

22. CAMPING

We entered the tiny harbor of Port Renfrew on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island well before the first light of dawn. Carlisle paid Robert the agreed-upon sum while I hauled our duffle out of his boat. After giving us a friendly farewell and a card with his cell phone number on it, Robert pulled away from the dock and motored off with no fanfare.

We hurried to clear the town and take cover in the rugged forests that spread outward and upward from the coast. I still hadn't heard James' thoughts, so I knew he wasn't close enough to see us. Nevertheless, we needed to maintain the fiction of Bella's presence. It was lucky that Robert planned to spend the day fishing. He would not be on the dock to answer any questions James might put to him regarding outsiders in the area. Or to be eaten for lunch, for that matter.

Edward, what did you make of the old man's outburst about Billy Black? Carlisle's question broke into my thoughts.

"His mind was unnaturally silent," I told him. "I couldn't tell whether it was truly empty or if it was blocked to me, something like Bella's. Perhaps he had some dementia."

Did his comment about Billy's "other son" mean anything to you?

"Nothing absolute, but he seemed to be impugning Billy's moral character. I also got the word 'grandson.' One might infer a familial relationship between Billy Black and Albert's progeny."

Carlisle looked thoughtful. *There are numerous connections between the Washington coastal tribes, particularly the Quileutes and Makahs. They share some traditions, legends of origin, and have intermarried often over the centuries.*

"And perhaps didn't marry, as well," I said wryly.

We were running now, but not fast as we had no desire to gain ground on Emmett. We just needed to find a campsite with good visibility of the surrounding area and remote enough to be private. As we went along, I used Bella's clothing to mark the occasional tree with her scent. James would not get a continuous trail of scent, but he would assume we were carrying her.

I spied a steep ridge about 100 yards ahead and suggested we look at it. After running a short while longer, we leaped to the top of the ridge and found a well-sheltered area with good lookout posts. We erected the tent and settled in to wait for Emmett.

"He's here," I told Carlisle, a couple of hours later.

Emmett?

I nodded. He had just arrived on Vancouver Island where he would follow the shoreline until he found our scent trail. It wouldn't take him long to catch up to us.

Less than ten minutes later, Emmett appeared through the trees about thirty yards from the bottom of the ridge. Carlisle stood and called to him. With two giant leaps, Emmett landed next to us, soaking wet, a bright gleam in his eye.

"James?" Carlisle queried.

"He's trailing," Emmett replied. "He came into Neah Bay about an hour ago, walked along the pier, then turned back into the forest the way he came. When I was sure he was gone, I ran out of the woods and took to the water."

"I wonder why he's going back," Carlisle mused.

I told him my theory.

“My guess is that he’s keeping track of where we are, but is trying to hide his thoughts from me. I haven’t heard him since we left. From what Emmett said, it appears he is making forays into my mind—reading range, then moving out of it. I just have not been listening for him at those precise moments.”

“How do you suppose he knew about your special skill?” asked Carlisle.

“Again, I’m guessing, but perhaps Victoria spied on our family or maybe Laurent picked up something about it when he visited our home.”

“Laurent promised to return north and I’m inclined to take him at his word,” Carlisle said, “but regardless, James must know about you. Which begs the question... what else does he know?”

Emmett spoke up. “Maybe once he crosses to the island, Edward can backtrack to get a reading on him.”

“That’s a good idea,” I responded. “It’s making me nervous to be this blind. I don’t want him turning back toward Bella. Victoria’s been searching Forks and the whole area. What if we’ve missed something?”

Emmett tried to reassure me. “Edward, Bella is safe with Jasper and Alice. Even if by some impossible chance, he found her, she’s still protected. He couldn’t get past those two.”

“All the same...” My mind was awash with possibilities for how James could hurt Bella. We had to take care of him, the sooner, the better. I growled with impatience and frustration.

“Emmett,” Carlisle spoke, changing the subject, “Do you want to hunt? It’s perfect country and we need to stay here for six or seven hours.”

