

19. THE HUNT

Three vampires entered the clearing one at a time about ten feet apart. The first male to enter—slight, with dark blonde hair—stepped aside for the second, allowing him to take the point position. Though a traditional sign of deference, the maneuver was a ruse. The second male, dark, vaguely European, was not the coven leader. The third vampire was a woman with a full mane of fiery red hair.

Judging by appearance, this coven was nomadic and wild, far removed from any humanity they once might have had. Each moved in a hunting crouch, prepared for attack or defense. They dressed in the style of Northwest backpackers, but were dirty and their clothes were ragged. They wore no shoes. The female's long hair was snarled and full of leaves and twigs. They carried no gear because they needed none.

Carlisle, flanked by Emmett and Jasper, stepped forward to greet the outsiders. The group responded by abandoning their bestial stances, but the two in the back did not relax their vigilance. The woman scanned our group and the clearing continuously, alert for any threat, while the rear male seemed focused on some kind of analysis. His eyes did not move. I listened to his thoughts and found he was studying our scents, differentiating us and trying to determine our relationships to one another. It was just a matter of time before he got a whiff of Bella. I stood ready to answer any aggression.

The leading vampire seemed more civilized than the other two, with more human-like gestures and movements. He stepped forward as their spokesman and offered a smile.

"We thought we heard a game. I'm Laurent, these are Victoria and James." The latter two were partners, while Laurent seemed a more recent addition to the group.

"I'm Carlisle. This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Rosalie, Esme and Alice, Edward and Bella." Jasper was promoting a calm atmosphere to deflect any latent hostility.

"Do you have room for a few more players?" Laurent inquired.

Carlisle returned Laurent's cordiality, but hedged his bets. "Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We're headed north, in fact, but we were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time."

"No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves."

"What's your hunting range?" Laurent queried, assuming that we were also nomads.

"The Olympic range here, up and down the coast ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali."

Laurent's surprise was evident. "Permanent? How do you manage that?"

"Why don't you come back to our home with us and we can talk comfortably? It's a rather long story." Carlisle's invitation caught the visitors by surprise, more for the word *home* than for the invitation itself. He was being hospitable to discourage violence towards Bella once they realized she was human. Their blood-red eyes proved they had recently feasted on human blood—most likely, they had never heard of covens that did not.

"That sounds very interesting, and welcome. We've been on the hunt all the way

down from Ontario, and we haven't had the chance to clean up in a while."

Unlike the other two, Laurent had a certain air of refinement that indicated experience with a civilized, non-nomadic lifestyle. I guessed he was an old vampire, possibly as old as Carlisle.

The others were younger, more raw. They had not spent much time, if any, among the civilized of our kind. They were rough-edged itinerants, and James had an air of ruthlessness about him. He also seemed to have some agenda, but I couldn't read what it was.

Carlisle continued the conversation. "Please don't take offense, but we'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand."

"Of course," Laurent replied congenially. "We certainly won't encroach on your territory. We just ate outside of Seattle, anyway." He chuckled at the memory of their hunt.

I felt Bella shiver and hoped that she hadn't heard the cruelty in his voice. Regardless, she couldn't miss the trio's gleaming, red eyes. She must be terrified; I touched her arm in reassurance.

Speaking with the newcomers, Carlisle subtly contrived to get Bella to safety, while possibly making some new friends.

"We'll show you the way if you'd like to run with us—Emmett and Alice, you can go with Edward and Bella to get the Jeep."

And silently, to me, *Get Bella somewhere safe. We'll escort the visitors home and keep them there until we hear from you.*

I acknowledged his words with a nod. Then, just as I was preparing to do as Carlisle suggested, a light breeze ruffled Bella's hair, sending a wave of her sweet scent into the air. I froze to attention, awaiting the fallout.

It didn't take long. James caught Bella's scent and jerked his head around toward her, his nose in the air, nostrils flaring. *A human? A delicious-smelling human, indeed!* He lowered to a crouch.

Instinct took over. I bared my teeth and snarled at James, matching his crouch, my arms stretched out to protect Bella.

"What's this?" Laurent's mouth gaped in surprise.

James began testing me, feinting first one way then the other. I predicted his moves easily, so that by the time he had moved, I was already blocking his new position. He understood, as I intended, that it would be difficult to get by me.

Ah! A worthy opponent!, he crowed to himself.

"She's with us," Carlisle cautioned James.

