

17. CARLISLE

No doubt Carlisle had heard me telling Bella his story. I knocked on the door to his office and waited for him to acknowledge us.

“Come in,” Carlisle invited. He marked his place in the large medical book he was reading and stood. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to show Bella some of our history. Well, your history, actually.”

“We didn’t mean to disturb you,” Bella apologized.

“Not at all. Where are you going to start?”

“The Waggoner,” I said putting one hand on Bella’s shoulder and rotating her to face the wall behind us. Covering the wall and surrounding the doorway was Carlisle’s collection of paintings and lithographs that served as a centuries-long record of his life.

Bella’s heart began to race and with his doctor’s ear, Carlisle automatically noted it. I heard him wonder whether her reaction was due to the impressive wall of paintings, his own presence, or the fact that my hand was on Bella’s shoulder. The latter, he decided, because he’d noticed it downstairs as well. I smiled to myself. Bella *definitely* wasn’t frightened.

I pulled Bella toward the left side of the wall where the 17th-century painting by Waggoner hung. It was a small, but detailed depiction of London from across the Thames. The old London Bridge, with its collection of residences and shops and even a tiny cathedral perched on it, spanned the river. Waggoner, who is famous for his 1666 painting called “The Great Fire of London,” had painted this one from the same perspective before the fire.

“London in the 1650s,” I told Bella.

“The London of my youth,” Carlisle added. Bella flinched when he spoke. He had stepped up quietly beside us, forgetting, no doubt, that Bella couldn’t hear him move. I squeezed her hand.

“Will *you* tell the story?” I asked Carlisle. Bella and I both turned toward him.

“I would, but I’m actually running a bit late. The hospital called this morning— Dr. Snow is taking a sick day. Besides, you know the stories as well as I do.” With a parting smile for Bella, he left for work. I loved and admired my father, not only for his singular qualities of integrity and compassion, but also for the respectful, loving way he treated me. He knew as well as I did that telling a human about us was an infraction punishable by death in our world. But after I’d saved Bella’s life and she learned what we are, he trusted my judgment to handle the situation. When I knew that I loved Bella, Carlisle didn’t question my decision to pursue her. And now that I was bringing her into our lives, Carlisle accepted her as one of us, human or not.

Bella, likewise, treated my family as if we were human. It was remarkable how well she was absorbing all this information that would startle even some vampires. Still, I was keeping an eye on her, watching for signs of shock or overload.

After a few more minutes examining the London painting, Bella asked, “What happened then? When he realized what had happened to him?”

Because I couldn’t read her mind, it took me a second to realize that she wanted me to continue with Carlisle’s story. I glanced at the painting of the English countryside and the cliff from which Carlisle had jumped in a failed suicide attempt, and decided not to share the details of that episode.

“When he knew what he had become,” I continued the tale, “he rebelled against it. He tried to destroy himself. But that’s not easily done.”

“How?” Bella blurted out, seeming to surprise herself.

“He jumped from great heights. He tried to drown himself in the ocean...but he was young to the new life, and very strong. It is amazing that he was able to resist” —I chose my word carefully—“feeding...while he was still so new. The instinct is more powerful then, it takes over everything. But he was so repelled by himself that he had the strength to try to kill himself with starvation.”

“Is that possible?” Bella asked.

“No, there are very few ways we can be killed.” I hurried on, before she asked the obvious next question.

“So he grew very hungry, and eventually weak. He strayed as far as he could from the human populace, recognizing that his willpower was weakening, too. For months he wandered by night, seeking the loneliest places, loathing himself.

“One night, a herd of deer passed his hiding place. He was so wild with thirst that he attacked without a thought. His strength returned and he realized there was an alternative to being the vile monster he feared. Had he not eaten venison in his former life? Over the next months his new philosophy was born. He could exist without being a demon. He found himself again.”

“He began to make better use of his time. He’d always been intelligent, eager to learn. Now he had unlimited time before him. He studied by night, planned by day. He swam to France and—”

“He *swam* to France?” Bella interrupted.

“People swim the channel all the time, Bella.”

“That’s true, I guess. It just sounded funny in that context. Go on.”

