

3. Promises

As the summer progressed, I was glad to see no more of Billy Black, the nosy Quileute elder who had stalked Bella and myself in the spring. After he'd gotten his message to Bella by way of his hapless son, "We'll be watching..." I'd been watching for him too. So far, he hadn't shown up at Charlie's house while we were there, which was a blessing, and I hadn't seen him or Jacob around Forks either. Billy had wanted to warn Charlie about me, but he couldn't do that without serious repercussions, so he sent his son, Jacob, to warn Bella instead.

Jacob had come to prom to deliver his father's message because Billy had insisted he do it in a public place. The other part of the message was likely to rile me—that Billy wanted Bella to break up with me—and Billy must have assumed Jacob would be in less danger if we were surrounded by people than if we weren't. How wrong he was!

If I wanted to harm Jacob, I could do it as easily with a crowd around as without. When I nearly drank Bella's blood that first day in biology class, I had my strategy worked out for how to "take care of" the twenty witnesses. When she followed me into the office, I yearned to take her in front of Ms. Cope. It would have been trivial, especially if one didn't care how many humans he destroyed in the process. Fortunately for the Blacks, I do care and it has been a long time since I killed a human. I was glad I could say that after having drunk Bella's blood recently. (Remembering made the fire rage down my throat which was a good incentive to stop thinking about that!)

We'd had run-ins with the Quileute tribe in the past when we lived on the Olympic Peninsula in the 1930s. We liked the region because it got so little sunshine. Rosalie, especially, preferred to get out where she could be seen and admired and in Hoquiam, where we settled, she could go to school every day as we did now and live a relatively normal life.

We didn't stay long in Hoquiam, one hundred miles south of Forks, because the presence of the Quileute made living there moderately uncomfortable. They came upon us one day while we were hunting and three tribal elders decided to approach in their human forms. It was a brave thing to do. If we hadn't been vegetarians, we easily might have turned on them. Probably they'd watched us as wolves for some time and already determined that we only hunted animals. We'd noticed the malodorous scent of werewolf in the woods, but it was unfamiliar to us then.

We were drinking when they made themselves known. Because of their calm, carefully measured approach, we understood that they recognized our kind and their thoughts confirmed it. Surprisingly, though, they were not frightened. As tribal chief,

Ephraim Black stepped forward and informed us that we were on Quileute land, hunting their game.

Carlisle also stepped forward and in his diplomatic way said, “I am Carlisle Cullen, head of this family. I apologize. We did not know. Is there some way that we can compensate you for your loss?”

Ephraim Black saw that we would not attack so he let his curiosity get the better of him and asked why we were drinking the blood of animals.

Never having been in such a situation before, Carlisle chose to be straightforward and honest. “We hunt animals because we need blood to survive,” he explained simply.

“Why do you not hunt humans for blood?” Ephraim asked, confirming my belief that they had been observing us unseen and knew what we were.

“We do not wish to take the lives of human beings. That is a choice we have made as a family. Please meet my sons, Edward and Emmett.”

Ephraim, Quil Ateara Sr., and Levi Uley did not know what to make of us and did not know how to respond. A vampire family? We seemed nothing like the vicious predators described by their ancestors, but they knew we were related because the three of them had phased, something which hadn’t happened for generations and which they previously thought was merely an old legend. When they found themselves manifesting the legend in fur, paws, and tails, they had been shocked beyond belief.

Ephraim Black explained to Carlisle that it had been the charge of their tribe from earliest memory to destroy “the cold ones” in order to preserve human life.

Taken aback, but maintaining his composure, Carlisle said, “As you observed, we survive on game. It is our sole source of nutrition. We only wish to carry on our lives as best we can in privacy and peace.”

“There are five of you?”

“Yes, our two wives are not with us today.”

“Where do you live?”

“We have a home in Hoquiam.”

“You have ventured north to hunt.”

“Yes, we try to spread ourselves across a large geographical region to avoid overhunting, though game seems almost excessive on the Olympic Peninsula.”

“The game is good.”

We stood there matching their “traditional” native silence with our vampire stillness. Eventually, Ephraim looked at his companions and said, “We do not want you to hunt on our land and we wish for you to keep your distance from our people.” He went on to explain the boundaries of the Quileute reservation. He finished with, “In return, we will not attack you unprovoked, nor will we incite other humans against you by revealing what you are. However, should you break your word and bite a human, we will commence with our charge. Do you agree to this treaty?”

