

12. Roots

So now what?

At twilight, I checked out of the hotel and decided to make a dash for the border. A quick look at a borrowed map told me that the Sabine National Forest lay just across the state line. It would be a good place to go to collect myself. I had no idea where Victoria had gone and not the first clue how to find out except for the means I had already employed—Alice—and I wasn't ready to talk to her yet.

It took no time to run the forty-five miles into east Texas and it was a relief to be there. The forest consisted primarily of different species of pine trees, which provided good cover from the daytime sunshine. There were places to hide and game to hunt. With that level of comfort, I could afford to let everything go for a while.

The first thing I did was turn off my phone. Then I went racing through the forest, seeking relief from the aching in my chest that barely allowed me to breathe. The place where my heart used to be was an empty void and without even my petrified version of a heart, I was losing my will to continue. I could understand the distress of the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*. Without a heart, it's hard to feel "real." You have no connection to other living creatures of the earth. You belong nowhere and can neither love nor be loved. In my present state, I was worthless to my family and I felt relieved not to have them hovering, waiting for the reappearance of the son and brother I used to be. I was afraid that that Edward might be gone for good.

I'd had an acceptable existence before I met Bella. I was content with my music, my studies, and my curiosity and desire to learn. I had the love of my parents and the companionship of my siblings and it had been enough...then. Now, I knew more. Bella had changed me from who I had been to someone else, someone better, and I could never go back. That was the sad truth. I no longer knew how to exist in the world. The fact that she was alive was enough to keep me alive, but without access to her, it could not keep me "living." I no longer cared for the life I'd had and I had no strength to reinvent myself. I was tainted by the knowledge of what *could* be and I had serious doubts whether I now could accept what had satisfied me before.

When sunshine first peeked into the forest, I scratched out a grave-shaped hole in the earth and sank down among the roots of the trees, covered myself with duff and pine needles, and lay there like a corpse, peering out from my hiding place. At first, my eyes followed every sound and movement in the woods until I became familiar with the swaying of pine branches in the breeze, the calls of anxious birds, and the hushed noises of the animals who knew to keep their distance. Then I closed my eyes and noted only the scents

of squirrels, pine sap, rodents, and the occasional deer that moved through the area.

I don't know how long I remained still. Time passed in a vacuum. I stopped counting the days that went by, though my idle brain automatically recorded the dawns and the sunsets. I could have accessed that number if I'd wished to, but I didn't. I floated in a river of nothingness, but was unable to achieve the relief of oblivion. There was no respite from the emptiness that stole my breath, stole my self, devoured my will to exist.

I was reminded of my father who had exiled himself from civilization and went to starve in the wilderness after he was changed, unable to abide what he had become. I was starving too—not for lack of blood, which I did not care about—but for something more vital than physical nourishment. Even after several weeks had passed, I didn't care enough about the searing, clawing thirst to chase after prey. Perhaps I would remain in the earth's embrace until the end of Bella's lifespan. Then I would drink to fortify myself for the journey to Italy, where I would goad the Volturi into doing away with me. It was the best plan I could think of.

Then much to my surprise, something changed. Suddenly, a sense of urgency awakened me. There was something I must do, that I was compelled to do. Though I wasn't sure what it was, the feeling was strong enough for me to wiggle my toes beneath the comforting weight of the forest debris. That experiment led me to move my feet, then my legs, my hands, and my arms, until finally I opened my eyes, blinked, and sat up. The environment had changed noticeably. The air was colder, with a crisp edge to it and I realized that winter was coming even to this southern outpost of the country.

I left the ground then and began to move through the forest randomly with no goal and no thought. When my nose caught the scent of deer, I involuntarily began to chase. Taking down the beast was more challenging than I remembered, but was accomplished soon enough and that soothing taste of blood aroused a fierce thirst I had not noticed before. I hunted actively then, pursuing the herd that had fled. I pulled down another and drank greedily until it was no more and then searched for another. Sniffing the air as I moved through the forest, I located a lone buck foraging for grass. I remained downwind of him and so silent that he did not sense my presence until it was too late.

He was a majestic beast. His head held seven-point antlers and his eyes held the wisdom of the ages. I sank my teeth into his throat hungrily. As I drank, I felt the life draining from him and as his soul left his body, I grabbed for it in my mind's eye, pulling it back to me as it floated away. I held onto his spirit and thanked him for his great gift. Perhaps God had sent him to me as a beacon of hope.

