

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Memorial Day

"I don't understand," I said, but the words felt soft and unconvincing, like I was trying to speak my way out of a dream. "What do you mean?"

He pressed his lips to mine, but it wasn't a kiss of passion this time. It was a kiss goodbye. Soft, adoring, and full of sorrow.

"I love you," he said. "And I'm sorry."

I wanted to let him know I loved him, too. I wanted to beg him to stay. But upon hearing him finally say he loved me, I had my moment of clarity. And I had to let him go.

He pulled away and I knew. He wouldn't be coming back.

#

It was the third night in a row that I'd encountered the beast of emptiness. It had a personality to me now, a face, and a voice that said, You are fucked, Bella Swan. I will devour you slowly, painfully, until not even your memories remain. It was my nemesis, and it was right there again, in my bedroom.

The first two nights it had been borne on the back of Derek who'd left me stranded in the shadow of a dead future. Edward, right or wrong, had gotten that beast to back down with a single glance, had sent it packing and crying for its mother. But that emptiness left by Derek? It was a small kitten, soft and warm compared to the terrifying black hole that was left in Edward's wake.

As soon as he'd left the room, silently, without a glance back, I felt like everything I held dear about life itself had left me.

I screamed into the darkness. Screamed so loud I half expected a neighbor to knock on my door.

"Zachary, how could you leave me? You should have taken me with you!"

How had I ever let my loneliness take me to such a wretched place as this? How had I allowed myself to fall in love with a seventeen year old boy? How had I allowed him to fall in love with me? This was worse than my worst depression in Jersey, and I never would have believed I could go lower than that.

I pulled myself off the bed and fished the Percocet bottle out of my purse. On the couch, I sat holding it, and then I opened the cap and spilled the remaining pills out and counted. Eighteen.

"I'm not doing this," I said to the empty room. "I would never do this." I know what it does to people to lose someone they love, and there was no worse way to die on someone than to take yourself out. I wouldn't do this to Charlie and I wouldn't do it to Edward. He'd never forgive himself. I wouldn't do it to the students. I simply wouldn't do it.

Get a grip, Bella. Get a fucking grip.

Right. I'm not doing this. I would never do it.

I put all the pills back except two. Those I took to subdue the throbbing in my ankle and in my head from all the screaming.

Then I fell back on the couch and sleep rolled in like a heavy fog.

#

I didn't wake up until after 9 a.m. Friday morning, when my cell rang.

"Bella are you all right? Where the hell are you?" Red asked.

"I overslept," I said. "I'm sorry. I was going to call out today."

"I was worried when you didn't show up."

"Edward didn't come and slit my throat last night, if that's what you were afraid of."

Red paused. "How's your leg?"

"It hurts like hell," I said. "I'm going to stay off of it for the rest of the weekend."

"Good plan. Enjoy the long weekend."

Right. Enjoy the long Memorial Day weekend—enjoy the holiday on which I was supposed to honor my dead husband's sacrifice for the nation. But I hadn't participated in a single Memorial Day event since Zack died. My avoidance had always made me feel guilty. But my awareness made me realize how little ground I'd covered in my journey through grief.

I thought I might never get through it. If I was closing in on six years after his death and I still felt this bad, maybe I just always would.

I rolled over and put the pillow over my head. I wanted to fall back to sleep, but I kept hearing Edward's last words to me replaying, over and over, like a traumatic memory.

"...when it's over and your time has come? I will be there, waiting."

What the fuck did he mean? He had to be manic. He'd lost his temporal sense. He was probably obsessive, too. And the mind reading? Maybe he was just a highly empathic person. That would explain his ability to be so sensitive to other people's feelings and thoughts. That could look like mind reading. Right? He could talk himself into believing that, with thoughts of grandeur and sleep deprivation as part of a manic episode.

Maybe he was having some Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. The poor kid had come apart, and I had probably been the one to push him over the edge.

I took two Percocets and lay back on the couch and fell asleep for four merciful hours.

#

"Bella?" Charlie was shaking my shoulder, rousing me out of a heavy, heavy slumber. "I heard you were a no show today at school. You all right?"

"Yeah," I mumbled through the stupor of severe lethargy. "Just overslept. I took off so I can stay off my ankle."

He dropped a sandwich on me and sat in the chair across from where I lay on the couch.

"Rough week."

I nodded. I didn't touch the sandwich.

"You need anything?"

"No," I said, covering my eyes with my hand.

