

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

### Graduation

Edward and I returned to my little house on K Street. I gathered the important things. Papers. Photos. My wedding album. My diaries going all the way back to sixth grade. These I put into a box that would go to the house in Kalaloch until we returned. I put my favorite band t-shirts, shoes, jeans, and sweaters into a large duffle bag. These I'd take with me. When he was in the other room I hid my vintage yard sale prom dress all the way at the bottom of the bag. This I'd wear for our wedding.

Edward went around the house, locking windows, emptying the refrigerator, and taking out the garbage. I sat on my bed and pulled a pillow into my chest, thinking. *Thanks for holding me these last few years, I said silently to the house. You were a great little nest but I'm happy to tell you, I'm not going to miss you.*

I changed into my black power suit. This was the one I wore when I needed to kick ass. It was the suit that told the world, *don't fuck with her*. First impressions go a long way, I thought, even with someone who knew me as well as Jake. He needed to know I meant business tonight and would suffer no bullshit.

Edward came into my bedroom as I was looking in the mirror fixing my hair. He walked up and kissed the back of my neck. "I hate to say this, but you should take that off," he said, looking at my engagement ring. "At least until after graduation."

"I hate this whole hiding thing."

"I'm sorry, Bella. It's just how it is. Wear this instead, okay?" He picked up the bear fetish from my dresser and fastened it around my neck. I took my ring off and then held it gently, admiring it for a minute before slipping it into my pocket.

"We're going to need a bigger house," I said.

He smiled. "I'll build you any house you can dream of."

"I want a big storybook house with secret passages and crooked staircases and hidden rooms. A house you can get lost in."

"Consider it done. Now you just have to tell me where."

"By the sea, somewhere Charlie can drive to see me within a day."

"Sounds perfect."

I turned around and kissed him. "I love you," I said.

"I love you, too."

"Edward, I'm nervous."

"I know you are, sweetheart," he said, pulling me close. "What do you think? Should we run? Say the word and I'll take you to Reckoner right now."

"You would do that for me?"

"I would do anything for you. You know that."

"Even defy Carlisle?"

"Yes of course," he said. "Bella, I'd defy heaven and hell for you."

"I don't want to run," I said, feeling calmer. As much as I dreaded facing Jake, I knew it would be much worse to avoid him. My history with him, with his family, made me feel as though I owed him that much. "Running won't resolve anything."

"I agree," Edward said, and leaned in to give me a soft kiss. I kept my face close to his, my eyes half closed as I let myself linger, taking in his scent.

"I love when you kiss me," I said. "It makes me forget the whole world."

"I love kissing you." He lifted me up and sat me on the dresser. Then he kissed me again, very gently on the lips, and then again, first the upper lip, then the lower, then slipping his tongue into my mouth as my lips parted. We kissed like that for minutes, disappearing inside the space a good kiss makes. "You are the whole world to me, Bella," he said. "Never forget that."

#

The first person I saw at graduation was Red, chatting with my father on the edge of the parking lot. I looked briefly toward the school roof, where Edward stayed out of sight.

"Don't know how you did it, Chief," Red was saying, "but I knew you'd get a handle on the bears. I'm just glad you got it under control before today. Makes my life much easier."

"They shouldn't be a problem now," Charlie said.

"Looking sharp, Miss Swan," Red said as I approached them. Charlie nodded in approval and gave me a small smile.

"Thanks for being a great boss," I said to Red, shaking his hand. "I'll miss you."

Red put his arm around me and gave me a friendly squeeze around the shoulders. "I'll miss you too, Bella. Glad you came out. The kids are looking for you."

Over in the crowd of giddy seniors I saw Mike Newton, looking brighter, if subdued. Paige, Angela, Erik, and Jessica were all hanging out with him, talking animatedly, probably about whatever graduation party was planned for later in the evening. When they saw me they waved me over, and when I got there, Mike gave me a hug.

"I'm so glad you're here," I said to him.

