

13. Going Public

I stayed in New Orleans with Alice for a few days before she went east to face more of her past in Biloxi and I went west to put Victoria permanently in my past.

Given our mutual state of mind, we didn't exactly have fun in New Orleans, but we went through the motions by playing tourist. We visited several "Cities of the Dead," which is what locals call their picturesque, above-ground cemeteries. We wandered through the Garden District and admired the grand and diverse architecture of the homes. On a cloudy morning, we sat at a café table in Jackson Square and pretended to eat beignets and drink chicory coffee because Alice insisted that everyone must do that at least once in New Orleans.

We rode the streetcar down Charles Street and roamed Bourbon Street at night, moving among drunken tourists and listening to the blues, jazz, and country music pouring from darkened doorways. We wandered other parishes in the city and discovered that even better music could be heard away from the main tourist haunts in neighborhood dives where the local people go to drink and listen to jazz.

It is easy to see why traditional vampires find New Orleans an agreeable place to hunt—which they obviously do. For decades, New Orleans has suffered the highest murder rate and the most missing persons of any city in the United States. Though the police will deny it, even they entertain questions about *what* (rather than *who*) is abducting and killing so many of their citizens. Some of them secretly believe in our existence, though I doubt if they would recognize us if they met us face-to-face.

One evening on Bourbon Street, a scrawny black man wearing a mud-colored fisherman's cap and sporting a gold front tooth approached us with an overly familiar smile.

"Ah betchoo twenny dollah I know wheah you got dem shoes," he said, expecting to take us unawares. But I knew this scam and wasn't interested in being his mark.

When I saw the startling image in his mind, I calmly replied, "And I bet I know where you got yours." I pointed to his handmade Italian loafers. He regarded me with mild amusement. Looking directly into his eyes like a Grand Inquisitor, I said, "You stole them from a corpse lying in his casket."

Never before had I seen a black man turn pale. Shock drained the blood from his face giving his complexion a gray cast. His eyes widened in fear and he began stepping backwards with his palms raised as if to ward me off. When he had put fifteen yards between us, he whirled around and darted into the crowd, his mind reeling with thoughts of voodoo curses and zombies bent on revenge.

Perhaps I'd been a little hard on him...the victim was dead, after all, and wouldn't miss his fancy footwear. The con man regarded items such as the Italian shoes, gold rings, and silk ties as a requisite of his janitor's job at a funeral home. Personally, I didn't have a problem with his pilfering. What was the point of burying valuable items that might be useful to a living person? What puzzled me was why the fellow chose to run that particular scam on tourists when it forced him to think about his vandalizing of dead bodies each time he offered the "shoes" bet. Perhaps his subconscious was punishing him. Not my problem.

"Wow, Edward, that was a little mean, don't you think?" Alice chided.

Was it? Maybe in my pain I was losing the compassion Carlisle claimed I'd acquired when I fell in love with Bella.

"Yeah, maybe so. He's not a very nice person, though," I replied, defending myself weakly.

"That kind of thing has a way of catching up with people, don't you think? He'll get caught soon enough," Alice said with a sideways look at me and a half smile on her face.

I saw her mental image of the huckster hurriedly peeling a pair of Armani trousers from the legs of a dead man when his boss, the mortician, unexpectedly walks into the visitation room. I laughed at the con man's mortified expression and his attempt to sidestep the situation. (*"His pants is wrinkud. Dey need some pressin'."*)

The mood of the city fit my mood perfectly. Beneath the guise of lively music, 'round-the-clock partying, and friendly social banter lies a desperate, mournful quality to the city's crumbling grandeur—and to its people too. The "have-nots" live behind veils that barely conceal their deep pain and hardship; the atmosphere is thick with it.

New Orleans has a long, ugly history as a slave-trading port, first for the French and Spanish, and then for the Americans. White Louisianans fought vigorously during the American Civil War to preserve that tradition in support of their labor-intensive, plantation-based economy. The scars of those years have trickled down through generations of a people living in a place that has found no quick cure for the poverty and disenfranchisement of its freed citizens.

Alice and I found vampire scent trails in the city and steered clear of them as much as possible. They weren't as prevalent on Bourbon Street and in the French Quarter as we had expected, assuming drunken revelers or lost tourists would be obvious prey. We saw more signs of vampire presence in the poorer districts of the city where drug users and dealers congregate and citizens have grown accustomed to seeing death in the streets. It wouldn't be hard to make someone disappear in these lawless parts of town.

Alice found a "Ghosts-and-Ghouls" tour for us to join one evening, which I didn't mind doing, thinking that it might be mildly entertaining. Our group of twenty was driven around the city in an open-air trolley car while a microphoned tour guide directed our attention to old houses and spooky buildings purported to have some connection to the occult. The guide was dressed as a vampire from Central Casting with a black cape, slicked-back hair, and a set of subtle fangs that he revealed at pivotal moments while

telling his stories, which produced squeals of fright from the more impressionable participants.

