

14. BLOOD

When Carlisle and Esme returned home, having called off their hunting trip, I explained to them Sam's decision to come after Bella, and Jacob's having formed a new pack to protect her. But truly, I was more worried that Bella would die before the wolves had a chance to kill her.

"Carlisle, please, you must check on Bella right away. She's failing so fast. She's held down nothing today and her heartbeat is erratic."

"It's time to start feeding her intravenously. It's our only option."

"I'll talk to Bella. She hates needles, but it's time to pull out all the stops. She must see that."

When I explained to Bella that we needed to start feeding her intravenously, Rosalie—the ubiquitous Rosalie—objected.

"It might be a trick, Bella. They could put something in it to knock you out."

I clenched my fists in readiness to knock Rosalie through the wall. Esme darted between us.

"You won't do that will you, Carlisle?" Esme asked him while keeping her eyes on my face.

"No, I won't, Bella. You have reached a critical stage and this is our last option to prevent starvation. If you don't make it through this, neither will the fetus."

Bella croaked weakly, "That's true, Rosalie. It's worth a try."

Rosalie looked at Bella for a few moments and then said, "Okay, we will allow it."

I took Bella's hand and knelt beside her. "Bella, darling, I know that you want to keep everything as normal as possible around here, but it would be safer to care for you at this point if we set up a bed near the medical equipment. Let me move you upstairs."

"No...Edward...I don't want to be tucked away in a hospital room. I want to be down here with the family."

"Okay, love, but I want to bring the bed down for you. It will make things easier." There was no point in arguing that it would be safer and more comfortable for her to be in a hospital bed with side rails and controls for repositioning the mattress. I knew she wouldn't agree to special equipment unless I implied that it was for her caretakers' benefit, rather than her own.

"If you think it would help, then I don't mind that."

Carlisle and Esme retreated immediately to the second floor where they'd set up Carlisle's office as a surgery for removing the creature when the time came. Nobody believed that Bella could deliver the huge thing naturally—not with that dense membrane

protecting it and not with her so weakened. It would have to be delivered by Cesarean section. I only hoped that Bella would get that far.

My parents descended the staircase with the hospital bed, its legs folded underneath. We set it up and I gently lifted my wife onto it while Carlisle readied the IV and Rosalie hovered over us both. Carlisle also set up an oxygen tank with a tube under Bella's nose, and a heart monitor to warn us if Bella's heart should stutter or falter or if her blood pressure started to drop. Bella had deteriorated rapidly in the course of the day. She was so weak now that she could no longer stand up.

"Is there any way to know how close to term she is?" I asked my father while stroking Bella's bony hand. I noticed that her wedding ring was spinning loosely on her finger. "Do you think days, a week?"

"We consider a pregnant woman ready to deliver when her belly reaches forty centimeters. With her rate of growth, I'm guessing Bella has just under a week to go."

She'll never make it, I thought, despairing. *There's no way she can survive another week in her condition*. I looked away so that Bella couldn't see my facial expression, which was not under my control.

"She needs to sleep now," Rosalie barked at us. "Everybody move away so Bella can rest."

Again, I clenched my fists in fury. Rosalie was behaving as if everything were going to be all right. She assumed that even if Bella died, we'd still have time to get the "baby" out and that was her first priority. Bella would be gone and she'd have just what she'd always wanted—to play Mommy—and without Bella around to get in the way. I hated her with a venom I didn't know I had. If it weren't for Emmett, I'd have taken a serious run at her days ago.

Jacob and Seth patrolled the property for the rest of the day and overnight, while Jasper and Emmett remained on high alert. The night passed with no attack from the wolf pack, but when morning came, a solitary werewolf crossed onto Cullen property.

I heard Jacob's thought. *What do you think you're doing, Leah?*

It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm joining your crappy little renegade pack. The vampires' guard dogs. Leah barked a laugh.

Seth, go let the Cullens know that it's just your stupid sister. I'll deal with this.