"Me too," Mike said. "Thanks for being there for me these last four years, Miss Swan. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"It was my pleasure," I said, my eyes tearing up a little. I used to love my work with kids, but that all changed after I thought, incorrectly, that I'd fallen in love with one of them. Knowing the truth now was incredible relief, and I felt more relaxed around my students than I had all year. "You're a great human being, Mike Newton," I said. "I know you're going to do very well. Just trust yourself, you know? You've got a lot of important insight into things."

Mike looked at me curiously. "You really think so?"

"I know so. You pick up on things that the rest of us can't see. I want you to take very good care of yourself so you don't get depressed again. Will you do this?"

"I'll try," he said.

"You'd better," Paige said, squeezing his hand. So they'd finally gotten together. Good for them. The look on Jessica's face didn't register any kind of regret or jealousy. More relief, than anything.

"The Cullens are here," Angela said, looking at Mike for a reaction, who was more guarded than anything else.

Alice, Jasper, Rosalie, and Emmett walked over to where we were, very casual, as though it was two weeks ago and nothing had changed between us. Alice was the

bubbiest, as she usually was, but tonight as she strode over in her cap and gown, I started to really understand her sweet, quirky pixie-like personality. According to Edward, Alice had absolutely no recollection of her human life and had always felt some part of her was missing. She seemed to always stay a kid, but not in some immature way. She was just eternally young. Her vampire family certainly loved her—they must have to suffer through a full year of high school just to give her an experience she'd always wanted. "I loved English, art, gym, and the dances," Alice told us after it was all over. "But I have no need to ever do that again. High school pretty much stinks as much as you all said it would."

"Congratulations on your graduation, Alice," I said as she beamed at us. She gave me a quick hug.

"Thanks, Miss Swan," she said. "I'm really excited. You all have to sign my yearbook!" She handed it to me and I laughed as I considered what the hell I should write.

"How is Edward?" Paige asked.

"He's okay," Emmett said. "He says congratulations to everyone."

"What happened to him?" Mike asked, without a tinge of hostility. "Is he in Alaska now? That's what everybody is saying—he freaked out, too, and got sent away."

"He'll be all right," Jasper said.

"Tell him I said good luck," Paige said. "Hope he gets into Dartmouth someday."

"Tell him I said goodbye," Angela said. "Actually, can you give him my email address at Stanford? I want to stay in touch."

"Mine too," Erik said.

And so all of the Thoreau club kids took turns signing Alice's yearbook and wrote down their email addresses for the Cullens to give to Edward, even Mike. My heart swelled, thinking of how much the kids really did love Edward and then again as I recalled, now in the proper context, how generous he had been with his attention and patience with each of them.

"I hear Mr. Banner is going to move back to Portland," Mike said sadly.

"I hadn't heard that," I said, feeling my stomach knot with guilt. "I've been out of town the last few days."

"I still can't believe after studying the bears all year long he got attacked by one," Erik said. "It's so unfair."

"He's going to be okay," Alice said. I was very relieved to hear this. "He's going to love Portland."

"He's from there," I said.

"This place just won't be the same without you and Mr. Banner," Paige said. "I guess that's the end of the Thoreau Club for good."

"Maybe another teacher will pick it up," I said. "I still think it was a great idea."

"I loved it," Angela said. "Way better than French Club."

#

A sudden chill went through me, something carried on the air, though it wasn't a scent. More like an electric current.

"It's Jacob Black!" Mike said. "Did you know Jacob and the Quileute tribal elders were coming, Miss Swan?"

"Yes," I said, taming the pitch in my voice. "I heard about that."

"We're going to go line up with the class," Alice said, a slight nod to me, as if to say, *stay cool, Bella*. "See you after I'm a high school graduate!" And then the Cullens turned and walked away like they were on a red carpet, which was the way they always walked, now that I noticed it.

Jake crossed the parking lot to where we all stood chatting. As our eyes met I could feel every hair on my body bristling like a cat spying a pit bull.

"Congratulations," Jake said.

"Thanks for being here," Mike said, shaking Jake's hand. "That's great of you guys to come."

"Come out to La Push this summer and we'll talk," Jake said. "We've got a specialist in indigenous dialects coming to talk to us about the Ani Tsa gu hi."