The first location we viewed was a crumbling old convent with boarded-up windows where a boatload of newly arrived immigrant women were said to have lived while they acclimated to the New World and waited for French colonists to select them as wives. The ratio of men to women in eighteenth-century New Orleans was fourteen to one and no colony could survive long without such infusions of women of child-bearing years.

Each of the young women is said to have arrived with her wedding dowry stowed in a coffin-shaped box. These valuable boxes were placed in the convent's attic where the window shutters were closed and latched. When the nuns found the shutters hanging open in the morning, they nailed them shut. In spite of this, the attic shutters continued to open themselves during the night and are said to do so still after two-and-a-half centuries. Alice and I didn't try to determine whether the story is true, but we noticed no vampire scent in the vicinity. As vampire myths go, this one certainly could have been based on fact, though the part about "coffin-shaped" boxes is an obvious fiction.

Our tour guide told another vampire tale of an ageless European Count who was known to host expensive and elegant dinner parties for high-society guests, serving them the best food and drink while he only sipped red wine. He hosted these parties for fifty years without appearing to age at all, and then immigrated to America and continued the pattern for another fifty years in New Orleans. The punch line to the story is that a guest once grew curious about the gentleman's ubiquitous wine glass and when no one was looking, took a taste of its contents. He discovered that it was not wine at all, but blood—presumably human blood. We were shown the Count's mansion, an overgrown relic that remains standing in the Garden District. He may live there still, though Alice and I didn't detect any signs of that. If he exists at all, which is more than possible, perhaps he has been driven away for the time being by the intrusive tours. Like the Cullens, maybe he will return to his house when everyone has forgotten the stories.

The tour perpetuated the usual myths, including the fictions that we sleep in coffins and burst into flames in the sun. We laughed when the tour guide claimed that a human must be bitten seven times to join our ranks. I'm afraid I found it rather tempting to contradict the "expert" with the microphone.

Had other vampires taken this tour to see how humans perceive us? If so, did the participants realize how close they were to the real thing? Perhaps some of our kind selected their prey from among the curious. I could see how it might be perversely amusing to follow a titillated tourist from the tram into the late-night streets of New Orleans, approach him from behind, and ask how he had enjoyed the tour before initiating him to the real world of the damned.

After two days of exploring the city and keeping each other company—though hardly able to cheer each other up—my sister and I decided to return to the tasks we had undertaken in coming to the South. I would follow the road to Houston and Alice would

head for Biloxi.

“You know, the Cullen name is revered in Houston,” Alice informed me before we parted ways. “Hugh Roy Cullen struck it rich in Texas oil and used the money to found the University of Houston in the 1930s. He’s a descendant of Carlisle’s.”

“Is that right? Carlisle never mentioned it,” I replied, surprised.

“He probably never had a reason to. The Cullens are known in the area as the ‘Rockefellers of Houston.’ I can’t see Carlisle bragging about that, can you?”

“No, though he could. It’s certainly an improvement over what *his* father did—hunt vampires and burn witches at the stake.” I smiled without amusement. “The Cullens have come a long way.”

“We’ve mostly stopped killing people, anyway,” Alice replied drolly.

With a brief hug of mutual support, we said our goodbyes and headed in opposite directions away from New Orleans. I returned to the Cadillac I’d parked near Highway 10 just outside the city and aimed it west toward Texas.

After only a few hours of driving, I approached Beaumont, Texas, where Jasper said Victoria had made her most recent cellphone call several days before. I had no reason to believe that she was still there, but I could track her more easily without my rental car. And since twilight was approaching, I returned it to the local Enterprise office and set out on foot once again.

Before long, it became evident both that Victoria had been in Beaumont and that she was heading toward Jasper’s hometown of Houston. It was ninety miles between the two cities and as I ran from one to the other, Victoria’s scent trail grew stronger. Approaching Houston, her path curved south around the city’s center and then veered north again after she had passed the major metropolitan area. I followed her route by jumping over busy parkways, running through an outlying industrial zone, and entering a suburban area full of traffic lights and automobiles. Eventually, it became clear that the trail was leading to a large mall with a long, arched skylight for a roof. It reminded me of a section of the magnificent Galleria in Milan and when I grew closer, I could see that it was named for it too. The well-lit sign at the entrance to the mall parking lot said “Galleria Shopping Center.”

