

## 10. Tracking

The cell phone on the desk in my garret room began vibrating and dancing across the glass surface. I liked to watch it move around and buzz. It gave me the sense that the caller was inside the phone waiting to be let out. I marveled at the technology that allowed someone four thousand miles away—Alice, I saw—direct something in my room to dance.

Remarkable.

I picked up the phone and flipped it open.

“Alice.”

“Hi, Edward.”

“You have news?”

“Yes, interesting news that I think you’ll want to know.”

“Try me.”

“Remember Laurent?”

“Of course.” *Stupid question.*

“Remember when he said he was coming to Denali?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s here. Actually, he’s been here the whole time. Irina’s sweet on him, I think. Anyway, guess who called him.”

“Why don’t you just tell me, Alice?”

“Victoria.”

“Victoria. The female from James’s coven?”

“Yes, his mate. Laurent didn’t know I was listening. Well, anyway, when we first got here, Laurent asked Jasper where he got his accent and Jasper told him Texas, of course, and they started talking and Laurent asked him how he got all his scars and Jasper told him about the Southern Wars. Laurent’s French...he didn’t know much about it. So that was a while ago, right? Well, Laurent must have been in touch with Victoria...gosh, I wonder why? Maybe he’s two-timing Irina. Do you think I should tell her? Hmm...”

“The story, Alice. Get back to the story.”

“Oh, right. Well, anyway, so in this phone call—which was this morning, actually—I overheard him talking to somebody...a female...and he said, ‘You are? Why?’ and then she said something and he said, ‘Because of that? Really?’ and then she said something and then he said something and then he said, ‘Texas, huh? What’s it like?’ and then she said something and blah, blah, blah...but you know what?”

“What?”

“I think Victoria is in Texas.”

“Yeah, so?”

Alice just waited until the light bulb came on in my head. *Oh... OH!!!*

“That’s very interesting information, Alice,” I finally replied.

“I thought you might like to know.”

“You were right. Thank you.” I hung up the phone to give the seed Alice had planted a chance to sprout.

*That vicious, redheaded bi...!* If it hadn’t been for her, James never would have found Bella in Phoenix! She was just as responsible for hurting Bella as he was. If she hadn’t disappeared after we killed that S–O–B James, and Bella hadn’t been stuck in the hospital for so long, and if the summer hadn’t been so wonderfully distracting.... I sighed heavily at the memory of a life lost to me now.

Victoria should be dead too. She doesn’t deserve to take up space on the planet after what she did! Why didn’t I think of this before? She *needed* killing! And that was my job, my privilege. It would actually be my *pleasure*! Maybe this was something I could rally some enthusiasm for—finding Victoria. Not only would I get to *KILL SOMEONE*, which might be cathartic all by itself, but I could pay back both James and Victoria for what they had done. And they had hounded Bella for no more reason than a springtime lark! James had tried the same thing with Alice eighty years before and he almost succeeded with Bella. Who knows how many others they had tormented in their time together? Victoria had to go!

Suddenly, I wished Jasper were here. Undoubtedly, he could provide useful information about the big state of Texas, “big” being the operative word. Only Alaska would have been a more difficult location as far as the United States was concerned. How to find a vampire in—I opened my laptop and pressed a few keys—268,820 square miles?

We didn’t have anyone in our family who was a particularly gifted tracker. Jasper was probably as good as anyone. But I should be able to do it—I was a vampire, wasn’t I? I wanted to do this job alone, anyway. It was my responsibility as Bella’s—

No. I wasn’t Bella’s anything. I mustn’t let myself think that way any longer. However, the task might give me some direction. I badly needed a project and this one appealed to me.

I know of two individuals of Carlisle’s acquaintance who are gifted trackers. One is an old misanthropic Englishman, as I recall...Alistair. Yes. I don’t know where or how Carlisle met him, but he told me once that Alistair has an amazing ability to find others. He thinks about whom he wants to find and then he feels pulled in a particular direction. When he follows that pull, he eventually comes face-to-face with his target. Carlisle says it’s ironic, because Alistair doesn’t like being around anyone. I suppose he could use his gift to avoid others too, though, by doing the opposite of what his instincts tell him.

The other tracker Carlisle knows is a famous member of the Volturi guard named Demetri. He’s a regular bloodhound. Nobody can escape his nose, or his intuition, or whatever makes his talent work. I’d have to ask Carlisle how it does work, just out of

curiosity. I couldn't exactly borrow Demetri from the Volturi for the price of a week's rental. Well, probably not. And apparently, Alistair is notoriously difficult and self-serving, someone who wouldn't blow his nose to help out somebody else. Of course, my father would never say such a thing, but sometimes you can piece together what he really thinks by what he *doesn't* say.