Leah's motivation for coming was purely selfish. She wanted to escape the pain of watching Sam and Emily together every day. But Jacob didn't want her in his pack either—her pain was too reminiscent of his own. I decided that if Jacob let her stay, I wouldn't tell Bella. She was frightened of Leah, who detested our family for what we were and openly disliked Bella for hurting Jacob.

What Jacob was putting himself through for Bella! It was both noble and masochistic. Bella made it hard for him to let go of her, because she had never fully let him go. It pained me to see the joy that lit up her face whenever he walked into the room. I knew I should be gracious as Bella lay dying, and share with Jacob what little time she had left,

but it was hard...very hard. One more searing pain atop all the others. It would be a relief to die. I knew I could trust Jacob to keep his promise and that gave me a small measure of peace.

Without knowing it, Jacob gave me other things too. Over time, listening to Jacob's mind had become habitual. At first, I'd listened because he was my rival and I was fighting for Bella with every advantage I had. When he came to see Bella at our wedding, I listened to know how he was doing, and then to protect Bella and potentially myself from him. I listened to him now for his wisdom. He could see things that I, even with my mind-reading skills, could not. Moreover, he was amusing. He had such a gift of expression. I knew why Bella loved him. In spite of myself, I loved him too.

So, listening to his conversation with Carlisle on the porch regarding Bella's condition, I caught it...something Jacob had said...no...*thought*. My father had explained that Bella was starving, that the fetus wouldn't let her body absorb nutrition. Carlisle asked, rhetorically, the same question I'd been asking myself for days: "What does it want?"

I caught Jacob's silent reply: *Probably just looking for something to sink its teeth into—a throat to suck dry. Since it isn't big enough to kill anyone else yet, it settles for sucking Bella's life from her. I can tell them exactly what it wants: death and blood, blood and death.*

In his snide, but highly accurate fashion, Jacob had hit the nail on the head. Except for Bella, we were all blood drinkers in this household and not one of us had recognized the truth. It was THIRSTY! It wanted BLOOD! Of course! What else? The thing was half-vampire! I didn't want to hope, but a tiny spark flared deep inside my dried-up, desiccated heart.

Carlisle had a stash of donated human blood in his refrigerator in case Bella required a transfusion during surgery. Would a transfusion help her now? I had my doubts. Being *thirsty* meant that the need was for *ingested* blood.

Rosalie took to the idea immediately, convinced that if Bella was told it would be good for "the *baby*" then she would agree to it. It was revolting how she pressured Bella without an iota of concern for Bella's human sensibilities. After all, the act could be seen as a form of cannibalism, instinctively repellent to a human. But Rosalie was right. When told "the *baby*" might be craving blood, Bella's response was hesitant, but willing.

"So who's going to catch me a grizzly bear?" she asked.

All of us were uncomfortable at having to clarify that the blood would be human, but Bella even agreed to try that.

Maybe it was because I had so recently asked Jacob to donate his semen, essentially, that she looked at him with wide eyes and asked, "Who?" If all of this weren't in the interests of trying to save Bella's life, I would have been ashamed of myself. What would we ask of Jacob next? A kidney? A lung? But I knew that if Bella needed it, I wouldn't hesitate to ask him for anything and probably, he would agree to it. I didn't know whether he or I was the sicker individual.

When Rosalie went to the kitchen to get a cup for Bella's libation, she chose one made of clear, see-through plastic. She had no empathy for Bella at all. She was just circling my wife's poor, failing body like a vulture waiting for a feast. If it weren't for Emmett...

To my great surprise (and Bella's) she *liked* the donated human blood, *loved* it even. She shut her eyes and moaned when she took her first sip, knowing instinctively that it was what her body needed. She drank one cup and reluctantly asked for another, embarrassed by her craving.

"Does this screw my total?" she whispered to me. "Or do we start counting *after* I'm a vampire?"

I smiled at her reference to the bet between Jasper and Emmett on how many humans she would kill as a newborn. "No one is counting, Bella. In any case, no one died for this. Your record is still clean." I cupped my hand around her sunken cheek.

