

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

### Anyone's Ghost

The breeze, the smell of moss and dirt and the dampness of the air told me I was still outside, even before I opened my eyes. Something soft lay against me, moving rhythmically, and I realized it was a belly rising and falling in the steady breaths of sleep. I reached my hand tentatively towards it and felt the soft pelt of an animal, a quick and steady heartbeat. Something next to it shifted and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw two black bear cubs, nestled into my side, and I held my hand over the heart of the smaller one. Not wanting to disturb their sleep, I moved very slowly away from them and then began to walk away quietly, but quickly, passing another black bear curled into a tight ball, fast asleep.

I had no idea where I was, other than alone in the woods, though I didn't know what forest it was. There was no moon and no way to see the stars through the thick trees and certainly not through the heavy clouds hanging close above. The air was cool and I was grateful it wasn't raining. I walked steadily in some direction I decided to call west, though I didn't really know.

The forest is a different kind of place in the middle of the night. It's quiet, but it isn't peaceful, and the soft, subtle movements you do hear score all kinds of dark fantasies. But that night I wasn't afraid of vampires or wolves or bears, or even ghosts, demons or devils. I was only afraid I would die out there and never see Edward again. That he'd never know what happened to me. That I'd never become his wife.

And so I kept walking. I walked all through the night, steadily in one direction. Unless I was headed due south, I would have to hit some major water body sooner or later, and if I could get that far, then I could find civilization.

Light filtered down through the canopy of leaves as the sun came up, but it was a dull, gray light. I would have appreciated a good dose of bright sunlight that day.

What had happened in my absence? Had Edward gone to La Push to find me? Had he fought with Jacob? Whatever ensued, at this point Edward was probably out looking for me, perhaps even somewhere nearby. With that thought, I walked faster, picking my way deftly through the underbrush, rocks and stumps of fallen trees. I crossed several small brooks where I was able to drink. I watched for signs of unwelcome visitors, bears at the top of that list, but crossed paths with none. I walked all day, but I there was no sign of Edward, nor any vampire. There was no sign of Jake either. When darkness came again I stopped but I did not sleep. Instead I dreamed with my eyes open.

A flash of white played in the dark, flitting in and out behind the trunks of distant trees. Not an animal, there was no sound to it at all, though it had form, no substance. Not a ghost, though at that point even a ghost might have been a welcome sight. This, I was certain, was a spirit. A spirit bear. But she came no closer. I began to walk again, in her direction, but I never reached her. I followed her the rest of that dark night.

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On the second morning, I welcomed the warmth of sun, saw the rays of light breaking through the cloud bank, down through the canopy of leaves. I came to the top of a steep hill. If I could get to the top of one of these tall trees, I might be able to see for miles, and maybe I'd be able to tell if I was anywhere near civilization.

I'd never been much of a climber, but decided to try. With some height, I might get a decent view of the valley below and get some idea of where I should head. I reached for the lowest branch of the nearest tree, but it was too high. I looked for something I could step on, but found nothing that would work. The big enough rocks were too heavy to move, and the fallen limbs of trees were not thick enough. I leaped into the air a few times but couldn't jump high enough to reach it. I surveyed the nearby trees but couldn't find one positioned as well for viewing the valley.

Then I remembered how Edward had climbed the tree on Sucia Island by pulling himself up the trunk by his arms and thigh muscles. I grabbed hold of the trunk tightly, the bark pressing painfully into my palms and forearms at first, but then I got a good hold and was able to scramble up to the first branch using my thighs and gripping the trunk with my feet and hands. I wasn't as fast as Edward, and certainly not as graceful, but with effort I was able to climb from branch to branch slowly all the way to the top.

I rested in the crown of this old conifer looked out over the valley. From here, the sun and shadows of the hills told me I'd been heading north, not west. There was a massive river bend to the north. I wished I'd had my wilderness map, a compass, something to help me identify this location. It looked distinctive enough, familiar even. This had to be either some part of the Sol Duc or if I was further south, maybe the

Bogachiel. But I didn't recognize it, and I didn't see any buildings, no sign of civilization anywhere. No campsites, no tourists, no cars, no roads. Just endless nature. It was magnificent. And daunting as hell. I looked to the south, down in the valley and back to the north, trying to decide which direction I would head in next. Downriver, I decided. That would be my best bet.