“Swimming is easy for us—”

“Everything is easy for *you*,” she complained.

I looked at her with exaggerated patience, waiting for her to let me finish the sentence.

“I won’t interrupt you again, I promise.”

I doubted that. “Because technically, we don’t need to breathe.”

“You—”

“No, no, you promised.” I laughed, shushing her with my finger on her lips. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“You can’t spring something like that on me, and then expect me not to say anything,” she said, speaking around my finger. I moved my hand to the side of her neck—another of my favorite spots—and listened to her heart accelerate.

Bella pressed her question.

“You don’t have to *breathe*?”

“No, it’s not necessary. Just a habit.”

“How long can you go...without *breathing*?”

“Indefinitely, I suppose; I don’t know. It gets a bit uncomfortable—being without a sense of smell.”

“A bit uncomfortable,” she repeated, incredulous.

It hit me again, the fear that each new revelation could be the one that pushed Bella too far and sent her running. I dropped my arm to my side and grew still, sad about the

inevitability of it. Already I missed her. Already I could feel a new kind of loneliness.

“What is it?” Bella interrupted my downward spiral by placing her hand on my frozen cheek. Her touch reanimated me.

“I keep waiting for it to happen,” I said.

“For what to happen?”

“I know that at some point, something I tell you or something you see is going to be too much. And then you’ll run away from me, screaming as you go.” I knew my smile was sad. “I won’t stop you. I want this to happen, because I want you to be safe. And yet, I want to be with you. The two desires are impossible to reconcile. . . .” I watched her face.

“I’m not running anywhere,” Bella declared.

“We’ll see.” I smiled, but remained doubtful.

She saw the doubt and frowned at me.

“So, go on—Carlisle was swimming to France.”

“Carlisle swam to France, and continued on through Europe, to the universities there. By night he studied music, science, medicine—and found his calling, his penance, in that, in saving human lives.” Talking about Carlisle like this always reminded me of how remarkable he was, unique among our kind.

“I can’t adequately describe the struggle; it took Carlisle two centuries of torturous effort to perfect his self-control. Now he is all but immune to the scent of human blood, and he is able to do the work he loves without agony. He finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital. . . .”

I drew Bella’s attention to the largest painting on the wall, a court scene by the Italian painter, Solimena, also mid-17th century. I continued the story.

“He was studying in Italy when he discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers.” I pointed to four figures depicted on the highest balcony, looking down over the crowd below. After a few seconds, Bella laughed with surprise. She recognized Carlisle.

“Solimena was greatly inspired by Carlisle’s friends. He often painted them as gods. Aro, Marcus, and Caius: Nighttime patrons of the arts.” I laughed. The Volturi, as they were collectively known, pretty much considered themselves to be gods too.

“What happened to them?” Bella asked.

“They’re still there. As they have been for who knows how many millennia.

Carlisle stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades. He greatly admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to cure his aversion to ‘his natural food source,’ as they called it. They tried to persuade him, and he tried to persuade them, to no avail. At that point, Carlisle decided to try the New World. He dreamed of finding others like himself. He was very lonely, you see.”

“He didn’t find anyone for a long time. But, as monsters became the stuff of fairy tales, he found he could interact with unsuspecting humans as if he were one of them. He began practicing medicine. But the companionship he craved evaded him; he couldn’t risk familiarity.”

“When the influenza epidemic hit, he was working nights in a hospital in Chicago. He’d been turning over an idea in his mind for several years, and he had almost decided to act—since he couldn’t find a companion, he would create one. He wasn’t absolutely sure how his own transformation had occurred, so he was hesitant. And he was loathe to steal anyone’s life the way his had been stolen. It was in that frame of mind that he found me.

There was no hope for me; I was left in a ward with the dying. He had nursed my parents, and knew I was alone. He decided to try....”

My mind wandered and I found myself staring out the window, remembering the vague image I had salvaged from my human life of my mother, Elizabeth. Carlisle told me that she’d destroyed her own chances of survival by nursing me from her sickbed. When she knew her life was ending, she told him she believed he could do things no one else could, and begged him to do everything in his power to save me.