But no, hope was too big a word. What I felt was more like will...the tiniest will to go on. It was time to reenter the world for a while.

As I patted myself down, trying to remove the dust from my clothing, I touched the stiff edge of something in my shirt pocket. Sticking two fingers inside, I pulled out some photographs...four photographs. How could I have forgotten they were there? Emblems of my former life when I was happy, when living meant something to me. It no longer did, but

she did and she was still out there, going on with her life. I would try too, at least for now.

I felt the familiar burn in my eyes and the catch in my throat as I tried to breathe. I let it take me over, giving in to the vampire tears that meant nothing and did nothing for me, except remind me that I was alive. I could still feel something.

It was some time before I became ready to face the world again, to face my family. There would be fences to mend, but I hoped that they would forgive me for abandoning them. I'd had no choice really and perhaps I would abandon them again, but for now, I would try to make amends.

I pressed the button to power up my phone and saw that the battery was dead. So I would be spared the discomfort of explaining myself for a little bit longer. I would rejoin civilization, though, locate my charger, and call my family.

With new resolve, I headed west out of the forest, saying goodbye to that haven of peace, if not resolution, and began to run for the nearest town. Nacogdoches was its name. Winter must be near, for the sun began to rise behind a heavy cloud cover and I could smell the rain that surely would come soon. I walked the main street of the town, looking for...what? Perhaps I needed a hotel room, somewhere to clean up, recharge my phone, and regroup.

Fortunately, I'd had the foresight to hang my duffle bag in a tree before going to ground. Stupid of me, I suppose. A hunter or camper could have ripped it open and stolen my wallet or taken the whole bag. Not that I would have missed it, particularly, but losing it would have made this particular day more difficult.

When I found a small mom and pop motel on the edge of town, I stepped into the office and clinked the bell sitting on the counter. With a lot of grumbling and coughing and great sighs, an old man appeared from a side door, still wrapping the tie of his bathrobe around his ample waist, his sparse gray hair flopping unattractively from the dome of his balding head. I presumed that these long strands were intended to wrap over his crown in sad mimicry of a full head of hair, but at that moment, they were simply signposts to his lack in that area. He yawned without covering his mouth and I saw that his discolored teeth were missing a few of their companions.

I pulled out a credit card to pay for the room, which made me wonder if Jasper's man was watching the activity on my cards to see if I was still alive. That's when I realized what I must have been putting my mother through for the past few weeks. I had left home on a mission to do away with a killer vampiress and then—as far as they were concerned—had disappeared from the face of the earth. Esme must be worried sick. I'd better call before my family had to resort to roundabout means to locate me. I unlocked the door of the basic, but sufficient, motel room and immediately shut the curtains in case the sun came out. Then I opened my duffle to extract the cell phone charger and I plugged in

my phone just in time to feel it vibrate in my hand.

“Edward?”

“Hi, Alice. You found me.”

“Yes, and you should be glad it’s me because Esme will want to wring your neck—now that she knows you’re alive, that is.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. I hope you could reassure her.”

“Yes, but that’s beside the point.”

“Please tell her I’m sorry.”

“I will, but it would still be good if you called her. Anywho...”

“Yes?”

“I have some personal business in Biloxi, Mississippi, and wondered if you want to meet up for a pint.”

“A pint of blood, maybe. What’s in Biloxi?” I asked, quite curious now.

Alice hesitated. “Well...relatives, actually.”

“Living relatives? Of yours?”

“Yes, I think so. Unless they’re all dead.”

“You’ve traced your family?” I was surprised and amazed.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“The website *ancestry.com* is how I got started and one thing led to another.”

“Are you from Mississippi?”

“Yes. I found the asylum where I lived and it still has all the old records hidden away in the dungeon. That’s how I found out I’m from Biloxi. I’m going there to find any family who’s left and...to see my grave.”

“Oh, Alice!” I exclaimed. “You have a grave?”

Her voice became soft. “My file contained an old letter from my stepmother which said the family was relinquishing me to the state. I scoured the newspapers from Biloxi where the records said I was from and I found my death announcement. My family reported me dead the same day they put me in the asylum and then they held a funeral for me, but I wasn’t invited.”

The news was heartbreaking.

“Of course, I’ll meet you, Alice. When and where?”

Her voice brightened. “Let’s meet in New Orleans. I’ve never been there—that I know of. I’d like to go on a vampire tour.”

