

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Bring It

Edward fired up Reckoner's heater—probably the first time he'd ever used it. My head felt water-logged, my thoughts straying from relief to anxiety as I considered the painful transformation to immortality I was about to endure. I struggled to stay awake even though I was freezing cold. He came back to the berth where I lay shivering and held me in his arms, tucking the blankets up under my chin.

"Have you started healing yet?" he asked and then kissed my forehead. "You've got some hypothermia."

"It doesn't... matter now," I said, shaking so badly I could barely say the words.

"Try to concentrate, okay? Focus on your breath."

I inhaled deeply but that started a coughing fit so severe it made me retch. Edward held me up, over the side of the bed until it subsided.

"Try again," he said, his eyes intense with worry.

I took a shallow breath at first and when I managed that, I tried a deeper one and then a deeper belly breath. Edward placed his hands gently over my heart and closed his eyes in concentration.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Praying," he said.

I nodded and closed my eyes and cleared my mind of everything except for the rising and falling of my breath, even tides, my lungs channeling oxygen into my blood stream, out and around my body.

I felt a tingle beneath Edward's hands that spread through my torso, then up my neck and down my legs and out into my arms. That feeling started to intensify and spread through my nervous system, first giving me a chill and then a ripple of warmth went through me, and then a stronger ripple, warmer than the last. A pulse began in my toes, in my fingers, painful and insistent, and then waves of heat began to wash over me.

"It's working," I said, my throat dry. "I'm healing now."

"I know," he said. "I can feel it."

"I feel sick." I put my hand over my mouth and Edward grabbed the trash can and sat me up. I heaved again as he held me over the side of the bed, holding my wet hair away from my face. It subsided and I lay back down, feeling a little better.

Edward went into the galley and came back with a bottle of water. "Sip a little of this," he said, looking more confident. "Your color is back. Good."

"What difference does it make if you're going to change me?"

"Good circulation will carry my venom through your system more efficiently. Hopefully that will make it less painful."

I propped myself up on the pillows and drank. Edward sat down and took my hand, his eyes holding mine in a lock, searching for something, just like I remembered them searching that first time he held me on this berth, during that forbidden sail, after our first kiss.

"Can you ever forgive me, Bella?" he said before I could ask what worry lay behind those eyes. His mouth was a tight, concentrated line across his face, barely concealing his anguish.

"Forgive you for what?"

"For putting you in this terrible situation," he said. "If you'd never met me..."

"I'd be miserable, popping pills on my couch and married to Derek Banner. Don't even go there." The thought of it made me want to retch again. I winced and took another sip of water.

"I've put you through so much hell," he said. "I can't imagine how you feel."

"How I feel?" I looked at him, incredulous. How could he not understand how I felt? And how would I begin to express it?

Since Zack's death, my life had been vacant of any real happiness, void any real hope for finding any. The future felt like a series of countless moments to endure. Lifeless. Wonderless. The day Edward stepped into my life was the day I thought

maybe there was hope for me. No—it was the day I knew there was. It was the day the future felt like it might offer me something more than a life sentence of emptiness.

"Edward, I feel saved," I said, my voice cracking.

"So do I," he said, taking my hands in his, running his thumb over my engagement ring. Then he bent and kissed the palm of my hand, and then the underside of my wrist.

"So then never think I'd be better off if I'd never met you," I said. "You know that's not true."

"Bella." He paused and looked away, then he leveled a serious look at me. "Tell me why you were swimming all alone out here," he said. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?"

"I'm sorry, Edward," I said. "But I just couldn't wait any longer."

"So you gave up?"

"No," I said. "Absolutely not. I was looking for you."

"You were looking for me way out here?"

"Hala led me out here."

"Who?"

"Hala, the Kermode," I said. "She appeared to me in the fog and I followed her out."

"She led you to drown?"

"No, Edward. She led me to you."

He nodded, wordless, intrigued. "You actually saw her?"

"Yes," I said. "It wasn't the first time."

