

### THREE

### HOME

The vampire Alexia stood on Millbank, her back to the Tate Gallery illuminated behind her across the road, and looked out over the moonlit river. To all intents and purposes she was simply staring into middle distance, her hands deep in the pockets of her long dark overcoat, her thoughts lost or unrecoverable as though in some nightly dream. Her long blonde hair billowed like silken sheets as the wind whipped up off the river to chase it across her face, yet her sharp eyes remained focused and steadfast on the handful of glittering lights on the water further up the Thames. She could see three small boats bobbing there, their pilots throwing searchlights across the surface of the water, looking for clues that they would no doubt never find.

Her acute sense of smell picked up the tang of sweat on their pallid flesh, of fear, she imagined, as well as from their labour. She inclined her head slightly to try and make out their voices more clearly, but the wind - it whipped up again - was blowing from the east, and it made it difficult to hear just what they were saying. After a number of gusts had rifled across the water, she gave up, and turned her back on the fast-flowing waters to gaze back up at the great grey facade of the famous Tate Gallery.

She sighed appreciatively as she recalled wonderful

moments spent wandering alone through its nighttime halls. How she'd adored the art that had hung upon its walls all those years ago. Not the modern efforts of today, produced so quickly with ignorant slabs of gaudy colour or tasteless texture, but the fine art worked and produced so many decades ago, fresh and vibrant and glowing from their hey-day. How she had loved to stroll along the river at the turn of the century, when painters arrived daily from across the Channel, and sought inspiration under the spell of London by twilight. She used to watch them sketch and plan for hours by candlelight, spellbound by the magic that would appear before her eyes in charcoal and pencil. Seldom did any of them paint by night, except some of them locked away in their dank studios, but the sheer feeling that came from seeing life captured by paint when she had witnessed them - wet canvases hanging from walls with such delicate touches of colour - oh, it had been too much to bear at times.

The wonder of sunlight, something she had not seen in over one thousand years of immortality, came to life in front of her eyes in just a few strokes of paint, glittering across the river, and sparkling on dew-laden lawns. Oh, the romantic headiness of those days sometimes used to make her feel so wonderfully vulnerable, and she'd let herself be seduced so many times in bars and in moonlit streets by those very same artists. But ultimately she had seen them all to their graves; natural deaths, of course, for the sensual artists that they were. Now she had only a handful of those miracles she'd seen worked hanging on the walls just across the road to remind her. It was a sad, but inevitable, end.

The patter of panicked footsteps somewhere off to her left snatched her momentarily from her memories, and her head turned instinctively to find their maker. The images of gleaming blue skies and sun-dappled leaves laid down luxuriantly with knife and brush flickered briefly in her mind's eye, until they became extinguished completely.

Out of the darkness came little Callie, her young angelic face gazing frantically in all directions. Her eyes were wide with fright and Alexia could smell a pall of fear in her, different to what she had smelt in the sweat of the policemen on the river, but more of a kind of dank rot that permeated her pale white skin. No heartbeat skittered inside the chest of the young dead girl, of course, not as she had heard it all those years ago gripped by the stranglehold of death, but it was obvious that something was indeed wrong for the child vampire to be so terrified. Alexia moved swiftly towards her, deftly avoiding the traffic of the early hour and intercepting her before she could disappear.

"What's wrong?" Alexia urged her quickly, and watched as Callie's eyes took a moment to register the sight of her.

"The body..." Callie stammered.

"By Lambeth Pier?" Alexia asked, and watched as the girl nodded her head. "Yes, I know. I've been watching them take the body away."

"You saw that it was a vampire that was killed?" Callie asked her.

"Yes," was all that Alexia said.

"How could they have killed him like that? Drained all his blood. It's not possible."

Alexia could not answer her, and went down on one knee in front of her and pushed her hand through

Callie's long golden hair. It was dangerous for them all, she knew, but Callie just seemed so young and precious. She had the body of a child, but Alexia had to frequently remind herself that the girl was already over forty years old.

"Will it never be safe for us?" Callie asked.

"I will do my best to make it safe for you, I promise."

"But what about you?"

"I've lived a lifetime."

"But we're immortal. You told me we would live forever."

"This is no life, Callie," Alexia said at last, "running and hiding. For centuries, man has slowly been coming to terms with sharing his world with us. They've put up resistance for decades, some fighting back, some even taking the upper hand."

"So why can't we just take it back?"

