

15. Banished

Needless to say, I searched for Victoria...up, down, all around. When that yielded nothing, I waited, thinking that she must be hiding nearby. I waited all night. I listened all day. I came back the next night and listened the following day. Still nothing.

Looking back on it, I think I know what happened. I cannot verify my theory now that I am on the opposite side of the equator, but I hope I was right. I hope Victoria suffered a great deal as she waited for me to end my vigil and go away.

When I finally gave up on finding Victoria in Texas, I still had one advantage on her—I knew where she was headed and I had already decided to anticipate her next move and fly to Rio de Janeiro myself. So as I watched and waited for her to emerge from her hiding place in the *colonia* and face me, I dreamed of kidnapping my love and taking her to South America with me. If I stole her away from everything we knew, perhaps we could escape the dangers that plagued her. In a new environment with a new start, maybe I could protect her better. Maybe I could stay with her for a lifetime.

It was a fantasy, I knew. *Where* Bella resided was not the source of her problems. I was. It was me and my world causing all the trouble—and I couldn't escape from me, nor could I bring her into my world. It was impossible. I already knew that, so why did I torture myself yet again by dreaming dreams that could never come true?

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

I had nothing but prayers to keep me away from her now. This one—quite suitably—was a page torn from an addict's handbook.

My only other coping mechanism was to try and distract myself from the pain, and I was doing that as best I could. No longer, though, could I tolerate thinking in terms of two weeks, or even one week, of this torture. I borrowed another credo from Alcoholics Anonymous:

One day at a time.

One day at a time to survive the torment, one *night* at a time not to race back to Forks in search of relief. With constant sunshine in Rio, I would not run during the day. I still had the discipline of almost ninety years to keep me from breaking the principal rule of our kind—to keep our existence secret from humans. On second thought, I guess I'd already

allowed myself one exception. Bella...my true love...knew what I was.

I'd last spoken to Alice from San Antonio, to let her and the rest of the family know that I was okay. She'd already known it, but I wanted to give our mother a reason to believe it. I had spoken to my father too, at his insistence.

"Edward, we want you to come home," he had said.

"I can't, Carlisle. I just...can't."

"I know that you're struggling, son, but can't we do anything to help?"

"I don't think you can. I have to make sure that Bella is safe and—besides staying away from her myself—that means eliminating Victoria. I'm close now. I think I have a good chance of finding her," I told him, without mentioning the waning of my drive to do so.

"I won't pressure you then. You must do what you feel is right. Just know that your mother misses you terribly, as do I. And we love you. Don't forget that."

"I won't, Dad. I love you both. I wish I could show it better."

"It's okay. We'll be here for you when you're ready."

It had been what? A month since then? Six weeks? I was no longer sure. Alice and Jasper had been back in Ithaca quite a while, long enough for Jasper to be well along in his Philosophy program at Cornell. Emmett and Rosalie had been on their way back from Europe.

"It's March, Edward," Alice was reminding me now. I'd let her reach me after I'd been in Brazil for two days.

"March, huh?"

"Yes. We're all going up to Denali for Cornell spring break. It would be nice if you tried staying in touch with the real world a little bit," she chastised.

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" I said defensively.

"Yes, but I had to call *you*."

"You would have done it anyway."

"That's beside the point."

"What do you want, Alice?" I groused.

"So you're in Rio now, I take it."

"That's right. Victoria came down here on holiday or something. I suppose being hounded across two states was too much for her."

"So she's there for Carnival?"

"Oh, crap! I didn't realize—it's Carnival! That's why—"

"You really are out of touch! How can you be in Rio and not know it's Carnival?" she asked without waiting for an answer. "Laurent's gone, by the way."

"He's not in Denali?"

"No, he left a couple of weeks ago. He told Tanya he had something he needed to do. Jasper thinks he went hunting...real hunting."

"Do you think he came down here to meet Victoria?" I asked with trepidation.

“So you haven’t found her, yet, I take it? I was hoping you could tell me.”

“No, I haven’t tracked her yet, but I haven’t been working too hard at it since I arrived. I will, though.”

“Good. I can’t get any picture of Victoria at all—or Laurent either, for that matter. They’ve both gone off my radar. I don’t know why. It’s bugging me.”

“Well, I chased her to the south Texas border,” I told Alice, “and she said she was coming here, so...maybe it’s too far away?”

“Shouldn’t be. I can see you.”

“Right.” I really was slow today. “I’ll keep an eye out for Laurent too. It could have been him she was talking to about Rio.”