I had never admitted my visions of Hala to Edward or anyone. That was partly because I wasn't certain I wasn't having a psychotic break, and I didn't want Edward to have Illeana arrange a psychiatric vacation for me. I was reassured when he took me quite seriously.

I told him what I now knew about Hala and her role for the Ani Tsa' gu hi—their belief that she was some kind of spiritual link for them. I talked about Anna Marie's claim that Hala's death created an epic spiritual crisis affecting the entire black bear population of North America.

"You're kidding me," he said. "She's claiming that all black bears are shape shifters?"

"That's what she said—they're all descendants of the tribe."

"They're all human?"

"Yes," I said. "Like a hidden human population."

Then I explained the story of Hala being the protector of the gateway to the next world, and how Hamani crafted a myth about Edward trying to gain entry to it by seducing her. I told him they believed I was Hala in human form, having forgotten my real identity and unable to phase back. And then I told him how Jake was being pressured to find him and kill him. "To steal my memories back," I said. "It's ridiculous. Like that would even be possible."

"But it's what they believe," he said. "You have to take it seriously, Bella."

"I know," I said. "But it's infuriating to me. I had no say in that, and I'm a central part of this new mythology."

"I suppose that's not how it works," he said.

"Edward, it doesn't even make sense. Just for the sake of argument, let's say Jake kills you and fulfills that prediction. How is he actually supposed to get my memories back? If you had them and you died, wouldn't my memories die too?"

"What did Jake say?"

"He said he wasn't going to kill you," I said. "But there's a lot of pressure on him."

"I'm sure," Edward said, looking grim. "We're going to have to stay away from La Push for awhile."

"Fine with me," I said. "I'm happy to just spend eternity in Maui if it comes to that."

"So you've been then?" He smiled. "It's a lovely place to spend eternity, I agree."

Spending eternity with Edward—that concept was beginning to sound real to me. I wanted to grasp it, hold it in my arms, take it inside myself and keep it forever. Not only was I going to marry Edward, I was going to be a vampire with him. Immortal. Forever young.

"I'm ready," I said. "I want to be a vampire now."

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I feel okay," I said, and it was true. I felt normal. "I feel pretty good, considering." I shifted under the blankets and brought my arms out and hugged my knees.

"How much do you want to know about what's going to happen to you after I bite you?"

"Nothing," I said. "I know it will hurt. Just promise you'll stay with me."

"Always," he said, squeezing my hand. "And when it's over and you're immortal, I'll show you a whole new world."

"You already have." I gave him a brave smile, hoping it might take my anxiety down a notch.

Edward leaned over me, took my face in his hands and brushed his thumbs over my cheeks. He held my face and breathed gently, exhaling over me. I inhaled his breath, fresh like daybreak, his scent clearing my mind. Then he kissed me, his lips soft on mine, comforting and reassuring in the face of what I was about to endure.

"If only there was a way to spare you the pain," he said, his jaw tightening.

"I'm not afraid."

"You don't have to be so tough," he said. "This is going to hurt."

"I know," I said. "Bring it." He gave a small laugh.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too."

Edward got up and drew the curtains. He pulled the blankets from me and lay me gently down and looked at my naked body for awhile, his eyes traveling slowly up and down, studying my human form for the last time. Then he lay next to me and gave me one final, soft, loving kiss, stroking his tongue gently into my mouth, pulling my upper lip between his lips. He kissed my forehead, my eyelids, my nose and then he opened his eyes and looked directly into mine.

"Are you ready for me, Bella?"

"Yes, Edward."

He flipped me to my belly and moved my hair away from my neck and I began to shiver, not from the cold but from anticipation. Excitement. His lips strayed down along my spine and my skin responded to their touch with heat, radiating from each place they made contact. Warmth spread again from my core all the way out to my fingers and toes. I wanted him badly. I wanted him to fuck me, to eat me, to drink me, to take me.