“I wish there were some grizzlies. There are only black bears on this island. But a bear is a bear, I guess, and they are quite feisty when they’ve just risen from their winter naps.” Emmett laughed. “I’ll go now, then.”

“Yes, and I’ll go when you get back. Edward hunted on Friday, so he’ll be fine until tomorrow. We all need to stay well fed until this situation is resolved.”

“See you soon,” Emmett replied and flipped off the ridge, somersaulting in mid-air before running off into the woods.

I wished I were here under different circumstances. Vancouver Island is a wild, magical place with thousand-year-old trees and unique animal species. Its central, western, and northern sides are largely inaccessible except on foot. Emmett would be in heaven, as the black bear population was healthy. There was plenty of my favorite, mountain lion, as well, and there were even wolves. Still, it was hard to enjoy the wildlife or even the majestic beauty of the primeval forest while separated from, and worrying about, Bella. It was hard to think of anything else. I needed to be back by her side.

And yet, until James was eliminated, she would not be safe.

How are you holding up? Carlisle inquired.

“Not as well as I could be, but I’m more worried about how she’s holding up. She was so frightened and so sad, and she thinks she isn’t worthy of our help. She can be so irrational... I’m always afraid she will do something impulsive and I’ll lose her forever.”

I dropped my head into my hands, fighting despair. “And here we are, doing nothing, just waiting for him to act.”

Try to be patient, Edward. You know that if we chase him, he’ll only run, then try

again. Vampires are tenacious creatures. Which brings me to something else...

I knew that Carlisle was trying to divert my attention, but I didn't protest.

You've decided about Bella then?

"Oh Carlisle..." I moaned, "As much as I wanted to leave her alone, I don't think I ever really had any choice in the matter. The decision to stay was made before I had any chance to effect it."

You know, son, that we support you, whatever happens. We only want what makes you happy.

"I know, and I thank you for that. But if anything happens to her, I will never forgive myself."

You had no way of knowing. What are the odds?

"True, but it doesn't alter my culpability."

Again, Carlisle changed the subject.

How is your control holding up? Jasper said you seemed to be having no trouble at all managing your thirst.

"Well...it might appear that way, but it takes constant effort." I saw his eyes widen, so I hurried to reassure him. "Not that I could ever hurt her now. I am sure that I won't, though the thirst is always present. What I'm struggling with now are these new... more human...desires. I want her...in ways I never have wanted before. And even more surprisingly, she wants me too. In fact, she has quite shocking...quite tempting... responses to my presence. I just don't want to hurt her. It would be so easy to make a mistake."

I can't pretend to understand what you're going through, Edward. I've never been in your situation or even known anyone in your situation, so all I can offer you is the common sense that I know you already have. Take things slowly. Keep yourself fed. As the more dangerous and more powerful creature, it is your responsibility to protect her where she can't protect herself. Apart from that, you shouldn't be afraid to go where your feelings lead you. You are a good man, Edward. You can trust yourself.

His faith in me was stronger than my faith in myself, but it was still good to hear. "I will love her always. That won't change."

Yes. We aren't easily altered, but it is apparent that Bella has already changed you in remarkable ways. I think she is good for you.

"I am not convinced that I'm at all good for her, but she wants me anyway." I sighed heavily, reminded of how much I missed her.

My brooding was interrupted by Emmett's happy hooting. He was playing Olympic gymnast through the gigantic, old, Sitka spruces.

"Emmett's back," I warned Carlisle. "Seven seconds."

We both stared at the top of the ridge, counting down. At zero, Emmett pogo'd into view above the ridge, dropped out of sight, then popped up again, landing on his hands ten feet from where we were sitting before flipping upright onto his feet. I laughed in spite of myself.

Carlisle smiled at Emmett's antics, then said, "If you hear nothing from our 'friend,' I'll hunt."

I focused for a moment, listening to the silent air. It stayed silent. There was no James and no humans in the vicinity. This was one good reason to lead James north—there were very few people to hunt.

“All clear, Carlisle.”

“I’ll be back soon then.”

With that, he leaped off the ridge and out of sight.

“Hey Em. Good hunt?”

