

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lobo Rey

All the leaves, the bark of the trees, the underbrush, and the air swirled around me, invaded me. The intense pain from my broken bones made speech nearly impossible. All I could do was will my heart not to stop. I felt like I was bleeding internally again, like I had become nothing but blood and dust all mingled inside a sack of flesh and that there was just no way my form was going to hold. I was withering, right there in Edward's arms as he ran faster, now faster again to the north.

Behind us I heard more bears, and then more, rolling up on us like a thunderhead. Edward was fast, but carrying me in his arms slowed him down. I thought he should leave me behind and save himself. Maybe the bears would spare me, but I knew if they caught us they'd never spare him. I prayed that Edward might hear my thoughts, but if he did he said nothing. I couldn't hear his, though I could guess what they were—don't die, Bella.

"Come on, Bella," he said, as I felt my pulse grow fainter. "Stay with me. Please."

"It's Edward! He's got her," I heard Emmett's voice, booming from a distance. "They're headed north."

"Run!" Edward yelled. "Don't follow. We're outnumbered."

But no sooner had Edward said it than I could sense the presence of the Cullens, a cold blast of air coming toward us from the east. "We can't fight them off," Edward called out to them. "There are too many. We have to run."

"They're catching up, Edward," Emmett called, now closing in on us as we continued our race to the north. "We're going to have to fight."

"How many vampires do we have?"

"Twenty," I heard Carlisle's normally cool voice strained. "But the others have to find us. They were all tracking to the east of here."

"There are nearly twice that many bears following now," Jasper said. "If we fight before too many more arrive we have a chance."

"She's fading, Carlisle," Edward said, his voice pained.

"Stop here and change her and we'll fight them," Emmett said. "Don't take the chance. We'll defend her."

"If we're defeated and she stays human she has a chance. If I change her they'll destroy her with the rest of us."

"We have to fight," Emmett said, jumping over the trunk of a downed tree.

"They're getting closer," I heard Rosalie say from a little further behind. "What's the plan?"

"Keep running," Edward said. "Run until we have no choice. Where are Alice and Esme?"

"Searching for the others," Carlisle said.

And so we all continued to run through the forest together, Carlisle, Jasper, Emmett and Rosalie behind us in a defensive line. We ran so fast that I could hear the trees moaning as we passed. The trampling of the undergrowth, the scampering away of wildlife felt like a runaway forest fire was coming through, and we were the beacons of its destruction.

"They're too close," Rosalie said, a little panicky. "Emmett, they're too close."

Then like a wave breaking on a rocky shoreline, the bears were upon us. I quailed as I realized just how many there were. Bears were everywhere.

"Make a perimeter around Bella," Carlisle yelled. And I saw Carlisle, Jasper, Emmett and Rosalie wheel about us, forming a protective circle.

Edward looked at me with grief in his eyes. "Carlisle!" Edward yelled, checking my vitals. Carlisle was at my side in an instant.

I heard a sound like a boulder crashing to the ground. "Emmett!" Rosalie screamed as a bear knocked her off her feet. Emmett gave a terrifying roar as he and Edward leaped to her aid.

"Don't let two of them get hold of you at the same time," Jasper shouted. "Evade! Evade!"

"Keep breathing, Bella," Carlisle said to me, gently straightening my limbs as he crouched protectively over me. I cried out in agony as he aligned my arms, my legs, my neck. Behind us I heard trees being broken, the sharp sound of kicks, punches, bodies colliding and the intermingled grunts and moans of pain from the battle steps away. "You can heal," Carlisle said, insistently, commanding me with his eyes. "I've seen you do it before. Concentrate."

"Don't let me die," I said, tears in my eyes. "Turn me, Carlisle. Please turn me before its too late."

"You'll be too vulnerable," he said. "Edward is right. Your hope now is to stay human."

"Don't let me die. Please don't let me die."

"I swear to you I won't, Bella," he said. "Just breathe. You've got to concentrate."

I tried to do as he directed, tried to will my mind to heal my body by concentrating on my breath and the warmth of the daylight. I tried to block out the terror that took place just steps away and think about the light. I sent heat into every part of me and then I could feel it—healing energy. It was still painful, but I could also sense that I was coming back together. I would be whole again. I would be whole. I fucking insisted I would be whole. For him.

"Edward, over here!" Jasper called, and then there was the sound of breaking bones and the agonized cries of a gravely injured beast.

"Don't drink their blood," Edward yelled. "You'll get distracted."

I turned my head and saw Alice and Esme run up to us with Tanya, Peter and six other vampires from the party.

"They're all we could find," Alice said to Carlisle. "We can't last very long out here," she said.

"We've got to run," Tanya said. "It's our only chance."

"We can't outrun them now," Carlisle said getting to his feet.