"I'd love that," Mike said. "Very cool."

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time to help Jake find the post-doc, someone who might be able to speak with the old man out at La Push. But now that I knew Jake might be able to communicate with the bears and learn about Edward killing the kermode, or Jasper killing one of their tribe, I worried.

"Hello, Miss Swan." Jake's voice was guarded, even as he smiled at me.

"Hey, Mr. Black," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "Thanks for coming to see the young Thoreauvians do the pomp and circumstance."

"I'm sorry about Mr. Banner," Jake said, turning his attention back to the kids. "I hope he's going to be okay."

"Me too," Erik said. "He's my favorite teacher."

At that point, Red walked over and corralled the kids back into line to get ready to begin the processional.

"Miss Swan, time to get started."

"Be right there," I said as the kids scampered off happily to join the rest of the graduating class. As soon as they were gone, Jake pulled me into a quick hug. "Are you okay?" he whispered in my ear.

"Of course," I said. I hugged him and then pushed away, cowering just a little as his eyes scoured me for any evidence of harm. "I'm perfectly fine. Better than fine. We'll talk all about it after the ceremony, okay?"

He nodded at me and over his shoulder I could see Carlisle, Esme, and Billy speaking, postures polite but guarded, voices in low tones. Carlisle looked over to where we stood and gave me the slightest acknowledgement. I half expected my phone to start buzzing in my pocket, but whatever Edward might be hearing, seeing or picking up telepathically wasn't enough for him to call. Good. Maybe this would go more easily than I thought.

#

"We'd like to honor Derek Banner as Forks High School's Teacher of the Year for the fifth year running," Red announced at the beginning of the speeches, right after all the seniors had walked into the auditorium and taken their seats. "For his dedication to the betterment of our students, for the extra effort he puts into every endeavor, and for his unwavering commitment to the Forks High School Community. This year's vote was unanimous. Most of us are aware of Mr. Banner's tragic incident with a bear this week. While he's recovering we send him our well wishes and prayers."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat in the faculty section of the auditorium. I felt terrible and I know Edward did as well, because he'd managed to pick up all of the uncovered costs of his hospital stay, and then Carlisle made a few other phone calls and got Derek a bed at one of the premier physical rehabs in Portland. Derek would leave Monday, and I would never see him again.

As valedictorian, Angela gave the speech on behalf of the seniors, a lovely reprisal of one of my favorite Thoreau Club debates.

"Classmates, we begin our adult lives during a time of great uncertainty. The world economy is in trouble. Our country is at war and has been for most of my

childhood, and the very planet we live on is changing in ways we still don't understand. These are events that can color our future bleak and oppressive.

"Or I think we can choose to see these times, and ourselves, in a different light. We can open our minds and our hearts to the challenges before us and see them as doorways to new realities, futures where our aspirations, our dreams prevail. The challenges we face can break us, or they can transform us. Our hope lies in finding the opportunities that adversity presents, and in believing that at our core, we have the strength to evolve into the human beings we want to become."

I cried a little listening to Angela's speech, remembering the intense conversations about those ideas we'd had over the year. I felt gratified seeing the mark those discussions had made on her outlook, and my own. I fumbled in my pocket for a tissue and felt the engagement ring between my fingers and held it. And the tears stopped.

#

In the post-commencement high, there were a few more tears, more hugs to students and staff. And then I was pretty much done saying goodbye to Forks High School.

"Great speech," Edward sent as a text message. I knew he'd like it. He always liked Angela. I called him.

"I'm going to find Jacob and get this over with," I said. "Did you read his mind?"

"He's fucking with me," Edward said, irritated.

"What do you mean?"

"He spent the entire graduation picturing you naked."

"God, what an asshole."

"Exactly."

"Don't take the bait."

"I'm not," he said. "But it's not only infuriating, it's distracting as hell."

"Let me get this over with. I'll call you back, okay?"

"Okay," he said. "But I'm telling you right now, the next time I have Jacob Black away from human witnesses, I will be kicking his ass."

"Fine by me."

