

CHAPTER ONE

Maximillian Britton, Earl of Trelayne, poised the stake exactly over the center of the heart. He pounded down with the mallet, calmly watching as the creature's eyes opened. It hissed, reaching toward his throat with long, sharp nails, but on the next down thrust, it went limp. From bitter experience, Max knew to pound several more times. He watched blood spurt from the hole, but only when he felt the stake strike the stone sarcophagus under the spine did he stop.

Max wiped off his gold handled mallet, passed down to him by his older brother, and set it carefully in its rosewood case next to several yew stakes that were topped with engraved gold handles. Locking the case, Max looked down at the blood on his hands. The urge almost overcame him to taste of the headiest blood of all—vampire blood. But he hastily washed his hands in the fresh water bucket he'd brought for just this purpose. He dried his hands and checked his superfine coat. No stain, not even on his blindingly white and pressed cuffs.

Of course, he should be meticulous at the art by now.

Then he pulled his unusually large gold pocket watch. The outside bore a bossed motif of a bat with its wings wrapped around a dove. The strange emblem, Max thought, had always made a fitting metaphor in the daily battle he faced as a Watch Bearer between peace and aggression, love and hate. And lately, hate was winning.

Max noted the time and made a detailed note in the tiny journal that never left his side.

“Sydney Blythe. Dispatched two o'clock of the afternoon, May 14, 1880, Blythe Mausoleum, on the outskirts of Oxford.” He put the notebook and watch back in his pocket.

Then he shut the sarcophagus lid and shoved the heavy casket back into its crypt.

The danger of his lonely quest for justice added urgency to his daytime wanderings. But he didn't repine. Such was his fate as the Trelayne heir, and the fate of his brother before him. Kill or be killed, and succeed where so many others died trying. Surely the loss of this latest playtoy would draw out the oldest, deadliest vampire ever known on English shores.

Unafraid, Max made his way into the sunshine, his hand around the smooth comfort of his pocket watch.

The comforting crackle of the letter in her pocket was Angelina Blythe Corbett's only reassurance as the elegant barouche bore her to destiny. A destiny she both feared and coveted. She stared out at the lovely, rolling hillsides redolent with spring grass, fat sheep and blooming wildflowers.

How many times had she pictured this lush, green land in her mind's eye?

Oxford, England. The land of her mother's birth. A land she knew only in pictures.

Fitting enough, as she knew her own mother only from a picture, too. It had faded over the years. Angelina pulled the worn daguerreotype from her reticule.

The night's haunting questions seemed all the more urgent now they had a hope of being answered in the bright spring day.

Why had her mother fled the elegant comfort of her father's Oxford estate for the peril and poverty of life alone in America?

Why had she taken her own life shortly after her daughter was born?

Most curious of all, why had she left instructions that her daughter was to have no contact with her English relatives?

Angelina traced a finger over the fading contours of that lovely countenance. The high cheek-boned face framed with thick mahogany brown hair. The slanted eyebrows that

complemented slanted dark eyes. The exquisite porcelain skin that never freckled and never tanned. A face, everyone told Angelina, that was an exact rendering of her own.

Nonsense, Angelina thought. Her mother had been beautiful.

Carefully, Angelina put the picture back in her reticule. She pulled the ugly gray serge fabric of her dress down over her knees and quelled, with her usual ruthless self-control, the old longing for taffeta.

Orphans could afford no such luxuries. Especially orphans who supported themselves as lowly assistants in university laboratories. Angelina had to fend off quite enough advances from professors and students without bedecking herself in feminine frills.

She didn't travel across the ocean to become the sort of miss she detested: silly, simpering, pining for a man. She traveled across the ocean to solve a mystery and to convince her mother's uncle, a former Oxford don, that she was worthy to assist in his science lab.

Tasks gray serge suited far better than taffeta.

Angelina stared resolutely forward.

And almost missed the gates, they traveled so fast outside the side window. The sight was accompanied by a muffled scream, a mortal agony Angel felt more than heard.

She pressed her nose to the glass, staring back. The carved marble gates were rapidly receding and the scream had faded into the quiet afternoon. She banged frantically on the roof with her fist, yelling "Stop! Stop, please!" to the coachman. "Someone's been hurt."

The coach jolted to a stop.

Angel bolted out and ran toward the marble gates of the cemetery.

"But miss, we almost be there," protested the coachman.

Angel paused briefly. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" He scratched his head under his cap. When the pretty girl only stared toward that ghastly place, her face dark with an excitement he didn't understand and didn't like one bit, he crossed his arms over his chest. Be damned if he'd offer to go with her into the hellish nest all the locals avoided. "Suit yerself. Give us a good yell you need anything."

She ran toward the cemetery.

