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122,000 words.

Osa Bella

by Myg

Introduction

“Do you have any interest in watching Twilight?” Mr. Myg asked me.

“What the hell is Twilight?”

“It’s a vampire romance fantasy movie.”

“I’m not into vampires.”

“I think you might like this though.”

That was my first conversation about Twilight and it happened maybe ten months ago. Then we watched it on DVD, and I thought, aww! This is really adorable and not half as terrible as I thought it would be! And that was the end of it.

Until December 2009. I ran into my old friend Mr. SnarkierThanYou, and he said, “Hey Myg, I saw your blog. You’ve got to talk to STY—she and Jenny Jerkface have a Twilight blog.”

“A what blog?”

People actually blog about Twilight? What the hell for? And then I came to Twitarded. And then STY bought me a copy of the Twilight, the book. And then it was all over.

And now this—a novel’s worth of fan fiction based on it. I call this little time sucking monster Osa Bella.

FTR, I have rewritten this blog intro about seven times trying to figure out what I really want you to know about this story going into it. I don’t want to spoil every hook, so I’ll just let you know, Osa Bella is my answer to the question, “What if you wrote Twilight for grown women instead of a teen girls?”

I wrote this for us. I wrote it with much love and much toil and it gave me a lot back in return. I hope you all enjoy reading this even a fraction as much as I've enjoyed creating it.

Thanks from the bottom of my heart to Twitarded, STY, JJ and LKW, for many things, not the least of which is providing a home for Osa Bella. But also for making me laugh every single day and for introducing me to the greater world of Twitardia.

Thanks to Snarkier Than You for pushing me over the edge of the cliff and holding my hand when I hit bottom. Thanks for reading this and cheering me on and making sure I was true to Twilight canon when I wanted to be, and for good all around editorial assistance.

Thanks to VitaminR for additional editorial help and for being my location consultant, even amid birthday parties, pink eye and adverse reactions to antibiotics.

Thanks to my old friend Mr. K for creating the original artwork that you see here, and because when I said, "Hey, can you help me with a graphic for a Twilight fanfic I'm writing?" You didn't laugh, you just said, "Cool!" Mr. K hasn't even seen the Twilight movies, but his wife and my good friend, Mrs. K, is on Team Jacob and may be coming to FFFFFOOOOORRRRRRKKKKKSSSS!

Thanks to Osa Bella, an amazing and mostly unknown band (who existed long before Twilight ever did), for sharing their name with me, though they had no say in the matter. They are old friends of mine and sadly, mostly defunct as a band, but you should pay them a visit ([LINK](#)) and check them out. I'll have to buy them all a beer or five next time I run into them.

And thanks, of course, to Stephenie Meyer for having good dream recall and creating this world for all of us to lose ourselves in.

Extra super special thanks with sexual favors on top to Mr. Myg, for too much to name here in general, but as specifically relates to this work, thanks for listening for hours upon hours upon hours to me prattling on about this plot detail or that characterization or this snippet of dialogue, and for giving me lots of good material for inspiration. Thank you for reading, editing, and taking me seriously even though there was really no good reason to. And thanks for encouraging me to go to Forks, even though it means I'll be leaving you with two twenty month old monkeys to reckon with on your own. By the way, you're fucking crazy. But I knew that when I married you, and in no small part it's the reason I fell in love with you.

In the world of soul mates, I know they're all supposed to be good matches, but still, most days I can't believe how lucky I got with mine.

The Obligatory Disclaimer

The Twilight saga, the stories, the characters, the universe that holds them all are the intellectual property of Stephenie Meyer.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Foot

I was running, as usual without looking, because I was almost not late, and I thought it would be nice to not be late on the first day of school. It would probably be the only day that term I'd be on time, if I could move fast enough. But as I reached for the car door handle I was assaulted by a powerful, hot stench coming from the ground, or rather, coming from an enormous pile of shit. I had just stomped my new green wedge right into its creamy center.

"That must be one hell of a big dog," I thought, running back to the house to change shoes. There was no way I was going to be on time now. I was never on time. For anything.

I should have gotten up earlier. I swallowed some of the coffee from my travel mug. Too weak as usual, because I suck at making coffee, but there was no one there to make it for me anymore and hadn't been for five years. I was already thinking what a bad idea it had been to let happy hour last until one in the morning, even if it had been the last night of summer break.

In the school parking lot I darted my way through groups of kids, some animated, some withdrawn, wandering into the building. There was no sun, but there is almost never sun in Forks, a fact I'd learned to live with since moving there four years before.

Forks High School was nothing like the sprawling suburban high I'd come from in New Jersey, but I liked that about it. I knew all the kids and their parents by first name, ran into them often in town. While sometimes it felt claustrophobic, something about being called out to at the post office and drug store by locals blunted the edge of my loneliness. On most days it was a comfort, but I never admitted this. I guarded my cynicism closely, a souvenir from Jersey I wouldn't relinquish any time soon, along with my unnatural attachment to the word 'fuck.'

I rushed through the crowded halls to the office.

“Welcome back, Miss Swan!” My favorite senior, Mike Newton called across the hall where he stood against a row of lockers chatting up his girlfriend, Jessica Stanley. I waved at them as I rushed to the main office to check in. Other assorted calls of “Hey Miss Swan!” greeted me and I waved in their general direction, unable to contain the smile on my face. It was nice to be around kids again.

I was known among the staff at Forks High as the teen whisperer. I was the school psychologist, but I was no great therapist, and in fact I had been written up no less than seven or maybe thirteen times since working there. That was for being inappropriate, saying the wrong thing, saying too much, or just pissing off the wrong parent with my directness. But there was one thing I did better than anyone else there: kids talked to me. Drug involved kids, mathletes, prom queens, no matter how sullen, brooding, flippant, jaded or dejected, they would all talk to me. I imagine it was because I’d never forgotten how much it sucks to be their age. Sort of a curse, really, but it came in handy on the job.

I walked into the office to see Mrs. Cope, the head school secretary, shaking her head at me. Nothing unusual there. “You’re late, Miss Swan,” she said.

“Well good morning to you too, Doreen,” I said.

“Miss Swan, I need you in my office,” Principal Colter called from the door of his office, the one in the corner with all the windows that you get when after fourteen years as a math teacher and four as Vice Principal you finally get to run the place. He was an old friend of my father’s, which was the reason I got, and probably still had, the job of school counselor at Forks High.

“Sorry Red,” I said, stepping inside. There was no point in making excuses. He knew me well enough by now.

“Listen, we have some new students starting today I want you to meet. Really strange situation.” He sat down behind the big wooden desk and handed me a file. “The Cullens are a new family in district. Moved down from Alaska over the summer. Carlisle Cullen is the father and he’s the new director of the Emergency Room at Forks General. He and his wife have five kids, but they’re all adopted out of foster care.”

“A couple of philanthropists,” I said. “Or are they creepy—like the psychos who hoard cats?”

“It’s definitely unusual,” he said. “You’ll see when you meet the kids.”

“So they’re not going to blend real well, you’re saying.”

“Blend? Bella, these kids will fit in here like Lamborghinis on a used car lot.”

"I'll call them down first period."

"No need. They're waiting in the conference room."

I grabbed my coffee and crossed the hall but I hesitated, strangely anxious. I peered in the conference room window for just a second before opening the door. There sat the Cullens, five of them, anyway, but all of them strangely beautiful and eerie, like ghosts in broad daylight.

Three boys and two girls sat perfectly still and quiet around the conference table with serene smiles save one, who sat slightly off from the other four, looking tragically bored. He was definitely my type of kid. The one I knew I would eventually reach, no matter how gruesome his tale. His kind always broke for me.

They looked like models, not teenagers, though they certainly looked young. No pimples. No bad hair. No awkward fitting jeans on the girls or excessive hair gel on the guys. Red was right. They were like Lamborghinis on a lot full of used Toyotas, Subarus, and Fords.

"Hi, I'm Miss Swan, the school counselor," I said, taking a seat. The four more subdued Cullens told me their names were Alice, Rosalie, Emmett and Jasper. The emo one looked up and quietly said, "Edward."

"Hi, Edward." I nodded, trying to break through the icy chill his voice cast on the room.

"Nice to meet all of you." I tried to sound welcoming. "I just wanted to introduce myself in case there's anything you need as you're getting used to this place. I know coming to a new school can be difficult."

Alice smiled at me, but then a weird expression flashed across her face, like she'd just remembered something urgent. Then the same thing happened to Edward, and he turned to Alice as though he might start an argument, but he just shook his head at her. She rolled her eyes as Edward turned to look at me again, like he was sizing me up. I felt myself go hot with embarrassment, though I could not begin to untangle the threads of silent communication that were happening in the room. I felt compelled to acknowledge it in some way, to ask if everything was all right, but instead I said nothing as his disturbed stare held me. I surveyed the other Cullens, who exchanged amused looks as I floundered for what else, exactly, I wanted to say to them.

"So..." I began, but then Edward stood up abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm not feeling well today." He glared at Alice, who shook her head dismissively.

"Do you need to see the nurse?" I asked.

"I just need to get to class." He walked to the door and accidentally brushed my arm as he squeezed between my chair and the wall in that too small room.

"Excuse me," I said and pulled my chair in, feeling a strange head rush just as our bodies met in that awkward way. I kept my expression blank as he left.

"I'll go check on him," Emmett said to Alice.