"Listen, I'm sorry I wasn't more compassionate about your break up with Derek."

I smiled at Charlie's carefully chosen word. "It's okay, Dad. I'm sure he saved me a divorce."

He walked over to me and gave me a quick kiss on the top of my head, and I teared up a little. If he knew what I had done to Edward, and what I had been willing to do, he would never look at me the same again.

"I'll be by tomorrow," he said. "Call me if you need anything."

After he was gone, I closed my eyes again and prayed for sleep to return, but it didn't. Instead I was tortured with regret. Why did I call Edward to me late at night? Why did I try to seduce him? Why did I fall completely apart in front of him when he told me, honestly, that he couldn't give me what I wanted? I'd known it all along. How could I do those things to him?

What kind of mess was I?

#

Two bowls of cereal, one apple, a can of soup, four pieces of dry toast. That's what I ate over the next two days from my little encampment on the couch. I couldn't bear going back in the bedroom. I tried to read, to watch television but I couldn't focus on anything but the pain in my ankle and terrible ache in my soul.

Sunday afternoon, Charlie came to check on me, looking more stressed out even though I'd done my best to act cool. I hated when he worried.

"I'll pick you up at five tomorrow," he said as he was dropped off Chinese take out that I wouldn't touch. He was having the Clearwaters and the Blacks over for burgers, Rainiers, baseball. Exactly what I didn't want to do.

"I need to stay home and rest," I said. "My ankle is really messed up and I've got to work on Tuesday. It's the last week of school."

"Jake will be there," he said.

"So?"

"I thought he might cheer you up."

"I'm not depressed," I said. He looked at me with that very concerned Dad face and that killed me. "What?"

"I don't know what to do here, Bella," he said. "I'm worried."

"There's nothing for you to worry about. I broke my ankle the same week I got dumped by my fiancé. I'm allowed to feel shitty."

"You haven't showered in three days."

I cringed.

"So don't smell me then."

"Bella," he said. "I know Memorial Day is a rough day for you and I don't want you here alone."

"Fine. Pick me up tomorrow then. And I promise to bathe first."

#

Monday afternoon I finally showered and got dressed. I pulled my hair into a loose ponytail and opened the medicine cabinet. I really wanted to drink, so I decided not to take any pain pills and hoped I could just deal with the throbbing without being a baby.

As I was putting on mascara I heard my front door crack open.

"Bella?" Jake called, letting himself in. "Where the hell are you?"

"Bathroom," I called to him. He came and stood the bathroom door, and I was happier to see him than I thought I would be. "I thought Charlie was picking me up."

"It was on my way," he said, then looked down at me. "Holy shit, you're wearing a skirt? What the hell happened to your leg?"

"I tripped."

"Nice!"

"I was almost killed by a bear."

"No way."

"Yeah, actually. I chased a kid who ran into the woods and I tripped. There was a very pissed off black bear..." How the hell was I going to explain this?

"No shit?"

"You know Jake, it was so crazy. The kid ran off to get help and the bear came right to me. I was so sure it was going to kill me, but something got to it."

"What do you mean, something got to it?"

"I don't know. The bear was coming for me, then the next thing I knew it was being dragged off in the woods. But what kind of animal could just drag a bear off like that?"

He grew quiet. "Well I'm glad you're all right."

"You know something."

"No I don't."

"Jacob, I'm not stupid. What do you think carried that bear off?" He backed out of the bathroom and I followed him into the kitchen.

"Are you ready to go?"

"You're not answering my question."

"Bella, how would I know? I wasn't there. Nothing can carry off a bear as far as I know, okay?"

"Could it have been a human?"

"You said it carried a bear—what do you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe I imagined the whole thing."

"Loca," he said. "Are you in a lot of pain?"

"I'm fine," I said. I wasn't, but I wanted to drink so sacrifices had to be made. "And by the way, Derek and I broke up."

"Charlie told me," he said. "So you finally dumped him?"

"It was the other way around."

"What a tool." He gave me a supportive look. "He didn't know how lucky he was."

That was the first time I smiled in days.

At Charlie's house, a lawn chair was set up in the back yard for me. I lounged with my foot up and drank a Rainier from a can as I watched Charlie grill hamburgers. Billy pulled up next to me in his wheelchair.

"You're gonna burn those," he said to Charlie. "You've got the fire too high."

"Shut the hell up," Charlie said. "My grill, I decide how high the fire goes."

