

25. Reunions

Bella's fingers were stroking my cheek, her eyes soft, but guarded. I raised her wrist to my lips and kissed the pulsing artery just beneath her skin, inhaling the scent of her blood. It was shockingly sweet with a musky undertone, just as I remembered.

With the tip of my finger, I traced the outer ridges of her lips and pressed against the pliant flesh. She parted her lips and a single tear spilled from her left eye. Brushing it away with my finger, I pulled her face to my chest and kissed her hair. My poor darling...so exhausted, but too stubborn to sleep.

Our plane landed midmorning at a cloud-covered SeaTac airport. Alice and I supported Bella as she stumbled blindly down the jetway into the terminal and past the security checkpoint. She looked surprised to see Jasper striding toward Alice and even more surprised to see my parents standing in the shadows a little farther along.

Alice and Jasper clasped hands and gazed adoringly into one another's eyes, oblivious to everyone around them. As always, he was assessing her emotional state and she was envisioning everything she and Jasper would say and do in the ensuing hours. They were two of a kind and deeply in love.

When we reached my parents, Esme threw her arms around Bella as best she could with me still clinging to her. I didn't plan to let go of her at all if I could help it.

"Thank you so much," my mother whispered in Bella's ear, the words vibrating with emotion. Then she wrapped me roughly in her arms—the part of me not attached to Bella—and reprimanded me in her gentle way.

"You will *never* put me through that again." In her mind, I caught a brief image of her putting me over her knee and I smiled.

"Sorry, Mom." I truly was sorry for causing her so much anxiety in the past few days.

"Thank you, Bella," my father said. "We owe you."

"Hardly," Bella replied, but the word came out unrecognizable as English.

"She's dead on her feet," my mother said in reproach. "Let's get her home."

Esme and I each took a side, supporting Bella's weight between us as we trekked to the parking garage. She was falling asleep on her feet.

When we came within sight of Carlisle's Mercedes, I saw Emmett and Rosalie waiting there and my hackles rose instantly.

"Don't," my mother whispered. "She feels awful."

"She should," I said at full volume, rage toward my sister rising fast. *Damn you, Rosalie!* I wanted to shout. My cruel eyes or stiffening spine must have given me away.

“Snot her fahl,” Bella mumbled, but it *was* her fault. It really and truly was Rosalie’s fault entirely. And she knew it.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Rosalie’s thoughts were tumbling rapidly over one another. *It was a mistake, I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

I could see that my sister’s apologies were sincere. She hadn’t meant to be malicious—she’d just wanted me home. But she had badly misjudged the situation with dire, almost deadly, results.

“Let her make amends,” my mother implored me, gesturing toward my Volvo, which was parked nearby. “We’ll ride with Alice and Jasper.”

I did not want to. I felt more like throwing a punch and I might have done so if Bella hadn’t needed my support just then. Emmett would have intercepted it, of course.

Bella saw my fury. “Please, Edward,” she begged.

I sighed heavily. I could refuse her nothing. As Emmett and Rosalie climbed silently into the front seat of the Mercedes I settled Bella into the back seat and pulled her into my arms. Her eyelids drooped closed immediately.

“Edward—” Rosalie began as Emmett started the car.

“I know,” I snapped, cutting her off. What I knew was that in spite of her jealousy and self-centeredness, Rosalie was dismayed by the events she had set in motion. I also knew that she had not wished for, or gloated over, Bella’s “death.”

“Bella?” my sister queried, for the first time in their acquaintance addressing Bella directly. Bella’s head jerked up in surprise.

“Yes, Rosalie?” she responded, her words slurred and soft.

“I’m so very sorry, Bella. I feel wretched about every part of this, and so grateful that you were brave enough to go save my brother after what I did. Please say you’ll forgive me.”

This demonstration of humility by my sister was unprecedented in my decades of living with her. Probably Emmett had coached her on what to say, but still, I was somewhat placated by it.

Bella wasn’t angry, as I’d already observed. She even tried to take the blame on herself to make Rosalie feel better. It was just like her—she was as selfless as my sister was selfish.

“Of course, Rosalie. It’s not your fault at all. I’m the one who jumped off the damn cliff. Of course I forgive you.”

Bella’s words were so slurred that she sounded drunk. Emmett found that amusing and chortled, “It doesn’t count until she’s conscious, Rose.”