Oh, and not to forget the dead-and-gone James. He had an extremely well-developed skill based on what I gleaned from his thoughts when we first met him. He'd been playing tracking games his entire vampire life. I couldn't tell how his talent worked, but he was extremely cunning. He had sent Victoria to Forks High School to dig up information about Bella. When Victoria found Renee's address, he immediately flew to Phoenix, almost as if he knew Bella would hide there. He may have had some precognition. Thankfully, that didn't matter now, because he was as dead as a doornail. He was a pile of ashes in a burned-out studio that had been torn down, loaded up, and hauled away to the city dump. A fitting place. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted Victoria to join him.

I was anxious to get going suddenly. I had no obligations in New York except what I owed my family, but I didn't think they would miss my barely there, barely functioning self. Esme was the only one likely to make a fuss when I told her I was leaving. She hated having her family split up. After only a month, she was fretting about how long Alice and Jasper had been away.

Then it hit me. Maybe Alice was staying away *specifically* because I was around. Though she disagreed with my decision to let go of Bella, she had left Forks abruptly and with nary an argument after she saw something that she quickly covered up with word games in her head. Then she argued with me about Bella over the telephone. I could see now that she didn't want to be near me because she was trying to hide something. The notion that Jasper needed to "get away" was just an excuse. I knew Alice wasn't angry with me, or holding a grudge, or anything of that nature, so it had to be a vision that she didn't want me to see.

I could accept that. If she didn't want me to see it, it might be something she was protecting me from as easily as something sly or underhanded. I decided to assume that her motives were good and not press her about it. I didn't really want to know anyway. I was having enough trouble keeping my head above water as it was. But if I left New York, then Alice and Jasper could come home, Emmett would have a better brother for a playmate, and I could take a much-needed break from Rosalie. She was getting on my last nerve.

Sometimes I secretly cursed "ol' what's his face"—Rosalie's dead ex-fiancé—for hurting her so badly, which led Carlisle to smell her bleeding in the street, which led him to change her, which led her to join our family. Then I would feel guilty for my lack of compassion and remember that Rosalie had brought us Emmett, and that Emmett was a godsend. One must take the good with the "less good," I suppose.

I needed to do some research on the Lone Star State. Maybe I could ask Alice to

pump Laurent for more information also. Any details could help. A city, a region, a purpose for her trip...any one of those could lead me to her. All of a sudden, I couldn't *wait* to hear the screeching sound when I tore off her head with my teeth. Then I'd "Flic-a-Bic" and it would be lights out for the nasty redhead.

I picked up my cell phone and speed-dialed Alice. It was the first action I had done with any gusto since, well...since *that* day.

"Hi Alice."

"I knew you'd call back."

"You were right, as usual."

"I *will*, Edward, but I haven't had a chance to do it yet. I have to make it seem natural, like I'm not really interested, like maybe I'm just making conversation. You know." I hadn't needed to ask the question for Alice to answer it. She already knew what I wanted.

"Yes, I do know. But could you hurry it up? I would like to get out of here."

"Not enjoying New York?"

"Not enjoying anywhere at the moment and I need to *do* something. Texas could be the answer."

"Okay, I'll do my best and then call you back. This having to say everything out loud to you kind of stinks, doesn't it?"

"Well, it's certainly less private on your end."

"Oh, by the way, Tanya says 'Hi' again."

"Super."

"Should I tell her 'Hi' back?" Alice asked like we were sixth graders.

"Probably, it would be better if you didn't tell her you were in touch with me at all."

"Hey, did you know that Cousin Kate can shock the stuffing out of you if you touch her by surprise?"

"Yes, you have to keep away from her hands."

"No, really, I mean if *you* touch *her*, *anywhere*, not just her hands."

"I guess I didn't know that."

"She says she's been working on it for centuries, but it's only now really starting to get lethal."

"Good for her. Now would you *please* hurry up?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Alice."

"You're welcome, Edward."

My sister called me back a couple hours later and gave me some news...very little news, but it was something. She said her eavesdropping had led her to believe that Victoria was working some scheme and trying to enlist Laurent's assistance. So far, he had declined, which was good. I was feeling very suspicious of Laurent.

