

THREE

THE VAMPIRE ANTOINETTE DE BRUGE

From the edge of Chelsea Bridge, Antoinette could see all the way along The Embankment. It was night, the sky cloudless above her head, the reflection of the full moon glittering like slivers of winking silver across the turbulent surface of the Thames. A cool breeze blew out of the summer night, bringing on its back a myriad of juxtaposed smells, roses and diesel fumes, seafood and fresh blood.

Antoinette sniffed suddenly at the wind like a dog snagged by an unexpected scent. Someone had an open wound somewhere close by, and the sickly sweet aroma played across her senses like an intoxicating liquor. Her eyes flickered closed with delirium. She had not tasted fresh blood for seven days, but tonight she would feed.

She scanned the pedestrians strolling beside the river with eyes like those of a hawk, sharp and focussed - filtering out the weak from the strong, the lone stray from the healthy pack - while her nose luxuriated in the tang of freshly drawn blood.

Couples walked hand in hand, joggers darting between them in shorts of bright yellow lycra. Dog-walkers took their pets for their last constitutional. Businessmen walked the last stretch home. Night-

clubbers in short dresses and cheap gold jewellery took to the streets for the start of a drunken night out, caterwauled by council workers repairing a faulty streetlamp. So many people, so many veins, and all of them pumping with the rich hot fluid that would keep her alive.

The skulkers had been close, though, that was all she could think, and closer than was comfortable. She'd managed to keep ahead of them since she'd left the body of the man from the nightclub in the alleyway behind the cinema further along the street. She'd slit his throat and barely pressed her tongue against the wound before they'd pounced upon her. Three men with clubs and knives had appeared from out of the shadows with nothing but her destruction on their minds. She'd managed to use the darkness to her advantage and escape them before receiving a single blow. She had been weak, and to have stood and fought them in such a state would have been impossible.

But it was getting more and more difficult to stay even one step ahead of them, to keep an ear to the ground, or to trust other sources that were already stretched paper-thin across the sprawling grimy metropolis of London.

One night a week ago she had been foolish. She had allowed a taxi driver to sweep her home with him after the streets had grown quiet in the early hours of the morning.

She had ridden up front with him, had even allowed him to press his sweaty hands across the flesh of her thighs, pushing them up towards her sex. She had allowed him that because to have denied him then would have been to deny herself his blood.

She'd known she could have killed him there and then in his cab, but it was safer to feed off the streets, away from prying eyes. Safer to feed inside, always safer behind locked doors.

But it had been a trap. In hindsight the clues had been obvious. She knew that now. But then? She had been hungry, hungrier than she had felt in a long time, and she had been stupid.

Inside the taxi driver's flat in Clapham waited four skulkers. As soon as the door had closed behind her, it had been locked and double bolted.

She had killed that skulker instantly, breaking his neck with a single sharp blow to the front of his throat. But she had not been quick enough to unbolt the door and flee. She had been grabbed by too many hands and hauled back away from it. She'd struggled but the wire was already being wrapped tight around her wrists, cutting into her flesh like razors. She remembered thrashing like some wild animal, something she had not done in a very long time, but it had shaken her free of all but one of her assailants, and had at least afforded her an accurate look at the rest of the flat in the handful of seconds that she had won.

The windows to the main room had been secured with metal bars fixed from the inside, the front door she could now see had heavy bolts drawn top and bottom. Whatever doors ran off from the living room were hidden by tall wardrobes, and it was clear in those few snatched moments that the vampire killers had prepared themselves well for this moment. Maybe it was even a commonly-used trap. The din of shouting voices hammered her attention back, and she lurched to find two of the skulkers and

the taxi driver coming back at her, the skulkers with a blanket stretched between them, the driver with a baseball bat.

Antoinette retreated quickly, the third skulker still standing behind her, still clasping with gloved hands the length of wire that tore and bit into her wrists. She felt his weight lift beneath her strength, and she forced him back hard into the wall.