"Yanks," he muttered, spitting in the grass for good effect. But he waited, knowing Lady Blythe would have his hide if he didn't. He cradled his blunderbuss in his arms. Just in case. The tales he'd heard about the goings-on here and at the two landed estates in the area, owned by the Blythes and the Brittons, fair curled his hair.

And he'd been bald these many years.

Heedless of the coachman's nervousness, Angel sprinted through the gates marked simply, Blythe. Her mother's maiden name. The place of her final rest, for that had been her mother's last request—that her remains be sent back to the land of her birth.

Angel stopped inside the gates again, listening intently. Had she imagined the scream? The place was quiet.

Deathly quiet.

No birds trilled. No hint of running water from the river Thames, which flowed so close by. Odd, that. It almost seemed as if this strange place, twined with ivy, shadowed by enormous oaks, filled with ornate headstones and mossy mausoleums, encompassed a universe outside the normal bounds of reality.

Telling herself true scientists never let imagination run amok, Angel walked slowly through the headstones. Her heart pounded as she read, searching, for her mother's name. The

Blythe family seemed to have an unusually tragic history, given the age of the people here interred when they died. The younger they were, the more massive and ornate the headstones.

Somehow, Angel knew to look for a simple marker for Eileen Blythe Corbett.

The need to feel some connection to the woman she'd never known seemed stronger than ever, forcing Angel deeper into the cemetery. That it was a macabre need that went beyond filial honor never occurred to Angel.

Maybe only bones lay here, but they were still tangible. They were Angel's only earthly connection to the mother that gave her birth.

The same mother who willingly deserted her by taking her life with her own hand.

Angel finally saw it. Small, almost overgrown by weeds. A very simple granite headstone. "Eileen Blythe Corbett." And then the dates of her birth and death. No dear daughter, no dear sister. No touching epitaph.

Falling to her knees, Angel stared at the name. She felt no urge to weed the headstone and bare it to the harsh light falling over her shoulder. Her mother had been shrouded in mystery for all of Angel's life. Finding her so, trapped in shadows for eternity, only seemed fitting. Angel wasn't fond of sunlight, either.

Nevertheless, some dark instinct made Angel bury her fingers in the damp soil beneath the weeds. The smell of fecund earth was heady to Angel's unusually acute senses. The scent fired her imagination, drawing her down into the soil. She ached with the need to see her mother, just once, and hold her in her arms. "Mother," she whispered.

The frenzied urge to dig with her bare hands, to pull this woman up and confront her, almost over came her.

Why did you leave me?

Warm moisture on her cheek recalled Angel to herself. She angrily dashed her tears away with a dirty hand. A shadow fell across her from above. She looked up.

A tall male figure blocked the sunlight from atop a mausoleum under construction. He stood on its roof, one arm casually around a male avenging angel. She looked between the angel and the man. There was an eerie resemblance between them in the shape of the perfect heads, the large hands, the strength of the legs.

The angel's wings were at half mast, and it looked weary as it stared down at the broken pocket watch in one hand, a sword high in the other. However, there was nothing weary about the man. He was both literally and figuratively above the cemetery, yet curiously, he seemed ruler of it as well.

Even with his back to the sunlight, he was strong, invincible, a being born of day and brightness. His hair was a hue so golden it seemed to absorb the light of times present and times yet to come and cast it back again, a lure and a promise to any woman bold enough to catch it in her hands.

While she gaped at him, he lightly jumped the twenty feet to the ground, so resilient to the shock of gravity that he was walking toward her the second his feet touched down. As if he ruled the forces of nature, too. She heard no crackle of broken twig or bent grass.

Then she could see his expression...Angel leaped to her feet and backed away, both repelled and mesmerized by the look on the perfect face that matched the perfect form.

He stared at her with utter fascination. Not with curiosity—with recognition.

He looked down at her mother's headstone and back at her face. Then he gave her a courtly bow. "Welcome, Eileen's daughter."

Shelly Holmes walked rapidly along the Thames. Big Ben bonged the hour in the distance, its normally robust clarion a puny wail under the choking fog. *Three P. M.*, Shelly thought, *I'm late*. Her footsteps were soundless on the wharf even when she broke into a run.

Heavy droplets mixed with the noxious coal fumes so pervasive in this disreputable part of London, forming an insidious fog, faceless, nameless, creeping through rotted doors and rag-covered windows. More than one poor consumptive soul had suffocated during these foul spring months.

However, Shelly was fleet of foot and breath in the thick pea soup. Her eyes, glowing green, saw images of heat and movement beyond mortal senses. She passed not a single soul as she wound deeper into the rabbit warren of warehouses lining the East India Docks, but her only regret was her tardiness.

More lives could be forfeit if she didn't hurry.