Alice had something else too—Victoria's cell phone number. It wasn't a great clue,

but it wasn't useless. Unlike in the old days where you could locate someone by their telephone area code, cell phone area codes didn't necessarily match geographic regions. You could buy a cell phone in California and use it in Florida. However, cell phone tracking is an intrinsic part of how they work. All kinds of data are collected by cell phone companies. Maybe I could steal some phone records and find out the origin of Victoria's phone calls. They did that sort of thing on CSI all the time. If I had been of a mood to chuckle, I might have chuckled at that thought.

The television show, *Crime Scene Investigation*, was all the rage in the U.S. Carlisle said the number of students applying to colleges to study criminalistics has grown exponentially since that show became popular. I've heard that the job is actually extremely tedious. Often, evidence doesn't magically produce DNA and even if DNA is found, getting test results can take months—not like on the TV show where DNA analysis is instantaneous and matching DNA to a suspect on the computer is a sure thing.

With Alice's secret intelligence in hand, I immediately began to search the Internet for information about locating a cell phone. Usually, a law enforcement agency must ask a judge to issue a warrant for cell phone data based on having probable cause to believe a crime has been committed. If the judge agrees that the probable cause is legitimate, then the wireless phone company is directed to turn over its records for a particular phone number.

From these records, one can determine the general location of the phone by checking which cell tower relayed its most recent phone call. Or the company can find out exactly where the phone is by reading its GPS coordinates. Either kind of information for Victoria's phone would get me close enough to her that I could then track her by her scent.

Since I have no affiliation with a law enforcement agency and I wasn't going to ask Victoria for permission to track her phone, acquiring location data was undoubtedly illegal. However, experience tells me that such things can be accomplished if you know whom to ask and have plenty of money to spend. I happen to have both.

"Alice?"

"Edward?"

"Is Jasper around?"

"Yes."

"Can I speak to him?"

"You could...but you don't need to!" Alice laughed. "Not that he wouldn't love to hear from you, I'm sure." She laughed again.

"Alice..." I warned.

"Okay, okay. The answers are 'yes,' 'yes,' and 'he's already working on it.'" I could envision her face as she gave me this information. Of course, she would know what I wanted and who I would ask, so she did it for me. Even *I* almost smiled—but not quite.

"You're rather amazing, you know that?"

"Yes, but thank you for saying so."

"Have Jasper call me when he gets the information, please, and tell him 'thanks.'"

By the way, the family misses you two, especially Emmett.”

“Tell him that we’re coming to New York soon.”

“As soon as I leave, right?”

“Pretty much, yes. But you know I love you, Edward!”

“I do. Thank you, Alice.”

“You’re welcome, Edward.”

Now all I had to do was wait for Jasper to contact his sleazy, but useful, lawyer in Seattle to find someone to get me the information I needed. In the meantime, I had better prepare Esme for my departure. She wouldn’t be happy about it, but it shouldn’t be hard to convince her that I would feel better if I had something constructive to do. She probably wouldn’t approve of my chasing after a dangerous vampire either, but I did not intend this trip to be a suicide mission and I had lots of advantages...probably. Victoria wouldn’t know I was coming, for one thing.

On second thought, though, she might. I’d better warn Alice to keep my plans secret from Laurent. If he and Victoria were friends, then he might reveal the information to her. Perhaps we should watch our backs with regard to him too.

\*\*\*

It took Jasper only two days to come through for me. Thank God! Now that I had found something useful to occupy my time, I was anxious to get started. Maybe chasing Victoria would ease the torture of sitting in one place, trying not to think about her...who she was with, what she was doing, how she was feeling, whether she ever thought of me.

After a month with my family, the “major crazy” seemed to have passed—I’d had no more fits—but the agony of my loss hadn’t eased. It had changed from the stabbing pain in my chest to an aching hollowness. I felt like a man made of balloons—just thin skin and air. I was sure that if someone poked me with a pin, I would deflate into a pile of unrecognizable scraps.

“She wasn’t in Texas after all,” Jasper told me over the phone. “She was in Shreveport, Louisiana, which is almost Texas, but not quite. Her phone records show that she traveled southwest from Little Rock, Arkansas, and though she could have gone to Texarkana and from there directly into Dallas, she didn’t. After getting to Texarkana, which is barely inside the Texas border, she veered back out and headed south through Louisiana. I have no idea what she would be doing in Shreveport.”

“She was probably looking for Sookie Stackhouse or visiting the Fangtasia nightclub,” I said drily, making a joke that Jasper wouldn’t get, not being a TV-watching vampire. As expected, he did not react.

