

11. Shreveport

I was glad to be on the move, leaving New York State and heading south. I had a mission now and though the pain of loss did not ease, moving seemed preferable to sitting still. At least it gave the appearance of progress.

Carlisle wasn't thrilled about my leaving on a murder mission, but just as he had done when Rosalie stalked and killed her tormenters in Rochester seventy years ago, my father would look the other way. He felt it was not unreasonable for me to seek payback for what Victoria had helped James do to Bella. He would never choose to kill when it could be avoided, but he believed in protecting his family, and James and Victoria had seriously threatened ours.

I'd considered driving from New York to Texas until I looked at a map, traced a few highways and realized it was fourteen hundred miles to Shreveport, Louisiana, where I thought I would start. That was half again as far as I'd driven from Forks to Ithaca and though driving was easy, it gave me a little too much time to think. When I did that, my internal engine began to lose power, slowly decreasing in speed until it was more or less idling, and then—to carry the metaphor one step too far—the fuel line clogged up and my engine stopped altogether. It would be better, I decided, to leave my car at the Ithaca airport and fly to Shreveport. Alice and Jasper could drive the car home when they flew into town.

After discussing my intentions with Carlisle, saying goodbye to everyone, and promising my mother that I would keep in touch, I left our new home that would never feel like home to me.

On the way to the airport, I called to book the next flight from Ithaca to New York City. From there, I could fly to Atlanta and then on to Shreveport. There was no route more direct than that, but I didn't mind much. I couldn't get to Shreveport in less than eight hours no matter what flights I took. I wanted to start in Shreveport because I had a feeling that something there interested Victoria and I thought that she might still be there by the time I flew in. I had no basis for that belief, but if I followed *my* intuition, like real trackers do, perhaps I would find that I had a knack for it. Tracking was the most common vampire talent and I'd never tested myself at it. My only real experience was when Carlisle, Emmett, and I had to track James on Vancouver Island when he inexplicably stopped tracking *us* as we intended him to do, and took off in another direction. We sniffed out his trail eventually and followed him to the Vancouver airport. It was too bad that our guess for what flight he took from there was utterly wrong.

During my day-long journey to Shreveport, moving from city to city and changing from one flight to the next, something Jasper said came back to me—he had told Laurent

about his creator, Maria. If Laurent was a friend to Victoria (or even something less than “friend”) and he knew Victoria was in Texas, might he not want to warn her about Maria? Maria was a powerful and dangerous vampire even this long after the Volturi had intervened in the Southern wars. According to Jasper, when he left Maria in 1938, the wars continued, only on a smaller and less visible scale. Newborns were still being used as cannon fodder to fight rival covens, except that the leaders now tried to fly under the Volturi’s radar.

We had last seen Maria in Calgary, Alberta, where we were living in the 1960s and she caused so much of a stir that we had to abandon Canada and the western side of the continent altogether. From what I could glean from her thoughts then, she had never stopped wanting Jasper to come back to her and whether that was because she missed him or only because she had found him useful was never clear. In Calgary, she had taken an immediate dislike to Alice, so much so that I warned my family that we must keep Alice away from Maria. Jasper insisted that she leave immediately for Denali, which she did.

Maria visited our home three times while she was in the area and made much of our “odd lifestyle,” which she could not comprehend. Most human–drinking vampires did not, so that was nothing new, but Maria couldn’t leave it alone. While she was there, she continually taunted Jasper about his tamed ways and how he seemed rather more like a eunuch than when she had known him. Jasper held up to it well. As long as Alice was safe, he wasn’t disturbed by Maria’s opinions any longer, but it irritated Emmett a great deal and we had to keep him away from Maria too.

Finally, after hanging around for several weeks, Maria announced that she was leaving Canada to return to her much–preferred, southern climate. Upon her departure, Jasper took her aside and politely requested that she stay away from his family in the future. As a final gesture of disdain, Maria swept through a downtown Calgary shopping center, breaking human necks at random and leaving the bodies lying scattered about. She hadn’t even killed them to feed, just to cause trouble for us. If the Volturi got wind of the incident—an invisible force streaking through a public place and twisting human necks three–hundred–sixty degrees around—they would certainly know that it was a vampire on the rampage and we were the only coven living in that area. It was our worst nightmare and we high–tailed it out of Calgary as fast as we could scramble.

It occurred to me that Maria might appeal to someone like Victoria, who had followed James—a similarly powerful and ruthless vampire—for who knows how long. If she did go looking for Maria, she would undoubtedly mention her run–in with the odd, animal–drinking coven in the Northwest, and Maria would know immediately that it was Jasper’s family to whom she referred. When Maria learned that the Cullens had killed James, she was likely to assume that Jasper was the killer. I could see Victoria coming back to take revenge on Jasper, perhaps with Maria’s blessing.