I often wondered if my mother had figured out, much as Bella had, that Carlisle was not human, and in some great leap of faith asked him to perform his miracle for her son. Carlisle wasn’t sure what my mother had discerned or how much she knew, but her desperate request convinced him to try to change me.

Not wanting to explain to Bella how Carlisle had done that, I ended the story there.

“And so we’ve come full circle.”

“Have you always stayed with Carlisle, then?” she asked.

“Almost always.” I’d said enough for one day. I wrapped my arm around Bella’s waist and walked her out of Carlisle’s office, toward the stairs to the third floor. She stopped me with another question.

“Almost?” she prompted. I couldn’t seem to deny her anything, so I reluctantly replied.

“Well, I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence—about ten years after I was...born...created, whatever you want to call it. I wasn’t sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite. So I went off on my own for a time.”

“Really?” Bella seemed truly curious, rather than disgusted or scared. Her reactions always surprised me.

“That doesn’t repulse you?” I couldn’t quite believe it.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I guess...it sounds reasonable.” I chortled in surprise. She was unbelievable. Here she was sympathizing with my rebellion against my parents, when it included sucking the blood out of human beings.

We climbed the stairs and I led her down the third-floor hallway.

“From the time of my new birth, I had the advantage of knowing what everyone around me was thinking, both human and non-human alike. That’s why it took me ten years to defy Carlisle—I could read his perfect sincerity, understand exactly why he lived the way he did.

“It took me only a few years to return to Carlisle and recommit to his vision. I thought I would be exempt from the...depression...that accompanies a conscience. Because I knew the thoughts of my prey, I could pass over the innocent and pursue only the evil. If I followed a murderer down a dark alley where he stalked a young girl—if I saved her, then surely I wasn’t so terrible.

“But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes. I couldn’t escape the debt of so much human life taken, no matter how justified. And I went back to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me back like the prodigal son. It was more than I deserved.”

And this was more than I’d wanted to tell Bella. I was not proud of that part of my life and I would not expect a human ever to accept it.

“My room,” I announced, opening the door at the end of the hallway and pulling

Bella through it. I watched her take in the beautiful view of the Sol Duc River, the Olympic National Park, and the Olympic Mountains through the southern wall of windows. Then she turned to examine my music library tucked into shelves along the west wall.

“Good acoustics?” she inquired, noting the carpet and the fabric-covered walls.

I nodded, chuckling. She missed nothing. I turned on a jazz recording to demonstrate while she perused my music collection.

A sudden lightness came over me as we stood together in my bedroom. I felt like a yoke had been lifted off my shoulders or I had suddenly lost a hundred pounds. I wanted to dance, sing, celebrate.

“How do you have these organized?” Bella’s question cut into my thoughts.

“Ummm, by year, and then by personal preference within that frame.” I turned to look at Bella, marveling at the change she had wrought in me.

“What?” Bella prodded, referring to my gaze.

I decided to share my thoughts with her.

“I was prepared to feel...relieved. Having you know about everything, not needing to keep secrets from you. But I didn’t expect to feel more than that. I *like* it. It makes me...happy.” I’d rarely used that word before I met Bella. I shrugged and smiled.

“I’m glad.” Bella returned my smile. It was so hard to read her eyes sometimes. For a second, I began to worry that the smile wasn’t real, that perhaps it was a kind prelude to her exit from this bizarre stage.

Bella read my face this time. “You’re still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren’t you?”

I nodded, a little surprised.

“I hate to burst your bubble, but you’re really not as scary as you think you are. I don’t find you scary at all, actually.” It was a bald statement, overconfident, and nothing if not an invitation to mischief.

“You *really* shouldn’t have said that.” I menaced her with an evil, horror-film chuckle. Then I issued a baby growl and bared my teeth at her as I bent into a hunting crouch, ready to spring.

“You wouldn’t.” She stepped back, shooting fire from her eyes, warning me away. Warning *me!* Ha!

I leaped at her then, snatching her off her feet and trapping her in the protective armor of my arms while we soared through the air together. My black leather sofa slammed against the wall when we landed on it.

