

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

### Ride your darkest fear

From Reckoner's bow I watched the waves as they rushed beneath her hull. It felt so good to move, to feel the wind at our backs, driving us forward into whatever future awaited. I would handle it, however it came down, I decided. I would stop crumbling in the face of my fear.

*Know what's worse than dying on your spouse, Bella? Zack's voice was clear in my head.*

*No, I thought. I really don't.*

*Underestimating her. Or him, as the case may be.*

I turned to look at Edward. He was pulling lines, concentrating on the angle of the sails against the wind. He didn't look forlorn, or lost or frightened. He looked content. Determined. Hopeful.

It would be a good sail to Maui, I thought. Plenty of down time with him. I smiled as I recalled our last sailing trip together and how much I loved having Edward all to myself. We would have a little time to plan our wedding, to think about starting a family, to dream about the places we'd go and the things we would do. I walked back to the cockpit with a smile on my face.

"Hey, beautiful." He reached for me and pulled me into a hug. "Feeling better now?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just thinking."

"What about?"

"About how lucky I am," I said.

Edward tightened his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. "I love you," he said. Then he let go and took the helm, adjusting our course a little. "We'll have to hug the coast for now, but we can't go in too close because the river bars can be hell."

"If we're sailing coastal, can we get cell reception?"

"We're not that close, but we've got a satellite connection. Do you want to call your father?"

"Yes," I said. "I want him to know that I'm okay. Otherwise he might come looking for you."

"Definitely call him then," he said with a small laugh. Edward locked the helm and disappeared below and came back in a moment with a phone.

"Hey—you had a satellite phone and didn't call me?" I said.

"I had no idea who might have your phone and I had no intentions of warning Jake I was coming."

"He knew you were coming," I said. "He was out looking for you."

"Well, he didn't find me, did he?"

Edward handed me the phone and I held it for several minutes. A certain dread filled me as I thought about La Push and that bear queen fate I'd just narrowly escaped. I had the strongest urge to avoid that call home, but I couldn't stand the thought of Charlie worrying, not knowing I was safe. As I pictured him with bags under his eyes from the lack of sleep he'd surely suffer if I let him wonder, I found my courage.

"Bella, thank God," he said, his voice breaking at the sound of mine. "You're alive."

"Of course I'm alive, Dad," I said, feeling sick with guilt. "I'm so sorry I made you worry."

"I thought you drowned," he said, choking up.

"I told you I would run with him."

"But how? Your clothes were on the beach and you were just gone. It made no sense. I thought you got desperate... I thought the worst."

"No, Dad," I said. "We're sailing to Maui. I'll send for you when we make landfall. We're going to get married."

"Bella..." Charlie paused. "Bella, there's a problem."

"What is it? Are you okay?"

"It isn't me," he said. "It's the Ani Tsa' gu hi..."

"Let them think I died. It's the only way I can escape them."

"Bella..." he said and paused. "They followed you."

"What?"

"They swam out after you."

"Well, they didn't find me," I said, and then registered the alarm that crossed Edward's face as he listened to our conversation.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "They all—the whole tribe is out there, swimming out to sea, looking for you." He paused again, and then pulled out his strongest, most stoic cop voice and said, "There've been casualties."

I went cold. "What do you mean, casualties? People have died?"

"Yes, Bella, they're drowning," he said. "And more keep coming. We've got teams of hunters here with tranquilizer gus, but we can't keep up. We tried to block off the beach, but they're moving down the coast now. We've called the Coast Guard and there are some volunteers out there in boats, trying to coax them back to shore, but they won't go."

"How many?" I asked, feeling my heart constricting in my chest.

"We've lost count. Bella, it's... it's a nightmare."

"Hamani," I choked. "What about Hamani?"

"He's here, waiting for you," Charlie said. "He says you'll return."

"Tell him he has to stop them."

"He can't," Charlie said. "He's tried but he's just one man."

"What about Jake?"

"He's trying to round bears up with the pack, but they won't follow him anymore. I don't know what we're going to do..."

"Oh no," I whispered. "Dad, what have I done?"

"You didn't know," he said. "You can't blame yourself."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Tell Hamani I'm on my way."