I walked out to the parking lot, over to the edge of the woods where Jake stood leering at me. I glared my most evil glare, which only caused him to smirk. Over by the

picnic tables, the same tables where I'd had the strange encounter with Edward a week and a half before, Esme and Carlisle stood talking to Billy Black again. Carlisle gave me a nod.

"Are they settling the treaty then?" I asked Jake.

"No," he said. "Not until you and I talk, and I'm not talking to you where Edward can read my mind."

"He isn't here."

"Do you think I'm stupid, Bella? Really?"

"Shit." My phone buzzed again and I pulled it out of my bag.

"Put Jacob on," Edward said, and though I was reluctant, I did.

"I know who's out at your place," Jacob said. "But it doesn't matter, we still outnumber you... Well, your little gathering has drawn a lot of bears out in the last few days. I wouldn't doubt they'd be easily persuaded to rid the peninsula of you and all your kind."

"Please, Jake," I said. "Don't be a dick."

"The deal was I get to speak to her alone, without your interference. You agreed to that, right? Or are you afraid she'll come to her senses if you let her off her chain for a little while?"

"Stop it," I said, trying to grab the phone from him, and our slight altercation did not go unnoticed by Charlie, who walked quickly to where we stood. On seeing him, Jake handed me the phone.

"Don't be afraid of Jacob," Edward said. "He's just trying to manipulate you."

"I'm not afraid," I said. "But this is ridiculous."

"Is there a problem, Bella?" Charlie asked me, eyeing Jacob.

"No problem," Jake said. "We were just talking."

"I didn't ask you."

"No, Dad," I said, glaring at Jake. "But stick close by just in case."

"Since when do you let a guy tell you what to do?" Jake said, challenging me in front of my father.

"I'm not letting anyone tell me what to do," I said.

"Bullshit," Jake hissed, trying to keep his voice on the low side, but his anger fueled the heated delivery of his words. Carlisle gave us a sharp look and then I saw him answer his phone. Edward, no doubt. "The agreement was that you and I speak alone," Jake continued. "Until you come speak to me where Edward can't interfere, there's not going to be a treaty."

"Keep it down, Jake," Charlie said. "Or this discussion is going to be over."

"You have to re-establish a treaty," I said. "I don't want any problems between the Quileute and the Cullens, Jake. Not because of me."

"It's not about you, Bella," Jake said. "It's about them not keeping their word. Edward bit you and he broke the treaty. He isn't trustworthy. And now you're not being trustworthy either."

"That isn't true," I said.

"Why won't you come talk to me where he can't follow?"

"I don't want any trouble," I said.

"Who is going to give you trouble? Edward? The Cullens? Because if they do, I'll take care of them. Say the word."

"No, that isn't it."

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid you'll keep me from him."

"How am I going to do that? Please tell me, because if there's a way, I want to know what it is." I let out a big sigh and he took my hand in his.

"I need to check something." I took out my phone and called Edward.

"Here's the deal," Edward said. "Back at La Push, Sue, Leah, and Seth Clearwater are all waiting to talk to you with Jacob and Billy Black. They are staging an intervention." He paused, clearly annoyed. "They think your addicted to me."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Charlie doesn't know about it," Edward said. "They want to warn you about losing your eternal soul. And Jake wants to convince you to leave me for him. He's not going to agree to any treaty until he talks to you at La Push."

"Son of a bitch," I said. "I can't believe this." I gave Jake a dirty look. "Is he going to agree to a treaty if it doesn't work?"

"Yes," Jake said. "As long as I get the chance to make my case."

"He's telling the truth," Edward said. "I wish I could tell you he wasn't."

"Is he going to try to keep me against my will?" Jake rolled his eyes.

"He'd better not," Charlie said.

"No, not that I can tell," Edward said. "But if he does, he will be very, very sorry."

"What does Alice see?" I asked.

"She can't see anything," he said. "What does your gut tell you to do?"

"Run."

"Okay, I'll be right there."

"No, wait," I said, looking over to the place where Carlisle stood by Billy and Esme. Alice, Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie were near them but off to the side, watching as I mulled over what to do. "Why can't you just agree to a new treaty?" I asked Jake. "Why are you being so difficult?"