After catching her breath, Bella began struggling to free herself from my “evil clutches,” but I wouldn’t allow it for at least two reasons. First, I was enjoying our physical contact tremendously and, second, she was so soft and pliable, like Play-Doh or Silly Putty, that I couldn’t resist playing with her a little. Gently, and with her tacit permission—nonresistance—I pressed her knees toward her torso and her calves toward her thighs, forming a little human ball which I squeezed against my chest. A new game, this. I’d call it “The Monster and the Maiden.”

She glared at me, trying to hide her alarm at being trapped with mock anger. I leered at her, daring her to challenge my fearsomeness.

“You were saying?” I growled, enjoying the moment.

“That you are a very, very terrifying monster,” Bella conceded.

“Much better.”

She wriggled in my arms, but I held her firmly. This scene represented such a triumph over myself that I didn't want it to end. Plus, holding her in this way was a *lot* of fun...

"Um...Can I get up now?"

I just laughed.

At that moment, I heard Alice and Jasper approach.

"Can we come in?" Alice inquired.

Bella tried to squirm away again, but I wasn't ready to let her go. Instead, I tilted her upright and set her on my lap in a more customary position. I felt the blood rush to her face, but there was no reason to be shy here. This was my home. Besides, I was pretty sure that she didn't mind being held.

"Go ahead," I replied to our visitors, still grinning as they entered.

Alice didn't hesitate, but moved to the center of the room and flopped onto the carpet, while Jasper hung back by the door. My sister, of course, wasn't surprised at all by our playful shenanigans, but Jasper's mind was spinning.

My gawd, how can he hold her so close? Is he losing it? Is she in danger?

Alice recognized Jasper's tension and decided to tease him and Bella at the same time. She remarked, "It sounded like you were having Bella for lunch, and we came to see if you would share." She kept a straight face as if nothing could be more natural. Bella tensed in my arms, her heart racing. *Finally, a little fear!*

"Sorry, I don't believe I have enough to spare," I refused, my mouth within inches of Bella's carotid artery and an evil grin plastered on my face. Bella couldn't see my expression, so the act was more to scandalize Jasper than anything else...and to show off a little, if I were being honest.

Of course, one couldn't fool Jasper for long with false drama. His shock lasted only a couple of seconds before he recognized my love, my joy, and, probably, my lust in the air.

He smiled at our joke before speaking. "Actually, Alice says there's going to be a real storm tonight, and Emmett wants to play ball. Are you game?"

I loved our family's baseball games. There weren't a lot of thunderstorms on the Olympic Peninsula—more of a constant drizzle—so we didn't get to play often. Still, I didn't want to leave Bella.

"Of course you should bring Bella," Alice said, reading my expression.

That can't be a good idea, can it? Jasper wondered to himself. Jasper, who until recently was determined to kill Bella to protect Alice from any possible threat of exposure, was now worried that I might lose control and kill Alice's new friend. As edgy as Jasper could be sometimes, he loved Alice to distraction and I loved him for that. Still, it was fun to tease him.

"Do you want to go?" I asked Bella, unable to hide my enthusiasm. I wouldn't go if she didn't want to join us.

"Sure," she said immediately. "Um, where are we going?"

"We have to wait for thunder to play ball—you'll see why," I told her.

"Will I need an umbrella?"

That struck all the vampires as quaintly amusing, since we were impervious to the rain.

"Will she?" Jasper asked Alice.

"No," Alice replied. "The storm will hit over town. It should be dry enough in the

clearing.”

“Good, then.” Jasper was onboard now and a happy anticipation settled over all of us.

We’ll leave you two alone, now that we’ve got that settled. Have fun! Alice directed her thoughts at me. Aloud, she said, “Let’s go see if Carlisle will come.” She jumped up and pulled Jasper along.

“Like you don’t know.” Jasper read the ruse and pulled the bedroom door shut discreetly behind him.

“What will we be playing?” Bella inquired, suddenly nervous.

“*You* will be watching. We will be playing baseball.” I felt her relax. *Not a sports fan*, I remembered from the hike.

“Vampires like baseball?” Bella rolled her eyes, disbelieving.

“It’s the American pastime,” I intoned solemnly.