#

Horrified, confused, anguished, I hung up and dropped to my knees, shaking. But for once, Edward didn't rush to my side, didn't try to comfort me. Instead he sprang forward onto the deck, up to the bow and hung his head over the railing.

After a few moments, I collected myself and went to him. In his hands, Edward held the forward anchor, crushed into a ball like it had been tin foil. He turned to face me, his eyes fierce, black, hollow with rage. "I don't want you to see me like this," he said, his voice eerily calm.

I put my hand on his back, then my arm around his shoulders and he turned and embraced me so tightly I thought I'd have bruises around my rib cage. "Bella, I don't want to give you back," he whispered. "I know that makes me a monster, but I don't care."

"No Edward," I said. "It makes you human."

"I am seriously considering taking you to Maui anyway. Fuck the bears. I don't care if the entire species disappears at this point. Just say the word and I'll do it. I know that makes me an awful, selfish bastard but I can't help it."

I really had to think about what Edward was suggesting. It wasn't our fault that the bears mistook me for Hala, right? I tried to tell them the truth, but Hamani willfully ignored me. How dare he put this kind of responsibility on me? I was one small woman. All I wanted was to be with the man I loved, mind my own business and go on my way. How dare the Ani Tsa' gu hi hitch themselves to me in this way? I never asked for this. Didn't Edward and I deserve some happiness? For fucking once?

Then I imagined dozens and dozens of black bears, swimming out into the ocean, looking for me. I remembered how it felt to wear out in the water, to almost drown. I imagined this happening over and over and over, one bear after another. Because of me. Because of Edward. Because of us.

"I don't want to make this decision alone," I said. "It's too big."

"You're right, I'm sorry," he said. "But I need a minute to calm down so I can think, because right now if I go back, I'm going back with a shot gun and some bear traps."

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to change course and take us north."

"So your mind is already made up, then," he said. "We're going back."

I hadn't realized it until he said it. "Yes," I said, and wiped the tears streaming down my face. "I love you so much and I don't want this tragedy be our legacy. Imagine living the rest of our lives with this on our shoulders? I can't do it."

"I'll never forgive myself for doing this to you," he said. "Not for all of eternity."

"You didn't do this to me," I said, looking out over the waves. "It just happened."

"Everything I've done has put you in more danger," he said. "No matter my intention, I've only brought you misery."

"Stop it. Everything you did, you did out of love for me," I said. "And the happiness I've known with you has been so bright, it obliterates the darkest corner of my misery, Edward. It will always be that way. No matter what comes."

He pulled back from me, studied my face and lovingly brushed the hair out of my eyes. He gave me a sturdy nod and said, "Okay then, we're losing time."

"I know," I said.

He went back to the helm and called, "Prepare to come about."

I moved out of the way of the swinging mainsail as he turned the boat and headed us back to the tragedy unfolding at La Push. I went back to the bow and spotted the white head of Hala a full boat length ahead of us in the water, swimming home.

"Are you fucking happy now?" I yelled out into the sea.

But Hala never turned around. She just kept swimming.

#

We talked all night as Reckoner sailed us north. After every angle was looked at, inspected, turned over, considered and then reconsidered, our situation came down to two impossible, irreconcilable truths: the bears would kill Edward if he went near them, and if I ran, they would follow me. Even to tragic ends. So Edward and I were going to have to separate, at least for now. There was no way around it.

"Well, we don't know what the future holds, right?" Edward said. "We just have to deal with the situation in front of us right now."

In any case, it had become clear our immediate future could not include our wedding. My disappointment nearly broke me and probably would have if I didn't have an entire population of black bears to save from a watery death.

"Come here," Edward said as he watched me brooding over this, my heart an iron weight in my chest. He put his arms around me, strong and resolved and we stood there quietly, looking out at the gloomy sea. Then he tilted my face to look me in the eye. "I want you to promise me something," he said, quietly.

I did not like the way he was looking at me then. I knew he was going to ask me to promise him something impossible, something wretched. "No," I said. "Please don't..."

"I want you to marry Jacob," he said.