“Yeah, two black bears, both testy. Saw some mountain lions.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll take a jaunt when Carlisle gets back.”

“*Still no James?*”

“No, I hope we haven’t lost him,” I worried.

If you wanna double check, I’ll stay here and guard Bella.

“Do you think you can handle that?” I asked sarcastically.

Sure thing! he enthused in my direction.

I took a running leap off the ridge, grabbed a Sitka branch as I flew by, hand-over-handed my way through a few more, then dropped to the ground, running. I was careful to return along the same scent trail that we’d made before. We didn’t want James to think we were going back and forth from the campsite to the shore to check on him, because, presumably, we didn’t know he was behind us.

I heard him just before I reached the edge of the forest outside Port Renfrew. His mind sounded like one would expect a bloodhound’s to sound, looking for a fresh trail. I inferred that he was moving along the shoreline, searching for our scent. Either that, or he was hunting for dinner in town.

I didn’t need to see him to know how close he was. He must have just exited the water—that’s why I hadn’t heard his thoughts until I was almost on top of him. If I weren’t specifically looking for a mind underwater, it was easy to miss. Total immersion destroys a vampire’s scenting capability and makes him more reliant on subtler sensory cues and instinct, much like any creature of the sea. I had to make an effort to differentiate a swimmer’s mind from that of an animal. It didn’t come up very often, since normally I was trying to block minds, not reveal them. Except for Bella’s, of course.

Arrrrgh! Thinking of Bella made me want to track down our enemy and destroy him without further strategizing or delay. I knew that was irrational. Three-to-one odds were better than one-to-one. And this battle wasn’t for my satisfaction. It was to ensure Bella’s safety. I retraced my steps through the woods to Carlisle and Emmett.

Carlisle was already back from his hunt. Out here in the forest, he hadn’t needed to go far to find prey. I informed him that James was near and would undoubtedly spy on us. We must be cognizant of his presence now, knowing that he might overhear our conversations. He must believe that Bella was asleep in the tent while we stood guard. Perhaps we could also slip in something about Carlisle and Emmett’s return home. That would entice James to follow us for another day before we sprang our trap on him.

Emmett took his position in front of Bella’s tent, while Carlisle and I took up posts behind the tent in the woods. Ideally, James should see us keeping watch without knowing that we knew he was there. We expected him to get close enough to verify our position and numbers, then retreat into the woods. Afterwards, we would pick up camp and head northward.

James’ visit was uneventful. I could hear his mind as he approached and I signaled to Carlisle when he drew near. Carlisle spoke to me about our phony plans and after a short time, James left, just as we’d expected. I heard his mind fade as he retreated. He’d probably gone back to Port Renfrew. He might be hunting.

It took us no time to pack and get moving. We traveled north and west toward the center of Vancouver Island to a remote wilderness called Strathcona Park. It was a vast protected area with no roads and few trails, but mountain peaks high enough to sport glaciers. Along with the heavy rain, melting ice and snow drained through countless rivers and creeks, some with breathtakingly beautiful waterfalls. It was among the most magnificent of landscapes I had seen and I'd seen a lot in my one hundred years. Even so, it was hard to appreciate it in my state of distress.

We pitched the tent again within view of a very high waterfall. To keep our ruse alive, we also started a small fire. We didn't need the warmth, but Bella would have. After checking for any sign of James, I left Emmett to guard the tent and Carlisle to patrol the area, while I went to hunt. I wasn't particularly thirsty, but I didn't know when I'd get another chance and I needed to stay strong.

Before finding any mountain lions, I ran into one of the many black bears on the island, and as Emmett had said, found him to be crabby—Bella's word—with hunger. He wanted to feast on me more than I did on him, but ultimately, he gave me no choice when he charged. Bear wasn't my favorite prey, but it would do. As the bear hurtled toward me, I raised my stiffened right arm and made a fist. My pathetic-looking defensive measure didn't slow the bear's attack at all and he caught my outstretched fist right between the eyes. The blow didn't even knock me off balance, but the bear's front legs collapsed and he tumbled forward. I leaped onto him as he rolled, grabbing his snout and lifting his huge head upwards. He had no time to fight back. My teeth sunk through his fur, skin, and sinew to open the large artery in his neck. I drank mechanically, trying not to spill blood on my clothes. I preferred to look civilized after feeding as well as before.