"I won't abide a treaty where their kind is seducing my people into their world under my nose, behind my back, that's why. For all I know they'll use us like a herd and feed my tribe to their party guests."

"That is such bullshit."

"How do I know that?" he said. "I never expected them to target you— especially when Edward knows how I feel about you."

One thing was certain. We needed to take the conversation out of the Forks High School Parking lot.

"What about all the bears at La Push?" I asked. "Derek just got attacked. What if they attack me, too?"

"Do you really think I'm going to let a bear anywhere near you on my reservation?" Jake said. "You are one of us and we are protecting them right now. They know they'd be hunted out of the area without us. They will never hurt you."

"It makes me nervous."

"You're a lot less safe around all those vampires out at the Cullens, trust me," he said.

"I'll go with you," Charlie said.

If a trip to La Push could put things right between the Cullens and the Quileute again, and if Edward hadn't read any devious intent in Jacob's mind, then there wasn't

much reason to refuse. "I'm going to La Push," I said on the phone to Edward. "If you don't hear from me in an hour, come get me."

"He can't come on our land," Jacob said.

"He knows that will never stop me," Edward said.

#

Charlie drove me to La Push. The urge to tell him to turn the car around and forget this whole silly family meeting nonsense was nearly overwhelming, but I ignored it. I wouldn't be able to leave in peace with Edward without knowing that the Cullens were safe from the Quileute and that the Quileute were safe from the Cullens' vampire party. Jake wouldn't try anything stupid with Charlie there, and in my heart I didn't believe Jake would ever allow any harm to come to me. However angry or upset he was, he was still Jake. He was still one of my closest friends.

I got out of the car and walked towards the Black's porch, where the old Indian man was sitting. When he saw me he leapt over the railing and ran to me, more like a young athlete than an aging wanderer. Jake helped Billy out of his car and then jogged over to where we stood, surprised by the old man's behavior.

"He likes you, Bella," Billy said. "You haven't met him before, have you?"

"No, I haven't been here in months," I said. Something about the old guy made me soft. He felt like some old sage. The old man leaned his face close into mine and touched his forehead to my own, holding me by the shoulders. He lifted the bear fetish from my chest, holding it in his fingers and muttering something I could not comprehend. Jake gently pulled him away from me.

"That's enough, grandpa," Jake said.

"He's one of them, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Billy said. "An elder."

"He's got to be centuries old," Jake said. "He's phased back and now he can't or won't go back into bear form. We'll know a lot more tomorrow after Anna Marie gets here."

I shook his hand then, and he held it to his face, held his own weathered, wrinkled hand over it and smiled, tears in his eyes. Then he turned and hugged Jake and wandered off into the woods.

"Is that okay?" I asked. "Should we go find him?"

"He does that all the time."

"Let's get this over with," I said, waving to my extended Clearwater family, Sue, Leah and Seth, who waited on the porch. We all went into the house and sat around the Black's living room, quite a contrast from the Cullen's in its small size and with its well-worn, rustic furnishings. "First of all, I'm with Edward of my own free will. I have no idea how you expect me to prove it, but it's the truth."

"I don't believe he's controlling her," Charlie said.

Jake looked at Charlie and then back to me. "If he was enchanting you, you wouldn't have come here," Jake said. "I'll give you that."

"Well, you're not wearing your ring," Sue said. "Maybe that's a good sign."

"Ring?" Jake asked, raising his voice a little. "What ring?"

"You didn't tell Jake?" Sue asked.

"You're engaged?" Jake asked, his face beginning to turn red with anger. "Again? Already? Jesus, Bella, you don't waste any time. And I can't believe you didn't tell me—for the second time, too."

"I was going to tell you," I said, taking my engagement ring out of my pocket and slipping it on my finger. "I was waiting until we got here."

"You cannot marry Edward Cullen," Jake said. "No way."

"Yes, I can, and I will," I said.

"He's a fucking blood-sucking parasite," Jake yelled. "He has no soul, for Christ's sake!"

"That is such bullshit," I said, my face heating up with anger. "You don't know that, you can't say that."