She heard his bones crack and grinned with glee, grinned too at the faces of the remaining three before her, hesitant now that their accomplice had dropped down onto his knees. But with her hands still bound hard and tight behind her, she had trouble even facing them.

She checked the windows once again. The bars were screwed into the brickwork. Even if she'd had her hands free she might not be able to rip them free, but like this she was trapped for certain.

Her eyes flickered back as the taxi driver threw himself at her, the baseball bat swinging down out of the air. Antoinette ducked swiftly but the bat found her shoulder, breaking the bone with a loud crack and bringing a searing pain that thumped at the point of the injury. Stumbling down onto one knee as nausea turned her stomach over, she fought to clear the unexpected agony as the second blow came.

The world went black for a few seconds as the impact battered her skull. But when her eyes reopened, the skulkers were descending upon her with their blanket, disorientating her and smothering her thrashing limbs.

Over and over the bat found her body, each blow bludgeoning her limbs and bringing agonising

pain. She was screaming, thrashing with her legs and her head until her foot found one of the skulkers. She yanked at his leg, and felt the weight of his body tumble. It must have knocked the second skalker sideways for the blanket lifted suddenly from her and she managed to find strength enough to haul herself upright. The taxi driver stared down at her with incredulous eyes, wondering how this being could still be alive. And then she lunged at him, sinking her teeth deep into the meat of his chest and tearing at it.

The flesh came away inside the ripping threads of his shirt, hot rich blood coating her tongue and throat as it pulsed out over them both. She took partial pleasure in it as it gifted her a shock of energy and revenge, forcing her to her feet before throwing herself on towards the door. She heard the deafening din of their shouts and screams at her back as she ran, but even that was shattered as she hurled herself at the front door with what little strength she had left.

The wood cracked and splintered as the door broke in two, Antoinette landing in a twisted heap on the other side. She lifted her head, thumping with injuries and running with blood, to find the skulkers already coming after her. But she had escaped their safe room and was back in the real world.

The landing window was only yards away, unhindered by any metal bars, and before they could reach for her and drag her back inside to finish her, she was up and off towards it.

With no bars protecting it, the glass shattered into tiny glinting darts as her weight tumbled through it. Three storeys up, she found herself

plummeting towards the hard ground. But what did it matter what was below? Better broken bones and fleeting pain than death at the hands of mortals.

There were trees below, however, a line of thin conifers that at least partially broke her fall. But with her arms still bound at her back with piercing wire and no hands with which to protect herself, their branches scratched at her face and throat, drawing blood swiftly inside razored nicks, until she tumbled out of their boughs and landed hard on the pavement beneath.

Her thoughts were thick and slow like gallons of black oil as her eyes struggled to open to the darkness of the ill-lit street. Agony shot across her face and shoulders, her mouth running with blood and grit, but already there were raised voices from somewhere nearby – the skulkers already running to finish the job – and so she had to force energy into her limbs, and haul herself into the darkest shadows of the night before she was found.

Anyone could have done her harm in the state she had been in, battered and still bound at the wrists, but the night offered at least some refuge, and she slipped into its welcoming depths as swiftly as she could.

A vampire that haunted the arches of Chelsea Bridge had freed her from her shackles that night, and she had indeed been grateful. That had been a week ago. Her wounds had mostly healed, the visible ones at least, but six nights rest had done their job, and she was ready to hunt once more.

Her shoulders still ached and she could still trace the last of the lines of scar tissue across her cheek and chin, but in a few more nights even they

would be gone.

She'd felt ashamed of offering herself to another vampire in such a state, especially beaten so badly at the hands of human skulkers, but this other vampire had felt neither pity nor amusement, but had simply tended to her as much as she had required and then left.

But he was not here this night. Did he even still frequent this place beside the Thames, or had she just stumbled upon him as he had hunted?

She had no idea, and they had barely conversed that night. She had waited at the bridge for an hour already tonight, and she'd reasoned in her head a hundred times that perhaps he knew she was there and chose not to show himself this second time. She recalled how he had seemed to simply uncloak the night from around him, as if the darkness was a cowl for him to wear when he so chose. Antoinette looked around her again, but he was not here, or if he was, she could not detect his presence.