"He's fine, Emmett," she said, and then to me, "Really. He's just nervous. First day jitters kind of thing."

"I'll go make sure," Emmett said and left.

"I can see you all look out for each other," I said. Rosalie gave me a clear "no shit," look, and then shoved her chair back and let out a bored sigh.

"My office is right down the hall here," I said. "Door's always open."

I was wary of the Cullens after that, but Red pestered me to keep an eye on them so I tried from a distance. At the end of the week I asked Edward's biology teacher, Derek Banner, how he appeared during class.

"Cullen kid? He seems ok," Derek said. "Quiet. "

"He hasn't seemed upset to you?"

"He does sit alone. He's the only kid without a lab partner this term. None of the other kids seem willing to go near him."

"Interesting," I gave my patented answer. Though I did find it quite interesting. Kids can be counted on to sniff out abnormal like a k-9 can find weed at a Phish concert. They just know weird when they see it. So I knew something about Edward was off for Forks High, but other than exceedingly good looking and rich, I didn't know what.

"Yeah, kids," Derek said with a dismissive shrug. "Did you see the staff assignments for the senior hike?"

"No." I'd forgotten all about the new "student bonding" program we were implementing for the seniors.

"You and I have L-P together. Should be a decent group." He was clearly enthusiastic.

"Great."

“Yeah, stop by my classroom later and we’ll talk gear.”

Derek was a recently single guy about seven years older than me, and he wasn’t a bad looking guy. He was bald, but kept his head shaved hardcore style and he worked out so he had a great body. Not terribly tall, but taller than me. We had always been friendly and that was all, though sometimes I’d wonder about him in that ‘I’ll bet he’s not too bad in bed’ kind of way. Probably a generous type with lots of mediocre foreplay and embarrassing pet names. I bet he even brought you tea when it’s over. Derek had been named teacher of the year four times, but then there wasn’t a lot of competition at Forks High. There are nice things about small ponds, I suppose.

Back in my office, I looked out the window as fifth period gym walked out onto the soccer field, Coach Clapp bellowing directions behind them. Some of the jock boys dribbled soccer balls around the perimeter while the girls lagged behind, clearly enjoying the parade of nimble young male bodies. Then suddenly the girls towards the back of the pack stopped to watch as two other girls came catapulting across the field.

Alice and Rosalie Cullen. It had to be, because as far as I knew we had no returning Olympic gymnasts this year.

I opened my window and heard Alice and Rosalie laughing as they tumbled effortlessly across the expanse of the soccer field. Their movement was unreal, like pixies flitting over a field of wildflowers. Coach Clapp stood staring, whistle dropped from his parted lips. The other kids watched them, confused as they frantically grouped themselves like a pack of frightened deer, hovering at the sideline.

Alice turned several cartwheels and then launched easily into three back flips. Rosalie answered her with a running flip, landing effortlessly on her feet. She dusted her hands off on her shorts and hollered at the class, “What? You’ve never seen a cartwheel before?”

Then she ran up to one of the guys and stole a soccer ball from him. The boy stood and stared at her, slack jawed as she gracefully whisked past him. Alice ran across the field—god damn they were fast—and caught Rosalie, stealing the soccer ball from her. The scene suddenly turned normal again as the rest of the class broke free from its stunned transfixion and began to dribble soccer balls tentatively around the field. Coach Clapp resumed shouting his directives, almost like it had never happened.

I wanted a closer look and apparently I was not the only one. As I walked out of the building, I noticed all the young faces at classroom windows. Emmett and Edward were staring from a window in Senora Carmen’s class, in some animated exchange, though I could not tell if they were laughing or arguing.

Coach Clapp lined the kids up for a series of shots on goal. None of the kids would go anywhere near the Cullen girls, who had volunteered to goalie. Alice noticed me and waved. I waved tentatively back to her.

“What the hell was that?” Red hissed at me, stalking onto the soccer field.

“I guess they’re athletic,” I said. “And clearly, they like attention.”

“Perfect,” he was annoyed. “Bella, these kids make me nervous.”

“Come on, Red. Don’t jump to conclusions.” My advice was empty.

Red walked over to where Clapp stood, arms crossed, surveying his students as they kicked soccer balls at Alice and Rosalie, who easily blocked every shot. It was like the rest of us were in slow motion.

A high pitched scream broke from a group of three girls hanging out in the corner of the field. They ran over to Coach Clapp and he blew his whistle in three short blasts and then waved the kids in, like a lifeguard on a closing beach. The other kids, seeing whatever it was that scared the girls, broke into a run. Some were laughing, and some were clearly afraid.

“Inside, now!” Clapp yelled.

Red shouted, “Everybody walk. Remain calm!” Most of the girls were scampering towards the building anyway, with the exception of Jessica Stanley, one of the more popular juniors, who was acting very cool and sauntering back to the building with some of the guys laughing whatever it was off. But Rosalie and Alice walked towards the woods.

“You two girls!” Clapp called to them. “Get your butts over here now!”

Then I saw it, coming to the edge of the treeline. A black bear, about the size of a large man, maybe the size I’d imagine a nice burly lumberjack to be. I found this strangely delightful. I’d never seen a bear that close before outside of a zoo. I walked over to Clapp to get a better look.

Rosalie looked back in our direction, annoyed, but she didn’t move. Then she said something to Alice and took a lunging step towards the bear. She made a face that I couldn’t quite see, but it almost looked as though she was baring her teeth. Alice laughed and tugged playfully at Rosalie’s arm, pulling her in the direction of the building.

The bear turned and took off into the woods.

In the parking lot after school I saw the Cullens arguing. Rosalie was laughing, Alice was biting her lower lip—was it to keep from smiling? The boy Cullens were bickering in low voices, Edward shaking his head angrily, Jasper throwing his hands up in the air. Emmet put his arm around Rosalie protectively as she gave Edward a sneer.

I felt like a voyeur as I sat in the front seat of my car and stared, hoping no one would notice me gawking behind the windshield.

Edward shook his head, as though he'd had enough of whatever conversation they were having. He opened the car door, but just as he was getting in he looked in my direction and our eyes met for a moment, one staggering moment that felt painfully long and devoid of common decency. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and tightened my jaw defensively as his eyes held mine in place. And though I knew it would have been better to casually smile or wave or simply look away, I found I could not. Instead I held his eyes with my own, thinking perhaps I'd find something there that would answer the question that hung between us. Who the hell did this kid think he was, staring at me like that?

Then he let it go and got in the car. I felt strangely triumphant I had not been the first to look away.

CHAPTER TWO

Future Perfect

Ritalin, Klonopin. I stood staring at my medicine cabinet. I was out of Xanax, which was probably for the best. I was in the mood for a Rainier, anyway. I stashed a few Klonopin in my purse, just in case.

I'd never been much of a pill head, much of any kind of user. The occasional glass of wine or the overindulgence at New Year's, sure. But it changed, like everything else, when Zachary died. Zack was my husband. He was killed five years before in Afghanistan.

I fell in love with Zack when I was 16, when he teased me in Spanish class for being quiet and convinced me to do his homework for him. I married him right out of high school, despite the protests of my divorced parents and all of our closer friends. I'd wanted to start a family right away, but Zack wanted to be a hero, so he became a soldier. After two tours of duty he didn't feel so invincible anymore, but he said he couldn't quit until the job was done. He left on a third tour of duty and just didn't make it home.

I was half way to a Ph.D. when he was killed and couldn't finish. A year passed and the pain of his loss didn't relent one bit. It wasn't at all like everyone said it would be. I didn't cherish the times we'd had. I didn't honor his memory. I just drank, something I rarely did while he was alive. And then when the alcohol wasn't doing enough to keep me from thinking, I started with pills.

Every day after he died was like the first day I'd gotten the news, and I understood that was not normal. I couldn't get out of bed anymore and at one point, stayed in my bed for two weeks straight, an assortment of empty bottles hidden beneath the night table. There was talk of medication and hospitals, but I knew how to get out of that. Besides, that wouldn't make me better.

I needed to get out of Jersey. I couldn't face the walls of our home, his empty side of the bed, his beloved AMC Javelin left untouched in the garage. I couldn't drive the streets we drove on without thinking about the unthinkable. Couldn't even bear to write my own name—his name. I just had to get out, to get away from his memory.

My father, Charlie Swan, was from Forks and was its police chief. I had been born there, and though I'd spent little time with him while I was growing up, we were close.

"Come on home, Bella," he said to me one night on the phone. "I'll do whatever I can to help you."

Forks was as far from my broken life as I could realistically get. It was so remote it could have been Venus, which would have been my first choice had it been a viable option. So I went, and Charlie helped me get a place to live and a job and much to my surprise, gradually I pieced together a new life for myself. Some days were better than others, but I still got up every day, and that was an improvement.

Thinking about Charlie made me realize I was running late for dinner, as usual. Like most Monday nights, I jumped in my car and headed for the diner to meet my father.

"Where's Sue?" I asked as I sat down. Sue Clearwater was my father's girlfriend of about seven years. She often joined us at the diner on Monday nights.

"She's at the dry cleaner's getting my uniforms."

"You know, if you don't ask her to marry you soon she's going to stop doing things like that."

"Now you sound just like her," he said.

"Well, we're both right."

"Quite a day you had at school today." He changed the subject.

"Yeah, did you check it out?"

"I stopped by but didn't see any bear. Just some tracks," he said.

