

49. DECEPTION

Two weeks before Christmas, Bella decided to take Renesmee to see Charlie. He'd been calling to complain that he hadn't seen his granddaughter for over a week. Bella was concerned that he might show up at the house if she put him off much longer.

Once Charlie had satisfied himself that Bella was not going to disappear without warning, he no longer dropped by every evening and weekend afternoon. He still visited frequently, but perhaps due to Sue's influence, he now called first to ask whether it was okay. Maybe Sue was afraid they would pop in one day and catch us at the dining room table sucking the blood out of a bear or something...like vampire Thanksgiving.

Since our guests arrived, Bella had been telling Charlie that it was an inconvenient time for him to visit and that she would let him know when he could come again. After Carlisle and Esme returned home, she decided to take a day to satisfy Charlie's wishes.

I was fine with that if Jacob went with her. Not that Bella couldn't protect herself and Renesmee, I just felt more comfortable when she had the backup. I knew Jacob would protect my daughter at all costs—with his life, if necessary—and though I thought the need unlikely, his presence was still comforting. It had occurred to me that the Volturi might send an advance team—with Alice gone, we had no way to know.

"You look *beautiful*," I enthused when Bella came out of her closet that morning. She had ventured into the dress section of the "warehouse" and selected a cashmere sweater-dress that fit her like a second skin, clinging enticingly to her curves. She also wore heels, which made her legs look even sexier than they were already. "Are you sure we have to go out today? I'd much rather stay here with you and help wrinkle your dress."

"I promised Charlie. You know how he is—if I don't show up, he'll get suspicious that we're leaving without telling him."

"All right. But darling, please take your cell phone and if you need *anything* at all, call and I'll be there lickety split."

"I've got it right here in my purse," Bella replied.

She seemed a little tense. Perhaps I hadn't done my full duty by her overnight? *Nah, that couldn't be it.* I chuckled. I was starting to think like the old Jacob.

Bella didn't like to go out in public. She always worried that she would run into people she knew and she couldn't let them see how much she had changed. I told her to just smile and wave and keep on moving. Her good friends had gone off to college anyway, though I supposed they might return for the holidays.

Then I realized that Bella said she had the cell phone "in her purse." That was new for her. Along with the dress and heels, in her hand Bella carried a fashionable-looking leather clutch, small and chic. She seemed rather fancily dressed just to visit Charlie, but

now that I thought about it, I realized that her style of dress had changed over the last couple of weeks. Perhaps having guests had inspired her, or missing Alice, or maybe it was the convenience of her new closet organization, but she had strayed from wearing jeans and t-shirts every day. Today she looked like an elegant model going out on the town. I was utterly charmed, but I didn't want to make too big a deal of it or she might become self-conscious.

Bella had been working very hard recently and I thought it would be good for her to take a day off and relax. She still spent mornings practicing her fighting skills in the meadow—I didn't ask her about that, though I could see most of what was happening through Emmett's eyes. He was enjoying his position as tutor, both because he was no longer the least experienced fighter in the family and because he got to beat Bella every day, though not without taking some damage himself. Emmett's policy of "no mercy" was actually improving Bella's skills rather quickly from what I could tell. Incentive at work, I supposed.

As for shield practice, Bella had projected ten feet or so and maintained it for short periods of time. She described her shield as like a thin skin that she could push away from herself in the manner of inflating a balloon. She said that it resisted stretching away from her and snapped back when she lost concentration.

Bella was working with Zafrina now rather than Kate, who had been disappearing into the woods with Garrett quite often. Bella no longer needed Kate's incentive to find her shield as she had at the beginning. If she required an emotional boost to help her project—for emotion seemed to be the key—she had plenty of reasons to get angry. Since Bella didn't need my services as a sacrificial lamb anymore, I was free to watch or to go about other business, much to my relief.

On this day when Bella was out, I invited my family to Carlisle's office to talk about what happened while they were gone. Carlisle had spoken some with Eleazar, but all the guests had been anxious to catch up with Carlisle, so it was hard to get time alone with him.

"The Denalis were shocked when they first saw Renesmee, but she charmed them one by one, telling her life's story. Or 'her days,' as she calls it." I chuckled. "You each should ask Nessie to tell you her story as she told it to our guests. It's quite special, revelatory in some ways. Everyone in the family makes an appearance. Emmett's wearing tights."

"What?" Em scowled and everyone laughed.

"Ask her yourself," I said with a grin. Nessie had confused the words *minstrel* and *minister*, so had visualized Emmett dressed as the Pied Piper of Hamelin for her christening. Jasper filling the plastic baby pool was funny too. Though he played poker with Nessie often, apparently Jasper hadn't taught his niece the second definition of the word *pool*.

I only hoped that we survived to attend Renesmee's christening. If any of us remained standing at the end of the confrontation, at least we knew whom she wanted as

her “second-” and “third-string” parents.