“The vampires on a vampire tour. That sounds interesting.”

“Okay, then. I’ll go ahead and you call me when you get there so we can find each other. I’ll be in the French Quarter somewhere.”

“Okay, Alice. I lost Victoria, by the way, in Shreveport.”

“You found her then?”

“Yes, she was there and she murdered a woman at the festival you told me about, so

I got out of town as quickly as possible. I'd already lost her, though. She eluded me almost like she knew I was chasing her. It was odd, because I never got close enough for her to actually see or smell me, as far as I know."

"I'm sorry that I wasn't paying better attention to you right then. That's when I started poking around on *ancestry.com* trying to find out more information after what Bel—what James's video said. Jasper didn't do any more tracking of Victoria's cell phone because you weren't answering yours. I saw you dig the hole, though, so I knew you were okay. I didn't tell Esme that you buried yourself. I think that would have scared her."

"You're probably right. That was wrong of me, I guess, but at the time, I just—"

"You don't have to explain it to me, Edward. You gotta do what you gotta do. But come meet me and then I can report back to everybody," Alice said, before changing the subject. "By the way, Emmett and Rosalie ran off to Europe for another honeymoon, did I say?"

"No, you didn't mention it."

"They're traveling around Sweden and then they're going to visit Iceland. The days are getting short up there now."

"What is the date, Alice?"

"You don't know?"

"Well, no, you called me the very second I got to my motel room. I suppose it was on the check-in paperwork, but I wasn't paying much attention."

"November 16th. You've been missing for over a month."

"Please tell Carlisle that I just couldn't—," I started to say.

"He knows, but he's still worried about you. So is Esme, and Emmett got really snarky after you left. I think that's why they left town."

"How are 'The Ruins' coming along?" I inquired, changing the subject myself this time.

"Good, I think. But let's meet up and talk then. 'Kay?"

"Okay, see you soon, Alice."

I had given up my tracking project without resistance, but I cared about Alice and I imagined that discovering her unenviable roots as she had must have been painful. I couldn't imagine why Jasper wasn't with her unless she had asked him directly not to come. He doesn't allow himself to be separated from Alice easily. I felt honored that she had called me, actually. I didn't know who she was trying to bolster, herself or me, but Alice would be the easiest person for me to see...except for the one I couldn't see.

I gasped. The pain hit me unexpectedly and I dropped onto the bed, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. *Owww...*

The next time I looked up, I could see that the fluorescent light bulb outside my door had come on, which meant the sun must have set. I hoped there had been only one sunset. I didn't mean to keep Alice waiting.

I checked the phone book in the room for the location of the nearest rental car

agency before changing out of my dirty clothing and brushing the dust and a few stray pine needles from my hair. Then I stuffed everything back into my duffle, left the room key on the nightstand, and ran the couple miles to the local airport. I rented the best car Enterprise had, a Cadillac DTS—the same vehicle the President had used for his inauguration, though I'm sure his had armor plating, bullet-proof windows, and other safety features I didn't require. This one had dark-tinted windows, though, a feature more commonly found in the South than in the North. It would let me drive during the day if I needed to. For now, I should need only a few hours to cross southern Louisiana.

We met in Lafayette Cemetery in the heart of New Orleans. It was Alice's idea, but I'd never seen the famous burial ground and it was certain to be atmospheric after dark. If anyone saw us inside the iron fence after hours, we could always growl or pretend to be ghosts and they were sure to run away. We were definitely the scariest thing in the cemetery, although other vampires probably haunted the place from time to time. New Orleans was regarded by some as a sort of spiritual mecca for our kind since Anne Rice's famously atmospheric vampire novels had popularized it as such. Perhaps we should be on our guard. Territorial locals could be wandering around too.

It was good to see Alice. Definitely worth the few hours of driving. She wouldn't be at all daunted by my mournful mood, so I wouldn't have to bother putting on a false mask of cheer.

"Tell me about your family in Biloxi, Alice," I said, seating myself on a tombstone. She chose a granite marker of her own and perched on it.

"My name is Mary Alice Brandon and I had a sister named Cynthia who was nine years younger than me. She had a daughter who might still be alive. Maybe I can meet her anonymously. I'm a little curious to see what she looks like. I've never known anyone who looked like me. Our family had orchards, but I don't remember that, of course. My mother died when I was still a girl and my father remarried." She took a deep breath and looked at her feet.

