." Wycliffe leaned forward again and lowered his voice as if he feared they might be overheard. "Rumor has it that she killed her husbands."

Charles stared into his ale, remembering his obsession with the woman seven years ago. He'd been taken with those olive-green eyes—and the promise of lush curves beneath her demure girlish gowns. She'd been shy, sweet and possessed of a gentle humor he found endearing but there had always been a hint of darkness and mystery about her. "She doesn't look like the type."

"You, better than most, know that appearances can be deceiving. Why, you've witnessed things that would shock the ton into speechlessness—with the possible exception of me."

Aye, the deceit and duplicity he'd seen beneath innocuous appearances no longer surprised him. He was a jaded man.

"But I am glad you find her appealing. That will make your job easier."

A job involving Mrs. Huffington? Never. Charles laughed and shook his head. "I am on holiday. Personal matters to settle."

"Come, now, Hunter. I know you are not spending your leave playing with the demimonde and dancing with new country lasses fresh into town for the season. Not while Dick Gibbons is still at large."

Gibbons. That misbegotten, vile, flea-infested bag of manure. *Gibbons* was the personal matter he intended to settle before taking another assignment. He'd wager all he owned that Gibbons was the man who'd killed his friend and put a bullet in his shoulder. "I have business of my own to attend, Wycliffe. I am not inclined to help you with any 'unofficial' problems at the moment."

Wycliffe sat back in his chair and tapped the table with one finger, a jaded expression on his face. "The truth is that you need to kill Gibbons before he kills you, eh? I've seen all kinds, Hunter, but the Gibbons clan is beyond my comprehension. I cannot think what could account for their felonious nature."

"It's in their blood," Charles murmured. "It's who they are and what they were born to be."

"I've known good men with no better beginnings. You do not really believe in 'bad blood,' do you?"

"Aye, I do. And I believe if it's birthed a Gibbons, you'd do the world a favor to exterminate it before it can spread."

Wycliffe gave a short laugh. "And nature and upbringing have no bearing? Are inconsequential?"

Charles shrugged. "I'd say they count for very little."

An arched eyebrow was Wycliffe's reaction. "I can see this is not the night for a philosophical discussion."

It certainly wasn't. Charles brought the conversation back to the point. "So if you think the Huffington woman is guilty of something, put someone else on her trail."

"That's precisely why I need your help. It isn't official, you see. Not yet. It is...delicate, and requires someone who is socially adept, accepted at all levels of society and who has a light touch."

"If it is not official, why are we poking our noses in what doesn't concern us?"

"Requests from some rather prominent people. Her former husbands' families are suspicious of the nature of the deaths. Too coincidental, they say. Too convenient. For her.

"She has profited nicely from both deaths. And her last husband, Gower Huffington, was quite wealthy. No immediate family, but he has a distant nephew who was expecting to inherit. He thinks Mrs. Huffington cozened his uncle into changing his will and thus cheated him of his due."

Disgruntled relatives looking for an inheritance were not reason enough to drag his attention from Dick Gibbons. He shook his head again. "Not interested."

"You haven't heard the rest." Wycliffe finished his ale and pushed his chair back. "About her and Adam Booth."

A cold feeling settled in the pit of Charles's stomach at the mention of his friend. "What about Booth?" Adam had taken a bullet that had been meant for Charles, and Charles had been carried away with a bullet in his left shoulder. Dick Gibbons had been gunning for Charles, not Adam. His

friend had just gotten in the way. And what did any of that have to do with Mrs. Huffington?

"He'd been courting Mrs. Huffington. 'Tis rumored they'd signed marriage contracts the day he was killed."

Charles remembered Booth's interest in the widow, but he hadn't realized how serious it was or he'd have warned his friend against her. He took a long, slow drink, digesting this information.

Wycliffe pressed his advantage. "Furthermore, Mrs. Huffington's former guardian, Lady Caroline Betman, died rather suddenly. Her death is being seen as yet another convenience for Mrs. Huffington. Each death was ruled accidental, save Lady Caroline's, which was thought to be natural. That is why the investigation must be kept unofficial. There is no new information that would warrant reopening the inquiries. Gathering that information would be your task."

Charles was forced to admit that Mrs. Huffington looked guilty of *something*. And he'd known unlikelier killers. "I only knew her briefly seven years ago, and have no way of knowing what she may or may not be inclined to do. In fact, I can think of no reason to take this assignment. I need to find Gibbons before he finds me."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. Maybe it isn't Gibbons you are looking for."

For a moment—just a moment—Charles thought Wycliffe was suggesting... "Mrs. Huffington?"

Wycliffe spread his arms wide. "Why not? If she is guilty of killing her husbands, then why not Adam Booth? Even *his* father has paid a visit to the secretary. You always said it was not like Gibbons to miss, nor was a pistol his first choice of weapons. What if it wasn't Gibbons holding the gun that night after all?"

That supposition gave Charles a moment's pause until logic took over. "What could her motive be? She wasn't married to Booth, so she did not stand to inherit. Would she not have waited until the nuptials?"

"Lady Caroline had negotiated a nominal settlement should Booth not wed her, no matter the reason. Afraid he'd back out, no doubt."

Bloody hell! Was everything he'd believed wrong?