Then below in the valley something glinted, brighter than the water's surface in the sunlight, like someone held a large mirror to the sky. It had to be a few miles away. And then I saw another, a sunspot just like it, and then moving like light itself over the river. And then I saw another further to the north, moving rapidly along the riverbank. Could it be the Cullens?

"Here! I'm up here!" I yelled as loud as I could, realizing that with the wind and the distance there'd be no way they could hear me, even with their superhuman hearing. But I yelled again, "Edward! I'm up on the hill!"

I saw them all converge. There were more now, maybe ten all together. I suddenly hoped they really were the Cullens and not some other vampire coven that had come out to frolic in the sun away from the usual tourist spots.

Climbing down was a lot harder than going up, and every time I looked down I became dizzy, making the whole ordeal twice as dangerous. I was certain I was losing them, that they'd search in the wrong direction and that when I finally reached the river bank they'd be long gone.

In my haste to reach the ground my foot slipped and slid down the trunk of the tree. I reached out for a branch to stop my fall but missed and tumbled hard, crashing through several weaker branches below. I felt a rib crack as it made contact with a large limb before I went into a terrifying freefall. I landed with a sickening thud on the ground, into a broken heap.

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*Breathe, keep breathing, Bella,* I said to myself. In—two, three, four. Out—two, three, four. I couldn't inhale too deeply because something was wrong with one of my lungs. I was lying on my back, one arm bent beneath me. I knew it but I couldn't feel it. I couldn't feel my legs. The parts of my body I could feel hurt so badly I had to fight myself from having another out of body experience. I was afraid if I did I wouldn't be able to come back this time, and I had to live until Edward found me.

I couldn't yell because I couldn't take a deep enough breath, but I could make noise, so I kept saying their names. Edward, Alice, Carlisle, Edward, Edward, Edward. They would hear me if they came close enough, and it wouldn't have to be all that close.

Jasper, Esme, Emmett, Rosalie. Edward, Edward, Edward. Please find me. Please find me before I die. Please.

Saying their names like this made me feel panicky and panicking wasn't going to help me live longer. I needed to keep making noise, though, because it would help Edward find me. I began to sing, faintly:

*And the Lord, he made us fools*

*The prettiest of fools, oh lord he did*

*Stand here holding all the rain*

*Can you hold it through the years?*

*Open up your fantasy and ride your darkest fear*

*Baby I will get us home.*

<sup>1</sup>

And though I was still in pain I now felt more hopeful, as though the song itself had reached right into my soul and calmed it like a frightened child. My thoughts were no longer racing and my heart rate was slowing down. I sang it again, from the top, and when I finished singing it the second time, I realized I was no longer alone.

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"Isabella, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

It had been more than five years since I'd had the comfort of that voice, both loving and lightly admonishing, but nearly always amused. Zachary knelt beside me.

"Zack," I said. "I can't feel my legs."

"I know," he said.

"Am I dead then?" I asked. "Is that why you're here?"

"You're caught up in the middle of something pretty big, Bella."

"What am I going to do?"

"Do what you have to do, babe."

"I don't know what that is. Do I let go? Do I fight?"

"I can't tell you that," he said. "Only you know that."

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics mis-remembered from the song *Fantasy* by Family Band

"Can I leave with you right now?"

"I'm not going anywhere." He smiled like we were having a private joke and with my one arm that wasn't broken, I reached for his outstretched hand, but instead waved through the ether where he'd been.

"Zachary, don't leave me here alone," I cried, but it was too late. He was already gone.

But he didn't leave me alone.

Before I could see them, I could feel their gaze, at first some distance off. I could smell them, clean but heavy like the earth. They lumbered slowly toward me and I prayed, please God, don't let them try to move me. That might really kill me.

I lay still, staring up at the leaves, watching them turn over in the breeze. I was quiet now and tried to think how I might communicate with them not to touch me. I was fairly certain I was bleeding internally. I didn't know about the condition of my neck, but it was likely my spine was badly damaged. I just wanted to lie still and breathe as long as I could hold out, hopefully until I could see Edward and he could change me, or at the very least, so I could see him one last time before I died.

Then a group of six naked men and women approached me. One young man bent over me and I gazed at his kindly, concerned looking face.

"Please don't touch me," I said. "I'm very badly hurt."