He could have just slapped me across the face. "I don't know if that's still an option," I said.

"If you don't marry him, they'll take you away."

"If I can't be with you, I don't care," I argued. "I'll wander in the woods with the bears."

"No, Bella," he said. "You're not a bear. You're not equipped to survive like that."

"I'll get some outdoor gear, a satellite phone or something. I'll take some wilderness lessons."

"No, absolutely not. You're not going to disappear into some world you don't know, alone, frightened, away from your family and friends. I know what you'll do out there."

"No, you don't," I said.

"Yes, I do," Edward's patience slipped and he raised his voice. "You almost killed yourself today, and that's far from the first time that's happened."

"That's not what I was trying to do," I said. "It was an accident."

"You have a hell of a lot of accidents, don't you?" He glared at me. "You accidentally overdosed drinking and taking pills? You offered me your blood after I nearly killed you in bloodlust? You fell out of a tree? That's not a coincidence, Bella."

"What exactly are you insinuating?" I asked, my heart pounding.

"Whether you'll admit it to yourself or not, part of you is driven to self-destruct, and now I can't be there to protect you. It has to be Jake."

Edward was right, and this pissed me off greatly. But I couldn't deny that in my worst moments, I could be, and had been, suicidally reckless. With all the pressure on me, facing another separation from Edward might trigger another depressive episode. If that happened while I was out in the wilderness with the Ani Tsa' gu hi, who knew how bad I might get? Edward knew the safest thing for me was to be surrounded by family and friends at La Push, even if it meant I had to marry Jake.

I sobbed into Edward's shoulder and he put his arms tight around me, smoothing my hair and whispering words of comfort, but it somehow just pissed me off more. I was so grateful for his love, his concern, his understanding. I felt safe encircled in his arms, in his love, but it was all going to be ripped away from me again, and now he was asking me to marry another man on top of it?

The angrier I got, the harder it was to be near him. I tried to push him away, but as I struggled he just held me tighter. I pounded his chest with my fists until it hurt, and

then I hit him even harder. He finally held my arms to my side and I just screamed in his face.

"I hate this!" I screamed. "I fucking hate this!"

"So do I," he said, sadly. "You'll never know how much."

"How can you ask me to marry Jake? Do you think he's going to marry me and then agree to sleep on the damned couch?"

"That's between you and Jake," he said, his eyes flickering with the rage he fought to contain.

"You can't be serious," I said, shuddering, imagining myself in bed with Jake again. "I don't want you to let me go that easily."

"Do you think this is easy for me, Bella? Really?" he said, his voice rising. "I am never going to let you go. Ever. But I need to know where you are and that you'll be safe. I need that much more than your fidelity."

"I don't want to marry Jake," I said, crying.

"It could be awhile before we can find a way to get you out of this position. If you marry him, you can stay at La Push and I know your father and Illeana will keep an eye on you. You said Hamani will let you stay there without interference, right?"

"Yes, but..." I said.

"Then you'll marry Jake and the bears can go back to whatever it is they were doing before all of this happened. When things settle down, I'll find a way to get you out of there."

"You want me to marry Jake and then leave him?"

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"That's fucked up," I said, exasperated.

"I don't care," he said. "I can't let you go where I can't follow. If you marry Jake, you'll be safe at La Push until we can get you out of this."

"I can't believe you're telling me to marry Jake!" I yelled. "And now you're fine with me sharing his bed? What the fuck?"

"Of course I'm not fine!" He backed me against the outer wall of the cabin and pressed his nose to my neck, then into my hair and inhaled deeply. "The thought of you with him makes me sick with rage," he seethed in my ear. "You are mine. You will always belong to me."

"That's right," I said, tears streaming down my face.

He kissed me then, his mouth urgent, opening onto mine, his tongue sweeping, tasting, claiming and I breathed into him my assent and my final capitulation. Then he pulled his face back and studied mine for a moment, his dark eyes shining and full of pain.

"Nothing will ever change that," he said, and then he ran his fingers along the bite mark on my neck. "Not even marrying Jacob Black."