The Home Box Office channel had a popular new series called *True Blood* which featured vampires who had “come out of the coffin,” so to speak, and were living among humans, drinking synthetic bottled “blood,” and trying to gain acceptance as equal citizens.

It was a ridiculous show, really, one that furthered all the myths the Volturi had created about how we slept in coffins, couldn't go out in the sun without being incinerated, could be killed by silver bullets or wooden crosses, and how vampire blood was an addictive drug to humans. It also perpetuated the myth that vampires could have sex with humans whenever they wished and that killing them afterwards was completely optional, love-biting being part of their sexual pleasure. If only *that* were true!

"But Victoria told Laurent she was in Texas?" I clarified with Jasper.

"She might have said she was 'going' to Texas. Alice isn't clear on that after seeing the phone records." I opened my laptop to find a south-central map of the United States.

"If she's planning to go into Texas, then she could still head straight west from Shreveport and end up in Dallas, which Wikipedia says is the biggest metropolitan area," I commented to my brother, whom I usually thought of as my brother-in-law, probably because I was so close to Alice.

"Or she could be cutting southwest from Shreveport and heading to Austin."

"Isn't Austin supposed to be the 'hippest' town in Texas? I understand it has an active music scene," I said, "though I don't know why Victoria would care about that." Jasper wasn't up-to-date on such considerations and didn't know.

"If she's looking for cities where she could get away with feeding on a lot of humans, she might be heading to Houston. It's the biggest city in Texas," Jasper guessed.

I countered, "On the other hand, didn't Alice say you told Laurent war stories about the South? Maybe she's interested in history, for some reason."

"Yes, could be. San Antonio is the oldest city in Texas, straight west of Houston, and there is indeed a lot of vampire history there. It's also home of the famous Alamo."

"Maybe she's looking for her American vampire roots," I sort of joked, though neither of us thought it was funny.

"The port city of Galveston is also near Houston and that's where I was heading when Maria found me."

"Did you tell Laurent about Maria?" I asked.

"Yes. We were exchanging stories of our creators. He's a personable fellow. He's trying to do as I have and switch to the vegetarian lifestyle—and having an extremely hard time with it."

"I'd consider being careful around him if he's keeping in touch with Victoria."

"He must be, since Alice stole her phone number from his cell phone."

"That says danger to me, Jasper. Watch yourselves, okay?"

"Sure."

"Can you get an update on Victoria's location in a few days and let me know which way she seems to be moving?"

"Yes, I'll ask my man to get another range of cell phone data."

"Thanks, Jasper. Call me when you have something. I'm going to leave New York and head south."

“Are you sure Emmett or I shouldn’t go along with you if you’re going to engage this woman?”

“Probably should, but I want to handle this myself. It’s something I can do for Bella. I guess you could say that I want some personal revenge. I didn’t get the satisfaction of ripping James apart.”

“All right, but remember that you can change your mind. Alice will be worrying about you.”

“Yes, okay.”

I began preparing to leave by packing my duffel. A short time later, Esme found me in my room doing so and was stunned.

“Edward? What are you doing? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, Mom. I was just getting ready to tell you.”

“Where? Why?” I saw her face fall in disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” I said, stepping over to give *her* a hug for a change. “I spoke to Alice. She and Jasper are coming back, so I’m leaving, but you’ll get two in exchange.”

“But I don’t understand, Edward,” she said, taking my face between her hands and looking into my eyes. “You’ve been feeling better, haven’t you?”

“I’m coping better, certainly, but I have something I need to do.”

“What could be so important that you would leave your family?”

I hesitated before answering. “I found out where Victoria is.” I hadn’t wanted to tell her. I knew it would frighten and upset her to know my plans.

“You’re going after Victoria?” Her voice rose in anxiety. “Have you told your father?”

“No, I haven’t seen him yet.”

“What did you find out?”

“Alice called me, and Laurent—you know he’s in Denali, right?—has been in touch with her. Jasper’s been helping me locate her and we think she’s headed to Texas.”

“But what are you going to do?” she inquired.

“Whatever I can. She can’t get away with hurting Bella. She doesn’t deserve to live.” As I spoke, my voice lowered in volume and I heard the vicious edge to it. I *did* want her dead.

My mother just stood there and looked at me beseechingly, but she didn’t say anything more. She must have seen the determination on my face.

“You’ll wait until Carlisle gets home?” I could see that this was not a question, but a demand and I wasn’t going to argue.

“Of course.”