“Ooh, that would hurt Irina’s feelings if it’s true, so if you find him, don’t tell me, I guess, then I can’t spill the beans.”

“If I find him, you’ll know it. Since you see me *so well*,” I retorted. The sarcasm was not lost on Alice.

“Thank God! Since you never call!” she hollered back. I should have seen that coming, but I didn’t. I remained silent. “Okay, Edward, but I want you to know that Rosalie is not happy and when Rose is not happy, none of us are happy.”

“What’s her problem?” I already knew, I thought, and I didn’t really want to. For once, this situation had absolutely nothing to do with Rosalie, though she no doubt thought I was punishing her personally by staying away.

“I think you know.”

“I do, Alice, I do. But I cannot look after Rosalie’s feelings right now. I can barely keep myself together, much less try to make her happy. I’m hanging on by my fingernails here.” I heard my voice fade to a whisper and break slightly on the last word.

“I know,” my sister replied gently. “She’ll survive. Here’s the thing, though. Why don’t you stop this nonsense now? Just give it up already. You can, you know. Your problems are all in your head. Just give in and be happy!”

“Alice...” I growled.

“Okay, okay...you do what you have to do. I promised I wouldn’t interfere, but I didn’t promise I wouldn’t tell you what I thought about it.”

“Bye, Alice.”

“Be that way then, but try to leave your phone on a little more, please. You’re worrying Esme something terrible!”

“Okay, Alice. Bye, Alice.”

“Bye, Edward.”

As much as she infuriated me sometimes, I was eternally grateful for Alice. She was my only link to sanity right now. She disagreed with me completely about Bella, but I knew she understood my difficulties and she cared enough to check in. The others in my family would check in too if I let them, but Alice was the only one who could stay detached enough not to add to my burden. What would I do without Alice?

But I'd been thinking about something else before my sister called...

Victoria had jumped into a septic tank! It's the only possible way she could have escaped me. Except for the grouping of new shacks, which used an open pit for their toilet, every inhabited plot of that *colonia* wasteland had a septic tank, or some semblance of one. The yard where Victoria's scent disappeared had one, but I'd only just now put two and two together, probably because the idea was so foul, or maybe because I was too distraught and distracted to think clearly at the time.

I remember seeing the neck of the buried tank sticking up above the dirt. It had a plastic cover that looked like the lid to a gigantic pickle jar with no threads. I didn't know what held it on—perhaps it floated off when the tank got full. But the opening would have been big enough for Victoria to lift the lid and slide in. Once inside, her scent would have been well masked by the odor of sewage.

The corners of my mouth twitched upward the tiniest bit. She'd had to dive into a vat of sewage to dodge me! *Ha, ha, ha!* Even if I never got close enough to destroy her, I had paid her back in some small measure for helping James track and nearly kill Bella. It wasn't enough, of course, but it was something...something tangibly nasty.

Unfortunately, I was already in South America before I'd figured that out. I spent two seconds thinking about how I would have coaxed her out of the tank had I realized she was in there. Perhaps a lit torch... Would a closed septic tank contain enough methane to blow up? I wondered idly. I thought it might. Not the best way to maintain secrecy about our presence, certainly, but *damn*, it would have been funny!

Water under the bridge. Now I was hanging around in Rio waiting for Victoria to arrive. I felt confident that she would come. I'd heard her phone conversation about going to Brazil before she knew I was nearby. It was only later that she began to flee from me. I don't know how she detected me—I'd been downwind of her and moved silently. It remained an unanswered question.

After that incident, I'd returned to San Antonio and caught an airplane to Atlanta, another from there to Brasilia (Brazil's capital city), and a third to Rio de Janeiro. The necessarily indirect route made it a ridiculously long journey—sixteen hours—but the first class seats were tolerable. I had an eternity of time to kill, anyway.

It wasn't until disembarking that last plane that I began to face the reality of the task I'd set for myself. With Rio's six million citizens and four hundred fifty-six square miles, how on God's green earth did I think I would find Victoria? My copious good luck?

It was crazy for me to be in Rio hunting Victoria. It was idiotic and maybe even foolhardy. I think I knew that when I bought my ticket, but getting farther away from Forks seemed like a good idea, regardless of the reason. The hunt could go on forever in such a large city and having that *raison d'etre* might keep me from running back to Bella with my tail between my legs. I'd tried everything else I could think of and felt nearer than ever to failure.

So I'd banished myself to Rio. I arrived in the wee hours of the morning, but the

airport was still a nightmare of crowds and confusion. I'd had to make an effort not to bruise or break anyone as they were bumped and bulldozed into my path. I escaped as quickly as I could and started walking toward the Central District of the city, brushing off cab drivers. I knew the airport was close to downtown, which would do for an initial destination.