Carlisle looked at Emmett and then me. *What do you think, Edward? Are they*

worthy of our trust? Do you see any duplicity in their minds?

I answered the last question by shaking my head slightly from side to side. Ephraim appeared to be genuine in his proposal and I saw no subterfuge in the minds of the others.

“We accept,” Carlisle replied. “We will stay clear of the boundaries of your land and we will bite no humans. In a few years, we will move on.”

“We will keep our silence. It is done.”

“It is done,” Carlisle repeated. With that, the elders turned as one and slipped away silently in single file. As we watched them move through the trees, we saw each one phase in succession and continue into the forest until they disappeared.

“Shape-shifters,” Carlisle exclaimed softly.

“What the hell?” Emmett interjected. He and I were both standing there with wide eyes.

“You might think of them as werewolves in the sense that they can change form from human to wolf, but they are not the same. I believe that they are genetic shape-shifters, born with this ability. That explains the unpleasant scent we’ve come across in these woods.”

“They can change into other animals?” I asked in disbelief.

“Quite possibly.”

“They’re huge!” Emmett declared. “Do you think they could actually kill us?”

“Quite possibly,” Carlisle repeated. “Natural vampire slayers,” he added in awe. “So vampires have lived here before.”

“It was a long time ago,” I said. “These warriors have no memory of our kind. What they know comes from tribal legend.”

After our successful negotiation, we kept our distance from the Quileute reservation and moved away three short years later. There was little point in stirring up the indigenous people any more than necessary.

Judging by Billy Black’s reaction to us, the Quileute still believed those old legends. It was such a coincidence that I should fall in love with a human girl whose father is a close friend to a descendant of Ephraim Black.

“Have you seen Jacob Black this summer?” I asked Bella one night in August when we were sitting in my car outside her house. I’d been with her so continually for the past three months that I probably would have known if she had, but I was curious anyway.

“No. Have you?”

“No, but I don’t think Billy Black would send Jacob to see me.”

“Probably not. I don’t think my dad and Billy have gotten together this summer either.”

“Wasn’t Charlie annoyed with Billy for his attitude towards my family?” I asked, recalling the two times I’d seen the Blacks at Bella’s house. Billy had come to make amends with Charlie and to watch baseball when his television broke, as I recalled.

“Yes, but they made up, I think.”

“Billy’s attitude toward us hasn’t changed, though, and he’s not happy that I’m spending time with you.”

“Yeah, maybe he’s afraid he won’t be able to keep his mouth shut about that and he’ll make Charlie mad again.”

“But your father doesn’t like me either.”

“Maybe not,” Bella grinned, teasing. “But he likes your dad.”

“Everybody likes my dad. Rightfully so.”

“Did I ever tell you that Charlie thought I was talking about Emmett when I first told him you were my boyfriend?”

“No, you never mentioned that,” I said, chuckling. “That must have given him a scare.”

“It did. That’s one reason he was so nice to you when you first met him.”

“He wasn’t *that* nice,” I reminded her with a smile.

“Well, he didn’t get his gun out, which he might have if Emmett had picked me up. But you’re so wholesome-looking.”

It was like a punch in the face. I felt my body freeze up as a tidal wave of guilt washed over me. What was I *doing*?

“Edward, what’s wrong?” Bella asked in alarm. I could not answer, tangled as I was in a web of pain, disgust, and helplessness.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Still, I could not reply.

“Edward, tell me right now!”

The sharpness of her words cut through my self-absorption.

“Bella...,” I said, hearing the tone of despair in my voice, “I’m *not* wholesome. I’m the *opposite* of wholesome. I should not be here.” Saying the truth made my heart sink further and my head dropped into my hands behind the steering wheel. “You should be dating boys like Tyler, or Connor, or Jacob Black...somebody *human*. I can’t believe I could be so deluded. It’s just so—”

“Stop it, Edward! Don’t say any more. I don’t *want* anybody else, do you hear me? I want you!”

Even that hurt. “That doesn’t matter. Don’t you see, I’m stealing your chances to meet someone who’s better for you than I am...somebody who can give you a normal life, children, a future... I’m so sorry, Bella. I’m sorry that I’m so weak...” The last word came out a whisper.