Before being told by Laurent, I hadn’t assumed that James and Victoria were mates. The bond between them seemed so much less than was the norm in my family. Because of

that, I hadn't thought much about Victoria's being a threat to us after James was dead. Perhaps she wasn't, but I wouldn't let that stop me now that I'd decided on my course of action. Anyway, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed possible that we were looking at potential trouble from Victoria, especially if she teamed up with Maria. Normally, Maria didn't tolerate other vampires moving into her territory, but it was clear (to me anyway) that Victoria was a follower rather than a leader and, for that reason, might be an acceptable companion to Maria. The last I had heard, Maria had killed or chased off all her coven members and was alone.

It was nearing twilight when the airplane from Atlanta set down in Shreveport and I considered what I should do. In an ideal world, I would step out of the airport and instantly catch Victoria's scent, but I had no reason to believe that she had even flown into the city. In fact, if she had come down from Arkansas as Jasper had said, she probably ran, feeding along the way.

With all the thoughts I'd been processing about Maria and Victoria and how they could be lethal if they teamed up, I decided to call Alice again.

"Edward?"

"Hi Alice. Do I have to ask?"

"No. Jasper thinks that your idea about Victoria looking for Maria is very interesting. I can't tell whether she's going to do that or not, unfortunately. She seems to be winging it, changing her mind frequently and bobbing around from place to place almost like she's trying to avoid detection or she's dodging something, but I don't know what it might be. Anyway, I do see Maria. She's in a city with lots of old stone ruins. The skyline has a tower that looks a little like the Space Needle in Seattle... Wait a second." Alice must have put her hand over the phone mouthpiece because her voice became muffled, but not so muffled that I couldn't hear her.

"What?" she asked someone on her end. "Um...let me see...okay, yes, the front is shaped like a bell and it has big liberty-looking bells hanging high up in the walls. Okay, thanks Jazz." She came back to me then.

"Jasper says it's San Antonio. Maria's in San Antonio, Texas. There are a lot of old Spanish missions there, so it has a distinctive look. The Space Needle thing is called the 'Tower of the Americas,' apparently." Again, her voice became muffled. "Is that right?" Then back to me. "Yes, that's what it's called and it's in San Antonio."

"But you can't tell whether Victoria is looking for Maria?"

"No, sorry. It kind of makes sense, though, doesn't it?" Her voice then faded to a whisper. "Jasper talked to Laurent about Maria; Laurent probably talked to Victoria; suddenly, Victoria calls from the South, heading toward Texas. Too bad you're not here—you could read Laurent's mind and see what's going on. It seems like he might be scheming against us. Or maybe not, because he refused to join her when she called. But Laurent probably told Victoria that Jasper's from down there and he's a scarred-up warrior. I'm just free-associating now, but what if Victoria thinks that Jasper killed James?"

Since Maria and Jasper are kind of on the outs, maybe she's thinking... Well, you can follow the dots as easily as me." Alice finally took a breath.

"I already have and came up with the same conclusion as you. What I don't get is why Shreveport?"

"Well, maybe she's just stopping off on her way to Texas. Jasper got some more cell phone information and as of this morning, she was still in Shreveport. I checked with the Chamber of Commerce and found out that there's a big river festival going on down there right now. If she's looking to drink up in preparation for running into Maria—which she might be, because Laurent probably told her how dangerous Maria is—then she might be looking for easy prey. I'd check out the river festival."

"That's quite a few more 'mights' and 'ifs' than I was hoping for, Alice."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was hoping to get more out of Laurent, but Victoria hasn't called him again and asking him outright is too obvious. He's wary, I think. Anyway, we're flying home tonight, so that's all I can do with that. Jasper can probably check into phone records again if you need it."

"No, let me poke around Shreveport and see if I can catch a scent anywhere. I'll go to the festival. It can't hurt."

When Alice said that she and Jasper were flying "home," I heard "Forks," and felt the familiar ache intensify. It was always there, that hole in my center. Focusing my attention on Victoria didn't change it at all. I could feel the utter devastation of losing my love and my future as much as ever. Nevertheless, here I was in Shreveport, Louisiana, and I had set this mission for myself, so I would push through it. I could see, though, that life was going to be very long if I had to push myself through every single day like I had this one without Bella to make any of it seem worthwhile.