The bear lay limp within minutes and I had no enthusiasm to look for another hapless creature. One bear was worth at least two deer anyway. I made my way back to camp.

We spent the night without incident and when dawn came, we renewed our fire, made coffee, and cooked some oatmeal for the human. The scent would remain on the air and lend credence to our deception. After burying the evidence, we packed the tent and trekked northwest through the rugged mountain country, jumping over fallen trees and wading through creeks along the way.

Late in the afternoon, we decided that Carlisle and Emmett would help set up camp and then leave. They would hike southeast for half a mile—parallel to our original route—then wait for James to pass by them. James would find me alone at the tent and Emmett and Carlisle would surprise him from behind. At last we were going to end this tedious game!

My longing for Bella—to hold her in my arms, to reassure her, to kiss her—had only increased during the two days since we'd been apart. I had wanted desperately to call and hear Bella's voice, but the risk that James would overhear was too high. Once he discovered Bella was not with us, the subterfuge was over. We must have our chance at him before then.

I listened for any mental activity in our area. There was none, so Carlisle took the opportunity to check in with Esme. She told him that Victoria had spent Monday night at Bella's high school and had visited Charlie's house in the morning after he'd gone to work. There was no danger to Charlie, so Esme didn't interfere. Since then, neither she nor Rosalie had seen Victoria. They believed she'd left Forks altogether.

After ending the phone call, Carlisle turned to Emmett and me.

“Victoria has left Forks,” he informed us for Emmett’s sake, as I had already heard his thoughts.

“Do you think she could be meeting James?” Emmett asked.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” answered Carlisle. “We must be prepared to fight them both if she joins James here.”

“Three against two still seems like good odds with Emmett’s strength and my hearing,” I noted.

“Yes,” agreed Carlisle. “It will be more difficult, but still within our abilities. We will follow them here and will not attack until they reach you at the camp, Edward. I will take on Victoria and you and Emmett take James.”

Carlisle and Emmett prepared to leave. Our enemies would likely attack at night, so we had only a few hours to wait for them. We said our goodbyes, then I stood outside the tent to wait and brood.

So I waited...and brooded...and waited some more. Hours passed, and the dark slowly retreated from a lightening sky.

“Should we head back to camp?” I read Emmett’s thoughts.

He had whispered the question to Carlisle. He and Carlisle had backtracked a mile from camp and taken a position fifty yards to the side of our original trail, then waited for James to appear. Now it was dawn and Emmett had grown impatient, having been on alert all night. Though Carlisle was willing to wait a few more hours, he recognized Emmett’s need for action.

“Emmett, why don’t you run back a mile or two toward Port Renfrew and look for any sign of James or Victoria. Try to avoid detection,” Carlisle had directed.

Half an hour later, Emmett reported back. He had found both their scents, but not them.

Ah! Damn it! That news was disappointing. They must have abandoned the chase. Considering the timing, I wondered if Victoria had found some information in Forks that convinced James to turn around.

As I waited, listening, I heard Emmett’s and Carlisle’s thoughts coming closer. They were tracking toward me in tandem. It seemed they were closing the circle behind nothing.

Edward? Carlisle called to me. *We’re following James’ trail, but we have not seen or heard either of them.*

He was right. Neither was anywhere in the vicinity. I loped down the trail to inform them and we returned to the campsite to review alternate plans.

“We need to find their trail and track them down,” said Emmett, anxious to go.

“Emmett found Victoria’s scent along with James’,” said Carlisle, “but it stopped cold not too far from where we were waiting for them.”

“I suppose they turned around. I wonder if Victoria followed James to give him some kind of information. Perhaps she discovered where Bella is,” I fretted.

“How could she have?” queried Carlisle.

“If Victoria or James were moving toward Alice, she would see it and call us,

right?” asked Emmett.