"That reminds me—I stepped in a pile of crap this morning in my driveway. I'll bet it was that same bear."

"You're not in Jersey, Bells." He was leveling that very serious chief of police look at me—the one that made me very grateful I didn't live with him as a teenager.

"Yeah," I said. "In New Jersey we have a reason for bear sightings—an explosion of hideous development. Here, you have all this stupid wilderness and your bears have no excuse." I finished my Rainier and ordered another.

"It is odd. We've had more bear sightings around town in the past three months than I can remember having in the past three years," he said.

"You're having another?" he asked and I rolled my eyes at him. He continued, "something in the ecosystem has got to be changing."

"Like what?"

"Not sure. Could be something affecting their food source. Or it could be some kind of predator."

"What kind of predator hunts bears?"

"Humans," he said.

The waitress came over with our order.

"Chief, there was another bear sighting, came right up to the Thriftway dumpster this morning," she said. "I'm really worried somebody's going to do something stupid and get attacked."

"Me too," Charlie said while drizzling the A-1 onto his hamburger. He looked at me and said, "Bella, you know how to deal with a bear attack?"

"Dad, why the hell would I know that?"

"Fight. And use this," he said, handing me a canister of pepper spray.

"Jesus, Dad," I took it and put it deep in my purse. "I'm more likely to blind myself than a bear."

"Good thing I didn't give you a pistol then," he said.

The Cullens quickly became the trending topic at Forks High, with students breaking into distinct camps of either Cullen fandom or Cullen antipathy. It was like they were a band or a ball team—everyone seemed obligated to have an opinion. The Cullens largely kept to themselves, and none of the students made overtures to befriend them. I don't know if they were intimidated by their money, looks, or freaky talents. I know they were confused by their connectedness, as it had quickly become clear that Jasper and Alice were together, as in, fucking each other, and the same went for Rosalie and Emmett. This kind of thing was most certainly frowned upon, though an inquiry to the Washington State Child Protective Services confirmed that anyone was unlikely to do much about it. Rosalie and Emmett were 18, and Alice and Jasper were less than a year from being legal age, and apparently of little interest to the state.

Then there was Edward. He was alone, aloof, bored, and usually appeared to be lost somewhere in his own head. It bothered me how he isolated himself. It wasn't a good sign. Isolated kids are often depressed kids, the kind who one day show up in your office having taken a handful of pills, or who just stop showing up at all. He was, however, proving to be an excellent student, and had no disciplinary problems other than random smoking incidents outside on school grounds. Some of the staff thought that marked him as a rebel. I wasn't so sure.

I hadn't had much interaction with Edward since that first day of school, but ever since I found myself noticing him constantly. His thick, brown hair was always a perfectly tousled mess. His eyes appeared to shift color, from black to toffee brown and back over days. He never spoke to anyone other than his family unless he was spoken to, and then he was quick to end the conversation. I wondered exactly what sort of chip he was carrying on his shoulder, given what little I understood of his ambiguous, unattached past.

What did I know about Edward? He'd been a foster child, which told me he might have been bounced around a lot as a kid. I had to guess he'd been abused or abandoned. And he had to be put in the system young—it was rare to get adopted from foster care once you were over the age of twelve. In fact it was hard to get into foster care at all once you were a teenager. He was clearly smart and obviously well mannered. Maybe he'd been adopted as a baby by the Cullens. But then, why was he so isolated and moody? Was there trouble at home? A genetic tendency towards depression or some other mood disorder?

I found myself thinking about this quite a bit. A bit too much, perhaps, for my own comfort.

One afternoon during the second week of school I found Edward by himself in the parking lot, leaning against his car, waiting for his siblings, listening to his car stereo. I recognized the song because it was a favorite of mine. This gave me an excuse to go talk to him.

I walked towards him and he stared openly at me, just like he had on the first day of school. I understood he was sending me some kind of warning, but I didn't care. The closer I came the more his expression softened, like I was walking through some kind of psychological barrier. At first he looked put off, but then his face cracked, just a little, and I saw the corners of his mouth start to turn up just before he caught himself and drew his mouth into a straight, unexpressive line.

"That's a great song," I said.

"You know it?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's Daylight by Mercy Brown. I love her."

"Really?" He was definitely surprised. Most high school students don't expect anyone over the age of twentyfive to know anything about music. I was used to that.

"Yeah, I'm a big fan," I said. "I read about her on Stereogum over the summer and have been an obsessive listener ever since."

"Huh."

He wasn't going to make conversation easy for me. I expected as much.

"So, how do you like Forks High compared to Highland Tech?"

"I haven't thought much about it," he said.

"How are your classes so far?"

"Fine," he said.

"Good." I smiled at him, maybe a little bit smugly. So for whatever reason he wasn't going to warm up. "Well, have a nice weekend," I said, ready to take my leave. "It's supposed to be sunny, for once."

"I don't like sun," he said. The edge of confrontation in his voice was unmistakable. He gave me another one of those looks you'd never give to someone you didn't know. He didn't want me to go, this was obvious. The feeling was mutual and discomforting and I was suddenly aware that I had a real problem on my hands.

"You've come to the right peninsula then," I said, unable to keep the smirk off my face, though I did keep my voice steady, my eyes locked right back on his.

Our tense little exchange was interrupted by the arrival of the other Cullens, who approached with the most amused expressions as they caught us standing there together. Alice was particularly bubbly. Edward glared at her in warning.

"Hey Miss Swan," she said, ignoring him. "Giving Edward a little counseling session?"

"Why, does he need it? I could pencil him in."

"Are you kidding?" Emmett said. "An army of psychiatrists couldn't crack that attitude."

"Shut up," Edward said. "We've got to go."

Students swarmed into the parking lot, a lighthearted exodus into the weekend. I left the Cullens bantering in the parking lot, but as I went back inside, out of the corner of my eye I saw Edward, still watching me. If I hadn't seen it, I would have known it anyway.

But I didn't turn around.

My best friend in Forks was Illeana Rogers, a young Cuban psychiatrist I'd met at a conference the year I moved back here. Technically, she was from Port Angeles, a compromise for her husband who dragged her out of Seattle ten years ago. She had a flair for the obscure, an evil sense of humor, and a keen appreciation for other people's pain which made her one of the best psychiatrists I'd ever known. She also had a love for the darker things in life—horror films, amateur porn, the occult. She was also my pill connection.

A lot of people would be surprised at how not big a deal prescription drug “off label” use is among doctors, especially psychiatrists. Most of the honest ones will tell you that Ritalin works far better than coffee if you're trying to get through medical training with your sanity. “We all do better with a little speed,” Illeana said. I had no argument.

She was not above sharing samples or writing scripts when times got rough. My anniversary, Zack's birthday, things like that. I never really thought it was much of a big deal, myself. What was the difference if someone prescribed you Klonopin because you had a psychiatric condition or if you were just a fucking wreck because your husband got himself killed and left you a widow at twenty five years old? The difference is in the details, really, and who cares about those?

I was running low on Klonopin and out of Xanax, so I went out to her place for drinks. The summer had been lonesome and difficult and she'd more than once hinted toward her concern that I might be getting depressed again. I knew she was right to worry—I'd do well to worry a little more about that myself. So when I turned up at her place looking for more pills, I wasn't surprised to get the lecture instead.

“You should see someone, Bella,” she said. “You know medication will only do so much. You need therapy.”

“Please, Illeana, we've been through this.” Psychologist or not, I am not a big fan of therapy. I've had therapy, yes. I've given therapy too. I find it to be only marginally useful unless a person actually wants to change. Most people do not, despite what they think, despite what they say. Most people want to stay the same and just talk about change. I was not particularly interested in change. I was just trying to lose the black clouds of death that followed me everywhere.

“Fine. What are you doing for your birthday next week? Want to go out?”

“Fuck that, no way. I'm staying home and drinking until I forget I was ever born.”

"That's pathetic."

"It suits me, then."

"Come on, don't be like that. Let's see what your thirtieth year has in store." She rubbed her hands together, brought out a bottle of Merlot and a deck of Tarot cards. I had no belief in the bullshit of the Tarot, but Illeana treated her Tarot deck like her DSM-IV or the New York Times—it was just another reference. She shuffled the cards and had me cut the deck. I poured two big glasses of wine and sank back into the couch as she huddled intensely over the spread laid out on the coffee table.

"Oh, honey I think you're gonna finally meet someone," she gushed excitedly. "This is the Hermit—this symbolizes you. Speaks for itself, no? A loner. Somebody isolated, spending too much time thinking. Totally you, girl. This next card crossing you, that's the Three of Swords. Three people in a conflict. One of the swords is dripping blood. Could be an injury. Don't look at me like that."

"You know I hate when you predict shit like that."

"You're so concrete. Please get a grip. Next you have the Three of Pentacles. Maybe a new job coming your way?"

"So I'm going to get fired? Great."

"Pessimist. This card under you is the Seven of Swords. It's like a foundation. It means some kind of move, like your move to Forks. Or it could mean you're going to be robbed."

"And why do I want to know this?" I asked. "More wine, please." She poured me a glass and continued.

"See this one? This is the sun. This is what's past. It means new ventures, business. A baby."

"In the past, sure. Any dream I had of that is gone now," I said.

"Don't be a shit," she said. "You're only twenty nine. Now check this out—this is what awaits you. It's The Chariot. That means travel. So you've got travel in your future, see? But this card also represents choice. A major choice will be ahead of you this year. But it also means you might want to redecorate your house."