"I need to make you feel good before I can stand to do this to you," he whispered in my ear. I began to moan quietly as he slid his hand between my legs and caressed me

there. "Oh, my Bella," he said as his fingers slid over the slickness between my thighs. "How I love your fragile human body, but when I imagine the things I can do to you after..." I gasped as his lips pressed to the base of my spine, just above my tailbone. He dragged his tongue back up until he reached the bottom of my skull and gently sucked the skin at the base of my neck. He held me down, keeping me still as he slipped a finger inside of me, stroking into the damp heat between my legs. I moaned loudly into the berth.

"Drink me," I said, breathing heavily. "Drink my blood while I still have it."

He exhaled strongly and I felt his body tense. "No," he growled in my ear. "That's not safe."

"Please," I said. "I promise you can stop yourself."

"That's not your promise to make," he said. "Lie still now. We're getting close." Then I felt him slip another finger inside of me, sliding and turning, finding that rough spot along the front of me and then stroking deliberately until I was coming hard, all over his hand. "Edward," I called his name, groaning in pleasure.

"That's it, my love," he said. I felt his tongue snake down to where my neck meets my shoulder, cold and hard and deliberate in its touch, tracing a new point of entry for his venom. "You are mine now and forever."

"Yes," I said, breathless, tightening around his fingers. "Forever."

Then his teeth sank into my flesh, quick and deep, not so much tearing as piercing, each tooth a razor slicing into me. I felt my blood rushing to the site of the new wound and as his venom began to course through me, I braced myself for the intolerable pain.

But the pain didn't come.

It was nothing like the first time he bit me. I could still move. I could still talk.

But I didn't do these things.

Instead I just lay there on my belly, my eyes clenched shut, waiting. My head began to throb like I'd had a bottle of wine and enough amphetamines to kill a baby whale. I felt heat intensify in every part of my body, but no burn. My muscles contracted, released, expanded, constricted like I was working out. I felt my heart pounding and my blood flowing like a river in a rainstorm.

"Bella?" he asked, his voice tense. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," I cried, opening my eyes.

"What do you feel?"

"It feels like electricity," I said. "I feel like I'm surging or something."

"Your heart is pounding," he said, putting his hand over the middle of my back. "Are you in any pain?"

"No," I said. I rolled over saw the confusion on his face and began to worry. "I'm not in any pain. What does this mean?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've never heard of someone getting that much venom and not being in pain. At the very least you should be paralyzed."

I willed myself to feel pain. For the transformation to begin. "Is anything else changing? Do I look any different?"

"You look flushed," he said. "That shouldn't be happening." He paused, listening, his eyes wandering over my body. "You're in tachycardia."

"What?"

"Your heart... it's racing."

"I know," I said. "I don't think it's working, Edward." I started to panic. How could he inject me with all that venom and it not transform me?

"No, it isn't," he said, gritting his teeth.

"Do it again," I pleaded.

"I don't think it's a matter of more venom. That hit should have transformed a bison."

"Well, why isn't it working then?"

"Bella, I don't know," he said. "Maybe the first bite I gave you behaved like a vaccine and you developed a resistance."

"A vampire vaccine? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"It's just a theory, okay?" Edward scowled, his brow creased with worry. "We'll watch and see what happens. I need to talk to Carlisle and we'll send for Mercy when we get to Maui. She might be able to sort it out."

I pulled the pillow over my face and gave a frustrated yell into it. Tears began to stream down my face as a realization set in. If I wasn't becoming a vampire now, maybe then I couldn't become a vampire at all. My thoughts began to race along with my relentlessly pounding heart, straying into territory I didn't dare go. I was seeing myself again at Zack's funeral, the coffin, the mourners until it all shifted and it wasn't Zack, but me, dead and gone and Edward withering under the heavy burden of grief.

"Edward, I'm going to die," I said, nearing hysterics.

"What?" he asked. "What's going on? Is it your heart?"

"No, I can see it. I'm going to stay human and die and leave you for all of eternity." I felt like I was on a very bad trip. I gripped the bed until I felt my nails piercing the mattress cover. "God damn it!"