But James's self-control was limited, as he had never practiced it. Here was a human for the taking and he was used to taking what he wanted. By challenging him, I had made Bella more desirable.

Laurent only then grasped the situation. He caught Bella's scent and understanding, followed by confusion, flooded his face.

"You brought a snack?" he asked, coming to the only conclusion that made sense to him. He stepped toward Bella.

The offensive word and his advance set me off. I snarled fiercely, baring my teeth in an unmistakable message. Laurent received it and stepped back.

"I said she's with us." Carlisle's voice was harsh, cold.

“But she’s *human*,” Laurent said, astonished.

“Yes,” Carlisle confirmed.

Emmett and Jasper seemed to have expanded to occupy more space, creating a front line of defense beside Carlisle. Emmett was sizing up James, ready to take him on. Jasper’s eyes were fixed on Victoria, who had remained in the background, seeming bewildered, but nevertheless, was crouched for a fight. Carlisle and Laurent, the spokesmen, remained committed to a truce.

“It appears we have a lot to learn about each other,” Laurent offered, downplaying James’ hostility.

“Indeed,” Carlisle agreed, standing firm.

“But we’d like to accept your invitation and, of course, we will not harm the human girl.” He glanced at Bella and met my eyes. “We won’t hunt in your range, as I said.”

James suddenly regretted allowing Laurent to speak for the group. This skirmish was not over for him—it had just begun. He’d set his course for Bella and, even as he relaxed his crouch and straightened to an erect posture, his predator’s eyes remained glued to her. I read what he was thinking.

“Edward,” was it? Ha, ha! You win the first round, but you cannot hide her from me. I’ve got her scent now—what an appetizing scent it is!—and I will find her. I will take her on the second round. How many are there? Seven...this is going to be fun! He leered at Bella, who was tucked safely behind me.

Carlisle took stock of Laurent for a moment, then decided to trust his words.

“We’ll show you the way. Jasper, Rosalie, Esme?” he spoke, rounding up his troops. They stepped forward, blocking Bella, Alice, and I from view, while Emmett stepped back, keeping his eyes on James as he did so.

“Let’s go, Bella.” I muttered, taking her elbow to urge her stiff body forward. Emmett and Alice took up rank behind us, as we all marched forward with deliberate movements, not wanting to trigger a pursuit in the others.

As soon as we reached the forest, I flung Bella onto my back in a single motion and accelerated as she tightened her grip around me. I channeled my fury into speed. Because of me, Bella was in danger, and I knew that she would not be safe again until either she or James was dead. He was a tracker, a dangerous sort of vampire whose primary skill was to locate creatures by their scent. For James, it was even more than that—tracking was his passion and his self definition. He could not retreat from the challenge I had posed to him. He never would. Ever. *What had I unleashed here?*

When we reached the Jeep, I threw open one of the rear doors and set Bella on the back seat.

“Strap her in,” I ordered Emmett, as he scooted in beside her. Alice took the front passenger seat, while I started the engine. I could not contain my rage at James, at our kind in general, and at myself in particular.

Damn it to hell, why had I brought her? I knew there were vampires in the area! I’ll kill that bastard James! Tear his head from his body! Rip his eyes out! Damn it!

I kept my cursing at a volume unintelligible to Bella’s ears—Alice and Emmett would just have to cope. I drove like a madman. Though there was no question of my causing an accident, I was mildly surprised that Bella didn’t object. She couldn’t be comfortable, bouncing around in the back seat like a rubber ball. She would survive that, though, whereas she wouldn’t survive James. *Damn it, damn it, damn it!*

When we reached the highway, I turned away from Forks. I didn't know where we were going, just away from there as fast as I could coax the Jeep. I knew our running wouldn't stop him, though. With his skills, he could find Bella anywhere, given enough time. As an immortal, all he had was time, and now a new game with which to fill it.

"Where are we going?" Bella asked, agitated

I didn't know and the others wouldn't cross me, so nobody answered the question.

"Damn it, Edward! Where are you taking me?"

"We have to get you away from here—far away—now." I didn't want to explain that she had become a walking target.

"Turn around! You have to take me home!" she yelled. I heard her try to unbuckle herself from the harness.

"Emmett," I commanded.

He grabbed Bella's wrists and held them still. We had no choice!

"No! Edward! No, you can't do this."

"I have to, Bella, now please be quiet."

"I won't! You have to take me back—Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family—Carlisle and Esme! They'll have to leave, to hide forever!" My parents would do that for me, I knew.