As expected, I found no trace of Victoria's scent at the airport and so I grabbed a taxi to the downtown river area. I would rather have run, but the area was urban enough that there wasn't much tree cover and city lights were bright for miles around. I had gotten spoiled living in Forks for the last few years. Not only was it rural and heavily treed, but it was cloudy all year around. The Southern states were much more restrictive to our movements, with bright sunshine on most days.

The driver dropped me off on Crockett Street, a few blocks away from the "Red River Revel," as the fall festival is called. When I arrived, the evening schedule of music and dance was well underway. I heard bluegrass banjo coming from one direction and indie rock guitar from another. The grounds, which ran perpendicular to the river, rather than alongside it, were lined with rows of patriotic red-, white-, and blue-striped booths from which artists and food vendors sold their wares to passersby.

At the far end of the grounds nearest the river was a large children's area with an "archeological" dig, a trampoline, ongoing art projects, and a ten-foot-tall man in a tailcoat, striped trousers, and a top hat gliding his way through the crowd on invisible stilts. Using a very long ribbon on the end of a stick, a clown was making beautiful patterns in the

air while a group of children jumped up and tried to grab the ribbon as it floated by just out of their reach. Nearby, I saw a large mosaic mural under construction. A cluster of adults was busy mortaring pieces of broken tile over the underlying design bit-by-bit.

Through the air, which was thick with the odors of deep-fat frying grease, grilling meat, and the pumping blood of hundreds of human bodies, I suddenly caught a whiff of it. It was fresh, but faint. I moved quickly then, with purpose and efficiency, wholly fixated on the hunt. It was Victoria's scent—I was sure of it.

My eyes darted back and forth watching for a streak of bright red hair while I tried to locate the direction of the scent. Shifting my duffle to carry it like a backpack, I crossed some railroad tracks that bisected the fairgrounds and slipped under the eaves of a large concrete building on the other side. With my back to it, I crept forward until I could peer around the corner. I saw nothing, but the scent was stronger. If she was here and I could smell her, then she could smell me too, depending on the wind's direction. I was downwind of her at the moment and I intended to keep it that way, making it more difficult for her to scent me. I wasn't sure if she would recognize my scent from our brief meeting in the baseball field, but there was no point in tipping her off to my presence if she did. She would certainly recognize the smell as vampire, whether she knew me or not.

I followed her scent trail swiftly through the children's entertainment area and, when I reached the chain-link fence on the far side, hoisted myself over it and out of the bright lights. Across a busy parkway, the Red River gleamed under the light of the rising moon. For a fraction of a second, I thought I saw a streak of red move through the air and disappear into the water, but I couldn't be certain. Timing the traffic just right, I raced across the four-lane parkway between moving cars, running at nearly full speed so that I wouldn't be detectable to human eyes. When I reached the other side, I took one long leap and landed on the riverbank, then stood there for ten seconds, scanning the water thoroughly from left to right and across to the opposite shore. Seeing nothing, I ran along the water for two or three minutes, searching for a stronger scent. Nothing. I turned around and ran along the shore in the other direction, stopping short when I found it—the place where the scent approached the water and disappeared. She had been here recently and gone into the water. I was sure of it.

I saw that the railroad tracks crossed the river nearby, so I ran to the bridge and dashed across its seven hundred feet as fast as I could. The water below was a murky gray-green color and had a noticeable current. When I reached the other bank, I took off running, first to the left and then to the right, but found no scent trail at all. She *had* to have come out of the water somewhere. I looked around trying to see what alternatives there might be. A barge was making its way downriver and I realized that Victoria could have grabbed onto the underside of a barge or boat and let it carry her a great distance downstream. She might be underwater even now.

Then I noticed a scraggly line of trees about fifty feet from the bank. They had been planted along a mostly empty roadway either as a windbreak or to screen an ugly view.

When I saw them, it occurred to me that Victoria easily could have leaped from a barge into the trees to hide both herself and her scent trail. It was a good idea. I rushed over to the trees—which this far south still held onto their leaves—and jumped into the branches of the nearest one. That might have been a careless move, for there it was again—Victoria’s scent.