I laughed at the absurdity.

"Now this card represents you, hija," she said. "The Queen of Pentacles. You're gonna be rich! Oh, don't forget me when you are. I'll miss you when you move to Hollywood." She gave me a fake frown.

"If I become rich, I will personally have every last tea towel you own embroidered with a cameo of my likeness for Christmas. Don't say I never gave you anything."

"So this next card is what—or rather who—is surrounding you right now. This is why I say you're gonna meet someone. This, sweetheart, is the King of Wands."

I laughed out loud.

"Ha! That is totally who I want to meet this year. The Jack of Vibrators would be okay too. Does it tell you his number?"

"Seriously, Bella, this could be your future husband right here. The King of Wands represents a man who is very talented, but very private. Creative, passionate, jealous type. It's someone you know—someone around you now."

Jacob, I thought, but didn't say. Jacob Black had been one of my closest friends since I'd moved back to Forks. We'd known each other since we were little kids, because his father Billy was my father's closest friend. Since I'd moved to Jersey as a kid we didn't see much of each other while growing up, but he was the kind of friend you were always comfortable with, like you hung out every day. He was the only person I could think of that might possibly fit the King of Wands description. Plus, he had a really nice wand. Though he hadn't been around much lately.

"Jacob?" Illeana asked. It wasn't like she read my mind. There just weren't other plausible possibilities.

"He's not into me," I said. I'd known this for awhile. We were close friends and had on occasion fucked, mostly out of curiosity, boredom and general horniness. But we never seemed to cross out of friend territory.

"Maybe he just doesn't know he's into you yet. Maybe that's what's going to change," she said. "Let me see what else is here. See in the hopes and fears place, you've got Justice. Ay, I hate this card. It's about right and wrong, blah, blah. You're worried about being judged. Who isn't?"

"Next."

"The final summary is..." She paused, curious. "Well, this card kind of sucks. It's the Four of Pentacles. It means you're going to be rich, but we already knew that. It also means 'blocking change' but I don't get it. Like, in the end, you won't change. You'll be eternally Bella."

"And that's why I don't want psychotherapy."

"You're impossible, you know that?" She tossed me her mother's afghan and I curled up on the couch. "Buenos noches."

I thought about what the cards said as I wound down for sleep, particularly that thing about the King of Wands. A talented, private, passionate man sounded very good to me. It was the first time since Zack's death I thought I might be willing to get involved with someone.

Would Jacob Black really ever fall for me? He was hot and we had good chemistry. We laughed a lot. We drank a lot, too, which was usually how we ended up in bed together. I could see falling for Jake, but his casual stance towards me made me reluctant to take the possibility at all seriously. I didn't need anymore drama or heartache. But if I thought it was possible? I could see being very into Jake.

I was taking an inventory of other men I knew, my mind a little loose with wine and sleep wandering down, but then that train of thought stopped at a station I hadn't anticipated.

Edward Cullen.

And for just a minute I indulged myself the shameful pleasure of recalling him in minute detail. I thought about his perfectly unkempt hair, those fierce probing eyes of his, and those full, demonstrative lips when they turned down in a scowl or pressed flat to each other in irritation. And as I began to wonder if he'd left a girl in Alaska, and if he missed her, and what those lips of his might feel like, taste like, in another ten years, I just had to stop myself. Too much wine. Don't go there, I said to myself.

Was there a real possibility with Jacob Black? Should I pursue something there? A relationship would probably be a good thing for me. Maybe it was time.

I slipped off to sleep, dreaming of Cuban coffee in the morning, almost forgetting I would be going home the next morning without a new stash of meds to take the edge off.

CHAPTER THREE

Hurricane Ridge

Two buses were loaded with the senior class for the day and everyone was accounted for save the Gittler twins who'd come down with an intestinal virus and the Cullens, who'd been signed out. That left us with 67 kids and 10 staff for the trek up to Hurricane Ridge.

The day's events included a five mile hike, an "I Spy" style nature walk competition, a philosophical discussion question relating to Walden and some stupid human tricks to facilitate breaking social barriers. All this was designed to be in the service of social cohesion for our seniors. It was admirable, really, but this was the first year we'd tried it so who the hell knew how it would turn out.

Derek Banner was in full hiking regalia, a small day pack with maps and water bottles and power bars, a tan hat that coordinated perfectly with his two hundred dollar hiking boots, swiss army knife hanging off his belt, right next to his cell. He cheerfully corralled our group of 14 kids with pithy words on the outdoors and he wasn't even terribly geeky about it.

I was looking down at my camera, adjusting some settings for what I'd hoped would be some decent wildlife shots. As I was fiddling, I tripped over a stone in the path and Derek caught me by the arm. I blushed as I heard the kids laugh at my clumsy move, but as I felt him steady me, I felt something else, unexpected. Something nice.

Mike Newton was in our group and in a rare state that day. Normally he was a tightly wound kid, friendly and outgoing, but stressed out. His family owned the local sporting goods store and he was all about the great outdoors, so he was really at home that day. It was a nice change.

"Hey, Miss Swan, I didn't know Jersey girls hiked," he teased me.

“Oh, you have no idea how many miles of exurban wasteland there are to explore back east,” I teased him back. “I’ve got mad hiking stories.”

“Tell us one, then.”

“Sure.”

I looked over at Derek, who smiled at me in that “Well, then?” kind of way.

“It was a bright, sunny day and I was hiking around the mall with every other female over 12 within a 4 mile radius. Actually, you may be interested to know there’s a mall every 4 miles in Jersey. It’s part of the state constitution, along with pizza made by real Italians and two license plates for every car... ”

“Awesome,” Paige Lee, another one of my favorite kids, said.

“It’s convenient, that’s for sure,” I said. “So, yeah, I was at the mall, on a Saturday, and it was bright and sunny out—unlike certain towns located inside a certain temperate rain forest I’ve heard about—and every teenager in the world was there. Not a single one was outside. And all of the drivers on the turnpike rejoiced.”

“That’s a lame hiking story, Miss Swan,” Mike said.

“Well, I’m not at the good part yet,” I said. “Then suddenly, Jon Bon Jovi walked into Old Navy to buy sweatpants, and all of the middle aged mothers of the teenagers lost their minds, and swarmed him for autographs. Because Jon Bon Jovi is a kind of patron saint in New Jersey,” the kids were now laughing.

“Oh, we’re halfway there... Oh! We’re livin’ on a prayer... ” two of the girls broke out in song, and I was fairly sure at that point that Derek Banner was wishing he hadn’t been assigned to work with me that day.

“Okay folks, let’s think while we’re out here in God’s country,” Derek jumped in, “Not about malls and aging rock stars, but about Thoreau and his great experiment. How do you think you would you be transformed if you left the life you knew in civilization and embraced a life of simplicity in nature?”

“That’s a good question,” I said, hoping I hadn’t pissed him off. “Every day we’re being transformed by a so many different influences. Friends, parents, television, movies, books, internet garbage. What if you just left it all behind and disappeared out here in the wilderness?”

“There’s no 3G out here, is there?” one of the kids joked.

“I can’t hear you now,” said another.

"I'd love it," Mike said. "Imagine you didn't have to deal with anything or anyone except mother nature. No parents on your back, no papers due. How about just for a day?"

"It would be boring," Paige said. "What would you do all day?"

"Survival isn't boring," Mike said.

Mike dropped to the back of our line so he could see Jessica, who was in the group following us. He handed her something—looked like a note, and then got back in our line. Real smooth, he was. Not obvious at all. She looked bored. But then, she always looked bored around him. I was fairly certain these two were headed for another break up, which meant hours of Mike Newton crying in my office. It made it hard for me to like Jessica, and she wasn't a bad kid. Just a typical 17 year old girl always looking out for the next better thing to come alone.

The hike was long and beautiful. September is one of the driest months on the Olympic Peninsula and we had a stunning, clear day. From the crest of the ridge I could see the white jagged edges of the snow topped Olympic mountains in the distance. Below, a thick cropping of tall evergreens rose towards the bright blue sky while an explosion of oranges, reds and yellows signaled the underbrush's descent into the slumber of winter. I'd forgotten how much natural beauty like this touched me, even living in the heart of the outdoors for four years. I'd always enjoyed hiking when I was younger, but I hadn't done much of this since Zack died. It was the kind of thing we used to do all the time in summer. I was pleasantly surprised the memory of it didn't make me sad just then.

"Why didn't the Cullens come today?" asked Paige. "That family is so weird."

"Total freaks," Mike said and several of the boys laughed. "They're like mutants or something. Ever notice how in lunch, they all buy food but nobody ever eats? What is that about?"

"They're all like, doing each other too," said another girl under her breath.

"That's enough," Derek said. "Unless you want to volunteer to be the topic of discussion next time you're absent from school." The kids settled down.

I wished the Cullens had come on the trip to Hurricane Ridge. If there was one group of kids who needed the socially integrating activities of the trip, it was them. Plus, the less the other students knew them, the more they would be relegated to the spoils of gossip and rumor mongering, which was just going to add up to more drama. As school counselor I had a vested interest in minimizing teen drama whenever and wherever possible. I sighed in frustration. Why had Dr. Cullen pulled them out of the trip? It was almost like he didn't want them to integrate.