These past two years had confirmed the precepts of a lifetime: females who gave up their independence to a man lived to regret it—or worse. Her mission was proof enough of that verity. Proof all London would soon be witness to, if she had her way.

The victims had been young.

They'd been female.

They'd been beautiful.

They'd been poor.

They'd been virginal.

Most telling, all had gone alone to meet an anonymous admirer. The strange courtships began the same. With flowers, and lovely poetry, and finally gifts, some lavish. What destitute young girl in these dire times of 1880 could resist such lures? But when they finally agreed to meet their suitor, late, alone...They suffered an end grisly even to Shelly, who'd investigated strange phenomena the world over.

But these latest murders were unique in her lexicon of serial killers. What possible creature, the Daily Globe had demanded only this morning beneath a lurid drawing of a vampire, could suck every drop of blood out of a body? Could the myths be true?

Two years ago, perhaps, Shelly would have scoffed at the very idea of the undead stalking undetected through the most populous city in the world.

Until the moors of Cornwall.

Until she met, face to face, not one werewolf, but two. She knew for a fact now that creatures of the night sometimes hunted mortals.

Shelly quashed the regret that was as much her companion now as loneliness. She couldn't change the past. But she could help protect the future. Today, with or without Scotland Yard's consent, she'd do all she could to catch the killer.

The Beefsteak Killer. A name coined by one of London's more lurid rag sheets. This killer liked rare meat. Bloody, as it were...the name stuck, to Shelly's regret, for in this age, the poor were already jealous enough of the wealthy. If this predator upon females did indeed prove to be a titled lord, the sordid truth would be inflammatory enough.

A breeze drifted down the brackish Thames. Shelly's prominent, sensitive nose wrinkled at the stench of hundreds of thousands of tons of raw waste that had been dumped into the city's artery only today. What did one say of a government that allowed such filth, then bemoaned the diseases that ran rampant through the poor?

One word: idiocy.

The fine Lords of Parliament should be forced to bathe in this stuff, drink of it, wash their clothes in it. Laws would change quickly enough then. Many more senseless deaths like this one could lead to riots.

If there was indeed a dead body to be discovered, as the anonymous tipster claimed, linking one of England's wealthiest earls to the carnage, these murders would move from the back pages to the screaming headlines where they belonged. But the truth needed a judicious hand. Leave the yellow journalists to tout the scandal, and not even Parliament would be safe.

The killer had to be stopped before another poor young girl died.

As her destination finally came in view, Shelly paused. Quite aside from her determination to better the lot of both her city and her gender, she admitted, at least to herself, that she had two overriding motives for her presence here.

One, just as civilization was built one brick at a time, so was society saved one soul at a time. Her wide mouth quirked in a wry smile

Two, Shelly had always wanted to know if vampires truly existed.

Under the hulking warehouse, the foul stench of sewage faded to a bearable level. Shelly's glowing eyes beamed through the blanketing fog to read the almost indistinguishable peeling black letters on the side of the sturdy wood and stone warehouse: Jasper Britton and sons, Importers and Exporters, East India Company.

Shocked to see the owner of the address chosen for this meeting place, Shelly stopped. She warily glanced around. A trap, perhaps?

Nothing. Shelly stepped closer. The warehouse door was ajar. She reeled back as she scented something more disgusting than raw sewage.

It came from inside the warehouse.

The stench of death...Overlaid by a menace so ancient even her formidable mind couldn't grasp its ageless hunger. Lifting her scarf over her nose and mouth and pulling the horse pistol out of her capacious coat pocket, Shelly plunged into the darkness.

She only had to follow the depressingly familiar odor of death and decay. Her heart sank at what she found. A lovely young girl, eyes open, staring with horror straight ahead. Arrayed on top of a crate, her clothes ripped, her throat almost torn open. But she was ashen from head to toe, her blood obviously drained. She was also in the advanced stages of rigor mortis and had begun to decay.

She'd been dead, Shelly judged, at least two days.

Killed here, or arrayed here as a ruse by the anonymous tipster who left a note under Shelly's lodging door? From the looks of it, this warehouse was seldom used any more, so it could be either.

Shelly bent and examined the fang marks.

Sure enough, one mark was slightly twisted, as if the fang that made it was crooked.

The Beefsteak Killer did this.

Shelly looked at the stamp on the crate: Britton and sons.

Since her suspicion that the killer was of the nobility had been increasingly borne out by the facts, Shelly had made it her business to discreetly inquire about the more suspicious members of the ton. Few were as scandalous as Maximillian Britton. He was the sole surviving heir of this import export company.

He was, by all accounts, a merry fellow, quick with a laugh, yet though he had many acquaintances, Shelly got the impression he had few friends. He slept with many women, but

loved none. He traveled frequently and seemed to have a curious fixation on cemeteries, where he was often found.