"Leave me," I said. "Save yourselves. You can't let yourselves be destroyed out here."

"Oh God, Jasper," cried Alice. She ran to where Emmett and Edward were pulling a bear off of Jasper while another pawed at his legs. With a ferocious howl, Alice nearly severed the bear's head with a sharp blow and a tearing bite. But as fast as the bear was dispatched, two more closed in on her. Esme flew at them, a mother enraged.

"We're not leaving you here, Bella," Carlisle said. "Tanya, stay with Bella until I can get Edward out of there. If we can give them more of a head start then we can disperse and lead them away."

Carlisle leaped onto the back of a large bear headed for Esme and jerked its head to the side, snapping its neck.

There was a loud, crackling sound that I thought might be thunder from a coming storm, but it was a tree breaking in half as Emmett was thrown into it by two bears. It was falling right toward me, but Tanya caught it and pulled it to the side at the last moment. A bear charged us and reared on its hind legs over me, and I braced myself to be crushed under its weight. Then Edward roared as he tackled it. He sank his teeth into its leg and I watched a river of bright red blood arc into the air as he let go. He came to my side. "I've got to get you out of here," he said. "How much pain are you in now? Can I move you?"

"Your family," I said. "They can't hold out against so many."

"We'll all run together. We've got to get to the water—we have the advantage there. Are you strong enough to ride on my back?"

"If you bite me but just inject me with a trace of your venom, won't I get a boost?"

"I can't risk doing that here, Bella," he said. "Not now."

"Okay, carry me on your back," I said. He helped me sit up. I moaned in pain, but I at least now had the strength to sit. Tanya stood before us, protectively as the rest of the vampires continued to fight the bears several feet away. Two bears emerged from the underbrush and took us by surprise. One jumped on Edward and tumbled with him, carrying him several yards away. Tanya pulled the bear off of Edward, only to be pinned by the other, whose massive jaws clamped down on her thigh.

"No!" Edward yelled. There was a horrifying squeal, like metal plates being torn apart, as the bear ripped Tanya's leg off. Edward grabbed the bear's head by the ears and smashed it into a large rock. But as he did, the first bear began to twist Tanya's head off.

"No!" I screamed. "No!"

Tanya's arms began to flail and her face cracked like dry earth in the hot sun until her body stopped moving. Edward flew onto the bear's back and crushed its skull. Another bear leaped over them and came straight toward me. Edward charged it and threw it into a tree.

"We're not going to make it," Rosalie cried. "We're not going to make it!" Edward gave her a desperate look and I felt hope retreat.

And then I heard it, along with everyone else. The fighting paused for a beat as we all registered the distant howling, eerie and foreboding. Jake.

"The wolves are coming," I said.

The howl grew louder, siren-like, more terrifying as it drew as it near. The other vampires looked frightened as they heard it, as if they all recognized that this was the war cry of Jacob Black, legendary vampire hunter.

"We've got to run!" Peter cried. "It's the wolves—we're done for."

Then I heard Emmet yell, "Edward look out!" Three bears attacked Edward as he was distracted by the noise, one pulling on his arm, another his legs.

"Edward!" I screamed.

Carlisle jumped on one of the bears and fought to pull it away. Edward broke free but then two more bears turned on Carlisle, one trapping him against the trunk of a tree while the other grabbed his neck in his jaws and began to crush it. Edward was fighting off two more bears as the other vampires continued defending.

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Then with the force of a tornado, the wolves came pounding in, fur bristling, teeth bared. Jake was out in front, now larger than the largest bear among them. He ran to Carlisle and bared his teeth at the bears who held him as the other wolves lined up behind him. Jake growled and snarled and the pack followed suit, pushing the bears back as the vampires took cover behind the wolves. Carlisle realigned his own neck, still somewhat dazed and then stood up and said, "Thank you, Jacob."

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"He's getting the bears to stand down," Edward said, coming over to me. And it was true, the bears had stopped their attack. The silence of the woods seemed to swell as the melee subsided.

Then Edward turned sharply to Jake, as though he'd been asked a very hostile question. "Yes," Edward said. "But it would have killed her—and me. I had no choice." Jake growled viciously at him.

"What is it?" Carlisle said.

"The kermode bear that I killed at Lake Crescent," Edward said, now distraught. "Jacob says it was their spirit guardian. They believe she was their direct link to the next world."

"Oh, my God," Carlisle said. "Edward—no wonder you were so affected by its blood."

"It's worse," Edward said. "One of the bears saw Bella run from me when I killed her—they think Bella is her, phased into human form."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"They think I've stolen you from them."

"But they're wrong," I said. "We have to tell them. Jake, you have to tell them."

"This is very primitive communication, Bella..." Edward put his face in his hands briefly, then looked up at me. "Jake got this information from someone—some translator—back at La Push."