At the end of the hike we broke into mixed groups and did some human pyramids, knots and assorted other silly activities to get the kids' social ties to shift a little. We watched with satisfaction as the bones of their little cliques fractured and our senior class transformed itself from a grouping of social islands into a more diverse and varied continent, at least for the afternoon.

It became obvious that Paige clearly had it for Mike as she made several attempts to be near him. She consistently laughed at his jokes, however meager they were, and she placed herself next to him during the ice breaking exercises, though with Jessica Stanley typically on his other side, she wasn't making much of an impact. Mike still had it bad for Jessica, most of the junior guys did, and it was painful to see how disinterested she was in him, despite their boyfriend/girlfriend status. I silently wished Paige a little dating mojo.

"Pretty good day, right?" Derek said to me as we were rounding the kids up to go home. "We should start a Thoreau club and do an overnight with some of the more interested kids. We could do a trip to Lake Crescent."

"Yeah," I said. "I think some of the kids would really go for that."

"Would you?"

"Sure," I smiled and looked off into the woods.

As the 67 seniors were piling onto the buses (they were all there, Red counted, five times) and the staff were packing our gear into the back, I went to use the bathroom before taking the trip home. "Hurry it up Miss Swan." Red instructed me like I was one of the kids.

On the way back to the buses I was singing that Mercy Brown tune again, thinking about Edward Cullen. It was too bad he hadn't come on this trip. It had been a really good day for the students, and I was sure he would have made a friend or two. It would have been interesting to see him making a human pyramid with a bunch of kids or twisting into a giant teen knot with the rest of his classmates. I laughed to myself as I tried to imagine him engaging in the activities with the other students. Somehow I just couldn't picture Edward at the base of a human pyramid.

As I approached the buses, I heard something. A few snapping twigs, the rustle of fallen leaves under foot steps. And it sounded almost as if it was following me, only from under the cover of the woods. I turned slowly to see two large bears, one black and one dirty white, wandering behind me along the fringe of the woods, eyeing me like lost school children looking for the bus home.

I grabbed my camera from my neck and turned slowly towards them.

The bears watched me, still and elegant as I approached, strangely comfortable with my encroaching presence. Maybe they were used to park visitors and had become like the crowd of pushy pigeons you found on city stoops, demanding bread crumbs.

When I got within about 15 yards I raised the viewfinder to my eye. I was being stupid, I realized, but I wanted to get a shot of the white bear and who knew if I'd ever see an albino bear again outside of the internet or a zoo. I began shooting and the bears looked curiously at me, like a dog might if he was expecting something from your pocket.

"Bella!" Red shouted, now noticing me and my subjects along the edge of the woods. I expected the bears to run, startled by his shouting, but they didn't. Instead, the white bear got up on its hind legs, like it was trying to see better. The black bear turned and began to plod its way back into the cover of the trees, bored. I looked back to where Red and the rest of the faculty stood and gestured—one minute—I just had to get one more shot of this magnificent white bear. I turned back to where it had been standing and noticed it had taken several strides towards me. It moved so quietly and fast I hadn't noticed. I should have run but instead just put my hand out as if to say "Stop!"

The bear stopped its approach and studied me. She was gorgeous. Thick white fur covered her towering form as we stood there, confronting each other silently. Her black eyes studied me with intense curiosity as I raised the camera back to my face and shot several frames.

"Get back here now!" I heard Red's last straw warning and suddenly realized another HR write-up was in my immediate future. I took the camera away from my face and I am certain that the white bear nodded to me in recognition before she galloped back into the woods.

The following day I was in the faculty lounge, licking my wounds from the severe reprimand I'd gotten from Red for setting such a bad example for the students, and he was right. There wasn't much I could actually say about it. Derek came in and asked quietly, "Did you bring any of those pictures with you today?"

"No," I said. "I was so stupid to do that."

"Yeah," he said. "But I bet you got some amazing shots of that Kermodé."

"The what?"

"The white bear. It's called a Kermodé. It's a genetic variant of a regular Black Bear, but they are never seen this far south."

"I didn't know that."

"You shouldn't have gotten so close to it," he said. "But I'm glad you got photos."

"I'll email you some," I said.

"I was thinking more about the idea for the Thoreau club," he said. "Would you be available to get coffee with me after school to do some brainstorming?"

"Sure," I smiled at him, but as I agreed to this pseudo-date, I immediately had that feeling you get when you've committed to something that is going to lead somewhere you're not sure you want to be, like buying a non-refundable plane ticket to your second cousin's wedding in Ohio.

"By the way, I thought you'd be interested," he continued. "Edward Cullen skipped blood typing in lab today. I know he's been a concern of yours." I nodded. "Apparently Harris caught him smoking in the woods during third period. He's in ISS for the rest of the day."

"Huh. Kid's a smoker. That figures."

"Yeah and he doesn't like blood."

"Lots of kids are queasy about that."

"We get fainters every year," he said. "None this year though. Must be my year."

I walked down the hall and looked in the window of the In School Suspension room, where Vice Principal Harris sat at the teacher's desk, reading a Modern Ammo magazine, looking satisfied. Edward sat across from him, still, his eyes full of anger, black and focused on some unknown point out the window. I wondered at that stillness and its contrast to the message of his gaze. He looked like a stone carving from an ancient legend. Not a single muscle twitched—he didn't even appear to be breathing.

Harris saw me standing at the door and made an irritated face, the normal face he made whenever he saw anyone. Edward looked at me then and gave me the slightest signal, but I understood what he wanted.

"Mr. Harris," I said, "I need to see Edward Cullen."

"What for?" he asked me. Edward got out of his seat and walked out the door.

"Interview," I said, wondering at myself for lying. I didn't actually have to give him a reason. "He won't be back."

Out in the hall Edward was leaning against the lockers waiting for me. "Thanks," he said.

"Right. I'm going to have to find something to do with you now," I said. "Do you mind coming to my office for awhile?"

"Not at all," he said.

In my office I offered him a seat on the small couch across from my desk. I sat in my chair across from him, wondering what the hell I might do with him. He looked curiously around my office, perusing the books off my shelf.

"So are you a traditionalist? Freudian? Or more of a behaviorist?"

"I'm a realist," I said.

We were interrupted by a knock at my door. Derek stuck his head in, surprised to see Edward there.

"Mr. Cullen, I thought you were in ISS for smoking," he said.

"What's up, Mr. Banner?" I asked, my heart racing just a little as I cut him off before Edward had a chance to reply. "Can I help you with something?"

"I just wanted to let you know I've got to stay late to help a student with an assignment. Can we get coffee tomorrow instead?"

"Sure," I said. "No problem."

"Great."

Edward cocked his head at me, mildly interested in this small amount of information about my personal life.

"You're a coffee drinker then?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I picked it up after I quit smoking."

"That stuff will kill you," he said.

"Ha ha," I said. "So, you're a smoker then?"

"It's a bad habit I picked up years ago," he said.

"Isn't your dad is a doctor? He must not like you smoking."

"Carlisle doesn't interfere much with what I do."

"Is that what you call him?"

"Yeah."

"How long have you been with your parents, anyway?" I asked.

"Awhile," he said, looking away.

"And your brothers and sisters too?"

"I don't like talking about myself or my family," he said, his eyes commanding me to silence in a way I found most unsettling. My heart fluttered in my chest, my skin tingled like a ghost had crept into the room. This was not a reaction I'd ever had to anyone before in my life, let alone a high school student.

"What do you like talking about, then?" I asked.

"I don't like talking."

Normally my patience, in short supply everywhere else in my life but here, could wear in even the most withdrawn kid, bring them to a place where they'd feel comfortable enough to crack and make some small connection. But not Edward. He was cold. So cold I felt affected by it, like I wanted to pull a blanket over him, shine the sun on him, do something to chip at the ice surrounding his favor.

"Have you ever heard of a Kermode bear?" I asked.

"Of course. I saw one once out on Princess Royal Island in British Columbia. Why?"

"I have some photos of one that I saw on the Hurricane Ridge hike."

"Kermode bears aren't this far south," he said. "Are you sure that's what you saw?"

"No, but that's what I was told it was." I pulled a photo up on my computer and motioned for Edward to come see. "I don't know why, but I'm sure this was a female."

He came and stood behind me, looking over my shoulder. He crouched down a little, so his head was level with mine, his face just over my right shoulder. Something was wrong, very wrong, with what his proximity did to me. I inhaled and was distracted by the scent of him. No teenage boy had a right to smell that good.

"You must have been very close," he said quietly. I could feel his breath against my ear. "You're a good shot."

"Not usually," I managed to say. I cleared my throat awkwardly. He stood up then and took a seat on the couch.

"They're called Spirit Bears," he said. "An ancient American Indian legend says every tenth bear was turned white as a reminder of the last ice age, but they're actually pretty rare."

"You seem to know a lot about bears."

"I'm a hunter."

"You should join the Thoreau club we're starting," I said, regaining my mental footing. "We're probably going to do an overnight at Lake Crescent in the spring. Maybe we'll run into the Kermode again."

"An overnight?" he said, looking at me in disbelief. "You're an outdoors type?"

"Not really," I said, feeling more relaxed. "Sort of. I like hiking and I like camping. I've never done any without a car and a cooler though."

"I don't like clubs."

"I should have guessed." I gave him a sarcastic look, not one to put him off too badly, but one that would challenge that I-hate-everything defensive posture. "I'd ask what it is you do like, but I know you don't like talking about yourself, so maybe I'll just make it up."

"Go on," he said.