"Bella, calm down," he said, taking my hands in his. I pushed him away and sprang out of bed, away from him.

"Don't marry me," I said, sobbing. "You need to find a mate that won't die on you," I choked out. "Mercy. You can marry Mercy."

"Bella, what are you talking about?" he said. "I'm not marrying Mercy."

"Okay then, Tanya," I cried. "She had her fucking head torn off and she didn't die."

"Calm down," he said. "You're not making any sense."

"I know what it's like to lose a spouse, Edward," I said, sobbing more. "I can't do that to you. I won't!"

"Bella, stop it, you're hysterical," he commanded, now on his feet. He backed me into the wall and gripped my head in his hands, forcing me to look into his eyes. I closed mine. "Look at me," he said. I focused there until I started to breathe normally. Then I noticed my own heart, just the damned relentless beating of it. Edward placed his hand lovingly over it and then kissed me softly on the lips. "First of all, we don't know for sure that you can't be changed. And second? Your love will carry me through all of eternity, no matter how long we have."

He kissed me again until my tears stopped, my breath deepened and my body went from rigid to soft beneath his touch.

"What are we going to do if I can't change?" I asked, weeping.

"We're going to get married," he said. "And we'll live our lives, just as we planned."

"We planned for me to become a vampire and spend eternity with you," I cried. "I feel like I've failed you."

It was the first time I ever thought I might see Edward cry, and truth is, I think the only reason he didn't is because he couldn't.

"Never," he said. "Don't ever say that, and don't ever think it. I love you exactly how you are and would never change a hair on your head if I wasn't so damned selfish."

If you stay human, it will be better for you, and I won't have to worry about you being damned with the rest of us."

"Being damned? Are you insane?" I asked. "There's only one way I can be damned, and that's to be kept apart from you."

"Well, we'll just have to make sure that never happens again, won't we?"

"But it will happen!" I crumpled, curled into a defensive ball and pounded my own head with my fists. Edward knelt down and took me by the wrists and held me securely until I was screaming unintelligibly and heaving sobs so heavy I thought the boat might pitch from the force of my grief.

Edward held me on the floor until the surge of energy his venom had caused was all spent in agonized wails. He tensed around me, feeling my pain co-mingled with the weight of his own. However brave he was, I knew he was every bit as heartbroken that I might remain mortal.

"I'm so sorry," I said, once I felt calm enough to utter the words. I turned on my knees and stroked his face and placed a gentle kiss just below an eye where I imagined a tear might have fallen under different circumstances.

"Bella, if I get to love you, live with you, breathe with you, marry you and have a family with you, I can't ask for more than that. I won't ask for it. That will sustain me until the very end of days."

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Edward brought me to my feet and led me back to the berth. He quickly disrobed and we slipped in between the covers and he held me, his hands exploring with a cool, gentle touch. He took me then, quietly, slowly, deliberately, until all I felt was his complete adoration, the totality of his devotion. He cherished me in the way only impermanent things like visions and dreams and memories can be cherished. He felt me everywhere with his hands, he laid his lips upon every inch of my skin, he inhaled me and spoke in soft words of the future he promised to give me.

"We'll sail down to San Diego and then head west until we hear ukeleles," he said, tracing the outline of my face with his index finger. "Then I'll send for your father and we'll get married right away. After that we can sail as long as you like while we have your storybook house built. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good," I said, stretching beneath him. He kissed me on the nose and smiled.

"Okay, let me make you something to eat and then we'll check the weather and see what kind of sail we're in for. Ready for a little open ocean cruising?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said.

As I thought about the adventure before us—the one that would culminate in my starlit wedding to Edward Cullen, my optimism began to rebound. In his careful, deliberate lovemaking, Edward reminded me that some things about love are eternal, reaching beyond the physical manifestations of our selves. He'd grounded me in that realization, and in the deepest part of my soul I knew this union tapped into something much greater than my small life, or his.

It was something that could not die.