#

Dawn rose insistently out of the east onto a crystal clear day. There would be no cloud cover, no fog to protect Edward from the invasion of television news crews and the growing crowd of onlookers that now filled the harbor. The sun would be fully up soon and our window of approach would close.

I had cried so much in the night I was empty of tears. I had prayed to every god I knew for forgiveness. For strength. I had plumbed the depths of my self loathing and arose empty of all desire, and all emotion except one. Resolve.

I would put this right.

As we came up the coast, we began to see the small black spots out bobbing in the water. Black bears struggled against the tide, on their way out to sea. They crowded the coastline, from Strawberry Bay all the way up to First Beach. There had to be over fifty boats along the coast and for each boat another bear fighting to get past it, a relentless procession of them following me to their doom. Every bear in Washington State, maybe even in the Pacific Northwest, must have made its way to this tragic circus.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, Edward started to reflect light under it like a beacon. He pulled his hood up, his sleeves down and donned a pair of sailing gloves.

"This isn't going to work," I said. "You can't let them see you."

He came about and headed back out to sea while we deliberated an approach. But I knew there was only one way in.

"Edward, I have to go."

"I'm going with you," he said.

"No, you aren't," I said. "They'll kill you. You've got to stay out of sight."

"Look, I had a major role in causing this disaster and I need to do something about it."

"Edward, you can't do anything about this right now without getting killed. This is something I have to do alone."

We continued the argument wordlessly for several minutes, his eyes locked on mine, and I know he was hoping I'd back down, but this time I did not. As much as I wanted him by my side, the threat of him being destroyed was too much. As though he'd finally reached the same conclusion, understanding that his presence would add another layer of distraction to the problem at hand, he finally let it go.

"So stubborn," he muttered, shaking his head. But then he kissed me on the forehead and hove to, Reckoner swinging gently left and then right in the breeze. He came and pulled me into his arms and held me. "Please, please be careful, Bella."

"I promise," I said.

"Whatever happens here, and whatever comes next, remember that I love you. And I will come for you."

"I know," I said.

In a regrettably painful moment, he looked down at the engagement ring on my hand and said, "Why don't you give that to me to hold onto for now?"

I took my engagement ring off and handed it to him and as he took it from my fingers, I started crying. "When will I see you again?" I asked.

"Soon," he said, brushing my tears away. His eyes glistened and his mouth turned to a small, sad smile. Then he kissed me, softly, on the forehead and took a slow, deep breath. I allowed myself to linger in the scent of him, one final time, that essence of all good things in the world, stowed safely in the vault of my memory. He touched his lips mine, a painfully tender goodbye.

"I'm really proud of you, Bella," he said.

I smiled at him sadly as we said a silent goodbye to our happily ever after, but I turned before I choked up, for fear I'd lose my nerve. Then I climbed to the bowsprit and took off my shoes. I looked back at him one last time, my fantastic love, shining under the sun. He nodded, encouraging.

"Be safe," he said.

Then I leapt from Reckoner's bow and dove down into the water.

#

My limbs were strong, stronger than I remembered from the previous day. The new dose of Edward's venom had invigorated me, had given me greater power and

speed. I raced forward like an Olympic champion, into the harbor, never looking back to see what course Reckoner set.

I reached my first bear, a smaller female struggling way out ahead of the pack. She gave a low whimpering growl as she saw me and I swam right to her. I hooked my arm under her forelegs and started to swim on my back towards the shore. She rested against me wearily, dead weight in the water.

Another bear began to swim toward us, and then another. If that trend continued, I'd soon be overwhelmed with bears needing a rescue and I'd never be able to swim back with more than one, even as strong as I was. As though she sensed this, my passenger twisted and kicked herself free of me and began to power back to shore next to me like a relay partner.

There was another bear, treading the current right beside a small fishing boat, being coaxed by a diver. As we passed, it began to swim towards us.

"This way!" I called, and powered to the beach. Another bear saw us and followed, and then another, and then soon all of the bears were following us, a swift and certain escape.