"Fine. I'm going to say you like good music. And fast cars. And Native American Indian history. And conservation, but not conversation. How am I doing?"

"Better than most," he said. "But then most of that you can get just from observation."

"Well, I'll guess I'll have to read your mind then," I said and closed my eyes, dramatically rubbing my temples. "You most love..."

"You can't read minds," he interrupted.

"How do you know? You didn't even let me try."

"Don't." He looked strangely uncomfortable. Not the reaction I was going for, but one I filed away as data.

"I can't actually read minds," I said. "I am, however, superb at reading body language, and right about now I'm sensing that you're ready to head to the library for some research on Kermode bears, or Austin Healy's or something productive like that." I wrote out a pass slip and handed it to him.

"Thank you," he said as he took it from me.

He paused before leaving, and again we were caught in that strange and powerful tension. It felt like a secret history from a different universe might suddenly reveal itself

and make sense of whatever unmentionable attraction held us in this bizarre, silent dance. If only we could stand to linger.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thirty

It was my thirtieth birthday and I was not happy about this at all, but I had a plan. The moment I got home from school I was going to take a couple of Klonopin, get in my big bed with a trashy novel and I would not leave it until I felt better, probably about three years.

My father had a different plan. "I'm taking you out to dinner tonight," he said.

"No, Dad. I'm really not in the mood."

"Tough," he said. "I made a reservation."

"It's my birthday and I should get to do what I want, shouldn't I?"

"What you want is to wallow in self-pity, so no. I'll pick you up at seven."

That annoying Chief of Police way of ending a conversation grated on me. That said, part of me knew I'd be better off distracted.

When we pulled into the parking lot of the local tavern, I smelled a set up. "Dad, you do not need a reservation to eat at the Mill."

"I had to get you to leave the house," he smiled and put his arm around me. We walked in, and god damn it if there wasn't a small surprise gathering in my honor. Sue and her kids, Seth and Leah, who were both in their mid twenties, were there already with Rainiers in hand. Illeana came up to me and kissed me on the cheek and put a tiara on my head. "Salud, Bella! Feliz cumpleaños!" She stuck a drink in my hand and led me to a table. "Happy thirtieth, princess."

"My father did this?"

"Don't be stupid. I did it, but it was his job to get you here. You can always count on a cop."

"I really do not want to be here."

"Sure you do. Look who I got to show up," she said as Jacob Black came up from behind and pulled me into a bear hug. I hadn't seen him since June. He was a new teacher this year at the high school on the nearby Quileute reservation where he grew up, and had been crazy getting himself prepared over the summer, or so he'd told me the handful of times I'd called him.

"Welcome to old age," he said, grinning. He gave me a quick, friendly kiss on the lips.

"Oh hey, thanks," I said sarcastically, but I was beyond happy to see him. He was the one person who knew how to break me out of my self-indulgent funks, and no doubt his absence from my life over the summer was a good part of the reason it sucked so hard.

"Dude, you got huge!" I took a step back from him and just admired. "You've been to the gym just a little?" Since I'd last seen him he added several inches to his chest and biceps.

"Clean living, baby," he said.

"Bullshit," I said.

"Happy birthday, Bella." I heard the gruff voice of Billy Black, Jacob's father and Charlie's best friend. Billy sported the most beat up wheel chair I'd ever seen. I supposed Medicare wasn't generous enough to float him a more modern model. I turned and bent down to give him a kiss on the cheek. "The best is yet to come," he promised.

"Bullshit again," I said.

"Don't be an ass, Bella," Charlie said. "Your thirties are some of the best years of your life. You'll see."

"I'll trade," said Billy.

"Cheers," I said. "Thanks for being here."

"Bella, there's more!" Illeana said, as she got up to welcome an older woman I didn't know to our gathering. "This is Sandra Clementini," she said. "She's a party psychic!"

I don't know what makes psychiatrists so superstitious, but I had to admit, Illeana did know how to make a party entertaining.

“So what’ll it be?” Sandra asked. “Tarot? Palm reading? Want me to talk to the dead?”

“At a pizza place?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Let’s go with palms,” I said. “The Mill is no place for the dead.”

She took my right hand and studied it with mock intensity. Then she took my left. “You are very left brained,” she said. “Ruled by logic.”

“You don’t say,” I mocked. Illeana stuck her tongue out at me.

“Not terribly easy going,” she said, wagging my thumb back and forth. “Hmm...” her eyes narrowed as her hand traced a line across my palm. “Some real heart break you’ve had,” and then she looked at me tenderly. “Are you single now?”

“If I tell you, isn’t that cheating?” I asked.

“Either way, there is some romance in your future, so it’s either happening now or will soon. But, it’s complicated.”

“Awesome,” I deadpanned.

“Your life line is very short,” she said, her eyes narrowing as she focused. “Look, it breaks here.”

“Great. Are you telling me I’m going to die young—on my birthday?”

“That’s not what that means,” she said. “But it looks like you’ve got some issues with your attachments,” she said.

“I don’t have any,” I said.

“I’d be careful, just in case.” She gave me a spooky look. “I think you’re headed for a string of unfortunate luck.”

“Did you pay for this?” I asked Illeana.

“Sandra, you are supposed to entertain us, not put a damper on the party,” Illeana said.

“I shouldn’t tell her? Then when she gets in a car accident you’ll call me and complain I didn’t warn her, no?”

“That’s great. Perfect.” I pulled my hand away. “You can’t alter fate anyway, right? So why know about it?”

“Who says you can’t alter fate?” Billy Black said. “Some aspects you can change.”

"Exactly," Sandra said. "Wear your seatbelt."

We ordered food and toasted the end of my youth and ate mediocre non-Jersey made pizza and drank too much beer, and as far as birthdays go, it was not all that bad. Charlie gave me the usual, cash. Sue gave me a new travel mug and Illeana got me a new leather bag. "Check the inside pocket when you get home," she whispered and made a cross eyed Klonopin face when no one was looking. Billy gave me a book on Quileute legends, something I'd asked him about a lot as a kid, and Jacob got me drunk, which is what I got nearly every time saw Jacob.

"I'll drive you home," Jacob offered.

We arrived at my house, and Jacob took my keys and helped me stumble into the living room, where I fell into a heap on the couch.

"Dude, you're gonna be so sick tomorrow. Let me get you some aspirin," he said.

"Let me see what I've got in here." I rifled through the bag from Illeana. More Ritalin, a few more Klonopin, and a friendly note that said, 'Janis Fords, Ph.D. Port Angeles, 360-532-1932. Call. This is the LAST TIME. Love, Ill.'

"What is this shit?" Jacob said, getting angry.

"Don't be a baby," I said. Jacob grabbed the pills out of my hands. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"You're too drunk, and you shouldn't be taking these."

"I wasn't going to." I got up off the couch, but then tripped and fell over the coffee table. "Fuck!"

Jacob helped me up and sat me on the couch. "Don't move, all right? I'll be right back." He came back with a tall glass of water and two ibuprofen and handed them to me. "You're such a jackass sometimes," he said.

"Is that anyway to treat me on my birthday?"

"No," he said. "This is." He threw me over his knee and smacked me on the ass. "One!" I screeched and he spanked me again. "Two! Three!" I shrieked, a combination of amused, incensed and turned on. I twisted myself around and tried to wrestle him. He pinned me down in about four milliseconds. "I had 27 to go, you know." He grinned.

If I wasn't so drunk I would have jumped him. If I could have moved. "Let's make a deal," I said.

"You are in no bargaining position," he said. "But, I am curious. What's your offer?"

"Spend the night," I said. "And I'll..."

"And... you'll what?"

"I don't know, what do you want?" My eyes were closing, I felt my words turn to oatmeal as I tried to get them out.

Jacob laughed. "Yeah, I want to spend the night with a girl so drunk she can't even finish her sentences." He picked me up off the couch and carried me into the bedroom. "You're not going to toss your pizza, right?"

"Mmm..." "I passed out somewhere between the couch and the bed. When I woke up in the morning, he was gone.

The next morning I called Jake, a tad bit embarrassed, a tad bit hopeful.

"Sorry I was so drunk last night," I said.

"Heh, no problem, you were just easing the pain of your descent into old age," he paused. "You were really ripped, though."

"Hey it isn't like you didn't help instigate most of that," I said. "I never get that drunk without assistance."

"Sure, blame the victim."

"How were you victimized, might I ask? I was the one with the headache the size of Vancouver this morning, on a work day no less."

"I had to be around all of the raw energy of a beautiful woman on the cusp of her sexual peak with no hope for getting any. Next time, get drunk, but not so drunk you pass out on me right at the good part, okay?"

"Oh, please." I was sort of gushing at the thought. "Anyway, we should get together and do something where I'm not embarrassing myself."

"Are you kidding? You embarrassing yourself is the best part of any evening."

"I've been wanting to see this singer," I said, tentatively. "Her name is Mercy Brown. She's playing in Seattle this weekend and I really want to go. Are you up for it?"

"Aw, Bells, I'm sorry. I'm camping this weekend with Embry." Embry was Jake's closest friend, and when the two of them were together, there was no getting a word in anyway. "But we'll do something soon. I definitely want to hang out."