The most important information my family needed to know, though, was the frightening pattern Eleazar had identified in the history of Volturi punishments—that Aro’s desire to acquire talented vampires was his ulterior motive for destroying covens. I reminded them how Alice had foreseen the Volturi’s decision to come to Forks before Irina had reported us, so it was clear that they were waiting for a pretext to “punish” us. I also shared the theory that Alice must have run to avoid putting her gift into Aro’s hands.

“Our situation seems rather better than it did before we left,” Carlisle observed. “Even if Alice and Jasper did have to leave, they’ve aided our cause a great deal by sending the Amazons, and Peter and Charlotte, of course.”

“I’m moderately hopeful that if we make it safe for Alice to return, then she might come back someday,” I said. “If we can negotiate with the Volturi to stop their scheming to acquire her, then we might live in peace—though I almost want to challenge them just for the dozens, if not hundreds, of vampires they’ve destroyed under false pretenses.”

“Hear, hear!” exclaimed Emmett.

“I hope we never have to take things that far,” Carlisle said.

“The destruction I saw through Eleazar’s thoughts was horrifying. None of the covens was as large as ours, but the Volturi have done it over and over.”

“Surely not every coven was destroyed just to acquire one or two individuals,” Esme protested.

“I’m afraid so—at least those expeditions where the ancients went along. They claimed to be monitoring how the guard was performing their duties. After the guard had destroyed most of a coven, Aro would pardon just the one or two vampires he wanted to take for his ‘collection’ and invite them to join the guard. With Chelsea’s help to break their former emotional ties and bind them to the Volturi, nobody ever declined. That’s how he got Heidi, Corin, and Arturo,” I told them.

“Who’s Arturo?” Emmett asked.

“He was a vampire from the region where Spain is now,” explained Carlisle, “twenty or thirty years older than any of us when he was changed. He could elevate the mood of individuals near him much like Jasper can, except that the effects lasted for several days. Aro wanted him to join the guard for Marcus’s sake. Marcus lost his mate eons ago, but has never recovered from the severe depression that caused.”

“Eleazar indicated that Arturo was destroyed after Aro acquired Corin,” I told Carlisle. “Did you know?”

Carlisle shook his head. “Arturo just disappeared one day and never came back. I thought he left the guard.”

“Who’s Corin?” Emmett asked.

“Corin is a member of the guard who can make you feel euphoric when you’re around her,” Carlisle replied. “Her gift is more powerful than Arturo’s was. Addictive too.”

“But Marcus won’t have anything to do with her?” I asked, having seen that in

Eleazar's thoughts.

"No. He doesn't appreciate having his feelings manipulated. Chelsea keeps Marcus alive by binding his loyalty to Aro. I think if he were left alone, he would find some way to die."

"But Aro needs Marcus because he can identify the relationships between members of a coven and determine how strong or weak they are," I went on. "Then he tells Aro which relationships Chelsea can break apart so that a coven can be dismantled more easily. Marcus also keeps Aro informed when a guard member's loyalty is slipping, according to Eleazar."

"That's all quite interesting information, Edward. How certain are you of it?"

"As certain as Eleazar, which is to say seven or eight on a scale of ten."

"Edward, does Aro want you too?" Esme asked, fear evident in her voice.

"Yes," I answered reluctantly. "When Alice and I were in Volterra, he was clear on that. After I went there to ask the Volturi to...destroy me..."—I glanced at Esme and saw the pain on her face at my mention of it—"...well, Aro had Corin shadow me around the city, though I didn't realize why she was doing it at the time. Her influence is probably why Bella was able to get there in time. Corin weakened my intentions for a few hours. Eleazar says vampire gifts for influencing others aren't as strong as the bond between mates, so my...um...feelings overrode Corin's influence after a while."

"Alice never told us," Esme said. My mother was covering her mouth with her hand and looking at the floor. Carlisle put his arm around her shoulders.

"I never told her...or Bella. It seemed irrelevant at the time, I guess, and I didn't recognize what Corin was doing right away." Everyone went silent, not wanting to bring up that horrible time. "I'm sorry, Esme. I didn't mean to remind you."

"It's fine, dear heart. You're here and that's all that matters now."

I went back to the previous subject. "Eleazar thinks that Aro will want Bella too, once he realizes that she's a shield. Her skills are complementary to Renata's. Bella prevents mental attacks and Renata deflects physical attacks. In time, Bella will be more powerful than Renata, though, I'm sure of it. She's already projecting ten feet. She's amazing!" I crowed. Everyone who had watched her work was chattering about Bella, so the family had heard, but I couldn't help bragging about her anyway.

"She is that. In many ways," Carlisle said thoughtfully.

"How did the Denalis take it when you told them about Irina?" Rosalie asked, changing the subject.