“But you’re not, Edward!” Bella countered vehemently. “Please don’t do this! Shouldn’t I get to vote on what’s best for me?”

“Not in the situation I’ve put you in. You should never have had me as a choice. I’m not right for you, not good for you...”

“Okay, that’s it! I’m leaving until you stop this! I won’t listen to it!” Bella announced as she got out of the car. Then she slammed the door shut with all of her might.

Caught up in remorse and grief, I didn’t see exactly how it happened. I only saw her

falling as the car door closed and I heard the unmistakable thump of skull hitting metal.

“Ow!” Bella wailed as her hand flew to her forehead.

I was out of the car and beside her in a flash, but I was too late.

“Bella! Bella, are you all right?” Her cry of pain had shaken me loose from my downward spiral of guilt and misery. “Bella, look at me!”

She was leaning into the car with the entire front side of her body and she cradled her forehead in her palm. Her head moved slowly side-to-side in her hand.

“No, you’re *not* all right or no, you don’t want to look at me?”

She nodded her head.

“Please let me see it. *Please*, Bella!”

“I’m fine,” Bella said softly, but her voice shook with emotion. She was crying!

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...” I pulled her shoulder away from the car and slowly rotated her body to face me. Her hand stayed on her forehead. Her eyes were brimming.

“Let me see,” I said as I gently pulled her hand away from her face. Already, she had a swollen red lump just below her hairline. “Oh, darling, you’re hurt,” I said, pulling her to me and pressing her head against my shoulder.

“It’s fine, Edward,” she insisted.

“Then why are you crying?” She didn’t reply, but she didn’t try to push me away either.

“I’m sorry, Bella,” I said, stroking her smooth mahogany tresses with my hand. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I promise I won’t mention it again tonight. Just please don’t do yourself in on my account.”

Bella snorted softly. “That’s nothing! Give me a badminton racket and I’ll do us both in.”

I smiled, remembering how she once had whacked both herself and Mike Newton in a single forehand stroke, giving each a minor injury. “Let’s take you in and get some ice on that. Maybe we can keep it from swelling too much.”

Well done, Edward! Just what Bella needs...another head injury! I rolled my eyes, disgusted with myself. How many *more* ways could I hurt her?

“Shall I carry you?”

“No, I can walk.” I put my arm around her waist and paced with her to the front door.

“What’s Charlie going to say?” I asked.

“Nothing, because I’m not going to let him see me. Let’s head straight for the kitchen, okay?”

“Okay.” We entered the house and heard a TV announcer talking excitedly on one of the sports channels.

“Hi, Dad!” Bella called as we walked past the living room without stopping.

“Hi,” Charlie answered mechanically. “No way! Bad call!” he yelled at the television set.

I pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and gestured for Bella to sit down.

“Plastic bag?”

Bella pointed to a drawer by the stove. I pulled out a zip-close bag and filled it with ice cubes from a frosted-over tray in the freezer.

“We’re going to my room to listen to some music, Dad,” Bella said as I reached for her arm to help her up.

“Okay,” Charlie replied automatically before realizing what she had said. “Bella!” he barked. “The door stays open and the lights stay on. He leaves before 11:00. Thirty minutes.” As usual, Charlie avoided saying my name.

“Okay, Dad,” Bella responded, humoring him. Eleven o’clock was Bella’s summer curfew now that she wasn’t grounded. It suited us fine. I supported Bella as she trudged up the stairs and then I sat her down on the bed, sitting beside her.

“Here, hold this to your forehead. It’ll be easier if you lie down.”

“I better put on a CD since that’s why we’re up here.”

“I’ll do it. You lie down. I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“No, Edward, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt that much.” I’d heard *that* one before.

“Shhh, no arguments,” I insisted, putting the first mellow CD I touched into the player and switching it on. Then I dashed to the bathroom for the aspirin and some water and dashed back. “This will help with swelling.”

I sat next to Bella’s prone shoulder and held the icepack to her quickly darkening lump.

“What happened?” I asked softly.

“Oh, I got my hand caught in the door handle and it pulled me over. The usual.”

“Bella, my Bella, what am I going to do with you?”

It was a question I could not answer. I promised myself that I would think about it again and try to reach a conclusion...soon.