Halfway through the second cup, Bella's heartbeat strengthened noticeably and her waxy-looking skin took on a pink blush. She raised herself into a sitting position without assistance, though half an hour earlier she hadn't been able to lift her head. Incredible!

"How do you feel now?" Carlisle asked cautiously.

"Not sick. Sort of hungry...only I'm not sure if I'm hungry or *thirsty*, you know?"

"Does anything sound particularly good to you, Bella?" he inquired.

"Eggs," she responded and looked at me with a smile.

The smile that crossed my face in reply almost startled me, it was so unexpected. Bella was *hungry*! Hope welled up before I had a chance to tamp it down. Was it *possible* that Bella could survive to birth this...baby?

We didn't have long to appreciate our victory over Bella's imminent death. Just when things were starting to look up, two warning howls from Seth sent Jacob racing out of the house. He leapt off the porch and phased to his wolf form in midair, ripping his last pair of sweatpants to shreds. Sam's pack was coming. Jacob's pack responded, dashing to get themselves in place to defend us.

Fortunately, Sam's pack members had come to talk, not fight. I listened in on the wolves' distant conversation as my family convened in the living room to hear the news. I gave them the play-by-play as Jared, in human form, asked Jacob to come back to Sam's pack and bring Seth and Leah with him. Jared was accompanied by three of his pack brothers, not including Embry, I noticed. Leah had caught on immediately that Sam hadn't sent him as part of the diplomacy mission because he was worried that Embry would defect to Jacob's pack. The pull for Embry must be immense, given what I had learned of his probable heritage. The bonds of blood were strong.

That was true for me too, I realized. Despite all the contention and all the times I'd wanted to rip his head from his body, Jacob was my blood—metaphorically speaking, of course. He loved Bella and I loved Bella and through her, we were brothers. Cain and Abel, maybe, but brothers...kin...blood. Jacob cemented that feeling when he told Jared his

intentions.

I quoted his words to my family: *"But I'm not coming back, not now. We're going to wait and see how it plays out, too. And we're going to watch out for the Cullens for as long as that seems necessary. Because, despite what you think, this isn't just about Bella. We're protecting those who should be protected. And that applies to the Cullens, too."*

I didn't repeat his next thought: *Most of them, anyway.* I smiled to myself. Jacob and I were in agreement on many things lately and one of them was how we felt about Rosalie. He wouldn't fight too hard to protect her, I was sure. He also figured that Emmett and Jasper and I, at least, could take care of ourselves.

Was it only a few days ago that Jacob had come to kill me? And now he was practically part of my family. He had taken steps toward accepting that Bella would likely become one of us—vampire—if it would keep her alive. Though being a vampire was only relatively alive, the distinction was critical. Should she die, I knew from his thoughts that he would likely regain his anger and hatred toward me long enough to keep our bargain, which is what I wanted. Once again, I was glad that I was the only one in my family who could read minds. And I was glad, suddenly, that Alice couldn't see into Jacob's head.

After telling my family what Jacob had said about protecting all of us and not just Bella, silence passed through the group. We shared a moment of contemplation and thanksgiving for our new allies—except for Rosalie, naturally.

Carlisle explained to Esme what it meant for Jacob, Seth, and Leah to break away from Sam's pack to protect us. They had each given up everything, including their homes and their families. Tender-hearted Esme broke into vampire tears, something I'd been experiencing rather often myself lately. Her face crumpled, her shoulders hunched forward, and she covered her face with her hands. Her body shook with emotion, though no actual tears came. Carlisle held her and when the moment passed, Esme became very determined.

"It's tragic that they have no homes to go to, no beds, no clothes, no food, nothing. I can't have them here doing all this for us, making such great sacrifices, without trying to make it better for them. Edward, please tell Jacob that we're offering them all beds to sleep in, showers, meals, rides, any personal possessions they need, and anything else any of us can think of to try to ease their circumstances. I know that they can't tolerate the way we smell, but they must need clothing. I'll wash some things that I think will fit them and cook them some food to take away."