“Yes, I presume she would,” answered Carlisle. “Therefore, I think we should go under the assumption that James, at least, is still here tracking Bella.”

“His trail came nearly all the way to this campsite,” I noted.

“Yes, I smelled it too,” said Carlisle.

“Then he must have been here when I was hunting. That’s odd, though. I didn’t go very far,” I said, puzzled. Why hadn’t I heard his thoughts?

“Okay then,” Emmett concluded, “We need to find James’ trail and follow it. At least then we’ll know where he went, even if we can’t catch him. There’s no point in staying out here if he’s gone.”

“Emmett’s right,” I told Carlisle. “I think it’s time to break camp and track him down.”

“I concur.”

In no time we were on our way again. With Emmett carrying the duffle, we began to backtrack along our own trail. We would continue until either we found James, we found where James had veered off, or we reached Port Renfrew where we had begun.

After retracing our steps for one hundred miles, Emmett found it.

“Yo! Bingo!” he cried, in an excess of enthusiasm for modern lingo. Carlisle laughed and I smiled in spite of myself.

“How fresh is it?” I asked Emmett eagerly, while bounding over to check for myself.

“A few hours,” said Emmett.

“I’d guess six to seven,” I clarified, “so he would have been closest to the camp when I was hunting. Damn! I shouldn’t have gone!” I slapped a nearby tree and watched it sway sideways before straightening again.

“You couldn’t have known, Edward,” assured Carlisle. “It was wise for you to stay fed.”

“So let’s track *him*,” Emmett prompted.

“There’s no other choice now,” I said. “He’s headed off to the east. We need to know where he’s going and why.”

“What’s east of here?” asked Emmett.

“Just forest between here and the coast,” Carlisle told him. “On the east side of the island is Nanaimo, where there’s a ferry to the mainland... Vancouver, BC.”

“He doesn’t need a ferry, obviously,” Emmett said.

“But what about a plane? He might fly back to Seattle,” I worried. “Let’s follow him.” It was the only plan we had.

We began running, Emmett leading the way. James had a hefty lead on us, so there was no need for stealth. As we got closer to civilization, that changed. There were more roads, fewer trees, and more people. We had to stay to the forest, be cautious. That slowed us down enough that it was nearing twilight when we reached Nanaimo. James’ trail was strong leading all the way to the ferry terminal. We took our cue and boarded the next ship leaving for the mainland.

During the hour and forty minute crossing, I stood on the frigid outside deck and stared into the water. Why was this damn ferry so *slow*? I felt helpless and forlorn, at the mercy of a psychotic, sadistic vampire. It sounded like something out of a bad horror picture. In fact, it *was*... and *I* was too. What was I *doing*?

A severe attack of self-loathing bent me double over the railing. I probably appeared to be seasick, but I felt much worse than any human sickness I could imagine. My soul was dead, and like a zombie, I was haunting a beautiful, innocent, and very much alive, human girl. There was no reason *at all* for my continued existence and yet I lived on. Destroying myself was the right thing to do. If I couldn't leave her alone and stop poisoning her life, it was the only thing left to do. I wished I did have the power to alter Bella's memory...to wipe it clean of me and all my kind.

Carlisle appeared at my side and threw his arm around my waist, preventing me from tumbling into the dark water below us.

What is it, Edward? When I couldn't answer, he went on, *It's going to be fine. We'll catch him. It won't take much longer. Just hang on, son. Bella is safe.*

Disgust had closed my throat and I could make no reply. I didn't want to worry Carlisle, so I propped myself up on the railing and nodded. Unlike me, Carlisle *did* deserve to live. He was doing so much good in the world. What had I ever done but take up space and now, endanger what I loved more than anything else? My body began to shake with revulsion, and self pity, and despair.

Carlisle spun me toward him and stared into my face. I don't know what he saw there, but it prompted him to wrap his arms tightly around me and hold me to his chest.

We stood there like that, in the dark, for a long time.

When the engine noise eased and we began slowing down, Emmett joined us. By the time the ferry pulled to the dock on the mainland, I had recovered sufficiently to propel my aching body onto dry land.