Was Victoria really going to the mall? It was such a silly notion that it might have made me chuckle at an earlier time and a different place. She’s a nomad, a vampire who normally avoids populated areas except to feed, but here she was visiting a suburban mall. Her trail, which became fresher as I sped along it, led me to a discrete employee’s entrance in the side of the massive complex. I slipped through a heavy, gray fire door and stepped into a long, dark hallway. At the end of the “tunnel” was a rectangle of bright white light from which raucous sounds of shoppers could be heard. The light made me wary, but I walked toward it until the hallway opened into a huge, rectangular area the size of an arena, over which domed the enormous skylight. No doubt it flooded the complex with brilliant sunshine during the day.

The Galleria Shopping Center boasted three stories of high-end boutiques ringing its outside walls and two large department stores anchoring its ends. The second and third floors had balcony railings made of plate glass which hundreds of people leaned against to watch the action in the open rectangle of the first floor.

As I stepped into the bright light of the interior space and peered around an escalator installation, I saw what everyone was looking at. It was an ice-skating rink—a reference to the Rockefeller Center in New York—but this one was large enough to host a regulation hockey game. On the ice, which looked almost blue in color, orange cones formed a dotted oval. Dozens of ice skaters glided around the outside of the oval, while more skilled skaters leaped and performed tricks in the center. It was a beautiful pre-winter scene with one startling component. Through the crowd around the skating rink, I saw a bright, red-orange flame of hair rotating in an impossible spin. Victoria was in the center of things skating a little too brilliantly for a vampire trying to pass as human. I was shocked by her brazenness, but quickly became mesmerized along with everybody else.

Why would Victoria come to such a public place? It was true that I didn't know much about her, but I'd assumed she would be like other nomads I knew and choose not to mingle with humans. Perhaps she was playing a game whereby she would wander into a public place to make a spectacle of herself before choosing her prey. If so, that implied she had been feeding from the population of this mall or was about to. If I handled the situation well, perhaps I could destroy her before she took the life of another human.

Victoria was skating in the center of the oval with the more advanced skaters and skate dancers. With preposterously short run-ups, she leaped into double axel spins, followed by perfect landings and artistic pirouettes, feats seen only in professional-class competitions, if there. Her showy performance either impressed or discouraged the other skaters into clinging to the side walls to watch. As larger areas of the ice became clear, my red-headed vampire prey claimed more of it. For ten full minutes she took over the rink, skating circles around anyone who dared to remain on the ice. When the piped-in music changed pace, Victoria altered her skating performance from slow and dramatic to fast and energetic.

An athletic human wearing tight-fitting spandex and black skates glided onto the ice behind Victoria and wrapped one arm around her waist, synchronizing his leg movements to hers. They skated one large figure eight around the ice together while the young man whispered something in her ear. Shortly thereafter, Victoria began skating backwards in front of her partner and on some signal leaped into the air. He simultaneously straightened his arms and lifted her above his head, balancing her there. She arched her back and spread her arms in a graceful flying pose as they circled the ice. Then on another signal, the young man flexed his knees to bounce Victoria slightly into the air. As she dropped, she swung her legs forward into a seated position allowing him to catch her cleanly in his arms. Then he set her feet on the ice and they glided forward in perfect synchrony. On the final notes of the popular song, the man dropped Victoria toward the ice

with one arm around her waist, bending over her in a dramatic dip.

The floor-to-roof audience began to clap and cheer. Wolf whistles drifted down from the third-floor balconies. I watched Victoria skate gracefully off the ice amidst these accolades, leaving the young man to skate alone and watch after her with a look of confusion. Others soon joined him on the ice in pairs and trios. I moved toward the ice too, walking quickly so I wouldn't lose Victoria in the crowd. I was beyond the opposite end of the rink from where she had exited, but with so many observers nearby, I dared not run to catch up with her.

When I reached the spot where I had last seen her, Victoria was gone. I scanned the crowd of skaters on the ice and those watching from outside the railing. Then I scanned the throng of people toward the far end of the mall, but did not see her bright red hair. She had left in a hurry. I located her scent trail and began following it, moving as fast as I could without drawing attention to myself. When I passed the last of the boutiques lining the walls of the building, a sharp turn took me down another long, dark hallway. I passed a door to a janitorial closet and two more leading to public restrooms before reaching a set of heavy exterior doors. I raced through them and cast an eye over the parking lot. No Victoria.

I began running then, tracking her west through a quiet commercial district and several suburban neighborhoods before reaching a large park, which was heavily wooded, but well-groomed. Racing into the park, I came upon a small lake and began to circle it to the left, getting nearly all the way around before I realized that I had lost Victoria's trail. *Damn!* It was so difficult to keep my mind on the task at hand when all I really wanted to do was run back to Bella... see her face, smell her scent... touch her hair... but *no!* I must guard against such thoughts! If I let my mind wander too far in that direction, I wasn't certain I could bring it back.