He was obscenely wealthy, obscenely handsome, and obscenely tempting to women. The perfect lure to the lovely but penurious.

His estate was just outside Oxford.

Leaving the body exactly as she found it, Shelly left the warehouse and walked rapidly toward Scotland Yard. As usual, they wouldn't be glad to see her. But as usual, they'd listen, for she'd long since proved her investigative skills to them.

Then it was time to check the train schedules for Oxford. She'd been hankering to visit Oxford's renowned Bodleian library anyway.

As she stared, transfixed, at the gorgeous male striding toward her, Angel was torn between the need to flee and the need to run her hands over those perfect features to assure herself they were real. She had never, in her entire life, seen such a good-looking man.

He glimmered with gold, from his hair, to his golden skin, to the gold studs in his ruffled shirt and cuffs, the huge, old-fashioned pocket watch and fob chained securely in his pocket, right down to the gold buckles on his shoes. In fact, his dress, too, was a blatant defiance of propriety, for he wore a crimson damask vest and form fitting pantaloons in style some years back, not the severe black tie and fitted suit of a Victorian gentleman.

His chin was strong, dented with God's loving fingertip, his cheekbones high, almost Slavic. His nose was bold, a bit too long, his mouth so perfectly shaped and lush with sensuality that, masked, he could have been a girl. But he was far too tall and powerfully built to be female.

Angel was tall herself. Still, he towered over her. Most telling of all, no one looking into those clear green eyes could call this man anything but a male on the prowl.

He was fixated on her, unblinking, consuming, hungry. Even as her temperature climbed and her loose clothes felt too tight, she knew she'd have felt less threatened if he'd suddenly flashed a tail and claws.

Then, when he smiled with the alert, hooded gaze of a predator, his gaze falling to the rapid pulse in her throat, for an instant, she thought she saw fangs....Gasping, she backed up until her hip knocked into her mother's headstone.

The tangible reminder of why she'd traveled so far gave her strength enough to snap, "Do all English gentlemen unclothe women with their eyes on first acquaintance?" She went red at her own boldness, but something about this man made her skin crawl. Her very nerve endings were alive with affront.

Was it affront?

A slight smile curled at that lush, sensual mouth. He removed a clean kerchief from his pocket and dampened it with his tongue. Heat curled through her at the sight, but then...

...the kerchief was still warm with his wetness when he used it to wipe the dirt from her face. "No, I usually wait until second acquaintance, but you, my dear girl, are a Blythe. The only rule with Blythe women is that there are none."

She backed a step, further embarrassed as she saw the kerchief come away stained brown. "How do you know I'm a Blythe?" She scrubbed at her cheek with the heel of her hand. Why did her flesh burn there where his essence touched her?

"You look exactly like your mother. You stand over her grave. And I heard you were coming." He gave her a charming bow. "Maximillian Britton, at your service."

His name meant nothing to her, but the air with which he said it spoke volumes. He was a lord.

And lord, was he trouble. Exactly the sort Angel had become adept at avoiding.

She turned to leave, but paused despite herself. She'd probably never see him again. Curiosity. It was both her best trait and her worst failing. "Why were you standing on that mausoleum?"

"Ascertaining its construction. I'm considering using the same freemason for my own crypt. One never knows when one's end draws near."

Claptrap. Angel didn't say it aloud, but she didn't have to. His smile only widened. His gaze raked her again, telling her what other charming lies they could say to one another. She turned to stalk off.

He stopped her, his hand gentle on her arm, no teasing about him now. His impossibly handsome fallen angel face was serious, almost severe. "Tell the coachman to take you to London. Book the first passage you can find back to America. For your own safety."

"From you?" Again, the words were out before she could stop herself.

This time, he didn't take the bait. But his green eyes darkened as he looked at the full breasts even her severe garments couldn't totally disguise.

Angel drew away and ran the remaining distance to the impatient coachman. He looked behind her, alarmed when he saw the lord. He pointed the blunderbuss at that haughty, naughty face.

Max stared him in the eye. The coachman cowered back, the gun sagging.

Flinging open the carriage door, Max ordered, "Take her back to London."

"Take me to the Blythe estate!" Angel contradicted, slamming her own door.

Through the carriage window, their gazes met and held.

Green and brown. Life and earth. Bound, the one giving life to the other.

Angel blinked, breaking the power of that immobilizing gaze. "Why do you wish to get rid of me?"

"Oxford isn't safe for the likes of you."

Likes of you? What in the devil did he mean? Then the carriage jolted into motion. Max stepped back, one unusually large hand uplifted in a wave.

We'll meet again, stubborn girl. He didn't say it, but Angel heard it nonetheless.

And even as she told herself she didn't care, a chill feathered down her spine.

Fear? Or anticipation?

Both. She was already in trouble. And she hadn't even met her uncle yet.