"They couldn't believe it, that she would betray her family like that."

"Not even after they saw Renesmee?"

"Kate was terrified when Bella brought her out," I said. "Well, they all were, actually. But like Irina, Kate's first thought was to tell the authorities before they were destroyed along with us."

"That's understandable," Carlisle said softly, "given what they've lost."

“Yes. But once they calmed down and realized that Renesmee’s heart was pumping and that they could smell her blood, they became intrigued. Carmen took to her immediately and made Eleazar listen to her story. He convinced Tanya and Kate to listen then and they were all converted. Renesmee was magical. You would have been amazed.”

“If the Romanians are any indication—” Emmett began.

“They’re not!” I interrupted.

“Well, I saw her approach the Draculas,” he said and Rosalie started to giggle. “That’s what Jacob calls them. I think it suits.”

“In more ways than one!” Rosalie added.

Emmett continued his story. “Renesmee asked the lighter one why their skin looked like toilet tissue.” Emmett laughed. “I think she meant ‘tissue paper,’ but I like her version better.”

“How did I miss that?” I wondered aloud.

“It was in the meadow when we were practice fighting. The ‘Dracs’ came to see what kind of fighting skills we had, I guess.”

“What did Vladimir say?” Carlisle asked with a smile on his face. I saw what he was thinking and laughed.

Emmett adopted a low, scratchy voice like the Romanians and repeated the speech.

““We sat still for a very long time, child, contemplating our own divinity,” droned Emmett, mimicking Vladimir. “It was a sign of our power that everything came to us. Prey, diplomats, those seeking our favor. We sat on our thrones and thought ourselves gods. We didn’t notice for a long time that we were changing—almost petrifying. I suppose the Volturi did us one favor when they burned our castles. Stefan and I, at least, did not continue to petrify. Now the Volturi’s eyes are filmed with dusty scum, but ours are bright. I imagine that will give us an advantage when we gouge theirs from their sockets.””

Emmett laughed raucously.

“Bella wasn’t too pleased,” he said, still laughing. I saw Bella’s shocked expression as Emmett had seen it. She’d snatched Nessie into her arms and backed away. I was sorry I had missed that interaction. I would ask Renesmee later what she thought of the Romanians.

“That’s horrid!” exclaimed Esme.

“Oh, it’s no worse than some of those fairy tales I’ve seen her read. The wicked witches eating little children and the like,” Rosalie countered.

“Do you think the Draculas will start something with the Volturi?” Emmett wanted to know, still hoping that he’d get to do battle with Felix at least, the biggest and best of the Volturi fighters.

“I hope not,” answered Carlisle. “If they do, they’re on their own. I hope Caius doesn’t think that we invited them here. He might view it as a provocation.” Once again, everyone became quiet, considering the dangerous situation that would play out in only two weeks.

“I saw Bella drive off with Jacob and Renesmee,” Esme said, changing the subject.

“Yes, Charlie was getting impatient that he hasn’t seen Nessie for more than a week, so Bella agreed to take her to visit for the day. She seemed a little secretive about it. I think she’s probably doing some Christmas shopping too.”

“I miss Alice,” Esme said sorrowfully. “It won’t feel like Christmas without her here insisting that we all sing Christmas carols.”

“I’ll help you decorate, Mom,” Rosalie said in an attempt to cheer up Esme. “I hate all this waiting around knowing that the guillotine is getting ready to drop on our heads.”

“Ah, don’t think like that, Rose,” Emmett objected. “It doesn’t look like we’re even gonna get a chance to fight and if we do, we’ll whip ‘em for sure. The wolves alone will send them running away with their tails between their legs. Remember how impressive they looked all lined up at our training session before the newborn battle? They were awesome! Of course, they’re not as good at fighting as we are, but they’re scary as hell. I do wish Jasper was here, though. We could use him.”

“We could indeed,” Carlisle commented. “He would be very helpful at keeping everyone’s emotions under control.” That wasn’t exactly what Emmett meant.

I was listening for the Volvo and had been for a couple of hours. Bella had been gone longer than I’d expected. When the car finally slowed to turn into our driveway, I was a little surprised that I hadn’t heard Jacob’s or Renesmee’s thoughts beforehand. Then Bella parked the car and carried the baby into the house and I saw why. Nessie was knocked out, snoring softly with her Cupid’s-bow lips slightly open and puckered against her mother’s shoulder. Jacob hadn’t returned with her; his thoughts were nowhere in the vicinity.

I was playing my piano, something I hadn’t done for some time. It was a good diversion to soothe my impatience while I waited for Bella to return. I didn’t want to call and make her feel I was checking up on her—I just missed her and of course, I worried whenever she wasn’t nearby. The music segued into Bella’s lullaby when she entered the living room. I had been too sad to play since Alice left, but after sizing up our advantages with Carlisle, I was feeling better about our chances.