The sweet scent of blood on the air caught her attention once again as the gentle breeze lifted it to her nostrils. Her eyes flickered closed with pleasure and hunger as she inhaled it slowly, its tang caressing the back of her tongue with its heady bliss. Her eyes opened, focussed and sharp, and surveyed the mortals still passing along the embankment, hoping to find the owner of the sweet wound, not caring if she had to open it wider for herself.

The dog-walkers had moved on, the joggers too, but new ones had arrived to take their place in the popular walkway across the water from Battersea Park. The council workmen were finishing up their emergency repair, packing away tools into battered

plastic boxes, winding up rolls of cable. Their muscles were strong but layered with stale fat. Experience taught her that the flesh would be tough too, the blood tainted from bad diets. The joggers would make a better meal, neat tight flesh, thin blood pumping eagerly through veins ripe for puncturing. She'd fed on the healthy before and fed well, but that was not for her tonight.

Antoinette continued to search the busy pavement, her keen unblinking eyes searching the pedestrians that made their way beneath the insipid yellow streetlamps like those of an owl surveying a buffet of field mice. Two lovers sat on a bench looking out over the glittering river, their hands locked together, fingers entwined, and she wondered briefly about killing them both. How romantic that would be, to die in each other's arms, and be together for all eternity.

Her mind wandered back to the vampire who'd looked down upon her those seven nights before with such compassion. She'd imagined so much, wondered about the possibilities, but that was not for her either. She'd been in love as a mortal, a century and more ago, and had been cherished by vampires since. But not for a decade had she been with another vampire, and although she knew of others in the city she had come to call home, she would not visit that tricky domain of love again.

A black cab pulled up at the kerb less than a hundred yards away, the sight startling her with memories of the skulkers. It was innocent enough, she suspected, as she watched a city gent climb out of the back and close the door after him. Even as the cab pulled back out into the flow of traffic,

Antoinette could see that he was no vampire killer. But still the tremors continued in her body, even once the cab had turned the corner and was out of sight, and she felt ashamed that so small a group of mortals could have such a lasting effect upon her.

Her mind was busy once again with renewed fears, and Antoinette left Chelsea Bridge and made her way through the walkers and joggers, all of them blissfully unaware of the killer that walked amongst them.

The breeze lifted her hair from her forehead as she walked. She barely cast an eye across the glittering surface of the surging river, but instead kept her gaze mostly at the pavement as her thoughts whirled inside her head.

A hundred and more years she had been a vampire, and she had seen more than most. So how had she managed to virtually hand those skulkers a free ticket to destroy her? She should have known better than that, should've known what plans these mortals could devise to try and even the odds that were stacked so desperately against them.

How could she be sure that she'd recognise those signs again?

How could she be sure that those same skulkers from whom she had managed to escape were not still watching her, were not still following her even now? She glanced behind her more swiftly than any mortal could notice, an unnatural motion that afforded her a peripheral vision of the walkers at her back as well as of those across the street. Nobody seemed to pay her any heed, no one visible to her scrutiny anyway. There were those that could hide themselves effectively, those that had learned from vampires

themselves in exchange for worldly goods or even immunity. There were even vampires that hunted their own kind. It was a dangerous time. But that last week? She had failed in her duty to protect herself, but had thankfully escaped with rational fears for the future. They had taught her a good lesson. But they would not congratulate themselves for that.

A young man stood leaning against the railings looking out over the river. She could see his hair, light in colour and long enough to move beneath the caress of the breeze. Although he wore a tan leather jacket, she could sense by his stature the firmness of his muscles, the fitness of his body, the taut flesh of his throat stretched tantalising as he bent his head. There were fewer pedestrians along this stretch of the embankment, and Antoinette made her way towards him now, focussing out the din and the fumes of the cars passing by, focussing in the pulsing heartbeat of this man, the scent of his skin, his ignorance of her proximity.

