

PROLOGUE—KIRYA

It was before the Normans came, before the Saxons and before the Celts. It was the time before Britain became an island.

In those years, in the hills that would many ages later be named the Cotswolds, a simple folk lived. They raised beasts and milked them and killed them for meat, and ate the fruits of the trees and the grains of the earth, as they had done, and their fathers, and their forefathers since the beginning of the world. And one winter night, midnight on the longest night of the year, Kirya was born. Her mother was a wise woman, and her father was unknown. Later it was said by some her father was one of the sons of the Earth, the Good Folk who made men tremble in fear and leave desperate offerings outside their huts at night. Others said her father was a ruffian, a lawless renegade driven out of his own village and a dozen others.

“She will die in grief,” one wise old woman said when Kirya was born and took her first breaths, then began wailing at the world.

“She will outlast us all,” that same woman said when a red moon shone down to mourn, or mock, the passing of the first full year of Kirya’s life.

Her mother gave the name Mehin, which meant Moon, but, as was the custom of her people, she chose the name Kirya, Sunrise, when she reached the age of ten. In her thirteenth year, when she was nearly of age, she went into the fields with her family’s sheep, and never came back alive...

Kirya stared at the trees, gray, crooked and grim, like the teeth of a giant.

The forest was where one of her sheep had fled, leaving the flock with no warning and

startling speed.

It was where the old mothers of the village said never to go.

It was where the goblins lived, where the Good Folk danced, where the ground spoke, the trees were hateful, and the rivers ran red and black.

But Kirya could hear the sheep bleating not far off. She gave her walking stick a white-knuckled squeeze, hesitated, and went on, following the worried sounds of the lost sheep. The minute she couldn't see the meadow any more, she was lost. The trees hemmed in behind her, blocking her retreat, herding her onwards, deeper into the wild heart of the wood.

The forest had her, and played with her a little for its own terrible amusement. It began with a thunderstorm — black clouds poured out of the west and then deafening thunder began and never stopped. Lightning poured down from above like arrows from the black bow of the sky god. Distant grassy hillsides caught fire, and smoke and steam rose up into the dark sky.

Lost and scared, Kirya clung to her stick and tried to remember the prayers of protection her mother had taught her, but all she could manage was babbling the names of a dozen gods.

The world darkened and the rain, cold and mixed with hard stinging hail, beat down, not at all impeded by branch or leaf. Kirya cried out in pain, but mostly in fear, and stumbled blindly, trying to find some shelter, trying to get out of the forest that (far too late) she realized really was haunted.

She tripped and fell over something wet and warm, and landed in what was left of the sheep. It was dead, very, very dead.

A flash of lightning illuminated the carnage, and also the thing that had inflicted it.

Kirya screamed and scrambled to her feet, but it was too late. The blood-splattered shape rose up and reached for her with impossibly long arms with impossibly long fingers at the ends

of them. "No!" Kirya screamed. Icy cold hands closed on her forearms and dragged her closer, and now she could see the thing clearly, and it was a terrifying sight.

It was tall, and naked, and only barely shaped like a human, with those horribly long arms, and a pair of gnarled, crooked legs that bent too high up, knees too close to the waist. There was nothing but a wild, sickening mesh of sunken scars where the eyes should have been. It was utterly hideous, an ashen-skinned monstrosity with fangs as long as fingers and scabby, taut flesh, and Kirya couldn't be sure if it was a man or a woman. Those parts had withered away, if it had ever had them.

Kirya screamed again. The thing screamed right back and its maw opened wide, too wide, and then it roared and bit down on her neck, those horrible fangs pierced her flesh, and the pain was so much, worse than anything Kirya could have imagined.

Worse, though, was the sense the creature was shaking with silent laughter. That was the last thing Kirya felt as the world went from brown to gray to black.

CHAPTER ONE

It was Lucy's fault. That wasn't the worst part of it, but it was what gnawed at her the most for a long, long time.

They'd been in Britain for three days, she and Chrissy. There was a routine, the same one they intended to keep for the rest of the Great European Tour. Tourism during the day, fun at night.

That day they'd started at the British Museum and worked their way down to Parliament and Westminster Abbey, and then over to Buckingham Palace for the changing of the guard. (Yes, it had been a busy day.) Lucy wasn't sure what she'd liked the most — okay, the palace. Also, everything. What was the saying? In America, a hundred years ago is long ago, in Britain, a hundred miles is far away? It was a humbling experience, a perspective-shaking experience, to sit in a building that was begun five hundred years before your country was founded.

The splendour of history and heritage was definitely not on Lucy's mind later on, though.