“Welcome home,” I said, smiling. There were a dozen others in the living room, but Bella was the only one there for me. I kept playing the lullaby. It seemed appropriate for the one sleeper we still had in the family. “Did you have a good time with Charlie today?”

“Yes. Sorry I was gone so long. I stepped out to do a little Christmas shopping for Renesmee. I know it won’t be much of an event, but...” Bella didn’t finish her sentence, just shrugged. The sadness in her voice unnerved me. I didn’t know that Christmas meant so much to her. I stopped playing and turned around on the piano bench to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her closer.

“I hadn’t thought much about it. If you *want* to make an event of it—”

“No,” Bella cut in, rather more firmly than I expected. “I just didn’t want to let it pass without giving her something.”

“Do I get to see?”

“If you want. It’s only a little thing.” Bella dug in her clutch and pulled out a velvet jewelry bag. “It caught my eye from the window of an antique store while I was driving by.”

Bella dropped a little round locket into my hand. It was 24-carat gold, with an inscription in French inside:

Plus que ma propre vie...

I sobered immediately. “Do you know what this says?” I asked Bella, though given the meaning, I was sure that she must. She might even have had it engraved herself.

“The shopkeeper told me it said something along the lines of ‘more than my own life.’ Is that right?”

“Yes, he had it right.”

I looked into Bella’s eyes to try to read what was going on in her head, but she looked away. It was important then.

When times had been dangerous in the past and Bella and I hadn’t known whether one or the other of us would survive, this had been our pledge to one another. Either of us would give our life for the other. Was she saying that she would give her life for Renesmee? I knew that she would, but why had this come up now, when our situation looked brighter? And why did she look so sad? All the lightness had gone out of her eyes since this morning.

Something had happened today—something grave—and she didn’t want me to know about it. She must have a good reason. The only thing I could think of was that she knew Aro could read my mind, but not hers. She was hiding something from me that Aro must not find out...something that made her very sad. Were we going to lose then? How did she know?

“I hope she likes it,” mumbled Bella, not meeting my eyes.

“Of course she will,” I affirmed, trying to make my voice sound light. If it needed to be a secret then I wasn’t going to pry. Still, I wanted to touch her, to be reunited physically at least, to be reassured.

“Let’s take her home,” I said, nodding toward Renesmee. I stood and put my arm around Bella, but she didn’t move.

“What?” I asked. Didn’t she want to go home with me? What did *that* mean? I felt uneasy.

“I wanted to practice with Emmett a little...,” she said with hesitation.

Seriously? Bella would give up our private time together to practice fighting? It was absurd.

Emmett piped up from in front of the television where he sat with Rose. “Excellent.

The forest needs thinning.”

I gave him a harsh look.

“There’s plenty of time for that tomorrow,” I said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bella argued. “There’s no such thing as *plenty of time* anymore. That concept does not exist. I have a lot to learn and—”

“Tomorrow,” I said flatly. Bella might know something I didn’t, but I knew something too—if we had to battle the Volturi, her fight training for a few hours more would not make one iota of difference to the outcome. And *I* needed her now.

We held hands and walked silently toward the cottage, jumping the river together. When we got there, I could barely wait for Bella to put Renesmee down before I carried her to our bedroom and tore off her clothes. Actually, the cashmere dress was too lovely on her for me to tear it, but I set her on her feet and had it over her head in the same instant. She was wearing undergarments—that was new too. A half-height, padded bra and matching lace panties, slightly less revealing than her honeymoon lingerie. I guessed that she wanted to follow the conventions of modesty when she was in public. The brassiere was sexy, cutting across the top of her breasts just above her nipples. Then I realized what the padding was for—not for augmentation, but to prevent her erect nipples from poking through the soft knit dress in an unseemly way. There was nothing like stiff nipples to encourage men to stare at a woman’s breasts...or so I’d heard. My wife’s breasts were the only ones that interested me.

Though Bella was distracted when we entered the room, she didn’t stay that way long. I leaned over to kiss her, pulling her toward me with a hand in the small of her back, and she melted into me, returning my kiss eagerly. I remembered the days when I couldn’t allow her to press her body against mine in this way and I was glad that those days were past.

There was something very sexy about having the most erogenous of Bella’s erogenous zones—and nothing else—hidden behind expensive silk fabric. It made me want to scoop my hands inside, but I didn’t. Bella was disturbed and, though I could see she was trying to hide it, I couldn’t ignore that.

I disrobed and then took her hand and pulled her to the bed. I lay beside her with my head propped on my hand and lightly stroked her exposed skin with my fingertips. Before long, Bella put her palm to my cheek and lifted her lips to mine. Then she looked into my eyes and I into hers. Their color was changing. Her eyes were amber-red now, a huge contrast to the glowing red that they were when she was new.

“I love you,” she said simply.

“More than my own life,” I finished.