She could bend over him and puncture his flesh and feed before anyone even noticed, she thought. No one would give any heed to what they would recognise as a lover's kiss, the woman behind the man, pressing kisses of love against the neck of her beloved. And with the weight of his blood in her belly she could flee back into the darkest of the night's shadows leaving him slumped across the railings where she had found him, with no repercussions until someone discovered the corpse the following daybreak with the morning's weight of passing commuters.

But as she closed within inches of him he lifted his head. Was it some motion that she had caused,

some movement that had alerted him to his dispatcher? And if so, what?

Her mind reeled as she saw his face. Her feet faltered and would carry her no more. Her teeth, which had already lengthened in her jaw, froze, and all desire to destroy this man went from her head.

It was his eyes that halted her, wide and blue, and she felt herself drowning as they regarded her. She seemed to swim helplessly for a few moments, disorientated by this mere mortal.

The two of them stared at one another, he with curiosity at this stranger almost touching him, she with emotions that both enraptured and disorientated her. But when he smiled at her, a delicate smile encased inside his curiosity, she thought she would lose consciousness.

She could smell the blood in him, could hear and feel the pulse of his heart, yet the desire to feed had drained almost instantly out of her. Even when he spoke, and she could not be sure what he had actually said to her, she felt weak inside, weaker than she'd felt after the skulkers had beaten her.

She knew she was still staring at him but she couldn't help it. A palette of thoughts swirled insanely inside her head like a modern canvas, and she was unable to make sense of any one of them. He spoke again, the smile still on his lips, and she realised he had asked her name.

"Antoinette De Bruge," she replied, her eyes still transfixed by his.

"What a stunning name," he said to her, his voice breathless, genuine, his smile still enrapturing her.

"And yours?" she asked, sanity sweeping over

her like an ocean over rocks.

"Nothing nearly so wonderful," he said, that smile of his breaking just as magnificently into a grin. "It's Stevie."

She knew he was no vampire, but what did that suddenly matter? She knew this was flirting, a petty act played out by mortals for cheap eroticism before their brief lives were snuffed out, but she didn't care. She'd promised herself so much, to abstain from such ludicrous notions, to feed and then retreat back into the shadows, but here he was, still looking at her, still smiling.

A thought surged into her head to bludgeon the rest that swirled unchecked there – kill him now and be done with all this nonsense. But how could she kill him? She could never destroy this beautiful Stevie.

"It's a bit late for you to be out walking here alone, isn't it?" he asked.

His voice shook her from her conflict, and in her hesitation to reply, he added:

"You are alone, are you?"

"Yes," she told him, attempting to reclaim some of her former calm. "I'm taking the night air. That's all. There's no harm in that."

"I had to get out of the flat too. I was going stir-crazy," he told her. "I've been working too much lately. I need to spend more time doing this."

"Talking to strangers?"

He smiled again. A laugh reverberated in his throat but didn't make it as far as his lips.

"No, this," he waved his hand down at the Thames. "I love this river. I should spend more time here. Especially on nights like this."

Antoinette watched him closely as he spoke, confirming the firm muscle of his torso through his white t-shirt, the way his jeans hugged his legs. Then her eyes fell upon his neck, the flesh she had expected to puncture, to press her lips against and then drink. But not tonight, she promised. Not ever. He did not deserve that.

"Do you want to go and get a coffee or something?"

His question caught her off guard. This was flirting, but with growing consequences. Did he not realise she was a vampire? Did he not know that she was over a hundred and fifty years old? Did he not think to ask about how she fed only after the sun went down? Perhaps she should tell him. Perhaps she should explain how she butchered his kind in order to drink from them.

But to tell that would be to lose his company, and she found herself accepting his invitation, found herself walking beside him along the embankment beneath the huge pale moon, the breeze bringing scents of roses and diesel fumes to them in an awkward marriage of delicate scent and grey poison. Antoinette knew the insanity of it, the two of them together, but what did one night matter? They could drink coffee and talk about the city and then they would never see each other again. She would leave him to go on his way. She would see to that.