I moved from tree to tree away from the river until the stand ended abruptly after one hundred feet. As I peered out through the leaves of the last tree, I saw that I was in an industrial-looking area with large factory buildings stretching in every direction. It would be easy to jump from one flat roof to the next for a long distance. Perhaps Victoria had done that too. The nearest building, about one-hundred-fifty feet long, sported an oversized Nike logo on its side and Victoria’s scent trail on its roof. After following her scent for the length of six such buildings (having to backtrack to find the right roof a couple of times), I was faced with an expansive parking area that was rather sparsely populated with cars. There were no more roofs within a jumping distance that would prevent me from being seen, so I hopped to the ground where Victoria’s trail ended and dashed back and forth, trying to pick up the scent again. She had clearly followed the same rooftops as I had, but once off of them, her scent disappeared. I searched the area for ten minutes before giving up. *Damn!*

This surprising outcome brought two questions immediately to mind. First, where did she go? Second, why was she using evasive measures? Surely she had not detected my presence. I had stayed downwind of her and her scent wasn’t absolutely fresh, so she must have run this circuitous route before I ever got close enough for her to have seen me. It was distinctly puzzling.

One thing I realized, however, was that I had not thought through this endeavor very thoroughly, which was unlike me. I hadn’t expected to find Victoria’s trail so soon and so abruptly, if at all, and I hadn’t considered the implications of actually finding her in an urban area. It posed problems for keeping myself both safe and hidden from human view while I performed unnatural feats of strength or speed. It would be better to chase Victoria to an uninhabited area before killing her, though this industrial zone at night probably would have sufficed.

That’s when I realized that this wasn’t exactly an industrial zone. Each of the large, warehouse-looking buildings was freshly white-washed and they all matched, more or less. These were not warehouses, but factory outlet stores—lots of them. In addition to the Nike building, I saw a large Adidas outlet, and an even larger Bass Shoes outlet. Shreveport must be a well-shod city. The factory stores appeared to be intermixed with restaurants and a few large hotels.

I spent the rest of the night scouring horizontal surfaces for miles in every direction trying to find where Victoria’s scent picked up again. Though I thought I caught whiffs of her every now and then, none of these hints of scent created a trail that I could follow. I didn’t understand it. The only possibility I could think of was that she had hidden herself

on some form of conveyance and left the area without her feet touching the ground. She could have hidden herself in the undercarriage of a truck, possibly, or perhaps she floated down the river after all.

Then I got it! Of course! She must have retraced her steps back to the river on the same scent trail and then headed down the river in one manner or another. She could have caught a boat or clung to a barge, or even swum underwater, but any way you looked at it, she had to be long gone by now. I sighed in irritation. Perhaps this task was not going to be as straightforward as I had hoped.

At the edge of the horizon, I noticed the faintest gleam of light and knew that I must quickly find somewhere to hide from the sun for the day. And just as I recognized the problem, I saw the solution—a casino hotel along the river. Perfect.

I hurried to the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino with my duffel still slung over my back. I was glad now that I had bothered to bring it along. It would make checking into a hotel a less-conspicuous endeavor. I moved the bag to one shoulder, straightened my clothing, and ran my fingers through my hair before walking through the grand entryway to the hotel lobby, which was white marble from floor to ceiling, including massive white columns standing like sentinels throughout. It seemed excessively posh for what I'd initially thought was an "industrial" district, but I could hear the musical notes of slot machines singing in the background.

One nice thing about casino hotels is that the staff never looks at you askance if you show up near dawn to check in. They're just glad to have you if you look like you have a couple of bucks to spend. Walking to the registration counter, I saw two staff members on duty. A large, young, white woman welcomed me with a broad Southern accent.

"Hello, sir. How may I 'hale-ulp' you this mornin'?" She said the word "help" in two syllables, with an extended long "a" sound. I was indeed in the South, a place known for strong accents, friendliness, and hospitality. I was certainly being welcomed.

I rented a room, which was shockingly cheap compared to a Seattle hotel, or even a Las Vegas casino hotel. As I recall, Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the nation, along with its neighbors, Mississippi, Texas, and New Mexico. Much of that can be explained in Texas and New Mexico by a heavy influx of poor immigrants from Mexico and South America and by the large native populations living on reservations, but not so much in Louisiana, which seems less explainable. It is also one of the most obese states in an obese nation, but whether that is due more to poverty or to the effects of the famous Louisianan diet—an eclectic mix of Southern-fried cooking and Cajun and Creole fare—is beyond my knowledge. To me, the scents coming from the restaurants and cafes I'd come across were as revolting as any other human food.

My hotel room was well-furnished with all the amenities, including a detailed map of the area. It turns out I was in the shopper's mecca of Bossier City, which is what "the other half" of Shreveport—across the Red River—is called. I had twelve hours to kill and shopping wasn't in my plans. I had a choice, though. I could spend the day watching cable

television and staring at the walls in my fancy room, or wandering around the casino.