I retraced my steps around the lake, but couldn't locate Victoria's scent. Perhaps she had swum the several acres across it. If she had entered the water, though, she would have to exit somewhere! I tore around the full perimeter of the lake, but found only the one trail leading to it. Either she was hiding underwater or she had pulled the same trick she'd used to lose me in Shreveport... backtracking in her own footsteps. I didn't think she was in the lake and I didn't know how she could have backtracked toward me, because I hadn't been very far behind her. I ran backwards along her scent trail, but couldn't find any point where she had veered off. I continued running all the way back to the edge of the park, but still found nothing except for a sign I hadn't noticed before:

George Bush Park
(formerly Cullen Park)

Damn, damn, damn! Not again! Victoria hadn't been behaving evasively, so I'd let down my guard, let my mind wander, and missed it when she changed tactics. Had she

detected my presence? I didn't see how she could have, but if not, why had she suddenly become evasive again?

Something else puzzled me. I was close to Victoria, but I hadn't heard her thoughts. *Why not?* Laurent would have told her that I could read minds, something I hadn't bothered to do when I'd met her at the baseball field. Maybe there was something peculiar about her mind that made her hard to recognize. Or maybe she operated so much on instinct that she was able to avoid consciously thinking about any strategy.

Whether she knew I was chasing her or not, Victoria was dodging me very effectively. In spite of her tricks, though, she was leaving a trail of scent behind her, so in theory, all I had to do was find it and I could find her. I decided to run a series of north-south lines about fifty yards apart over the area between the park and the mall. If I didn't find her scent that way, then I would run a series of east-west lines.

Running a grid can be tedious, but I had no other ideas and nothing but time on my hands. Maybe the chore was a blessing in disguise, because running was one of the few things that brought any kind of relief from the endless ache in the place where my heart used to be. I began running lines crosswise to Victoria's original trail, cursing myself all the while for my ridiculous ineptitude. I couldn't do anything right by Bella, nothing at all, including trying to eliminate the danger from her life.

I continued with my unproductive exercise for ten minutes before it occurred to me that if Victoria had repeated her trick of backtracking on her own footsteps, then perhaps she had also repeated her trick of jumping into the trees to escape. With that inspiration, I bolted back to the park and sprang into the first stand of pine trees I saw, leaping from one tree to another to another, moving fast.

If Victoria's scent had been in the trees above me as I ran, I should have been able to smell it from the ground, but I hadn't and I could think of only two possible reasons for that. Either the trail in the trees paralleled an existing trail on the ground or I hadn't run beneath the right trees. I raced a jagged line through the trees around to the opposite side of the lake.

Then, unexpectedly, I found it. The trail in the trees seemed to start from nowhere, with no ground trail leading to it. Now I understood what Victoria had done. Instead of running into the lake or backtracking from it as I had thought, she'd jumped across it and landed in a tree! I was impressed by the number of clever tricks she had for evading a pursuer. Based on her use of them, I had to assume that Victoria knew she was being followed, though perhaps she didn't yet know by whom. If her nastiness toward my family was any indication, Victoria could have any number of pursuers bent on doing away with her. She had created a terrible stir in Shreveport, for example, and local vampires there might have taken exception to that.

I ran through the trees until the scent dropped to the ground and out of the park on the west side. If Victoria continued in that direction, eventually she would end up in San Antonio, which quite possibly was where she was headed. I prepared myself for a long

chase.

Victoria's detour into the Houston mall puzzled me. The way she had run directly to it made me think that she'd been there before. I wondered if she was developing the habit of using such public places as her hunting grounds, which was what she had done in Shreveport. If Victoria hadn't decided to leave the ice so abruptly—*because of me?*—perhaps she would have lured the young man out of the mall and fed on him. It was as good a hunting strategy as any, I supposed, except that it drew a lot of attention to herself.

Oh! That was it!

Finally, I understood. She was *trying* to draw attention to herself. She was sending a signal to other vampires that she was in the neighborhood! Word was certain to get around to those who lived in the area. She was either inviting her own destruction or she was making sure that she met a particular Texas-based vampire. Who else could it be but Maria?

Maria was certain to have enemies—she was that kind of individual—who might discover Victoria's disruptive presence before she did, but one way or another she would hear about Victoria. After all, Maria had taken control of Texas in the days when Jasper was with her. Maybe Victoria was trying to draw Maria out while avoiding being attacked by her or others who caught wind of her. That would explain Victoria's evasiveness and why I was finding it so difficult to catch up to her.

This project was becoming more involved than I had expected when I took it on. Even so, I was finding it difficult to work up much enthusiasm for it. I had no real interest in Victoria. As long as she stayed away from Bella, I couldn't care less where she went or what she did.

Then a thought occurred to me—what if Victoria did decide to go after Bella? If she headed toward Forks, I would *have* to follow her, wouldn't I? *Of course I would!* I could never allow Victoria to get anywhere near my beloved!

Oh Bella... Here I am wishing for the unthinkable just so I can be near you again....