I was disappointed, but not at all surprised. This was the reason I never really let myself consider Jake as a serious potential hook up. He never really had time for me,

and I knew I was destined to stay in the friend/fuck buddy category with him no matter how I tried to push it. And I didn't know how to feel about that. We'd had sex several times over the years, but whatever it was between us never seemed to get any lift. I could never tell if it was me, if it was him, or if it was just a non-stunning combination of things. Maybe someday when he got married I'd pull a Julia Roberts and go apeshit in front of a mass audience and confess my love. But probably not.

I decided to go to Seattle anyway. I had just turned 30, Seattle was a big town to get lost in and I needed a birthday weekend. I'd shoe shop and eat prawns and see a real band. And I'd go alone. That way when I inevitably embarrassed myself, it would be in the company of complete strangers and not people from the small town I now called home.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reckoner

As I unpacked a few things in my room at the Ace in Belltown on Saturday afternoon, I was impressed what a good idea this trip had been. Of course it was early and I was uncharacteristically optimistic.

First on my itinerary was shoe hunting. As I was perusing the displays at Shoefly I almost wished I had dragged Illeana with me, but as I loaded up my VISA, my guilty conscience thanked me for flying solo.

After changing into something that could split the difference between nice restaurant and hip rock club, I went out for prawns at The Waterfront Grill and watched boats. I love to watch boats.

I had lived in Toms River along the Jersey shore and while it was no Seattle, it was the place I discovered my love of sailing. For my 23rd birthday Zack gave me sailing lessons and I'd gotten so into it I became certified to charter monohulls under fifty feet. I hadn't been sailing at all since Zack died, another part of that life that had remained preserved, precious in memory, like it was behind museum glass.

I walked along the waterfront over to Bell Harbor and strolled up and down the docks. Rows of boats gently bobbed in the rhythm of slow currents. I loved reading the names of the boats and where they were from. Carly Sue, San Diego. Wild Eyes, Boston. Troubadour, Vancouver. Five Stars, Seattle.

Then I saw it. The one. Reckoner, Anchorage. It was a vintage Hinckley, just about 50 feet, an ocean cruiser with a red undercoat. She bobbed gently in her slip, like she was breathing in sleep. This was the boat I'd have someday when I inexplicably became rich.

I peered into the cockpit, looking for any sign of the owner. I ran my hand along the rail of her stern and almost couldn't stop myself from boarding. I took several photos of it with my phone so later I could drool and dream of sailing her in the San Juans.

Around 9:30 I wandered over to The Crocodile for Mercy Brown's set. After a few months of listening to her album repeatedly I couldn't wait to hear her live. And after the day of relative solitude I was eager to be among people again.

I'd decided against bringing any of my usual pharmaceuticals along. I didn't want to risk doing something stupid like taking a Klonopin, ordering a beer and then needing some poor barmaid to call me a cab at the end of the night. Or an ambulance. It wasn't likely I'd go to a club and not drink. Actually, it was nearly impossible.

At The Crocodile I made my way towards the stage, Rainier number one in hand. Mercy Brown started a soulful but dark, moody and sparse set. Her voice conveyed the pain of lost love in a way that touched me deeply, which was the reason I couldn't get her songs out of my head. I felt like if I were to have a beer with her, I could really talk to her. Like she knew what it was like to survive hell. I closed my eyes and just let my body sway with the sound.

As I let that sad, ponderous music sweep over my thoughts, I couldn't help thinking about Zachary. I could see him in the driveway, working on my car. At dinner, making a face at something I'd burned on the stove and fed him anyway. In bed, holding me as we drifted off to sleep after sex. I went and got another beer.

All the good optimistic energy I'd mustered about this weekend began to erode in the wake of my melancholy. I wanted to talk to someone, anyone so I could distract myself. But near the stage it was just me and Mercy, and she was doing all the talking. I had two more beers in half an hour, and then went to pee.

I started a conversation with a guy at the bar. His name was Oliver and he was really into female singers. He was a second year graduate student in Art History. He smelled like garlic and was too fashionable. I quickly ran out of things to say. I excused myself and began to push my way through the crowd back to the stage.

The beer was loosening me up and the music was loud enough that there was no way to talk to anyone without shouting in their ear, but I really wanted someone to say little things to, like "she's got a great voice, right?" Or "this reminds me a lot of Family Band," or anything to make some sort of connection to someone, anyone.

I scouted the room looking for someone to start chatting with. That girl leaning on the wall was too hip, and her friends looked too clever. That guy? He was cute. I was

encouraged when he looked my way and smiled. I started to walk over towards him, not directly to him. But then a woman—obviously a girlfriend or at least a date—came and put her arm around his waist. Another guy over by the bar looked safe and alone but when he caught me looking his way, he looked a little too enthusiastic and I was in no mood to fend off unwanted pick ups. By that point I was in no shape, either.

I was in the middle of my fourth beer, beyond buzzed when I noticed him, off to the side, towards the back of the club, alone. I nearly dropped the bottle when I did.

Edward Cullen stood quietly along the far wall. It should have been impossible, but it was definitely him. I'd know that blank expression anywhere. And I was completely, inappropriately, achingly happy to see him. My heart felt like it had swollen to three times its normal size. I wanted to buy him a drink, I was so glad to see him. But I wasn't far gone enough to do that.

Instead I hid behind a tall biker dude and watched him as he watched Mercy Brown's performance, still like stone, lost in his thoughts. He stood out, not for looking underaged, but for looking unapologetically beautiful. Three young women approached him, obviously impressed. One of them, the tall one with the good teeth and snarky t-shirt, spoke and I watched as he turned his head, annoyed by the distraction. Then he gave a polite smile and said something that made them all blush and scamper away like junior high girls. I felt the cynical, sardonic grin settle on my face as I tried to imagine what absurd comment he must have made, and then he caught me staring. I froze to the floor and he gave me that look again—the one that tells me he knows something is up. The one I can't tear myself away from, no matter how loud my conscience yells "Run, Bella!"

And then there we were, staring at each other from across a crowded bar, just like in some cliched movie, only in the cliched movies, the guy is usually old enough to legally drink. He must have had a fake ID to be in that club, and the responsible thing to do would have been to confront him and call his parents. Had I not been so wasted I might have considered doing something responsible like that. But instead I ducked out of the room and into the bathroom and prayed I could get out of there without having to speak to him, because there was no way I was hiding the fact that I was drunk. Drunk was no condition to be in when dealing with Edward Cullen.

I splashed my face with water, fixed my hair and make up and then snuck out of the club. I saw no sign of him, though just as I allowed myself to feel relieved, I turned the corner he was there, waiting.

"Let me buy you coffee," he said, halfway between amused and annoyed. It wasn't a question, nor really much of an invitation. More like an instruction.

"Um, uh," I stammered. "Hi." I was just too lit to be hanging out with a student, and mortified to be caught by Edward out at a bar, drunk and alone. I could imagine how well this would play back at school on Monday in the cafeteria. "It's pretty late, isn't it?" I asked, doing my damned best to announce.

"It's just after eleven," he said, slipping his arm around my shoulders as he steered me down the sidewalk, away from the club. "And I don't think it's a good idea for you to wander around here alone... right now."

"Hey, um..." was all I could say in response. It was an incredible gesture, I thought, him putting his arm around me like we were old pals. The audacity. I should have set him straight, right there and then, but I was drunk and his arm was strong and protective... and wrong and I should have slipped out from under it, I know, but I didn't, and he ignored me anyway.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as we walked.

"I came to see Mercy. She's an old friend mine," he said.

"Do your parents know you're here?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "She's been staying with us while she's on the west coast. Why? Are you afraid I ran away from home?"

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling like an ass in the face of his sarcasm.

"Did you like the band?"

"Yeah, actually, very much. They remind me of a darker Best Coast, which I think is exactly what Best Coast needs, more darker... ness" I fumbled the words in my drunkenness. I was probably blushing, too. We walked into a cafe and took a seat.

"I'll get you a copy of her newest album," he said as we sat down in a booth. "It hasn't been released yet."

"Thanks," I said.

"What are you having?" he asked as the waiter approached.

"Just coffee," I said.

"Nothing for me," he said.

"You have to at least let me buy you coffee," I said. "I feel really..." I hesitated. 'Rescued,' was sort of the right sentiment, but it was all wrong. I knew everything about him being there, with me in that moment, was out of place.

"What?" He was entertained, almost, by my struggle to find the right words.

"I don't know," I said. "I wasn't having the best night, I guess."

"Maybe you'd be having a better night if you weren't out by yourself," he said. "Why are you here alone?"

"It's my birthday."

"And you normally spend your birthday alone?"

"No," I said, grateful as the caffeine started to kick in. "Just this one."

"Happy birthday," he said. "How many years?"

I gulped. There was really no point in evading, even if that's what I felt like doing. "Thirty."

"That's a great age," he said.

"Easy for the seventeen year old to say."

His expression softened and he changed the subject back to Mercy's set and I started to relax. Then the caffeine and the alcohol combined to loosen my tongue, too much. Edward generously gave me his unwavering attention as I gabbed about bands I used to love, and how I missed seeing live music, and all the bands I'd seen while I was in graduate school. Then I talked about my dinner at the Waterfront Grill and how I couldn't cook and the boats I admired at Bell Harbor and how I missed sailing and how I should probably look into the sailing at Port Angeles. Then I went on in great detail about the vintage Hinckley I'd seen earlier and how tempted I'd been to board it. I realized I was essentially talking about illegal breaking and entering with one of my students and caught myself, but was surprised when I saw him do something I'd never yet seen him do.

He smiled.