"You need anything?" Jake asked. He picked up my beer can and shook it. "I'll get you a fresh one."

"I should injure myself more often," I said. He winked at me and went to the cooler.

Leah came and pulled up a chair next to me and Billy.

"Jake says you found somebody from the UW who can talk to the old man," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "She'll be coming out here next week. I hope she can understand him or at least figure out what dialect he's speaking."

"Me too," she said, looking frustrated. "He's getting really stressed out. Yesterday he wandered into the elementary school and was drawing bear pictures with the kids' crayons. He's trying to communicate something."

"Sounds like he's regressing," I said. "Probably some form of dementia."

"Come on," Seth interrupted. "I want to get a round of buzzed horseshoes in before the ballgame starts."

"Mariners against the Yankees?" I said. "It's going to be brutal."

"Yeah, for the Yankees."

Charlie, Seth and Billy started to argue baseball and I fell quiet as I took in this extended family of mine. I should be grateful. I should not wallow. I will not wallow. I cracked the fresh beer and drank a quarter of it.

Sue brought the food out to the picnic table—macaroni salad, coleslaw, deviled eggs, and piled a plate high for me, gesturing for me to have a seat. Jake helped me out of the lawn chair to the table, and we drank and ate and I found myself relieved to partake in the picnic banter, sliding into the looseness of beer soaked tongues that floated in the backyard as we quibbled over sports and grilling technique.

And I started to feel a little better.

"You're losing weight," Sue said, looking at me concerned.

"Really?" I said.

Jake pinched my side. "You're skin and bones, Bells," he said.

"Give me some more potato salad then." Sue smiled and put a helping on my plate. I caught Charlie looking over at me, his face the most relaxed it had been in days.

"A toast," Jake said. "To Bella's new single status."

I blushed, but raised my can. "Hear, hear," I said. "And good riddance."

Everyone laughed and raised their beer cans and took long, enthusiastic pulls.

"I always thought he was a twat," Jake said.

"You only met him once," I said. "And we weren't even dating then."

"I could tell the first time I met him he was a twat," he said. "I told you not to marry him."

"So you were right," I said, getting annoyed. "What can I say?"

Sue shot Jake a look and shook her head and then got up to clean the table, Charlie and Leah helping her.

"Is it margarita time yet?" I asked.

"Hell yes," Seth disappeared into the kitchen and I smiled as I heard the blender.

"So what happened with him, anyway?" Jake asked.

"He's an asshole, that's what happened," I said, giving Billy a smirk, who was looking expectantly at me. "We got into an argument over religion."

"I knew it," Jake said.

"He broke up with me the day after I broke my ankle. The day one of my favorite kids tried to kill himself. I'd been at the hospital all day and when I came home he dumped me."

"What a dick," Leah said, sitting back down at the table.

"Right?"

Seth came out and handed me a frozen margarita and I raised my glass to him and drank.

"He really is an asshole," Jake said.

"No shit," I said. The alcohol was warming me up, and loosening my tongue. "And as if breaking up with me wasn't enough? The next day he came into work and reported to my boss that a student had been stalking me. Just to start shit."

"Stalking you?" Billy said. "A student?"

I took another drink and felt my brain warble a little. "It was all bullshit."

"Who was it, Bella?" Jake asked.

"Who was what?" I said.

"The stalker."

"There was no stalker," I said.

"Edward Cullen," Charlie said, overhearing our conversation as he and Sue walked back outside. Sue sat an apple pie down in front of me and looked sharply at Charlie over her shoulder.

"Bella, are you being stalked by a Cullen?" Jake asked, his eyes turning deadly serious.

"Of course not," I said. "Dad?" What the fucking fuck are you doing? I wanted to add.

"I went out and spoke to him and his parents," Charlie said.

"How do you know the Cullens?" I asked.

"The Cullens are neighbors," Billy said.

"They don't live at La Push," I said.

"Our families go back," Billy said. "We don't like them—we've had problems with them hunting on our land."

I tried to set my facial expression to a neutral tone, like I would if I was conducting a counseling session and someone had confessed something horrid, like a gruesome murder or a rape. But it was very hard to do so buzzed.

"You okay?" Jake asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm just tired. I hate Memorial Day."

"Want to go home?"

I nodded.

#

Back at my house, Jake helped me out of the car but was looking all around, as though he was paranoid about something.

"Are you being followed, Jake?" I joked.

"I thought I smelled something."

"I don't smell anything."

"It's going away now."