"Go on," I encouraged.

"I found the asylum where they put me. It's still there and still a psychiatric hospital. They don't call them 'Lunatic Asylums' or 'Homes for Idiots and Imbeciles' anymore." She looked up at me with an ironic half-smile.

"I didn't remember the place, but it was built after Dorothea Dix started shaming all the Eastern states into providing more humane facilities for lunatics. Before she came along, they still used chains and provided no heat and just let inmates live in their own filth under the excuse that the insane didn't have the same sensibilities as other people. I must have been a real case if they kept me in the dark, because the building is designed so that most of the cells get light and air from four sides. Of course, they probably used darkness and no fresh air as punishment. I don't know. Anyway, nothing jogged my memory at all, so even if I was unhappy, I don't remember it."

"Do you think they gave you electroshock, Alice?"

“They did—a lot. According to my file, I was considered unruly and disruptive of the other patients. Probably I told fortunes or something.” She laughed lightly, but there was little humor in it.

“Electroshock is known for wiping out people’s memories,” I said gently.

“Yeah, seems kind of obvious, doesn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, Alice.”

“I would be too, but I guess I’m not because it’s made me forget all the bad things, including being changed. I do wish I could remember the vampire who saved me from James, though. At least I had a friend.”

I didn’t comment. What kind of friend would leave a perfectly sane, young girl to grow up in a dark hellhole when he could have freed her from her prison any time he wished? It took threats from a more powerful vampire than he was to get him to act. Her human life was forfeited for his selfishness.

Alice stood up then and I followed her lead. We walked as we talked, and looked at the interesting variety of above-ground crypts and tombs until we came upon a particular area of the cemetery where all of the dates of death were the same.

“Alice, have you seen how many of these people died in 1853?”

“Yes, there was an epidemic of yellow fever that summer and fall in New Orleans.”

“How did you know?” I wondered.

“I asked Carlisle if he knew anything about the city—that I wanted to visit—and he told me the story.”

“Don’t tell me he was here!”

“He was. When word of the plague got out to other parts of the country, a great many doctors and nurses came down here to help, Carlisle included.”

“I should have known. He was in Chicago during the Spanish Influenza epidemic too,” I told my sister, though she’d heard the story many times.

“I guess he feels that his special status demands such sacrifices of him, though I don’t think he sees them as sacrifices, particularly.”

“There are half a dozen to a dozen deaths recorded in 1853 on each of these tombstones, and row after row of them. Whole families were wiped out, according to some of the inscriptions. I wonder how many ultimately died.”

“Probably thousands, but the African-Americans were largely immune to it, Carlisle said.”

“Why?” I knew of no natural immunity to a virus based on the color of one’s skin.

“At the time, everybody thought that African lineage lent immunity, but the doctors eventually figured out that it was the long history of African slavery in New Orleans that gave them immunity. So many generations of exposure to the local, less deadly, versions of yellow fever made them immune when the nasty one came along. Recent black emigrants, whether slaves or Freedmen, caught the virus at the same rate as more recent white emigrants.”

We walked silently then, both of us buried in our own thoughts. Finally, I brought up a subject that was troubling me.

“Alice,” I began, “I don’t know where to go from here. I can’t really go home, especially without having accomplished anything except one day of unsuccessful tracking, followed by weeks of incapacitation. And I’m no good for anyone, anyway, right now.” I might have imagined it, but I suddenly got the feeling that Alice tensed up. Her thoughts began to race and I didn’t have the energy to bother keeping up.

“I was hoping that you would decide to meet me after you rose from your grave, so I asked Jasper to search cell phone records again before I came down here. He’s probably got something for us by now. I’ll call him.”

Jasper did have information. Victoria hadn’t used her phone for several weeks and Jasper’s man thought perhaps she’d changed her phone number, but then she began using it again.

“She passed through Beaumont,” Jasper told me, “and appeared to be moving toward Houston when she made her last call two days ago.”

“Do you know whom she was calling?” I asked.

“Not Laurent. Otherwise, no. It’s an unlisted number.”

“Thanks, Jasper.”

“Give me back to Alice, would you?” I handed the phone to my sister.

So, now I knew where to start again and I would. It was my obligation to take care of this ugly loose end. Then what? I had absolutely no idea. I had no idea what to do with my life without her. She *was* my life. My everything.