"Everyone knows that," Leah said.

"Prove it," I said. "Prove that he has no soul. Better yet? Prove you *do* have one."

"Humans do not marry vampires," Billy said. "It's against the laws of nature. They are from darkness."

"No way are you marrying a fucking vampire," Jake said. "Charlie, you can't let her do this."

"The Cullens are not normal vampires," I argued. "They are not human predators. Your whole tribe knows this—you're just jealous and angry, Jake. I get it. But you know what? I am not going to be caught in the middle of your little personal crisis, okay?"

"Fuck you, Bella," Jake said, and then stormed out of the house. Charlie tensed but didn't say anything, and Billy gave me a stern look. The room fell quiet as everyone looked at me for some kind of response. But I had none.

"Bella, you can marry whoever you want," Charlie said.

"She's in over her head," Sue said. "That's all. It's not her fault."

"I'm not in over my head," I said. "You met Edward, you can see he's a loving, caring man."

"I've met the Cullens several times now," Charlie said. "They are what they are, and I don't like it. But I know one thing for certain. Ephraim Black wouldn't have cut any deals with them if they weren't worthy of it. Right, Billy?"

"I don't like it," Billy said.

"That's because Jake's in love with her and you don't want to see him hurt," Leah said.

"He should have told me," I said. "If he loved me, he sure didn't act like it."

"He thought it wasn't fair to you to be the mate of an alpha wolf," Billy said. "You'd always have to share him with the pack."

"He should have asked me," I said. "He had a lot of chances."

"I know that," Billy said.

"We all told him that," Seth said.

"All right, I'm going to go find him and talk to him," I said.

"He's in the garage," Billy said.

"How do you know?"

"That's where he always goes when he's upset."

I walked out the back door of the house towards the garage, but stopped to call Edward.

"How did it go?"

"He believes you're not controlling me, but he's not happy about the engagement."

"You didn't expect he would be, did you?"

"Not really. It just sucked."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you two are close."

"I'll be leaving here soon."

"Good. Come home so I can hold you."

As I hung up, I heard a sound and turned. The old man was back, his face full of light, full of peace. He looked so happy that I wished I could ask him why. The closer he came to me, the more I felt it myself. I smiled at him, a warmth spreading from my heart out to my extremities as he drew near. He took me by the hand and spun me around, like we were dancing. Then he began to laugh, exuberant in his delight, and I started to laugh too. He pulled me into another embrace, leaning his head over my own, my skull locked under his chin as his arms wrapped around my back. He pulled back from me and then I saw, over his shoulder, five bears emerge from the edge of the woods. The old man pat my hair and smiled again. I pulled out of his embrace and backed a few feet away as I saw the other bears approach us.

"Jake?" I called, over my shoulder. "Jake! Bears!"

Then, grinning broadly, the old man phased into the most enormous bear I'd ever seen in my life. I turned to run to the garage, and saw Jake emerge from the door.

"Bella?" he said, his voice tense. "Bella run!"

Teeth grazed my back—the old man bear was grabbing me in his jaws. He lifted me right off the ground by my clothes and the fabric began to give. For a moment I thought I'd fall right out of my pants, but I didn't. Then he began galloping towards the woods with me dangling from his jaws.

"Jake! Help me! Help me!"

Charlie ran out of the house and I saw him draw his weapon.

"Let her go!" Jake yelled and leaped into the air, phasing into the big red haired wolf. He chased us, but the bear raced into the forest as fast as a vampire might. I twisted and clawed and pounded with my fists, but I could not make the bear drop me.

He carried me deeper into the woods. I could hear more bears following us and Jake snarling, following closely but not catching us. The bear accelerated again, faster than I would have believed possible, even for supernatural beings. Jake fell behind and when we had finally lost him, the bear dropped me.

I tried to get up and run, but he bent over me and pressed his paw gently to my throat, pinning me to the ground. I flailed as he held me there, but he didn't let up. He pressed harder and I began to get lightheaded, feeling the weight of him over me, the darkness encasing me, the smell of his fur, ancient earth.

Then it all went black.