“Ahcasha,” Bella mumbled in protest. We deciphered that as “I’m conscious,” which she no longer was.

“Let her sleep,” I whispered. To my relief, Bella remained sacked out all the way to Forks and showed no sign of having nightmares. I asked Emmett to turn the heat up high.

She seemed so thin and fragile.

As we entered Forks, I could feel Charlie's rage long before we reached his house. I assumed that Alice, or perhaps my father, had called him with news of our homecoming. I knew that he would not be happy with me and that was regrettable. There was no way Charlie could understand what had gone on between his daughter and myself without assuming I was at best a cad and at worst a demonic influence. Perhaps he was right on both counts.

Emmett pulled up to Charlie's curb and I saw Bella's father look out the window. The front door flew open and he stomped out of the house as I lifted Bella from the car and carried her toward him in my arms.

"Bella!" he roared.

Charlie met us halfway up the sidewalk with his emotions spilling out ahead of him. His thoughts were indecipherable except for one: *That sonofabitch! What has he done to my daughter?*

"Charlie," Bella muttered, but the word was unrecognizable.

"Shh. It's okay; you're home and safe. Just sleep," I murmured in Bella's ear. She seemed prepared to do that until Charlie began shouting at me, full volume.

"I can't believe you have the nerve to show your face here," he thundered. He had a lot to learn about my "nerve."

Of course, I wished that we could have an easygoing relationship because he *was* Bella's father, but that ship had sailed the previous year. This incident was not going to improve his opinion of me.

Bella tried to protest on my behalf. "Stop it, Dad," she mumbled, but I was the only one who could hear her.

"What's wrong with her?" Charlie boomed.

I replied softly, trying not to disturb her any more than necessary. "She's just very tired, Charlie. Please let her rest."

"Don't tell me what to do! Give her to me. Get your hands off her!"

I had no intention of disobeying orders from the Chief of Police, so I attempted to pass Bella's dead weight to Charlie. She woke up enough to cling fiercely to me as her father tried to pull her away.

"Cut it out, Dad. Be mad at me," Bella said, trying to deflect Charlie's anger.

It worked. "You bet I will be," he fumed. "Get inside."

"Kay. Let me down," Bella sighed. I placed her carefully on her unsteady feet.

As soon as she lifted her foot and tried to put it down again, Bella collapsed. I had to move a bit too fast to catch her before she hit the sidewalk, but Charlie didn't remark on it.

"Just let me get her upstairs," I said, "then I'll leave."

"No!" Bella objected.

I took Charlie's silence as concession and carried Bella toward the front door. He followed us, scrutinizing my every movement.

“I won’t be far,” I whispered into Bella’s ear below the range of Charlie’s hearing. I carried Bella into the house as smoothly as possible and by the time I reached the stairs, she was asleep again.

“Put her on the bed and come back down here immediately!” Charlie ordered at a lower volume. I nodded my assent.

He’s surprisingly strong for a kid. I caught the thought amidst the fog that was Charlie’s mind.

Yes I am, I answered him silently and my will was at least as strong as my body. He could not keep me away from Bella no matter how determined he might be to do so.

After I laid her on the bed, Bella clung to my sweater with a death grip. I had to peel her fingers from the fabric one by one. Then I pulled off her shoes and placed them beneath the bed. I tucked the blanket around her and smoothed her hair away from her face. Then I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Sleep well, my darling,” I whispered.

I stood and left the room, then approached the staircase to face Bella’s father who was waiting for me at the bottom. His anger had not subsided.

“I’m not even going to ask you what you were doing with my daughter for three days,” Charlie began in a heated whisper that wasn’t particularly quiet. I descended the stairs until I was standing across from him as he continued to rant. “I don’t want to know. But I forbid you to walk through this door again. Do you understand?”

I nodded silently.

“I respect your father and all, but you have been nothing but trouble for my daughter and I don’t want you seeing her anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie. Truly I am,” I apologized quietly. There was nothing more to say.

He stared at me without blinking for seven full seconds, his arms crossed over his chest, his legs slightly apart in an aggressive stance. Then he grunted and stepped aside to let me pass. I walked by him to the front door, opened it, and stepped outside.

“Goodbye, Charlie,” I said, turning halfway around to look at him. He slammed the door behind me.

I walked to the driver’s side of the Mercedes to tell Emmett to head on home, that I was staying, until I saw Charlie staring at us through the front room window. I decided it would be best to ride off with Emmett and walk back. Charlie wanted to see me leave his property, I guessed.