"It is not that simple, Callie. We're not completely invulnerable to them. They've learnt our weaknesses, and they've learnt to prey upon them. It is a dangerous time, and it is not just humans that we have to fear. There are threats lurking inside our own ranks. There has been turmoil for years, clan fighting clan, vampire fighting vampire, and there has been no Master to bring order to the chaos. That is why we have to hide in order to simply survive."

Callie gazed up at her, any argument she might have had frozen upon her lips. What could she say? There simply were no words.

"We should be off the streets," Alexia declared at last, beginning to start away. "There is too much death in the air. Way too much."

The streets of London were still relatively busy even at two thirty in the morning, and they travelled swiftly through the dark streets towards Knightsbridge. Skulkers could be hiding almost anywhere, and it seemed that they were growing stronger and more dangerous all the time. Taking her human prey earlier was stupid, she knew, but she needed to feed nightly, and at least taste human blood every once in a while. Of course it was true that killing animals drew less attention, but their blood lacked the richness that they needed. It was an insane situation, but it was all that they had.

The top floor flat in Knightsbridge was perfect. With access to the rooftop she could see out over Hyde Park and much of the surrounding area. She'd bought it many decades ago and had never regretted it, but it was only in recent times that the turnaround in the hunter-prey scenario had occurred. Humans had always had their superstitions, however, and the bravest of the superstitious had always struggled to put their fears to the test. What hadn't worked had brought about their deaths. What had worked had resulted in laws of salvation, weaknesses penned in books and tomes. There were still one or two myths, of course, there always had been in these things, but most of the rules ran true.

The stake through the heart was number one, naturally, but bury a stake through the heart of anything and it'll kill them. Sunlight, sure, but sealing yourself in a coffin or similar was usually not a problem except for those who had not planned sufficiently well enough in advance. Garlic? That was a joke surely. Alexia actually quite liked the smell of it,

except once cooked and on someone's breath. But it was the crucifix that was the biggest puzzler of them all. Only those who had accepted Christianity in life but renounced the church in death was affected by it, and it was still to this day a wonderfully profound spectacle to behold; that of the mortal's expression as a vampire stalks unaffected towards him, the cross slipping from between their bewildered fingers. She had seen it herself a thousand times. It never failed to amuse. Her home was in Kar'mi'shah, a world away, and Christianity had never taken much of a firm hold. There were a few small churches, she recalled, but they were so isolated and of so little consequence to the greatest cities that it hardly mattered.

Shapeshifting was another misconception held by the human populace of both worlds. Not all vampires could transform themselves. She had been sired in Tooma, a district of Kar'mi'shah, over a thousand years ago, and had become part of the Faraoh tribe through marriage. Most clans were not shapeshifters, but the Faraoh clan was. It was the Faraoh clan to which the Master Jackel El'a'cree had belonged, and it was he who'd had the power to transform himself into any creature he'd so desired. In his temples he'd preferred the image of the jackal itself, but had taken many different guises in front of his mortal worshippers; the crocodile, the bull, the eagle, but nearly always with his human body beneath. They were gods to their followers, and they were worshipped devoutly. It was the mortals who built them their temples. It was the mortals who carved out their portraits in stone. And it was the mortals who went to them to have the evil spirits drained from their blood. It was all good. Until it all stopped.

Callie clambered up through the skylight and came

to sit beside Alexia on the dark slates of the rooftop. Alexia acknowledged her arrival but did not interrupt her vigil.

“What do you see?” Callie asked her, as she followed the vampire’s gaze over Hyde Park.

“The past,” Alexia told her. “Always the past.”

“I cannot see it,” Callie said, gazing into the darkness of the park.

“I am glad of that,” Alexia said. “It is something that you do not want to see.”

“Do you mean the clans again?”

Alexia nodded slowly.

“I want to see your family,” Callie said, turning to look at her. “You make them sound so regal. I bet they wouldn’t hide in the shadows or run away.”

“I want to see them again too,” Alexia told her.

“Will you take me with you?”

“I would if I could, sweet one.”

“But you don’t think there’s a way back home?”

Alexia shook her head.

“I don’t know of one.”

Callie seemed to leave it at that then, and together they stared in silence over the empty blackness of Hyde Park for a while, its expanse devoid of all human life, but busy with rabbits, owls and foxes. They had fed on worse.

“Will you tell me what happened?” Callie asked.

“To what?”

“To your family.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because it makes you sad. If I knew what happened, I could perhaps try to help.”

Alexia turned her head to look at her now. Callie’s large oval eyes returned her gaze, and she did seem

genuinely interested, but Alexia still saw the child whenever she looked at her. A child could not possibly understand, no matter how much she insisted.

“One day, perhaps,” Alexia replied, turning to look back at the darkness. “One day.”