"Calm down, Bella," I said flatly. "We've been there before."

"Not over me, you don't! You're not ruining everything over me!" She tried to wriggle out of Emmett's grip, with no visible effect.

Alice cut in with irritating calm, "Edward, pull over."

She wasn't going to override me.

"Edward, let's just talk this through," Alice insisted.

"You don't understand," I bellowed at her. "He's a tracker, Alice, did you *see* that? He's a tracker!" How could she not realize?

"Pull over, Edward."

No, no, no, no, no! My foot got heavier. I was glad Bella couldn't see the speedometer move beyond one-hundred-twenty.

"Do it, Edward."

It was impossible to argue with Alice when she wouldn't argue!

"Listen to me, Alice. I saw his mind. Tracking is his passion, his obsession—and he wants her, Alice—*her*, specifically. He begins the hunt tonight."

"He doesn't know where—"

"How long do you think it will take him to cross her scent in town? His plan was already set before the words were out of Laurent's mouth."

Bella's anxiety rose several levels.

"Charlie! You can't leave him there! You can't leave him!"

Again, she struggled with Emmett and the harness. This is why I didn't want to have this conversation in front of Bella!

"She's right," Alice said.

Crap! My foot eased slightly.

"Let's just look at our options for a minute." Alice's voice was calm.

Damn it!! My foot eased a little more. *Damn, damn, damn!* I veered off the roadway and slammed the Jeep to a stop.

"There are no options," I told Alice, an even emphasis on each word.

“I’m not leaving Charlie!” Bella hollered from the back seat.

I don’t care about Charlie! She wouldn’t forgive me if she’d heard that thought.

“We have to take her back,” Emmett said.

“No.”

“He’s no match for us, Edward. He won’t be able to touch her.” Emmett again.

“He’ll wait.”

Emmett smiled. “I can wait, too.”

I was losing ground in this argument. “You didn’t see—you don’t understand. Once he commits to a hunt, he’s unshakable. We’d have to kill him.”

“That’s an option.” Emmett wasn’t troubled.

“And the female,” I pointed out. “She’s with him. If it turns into a fight, the leader will go with them, too.”

“There are enough of us.”

“There’s another option,” Alice stated coolly.

The snarl I directed at Alice contained an implicit threat.

“There—is—no—other—option!”

Do not say it, Alice! Don’t you dare say it! I shouted in my head, though she couldn’t hear me.

Edward, you know it makes sense. It’s the only thing that makes sense for the long term. And I saw it. You know I saw it.

I stared her down, silently threatening. We were caught at an impasse when Bella interrupted us.

“Does anyone want to hear my plan?”

“No,” I growled. I would not be moved.

Alice was angry now. *You are being completely unreasonable, Edward.*

“Listen,” Bella asserted, “you take me back...”

“No.”

She would not give up.

“You take me back. I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix. I pack my bags. We wait ‘til this tracker is watching, and then we run. He’ll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie won’t call the FBI on your family. Then you can take me any damned place you want.”

We all were silenced.

“It’s not a bad idea, really,” Emmett said.

“It might work—and we simply can’t leave her father unprotected. You know that,” Alice added.

They all waited for my response. “It’s too dangerous—I don’t want him within a hundred miles of her.”

“Edward, he’s not getting through us.” Emmett couldn’t imagine losing *any* fight, but I could, and the stakes were simply too high.

After a quiet moment, Alice said, “I don’t see him attacking. He’ll try to wait for us to leave her alone.”

“It won’t take long for him to realize that’s not going to happen,” Emmett asserted.

“I *demand* that you take me home.” Bella, again.

Aaaaaahhhh! I shut my eyes and pushed my fingers into my temples, trying to tune them out. They were allied against me, but I was responsible for Bella’s safety. I couldn’t

trust her to put her own life first. And if anything happened to her...

"Please," Bella begged, finally breaking my resolve. I felt flayed, raw. If it were possible, I would have cried in frustration and fury and defeat.

So I gave in to her, but not without demands. I kept my voice even as I spoke.

"You're leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not. You tell Charlie that you can't stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works. Pack the first things your hands touch, and then get in your truck. I don't care what he says to you. You have fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep."

I revved the Jeep's engine, punched the gas, spun us around one-hundred-eighty degrees, and shot back toward Forks.

"Emmett?" Bella queried.