I felt the sand beneath my feet and began to walk up onto the beach. A huge crowd had gathered, complete with camera crews from the national news outlets, government officials, tourists and nearly all of the Quileute Nation. Hamani stood in the middle of them all, the tears he shed obvious to me, even from a distance. Jacob stood next to him, arms crossed, face fixed in a scowl, his eyes trained on me. Charlie and his small militia of hunters paused with their tranquilizer guns to watch the strange spectacle.

I looked around me as I trudged out of the water. To my left, to my right, behind me, I was flanked by an army of black bears, one of the strangest looking processions in history.

We walked out of the water, onto the shore. The news teams and the government workers took several paces back from us, put off as they were by the bears who followed me. Teams of FEMA agents shooed the rest of the onlookers back behind a barrier.

I approached Hamani and he gripped me by the face and touched his head to mine, tears falling down from his eyes to the sand, mixing with my own. Then he wrapped his arms around me.

"I'm so sorry," I cried. "I didn't know, I didn't know."

Charlie came running over to where we stood, breaking through the crowd of bears that gathered around. Hamani released me and I was immediately enveloped by the reassuring embrace of my father. I sobbed until I crumpled in his arms.

"Dad, I'm so sorry," I cried.

"I know," he said. "I'm just glad you're okay."

Sue came and wrapped a warm blanket around my shoulders. "You're so cold, honey," she said. I nodded and then felt her arms warm around me, too.

Jacob walked over to the water's edge, and stared out at the ocean, scanning the horizon. He didn't say a single word to me. I tentatively approached him, his eyes were cold and distant.

"Where did you come from?" he demanded without the courtesy of looking at me.

"Edward brought me," I said.

"Where is he?"

"He's at sea."

"Bullshit!" he snapped. "He needs to answer for what he's done!"

"He didn't do this—I did," I said. "And I'm here to answer for it."

"Bella, it's such a nightmare." His voice was pained as he finally turned to face me.

"Show me," I said, touching his arm. "I need to see."

Jacob pointed to the tree line, where a two rows of dead bears were laid out, sixteen black mounds of damp, matted fur sprinkled with sand and strands of seaweed. The beach was littered with the tranquilized bears, who were now surrounded by the surviving bears who'd come back from the sea. We walked to the corpses, mortified at the sight.

"How many were lost at sea?" I asked.

"We lost count," Jacob said.

"Hala's brothers and sister?" I asked.

"They're gone. They were the first to drown."

I sank to my knees, overwhelmed by the devastation. Now Hamani had lost his entire family. They died because of me, along with how many others?

I thought about the members of the tribe who'd saved my life after I'd fallen from the tree. Thought about how they'd pursued me in the woods after Edward had found

me. They thought they were trying to save me. Protect me. All because they believed I was something I wasn't.

Hamani and Anna Marie came over to us. Anna Marie, quiet for once, placed a warm hand on my shoulder, and Hamani placed his hand on my other shoulder. I reached up and held it.

Then I got to my feet and visited with every single dead bear and placed my hand into its wet fur and apologized. I knelt beside the last bear a long time, until finally Sue came and draped a towel around my shoulders. "Let's get you some dry clothes, Bella," she said.

#

The Quileute Tribal Council requested help for digging graves. According to custom, we had to get the bodies into the ground by sundown. I was grateful and surprised when every single volunteer came to the burial grounds to help with such a depressing task. After changing into dry clothing, I joined them at the clearing in the woods and began to dig.

For the rest of that day, Jacob avoided me. He did not speak to me. He did not dig with me. He didn't come anywhere near me. I didn't try to approach him, either. I understood the injury I had caused him with my betrayal. I knew he needed some space, and I had no idea whether he would still agree to marry me. But I couldn't worry about it then.

When the graves were dug, we committed the bodies to the earth and then went down to the beach where a large fire was built. The elders led the gathering in several songs of mourning, low melodies that stretched across one hundred voices and floated out to sea as darkness filled the sky.

#

I stayed on that beach all that long, clear night tending the fire with Hamani and the remaining bears, who now meandered in a daze after waking up from their tranquilizer-induced slumber. Charlie tried to convince me to come to Sue's and get some sleep, but I wanted to stay with the bears, at least for that night. He gave up arguing and came back with three sleeping bags, a sandwich and a beer I didn't drink. Hamani gave the sleeping bag a funny look, shrugged his shoulders and then lay down, resting his head on it like a pillow.