Casinos are a great place for vampires to roam. Not only are they sunlight-free all day, but if you're outside of one just before dawn, Jasper tells me, you can frequently find willing prey. There are those gamblers who creep away from casinos just before morning, having lost their entire life savings at the high-stakes blackjack or poker tables and would rather commit suicide than return home one more time to their exasperated spouses and hungry children. Jasper says you can spot them a mile away and often, they are almost grateful to be spared facing what awaits them at home. There are also those who have drunk a few too many free cocktails and wouldn't know what bit them. Having someone either disappear after a night at the casinos or wind up dead nearby with signs of self-inflicted wounds are acceptable ways to dispatch prey in Jasper's experience. I wasn't planning to take any human prey, so I would have to accept his word on that.

I turned on the television and flipped through its many channels until my thoughts began to wander in dangerous directions. I didn't mind being still during the daytime, but I did mind the hours that would pile up one on top of another, giving me long periods to do nothing but think of Bella. The relentless sunshine of the South might be difficult to handle in more ways than just the obvious one.

When I could stand my own thoughts no longer, I forced myself out of my hotel room and down to the casino. Designing casinos without windows is a clever way to keep players from noticing the time pass as their money drains away. You will never see a wall clock in a casino either.

I played some cheap slot machines and then some high-roller slots and came away a few hundred dollars ahead. Then I wandered to the blackjack tables and stayed there, taking fake bathroom and food breaks and accepting, but not drinking, the alcoholic beverages foisted upon me. At the end of my gambling jag, I was up about twelve hundred dollars, which was a nice little bonus for a wasted day. My mindreading skills didn't help me much at blackjack, not as much as at poker, but in my current state of mind, it was simpler. I bet the odds mindlessly without paying much attention, which once again left my thoughts free to wander back to the only thing I really cared about—Bella, of course.

How I longed to see her again, to talk to her, or just to lie alongside her in her bed and watch her sleep. It made my body throb with pain just to think of it. Eventually, that was all I could think of and so I gave up on the casino and went back to my room.

I decided to give myself a good spraying down in the shower and wash my hair since I might as well use some of the amenities that were offered. I didn't shower often. Dirt didn't stick to our bodies and our stone skin did not sweat, or shed cells, or get oily. Our hair could collect dust after a while, but usually a good brushing took care of that. Still, showers could be pleasant from time to time.

Afterwards, I lay naked on the bed with the television remote in my hand, clicking through the channels in a way that irritated everyone when Rosalie did it, more as a reflex than because she was looking for something to watch. Then my ears caught some startling

words from a local news report. I immediately flipped back to the channel where a newswoman was standing in front of the half-finished mosaic I had seen at the festival grounds the night before.

“...at the Red River Revel last night after the gates were closed and workers were cleaning up in preparation for today’s events. She was found in a dumpster behind the food court and it was clear to anyone observing that her neck had been broken viciously. Police Chief Rene Beaufontaine says that she was fully clothed and did not appear to be the victim of a sexual assault. When asked for a possible motive, he said that it is too early to speculate. How her neck was broken remains a mystery since the coroner has reported no sign of head trauma. This is Dixie Dawson reporting from Shreveport.”

She *had* been there. I already knew it, but to see such blatant evidence was still a shock. Throwing a woman’s body in a dumpster might not have been the best means of disposal, though the reporter said nothing about bite marks. If we drank carefully and stopped just before the heart failed, we could use our venom to close the bite wounds. However, once the victim’s heart has stopped, that is no longer possible because our venom cannot heal dead tissue. So Victoria was being careful in that way, unless the police were merely keeping details of marks on the body a secret to help them catch the killer.

Alice’s guess was right. Victoria had used the crowd and the bustle of the fair as a means of feeding in plain sight. It wasn’t a great strategy, since the city would now be under siege and news reports would be unrelenting until the killer was found which, if results followed the truth, would never happen.

This sort of behavior was not how we kept ourselves discretely hidden among humans. Not only that, but other vampires in the area would immediately recognize the presence of a nomad who was endangering their feeding grounds. The southern United States and Mexico were known for territorial disputes between vampire covens over high population areas. Maria was famous for her warring exploits that allowed her to take control of Texas and a large chunk of northern Mexico in her heyday when Jasper was at her side.

Perhaps Victoria had intended to dispose of the body of her prey in a better fashion, but had been forced to take expedient action before being discovered. Whatever the reason for what she did, she had endangered both of us. And who knows how many other persons had disappeared from the fair and hadn’t been reported missing yet?

I knew Victoria couldn’t have been running from me. I didn’t see how she would have known I was there. She must have been running from the evidence she had left of her presence. If I did not want to get caught up in a war not of my own making, I would be wise to leave town immediately.

It was time to “get outta Dodge.”