"Leah doesn't like eating in her wolf form, so that would be a welcome gesture, I'm sure," I told my mother. "And when Jacob left here just now, he ripped through the last of his clothes. When he phases back to his human form, he'll have nothing to put on."

"I'll find something of Emmett's for him to wear, and set it on the porch where he can find it when he returns. Edward, how big is Leah? Could she wear any of our clothes?"

"She's about your size."

"Okay, then I'll put together some things for her too. I don't want them to suffer on

our account.” Esme left the room to see to it.

“Carlisle,” Bella croaked.

“Yes, Bella?” Carlisle swept to the side of the hospital bed.

“I’m feeling much better. Do you think that I could lose some of these tubes now?”

“Yes, I think so. We can stop the nutrient mix, since you’re eating. I think you’re also breathing fine now without the oxygen. Let’s keep the fluid drip for a while longer.”

“Do I need to be in bed?”

“No, we can hang the fluids on a rolling stand. It’s very important, Bella, that you tell us of any discomfort you are having and not minimize anything. If you’re cold, for example, you need to tell us. If you’re thirsty, hungry, whatever, we need to know.”

“Okay.”

It took us four minutes to remove the hospital bed, put the furniture back in place and settle Bella down on the couch with her remaining IV drip bag set up behind her. We wrapped her in blankets on Jacob’s advice.

It was a different scene that Jacob returned to when he strolled through the front door in Emmett’s borrowed clothes. He had come to report what we already knew about—Jared’s plea for him and his pack to return home. I felt enormously grateful to Jacob for his show of loyalty to my family and for his contribution to Bella’s much-improved condition.

But my heart sank immediately when Bella spied Jacob coming through the door. She was elated to see him, almost ecstatic, like he’d been missing for years. I *couldn’t* understand it. Of course she loved Jacob, but what was so thrilling about his mere presence? And even if she was overjoyed to be near him, why was she so open about showing that to me? She must realize how it hurt us both that she clung to him so tenaciously. It seemed to be a bizarre blind spot, bordering on mental illness.

“Where’s the flood, mutt?” Rosalie asked, referring to Emmett’s too-short trousers.

“You know how you drown a blonde, Rosalie?” Jacob responded without looking at her. “Glue a mirror to the bottom of a pool.”

“I’ve already heard that one,” Rosalie hollered after him as he left the house.

Just then, I remembered Esme’s request and followed Jacob outside. I wasn’t doing it just for Esme—I wanted to repay him in some small way for everything he had done for Bella and everything he was doing for my family...and me. I knew he wouldn’t want to acknowledge his kindness to vampires, so I simply presented Esme’s offers of food, clothing, showers, and whatever else he and his pack needed. I thought Leah would refuse anything we offered, but I hoped Jacob could change her mind. These three wolves were defying their very DNA to help us, their mortal enemies by definition.

Our conversation was cut short when I heard Bella’s low, pained cry from inside the house. I dashed back to find her bent over, holding her belly, with my family gathered closely around her.

“Bella! What’s wrong?” I cried before I’d reached her side. She grimaced, unable to speak. Rosalie was holding her from behind the couch, while Esme and Carlisle hovered

in front of her, my father reaching to pull Bella's arms away from her belly.

"Give me a second, Carlisle," Bella gasped.

"Bella, I heard something crack. I need to take a look."

"Pretty sure...it was a rib. Ow. Yep. Right here." She pointed to her left side, second rib from the bottom. It must have kicked her. The thing was shockingly strong.

"I need to take an X-ray. There might be splinters. We don't want it to puncture anything." Carlisle took Bella's left arm and removed the IV needle, handing the apparatus to Esme.

"Okay." Bella was struggling for breath. Inhaling was obviously painful.

I bent forward to pick her up, but Rosalie dashed around the couch to beat me to it. I gave her a silent stare and she growled, "I've already got her."