"How much did you drink?"

"Not enough. You still have Tequila in your liquor cabinet?"

"A little."

"Good. Let's get drunk."

"Oh my God, are you kidding me?"

"You're already halfway there."

"Aren't you going back to the party?"

"Why? Are you kicking me out?"

"No," I said. "Of course not. It's been a long time since we hung out."

"You were engaged, remember?"

"Don't remind me."

We went in and I lay down on the couch and Jake turned on the baseball game and brought the Tequila bottle out and set it on the coffee table.

"Where are your limes?"

"No limes," I said.

He poured two shots. "Have some salt," he said.

I took a lick of salt and threw back the shot. It burned, but in a good way. I looked at Jacob and let out a heavy sigh. He looked good. He always looked good. He was wearing a black fitted t-shirt and a pair of nicely worn in jeans. Workboots. His biceps bulged through his sleeves. He grinned at me as he took a shot and then poured me another.

"I'm not doing that. I just had one."

"Come on, lighten up," he teased. "Let's play a game. If I guess something true about you, you have to do a shot. If you guess something about me, I'll do one."

"That's the stupidest game ever, Jake. Who would play that?"

"You haven't been laid in over a year," he said. I shook my head at him and drank the shot. He laughed. "You should do something about that."

"Tell me about it." I looked at him crossly. "You know something about whatever it was that attacked that bear that you're not telling me," I said. Jacob took a shot. "You have to tell me, Jacob—it's driving me insane."

"You're wearing a thong," he said.

I shook my head. "Nope."

"That's a shame," he said.

"You're on steroids," I said, looking at his enormous shoulders.

"No, thank you very much. Can't a guy work out a little without everybody thinking he's on steroids?" He poured two more shots. "You'll have to guess better or I'm never getting drunk."

"Your turn," I said.

"You're not telling the truth about Edward Cullen." He narrowed his eyes at me, a direct challenge. Bastard. He knew I could never keep my mouth shut when I was drunk.

"You're not telling me the truth about Edward Cullen," I fired back.

He took a shot.

"You have to tell me," I said. "What do you know?"

"What do you care?" he asked, accusingly. "Was he here?"

"No," I said. "Of course not."

"Bullshit," he said. "Do not let him near you, Bella. I mean it."

"What the fuck are you talking about? He doesn't come near me. He's a student."

"Why are you so interested in him, then?"

"It's just because of Derek," I said. "He said some really weird things about him."

"Like what?"

"He said Edward was possessed by the devil," I said.

Jake scoffed. "Really? Those Christians give Satan all the credit, don't they?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Jake?"

"You're going out of town next weekend," he said, and pushed another shot in my direction.

"No, I'm not." I said, puzzled. "It's graduation."

"Yes, you are. I'm taking you."

"Where?"

"How about Vancouver?" he asked. "You need to get out of Forks for a bit, don't you think? Change of scenery."

I did the shot.

"Good. We can leave right after the graduation ceremony." He leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I felt dizzy and my face was hot.

"Oh shit," I mumbled. "I'm really wasted."

"You need some air," Jacob said as he saw my skin flush with color. He poured me a glass of water and I took a long drink. "Drink it slow or you'll puke." He pulled me to my feet and I staggered. "Great, now you'll break the other leg." He hoisted me into his arms and carried me to the front porch. He sat me down on the swing and sat next to me, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"Why couldn't you just fall in love with me?" I mumbled, drunkenly. "Do you have any idea the trouble you could have saved me if we'd gotten together a year ago?"

"Oh shit," he said. "Come on, Bella. Don't do this."

"I'm sorry," I said, leaning my head against him and closing my eyes. "I'm just drunk. Ignore me. And don't remind me of any of this tomorrow."

He pulled me into his lap gently and held me. Then he started kissing me, soft and hesitant at first, but as I began to kiss him back his lips pressed harder against mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck and felt his hands slide under my shirt, hot and rough against the skin on my back. I thought of Edward and was disgusted with myself all over again. It wasn't Jake I wanted touching me. I didn't mean for it to happen, but quiet, hot tears started to stream down my face. Fucking tequila.

"Bella?" Jake stopped kissing me and wiped the tears away. "Talk to me." I just shook my head silently, keeping my eyes down so he couldn't see my face. "I'm sorry," he said and held me. I really started crying then. "Is it Derek? It's too soon for this?" I shook my head.

"No, it's not that," I said, crying.