He reached down and carefully pulled my left arm out from under my back and I cried out. Then he pointed to my engagement ring and said some words to the others in the group. He lifted the bear fetish from my neck and inspected it. The men and women circled me and began chanting something sorrowful. Perhaps a funeral rite, I thought. But I was determined not to die. Not yet.

Then the man slowly straightened my limbs, one by one. I gasped and cried out again as I began to experience a sensation like an electric current running through my veins. I could feel my toes and fingers again. I had a spike in my pain but at least could feel every part of my body now. I drew in a slow, deep breath and felt a sharp jab in my lung that turned to a dull ache.

Their voices grew louder, less sorrowful, more powerful as I felt my pain intensify. I throbbed from head to toe. I moved my feet and then my legs, my fingers and hands and arms. I hurt but I could move now. I turned my head from left to right, slowly.

The tribesmen and women never spoke directly to me, but their voices turned to a clamor of debated positions. They were making a decision, and that decision was to take me with them.

They pulled me gently to my feet, but I could barely stand without feeling as though my bones would crumble to dust. The largest of the men gently picked me up and I groaned again as pain ripped through my core. A woman took my hand and held it and I felt heat radiating from her through me, soothing the edge of my discomfort. Then we began to walk, slowly, towards the river.

As we picked our way carefully down the side of the hill, I looked to the south, downriver but could no longer see those points of sunlight flitting along the riverbank. My heart sank. Maybe I hadn't really seen any vampires at all.

I worried I might pass out again from the pain of being carried and was relieved when one of the women motioned for us to stop as soon as we reached the river. I was laid out on a bed of leaves and two women brought me cool water in their cupped hands to sip, but drinking was difficult. I sputtered and coughed and my lungs hurt. Another man came back with the root of some plant and motioned I should chew on it. In my teeth it tasted faintly of licorice and dirt. I hoped it would dull the pain.

They sat down on the ground, closer to the riverbank and began to talk, some intense discussion I couldn't follow. I felt myself fading again as the pitch of their voices rose. I could tell they were arguing, and then they were gesturing with their hands and looking over to where I lay, their eyes full of worry, perhaps fear. Then they turned their attention to something across the river that I could not see or hear.

I tried to lift myself onto my elbows so I could look when I was suddenly lifted, very gently, by cold hands that I would know anywhere. My eyes closed in a silent prayer of gratitude as I caught and stifled a sob in my throat. I opened my eyes and saw Edward's silent, worried face looking intently at me, and though I was overcome with unbearable pain, I managed to stay very quiet as he whisked me off into the woods.

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My heart sputtered and then raced as I felt his arms, strong and protective around me, cradling me as he tore off into the brush, away from where the tribesmen and women had been distracted, now I assumed, by the other Cullens. He looked upset as he glanced down, still running as fast as I'd ever seen him run.

"Bella, you're hurt," he said. "How bad?"

Despite the ringing in my ears, I could hear the frantic rustling of underbrush behind us, the grunts and roars of the tribe, now back in bear form, as they chased us through the woods. "They're coming, Edward. They're coming." I was so weak now I could barely whisper it.

"I know. I'm going to outrun them. If I can get us to the water, we can get away."

"Edward, I think I'm dying," I said, weakly.

"Did they hurt you?" His voice was tense with worry.

"I fell from a tree," I said. "I broke nearly every bone. They found me and put my body back together but the pain, Edward. It's so bad I don't know how long I can stand it."

"Okay," he said. "I can hear your pulse, it's weak but it's steady now. Are you having any trouble breathing?"

"Some," I said.

"As long as your heart continues to beat we're okay. I'm going to turn you as soon as we get away from them."

"Can you turn me now? Before it's too late?"

"No, Bella," he said. "There are at least ten following from what I can hear. I can't fight off ten bears alone and protect you. I've got to keep running."

"Where are the others?"

"On the other side of the river," he said. "We were tracking you."

"I don't know how much time I have." I was too weak to even cry. I could not stand the thought of dying in his arms, though if I was going to die, there was no place I'd rather be. My eyes closed and I felt myself begin to detach from the pain, from the physical form that housed me. The hyper speed of Edward's running made my bones, my insides feel pulverized. I tried to concentrate on that pain, to anchor myself to it, to stay in my body as he drove us ever faster into the unforgiving forest.

"You've got to hold on, Bella," he said. "Please hold on."