Downtown Rio is pretty at night, modern and well-lit, with enough elegant old buildings to give it a European feel. I passed the National Historical Museum and several treed plazas just beyond the airport, then a number of stone edifices that looked like courts and legislative buildings. Much to my surprise, the downtown was not deserted. There is little or no residential space in the business district and I had seen no late-night clubs or early-morning restaurants there, but people were still on the street. I avoided them as best I could. They seemed to be a young and raucous crowd and drugs and alcohol were in evidence.

My first goal was to find a daylight hiding place for myself. I had not timed things well, as it turned out, and pre-dawn light already was sliding up the horizon. I passed a beautiful, old, stone church and thought I might stay there if I could get inside it undetected. Churches always have odd closets, empty niches, trapdoors to crypts, and such. I didn't have a lot of time to fool around finding those hidden spaces, though.

I kept walking, hoping to locate something simpler and more obvious to use as my lair. A few blocks on, though, I saw another beautiful stone church and decided that it must be an omen. I gazed upward at the elaborate structure which had two bell towers flanking its front façade and a huge dome arcing over the central building, and tried to figure out the best way to gain access.

Oddly enough, the grounds around the church were filled with dozens of black- and brown-skinned children, some as young as four or five and others as old as sixteen or seventeen, more boys than girls. Many of the children were sleeping on the grass and on the surrounding concrete, but some were awake and prowling the area. When they spied me, they rushed over en masse and swarmed around my legs, giving me shy smiles and firing off a hundred questions in Portuguese. I felt more than one little hand reach into the pockets of my trousers and the back of my waistband. They were looking for a wallet or a money belt, touching me everywhere, seemingly immune to the subtle signs that mark me as "other." Most human beings keep their distance from us intuitively, sensing the danger in our overly pale skin, the odd color of our eyes, the stillness of our bodies, but these children were fearless. When I thought about the experience later, I realized that at least one of those little hands probably was offering me "personal services," which made me very sad, indeed.

So I was meeting the notorious street children of Rio de Janeiro! I had read articles about them in the 1990s after several carloads of men, including off-duty police officers, drove to this very place, Candelaria Church, and opened fire while the children were sleeping. Eight children were killed and many others were wounded that night, purportedly

as retribution for hurling rocks at a police car earlier that day. The internationally reported incident, which became known as the Candelaria Massacre, led to some efforts at reforming the brutal treatment of street kids, but I could see that it had not reduced their numbers. They are said to survive on begging, pickpocketing, and hiring themselves out to do menial tasks. Some prostitute themselves or serve as gofers for drug dealers. Theirs is a sad plight, but they are also a nuisance when one wishes to keep a low profile.

To shoo them away, I pulled some dollar bills from my wallet (which I was holding safely in my hand), crumpled them into tight wads, and flicked them high into the air with my thumb and forefinger. I tossed my pocket change upward for good measure, though I wasn't sure whether U.S. quarters, dimes, and nickels would do them much good. They might have preferred cigarettes. As the children scrambled for the money, I darted away to the refuge of the church, noting their startled thoughts when they looked up and realized that I had "disappeared."

Along the side of the church, outside the light of the nearby streetlamps and behind the taller and wider façade at the front of the building, I jumped to the church's roof and then scrambled up one of the two bell towers until I reached the open enclosure where the church bell hung. I rolled over the stone wall and dropped out of sight behind it, landing softly on my duffle which was still strapped to my back and, remarkably, unmolested.

When I decided that I had gone unnoticed, I peeked over the wall and saw that most of the children had returned to the church grounds—their unfenced and less-than-secure sanctuary—though some of the more industrious (or hungrier) continued to comb the ground looking for cash. I recalled from reading about the massacre that the nuns at this Catholic church feed the children and provide some guidance and basic necessities of life, as well as allow them to sleep on the grounds.

I don't know whether the vendetta against Rio's street kids has lessened in the twelve years since the incident or whether the men who shot the children were ever convicted. Rumor has it that shopkeepers hired the "hit men" to remove the children from around their businesses and that it was far from an isolated incident.

Though any number of street kids may die at the hands of wicked humans, I was as certain as I could be that these unprotected children also provide a continual buffet for Brazilian vampires. Like the people of the Texas *colonias*, their numbers seemed limitless.

I settled into my stone refuge which, for once, was open to the air (though one couldn't call Rio's air "fresh," exactly). I'd have to keep my head below the top of the wall lest the sun reflect off my skin and draw attention. From what I remembered of Rio de Janeiro when I visited with my family in the 1970s, it is essentially sunny all the time, and March is the end of the summer season...to the degree that Rio has seasons, anyway.