"I do love you, you know?" he said. "It's just, I don't know. Maybe it's because we've known each other so long." I nodded. "Hey," he said, "If we're both still single in three years, I swear I'm going to marry you, okay? It'll be great. We love each other, we get along great. We'll have gorgeous babies. Why not?"

"Jake, you shithead." I pulled myself off his lap, wincing at the pain shooting up my leg from my ankle. "That's not what I want."

"Bella," he said. "I can't settle down right now."

"I don't want you to, asshole!" Of all the fucking nerve!

"What then?" he was confused.

I was really crying then. Sobbing into my hands. "I don't want to marry you. I want to want to marry you, you know? Does that make sense?"

He exhaled, "Yeah, it does." He rocked the swing gently and put his arm around me. "Sometimes I feel like I need to settle down too, but then I panic, like I can just hear all these doors slamming closed forever." I rested my head on his shoulder.

"Do you ever feel like the things you want aren't good for you?" I asked.

"Jesus Bella, I feel like that every single day." He sighed. "But, dude? You're really killing my buzz. Can't we just go back to making out?"

"So you're afraid of commitment then?"

"Shhhh." He pulled me closer and kissed me, hard. I sucked in my breath and felt myself go loose. I could use a good fuck right now, and Jake was definitely a good fuck.

#

He picked me up off the swing and carried me straight to the bed and put me down gently. "You're not too drunk for this, are you?" he asked.

"For what?" I started to take my shirt off but he sat down on the bed next to me and took my hands in his.

"I'm serious," he said. "And I'll do that, if you don't mind..."

"I am definitely buzzed," I said. "But if you don't fuck me now, I am going to spend the rest of the night spamming your phone with drunken texts and photos of my ass until I pass out."

"Oh, nice. Like they wouldn't go right up on the internet."

"You wouldn't dare."

"You're right. Your dad's a cop." He pulled his shirt over his head and I gaped at his massive pecs.

"Jesus—are you sure you're not doing steroids?" I felt his biceps. "Supplements? What? You can't be working out that much."

"Shut it, Bella," he said and leaned over me, pushing me back down. He laid his lips against mine, his tongue gliding into my mouth, slippery and hot and tasting of alcohol. He pulled my sweater from my shoulders and moved a hand under my t-shirt. His hot fingers drew imaginary lines on my skin.

I began to ache everywhere. My head, my neck, my stomach, my legs. I felt my back arch slightly under his touch. He slid his hand up my shirt and unhooked my bra. He started to gently tease my nipples with the backs of his fingers and I moaned.

I opened my eyes and he smiled. "You okay?" he asked. My eyes rolled back in my head and I sighed as he pinched my nipple between his forefinger and thumb.

"Yeah," I breathed out and closed my eyes. "I'm good."

Jacob leaned over me and kissed me gently, softly wrapping his hand around my breast, stroking it. "How's your ankle?" he asked.

"It's not my ankle you need to be worried about right now," I said and he laughed. Then he tugged roughly at my skirt, popping the button open. I gasped as his hand slid down inside. Then he was kneeling between my legs, easing my skirt down. I watched as he took his pants off and then he stood at the foot of my bed, towering over me. I cringed as I remembered Edward standing in that same spot almost a week ago, looking at me. I squeezed my eyes shut.

I heard Jake open the condom wrapper and then roll it on. Then he was on top of me, pressing himself between my legs. As I felt him hard against me, I just wanted him to get it over with. "Hurry..." I whispered in his ear.

"What's the rush?" he asked as he kissed me and then pulled my t-shirt over my head. I was naked under him and he caressed my breast as he held himself over me. He was breathing heavier now, exposing his cool-headed charade. He kissed my neck and his hands strayed over my skin.

"Please, Jake," I breathed, then took his earlobe between my teeth. I exhaled as he let out a low growl. His body stiffened and his mouth came crushing down on top of mine as I felt him enter me slowly.

"I can never say no to you, can I?" he said as I felt him fill me. I pressed my hips to him to take him fully and winced with the pain of it. It had been a long time.

"You okay?" he whispered as he felt me tense, and held still for a moment. "Really Bella, I don't want to hurt you and you are kinda drunk."

"I'm okay," I said. He moved slowly inside. I sucked my breath in sharply and then began to relax under him. He kissed my neck and shoulder and then covered my mouth with his again, thrusting his tongue deep. I moved my hips, rocking with him, letting him fill the emptiness, even though I knew that when this was over he'd leave and it would come back.