Charlie and I stared wordlessly into the fire for a long time until he finally fell asleep in his sleeping bag next to me. I listened to the steady rise and fall of his breath, the slight rattle at the back of his throat and felt grateful he was there. The beach was quiet other than the sound of the water and the crackling and snapping of the dying

fire. I continued to watch the embers until they all burned out, small reminders of the mortality we shared. I fell asleep wondering how long I might yet burn.

In the very early morning, I heard soft footsteps in the sand and opened my eyes into the paling darkness. Jacob whispered something to Charlie, and he got to his feet groggily, looked at me, and then walked off towards the Black's house. Hamani stirred in his sleep but didn't wake as Jake came and handed me a cup of coffee. I caught its aroma, strong and forgiving.

"Let's take a walk," he said and gave me his hand.

Five black bears followed us. Three of them I remembered them from the swim home, and the others had turned up sometime in the night. We all strolled along the water's edge back towards Jake's house. I sipped the hot drink and felt it warm my stomach.

"Jacob, I am really sorry," I said. "You'll never know how sorry I am."

"I know," he said. He kept his eyes straight ahead but hooked his arm through mine.

"They still think you're going to marry me, don't they?" I asked. "Otherwise they would have taken me into the woods by now."

"Yeah," he said.

"It's okay," I said. "I know you don't want to marry me."

"I never said that," he said. And then before I could brace myself, I found myself crying again. "Could you please not do that?" he asked. "Come on, Bella."

"I'm sorry," I said, wiping my eyes. "I feel so fucking bad for those bears—those people who died. I will never forgive myself."

"You didn't know," he said.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I let my own selfish desire blind me from everything else. I just couldn't see what was really at stake here. I will never let that happen again."

"So what's the deal between you and Edward now?" he asked, glancing down at my naked ring finger.

"We obviously can't get married right now, with all that's happened," I said, my stomach clenching at the thought. "I need to deal with this bear issue."

"Edward's at the house," he said, studying my reaction. I flinched as I felt anxiety gripping my throat, choking me from the inside out.

"You didn't kill him?"

"Of course not," he said. "Bella, what kind of an asshole do you think I am?"

"He came to convince you to marry me, didn't he?"

"That wasn't the only reason," Jake said. "And he didn't have to convince me."

"Well, whatever Edward might have said, I don't expect you to marry me. I have it all worked out. If you can just play along for now, we can pretend to postpone the ceremony and I can get some wilderness instruction so I can survive out there. I can get a GPS and a good satellite phone and a little solar generator so I can stay in touch with you guys, and I'll get a decent packing tent. Then I'll live off the land. I just need the training. I'll get good winter gear, come back for holidays, that sort of thing."

"Loca," he said. "No way are you doing that."

"Jake," I said, my eyes tearing up again. "You don't want to marry me. I know you don't."

"You don't know anything." He stopped walking and took my hand in his. "I know you've been through hell and there's a lot of pressure on us. But I also know something else."

"What?"

"I know that I love you," he said, and then pulled a beautiful little diamond ring out of his pocket. "And I'm not letting you get dragged off to Canada by a pack of bears, okay?"

"Jake..."

"Bella, will you marry me?"

"Jake," I said, tearing up. "You deserve so much more than what I can give you right now."

"Do you love me?" he asked. "Even a little?"

"Of course I do," I said. "You know that."

"Well, that's something, right? We can come to an understanding, I think."

"You deserve more," I said.

"Stop saying that," he said. "It's annoying."

"Okay." I hugged him. He pulled back to look at me and brushed a strand of hair out of my face.

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Okay, then." He nodded, a silent acknowledgement of the understanding we had. We would be husband and wife, knowing, but maybe never speaking, of the shadow that loomed in my heart. He slipped the ring on my finger and I tried not to wince.

"I can't believe you got me a rock," I said. "You didn't have to do that."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," I said, my voice catching as I made a ridiculous attempt to sound upbeat. We started walking towards the house again and he held my hand, his fingers steady and warm as they intertwined with mine, cold and lifeless.