I slid into the back seat and Emmett drove around the corner out of sight.

“Let me out here, Em.”

“He didn’t sound too happy with you. Are you sure you want to push it?”

I didn’t bother replying to that ridiculous question.

“Tell Mom I’m with Bella, please.”

“You might wanna go hunting, kid. Your eyes are blacker than an 8-ball.” He

smiled, trying to lighten my mood.

“I’m not leaving her now.”

“Okey dokey, then, it’s your throat. See you at home sometime.”

“Bye, Edward. I’m glad you’re home,” Rosalie said meekly.

I nodded, but did not reply. I wasn’t ready to forgive her just yet.

The Cullen family was reunited in Forks. I didn’t know whether Carlisle and Esme would stay or return to New York. I thought Alice might want to remain in Forks and finish high school with Bella, but it didn’t matter to me particularly. I wasn’t going anywhere.

It was a typical, early spring day in Forks with heavy cloud cover that kept the morning light dim. It would remain dim until the sky began to darken around 5:00. I had missed the clouds a great deal. By blocking the sun, they simplified our lives and allowed us so much more freedom. No more hiding in rat-infested attics in the daytime!

I trotted back to Charlie’s house and listened for human thoughts nearby. What I heard instead was Charlie’s side of a telephone conversation.

“Yes, she’s home.”

“I don’t know yet, she was too tired to talk.”

“The Cullens brought her back, so I assume she ran off to find him.”

“Yeah, she seems fine.”

“Thanks, me too. Do you need some help today? Bella will probably sleep all day.”

“Okay, give me an hour.”

I didn’t know who had been on the phone with Charlie, but it sounded like he planned to leave the house soon. All the better that I was there to watch over Bella in case she woke up frightened. I took a quick look around and then leaped to grab the eaves above her window, which I slid open before slipping inside. Bella hadn’t moved an inch since I’d laid her in her bed. She was sleeping like the dead. I heard Charlie tromp heavily up the stairs, probably coming to check on her. I slipped into her closet quickly and silently.

Charlie opened the bedroom door and looked in at his slumbering daughter, love and relief both recorded on his face. He stood and watched her sleep for a minute or two then glanced around the room before retreating into the hallway.

I crept out of the closet, hid my shoes under the bed, and stretched out next to Bella. Lying there after so many months away...smelling her scent, listening to her heartbeat...it was wondrous. I could barely believe she was real. At some point, she rolled over and wrapped her arms around my neck and rested her head on my chest and I knew I was back where I belonged.

Bella slept for the rest of the day and into the night, giving me time to consider many things, particularly those pertaining to the future. During those hours, I drew several conclusions: 1) I would never leave Bella; 2) I could not change Bella (or let Alice change

her); 3) When Bella's life ended, I would go to the Volturi and force them to destroy me.

In the meantime, my plan would require Bella and I to dodge the Volturi if they decided to come to our side of the world and check on Bella's status. I anticipate that they will follow through, partly because they don't make idle threats, but mostly because Aro is so curious about how Bella would turn out as a vampire.

That is where Alice can help. She would warn us when the Volturi are preparing to visit so that I can hide Bella beforehand. Demetri won't find her—I'm almost certain of it. The way he located me on top of the wall outside the castle was nearly identical to how I find someone's mental voice and my gift doesn't work with Bella. Aro and Jane's gifts, which also operate on the mind, don't work either, evidence that further confirms my theory. There were a few details to be worked out with the plan, but we had plenty of time.

Charlie returned home in the late afternoon—someone named "Sue" on his mind—and stepped into Bella's room to check on her. Predictably, he found her alone in bed, still soundly asleep, with no evidence that anyone might have been lying next to her all day. He came in again before he went to bed, mildly concerned that she was sleeping so many hours, but he'd seen how exhausted she was when she got home and so he didn't try to awaken her. I thought he would look in on her again during the night if he woke up (which he rarely did). I was getting good at leaping for the closet in the nick of time and it smelled like Bella in there, so it was a pleasant place to be.

Around ten o'clock, Bella called out something unintelligible in her sleep. She was clearly agitated. Lying behind her spoon-fashion, I rubbed her back with my hand and she spoke again.

"Edward...stay," she said.

"I will, my darling...forever," I whispered and she mumbled something more before returning to a deep slumber.