"Oh, sorry," he said, for whatever reason. I was too busy planning strategy to pay attention. I'd warned Bella that I would be tyrannical until these nomads were gone. I just wished I'd been more cautious before we reached this crisis. I would try to make up for it.

"This is how it's going to happen. When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk her to the door. Then she has fifteen minutes. Emmett, you take the outside of the house. Alice, you get the truck. I'll be inside as long as she is. After she's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carlisle." *No mistakes.*

"No way," Emmett dissented. "I'm with you."

Though I appreciated his loyalty, it was not helpful at this moment.

"Think it through, Emmett. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you." It was hard to argue with that kind of commitment from someone you loved. I sighed.

"If the tracker *is* there, we keep driving."

"We're going to make it there before him," Alice announced. "What are we going to do with the Jeep?"

"You're going to drive it home," I told her, brooking no dissent.

"No, I'm not."

Damn it Alice! Why will nobody listen to me? Damn it, damn it, damn it!

"We can't all fit in my truck," Bella said. "I think you should let me go alone."

Arghh! Not her too. "Bella, please do this my way, just this once." I gritted my teeth to keep from yelling.

"Listen, Charlie's not an imbecile. If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get suspicious."

"That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters."

"Then what about this tracker? He saw the way you acted tonight. He's going to think you're with me, wherever you are."

Emmett was impressed. "Edward, listen to her. I think she's right."

"Yes, she is," Alice concurred.

"I can't do that."

"Emmett should stay, too. He definitely got an eyeful of Emmett," Bella added.

"What?" Emmett was taken aback.

"You'll get a better crack at him if you stay," Alice told Emmett.

I was appalled. "You think I should let her go alone?" What the hell was she thinking?

"Of course not." Alice said. "Jasper and I will take her."

Hmm, I saw her reasoning, but...how could I leave Bella? How? It was not possible.

"I can't do that," I told Alice.

Then Bella took a shot.

"Hang out here for a week—" I scowled and she altered her words. "—a few days. Let Charlie see you haven't kidnapped me and lead this James on a wild-goose chase. Make sure he's completely off my trail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route, of course, and then Jasper and Alice can go home."

Hmmm. "Meet you where?"

"Phoenix."

"No. He'll hear that's where you're going." *No mistakes.*

"And you'll make it look like that's a ruse, obviously. He'll know that we'll know that he's listening. He'll never believe I'm actually going where I say I am going."

Emmett chortled. "She's diabolical."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"There are several million people in Phoenix," Bella reasoned.

I would not be easily convinced. There was *no* room for errors. None. "It's not that hard to find a phone book."

"I won't go home."

What was she thinking? "Oh?"

"I'm quite old enough to get my own place."

What, alone?

"Edward, we'll be with her," Alice reiterated.

Yeah, that would work great...just great. "What are *you* going to do in *Phoenix*?" I asked Alice.

"Stay indoors."

"I kind of like it." Emmett wanted a chance at James, but it was not his call to make.

"Shut up, Emmett." *Would he? No, of course he wouldn't.*

"Look, if we try to take him down while she's still around, there's a much better chance that someone will get hurt—she'll get hurt, or you will, trying to protect her. Now, if we get him alone..." Emmett said, anxious to get started.

I had slowed our speed to give myself some time to think.

After some consideration, I decided that Bella's plan could work...*if* we executed it perfectly, *if* James behaved predictably, *if* Charlie bought Bella's story and let her go... *if, if, if...* Regrettably, this was the best plan we had, and it meant being separated from my beloved. I did not want to leave her—at all. But it seemed that my presence only made her more vulnerable. *So what's new?*

"Bella," I began, knowing that I had no choice. Emmett and Alice peered through their respective windows, looking for James, but also giving us what passed for privacy in the Cullen household...non-prying eyes and selective hearing. But this wasn't that moment...not yet. "If you let anything happen to yourself—anything at all—I'm holding you personally responsible. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

I wished my warning would grant her some instinct for self-preservation.

"Can Jasper handle this?" I asked Alice.

"Give him some credit, Edward. He's been doing very, very well, all things

considered.”

“Can *you* handle this?” It was hard to trust Alice’s judgment when we disagreed utterly on the best course for Bella’s future. I wanted her word.

Alice deliberately misunderstood and gave us all a demonstration of her vicious predatory nature. She bared her teeth and issued a highly convincing snarl that made me smile. All was forgiven, of course.

“But keep your opinions to yourself,” I added under my breath.