"Jake," I said. "You have to tell them I'm not her."

"He can't explain anything to them right now," Edward said, looking ill. "Bella—they think you're Jacob's mate. He told them you were marrying him so they would bring you back to La Push. That's probably what the tribe was doing when I found you."

"What? No," I said. "No."

Jake turned and came to where we were. He walked up to Edward and drove him several steps back from me with his head. I expected Edward to argue or push back, but I could see him restraining himself and backing off. Then Jacob came to where I sat on the ground and stood over me, protectively.

"No!" I said to Jacob.

"Bella," Edward said. "Jacob can't keep the bears from attacking unless they believe you're going to marry him and unify the two tribes. They believe he's going to be your husband and their king."

"Tell them no," I said. "It's not true."

"Jacob," Edward said. "You need to phase and explain it to her."

Jake arched his neck over me, possessively. The bears backed further away, cautiously as the rest of the wolves closed the circle around the vampires who stood near us. Jake phased and crouched over me, naked. I began to cry.

"What the fuck did you do?" I yelled at him.

"What the fuck did I do?" he said, furious. "What did I do? I just saved your fucking blood suckers, that's what I did. And you're welcome."

"Don't be an asshole," Edward said. "She's in a lot of pain."

"What the hell happened to her?"

"I fell out of a tree," I said.

Jake shook his head at me. "Why didn't you tell me what he did?" he demanded. "Do you have any idea the consequences of this?"

"How the hell could we know that?" I yelled back.

"Do you understand how evil an act it is to slaughter and drink the blood of a spirit animal? Do you know how lost these beings are now? They will never stop hunting you."

"Explain that they're wrong," I said. "I'm not some spirit animal, or whatever the hell they think I am."

"Yes, I can see that," he said. "But that doesn't mean they will."

"So what the hell am I going to do?"

"You're going to marry me," he said. "Or else they're going to take you back into the forest and wait for you to phase into a bear and I have no idea what they'll do to you once they figure out that you're not her."

"What about Edward? What about the Cullens?"

"They'll kill them and I can't do anything about it unless the Ani Tsa gu hi believe I'm going to be their leader. The only way I can do that is if you marry me."

"Edward?" I said, desperate. "What do I do?"

"You're going to ask him?" Jake said, furious. "After what he's done?"

"Bella," Edward said. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," I said, crying. "They can't kill you. I can't handle that."

Edward moved to comfort me but Jake glared at him.

"Don't come anywhere near her if you want to live," he said, and as he spoke, I noticed the bears back on their haunches again, ready to attack. Edward stood still, his eyes pained as he looked at me.

Sometimes in the face impossible circumstances, you begin to understand that your will and your desires mean nothing in the face of your destiny—they are only agonies burdening you on the path to the inevitable.

I recalled vividly that night at Lake Crescent, when I provoked the spirit bear and Edward killed her to save my life. Now, for this, he would not be mine. I would not be his. But by my own hand in this moment, he would live. That much I could do.

"It's your call, Edward," Carlisle said.

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

"Bella," Edward said, looking into my eyes. It was all he had to say. He, too, understood what had to be done.

"Do you promise you can get Edward and his family out of here safely?" I asked Jacob.

"Yes," he said. "I promise."

"Okay," I said. My heart, which had been weakened by my fall from the tree, strained by the coursing adrenaline of my pain, now fell heavy inside of me and broke. "I'll marry you."

I couldn't look at Edward.

"Can you walk?" Jake asked.

"No," I said, my voice cracking.

"Let me examine her and see how far she's healed," Carlisle said. "I can align her again before we leave."

"Don't come near her. You have to leave for the city," Jake said. "Go to the north. My pack will go with you and protect you. We have no idea how many bears are involved but we know it's a lot more than this."

"You'd do that for us?" Jasper asked.

"I'm doing it for Bella," Jake said. My tears fell heavily as the vampires began to move off with the pack.

"Edward," I cried as Jacob lifted me off the ground. Edward reached for me, like he was going to take me right out of Jake's arms, but then stopped himself as the bears growled and shifted toward him.

"For her sake," Jacob said. "Don't get yourself killed."

"We go to Reckoner and sail back to Alaska," Carlisle said. "Without Bella."

I began to take Edward's ring from my finger to return it, but he shook his head at me, very subtly. The bears must have believed the ring was from Jake, I realized. Edward's eyes locked on mine then, like they had so many times before, and he tried to

soothe me but I wouldn't allow it. I wanted to stay with the pain of this separation, because it was the part of him I could keep with me. Our silent conversation was only a moment but transmitted an eternity of longing. Our hearts mingled in that desperate space, making their final commitments. Saying their last goodbyes.

And then they were gone.