I looked around inside the bell tower where I was bound to stay for the next twelve hours. The huge iron bell, five feet tall and at least as wide, hung perhaps ten feet above my head and had a flat bar across its top. From the bar hung a long, sturdy rope that fell through a ladder hole in the wooden planks where I sat. Presumably, a bell ringer would pull the

rope from below to set the bell swinging and ringing. If I had thought about it, I would have assumed that church bells were rung mechanically in the 21st century and that bell ringers were obsolete, but obviously I was wrong. I wasn't sure what day of the week it was, but I hoped I wouldn't be meeting a Catholic priest or sexton when he decided to climb into the belfry.

Wouldn't that be peachy? If I had some wings I could pretend to be an angel...like the angel, Carlisle. Or a vampire bat...I could be the vampire bat in the belfry!

Alice would laugh at that one. I definitely looked more bat than angel in the clothes I was wearing. They were badly rumpled, but less bedraggled than the clothes in my duffle, all of which were covered with good ol' Texas dirt. I should toss the whole thing and get some new clothes, I supposed, if I was going to haunt Rio for the foreseeable future. Where was Alice when I needed her?

Where is Bella? I need her. (A tiny voice whispered in my head.)

That doesn't matter! What I need isn't the point! I lost my life. Bella shouldn't have to lose hers. I won't let that happen! Arrghhh!

The pain, oh, the paaaaain...

I curled into a pill bug on the plank floor.

Could a man survive being thus divided? I did not think so...not a *human* man. But I wasn't human and I couldn't *not* survive it, every twist of the knife, every crack of the lash, every turn of the wheel, world without end.

Sanctuary! Please, oh please. I would keep in my bell tower, never come down. Images filled my head of Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which Esme had dragged me out to see in 1939. I considered the parallels. Quasimodo whisked his gypsy love to his bell tower to give her sanctuary from certain death. I climbed into my bell tower seeking sanctuary from relentless pain. The church couldn't save me, that I knew.

If only I could keep her until her end! I would follow after at once, steal her body away and hold her in my arms as I turned to purple smoke floating to the sky... But no. If I followed my prescribed course, I would not have her...neither before death, neither after. She was lost to me forever.

My body began to shake violently on the floor of the belfry and, like a kindred soul, the bell above me began to vibrate. I heard an infinitesimally soft harmonic note ring through the air. Iron and stone together... alive.

How does one absorb the finality of such a sentence? Humans can do it, of course. Their memories dim; their pain fades; their lives go on. Ours do not. We do not change; we never forget; our pain never eases.

I heard a deep groan of wretchedness echo in the open chamber before I realized it came from me. I shoved my fist in my mouth to stifle the horrendous noise of grief. The citizens would decide that their bell tower was haunted and send priests to remove the demon. Would they could remove the demon from my existence. Free me from me.

But then I remembered Bella. My love exists...and though I cannot see her or hear

the pulse of her heartbeat or feel the warmth of her body, she is yet alive. I let that truth flow through every part of my body and settle into my consciousness. It was a thread of hope, a reason to go on. I am not lost as long as she walks the earth.

I felt the cell phone in my pocket begin to vibrate, but I did not look at the number. There was no one I could speak to. Not then.

Looking back, I do not know how I survived that first day in the belfry. When I bury myself in the ground, I can feel the soil and pine straw and the rotting leaves around me and take a small bit of comfort in their weight and blanketing warmth. I feel held by the earth, calmed by its eternal existence. It would be there always. But in the bell tower, exposed to the restless breezes, the shouting of children outside, the grinding of gears, and the endless stench of automobile exhaust, I felt insubstantial, rootless, battered by external forces. I found no peace in my sanctuary.

I could not stay in the Candelaria Church another day. It reminded me too well of my banishment from true eternity. Heaven is not attainable for me...but it *is* for Bella. If I let her live, she would have a natural, happy life, and an infinite, heavenly afterlife. I *wouldn't* take that away from her!

When nightfall came, I decided to make my escape into the slums of Rio de Janeiro. It was a more suitable place for the likes of me. Anyway, I recognized during my agonizing hours in the bell tower that Victoria would come to Rio and head for the poorest of the poor neighborhoods to feed. As she had done in the *colonias*, she would prey on the “wretched refuse,” the slums jam-packed with humans nobody cared for, including perhaps, the street children whose lives seemed so expendable to the citizens of this teeming metropolis.