Midnight came and went, and then it was well past one, and Lucy had no intention of leaving the club. The music was good and the boys were hot.

"We have to get the train early tomorrow," Chrissy pointed out in a loud sort of whisper, and not for the first time. Not even for the first time in the last half hour.

"We can sleep on the train," Lucy retorted in between sips of her martini.

"Lucy, come on..."

Chrissy was probably right, but now Lucy was in that brittle mood where even a sensible comment repeated a few times seemed irritating, downright offensive even. She made a face at

Chrissy.

“I mean it,” Chrissy said.

“Rrrh. Just one more drink, all right?” Lucy asked.

Chrissy sighed in the half-hearted sort of way that told Lucy she’d won.

Lucy smiled cheekily at that, and that was when he found them.

“Hi.”

Lucy and Chrissy both looked up. And up.

Tall, dark and handsome. Lucy had seen him a couple times since they’d hit this club.

He’d been with a woman, tall, dark and beautiful, and she’d assumed they were together, but the woman was gone now, and it was just him.

And them.

“Hello,” Lucy said, her heart pattering just a little. She felt like a teenager, but she couldn’t help it. His eyes, his smile... “Americans?”

Lucy nodded and started to say “Yes” even as the man moved past the question with a brisk, impatient “I knew it!” He sized them both up and smiled faintly, then raised his glass of whatever-it-was in greeting. “Mind if I join you?” the man, maybe twenty, maybe twenty-five, dark eyed and intense looking, his chin a little stubbly, asked in a low voice.

“Be my guest,” Lucy answered without thinking. He was already sitting down.

And just like that, he had them.

Five minutes, maybe ten but probably not, it was so quick, passed in a blur, and then he was leading them both out of the club by a side door past the toilets, and down the side street to an actual alley. During all that time, Lucy didn’t think anything was wrong about any of it. They’d walked for a couple minutes when the man stopped, took a long, lazy look around, and

then turned to them and smiled again. It was the sort of smile that should have sent them running, but instead Lucy and

Chrissy just stood there. Waiting. Lucy rallied, just a little, enough to say "We should get back to the hos — "

"Stay," the man told Lucy, cutting her feeble protest off with the force of his voice. He pressed one cool finger against her lips as he did. Lucy stood there, a little dizzy. She looked around the alley. It was empty except for some junk piled up by one padlocked metal door, quiet, and a little dark, since the nearest lightbulb was out and the other one was way up near the corner of the alley and that side street... no, this was the second alley, wasn't it?

Lucy turned back to ask but instead of saying anything, just let her mouth hang open, gawping stupidly. It was like her brain was wrapped up in a thick fog. Couldn't think clearly, couldn't think quickly.

Tall, dark and handsome had Chrissy locked in a tight embrace, one hand on her behind, pinching her shiny skirt. With his other hand, he smoothed back her long chestnut hair and then — Lucy grimaced — he licked her neck. Chrissy let out a half/ecstatic sigh and pressed herself up against him. And then, peering over Chrissy's shoulder, the man smiled — his teeth shone bright and long — fangs, shark's teeth, grotesque — for a second before he bit down on Chrissy's smooth tan neck. She shuddered from head to toe and let out a gasp that was definitely not half-anything, clung to him even tighter, gasped again and again, but each time was fainter than the last. Then she was bucking, and then trembling... then her head slumped back, and there was one last miserable, frightened gasp. The man let her drop.

Chrissy fell face first onto the dirty alley floor with a dull THUD and the man stepped over her, coming towards Lucy. Some deep part of her mind screamed RUN! but it couldn't cut

through the fog, and Lucy just stood there as he put one arm around her waist and drew her in.

His tongue was icy cold, and just a little raspy like sandpaper, and a little slimy at the same time. Lucy gagged as he twined his fingers in her hair and jerked her head to the side. Her neck burned with exquisite pain and her toes curled.

“Gnh — ” Lucy tried to push against him, but he didn’t move, couldn’t be moved, it was like pushing against a wall, wasted effort, and all it did was put her more off balance. One foot wobbled, a long heel snapped, and only his hold on her kept Lucy up.

Dizziness. The world tilted wildly but stayed in place, it was her that was tilting, no, nothing was moving at all, it was just getting grey, and foggy, and now it was getting black, where were the lights going...?

HELP ME! Lucy tried to scream but she could only gasp and even that took away most of her little strength left. She slumped forward into the man’s arms, head on his shoulder...

No. She wasn’t going to die like this. And, somehow, she managed to drive a knee up, hard, into the soft spot between a man’s legs. “Help! HELP!” and the vampire actually recoiled in surprise, if nothing else.

The world tilted crazily, and the vampire receded, as she fell and landed in darkness.