Rosalie carried Bella swiftly up the stairs, moving as smoothly as she could, with me on her heels. We arranged Bella on the examining table in Carlisle's surgery (nee office) while Carlisle pulled over his portable X-ray machine. A few moments later, we were looking at the films, which showed that one of her left-side floating ribs was broken, a greenstick fracture. The bone had split lengthwise, rather than crosswise, and the pieces had snapped back into place.

"It kicked her, didn't it, Carlisle?"

"Yes, that would be my guess. The foot, or possibly a hand, maybe even an elbow, hit the rib at an angle. With this kind of break, the natural tension created when the splinters are pushed outward causes them to pop back into place, but the fractures are long and can take quite a while to heal. At least there is no displacement, nothing poking out. How is your breathing, Bella?" my father asked.

"Fine," she replied in her usual manner. All of us raised our eyebrows and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly.

"It hurts some if I inhale too deeply," Bella amended.

"Can one of you hand me some bandaging tape? Top drawer."

I shuffled through the medical supplies in a nearby rolling cart and located the tape, handing it to Carlisle. Bella was gripping my hand hard enough that hers had turned white from the pressure and beads of sweat were running down her forehead. She was in more pain than she was admitting to. Carlisle noticed it and caught my eye.

It's bad, isn't it?

I grimaced and nodded minutely.

"Rosalie, can you please help Bella sit up with her legs over the side of the table?"

Bella held her body rigid and winced when Rosalie touched her. I lifted her thighs, while my sister lifted her back and we spun her into place. Her breathing was a shallow pant.

"Please gather Bella's shirt above her lower ribcage. Or you can take it off if you prefer, Bella, but lifting your arms might be painful."

"Rose, could you hold it up for me, please?" Bella asked, giving Rosalie an

apologetic half smile.

As my sister folded and rolled the big sweatshirt above Bella's stomach, I stifled a gasp. I'd seen the mottled black and blue before, but since the last time I'd looked at my wife's stomach, her entire left side had become one big bruise. There was no ivory-colored flesh left. I turned my face away to hide my anguish.

"Now, Bella," Dr. Cullen admonished, "it's extremely important, and becoming more so, that you let us know about the slightest change, pain, or discomfort. The fetus is growing so quickly that you could have any number of symptoms or injuries. If you are stoic and don't tell us, then it's very hard for me to help."

"Okay, Carlisle.

"Edward, help me wrap this tape around Bella's back." I did as he asked and together we mummified Bella's upper belly.

"How does that feel?" Carlisle inquired.

"Much better," Bella replied.

"Unfortunately, that's about all we can do for a broken rib, but it should keep the bone from moving around and re-breaking or hurting quite so much."

"Thank you, Carlisle." Bella was breathing a little easier.

"Bella, it's nearly nighttime. Let's settle you into bed, okay?" I suggested. "It might be best if we didn't move you around too much more today." Bella nodded in reply.

Again, Rosalie gathered Bella carefully in her arms and transported her up another flight of stairs to our bedroom. Together, we arranged Bella on the big bed with pillows supporting her from every side. Then, purposefully, Rosalie marched to the nearby couch and took up a sentry position.

"I think I can manage my own wife for the night, Rosalie," I said, bitterness seeping through my words.

"I'm not leaving unless Bella asks me to," Rosalie replied haughtily.

"It's okay, Rose. Edward can carry me to the bathroom and I don't think I'll be throwing up anymore, thank goodness. The baby's thirsty, though. Would you mind refilling my cup?" Rosalie nodded and left the room.

"Edward, I feel a little cold. Could I have a blanket, please?"

"Of course, darling." Finally, she had asked for *something*. I wrapped a thick quilt around her, and then moved very carefully onto the bed. I held my beloved, battered wife in my arms, careful not to touch her skin. "How is that? Are you okay?"

But there was no reply. Bella had already dropped off to sleep. The pain and the lightning-fast growth of the thing was taking every ounce of strength she had. When Rosalie returned with the cup of blood, I shook my head and nodded at Bella's misshapen form. Rosalie retreated without a word. Thank goodness for small favors.