The waiter came with our tab and he went to pay the bill, but I wouldn't let him. "It wouldn't be appropriate, really," I said. He found this most amusing, and given my endless stream of drunken prattling, it was sort of ridiculous. "You didn't even get anything," I pointed out.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Good. I want to show you something."

"What?"

"You'll see," he said. He hailed a cab and we got in. "Bell Harbor," he said to the driver.

We got out of the cab and strolled along the dock. The moon shone high over the harbor, but it was just sliver, only the bottom part, like a swing in the dark sky. So many thoughts swirled in my head walking along with him. I shouldn't be doing this, was the first and foremost. Dear God in heaven, why couldn't he be 25 or better yet, 30? was right behind it.

"Oh, while we're here let me show you that vintage Hinckley," I said. "Wait until you see it. It's gorgeous."

"Yeah, I'd like to see that," he said. We strolled through the forest of masts, to the end of Pier 13 where Reckoner was gently swaying in the breeze.

"This old thing?" he said. "Really? You like this boat?"

"Oh my God, are you kidding? I am going to find a way to make a million dollars just so I can track the owner of this boat down and buy it. Then I'm going to live on it. Forget Forks. Forget land. Forget everyone. You can go around the world on a boat like this." I sighed and ran my hand along her hull. It was cold and smooth and solid. "Only problem is whoever owns it will never sell her. It'd be like selling your wife and kids."

"Hmm," he said, and then jumped into the cockpit. I'd never seen anyone move like that before. It was like I blinked and he moved eight feet, but I hadn't even blinked. Maybe the coffee hadn't helped much.

"Edward! What are you doing?" I hissed. "You can't do that! It's like breaking and entering."

"Come on, live a little." He motioned for me to come aboard and reached his hand to me. I looked around and didn't see anyone. What the hell was I thinking? I wasn't thinking, really, and that was the problem. I took his hand.

Cold, cold, cold was his skin. So cold it frightened me. I pulled my hand away quickly, as if I had grabbed a block of ice. "Your hand is so cold—are you okay?"

He looked a little embarrassed, a little annoyed. "I have a medical condition. It's a circulatory problem."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It just caught me by surprise."

I reached for his hand, and he offered it again. This time when our fingers met, I didn't feel the cold. I felt the smoothness of his skin, the strength in his bones, like that hand had been around the world and back, had carried the troubles of a man five times

his age. It felt like our hands held each other independent of their owners, would have trouble letting go once the task of boarding was complete.

I hopped aboard and he caught me around the waist as I swayed a little, my legs more rubbery than I'd realized. His hand still held mine firmly and then I was sort of in his arms. This could be a very, very bad thing, I thought.

"Careful," he said, as he steadied me on my feet. Could he hear my heart pounding? I felt like it was in my throat, pumping the blood up into my ears.

I pulled myself from him and forced myself to focus on the boat. Once I noticed my surroundings, I was absolutely smitten, the adrenaline of the borderline delinquent act thrilling me. I couldn't believe the detailing in the cockpit. The wheel was enormous, smooth and made of wood. Not like the steel wheels modern boats used. No modern navigation gadgets either.

"I wonder if they use a portable GPS? Wish I could see the cabin. I'll bet it's amazing," I said.

"Let's find out," he said.

"No! That's really going too far!" I put my foot down. I was not going to break into the cabin of some very wealthy person's yacht. Edward laughed and pulled out a set of keys and handed them to me. "What's this?"

"It's okay," he said. "Really, I swear the owner won't mind."

Incredulous, I opened the cabin door, and went down the companionway, into the cabin. He followed behind, eyeing me closely for a reaction.

"It's gorgeous," I said, running my hand along the teak counter of the galley. "Absolutely stunning. It's pristine, actually. Is this your father's boat?"

"No," he said. "It's mine."

"Yours?"

"I've been sailing since I was a kid. It's a good place to be alone."

"I know. It's like you can be alone, but completely absorbed," I said. "It is never lonely."

"Unless you're on your way to Tahiti and you're becalmed for two weeks," he said. "That can get tedious."

"You've singlehanded to Tahiti?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I've never done any open ocean cruising," I said. "But I will someday. As soon as I buy Reckoner from you."

"She's not for sale." He smiled. "As you guessed."

"For someone who doesn't like to talk about himself, you certainly have a lot to tell."

He smiled again, but offered nothing in response. As I began to wonder what it might take to dislodge more of his secrets, my head began to clear and nagging thoughts about professional boundaries and more weirdness back at school began to percolate. I shouldn't be here, I thought to myself. I really should not be here.

"What's wrong?" he asked, I assume noticing the absentminded hair twirling that gave my thoughts away.

"It's getting late," I said. "I should really go."

"I'll walk you back to The Ace."

I paused. I wasn't so drunk that I didn't realize he had no reason to know where I was staying. He looked at me curiously.

"Did I guess wrong? Or would you rather I call you a cab?"

"I can call a cab. I'm sober now." I blushed. "And I am really sorry you ran into me like this," I stammered. "Not that I'm sorry I ran into you." He watched me, amused as I tried to recover my manners. "I mean, I'm sorry you saw me in less than a state of professionalism."

"You mean drunk?"

"Yes, that. And I would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell anyone that you saw me drunk, though, really, I can't ask that of you." I blushed again and stared at my feet. "You did see me drunk, and it's your right to tell whoever you want whatever you want. It's my fault I was drunk out in public." In reality, I didn't want him to tell anyone he'd seen me at all. How would I explain being alone at midnight with Edward Cullen on his fifty foot yacht in Bell Harbor over the weekend? If it came out, I could be looking at something a lot more serious than another HR write up.

"Is that something you do a lot? Get drunk by yourself in public?"

I frowned at the insinuation. I wanted to deny it, but I had just been drunk in public earlier that very week.

"Well, it's my birthday," I said, my face hot with embarrassment. "I guess I'm not taking it that well, acting like a kid and all."

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s our secret.”

Monday when I came into my office there was an envelope waiting on my desk. I opened it and found an unreleased Mercy Brown CD, but nothing else. No note, no explanation. I put it in my computer’s drive and listened on headphones to the first song. She sounded just like that at The Crocodile—moody, somber, sincere.

All the way home from Seattle and for too much of the night I had been thinking about Edward. Edward Cullen, the seventeen year old boy who singlehanded his own vintage yacht to Tahiti. Edward, who hung out with hip musicians in Seattle on the weekends. Edward with the ice cold touch who seemed nothing like any seventeen year old I’d ever known. Edward Cullen was beyond a curiosity to me. Not some aging out foster child with a mood disorder like I’d originally thought, but something even more mysterious.

It had been so easy to talk to him, and not just because I was drunk and lonely and would have poured my heart out then to the cab driver or the coat rack. It was like I talked to him like that every day. I couldn’t stop imagining myself with him again, having coffee, in the cab, walking along the dock, in the cabin of Reckoner. My mind then wandered into the forbidden territory of what might have come next were he 25 and not 17 and I felt ashamed. Some things could not ever be.

I couldn’t listen to Mercy Brown anymore because the sound of her voice made me want to talk to him again, and that just felt wrong. But as wrong as it felt, I went down to Edward’s lunch period to look for him anyway. I didn’t plan to speak to him. I just wanted to see him.

He was there, sitting at his usual table staring right at the cafeteria entrance almost like he was waiting for me. As soon as I saw him my heart began to thud in my chest. He gave me the slightest head nod, a quiet acknowledgement, which I returned. Then I gave him another and turned and walked down to my office without waiting to see his reaction. Within a minute there was a knock at my door.

“Come in,” I said, feeling my pulse quicken.

He stepped through the door and gave me a curious look.

“You wanted to see me?” he asked as he leaned against the closed door. It was a remarkable posture he took, leaving me no escape from that little room. Not that I had any intention or desire to run. But something in the back of my mind told me that’s exactly what I should be doing.

“Yes,” I said. “I wanted to thank you for the CD.”

"You're welcome."

"And to tell you, well..." I paused because I wasn't sure what I wanted to tell him. A lot of things, actually, but most of them not appropriate. "I've been thinking about my behavior this weekend and I want you to know how much I appreciate what you did for me."

"You're welcome."

"I know I didn't exercise the greatest judgment, allowing myself to be intoxicated in public, certainly not alone. It was a bad example to set. But it was very kind of you to get coffee with me."

"Do you always talk this much?" He wasn't being rude as much as curious, though his question did throw me. "I thought it was just because you were drunk."

"No," I said, and bit my lip. "I always talk this much. It's annoying, right?"

"No it isn't. It's interesting, though. Most psychologists are pretty tight lipped about themselves."

"I know. I'm an anomaly. I tend to err on the side of saying too much."

"Oh, I'm sure you're hiding plenty."

I quickly looked away from him but could not stop a small laugh from escaping at the truth of his words.

"You know, I haven't told anyone I found you drunk in a bar in Seattle," he said. "And I never will. You don't have to worry."

"I'm not asking you to keep it a secret" I said. "It wasn't fair of me to ask that of you."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I would never tell anyway."

"That's not why I called you down here," I said.

"I know," he said, smiling at me in such a way that told me he really did know. He knew that the real reason I wanted him in my office was just to have him alone in my office.

And then I was suddenly, alarmingly out of things to say to him. That confident smile of his invaded me, made my neurons misfire and my palms itch and made me acutely aware of other, more remote parts of myself too. There was nothing to say about any of that though.

So I just smiled back.